Menstrual Monsters: the Reception of the *Ginger Snaps* Cult Horror Franchise

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“I think it is definitely possible to make feminist horror movies and I think we have proven that with all three *Ginger Snaps* films.

--Paula Devonshire, Producer of *Ginger Snaps Unleashed, Ginger Snaps Back*--

**Introduction**

How quick can a scary movie establish a devoted fan following that turns a desired cinematic object into a contemporary cult classic? Pretty quickly, judging by the reception trajectory of *Ginger Snaps*. Less than five years after the release of the first of the off-beat Canadian low budget horror gems, *Ginger Snaps* (Fawcett 2000), and hardly a year after the sequel and prequel, *Ginger Snaps II: Unleashed* (Sullivan, 2004) and *Ginger Snaps III: Ginger Snaps Back* (Harvey, 2004), the series has become a b-movie buzz word for horror reviewers and fan communities alike. Critics have been quick to note the cycle’s a-typical traits, claiming that the films focus on two teen sisters fighting off fur lined infection represents a “genre busting sensation” (Vatnsdal, 2004: 216), that extends horror mythologies to a new range of viewing groups.

It is more than just a shake of the hips in which the *Ginger Snaps* films are different. It seems that the horror genre is unable to contain them. In 2004, the UK distributors Mosaic Entertainment commissioned an audience research project
(originally intended for the DVD box set of the trilogy) meant to confirm the series as an extension of existing horror traditions. However, the resulting findings highlighted a range of unexpected responses that surprised even the commissioning agencies behind the study. Rather than reading the trilogy as unproblematic horror texts, audience responses revealed a markedly different set of concerns than those associated with traditional readings of the genre. Central to these audience responses were the processes of ‘gender’ and ‘identity’, which became a constant focal point for fans of the franchise.

We would like to suggest that these tools give the answer as to why the Ginger Snaps franchise has become such a cult/fan phenomenon. They account for much of the weirdness associated with the film and its public appeal, in its content and tone. They also account for peculiarities associated with its production process, its critical reception, and in the various audience reactions. This essay will address the various aspects of such conflations of gender and identity in the production concerns, critical reception, and actual audiences’ responses of the Ginger Snaps trilogy to demonstrate how the complications these instigate invites a cult reputation. At the same time, we will also suggest that ‘gender’ and ‘identity’ become tools critics and audiences use to decode cultural meanings of such texts.

**Menstrual Monsters: Issues of Gender and Identity**

A quick look at the content of the Ginger Snaps films confirms the centrality of themes of gender and identity to the series as a whole. The original film focused on the close bond between two marginal and macabre heroines: Ginger and Brigitte Fitzgerald, played with deadly enthusiasm by Katherine Isabelle and Emily Perkins. The sisters’ obsession with all things deathly not only marks them as a cause for
parental concern. It also ensures their status as the untouchable geeks within the all too cool teen community of Bailey Downs. The opening of the film depicts the pair staging a variety of verite style mock deaths for a high school project on teenage life in the region. This montage of murder and mayhem not only demonstrates the pair’s disgust at the banality of their suburban surroundings, it also proclaims their self-styled exclusion from the heterosexually fuelled dynamics of the teen scene.

However, when the pair are attacked by the wild wolf that has been terrorising locals, Ginger is bitten by the beast on the eve of her first menstrual cycle. Not only does this assault construct Ginger as a source of threat to the rest of the teen prom scene populous, it also comes to define a horrific point in the development of her sexual identity. Reviewers such as Bianca Nielson (2004) have noted the connection between Ginger Snaps and previous horror classics such as Carrie (Brian de Palma, 1977), arguing that both use imagery of menstrual change to highlight monstrous connotations of female sexual development within the genre. However, while Carrie limits the “unsettling” imagery associated with female cycles to its opening shower room sequence, Fawcett expands such references to Ginger Snaps as a whole.

These representations of the female ‘curse’ centre on scenes of Ginger’s loss of blood in locker room retreats, as well as extended discussions of menstrual change that mark the Fitzgerald sisters interaction with other characters in the text. What is important about the film’s treatment of sexual identity is the degree of disgust that characters associate with female physiological change. Not only does Mr Fitzgerald express “his revulsion at overhearing a discussion to do with female reproductive processes at his dinner table” (Nielson, 2004), but even the female school nurse offers a verbal exercise in body horror when questioned for an explanation of what is happening to Ginger’s body. As Nielson notes:
Where the school nurse in *Ginger Snaps* refers to a “discharge” which is “squeezed out like a pump,” she likens the blood to a kind of “garbage.” She further accentuates this by calling the “discharge” a “brownish blackish sludge.”

