

The Vancouver Horror Show (VHS) Film Festival Continues to Make its Mark

BY KELLY DOYLE
Kwantlen Polytechnic University

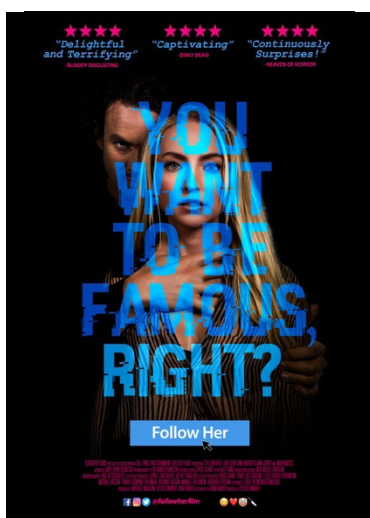


Fig. 1 | *Follow Her*. Classified Films, 2022.

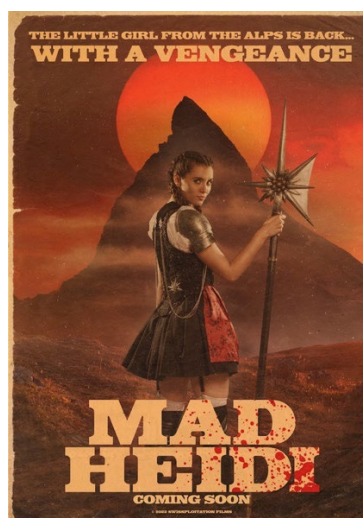


Fig. 2 | *Mad Heidi*. Swissploitation Films, 2022.

When I first discovered the Vancouver Horror Show in 2019, it was in its second year and boasting a total of thirty-two short films from around the world and one feature length film, all screened over two nights. The festival continues to meet and exceed its stated goal of “celebrat[ing] the power of storytelling, provid[ing] a platform for emerging independent filmmakers, and bolster [ing] the artistic community in Vancouver” (“About Vancouver Horror”). Now in its fifth ‘season,’ the festival has taken on a life of its own, expanding its current programming to include a staggering sixty-one short films and six feature length films from thirteen countries. In the wake of the COVID-19 lockdown, the event has transitioned from virtual streaming to a current hybrid model that accommodates both horror lovers living in Vancouver and those who can’t attend in person or who prefer to stream. The in-person portion of the VHS ran

from November 4-8, 2022, with three feature films and four blocks of short films screening across three different theatres in Vancouver. Each live event was followed by a filmmaker Q&A and awards ceremonies. The online portion of the festival helpfully and flexibly included the shorts from the in-person screenings as well as three features and twenty-five additional short films, all of which were available from November 8th to 18th for on-demand horror. While some virtual festival attendees might be disappointed that feature films *Follow Her* (2022), *Mad Heidi* (2022) (Figs. 1 and 2), and the highly anticipated *Terrifier 2* (2022) are not available to stream, at \$35 CAD a ticket, the virtual offerings are nuanced, plentiful, and wholly satisfying.

The VHS is a truly diverse event, embracing, celebrating, and showcasing horror from Norway, Spain, Italy, The



Fig. 3 and 4 | Dustin McGladrey and *House After*. Student short film, 2022.

Netherlands, The United Kingdom, Russia, Finland, Austria, Sweden, Australia, and the US as well as British Columbia. There is a special emphasis this year on local filmmakers including Dustin McGladrey from the Nisga'a Nation (Fig 3). A UBC alumnus writer/director, McGladrey won the VHS emerging filmmaker award in the Student Film category for *House After* (2022) (Fig. 4), which is inspired by his family's experience with residential schools. Grappling with the very real experience of intergenerational trauma, the film resonates with others that are politically charged and which ask the audience to face uncomfortable questions about colonization, like Jenna Kanell's *Trap Door in the Sun* (USA 2021) with its haunting imagery of Lulu screaming silently while cookie-cutter, gentrified suburban homes are built on Cherokee lands, erasing the Indigenous people there while asserting that these colonized, appropriated spaces are "a great place to live, work, and play" (00:33:30)...if one is a settler. Other notable local contributions include *Consumer* (2022) from Vancouver-based writer, director, and actor Stephanie Izsak about the horror of body dysmorphia and toxic beauty standards for young teenage girls in a social media influencer-saturated society; Brian Sepanzyk's compelling film about a woman coming to terms with her estranged father's death and unpacking his sinister death while packing his home (*In the Shadow of God* 2022); and feature film *Follow Her* (2022) that won Best Director and Best Lead Performance.

