Beddows, A. (2021) Ferocious Marys and Dark Alessas: The Portrayal of Religious Matriarchies in *Silent Hill*. In B. Grafius & J.W. Moorhead (Eds.) *Theology and Horror: Explorations of the Dark Religious Imagination*. Rowman & Littlefield: Maryland, USA.

Ferocious Marys and Dark Alessas: The Portrayal of Religious Matriarchies in *Silent Hill*

Amy Beddows

Theologians have repeatedly drawn attention to the unfavorable portrayal of women in Judeo-Christian texts and practice. Feminist critics have noted that "the norm for women is absence and silence" in ancient religious texts[1] and that when women do appear, they tend to be framed in binary terms as passive devotees or monstrous demons, virginal mothers or seductive whores, innocent lambs, or corrupt sinners (Stanton 1993; Daly 1973). Unsurprisingly, such stereotypical depictions are in line with the patriarchal norms which have long persisted in wider, secular society, which deem women as inferior and subordinate to men (Schur 1984).

Subsequently, there have been calls for alternative theological interpretations which value and empower women (Russell 1985) yet in the absence of such belief systems we have to look outside of existing frameworks for more egalitarian possibilities. This chapter will briefly consider the critical arguments regarding the role of women in religion, primarily Judeo-Christian scripture, and explore the value of alternative representations as a challenge to the dominant power structures in non-secular and secular society. It will do this through particular readings of the multimedia horror franchise *Silent Hill*, as a critical reflection of the ways that religious belief and practice can embody the social devaluation and control of women.

Women and Religion

In the 1890s, a committee of suffragettes led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton created *The Woman's Bible*, a commentary on passages of the Old and New Testament where "women are made prominent by their exclusion" (Stanon 1993, 5). Since then, feminist theologians have echoed concerns that Judeo-Christian scriptures "are designed to erase women's existence as

subjects" and that when women are mentioned, they are cast as 'other' to the superior male norm (Ruether 1985, ix). These patriarchal biases have been reinforced through various theological interpretations over the centuries, often conducted by male scholars within patriarchal societies and institutions (Russell 1985; Klopfer 2013), and have led to a wider, secular acceptance that gender differences, particularly the devaluation of female/feminine traits, are part of a 'divine plan' or natural order (Stanton 1993; Daly 1973).

In biblical texts, women are often presented in relational roles as mothers, wives or mistresses rather than individuals with their own humanity and agency (Ruether 1985). The predominant archetype is Eve, as the story of Genesis denotes man as the primary human creation and his female companion as secondary, being formed from his (male) body by the (male) Creator. Adam is tasked with naming woman along with the rest of Earth's creatures, which relegates Eve to the level of beasts yet despite her lack of status, Eve is blamed for humanity's need for salvation, thus shaping her into the template for female wickedness which has justified the disdain and devaluation of women ever since (Daly 1973; Stanton 1993). Another archetype of female wickedness is Lilith; in Jewish mythology, she rejected a life of inequality as Adam's wife and was banished to become a demon. Although to some the story of Lilith represents "the banished power and autonomy of woman" (Ruether 1985, 64), the warning is clear: violate patriarchal expectations and you will be cast out as a monster.

The figure of Mary Magdalene also illustrates the devaluation that can occur through revised interpretations of religious doctrines over time. Originally a disciple and close confidante to Jesus, Mary's identity has been conflated with other 'sinful' women and reduced to a sexual being most known for bearing witness to His suffering and death (Ruether 1985). Biblical women are punished for their sexuality; Dinah (Genesis 34), the concubine of Levite (Judges 19) and Susannah (Book of Daniel 13) are raped, dismissed and made accountable for their violations (Klopfer 2013), demonstrating their low value as well as an inherent mistrust of women's words. Jezebel has become a cultural archetype for wicked and deceitful women (particularly women of color), while the Whore of Babylon is the ultimate symbolic conflation of female sexuality, evil and the corruption of man (Daly 1973).

The most notable woman in Christian theology is Mary, mother of Jesus. Although ostensibly a positive portrayal of woman, her 'perfection' imposes a template of passive femininity, for despite being Mother of humanity's Savior, she is given no influence or agency in

biblical passages. The veneration of Mary presents a restrictive expectation for women to model her compliance or else be punished as sinful Eves (Daly 1973; Ruether 1985), as well as the impossible biological aspiration of virginal purity *and* natural (heteronormative) motherhood (Kissling 1999). This model of female purity is especially perpetuated by religious fundamentalisms, which promote patriarchal ideals as a means of social control by framing societal problems as the result of women neglecting their 'traditional' roles or asserting their sexuality (Howland 1999).

The absence of alternative representations of women in religious texts adds weight to these damaging stereotypes. Most obviously, there is no template for a female Savior, for although Christ is depicted with the typically 'feminine' traits of mercy, gentleness and wisdom, His image "does not liberate women but reinforces the identification of femininity with passivity" and women must therefore look elsewhere for a 'redemptrix' figure who "can dismantle the systems of private repression and public violence" (Ruether 1985, 112). These omissions complicate the overall messages of liberation found in the Bible for women and also for men (Russell 1985), for a more inclusive Christ figure would liberate all of humanity from the rigid expectations of patriarchal masculinity (Daly 1973).

These issues are not merely theological concerns but have real, practical impacts on the lived experience of women. In *The Sociology of Religion*, Weber observed that even when women are included in religious texts and mythologies, it does not ensure social equality due to the "complete monopolization by men of the priestly functions, law, and of the right to active participation in community affairs" (1963, 104). Although things have improved since Weber's writing, women's voices and perspectives have traditionally been left out of theological analysis or included as afterthoughts or side-notes to androcentric perspectives (Malone 1999). Biblical messages of female devaluation have infiltrated areas of secular society such as politics, scientific research and law (Stanton 1993; Daly 1973) and for many, the religious position on issues of gender or sexuality are seen as indisputable 'truths', even outside of non-secular contexts (Kissling 1999); one only has to look at the archetype of Eve as a reflection of the essential 'nature' of women to see how embedded such cultural meanings remain in our collective understandings (Daly 1973). The early templates of women as deceitful, seductive and monstrous are still inherent today, in societal myths which justify the silencing, discrediting and

devaluation of women in the justice system, education, politics, health and social policy (see Schur 1984; Howland 1999; Rose 1999; Jordan 2004).

