

Breaking the Cycle: Media Representations of Victim-Survivors and Child Abuse.
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Breaking the Cycle: Media Representations of Victim-Survivors and Child Abuse

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Discussions around media representations of sexual violence and abuse have become both more mainstream and more nuanced in recent years. There has been criticism of news media and public commentary which demeans and discredits the experiences of victim-survivors, such as Prime Minister Boris Johnson's dismissal of funding for a child abuse enquiry as money "**spaffed up a wall**", the extensive reporting on the trial of Carl Beech and celebrities warning of a **culture of victimhood**. Many people look to the media for information on complex social issues – particularly more 'private' events such as sexual violence – and too often, onscreen representations fall in line with negative societal stereotypes around abusers and victims. Thankfully, the media can also present more progressive depictions which challenge these so-called rape myths and enable people to make sense of their experiences and the experiences of others (**see Kitzinger, 2001**).

Naturally, these conversations have extended to fictional media, such as **the role of women in film and TV** and the portrayal of **sexual violence on screen**, whilst depictions of childhood abuse and those who survive it have been subject to less analytical scrutiny. A prevalent stereotype is the 'cycle of abuse' myth, which asserts that those who experience abuse in childhood will replicate their victimisation and become abusers themselves. More than twenty years after sociologists have debunked this theory and warned of the damaging impact of adhering to such myths (see **Kelly, 1996**), the idea of a cycle still persists within media. This is particularly evident within the horror genre, where childhood abuse is framed as the 'origin' for many villains, murderers and monsters, so much so that it is often used as a shorthand for deviancy. This may seem like a niche discussion but horror's influence on popular consciousness and mainstream culture cannot be denied, as shown by the familiarity of characters such as Norman Bates or Buffalo Bill and their adherence to pop psychology tropes.

Problematic depictions of child abuse are not a gendered issue. In the horror genre, male-survivors of abuse are often cast as monsters, such as the animalistic Francis Dolarhyde in *Red Dragon* or Hannibal, the sadistic Martin in *Human Centipede II* or the charming child-abuser Jeff in *Hard Candy*, but many monstrous cinematic females are also given childhood trauma as part of their vengeful 'evil' (Sadako/Samara in *Ringu/The Ring*, Alessa from *Silent Hill* and Asami in *Audition*). Even when the childhood experiences of villains are referenced with some sympathy, the focus is still on their subsequent depravity and violence. This link between abuse and deviancy has been further conflated with gender identity and sexuality through notable horror villains Norman Bates (*Psycho*), Buffalo Bill (*The Silence of the Lambs*) and Leatherface (*The Texas Chainsaw*

Massacre) to paint a particularly grim picture: those who are abused as children will grow up to be damaged, dangerous and a threat to heteronormative expectations.

These restrictive stereotypes send several unfair messages to viewing audiences. Abuse is often presented as the trigger for the subsequent horror (as the act which creates the ‘monster’) rather than a source of horror in its own right, which both places responsibility onto the victims *and* overlooks the severity of childhood trauma. Victims tend to represent the narrow, dominant dimensions of their culture (e.g. mostly white, able-bodied, middle-class in Western films) when we know that abuse transcends race, social status and ability. Most damagingly, these depictions feed into crude societal narratives which frame victim-survivors as weak, damaged and pathetic and overlooks their ability to resist and cope. It is difficult to accurately measure the prevalence of child abuse yet current estimates suggest it is far from uncommon, ranging from **12-20% of girls and 5-8% of boys**; whichever statistics you favour, it is hardly a fringe issue and therefore media representations are worthy of analysis.

Thankfully, horror can also provide us with more progressive depictions of victimisation. The genre is well-suited to exploring everyday fears and wider socio-cultural issues in a way which provides entertainment *and* cathartic release - see for example, the commentary on racism in *Get Out* or abusive relationships in *Midsommar* - and there are films which take care to present more balanced and complicated depictions of victim-survivors without sanitizing the realities of abuse, such as *Gerald's Game* (2017) and *Possum* (2018).