Striking in this year's selection of films is the depth and breadth of cultural excavation both inside and outside of Canada: The short film *Niyebe* (2022) from Kevin Ang chills with its use of a female monster from the Philippines that sucks unborn children from the womb in the context of a struggling blended family, while from the East Coast comes Shane Mills's *Mummers Legends* (2021). Set in St. John's

Newfoundland and doubtless inspired by the real-life 1860 murder in Bay Roberts, Newfoundland (Coles), the film evokes the distinct culture, history, and Irish-inflected dialect particular to Newfoundland and the tradition of mummering: during Christmas, mummers disguise themselves in outlandish costumes and visit homes seeking a dance, a drink, and insisting hosts guess their identities. Uncanny in their anonymity and strangeness, mummers occasionally used their disguises to commit harassment or violence related to "personal grudges, family disputes or religious or class conflicts" (Dohey qtd. in Coles), and it is this dark underbelly of the lighthearted tradition that Mills ruminates on. Indeed, from the stark and sublime cinematography of *Fishwife* (2021), the comedic yet black humor of the animated short *The Fall* (2021), and to the more traditional and chilling supernatural scare of *The Wheel* (2021), there is something for every fan of the horror genre in VHS offerings.

A notable event that has quickly become a successful staple in the VHS is the Screenplay Table Read series, now in its third year. Through Zoom, festival attendees are invited to attend a live table read of the three VHS screenplay finalists, each performed by professional actors with critiques and feedback provided by three industry panelists. This year, the panelists were NYC-based producer, screenwriter, and Professor Vanessa King; performer and comedy writer Ambika Vas; and myself as a professor specializing in horror film and feminist film theory. The finalists included three very different scripts, including Vincente DiSanti's satirical horror-comedy *Ghost Chicken*, Montgomery Burt's taut and skillfully paced *Francine and Gerald* (inspired in part by the 1994 abduction and murder of eight-year-old Kelowna resident Mindy Tran) and Daniel Alan Kiely's hauntingly tragic, horrific, yet beautiful *The Whisper Tree* (Figs.5 and 6). All three finalists reflect the diverse nuances of



Fig. 5 | Promotional image for the Screenwriting Table Reads. VHS, 2022.



Fig. 6 | Screenwriter Daniel Kiely engages with the VHS panel after the Table Read of *The Whisper Tree*. VHS, 2022.



Fig. 7 | VHS Talks Panelists: Director Karen Lam, Actor Enid-Raye Adams and Dr. Kelly Doyle.

horror as a genre and hint at the horrific in the mundane: the discourse around morality and meat eating, the murderer or child predator hiding beneath a veneer of civility and normality in a small town, and the seemingly hopeless reality of sexual abuse, intergenerational trauma, and the unfairness of life, respectively. Each script serves to inspire us to question societal norms, to sit with discomfort, and sometimes to see the light in the darkness. A Table Read is a chance for the casual viewer to peer behind the curtain of this important process in the film industry, and a chance for the screenwriters and audience to see life breathed into their work by talented actors. DiSanti’s work inspired laughter while Burns balanced light against dark in a tense and suspenseful showdown between a cop and a child murderer before Kiely moved me to tears. For anyone interested in film and the creative process, this is a rare chance to hear screenwriters discuss their vision and inspiration behind the horror stories they write, and to hear industry experts offer constructive feedback. Organizer and moderator Meghan Hemingway also played the role of “Francine” in Burns’ read. Three years in, this event continues to be lauded for its insightfulness and usefulness to writers, and this year, *The Whisper Tree* was chosen as the winning script.

Finally, the most exciting addition to the VHS in 2022 is the inaugural debut of the “VHS Talks” event, a panel discussion of key considerations in horror film which I had the privilege to be invited to participate in (Figs. 7 and 8). This forty-five minute live panel discussion on the female gaze in horror film, moderated by Meghan Hemingway, took place on opening night to an audience of fifty people, some of them including directors and actors from the shorts block that screened just prior. Specifically, the panel considered what horror looks like in 2022 from a female filmmaker point of view, the representation of women on and offscreen, and how the genre is evolving to make space for female voices in an historically male-dominated space.