This is not intended as a blanket criticism of religion.[i] For many, faith is an important source of community, self-actualization and liberation and although some doctrines may embolden misogyny in modern society, they can also challenge prejudicial messages. Yet addressing these imbalances is not an easy feat and it is not enough to simply add women back into the picture of religion. The growing acceptance of female priests in everyday liturgy has improved the lives of individuals yet done little to dismantle the underlying patriarchal structures and may give the illusion that equality is being achieved (Daly 1973). Even the inclusion of female deities does not challenge social status discrepancies, as they often reflect patriarchal fantasies and fears of women as deferential or vengeful (Eller 2000). A female God can only have power if She speaks to the truth of oppression and vilification of women, otherwise She too would maintain the fallacy of equality (Daly 1973).

In light of this, there have been calls for radical re-imaginings of theological frameworks to elevate those who have been marginalized (Daly 1973; Russell 1985; Malone 1999). Such an overhaul requires "a blueprint for a social structure – and perhaps a Church structure – in which power and decision making are equally shared between men and women" (Kissling 1999, 201). Daly (1973) proposes a matriarchal 'counterworld' to create a new imagining of God, faith and practice and as religion is a foundation for many societal structures, she argues that such an overhaul would instigate wider cultural change. Yet without blueprints for deconstructed counterworlds or historical examples of matriarchal or egalitarian alternatives to refer to (see Eller 2000 for discussion of the contested existence of prehistoric matriarchies), it is hard to imagine how such a society might function. Some feminists have expressed concern over the demands and losses that such a revolution would require of women and men (hooks 2015). This is where it may be fruitful to turn to fiction for inspiring and creative imaginings of alternative religious structures.

Matriarchies in Horror

The horror genre is known for exploring everyday fears and deeper social or political anxieties through a fantastical and nihilistic lens (Kermode 2018). Horror film and TV shows are

an ideal medium for tearing down comfortable, familiar worlds to rebuild bold, new frontiers for audience consideration. Arguably, videogames have even greater capacity to create immersive spaces through which to explore cultural anxieties via our control of and relation to symbolic avatars and representative environments (Kirkland 2009b) which can "embody uncomfortable truths about ourselves and our society" (Steinmetz 2018, 268). Videogames can make us feel masterful but can also confine and oppress us through imagery and gameplay (ibid). In comparison to other media products, there is a decreased distance between the horror and the participatory player/viewer, which further encourages us to relate to the presented content.

The vulnerability and corruption of women is a common theme in horror, such as through demonic possession, and these portrayals often conflate religious notions of 'abjection' and impurity with the female body (Creed 1996). Horror is well-suited for exploring complex social issues such as difference, oppression, and the abuse of power within patriarchal societies – look to the number of films addressing the witch trials of Europe and North America – yet despite the genre's potential for subverting the status quo, there are surprisingly few depictions of alternative power structures where women are centered and afforded power. The examples that do exist paint a negative picture of the prospect.

Matriarchal cults in film are often shown as the source of horror and evil hidden within wider patriarchal society. The most notable example is *The Wicker Man* (Hardy 1973)[ii] but a recent resurgence in depictions of matriarchal groups in *Suspiria* (Guadagnino 2018), *Hereditary*, *Midsommar* (Aster 2018; 2019) and the *Paranormal Activity* franchise, most notably *Paranormal Activity 3* (Joost and Schulman 2011), suggests a renewed interest (and renewed anxieties) in the prospect of female-centric societies (for fuller discussion see Subisatti and West 2015). Whilst some aspects of these matriarchies are depicted positively, such as the sense of community, loyalty and engagement with nature, they are also demarked as amoral, anti-Christian cults who torture and murder (predominantly male) non-believers in pursuit of their faiths. The horror of these societies lies in their deep contrast to the 'normal' standpoint – primarily male, white, Western, Christian – against which they are clearly 'other'. By depicting alternative societies as a source of horror and violence, films such as *Midsommar* or *The Wicker Man* reinforce the patriarchal insistence that any challenges to the dominant power structures would be unnatural, immoral and inherently damaging to humanity, especially men. This renders such depictions as interesting and refreshing but ultimately problematic more so than hopeful.

And with no comparable templates in reality or in history, this becomes the dominant viewpoint on matriarchal communities.

Another view of matriarchal religious communities which also reflects many feminist theological critiques is *Silent Hill*.

<center>*Silent Hill*</center>

Silent Hill is a psychological, survival-horror franchise which centers on the eponymous fictional town. The original videogame *Silent Hill* (1999) was developed by Team Silent (part of the Japanese company, Konami) and has spawned 11 further games, two films and multiple novelizations. In the games, players are forced to explore the mostly-abandoned town in order to solve clues and contend with the nightmarish monsters stalking the foggy streets. The twisting narratives are less coherent than typical horror games and the inclusion of 'otherworlds' – when the town periodically shifts into the Fog World, a transitional realm of Darkness and the disintegrating, nightmarish Otherworld or Nowhere – creates an unnerving, disorienting experience for players (Pruett 2011; Kirkland 2015). Despite the shifting realities, it is a very human world which focuses on those trapped in the town with each title in the franchise following a new protagonist as they search for a missing loved one or some truth about themselves.

This analysis will focus on the first and third games (Team Silent/Konami 1999; 2003) and the film *Silent Hill* (Gans 2006) due to the overlapping themes and common religious elements.[iii]

Silent Hill (1999, abbreviated as *SH1*) follows Harry Mason in his search for his daughter, Cheryl, following a car accident. He encounters a sinister cult, The Order, led by the fanatical Dahlia Gillespie who burned her own daughter, Alessa, as part of a failed ritual to 'birth' the cult's deity. Alessa has supernatural powers and survived the burning by splitting into two: the 'innocent' part of her was manifested as the infant Cheryl (whom Harry adopted), whilst the rest of her remained incapacitated in the town's hospital. Alessa's torture exaggerated her powers and created the darkness and monsters in the town.[iv] Harry thwarts the cult's plot and rescues the infant reincarnation of Alessa/Cheryl, whom he raises as Heather (the protagonist of *Silent Hill 3*).

