AMANDA HAMPTON

Selected Writing Samples

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A GIRL WALKS HOME ALONE AT NIGHT

Feminism Grows Fangs

In the landscape of today's film industry, where sequels and remakes and recycled ideas abound, a film that is considered to be the first of its kind is something of a unicorn—a rarity, if not an impossibility. However, writer and director Ana Lily Amirpour has turned myth to reality with her 2014 arthouse horror flick *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*. Billed as "the first Iranian vampire Western," the film blends cultures, genres, and styles, resulting in a composition that defies categorization. It is certainly the most intriguing and original vampire movie to grace the silver screen in quite a while, creating space for reflections on patriarchal narratives, female rage, sexuality, and cultural isolation within its mesmerizing black-and-white dreamscape.

A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night is set against the desolate backdrop of the ubiquitous Bad City, where pimps and drug dealers run rampant, ravines filled with bodies are commonplace, and crime appears to be the main component of the labor force. Amidst this chaos, a hardworking young man named Arash (Arash Marandi) takes odd jobs to care for his heroin-addicted, debt-ridden father Hossein (Marshall Manesh). They are harassed by sadistic drug dealer and pimp Saeed (Dominic Rains), who is violent towards Atti (Mozhan Marno), a prostitute that works for him. This assortment of archetypal characters are tied together not only by their involvement
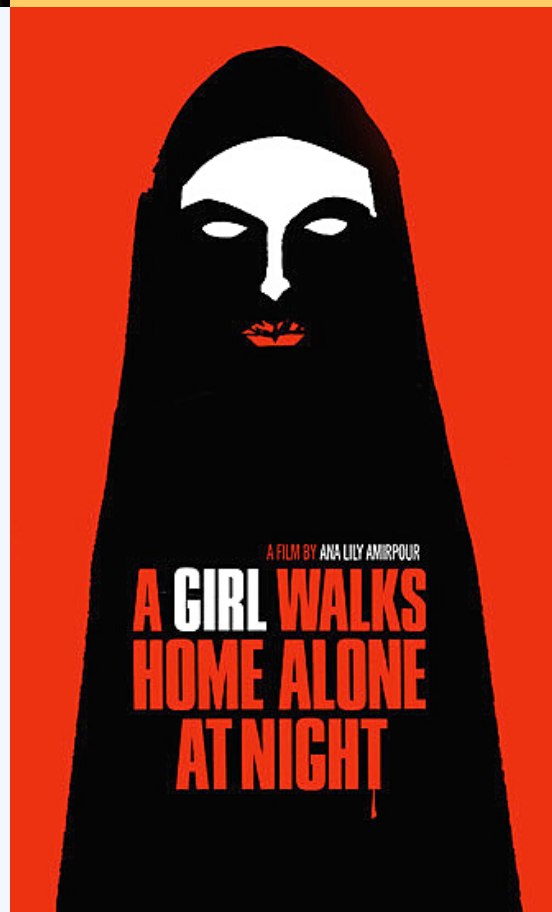
A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night (cont.)

in the city's break-neck criminality, but also by their encounters with a mysterious chador-clad avenging angel known simply as The Girl, portrayed with nuance and a dreamy sort of ruthlessness by Sheila Vand.

With wide-screen, high-contrast noir imagery and anamorphic lenses emphasizing its bleak, alien atmosphere, the film finds much of its footing in Lyle Vincent's cinematography. The style is largely reminiscent of spaghetti westerns, particularly with its serene, engrossing focus on a lone antihero with a penchant for mystery and vigilantism; here, it is reimagined with a female lead and blended with elements of classic vampire movies and Iranian culture. While the movie's plot largely echoes its visual style, stopping just short of coherence and characterized by a foreboding sense of stillness, Amirpour and Vincent manage to create an artistic landscape that is both deliriously disorienting and deeply personal where other filmmakers may have been unable to avoid veering into pretention.

Equally integral to the film's dreamy incongruity is its soundtrack, which both reflects and aids in constructing the blend of cultures, influences, and styles that allow A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night to exist beyond the limitations of convention. The eclectic mash-up of Iranian songs contrasts with the stark, noir stylization of the visual world they illustrate; without an excess of dialogue, the characters' inner worlds are often revealed through the music that fills the negative spaces. Dramatic orchestral moments bring to mind the tension of the ostentatious showdowns of traditional American westerns, folk-y melodies pay homage to Iranian films, and ethereal, operatic vocalizations balance the barren landscape with a sweep of elegance.

