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Senior Seminar

Fresh Flesh: An Analysis of the Hegemonic Gender Ideas Presented in the film, Fresh (2022)

Introduction:

There are many communicative phenomena and theories that are present within the 2022 film, *Fresh*. The 2022 horror film *Fresh* both reinforces and denies hegemonic ideas of gender performance of femininity/masculinity, power dynamics, queerness, and “traditional” gender roles. In particular, these theories will be explored through the lens of the performance of gender within the genre of horror and how the film simultaneously supports and rejects various hegemonic gender norms, as well as the ways in which sex, cannibalism, and various horror archetypes come into play. The film focuses on the main protagonist, Noa (Daisy Edgar Jones), and her escape from her new cannibalistic boyfriend, (Sebastian Stan). This paper will explore that Noa’s support of the roles of the final girl, except that she is sexually pure and how it ultimately saves her in the end. The topics of flesh, sex, and its role in cannibalism will also be explored. In particular, as an objectification and offering of one’s self, and how it plays into the title of the film, *Fresh*. Since this film is much more recent there is little to no surrounding research on its reflections of the experiences of society today, as well as the hegemonic norms of gender portrayed. This work is important because looking at the artifact in-depth could be crucial in the communicative rhetorical construction of gender. Particularly, this artifact could lead to better understandings surrounding the perpetuation or resistance of hegemonic gender norms within society.

Background:

Fresh written by Lauryl Kahn, was directed by Mimi Cave, in what became her first directorial debut in film on January 20, 2022 (Flemming, 2020). The horror film performed so well that, during the week of its release, it was the second highest-streamed film across all platforms (Prange, 2022). It was also nominated for and won the title of “Best Horror” in the 2022 Hollywood Critics Association’s Midseason Awards, among many other awards and nominations (IMDb, n.d.).

Fresh takes the audience on an adventure through the horrors of dating in today's day and age. The film follows the protagonist, Noa (Daisy Edgar-jones), who, after another failed online date, meets a man (Sebastian Stan) at a supermarket and goes out with him. She eventually agrees to go on a weekend getaway where she is drugged and kidnapped. She then discovers he is more than just a surgeon, but also a human trafficker and cannibal who lures his victims out on dates, takes them, and keeps them alive while harvesting their body parts (to keep them fresh) to cook and/or sell to other cannibals.

This film is very reflective of the modern societal norms of dating seen today. The fear surrounding modern women with online dating and human trafficking is a very prevalent issue. Lauryl Kahn states that the film takes on “...this subconscious way [women] operate in the world — where we park, do we have our keys, is our friend on speed dial. Things that men don’t think twice about” (White, 2022). Most women nowadays know of the spiel given when meeting someone online or going out on dates. Whether it is from mothers, sisters, or friends, they are told to turn on their location, send updates, and carry their pepper spray on their keys. There was also an emphasis on the film's stance on violence perpetrated by men. The film's writer was determined to bring attention to the idea that, “violence and things that men do, in a lot of ways, don’t discriminate... whether it’s trans women, nonbinary women, straight women,

queer women ... violent men are an all-encompassing fear”(White, 2022). This is because, every woman, knows there could be danger waiting around the corner, and unfortunately, there is often almost no way of knowing or protecting yourself in the “right” way.

Fresh preys on the already-existing fears of the time by exploiting the pervasive issues of human trafficking, drugging, and cannibalism. In 2021 alone, there were roughly 10,359 trafficking situations reported to the National Human Trafficking Hotline (2021). While that is an alarming number in itself, it is only a fraction of the trafficking situations that go unreported. It is also important to note that while this does not happen to only women, according to the Polaris Analysis of 2021 Data from the National Human Trafficking Hotline, women make up 65% of likely victims (2021). Similar to this, 2021 also had highlights of sensationalism surrounding cannibalism.

In particular, 2021 had various claims involving actor Armie Hammer and his alleged cannibalism. On top of all of the fear surrounding human trafficking, headlines all across the U.S. sparked terror and scandal when an ex-partner came forward accusing the famed actor of being a cannibal. This scandal came to a head when multiple screenshots of his texts were released where he referred to himself as “100% a cannibal” (Rodriguez, 2023). Not only this but he was also accused of various crimes of rape and abuse, adding to this fear.