It is the emergence of this ‘monstrous’ sexual identity that brings Ginger to the attention of high school jocks such as Jason McCarty (whom the heroine infects in a violent erotic encounter after the character unwisely questions “who is the guy here?”) For Nielson, “The interest that Ginger arouses in her male classmates disgusts her younger sister Brigitte because it represents her entry into a sexualized world that they had vowed to avoid in a pact to never be “average” (Nielson, 2004). The resulting transformation in Ginger’s behaviour tests the endurance and loyalty of the two sisters. This is confirmed in the film’s finale, when the younger and more passive Brigitte is forced to destroy her older, more dominant sister in order to quell the infection that is spreading through the Canadian suburbs.

With its emphasis on the close bonds between females undergoing ‘monstrous’ transformations in sexuality, it seems unsurprising that the theme of gender was so pronounced in Fawcett’s original film. While acknowledging that *Ginger Snaps* resides within the existing generic template of “hormonal teen-horrors”, Bianca Nielson has recognised the film’s a-typical qualities, concluding that the film even demonstrates “a kind of feminist solidarity experienced by two teenaged girls.” (Nielson, 2004). Moreover, she extends possible themes of identity to include a national perspective:

The deviancy of Ginger’s sexuality is potently contrasted with the banality of the sisters’ Canadian neighbourhood. The difference between Ginger’s sexuality and the town’s moral position highlights the repression that underpins the female experience of adolescence in general. The opening shots of the film depict a dull and pristine suburban landscape. The camera passes over streets full of identical houses, coming to linger on a brown tussock field where many more such houses are
planned. A real estate sign reads, “Bailey Downs: A Safe and Caring Community.” The ensuing scene is juxtaposed with this image of the safe and boring Bailey Downs. A woman emerges from her garden screaming having discovered her son playing with the severed paw of their family pet, which she then finds massacred in a quaint doghouse. Children playing hockey on the street turn and stare at the hysterical mother, shrug, and resume play. The violence perpetuated by “The Beast of Bailey Downs” has become commonplace, an uninteresting daily reality.

Indeed, while the issues of gender and identity came to dominate the original, it is interesting to see the ways in which they expanded and elaborated upon by later films in the Ginger Snaps cycle. In terms of gender, the menstruation-werewolf monster metaphor remains at the heart of the franchise, while wider themes of Canadian suburban isolation referenced in the original’s bleak depiction of the location Bailey Downs are backtracked and backdated in the gory prequel Ginger Snaps Back. For many critics writing around the time of the films’ releases, the gender trope seems the most salient: the emphasis on the explosive expression of repressed female rage evidenced in the original Ginger Snaps can even claim to have re-written the rules of what the contemporary horror film can offer women. In particular, the film’s conflation of menstruation with monstrosity has lead many reviewers to argue that Ginger Snaps contains feminist and even lesbian subtexts (Nielsen, 2004; Briefel, 2005). But the theme of Canadian identity seems to be regarded important as well. Caelum Vatnsdal applauds Ginger Snaps Back for using the history of Canada as a backdrop to a horror story, one in which “werewolves and voyagers” appear next to each other (Vatnsdal, 2004: 229), and one which might lead the way into combining attention for representations of national identity with quality.

We would argue that it is the conflation of these themes that gives Ginger Snaps a specific appeal to multiple fan groupings, thus giving these audiences something to chew on actively in a ‘cult-ish’ manner. Each elaboration of gender or
identity seems to pivot around another, and together they outline and relay numerous links between the original and the sequels in ways that invite a degree of audience investment a-typical of the horror genre. For instance, while the original film used the metaphor of monstrous transformation to convey the potential horror of teenage transformations in female sexuality, the sequel *Ginger Snaps Unleashed* uses the imagery of emerging monstrosity to explore female teen maladies such as self-harming, drug abuse, and anorexia, in a setting few would confuse with anything but Canada. And while Grant Harvey’s prequel *Ginger Snaps Back* shift emphasis to highlight issues of Canadian identity within a horror framework, its relocation of the two heroines to a hostile, all male, 19th Century outpost also allows for the extension of gender themes familiar to the series. (In this case, a prototype of Victorian feminism sees the pair embrace monstrosity and infection rather than sacrifice their unity to male oppression.).