> DRAMATIC ORCHESTRAL MOMENTS BRING TO MIND THE TENSION OF THE OSTENTATIOUS SHOWDOWNS OF TRADITIONAL AMERICAN WESTERNS, FOLK-Y MELODIES PAY HOMAGE TO IRANIAN FILMS, AND ETHEREAL, OPERATIC VOCALIZATIONS BALANCE THE BARREN LANDSCAPE WITH A SWEEP OF ELEGANCE.

The soundtrack also serves to emphasize the kaleidoscope of contradictions that make up the nameless Girl. With her otherworldly beauty and fondness for blood and brutality, she is quite difficult to pin down; in one scene, she is a red-lipped femme fatale, in another, a punk-rock art-school girl sifting through her vinyl collection, and at times she is lovestruck, vulnerable, and scared. She is incredibly effective in inspiring terror, and seems to enjoy herself while doing it, but her forays in the shadows are accompanied by lush 80s synthpop and her walls are papered with posters of Madonna and Michael Jackson. She begins the film dancing alone in her bedroom beneath a disco ball to Farah's "Dancing Girls," a Farsi/English song reminiscent of a Blondie number with a thrumming club beat underneath. The lyrics, "she's just a normal girl / dancing to her favorite song" create a sense of intimate banality at odds with the nightmarish violence of her existence outside her room.

More than other movie genres, horror is deeply concerned with the mechanisms of violence, and thereby the power dynamics and gender roles of modern society. To exist, violence must be acted out by two parties, the predator and the prey, and this dichotomy creates a vehicle through which power structures and gender dynamics can be examined. Movies like Teeth and Jennifer's Body are revolutionary in this aspect, placing women in the role of the predator and allowing viewers a glimpse at a historically unexplored shift in power.

The very title "A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night" suggests horror and violence, with the immediate inclination being to assume that we should be fearing for the safety of the girl in question. A girl walking home alone at night is immediate cause for concern—it is common knowledge that all manner of bad men and evil things lurk in the dark, waiting to prey on unsuspecting women. Here, however, The Girl roams the streets without needing to fear for her safety, and is the perpetrator of violence rather than the victim of it.

In this way, the film subverts the typical horror movie model which positions women as victims. It reads somewhere between vampire romance Only Lovers Left Alive, with its focus on the deep bonds formed between lonely people in a world that seems hopeless, and Jennifer's Body, with its unabashed celebration of bloody, cathartic female vengeance. However, The Girl is neither as concerned as Eve nor as cunning as Jennifer, who knows how the world sees her and uses it to her advantage. The Girl goes unseen, trying on a host of different roles and seeming both amused and unimpressed by each come the end of the night. She is a chador-wearing immortal vampire who preys on violent men, has a healthy-but-awkward relationship with a love interest, is all too aware of her own morality, and listens to 80s music; she is attempting to negotiate space in a male-dominated society, and her experience is at once alien and deeply familiar.

PERSEPOLIS

A FILM BY MARJANE SATRAPI AND VINCENT PARONNAUD

PERSEPOLIS CAPSULE REVIEW

Written and directed by Marjane Satrapi and based on her autobiographical graphic novel of the same name, *Persepolis* follows a rebellious Iranian girl as she grows up during the Islamic Revolution. The simplicity of the film represents much of its interest factor: the animation is purposefully sparse and two-dimensional, using shades of black, white, and gray with an occasional appearance of color for emphasis. This makes the film feel true to the original graphic novel, and lends it a sense of stark authenticity. Despite its monochrome illustrations, the film overflows with warmth, humor, and poetry.

This sense of sincerity makes it easy to see why the movie hasbecome so popular—it is simple, elegant, and tells a story which many can empathize with. Marjane continually finds herself feeling out of place in the spaces she resides in—she is too outspoken, too wild, too much, whether she resides in Iran or in Austria, where her parents send her out of fear for her safety. *Persepolis* is, essentially, a coming of age story, and despite its format, it rings truer, warmer and more triumphant than similar fabrications like *Juno* and *Lady Bird*. Its unconventional format, unbiased narration, and casting choices (all the film's actors are French and speak in their native language) serve to create a film that is complex, compelling, and wholly alive.