In *Silent Hill 3* (Team Silent/Konami 2003, referred to as *SH3*), we follow Heather Morris, a teenage girl who is lured to Silent Hill to avenge the murder of her father and discover the truth of her origins. The game is a direct sequel to *SH1* and Heather is revealed to be the reincarnation of Alessa/Cheryl who is chosen by the cult (this time led by Claudia Wolf) as the vessel for their unborn god. Heather disrupts the ritual – by vomiting up the half-formed deity – and Claudia takes her place but dies during the birth. Heather kills the god and escapes the town.

The film adaptation, *Silent Hill* (Gans 2006 - referred to as *Silent Hill,* 2006), covers the events of *SH1* with some notable differences. We follow Rose Da Silva, the adoptive mother of Sharon, as she searches for her daughter after they become separated in Silent Hill. Rose encounters the zealous cult, the Brethren, led by Christabella who ritually burned Alessa as a witch in an attempt to purify her 'sin' (Dahlia is Alessa's mother but is a minor cult member in the film). The burning split Alessa into three selves; her innocence as manifested in Sharon, the human Alessa who remained bedbound in the hospital, and Dark Alessa, the embodiment of suffering who is responsible for the monstrous otherworlds. In order to save her daughter from being burned, Rose helps Dark Alessa and adult Alessa gain entry to the church where the cult seek sanctuary from the monsters (most notably, the iconic Pyramid Head). Alessa kills the cultists in revenge and Rose and Sharon leave Silent Hill with the suggestion that Dark Alessa has merged with Sharon and gone with them.

Religious Imagery and Themes

Silent Hill is characterized by dark, psychological imagery of torture, gory violence and Catholic-tinged religious symbolism, with different narratives centering around sin, atonement and retribution (Steinmetz 2018). The shifting otherworlds are clear representations of limbo, purgatory and hell and the religious cult who inhabit the town feature prominently in the plot.

*Silent Hill'*s design is an amalgamation of Western and Eastern cultural influences and this is particularly reflected in the town's theology, which blends Judeo-Christian iconographies (crosses, crucified bodies, churches and altars) with elements of Shinto (mirrors/water as portals, realms of fog/darkness, pollution and purification), Native American and Aztec mythologies (Pruett 2010). This combination creates a multidenominational picture of organized religions yet the vast majority of aspects and symbols are coded as Christian. The immediacy of religious

imagery in the games (a crucified corpse in *SH1*, Heather's memories of magic symbols and altars in *SH3*) and film (the opening scenes feature an illuminated cross and billboards with psalms) adds weight to the intentionality and relevance of these theological themes (Subisatti and West 2017).

The cult is the only functioning organization in Silent Hill. As other traditional institutions are either absent or reduced to a few individuals (Cybil Bennett and Officer Gucci as police, Dr Kauffman and Lisa Garland as medical staff), religion is the dominant power in the town. The cult appears to follow a version of Christianity yet there are some contradictions: in *SH1*, Dahlia refers to the cult as the 'other church', the altar beneath the Antiques Shop is scrawled with 'No God' and they worship a female deity. This suggests that Christianity has some importance but their belief system is mixed with something more ancient (in line with the nature of the other matriarchies on film previously discussed). In the film, the Brethren are even more clearly depicted as Christian through their language (they repeatedly speak of sin), their embellished crucifix symbol and the biblical passages and murals adorning their church. There is also no mention of a female deity.

Through the viewpoints and interactions of different characters, *Silent Hill* presents a uniquely multifaceted picture of religious oppression of women. The Order is depicted as using indoctrination, hallucinogens, and violent sacrificial rituals to cement their belief system and it is their unchecked religious fanaticism which has created the dark otherworlds through the persecution and murder of a young girl. The Brethren are obsessed with purifying sin by burning women and girls who are demarked as witches through their challenge to the cult's control. Similar to the archetype of Eve, the persecution of witches is another form of female subjugation and scapegoating which was especially used against women who posed a threat to patriarchal control by refusing to conform to expectations of purity and femininity (Daly 1973). Biblically speaking, "rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft" (1 Samuel 15:23 KJV).

Women in *Silent Hill*

Silent Hill embodies many feminist criticisms of organized religion, particularly Christian fundamentalism, in three distinct ways. Firstly, it reflects and subverts the ways that theological frameworks often depict women as lesser. It also highlights the fallacy of addressing gender

inequality by affording power and reverence to the women living within patriarchal religious structures. Finally, it presents several compelling models of female resistance to the status quo. Subsequently, *Silent Hill* can be seen as a 'dark doppelganger' (Kirkland 2009a) to traditional, patriarchal religious systems which have silenced and erased women for centuries.

The town is populated by complex female characters who both reflect and eschew the binary stereotypes usually available to women: Alessa and Dahlia, Heather and Claudia, Rose and Christabella. Even the dark versions of Alessa are not portrayed as completely evil, for she protects and cares for her adult self, helps to obtain justice against her abusers and shows mercy to other characters. The series confronts female-centric issues such as the persecution of witchcraft, abuse, sexual agency, birth, and motherhood. The Silent Hill cults have a distinctly matriarchal structure and are consistently led by women – Dahlia in *SH1*, Claudia in *SH3*, Christabella in *Silent Hill* (2006) – and in *SH1* and *SH3,* their primary goal is to facilitate the birth of their female god through female sacrifice (Alessa and Heather, respectively).