**They Don’t Call it a Cult for Nothing: The Production Concerns of *Ginger Snaps***

If issues of gender and identity are central to a range of readings and interpretations of the *Ginger Snaps* films, then their importance is identifiable at the three key levels of production, reception and audience interpretation. The first level where gender and identity are issues of importance is that of the production. At the origins of the *Ginger Snaps* films are director John Fawcett and screenwriter Karen Walton. Their contributions shaped the original’s main themes of gender representation and cultural identity within a horror framework. Fawcett and Walton collaborated very closely on the story, as a team and as a couple. Fawcett’s experience in directing episodes of *Xena: Warrior Princess, La Femme Nikita* and *Queer as Folk*, the first two with female protagonists (and with close links to the horror genre), and all three pregnant
with lesbian and gay overtones, mixed well with Walton’s experience in the horror genre (she collaborated on *Cube* and *Prom Night II*), and her own writing for *Queer as Folk*. The a-typical fusion of fright and feminist tactics that Fawcett and Walton’s collaboration provided was confirmed by the overlap of other creative personnel who contributed to both the original *Ginger Snaps* and the two subsequent sequels. As Paula Devonshire, the Producer of both *Ginger Snaps Unleashed* and *Ginger Snaps Back* has explained:

“The whole *Ginger Snaps* cycle is based around an incredibly close, incredibly creative team. The first film was based around the collaboration between John Fawcett concept and Karen Walton’s script. Steve Holbert was onboard from an early stage as the producer and Brett Sullivan was the editor, before going on to direct *Ginger Snaps* unleashed, while Grant Harvey was the second unit director before going on to direct *Ginger Snaps Back*. We also had the same camera operator, production designer and so on. So not only was there a lot of continuity between the original and the sequels, but there was a real understanding of the characters and the female issues that all three films raise.” (Devonshire, in Mendik 2004).

At the level of casting, the trilogy benefited from the stellar pairing of Katherine Isabelle and Emily Perkins, who portrayed the outcast and outlandish Fitzgerald sisters with an awareness of the wider debates that the text was engaging on. In the case of Emily Perkins, an educational background in psychoanalysis and gender studies ensured that her performance actively drew on theoretical conceptions of female performance and feminist rhetoric.

Undoubtedly, the tight-teamed yet competitive presence (they auditioned for the sister parts together) of Isabelle and Perkins added the misunderstood girl/teenager tension to the text. This proved a key ingredient for linking the gender and identity issues to the wider references of puberty anxieties, sibling rivalry, suburban boredom,
sexual awakenings, and the search for gender belonging essential to giving the narrative both a cultural relevance and, in fact, a feminist pertinence. At the same time, Perkins and Isabelle’s prior experiences as youthful horror performers in *Stephen King’s It* (Wallace, 1990), *The X-Files* (1998), and in *Disturbing Behaviour* (Nutter, 1998) respectively, helped reinforce the gender/genre prominence. According to stories surrounding the shooting and production of all three films, the gender and national identity themes later to be picked up by critics were put at the centre of the production.

With these production roots, it is easy to identify the blend of genre and gender that makes *Ginger Snaps* stand out from other horror movies. Indeed, while it is true that *Ginger Snaps* films feed on upon established folk and cinematic myths that link the werewolf to scenes of unrestrained violence and sexual excess, Fawcett and Walton’s focus on female teen transformations undercut many of the gender presumptions associated with ‘wolfdom.’ It is not merely the fact that budgetary restrictions demarcated Fawcett’s rendition from the visceral visualisation of werewolf transformations evidenced in 1980s films such as *An American Werewolf in London* and *The Howling*. Rather, it is the fact that while these earlier films used extended and excessive scenes of transformation as metaphors for masculine change, the body horror of *Ginger Snaps* trilogy is closely connected to menstrual cycles and uncontrollable changes in female sexuality. As Fawcett commented:

“As soon as we found that whole lunar cycles menstrual cycles theme and put them together in a werewolf movie, that is when this whole thing came together. The weirdest thing is that I don’t know if I could defend *Ginger Snaps* connection between menstrual blood and infection or not. I actually thought that women would be very offended by this film. I was worried that what we
Fawcett’s concern is simultaneously confirmed and countered by Devonshire, who sees the monstrous/menstrual link as a sign of the films’ message that even in apparent monstrosity, women need to demonstrate their independence:

“To the extent that there are central male characters in these films, they are only really exist as a point of contrast to the two female characters. Although these male leads may desire or even wish to help the Fitzgerald sisters, the idea of these two young women having to save themselves is the abiding theme of the Ginger Snaps films. These movies are all about women helping themselves, they don’t need men to come and rescue them, these girls contain an inner strength that the male characters could never possess.” (Devonshire, in Mendik, 2004)

Devonshire also links the gender theme to issues of identity, in insistently linking the body politic to national politics, in particular to the creation of a specifically Canadian horror film aesthetic in which to situate the werewolf trilogy. As she commented:

“I would definitely argue that the Ginger Snaps films express a Canadian horror film aesthetic. Being that all the people on our team are all Canadian filmmakers, all Canadian crew, all Canadian locations, this very clearly signals the national roots of the Ginger Snaps films. Ginger Snaps is based on the Canadian suburb where John Fawcett was raised. In fact, I think the Canadian emphasis of the films has increased as the cycle has progressed.” (Devonshire, in Mendik, 2004)