In an interview with *The Hollywood Reporter*, Lauryn Kahn also alludes to the idea that part of the inspiration from the film is derived from tensions between women during the Trump Election who are complicated in not supporting women (White, 2022). While the Trump election was one that embraced hatred and strife throughout the country, there were many layers that made their way into the context of the film. Especially in certain characters who operate behind the men in charge. Director Mimi Cave also pointed out how the film was made after seeing

Jeffrey Epstein and the “cases of men that are in scenarios that are the 1% of the 1%, who are so wealthy that no one ever says ‘no’ to them” (Sippell, 2023).

The film itself did a seemingly excellent job of balancing the preexistent fears of society with the excitement of horror. The film was received well by the audience, though still critiqued, and currently has a rating of 81% on Rotten Tomatoes (n.d.). One Vanity Fair review states that the film attempts to “strike a balance between urgent messaging and pure, gnarly depravity,” however goes on to describe it as, “a grim slice of visceral entertainment, occasionally dressed up as something weightier” (Lawson, 2022). These reviews, however, were not the majority consensus for the film. Another reviewer, highlighting its entertainment factor, called the film “sickly fun,” and pointed out that “the irresistibility of “Fresh” lies in the fact that it doesn’t take itself *too* seriously” (Laffly, 2022).

Although there are some critiques about the film’s essence it has, overall, received high praise, winning the 2022 Hollywood Critics Association Midseason Award for Best Horror. The film was an accumulation of many real fears, turned into a horrific film experience. This was done through the context of societal norms during its creation which traveled to and affected the audience in various ways by captivating them.

Literature Review:

Through analyzing the 2022 film, *Fresh*, greater understandings of the ways that the hegemonic ideas of femininity, masculinity, and sexuality are (re)created and reflected in horror film tropes of cannibalism, body horror, the final girl, monsters, and power dynamics will be explored. This Literature review will inform my analysis by reviewing surrounding literature and articles, followed by the additions to my study. Since there is no current research

surrounding *Fresh* (2022), similar horror film artifacts such as *Silence of the Lambs*, *Captivity*, *Raw*, *Halloween*, and *Frankenstein* will be explored.

Carol Clover's article, "Her Body, Himself", focuses on the core components of the slasher film genre and how gender comes into play. Clover's article discusses topics such as the terrible place, the final girl, the killer, weapons, victims, and the use of the I-camera. While Clover uses traditional slasher films (*Halloween*, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, and *Friday the 13th*) to examine hegemonic ideas surrounding sexual transgressors, femininity, masculinity, and phallic weapons, my analysis would explore these ideas through the lens of *Fresh* (2022). It would analyze Noa's journey as the final girl, the fellow victims she is trapped with (and came before her), the sexuality of her new-boyfriend-turned-killer, and the secluded estate/torture chamber she is held at.

In the article "Seeing the Female Body Differently': Gender issues in The Silence of the Lambs", Dubois claims that a crucial standard of the serial killer genre is the uniting of sadism with voyeurism, which men witness, and women live. The woman is a passive object whose purpose is to be watched and destroyed. Dubois also makes arguments about the main female protagonist being destroyed as a punishment when switching from a passive object, being watched, to an active searcher for escape. It also touches on the idea of the mentor-pupil trope often seen in horror movies and argues they exist due to seeing each other as human in a world where others view them as monsters.

Another piece of literature, "All Stripped Down: The Spectacle of "Torture Porn." by Dean Lockwood, suggests that the power dynamics, tropes, and processes seen in torture porn horrors are gendered. These processes are often ones that equate to the suspension of the assault, and the anticipation of waiting, as opposed to the actual spectacle of the damaged body (the act

of assault). Lockwood argues that the expectation unites the audience and protagonist, both realizing what/who comes next. This article also suggests that these processes equate to control. It pulls on the film *Captivity*, where the protagonist, Jennifer, is locked in an electrified room used to study her, to demonstrate that the ultimate goal is to “play them, not play with them”(2009, p. 46). Finally, it argues that this genre is about a metamorphosis of the victims and demands affect (the act of change) over an effect (the change).

In the article “Dr. Frankenstein and the Industrial Body Reflections on 'Spare Part Surgery”, Helman argues that surgery in horror (particularly in *Frankenstein*) is a form of gender-blurring that tries to achieve a perfect body. It also describes surgery as a permanent link to the world of industry and science. A transplant makes them “the ultimate consumer, incorporating the products of industry into [their] very body, and a living, walking advertisement for their efficacy” (1988, p.14). In the film *Fresh*, there are multiple allusions to spare parts and surgery and its reflection of dominant ideologies in society.