My role was to situate the conversation in terms of ‘the gaze’ and its changing resonance since Laura Mulvey’s seminal essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” in 1975. In the framework of psychoanalytic theory, Mulvey argued that Hollywood film in particular is structured by the totalizing male gaze (defaulting to white, able-bodied, heterosexual men) which literally frames film and ideology through the ‘look’ of the spectator, the director, the camera, and the central male characters of a film. In this framework, Mulvey argues that the gaze is patriarchal and divided into active male and passive female, where a woman is always the bearer of rather than the maker of meaning, a typically erotic spectacle to be devalued, fetishized, saved, or punished as dictated by patriarchal society’s standards and her conformity (or lack thereof) to its ideology. “The determining male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female figure which is styled accordingly” (808). Unsurprisingly, such a framework of representation lends itself to misogyny and damaging options for female spectator identification, especially when watching a horror film. If film is largely produced by and for the viewing pleasure of the average

heterosexual man, identification for the female spectator is woefully limited to masochism, masculinization, or marginality. If Mulvey is right in that female spectators routinely are forced to witness, through a sort of narcissistic identification, their own sexualization, humiliation, rape, mutilation and murder, there are good reasons for women to avert their eyes in a horror film. As Robin Wood notes in his analysis of cultural/filmic oppression and repression, “The dominant images of women in our culture are entirely male created and male controlled. Woman’s autonomy and independence are denied; onto women men project their own innate, repressed femininity in order to disown it as inferior” (78). Hemingway structured the panel brilliantly to echo and subvert the male gaze to shift women in film from passive spectacles to active agents with myself as spectator/film theorist, Karen Lam as director (*Bring It On: Cheer or Die* (2022); *Evangeline* (2013); *The Curse of Willow Song* (2020)), and Enid-Raye Adams (*Riverdale* (2017-2018), *Bates Motel* (2016)) as actress resisting the role of mere spectacle.

In outlining feminist film theory’s resistance to the misogynist framework of the gaze and psychoanalysis that read women as object, my own contributions to the discussion highlighted the power in sexual difference and the potency that the monstrous woman in horror can offer. The short film *Wall #4* (2021) in a later shorts program reflects on the collapse of film’s 4th wall and what it might mean for the gaze to be returned by the woman onscreen. One film the panel touched on was *X* (2022), a slasher film that explores cultural fears around aging for women in particular and unsettles by drawing attention to the polarized existence for women as sex objects or despairing old crones. For all three panelists, the film prompted reflections on how women in the film industry are not permitted to age, or to remain sexual and whole persons when they do age. And yet, it is a common trope in slasher horror that women who transgress the social order by being sexual are killed, so the degree to which a woman appears to have sexual freedom and agency in horror films is directly proportional to the violence enacted against her. All three women spoke freely and frankly with humor and acerbic confidence about personal and professional experiences in filming, writing about, and performing horror. Lam discussed her experience of being told by men or male executives that her characters were not attractive or sexy enough, or that her handling of horror was the wrong way. Adams recalled one harrowing scene as an actress in which her character was tortured and the director chose to cut a moment that highlighted a connection between victim and killer, thereby foreclosing the possibility of seeing her character as a full subject to identify with. One of the most germane questions to arise from the sessions came at the end when an audience member asked how we can move beyond misogyny in film and mansplaining of female experience, knowledge, representation, and expertise. The panelists largely agreed that laying the groundwork for other voices and perspectives than those of studio executives, directors, writers, and actors who are traditionally



Fig. 8 | VHS panelists respond to a question from moderator Meghan Hemingway. VHS, 2022.



Fig. 9 | Promotional poster for *Terrifier 2*. Dark Age Cinema, 2022.

white, heterosexual, and Hollywood-based was part of the process, one we were actively engaged in as a part of this panel. After all, Mulvey’s critical article did not consider that the spectator is not necessarily white, heterosexual, or male, and that the female spectator might respond with anger and resistance to her portrayal onscreen by writing, speaking, acting, or directing.