At a cursory glance, the series seems to replicate some less than progressive messages. The protagonists in the games are male (other than Heather in *SH3*), many of the monsters are crude mutations of the female form (patients, nurses, the deformed god) and the major antagonistic are women (Alessa, Dahlia, Claudia). *SH1* especially falls into typical gendered tropes with Harry as the male protector searching for his vulnerable daughter, reassuring the passive, emotional Lisa and thwarting the deceitful Dahlia and vengeful Alessa. Despite the raised status of women within the cult, the organization perpetuates many traditional patriarchal injuries against women, casting them out as 'false prophets' (Dahlia) and violently punishing those who do not live up to their ideals (Alessa, Cybil, Sharon). This reinforces the dominant narratives that women are lesser and therefore deserving of retribution for societal violations.

Yet on closer analysis, *Silent Hill* challenges these tropes. Firstly, the cults are depicted as cruel and misguided and their violence against women is directly challenged by the protagonists:

> Rose: *"that's your answer – burn anything you are afraid of, anything you can't control!"*
>
> *Silent Hill*, 2006
>
> Heather: *"a God born from hatred can never create a perfect paradise.*"

Ultimately, their cruel and persecutory religion fails them; in *SH1*, the ritual fails to birth the deity, whereas in *SH3*, the deity is weak and easily defeated. In *Silent Hill*, 2006, the cultists are unable to protect themselves from Alessa's vengeful punishment.

The wealth of strong and compassionate female characters in *Silent Hill* challenges the notion of women as lesser, especially in relation to their male counterparts; they are not weak, emotional or passive and men are not overly-masculine or dominant (Kirkland, 2009b). There are no sexualized characters in *Silent Hill* aside from the monstrous nurses, which can be read as exaggerated reflections of Alessa's attitude towards her supposed caregivers. In *SH3*, men are mostly minor bystanders to the female-driven narratives, with Heather's interactions with Harry, Douglas Cartland, Leonard, and Vincent designed to aid her development and facilitate her confrontation with Claudia and the female god. The male characters in *Silent Hill*, 2006 are well-meaning yet ineffectual; it is Rose who rescues Sharon whilst Chris and Officer Gucci remain sidelined in the real world.[v] The other male characters are relegated to voiceless, nameless cultists who are often anonymized by protective mining gear and reduced to their physicality as thugs who assault and restrain the female characters at Christabella's orders. Even in the male-driven narrative of *SH1*, it is the female characters who have knowledge and guide Harry through the world (Cybil, Dahlia, Lisa). Cybil is a capable, trustworthy figure and despite Lisa's emotional dependency, she is the one who exacts revenge on Dr Kauffman. Most notably, although Harry is the protagonist, *SH1* is essentially the story of Alessa.

Other notable male characters are the monstrous Pyramid Head, the retributive enforcer of societal rules (he skins a cultist for being outside the church), the school janitor who abuses Alessa and is transformed into a barbed-wire-wrapped abomination and Leonard Wolf, the abusive cultist father who attacks Heather. These monsters are stark representations of the violence enacted against women and girls who violate societal boundaries or are left vulnerable without male protectors; although hideous, they reflect the abuse of women rather than being male inversions of Creed's 'monstrous feminine'. Throughout the *Silent Hill* series, male monsters often reflect the monstrous patriarchal forces of real life[vi].

The Monstrous Female

As male monsters reflect different forms of violence against women, the feminine creatures represent the ways that women are restricted by religious and societal norms. The violent, twisted nurses embody the distorted care which Alessa received and are a bastardization of the stereotype of women as 'natural' caregivers. The shadowy Larval Stalkers in *SH1* and the burning Grey Children in *Silent Hill*, 2006 are ethereal childlike monsters which can be seen as personifying the violation of childhood innocence, in particular the sexual abuse and burning of Alessa. They are mostly benign and follow Harry and Rose in search of protection more than to cause harm; again, these creatures are frightening not because of their feminine characteristics but due to the grotesque reflections of female restriction and suffering which they represent.

The most notable female monster is the complicated character of Alessa. Despite her accused status as witch and subsequent destruction of the town, her portrayal is deeply sympathetic. Alessa is defined by her innocence and her "vulnerability as a young girl underscores her body as an effective locus of suffering" (Green 2014, 152); she is shown as a gentle figure who is punished for who she is rather than what she does (in the film, it is implied that her 'sin' was the illicit affair between her mother and unknown father). Like the banished Lilith, it was the act of punishing her for refusing to meet patriarchal expectations – in Alessa's case, daring to have power – which created the monster. The image of the badly burned adult Alessa emerging in the church, restricted by bloody bandages, is pitiful and saddening as much as monstrous and it complicates the division between victim and villain; as with her disfigurement of the abusive janitor, Alessa's violence against the cult is retributive and restorative.

Arguably, another monstrous female is the false mother of the cult, Dahlia/Christabella. Their decisive actions and lack of empathy are more typical of masculine villains and they reject the role of mother in favor of leadership and power. Although Christabella's death is overtly sexualized – she is torn apart by barbed wire in a crude sexual assault – this violation could be intended to expose her as a false mother and as much Alessa's cruel creator as Dahlia (Green 2014), rather than commentary on the abjection of the female body.

Speaking Out and Bearing Witness

"Silencing is a hallmark of oppression", especially when speaking of abuse (Jordan 2012, 254) and as such, women are often omitted from theological narratives. Conversely, *Silent Hill* elevates women's stories and encourages us to bear witness to their suffering. In *SH3*, we accompany Heather on her mission to avenge Harry's death. Although she is assertive, there are also moments of uncertainty and it is through her emotional colors that we experience the game. Her emotional breakdown after finding her father's body is given as much importance in an extended cutscene as the plot points which follow, enabling us to engage with her loss. At the Otherworld amusement park, she has to fight her gruesome doppelganger as the Memory of Alessa which could be read as her symbolic resistance of the cult's bloody history against women, or her choosing to excise her personal trauma (as an incarnation of Alessa) rather than letting it define and consume her. At the end of game, Heather decides to reclaim her identity as Cheryl; no one else defines or names her and although we control Heather throughout the game, she dictates this outcome of her (our) journey.