The ideas of body and gender being blurred and discovered are also discussed by Adam Lowenstein, who offers a particular insight into femininity and cannibalism in the article, “The Embodied Surrealism of *In My Skin*”. Lowenstein argues *In My Skin* focuses on femininity and the grappling between surrealism and identity/ownership in auto-cannibalism/self-harm. There is a strong emphasis on the outward changes in appearance, being a reflection of a grapple with the inward and the risk that comes with it. There is also a tie between Ester from *In My Skin* acting as both “assaultive director” and “assaulted spectator” (2015, p.481). She becomes both a subject and an object.

The idea of queer killers is a common theme in many horror and slasher films. In fact, Benshoff suggests in “The Monster and the Homosexual”, that the queer male is monstrous

because he performs feminine characteristics. It is not a reflection of queerness, but a reflection of the heterosexual views of queerness. The article goes on to suggest that often, the vampiric monsters have characterizations of being homosexual or bisexual, which cement them as unnatural and plague-carrying.

The analysis of *Fresh* 2022 will analyze Noa's journey as the final girl, the fellow victims she is trapped with (and came before her), the sexuality of her new-boyfriend-turned-killer, and the secluded estate/torture chamber she is held at. It will also argue that the ideas found in Dubois are also found and recreated within the film, *Fresh*, as well as explore the relationship of mentor-pupil within the power dynamic of not just man-woman, but also captor-captive. While there are focuses in the surrounding literature on various control aspects of the torture porn genre, the analysis following will focus on how these ideas are reflected within *Fresh*, and its use of control over the main protagonist, Noa. Beyond the ideas of Frankenstein, *Fresh* will highlight the differences between transplant and extraction.

The examination of this artifact will cover these topics, and go into more depth about, specifically, Noa's grappling with identity as her appearance changes, and she is forced into cannibalism in order to escape and survive. This problem is especially true since she must grapple with the guilt of now knowing and befriending the other victims she is trapped with and eating. As the surrounding literature deals with a loss of body parts, this film will be explored with the knowledge that this loss is a result of drugging and its effects on identity. It will also focus on the queer-coded killer (Steve) and how he does not suck the blood out of the living, but instead, consumes the meat of people whom he keeps alive.

Analysis

The opening credits for *Fresh* do not actually begin to roll until a little after half an hour in. The first 30 minutes of the film focus on establishing the relationships between characters and tricking the audience into forgetting about the horror aspect as they join Noa in being won over by Steve. Once he eventually lures her away with a promise of a surprise vacation. She winds up at his secluded modern house in the middle of nowhere, where he drugs her. The credits display a gruesome bloody reality while we watch from Noa's perspective as she is hazily brought to her new hell.

Noa, the main protagonist, is a small white woman with European features and long brown hair. She spends the first portion of the film coping with the letdowns of modern online dating and unsolicited dick pics. She rejects every painstakingly uncomfortable sexual advance towards her, making her a prime candidate for Carol Clover's "final girl" in her essay "Her Body Himself" but everything begins to change when she meets Steve. After a heated conversation with her bisexual best friend Mollie about not needing a man (which takes place in a kickboxing class to showcase their masculine independence), Noa heads to the supermarket, where a handsome but unassuming Steve approaches her in the fresh produce aisle. After some awkward and cute flirting, they exchange numbers and part ways before he texts her a few days later, asking to go out.

The date goes exceptionally well as the two begin to hit it off. In a dark but mood-lit bar, the audience learns that Steve is a reconstructive surgeon. We also learn that both Noa and Steve have had difficult relations with their parents. Again, Clover's essay is highlighted by this idea. Although the audience is not yet aware of who Steve is or what Noa will have to do. The idea

that the killer is queer-coded corresponds with the idea of a dead or absent mother. Noa, who has no contact with her mother, a dead father, and no siblings, feels understood by Steve, whose father lives in Texas and has a dead mother. As the night, and alcohol content progresses, the camera shows the progression of sexual tension by highlighting the objectification of one another through a series of shots that show their faces cut off in various ways in the frame. This buildup leads to the climax of them eventually going back to Noa's and sleeping together. This act is a pushback against the "final girl". After waking up from their night together, they smile, laugh, and talk before Noa gets in the shower and allows the water to cleanse her, equating to the water attempting to cleanse her of her sins because, as seen later in the film, although Noa is captured, she gets special attention and escapes despite sleeping with him.