The woman who looks back also leaves space theoretically for different cultural, sexual, or racial experiences and viewpoints. Uncoincidentally, shorts block 1, screened immediately prior to the talk, deftly served to exemplify how this resistance can be undertaken. In his short comedy-horror *Black Zombie Movie* (2021), Choni Francis responds to the lack of Black representation in the zombie subgenre and tells his story from the perspective of black characters in a black neighbourhood. With nods to films like *Shaun of the Dead* (2004), Francis creates a fun and witty film that refreshingly positions female characters as no-nonsense fighters, not just masculinized final girls (although the lead does wear a white tank top in what seems like a nod to this role). He opens with a real estate agent trying to make a sale during the encroachment of gentrification;

she loses her sale and her life, but not before pepper-spraying a zombie and delivering a swift front kick while wearing red pumps. Underscoring the hilarity are very real issues that are being addressed: the absence of a person of colour in many film narratives both in front of and behind the camera, and the insidious reason women might realistically have pepper spray on hand. Shot by a female director, *Consumer* relates female experience from a necessary female perspective, and *Bufflehead* (2021) comedically satirizes the near future of a healthcare system that decides who deserves treatment based on their commitment to conservationism... the film title provides a hint to the criteria. Like most effective horror films, these (and many others across the festival) reveal and critique very real societal inequities and assumptions in their politics. Coming full circle, the Irish short *Shadowban* (2018) turns back to the gaze as spectators watch a livestreaming would-be influencer assailed in the middle of nowhere at a red traffic light that won't turn green. As viewer comments roll in during her broadcast, one stands out: "She got what she deserved." The callous dismissal of female terror and endangerment onscreen for likes or entertainment uncannily foreshadowed the discussion to come in the VHS talk that followed, particularly when one considers the symbolic implications of a woman prevented from getting the 'green light' and the meaning of 'shadowban': blocking or silencing comments from users on social media without their knowledge.

Opening night ended with a sold-out screening of *Terrifier 2* (2022) from Damien Leone, a follow up to *Terrifier* (2016) and a unique indie slasher film with no studio backing, no rating, an unprecedented 138-minute runtime, and a shockingly impressive performance in the box office.

In it, Art the Clown (David Howard Thornton) returns to the timid town of Miles County where he targets Sienna (Lauren LaVera), a teenage girl, and her younger brother on Halloween night. It has the VHS tape vintage feel of a slasher B film from the 70s or 80s and is a surrealist slasher nightmare that recalls the blood and gore from grindhouse films. This film revels in pushing the envelope, with one particular bedroom scene that ostensibly led some viewers to vomit or faint. The unspeakable murders of Art the Clown, face frozen in a maniacal grin of teeth and black greasepaint and enacted in complete laughing silence, are enacted across race and gender, but it is still women who bear the brunt of his attentions and with relentless screentime. Sienna is positioned as Art's nemesis, a warrior angel, a light to his darkness (and LaVera fills the role surprisingly well), but she is still the final girl we see through the lingering eye of the camera as it pans over her scantily clad, muscular body for the benefit of only some spectators. Not even entrenched in the gender flux of masculinization usually ascribed to the final girl, Sienna is infantilized in her opening nightmare and sexualized in the film's living one, despite her heroic confrontation with the clown. There are very effective and surreal moments of levity and even hilarity in the film, largely due to Art's expressive pantomime in every situation and some of the campier gore sequences, but laughter and



Fig. 10 | The VHS team celebrates opening night on Nov. 5, 2022.

comedy are, of course, subjective. Leone notes in *Variety* that "There's a very blatant blanket of fantasy over the whole thing. Within the first two minutes, it's clear this movie isn't based in reality, so I was hoping that would make the violence a little more palatable and accessible." One might note here fantasy still involves representation and privileges particular viewpoints. After all, "Leone based much of the [bedroom] scene on a photograph of a Jack the Ripper victim, attempting to 'reverse engineer' the abject horror and destruction created by one of the most brutal serial killers in history" (Craig). The Ripper's victims were women, and the issues of identification bound up in Art's brutal killing scenes were fascinating and troubling to consider given that this film's screening took place after a discussion of the gaze and how we see women in horror. Theories of laughter are varied, one of the oldest being that it is "the product of malicious joy, gloating, derision, ridicule, and self-satisfied mockery" (O'Neill 35) or "a function of (perceived) superiority" (35) over the victim of the laughter. Art's face, frozen in an intimidating rictus of bared teeth in a derisive and sadistic smile, suggests that the pain, mutilation, and objectification of the people he renders bodies are a function of his superiority over them. It is suggestive, then, that his most brutal kills and disfigurements involve women, but also that it is a woman, unsmiling, that emerges as his nemesis. Overall, the Vancouver Horror Show continues to excel and celebrate as it disgusts, entertains, engages, unsettles, and showcases horror and all the talented people who create it (Fig. 10). ■