In *Silent Hill*, 2006 we follow Rose's quest to alleviate Sharon's night disturbances, which take her to the town in search of answers; this is in contrast to Chris' initial insistence that they consider medication and hospitalization to treat their daughter. Rose wants to do more than manage the symptoms or pathologize Sharon, she believes that *understanding* what she is experiencing is the way to help her. We also bear witness to the fate of Cybil, the police officer who helps Rose search for her daughter; although she is not as fleshed out as the other characters, we are forced to watch her brutal beating and ritualistic burning through uncompromisingly graphic scenes. The women in Silent Hill are hardly passive martyrs to their fates but the portrayal of their treatment makes us *witnesses* to their suffering and further subverts the notion of women as inactive, vulnerable victims of patriarchal forces. We sympathize with these characters because we descend into Silent Hill alongside them and are encouraged to engage with their losses, their injuries, and dilemmas.

Most notably, we bear witness to Alessa's suffering. Alessa herself does not speak; she does not tell Dahlia about the janitor's assault against her and is silent in the hospital and the church, which is indicative of "a long tradition of female victims and martyrs" (Green 2014, 154) but her story is told in other ways. It slowly unfolds through Harry and Rose's understandings as they explore the places where she was abused – the school, the hospital, the hotel, the other church. Her story is told through Lisa's shocked testimony of Alessa's injuries and survival. In

her analysis of the film, Amy Green compares Dahlia to Mary Magdalene as she bears witness to the betrayal and torture of Alessa as well as her retributive resurrection in the church (2014); after Rose and Sharon leave Silent Hill, Dahlia is left as the only survivor who can speak of what happened. But it is Dark Alessa who speaks most for her injured, adult self and forces us alongside Rose to witness her suffering, through visions of her betrayal and immolation by the cult as well as her painful existence in the hospital. To allow Alessa entry to the church, Rose has to bear witness and "tell them the truth" that they burned an innocent child. When bedbound Alessa rises up into the church, we witness the extent of her physical wounds and broken frame; yet her expression while slaughtering the cultists – of agony and sadness more than vengeful glee – frames her revenge as righting a wrong more than a sadistic pleasure. Like Dahlia, we are forced to confront the horror of her daughter's transformation and see the pain in her question: *"what have you become?"* So far, we have followed Rose and Sharon but at this point we become invested in the perverse justice of the evisceration of Christabella and the others; and unlike Rose and Sharon, we do not hide our eyes from it. Dark Alessa dances and revels in the falling blood, aligning us (as viewers and horror fans) with the savage, hateful part of Alessa, which makes our witnessing all the more cathartic.

As an aside, a promotional poster for the film featured young Alessa with her mouth removed. Considering the different ways that women's stories are told throughout, this image may herald the film's intention to explore the ways that women's and girl's voices are smothered (Green 2014).

Alternative Mothers

Motherhood is a major theme in *Silent Hill* and we are presented with a variety of complex and imperfect mothers who demonstrate that the role requires significantly more than biological birth (Green 2014). Dahlia is the ultimate callous mother in *SH1*, abusing her daughter and showing similar disregard for Cheryl in fervent pursuit of her faith; she is doubly a mother to Alessa, as her violence also 'births' her into her split selves. Her counterpart in the film adaptation is Christabella, who initially appears as a compassionate, maternal figure to the Brethren but similarly deceives and tortures others to meet her own ideological ends; she 'tricks' the naïve Dahlia into letting them purify her child. The film version of Dahlia thus represents the

'failed mother' (Green 2014), who may love her child but must shoulder the guilt of being unable to protect her. Curiously, the cult accuse Alessa of not having a father which raises some suggestion of a virgin conception (though it is more likely she is being damned for her sexuality, which adds to her comparisons with Mary Magdalene). Another 'failed mother' is Claudia, who endeavors to bring about the birth of God but dies in the process and is unable to protect her progeny from Heather.

These imperfect mothers sit in stark contrast to Rose. Green has written extensively on the comparisons between Rose and Mary, mother of Jesus; she argues that compared with Mary's subservience, Rose "represents both the sorrowful, searching mother and also the one ready to enact violence to be reunited with her offspring and to punish evildoers" (2014, 149). She is caring and sympathetic to her child as well as to Dark Alessa but is also a "violent avenger" when facing Christabella and the cult. Interestingly, Rose appears to have some Christian faith as she prays for God's help when being pursued by the Brethren in the school but the necklace she clutches is a locket of Sharon rather than a crucifix, which exalts her role as mother into something divine.

Rose also overcomes the virgin-mother dichotomy discussed by theological scholars. As adoptive mother of Sharon – and potentially of Dark Alessa through her later absorption – she has not biologically birthed her children but cares for them more fiercely than Alessa's 'natural' mother. She is willing to sacrifice herself for her child: she travels to an unknown town, survives a car accident, escapes monsters, is separated from her loving partner and is stabbed by Christabella, all for Sharon. She is also willing to help Alessa by offering her body as a vessel for Dark Alessa to enter the church, another allegory for motherhood. Green (2014) suggests that Rose is the modern archetype for Mary who manages the apparent contradictions between compassion, ferocity, and love that are complicated by traditional, passive images of the Holy Mother.

Moving to *SH3*, there is also the figure of the unwilling mother in Heather. After realizing that she is gestating a god-fetus (via another seemingly virginal 'pregnancy'), she chooses to abort the fetus rather than carry the twisted conception to term, rejecting the cult's hateful ideologies as well as asserting her reproductive autonomy. This monstrous subversion of pregnancy and the half-formed god that emerges from Claudia illustrates the hideous abnormality of procreation when it is forced against the will of the mother; Heather is a bold

archetype of choice and self-preservation against the venerated sanctity of selfless motherhood so often represented.