Perhaps one of Clover's most memorable arguments about slasher films is the use of the I-camera to However, the only time we see Noa through the I-camera of Steve is when he eventually abducts Noa and has her chained to the floor in a surprisingly well-decorated cell. All other uses of the I-camera come from Noa's perspective (a shift that happens much earlier than most slashers that occur at the end) starting when she is first drugged (and sees a very blurry Steve and bright lights) and carries through the rest of the film in various displays of power dynamics. Another example of the use of I-camera from Noa's perspective is when, while attempting to escape from Steve by tricking him into allowing her to leave her cell to shower, she is caught. The camera shows Steve's face as he slams Noa's head into the wall behind her and cuts to black as she passes out. Within *Fresh*, the I-camera is used to bring the audience into relation with the character we are seeing through. This usage is repeated whether it is meant to induce fear or feel power.

The house in which the women are kept, a modern house owned by Steve that is well-furnished and lit with yellow and red warm lights, also doubles as a prison in the basement with cells made of stone, floored with carpet, a bed in the floor they are chained to, and automated wood cells. The house, a different embodiment of Clover's terrible place, also contains a room where he performs surgery on women to harvest their body parts. Largely resembling a hospital room, dawning with white lights, white walls, floors, ceilings, machines, and scrubs, the audience is taken into a place where births (and C-sections) often happen. To further highlight the (re)births in this room, each woman, while having something taken from them while being cut open, also emerges from this room with a new sense of vulnerability, confusion, and anger. All the while, Steve plays the role of surgeon/doctor.

The farther the audience moves forward with Steve, the more his nature is revealed. He is no longer the handsome and kind (but still masculine man). Instead, he shifts from masculine appearances and clothes to turtlenecks and queer-coded mannerisms. Clover's sexually confused killer begins to come into play here, as well. When Noa awakes, he has swapped out his more rugged masculine look of layers and messy hair for a manicured look of a sweater vest and gelled-up hair. His house is filled with more warm lights but is eerily decorated and pristine which makes it feel ominous. It does not encompass the messy and unkept feel that a hegemonic masculine place would. No longer an unassuming presence, every phrase seems to have an underlying taunt meant to show he is still in power. There is also a scene where, while packaging up an order for a client, he holds up a light blue lacy bra to his chest and seems to acknowledge that he likes the feeling, before placing it away.

Steve also shows that he has a need to be in control and obeyed. He is not erratic or messy, and nothing is left to chance. He makes sure every girl he abducts has no one who will

look for them, has a wife who is involved in the business, stores the girls in a remote and pristine location, and even keeps their phones to avoid suspicion. The only time he is erratic is when it involves Noa. Even before preparing the dinners with the women's bodies, he scrubs and scrapes his hands clean. This is a very different gender performance from the Steve, whom ate unwashed cotton candy grapes from a bag while "spontaneously" meeting Noa and falling in love with her through a "fuck it" mindset. The very reason why he cuts up women has to do with the need to be in control.

That being said, how he treats women is very supportive of hegemonic gender ideals. The women he kidnaps and sells are nothing but a product to him. Animals being prepared for slaughter. Multiple times throughout the film, he refers to their bodies as "meat", even going so far as telling Noa to try to relax because "stress is bad for the meat" (Cave 2022). One thing that does come off as counter-hegemonic in this film is that it ties into the relationship between the women and their bodies. Each dismembered body part is labeled with the name of the woman it was taken from. Steve also keeps tokens from each woman, usually a phone, photo, jewelry, and keys. He also sends some of their items to the clients with their orders because "clients want to feel closer to the product" (Cave 2022).

Ultimately, it seems that Steve is unable to truly be a "correct" man and, amidst his gender & sexual identity dysphoria, mutilates the bodies of women and consumes them. He does this to 'punish' the women for having something he experiences while also committing violence to hang onto the hegemonic ideals of masculinity. Cannibalism is also something that is highly taboo, a different form of an "other". Not only is Steve literally consuming flesh, but it is also something that takes the place of sex. The two do not exist in the film together at the same time. If it did, he could have done so when he and Noa had slept together the first time. The flesh

becomes a stand-in “inappropriate sexual object of desire” that Benshoff discusses regarding homosexuality and monsters (2015), and subsequently links him to queer vampiric-coded characters.