Mike Flanagan's 2017 film *Gerald's Game* follows Jessie (Carla Gugino) as she spends a weekend away with her manipulative husband, Gerald, who has a fatal heart attack during a coercive sex game and leaves Jessie handcuffed to a bed in the middle of nowhere. The film showcases Jessie's resilience in the face of her hopeless predicament and the memories of her childhood abuse which emerge as she seeks to escape her confinement. Throughout the claustrophobic scenario, Jessie utilises many of the creative cognitive strategies that victim-survivors can develop as a means of coping with abuse: she dissociates from her pain and reality, talking herself through the options for escape as well as her trauma memories, whilst retaining empathy for her child-self who relied on silence to survive.

The character of Jessie flouts many of the typical tropes of female victims; she is not weak or passive, she uses physical as well as psychological resistance against her husband, a feral dog and finally a stalker who breaks into the house. In the final scenes, she confronts one of her abusers in court with defiance rather than fear: “*you're so much smaller than I remember*”. She is depicted as strong and powerful but not superhuman, which is another trope often afforded to victims and while it may seem empowering, it also belittles the everyday realities and disabling impacts of abuse. The film ends with Jessie hurt by her ordeals but healing, speaking out and using her experience to help others.

The horror film *Possum*, directed by Matt Holness (2018), offers a different but similarly progressive portrayal of a victim-survivor through Philip (Sean Harris), who returns to his childhood home to confront the death of his parents and his muddled memories of abuse. He is tormented by Possum, a spider-like puppet with his face, who follows him through the sites of his abuse and eventually leads Philip to uncover the truth, that he was abused by his uncle, Maurice, who is still hurting children. Philip confronts and kills his uncle in order to rescue one of Maurice's other victims, a young boy. The ending is dark but quietly hopeful, with Philip having finally dismantled and silenced the puppet and seemingly at peace.

Possum is a bleak film but it does ultimately present a positive alternative to typical portrayals of male victim-survivors. It does not shy away from the impact of Phillip's traumatic experiences and shows him as an anxious, unsure and at times confused adult, with fragments of dissociative memories rather than a clear narrative of what happened to him. He is socially-introverted and childlike – at times racked with fear and paranoia – yet he is also shown to have created a life for himself and expresses his trauma through puppetry, sketching and poetry. His portrayal is more nuanced than the stereotypical picture of PTSD often favoured in the media and despite his social awkwardness, none of the horror originates from Philip: the horror comes from the unfolding of his childhood memories and the realization that it was Maurice who abused him following his parents' death. Philip is neither villainous monster nor hyper-masculine avenger; he kills Maurice out of self-defense and to protect other victims and in many ways, is depicted as a normal man trying to move away from his difficult childhood.

These films offer us complex but sympathetic templates for victim-survivors which also challenge some of the other myths permeating popular understandings of abuse. They show that abusers are known to and trusted by their victims, as fathers, husbands and uncles rather than strangers, and that abuse happens in the home within families. They present abuse as emotional and psychological as much as physical or sexual and explore the long-lasting effects of trauma but also the potential to create a meaningful life around it. They do not equate victimisation with weakness and show that strength, resilience and resistance come in a variety of forms, with dissociation, silence and repression – 'playing possum' – being crucial strategies for survival.

Of course, horror films are not to everyone's tastes but they do provide important challenges to the dominant, negative narratives of victimisation. At a time where discussions have been fuelled by the #MeToo and TIME'S UP movements, it is crucial that we critically consider the messages we are consuming through our media and the ways they may be maintaining stereotypes and stigma around victim-survivors. Horror can be easily dismissed as a homogenous genre but its influence on public awareness and its ability to unflinchingly explore complicated issues, such as child abuse, should not be undermined, especially in the absence of more hopeful media representations and rhetoric.

Parts of this article have been paraphrased from previous blog posts by the author, [here](#) and [here](#).

References

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