Finally, there is Alessa, the "mother of god" (Dahlia, *SH1*). As a means of surviving her suffering, she 'births' her innocence into Cheryl/Sharon and her rage into Dark Alessa, and also conceives the monstrous representations of her abuses which stalk the town: yet more versions of an immaculate conception. In the final showdown in *SH1*, she is reborn as the Incubator and delivers her innocence to Harry for protection, as the baby Heather. Her mother status comes not just from her progeny but also her mercy; she spares Rose and Sharon during the seemingly indiscriminate slaughter, and also Dahlia, whom she appears to have forgiven for her inaction:

> *Dahlia: "why did she not take me with the others?"*
> *Rose: "because you're her mother. Mother is God in the eyes of a child."*
>
> *Silent Hill*, 2006

The value in these varied incarnations of motherhood lies in their challenge to the notion of a single, 'perfect' maternal template of meekness and selflessness. These archetypes also allow for the rejection of motherhood altogether, an option which is often not presented as available to women but one which elevates female humanity and agency above the ability to procreate. To reject the role of mother can be seen as an act of resistance in the face of such strident expectations and restrictive gender roles.

Female Resistance and Female Saviors

The world of *Silent Hill* provides several templates for "female power, both redemptive and terrible" (Green 2014, 149) which resist the patriarchal constructs that try to suppress their agency. Rose provides a loving and fierce archetype for motherhood who transcends patriarchal expectations and embodies female autonomy without rejecting her gender. Yet she does not attempt to control or belittle the other women; she recognizes Dahlia's humanity despite her passive neglect as a mother and moves from being an active participant to quiet observer in Alessa's revenge. Her status is elevated above a purely relational role to Sharon or Chris to the status of a deity: as both Rose and Cybil proclaim, "mother is God in the eyes of a child".

Cybil in *Silent Hill*, 2006 also represents a powerful Savior through her role of selfless helper. Despite having no personal connection to Sharon, Alessa or the town, she ends up sacrificing everything to support Rose. At first, she represents a typically masculine, patriarchal authority figure (short hair, gruff attitude, mistrustful of Rose's story, physical aggression) but throughout the film she sheds her trappings of authority (through the loss of her helmet, glasses, jacket, and gun) and becomes more compassionate. Cybil's dedication to saving others is mentioned several times by Gucci and her last words are a plea not to spare herself but to save Sharon; she is ultimately burned for the 'sin' of selfless support of other women and defying the religious system which persecutes them.

In the figure of Heather, we have a template for resistance and survival that is grounded in reality. In many ways, she is a 'typical' teenage girl as evidenced by her interest in fashion, her playfulness and sarcastic humor (*"don't you think blondes have more fun?"*); yet these traits are not belittled or equated with weakness. Despite her age, she is streetwise and self-protective; she refuses to engage with Douglas when he approaches her at the mall – *"are you still following me, do I have to scream?"* – and remains mistrustful of other characters' motivations. She also survives her trauma, violence and loss without having to fragment or compartmentalize into monstrous versions of herself. She is thoughtful and considerate to the pain of others – she listens to the words of the Confessor (who may be Dahlia) and forgives Douglas for his role in The Order's plot and her father's death – but she vehemently rejects the cult's promises of salvation in favor of her moral beliefs:

> Heather: *"suffering is a fact of life. Either you learn how to deal with that or you go under. You can stay in your own little dream world but you can't keep hurting other people."*
>
> *SH3*

As the counterpoint to Alessa, Heather chooses to resist her hate and pain rather than embrace it yet this strength does not minimize her survival. She is a model of resistance who is strong because she *has* to be and the action centers around her because of the cult's machinations; she does not choose to seek it out. She is also the most self-aware of her reality, asking *"is that the end? I guess it's time to roll the credits…"* before stepping into the Darkness

realm to return to the real world. This makes her a very human character. Kirkland points out that Heather's combination of typically feminine traits with her strength and complexity makes her a relatable figure for both female and male gamers (2009b).

Although antagonist as much as protagonist, Alessa is perhaps the most interesting template of resistance as simultaneously victim, survivor and avenger. As with Heather, the severity of her abuses is not minimized by her survival and she is arguably the most powerful character in the series: Pyramid Head, Leonard Wolf or the half-formed god have little weight in comparison. Her cruel actions are not reduced to simple 'evil', for she embraced Dark Alessa and transformed Silent Hill out of desperation to survive rather than an intention to cause hurt:

> Alessa: "when you're hurt and scared for so long, fear and pain turn to hate and the hate starts to change the world."

> Silent Hill, 2006

Even her existence is shown as an act of resistance, through her supernatural powers. Even though it is bestowed on her by others, her identity as a witch is a powerful one "beyond the good and evil of patriarchy's world" (Daly 1973, 66). Alessa becomes a Savior of sorts by releasing the cultists from the horrors of their reality through her righteous revenge. In the church, Dahlia observes her 'becoming', as her fragmentation allowed her to marry the conflicts between honoring and protecting her innocence, valuing the justice of her rage as well as accepting the existence of her true adult self. Despite all that was done to her, she retains her autonomy and her choice of transformation is an act of resistance: she was not created, she *became.*

These models of female resistance can also be seen as possible Saviors for women looking to resolve the complicated relationship between self-autonomy and faith through "a Christ who can affirm her own personhood as woman" (Ruether 1985, 112) and their subversion of both feminine and masculine traits could also provide meaning for men looking to escape the restrictions of patriarchal convention. However, as is often the case with cultural representations, it must be noted that *Silent Hill* only reflects the experiences of white women and that these depictions of motherhood and female Saviors are unlikely to offer representation or meaning for women of color.