SCREAMS WITH A CONSCIENCE

Why horror movies have emerged as the best vehicles for socio-political commentary

Horror movies have always aimed to cause discomfort, to invite discussion, and, of course, to instill a healthy dose of terror in movie goers. The point of the horror genre is undoubtedly to frighten, but the things that scare us have changed over the years, and the genre has evolved accordingly. Films like *Psycho* and *The Exorcist* used to incite so much fear as to cause movie-goers to rush from theatres mid-film, and now are seen as quirky classics rather than scream fests.

Now, our fears lie less in monsters in the closet and more in the daily news cycle, where chaos and violence reign supreme. The hyperawareness of the digital age has created a generation that is far more afraid of the harshness of the real world and what the people who live in it are capable of than any ghost or monster. When we watch today's horror films, there is no sense of relief or safety when the credits roll, because we know that we are not safe from the monsters we see reflected on the screen. Oppression, injustice, and abuses of power still exist when we leave the theatre.

Screams With A Conscience (cont.)

Horror films have always served as vehicles for socio-political commentary, and recent films like *Get Out*, *Us*, *Ready or Not*, and *The Hunt* have made this more evident than ever. However, they certainly weren't the first movies of the genre to reflect cultural fears and point out societal issues. 1968's *Rosemary's Baby* had subversive undercurrents focused around the politics of women's bodies, especially given its release during the height of debates surrounding contraception and reproductive rights.

Also released in 1968, George Romero's *The Night of the Living Dead* did more than birth the flesh eating zombies we know today: Romero sought to explore the anxieties of the American public surrounding escalation racial tensions and the Vietnam War and, ultimately, provide an ominous glimpse at the country's trajectory. The film was one of the first to turn the familiar into the threat, focusing on the bloodthirstiness of friends and neighbors rather than expounding on fears of the foreign and unknown.

Romero's 1978 follow-up *Dawn of the Dead* provides a critique of America's descent into consumerism, centering around a shopping mall where zombies and humans alike flock to retain a sense normalcy and horde resources, respectively. And *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1978) was largely interpreted as a reflection of fears resulting from the Red Scare, with the now-notorious "pod people" representing the perceived communist infiltration of America.

The veritable explosion that was the socio-political sphere of 2016 spurred a new wave of horror films that reflected the outpouring of anger and disillusionment illuminated by the presidential election. An NBC/Wall Street Journal poll found that 70% of Americans were angry "because our political system seems to be working only for the insiders with money and power," and movements such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo brought the simmering tensions surrounding race and gender to the forefront of the cultural consciousness.

It's impossible to think of horror as social commentary without immediately conjuring up Jordan Peele's 2017 masterpiece *Get Out*, which almost single-handedly renewed public interest in the social thriller. The film follows Chris, a black man, who is invited to spend the weekend at the suburban home of his white girlfriend's family. He is immediately put off by the strange behavior of her parents, their friends, and their black servants.

However, the real horror of *Get Out* isn't truly in the cold-blooded lunacy of the Armitage family as they kidnap black people and auction off their bodies to wealthy, ageing white acquaintances. It's in the casual racism, fetishization of black bodies, and empty claims of social awareness ("I would have voted for Obama a third time if I could") that are disturbingly, painfully familiar in modern society. Peele prompts viewers to consider the question, "What cruel and ugly forms of racism are your 'woke' friends hiding?"

His similarly incendiary project *Us* (2019) follows a family who is attacked by murderous doppelgangers intent on eradicating them. Here, especially given the glimpse the movie provides into the motivations of the monsters, Peele plays on Western culture's nebulous but prevailing fear of the Other. Peele has said that he hopes the message of the film won't be lost on the notoriously racist and xenophobic President Trump should he ever see it.

Also released in 2019, Matt Bettinelli-Olpin and Tyler Gillet's *Ready or Not* uses satire, allegory, and familiar slasher tropes to call out power-hungry, out-of-touch elites. The film follows protagonist Grace, who learns that her new husband's board-game mogul family have a long-standing tradition of turning newly integrated spouses into the objects of deadly games of hide-and-seek. It points out the dangers in privilege and entitlement, particularly when it comes to the wealthy using the lower class for entertainment.

Political commentator Ana Maria Cox says in the Geek's Guide to the Galaxy podcast: "Horror is almost inherently political. That's why I love it. Tell me what you're afraid of and I'll tell you who you are." When done right, horror films digest our fears and turn them into mirrors, providing opportunities for reflections on society and ourselves. In recent years, this has become more evident and relevant than ever: explorations of societal fears have always existed at the heart of many horror movies, but as the core issues facing our society have become more overt, their reflections in the horror genre have followed suit.