WORKS CITED

- Black Zombie Movie*. Directed by Choni Francis, performances by Carl Tart, Ariel Brown, Tory Devon Smith, Tristin Cunningham, and Choni Francis. Independent short film, 2022.
- Bufflehead*. Directed by Steve Brett, performances by Abigail Hardingham and Rochenda Sandal. June and Stella Productions, 2021.
- Coles, Terri. "The Dark Side of Mummering: What you May Not Know about a Beloved Tradition." 26. Dec 2018, *CBC News*, www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/dark-mummering-crime-murder-1.4940745#:~:text=A%20mummering%20murder&text=%22This%20was%20the%20first%20case,or%20even%20a%20short%20imprisonment.
- Consumer*. Directed by Stephanie Izsac, performances by Eden Summer Gilmore, Jill Morrison, and Nic Altobelli. Crazy8s Film Society, 2022.
- Craig, Richard. "Why *Terrifier 2*'s Bedroom Scene is so Controversial." *Screenrant*, 1 Nov. 2022, screenrant.com/terrifier-2-art-clown-allie-bedroom-scene-controversial/.
- The Fall*. Directed by Desirae Witte, performance by Brain David Gilbert. Phillapa Tanner. Independent short film, 2021.
- Fishwife*. Directed by Beth Park, performances by Shango Baku, Charles Beaven, and Scarlett Brookes. Beth Park, 2022.
- Follow Her*. Directed by Sylvia Caminer, performances by Dani Barker, Luke Cook, and Eliana Jones, Classified Films, 2022.
- Hemingway, Meghan. "About Vancouver Horror Show Film Festival." *Vancouver Horror Show Film Festival Announces 2022 Lineup to Include the Vancouver Premiere of Terrifier 2*. 11 Oct. 2022, Press Release.
- House After*. Directed by Dustin McGladrey. Student short film, 2022.
- In the Shadow of God*. Directed by Brian Sepanzyk, performances by Sara Canning, Andrew Roy Drury, and Mark Kandborg. Olive Room Productions, 2022.
- Mad Heidi*. Directed by Johannes Hartmann, performances by Alice Lucy, Max Rudlinger, and Casper Van Dien. Swissploitation Films, 2022.
- Moreau, Jordan. "*Terrifier 2* Director Reveals Sequel Plans, A Dismembered Penis Scene that Went too Far and Using Raw Meat for Intestines." *Variety*, 28 Oct. 2022, variety.com/2022/film/news/terrifier-2-sequel-ending-deleted-penis-scene-1235416008/.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." 1975, pp. 803-816, PDF, www.amherst.edu/system/files/media/1021/Laura%2520Mulvey,%2520Visual%2520Pleasure.pdf.
- Mummering Legends*. Directed by Shane Mills, performances by Mary Walsh, Darryl Hopkins, and Allison Moira Kelly. Grind Mind, 2021.
- Niyebe*. Directed by Kevin Ang, performances by Jasmine Vega, Azriel Dalman, and Louriza Tronco. Independent short film, 2022.
- O'Neill, Patrick. *The Comedy of Entropy: Humour/Narrative/Reading*. University of Toronto Press, 2017.
- Shadowban*. Directed by Shane Brennan, performance by Fiona Bergin. Foe, 2022.
- Shaun of the Dead*. Directed by Edgar Wright, performances by Simon Pegg, Nick Frost, and Kate Ashfield. Universal Pictures, 2004.
- Terrifier*. Directed by Damien Leone, performances by Jenna Kanell, Samantha Scaffidi, and David Howard Thornton. Dark Age Cinema, 2016.
- Terrifier 2*. Directed by Damien Leone, performances by Lauren LaVera, David Howard Thornton, and Jenna Kanell. Dark Age Cinema, 2022.
- Trap Door in the Sun*. Directed by Jenna Kanell, performances by Lane Carlock, Kaden Earwood, and Brenda McEwing. Laser Pigeon Pictures, 2021.
- Wall #4*. Directed by Lucas Camps, performances by Bert Hana, Florence Vas Weeda, and Anton de Bies. Lucas Camps Producties, 2021.
- The Wheel*. Directed by Nikhal Bhagat, performances by Jack Baca, Molly Beucher, and Christian Crandall, Kona Town, 2021.
- Wood, Robin, et al., eds. "An Introduction to the American Horror Film." *Robin Wood on the Horror Film: Collected Essays and Reviews*, Wayne State UP, 2018, pp. 73-110.
- X. Directed by Ti West, performances by Mia Goth, Jenna Ortega, and Brittany Snow. A24, 2022.