The Fallacy of Elevating Women Within a Patriarchy

The game series also addresses the fallacy of empowering women within existing systems of power and expecting change or equity. The horror scholar Alison Lang (2014) observes that religious cults often emerge from a dissatisfaction with mainstream options for autonomy or acceptance, therefore the female-centric cults of *Silent Hill* could be seen as a (problematic) reaction to the ways that women are omitted and ignored by mainstream religions. The fallacy of equality is clearly demonstrated through the cult's savage capacity for cruelty; despite their matriarchal belief system and power structure, they view women as vessels for torture and death in pursuit of their faith. The Order's female god is mostly absent and when she does appear in *SH3*, she is fallible enough to be dispatched by a non-believer (Heather); as previously mentioned, female deities often support the illusion of equality and the fact that The Order's deity is never referred to as a 'goddess' suggests she is just another version of the traditional male Creator. The god of Silent Hill is painted as an inversion of the God of Christianity, whose tenets are hate and destruction rather than love and forgiveness:

> *Claudia: "I thank you for nurturing God with all the hate in your heart".*
>
> *SH3*

The fact that the deity's existence is mostly irrelevant to the plot of the games (and absent in the film) shows that it is the blind faith and conduct of the human followers, not the underlying mythology, which is the source of evil in *Silent Hill*; this mirrors many of the caveats which criticize scripture or practice more so than religion itself. Despite the assumption of female gentleness and compassion, Dahlia and Christabella are quick to advocate deceit, torture, and murder in pursuit of their faith. The murals in the hotel in *Silent Hill,* 2006 suggest they have burned many women in their battle against the Darkness yet they absolve themselves of guilt by blaming the town's hellish transformation on sinners and fallen women. And as discussed, the cult has no power and does not offer anything liberating or hopeful for women (or anyone), other than as a counterpoint to the versions of resistance who come up against them; the cultists live

bleak, dangerous and restricted lives within the desolate town, with little hope of salvation or reprieve.

The Counterworld

As well as exploring individual templates for salvation and resistance, *Silent Hill* presents a version of Daly's counterworld, the radical deconstruction of patriarchal society, through its shifting reality states. As player/viewer, we witness the spreading decay of rust and rotting metal, flaking paint and ash which takes over the town and this disintegration is most apparent within the institutions which are key sites of socialization and patriarchal control: schools, hospitals, churches. The deeper we progress through the otherworlds, the more unstable and disorienting these places become and the reality shifts are heralded by sirens or crackling radio static, harbingers of communication failure and crumbling humanity. On a more metaphorical level, the otherworlds may also reflect the different stages of coming to terms with such a counterworld; the Fog World represents confusion, lack of direction or hope, the Darkness realm stands for the void of the unknown before we enter the horrific, deconstructed reality of Otherworld/Nowhere.

As well as the collapse of physical environments, *Silent Hill* focuses on the fracturing of the heteronormative family: Harry's wife has died and he is separated from Cheryl; Heather is orphaned and unsure of her identity; Rose, Chris and Sharon are permanently separated. Although these splintered families and the transitions between otherworlds are both effective mechanisms for advancing plot or tension and characteristic of the series' horror aesthetic, they can also act as metaphor for the extreme upheaval of the status quo. Pursuit of a true counterworld would mean the destruction of everything patriarchal – from societies to institutions and individual families – and the results *are* horrifying. This points towards the representations of individual resistance as a more hopeful, and bearable, direction for escaping the confines of patriarchal control.

However, it is apparent that such resistance cannot come without loss. In *SH1*, Harry escapes the town with a new soul to care for but he has had to leave his seven-year-old daughter behind. The events of *SH3* leave Heather facing a brave new future alone, without her family, her name or her old identity. *Silent Hill*, 2006 ends with Rose and Sharon (and possibly Dark Alessa) separated from Chris in the Fog World. Yet there is also hope: Harry has Heather,

Heather embraces her new identity and Rose and Sharon seem safe and content to be with each other.

Conclusion

In her thorough analysis of *Silent Hill*, Green (2014) summarizes the film as a critique of blind faith more so than of Christianity. However, I would argue that the series dissects and explores the ways that religion can be exploited in justification of the devaluation and control of women. Feminist theologians have long championed the need for alternative religious canons which provide value and respect to women, yet none exist. Perhaps such alternatives can be created and imagined through subversions of male-dominated societies and the exploration of new possibilities and counterworlds. With its multi-layered portrayal of religion, gender roles, oppression and retribution, *Silent Hill* fulfills these stipulations by both problematizing patriarchal structures and providing complex, relatable female-driven models of resistance. It presents a matriarchal society which imbues women with power and value whilst also demonstrating how such a system would replicate the devaluation and persecution of women; although this seems to follow the narrative set by other negative portrayals of matriarchies, *Silent Hill* explores why this would be problematic and offers more realistic feminist alternatives.

At the very least, immersive media products like *Silent Hill* can provide women with complex alternatives to the restricted templates afforded through societal norms. We can aspire to be gentle and ferocious like Rose, or to recreate ourselves as an act of resistant survival like Alessa, or refuse the expectations defined by our gender like Heather. We can also experience the catharsis of bearing witness to the realities of female suffering and entertain the possibility of restorative justice. In this way, the horror genre – especially the immersive world of survival-horror videogaming – may continue to be influenced by religious themes and in turn, may shape theological understandings of the conflict between the oppression and liberation of women.

Malone wrote that "it is unlikely that the grip of patriarchy will ever be completely loosened, but the process of trying to create an inclusive community can bring joy and even exhilaration" (1999, 225). Ultimately, isn't that why we engage with the alternative worlds presented by horror, to enjoy and be exhilarated by the experience? For some viewers, the

fantastical counterworlds of *Silent Hill* may offer a hopeful, if horrifying, alternative to the status quo.

Notes

[i] Many of these criticisms also apply to the readings and practices of other world religions, and even more egalitarian belief systems such as Buddhism or Shinto view women as lesser and restrict their involvement with religious spaces, roles and rituals (Howland 1999; Satha-Anand 1999; Littleton 2002).
[i] It may be debated whether *The Wicker Man* actually depicts an egalitarian society due to the leadership of Lord Summerisle but I would argue that the general authority given to women and the veneration of female sexuality and fertility would warrant its consideration as a matriarchy.
[i] Although *Silent Hill 2* (2001) is generally considered part of the original canon in terms of themes and mythology, it is not included here due to its focus on psychoanalytic themes more so than religious elements.
[i] It should be noted that the background mythology and events in the franchise are complex and differ both between and within games, depending on player choices. For the ease of clarity, I have tried to focus analysis on common themes and canonical/'normal' events and endings.
[i] Interestingly, the feminist slant of *Silent Hill*, 2006 appears to be a happy accident, as interviews with Christophe Gans and screenwriter Roger Avary suggest that a critique of patriarchy was not part of their original plan for the film (Green 2014).
[i] Although *Silent Hill 2* is not included in the current discussion, the Pyramid Head, Mannequin and Abstract Daddy monsters clearly reflect male abuses of women.