Steve is not the only vampiric-coded character. Besides the “one percent of the one percent” that takes part in this “industry”, Noa also begins to find this a part of her reality (Cave 2022). After Noa attempts to escape and Steve literally takes her butt off and cauterizes it as punishment, Noa and Penny (another girl taken that communicates with Noa through the vents connecting their cells) talk about wanting to hurt him. She discovers she is the only one he slept with before being taken and has earned special privileges while she reads a note left behind by another girl telling her that if she finds the note it is because he likes her and to keep fighting for survival. We later learn that the woman who left the note, Sami Akabari, was killed when Noa is shown the collection of items he has of the girls. This scene is also where the audience learns that Noa’s stuff is kept separate from Steve. Noa, after her conversation with Penny, begins to try to gain Steve's favor again by asking him questions about the cannibalistic tendencies by asking what it tastes like and even agreeing to try it with him. She begins to switch from a passive object to an active fighter.

Steve elaborates to Noa that he finds it is a “very powerful thing”, and that “...this whole world is about giving yourself over to somebody and becoming someone else forever” (Cave 2022). He then goes on to equate the surrender to love, showing he has strong confusion about the topic and himself. Noa then eats a meatball made of a woman named “Hope” and tells Steve that it is indescribable, gaining more of his confidence. After the night has ended and she is alone, she immediately throws it up while, unbeknownst to her, Mollie has been abducted during her search for Noa and is getting her breasts removed.

The following day, Steve greets Noa in her cell and gifts her a bubble-gum pink dress with a giant bow on the front of it, equating her to the gift. He invites her to dinner and gives her makeup to “freshen up”, while he does the same. Noa, cloaked in a dark red light accepts. He then prepares Melissa (another girl Noa had somewhat befriended while being held) and Mollie’s breast meat for Noa, who unknowingly consumes a part of her best friend. Like a confused and ashamed pupil, she then breaks down crying “It is really nice, and it’s also so confusing, and I can’t quite process 'cause I feel awful. I feel awful cause I don’t feel awful” (Cave 2022) Steve, assuming the role of mentor attempts to comfort her like a child, saying it is okay and that she’s just different, which seems to work. However, later that night when she is shown Steve’s collection of items from the women, she recognizes Mollie’s phone and quickly puts two and two together, decidedly throwing her plan into action.

Noa then invites Steve to dance which is not only a play on fighting being a dance but also parallels a scene earlier in the film where Steve asks Noa to dance. This time, however, instead of Steve taking the lead and Noa being unsure, Noa takes the lead and even takes up more space than he does for the first time in the film. She eventually leads him to the bedroom, implying sex, but as she leans down, she castrates him with her teeth. Noa pursues an equally personal revenge on him for removing parts of her and destroying them with his teeth. Following this, she quickly locks Steve in his room while she runs to free Penny and Mollie. Steve discovers them in the kitchen, where a fight breaks out as Steve attempts to strangle Noa to take his own revenge but is met with the three girls (each at a disadvantage due to various healing surgeries and missing body parts) where he is eventually brought down.

This unfortunately does not last long because they flee through the woods Steve returns with a gun and shoots sporadically, trying to take them down, but misses every shot. After

another fight where he attempts to kill Noa, she, with the help of Penny and Mollie, manages to get a hold of the gun and point it at Steve's face as he lays incapacitated, castrated, and covered in his own blood. We see Noa looming over his destroyed body as she exerts her power by asking him to give her a smile. As he submissively complies, she shoots him in the head, turning the power dynamic and cementing her standing as a final girl. As the film wraps up, *Fresh* highlights that Noa does not truly get to live happily ever after, as a text comes in from Chad (one of her former failed dates whose advances she rejected) asking, "u up?" showing the continued cycle (Cave 2022).

Conclusion

In film throughout the years, it is virtually impossible to avoid the hegemonic ideas about gender and rules that are being reinforced or pushed against in horror films. By exploring surrounding literature about similar films, and analyzing the film, better understanding of the way the film *Fresh*, communicates gender hegemonies. In the 2022 horror film *Fresh*, hegemonic ideas of the gender performance of femininity/masculinity, power dynamics, queerness, and "traditional" gender roles are both reinforced and denied.

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