Bibliography

Abdel Halim, Asma. M. 1999. Reconciling the Opposites: Equal but Subordinate. In *Religious Fundamentalisms and the Human Rights of Women*, edited by Courtney. W. Howland, 203-14, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Aster, Ari, dir. *Midsommar.* 2019; A24.

Aster, Ari, dir. *Hereditary*. 2018; A24.

Creed, Barbara. 1996. Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection. In *The Dread of Difference*, edited by Barry K. Grant, 37-67, Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Daly, Mary. 1973. *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*, Boston: Beacon Press.

Eller, Cynthia. 2000. *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory*, Boston: Beacon Press.

Gans, Christophe, dir. *Silent Hill*. 2006; Sony Pictures Home Entertainment and TriStar Pictures.

Green, Amy. M. 2014. "Mother is God in the Eyes of a Child": Mariology, Revelation, and Mothers in Silent Hill, *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, 14, 1, 143-164.

Guadagnino, Luca, dir. *Suspiria*. 2018; Lionsgate.

Hardy, Robin, dir. *The Wicker Man*. 1973; Canal+.

hooks, bell. 2015. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, New York: Routledge.

Howland, Courtney W. 1999. *Religious Fundamentalisms and the Human Rights of Women*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Joost, Henry and Schulman, Ariel, dirs. *Paranormal Activity 3*. 2011; Paramount Pictures UK.

Jordan, Jan. 2012. Silencing rape, silencing women. In *Handbook on Sexual Violence*, edited by Jennifer Brown and Sandra L. Westlake, Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

Jordan, Jan. 2004. Beyond belief? Police, rape and women's credibility, *Criminal Justice*, 4, 1, 29-59.

Kermode, Mark, presenter. *Mark Kermode's Secrets of Cinema*. Episode 5, "Horror". Aired 14 August 2018 BBC Four UK. Accessed on BBC iPlayer 10 July 2019. https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0bfp4h7

Kirkland, Ewan. 2015. Restless Dreams and Shattered Memories: Psychoanalysis and Silent Hill, *Research Journal on the Fantastic*, Vol III, no.1 Spring, 162-82.

Kirkland, Ewan. 2009a. *Horror videogames and the uncanny*. Paper presented at the Breaking of New Ground proceedings of DiGRA, Brunel University, London UK. http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/09287.25453.pdf

Kirkland, Ewan. 2009b. Masculinity in Video Games: The Gendered Gameplay of Silent Hill, *Camera Obscura*, 71, 24, 161-83.

Kissling, Frances. 1999. Roman Catholic Fundamentalism: What's Sex (and Power) Got to Do with It? In *Religious Fundamentalisms and the Human Rights of Women*, edited by Courtney. W. Howland, 193-202, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Klopfer, Sheila. 2013. *Feminist Scholarship on Women in the Bible, The Center for Christian Ethics*, Texas: Baylor University.

Lang, Alison. 2014. "One of Us: The Transcendent Rise of Religious Cults in Horror". The Black Museum Lecture Series accessed May 21 2019. http://theblackmuseum.com/?p=1076

Littleton, C. Scott. 2002. *Understanding Shinto*, London, UK: Duncan Baird Publishers.

Malone, Mary. T. 1999. Women in Theology, *The Furrow*, 50, 4, 217-25.

Pruett, Chris. (2010) The Anthropology of Fear: Learning About Japan Through Horror Games, *Interface: The Journal of Education, Community and Values*, 10, 9, 1-19.

Pruett, Chris. 2011 "The Changing Utility of the Otherworld in the Silent Hill Series". Online gaming blog horror.dreamdawn, June 12, 2011. Accessed August 19, 2019. http://horror.dreamdawn.com/?p=29211.

Rose, Susan. D. 1999. Christian Fundamentalism: Patriarchy, Sexuality, and Human Rights. In *Religious Fundamentalisms and the Human Rights of Women*, edited by Courtney. W. Howland, 9-20, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ruether, Rosemary Radford. 1985. *Womanguides: Readings Towards a Feminist Theology*, Toronto, Canada: Beacon Press.

Russell, Letty M. 1985 Authority and the Challenge of Feminist Interpretation. In *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, edited by Letty. M. Russell, 137-46, Oxford UK: Basil Blackwell.

Satha-Anand, Suwanna. 1999. Truth over Convention: Feminist Interpretations of Buddhism. In *Religious Fundamentalisms and the Human Rights of Women*, edited by Courtney. W. Howland, 281-92, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Schur, Edwin M. 1984. *Labeling Women Deviant: Gender, Stigma, and Social Control*, New York: McGraw-Hill Inc.

Stanton, Elizabeth C. 1993. *The Woman's Bible*, Boston: UPNE (Original work published in 1895).

Steinmetz, Kevin F. 2018. Carceral horror: Punishment and control in Silent Hill, *Crime Media Culture*, 14, 2, 265-87.

Subissati, Andrea and West, Alexandra. 2017. *Achievement Unlocked*: *Resident Evil (2002) and Silent Hill (2006)*. Faculty of Horror Podcast April 18 2017, Accessed on 28 August 2019. https://www.facultyofhorror.com/2017/04/episode-49-achievement-unlocked-resident-evil-2002-and-silent-hill-2006/

Subissati, Andrea and West, Alexandra. 2015. *Mother Lover: Matriarchy in The Wicker Man (1973 & 2006) and Paranormal Activity 3 (2011)*. Faculty of Horror Podcast April 27 2015. Accessed on 28 August 2019. https://www.facultyofhorror.com/2015/04/episode-26-mother-lover-matriarchy-in-the-wicker-man-1973-2006-and-paranormal-activity-3-2011/

Team Silent/Konami. 2003. *Silent Hill 3*, Playstation 2.

Team Silent/Konami. 1999. *Silent Hill*, Playstation.

Weber, Max. 1963. *The Sociology of Religion*, translated and edited by Ephraim Fischoff, Boston: Beacon Press.