Indeed, it is interesting to note that the original’s focus on the potential violence lurking behind the apparent banality of the Canadian suburban landscape is extended in the desolate sequel Ginger Snaps Unleashed. This situates its surviving heroine in a
range of austere, isolated institutional buildings which are largely cut off from the rest of civilization by extreme weather conditions and open to potential attack from the wolves stalking Brigitte. Once again, the connection between monstrous transformation and wider Canadian identity proves to be a theme that dominated the production processes of both *Unleashed* and *Back*. As Devonshire has commented:

“There’s even a line in *Ginger Snaps Unleashed* where Ghost says “Has the monster come from the infinite darkness?” and Brigitte replies “No, it’s come from the suburbs”, which once again links the series to a uniquely Canadian experience. Canada is such a nation of kinds growing up in suburbs, so when I look at Bailey Downs I can totally recognise where I grew up. Moreover, in *Ginger Snaps Back*, we go for the themes of the voyagers and French Canadian accents to make clear the film’s identity, while the fort depicted in the film is clearly modelled on a Hudson’s Bay Trading Fort. None of the films have any American identity to them, they are all clearly Canadian, and we are proud of these films for precisely that reason.” (Devonshire, in Mendik, 2004)

Every cult film needs its production legend. It seems that, thanks to the very intimate conflations within the crew, the loci of gender and identity have given the production process a sort of internal rationale. It does not really matter whether or not this focus is derived from personal backgrounds or from bigger, intellectual concerns, it is the fact they are presented as relevant that counts. It always remains precarious to see these stories as ‘true’, but at the very least it means ‘gender’ and ‘identity’ have had a central place in ‘talk’ about *Ginger Snaps* from the very word ‘action’.

**The Release and Critical Reception of *Ginger Snaps***

As well as motivating the production concerns of its original creators, the key variables of gender and identity are also crucial to the reception of the *Ginger Snaps*
films. They were released, in typical cultish fashion, in scattered stages and on an ad hoc basis, without an overall strategy, generating much, unstructured, ambiguous attention: a ‘noise’ more than a hype, in which thematic connections become more important than narrative or chronological ones.

Waves of festival releases were followed by theatrical releases for selected territories, in turn followed by general video and DVD releases, but several of the release stages overlapped significantly. For the first film for instance, the first wave of festival releases stretched from September 2000, when the film premiered at the Toronto Film Festival to Spring 2001, with screenings at festivals in Amsterdam, Los Angeles and Philadelphia. A second wave carried on well into 2002, with mostly genre festival screenings. It was intersected by a wave of theatrical releases, from May 2001 (Canada) to Fall of that year (US and Peru). With video premieres cushioned in between, most of the world got to know *Ginger Snaps* within 12 months, but in decidedly different ways and through various formats. With the releases of the second and third films only half a year apart such overlaps and variations became more common. With the video rentals and sales massively outnumbering any theatrical returns, the impression of the three films actually forming a coherent trilogy is most emphasised by the video and DVD presentations. For instance, the Dutch distributors of the sequel, linked *Ginger Snaps* to *Ginger Snaps Unleashed* by offering rental customers the opportunity to keep part 1 when renting both, while the UK three-film box set (released 2005) actually puts *Ginger Snaps Back* as the first film in the series. Needless to say, such presentations add the confusion of the narrative order and stylistic coherence.

At the level of critical reception, it is hard to find any bad reviews of *Ginger Snaps*. Overall, the forms the appraisals took are more or less uniform. One striking
characteristic is the need reviewers feel to demonstrate, in an almost academic fashion, how Ginger Snaps perfectly ticks all boxes associated with contemporary horror film motives and motifs. The lavish Sight and Sound reviews, for instance, or the Kamera.co.uk one, mention the suburban high school setting, gothic-style of the sisters, their repressed anger, feminism and folklore (the werewolf theme) (Williams, 2001: 36; Patterson, 2001). and in namedropping Halloween, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Friday the 13th, Carrie, The Exorcist, An American Werewolf in London and even Jaws (we think it must have been the size of the fangs), Williams, like so many other reviewers, seems to suggest Ginger Snaps is a good candidate for canonisation in the genre.

Throughout all reviews issues of gender and identity receive by far the most attention as key points for reviewers. The most common critical argument seems to be that, by equating menstruation with monstrosity, the Ginger Snaps films extend the impetus of previous classics such as Carrie, putting the horrific potential of female sexuality at the forefront (see Nielson, 2004). Furthermore, the films’ transgressions and recuperations of dominant conceptions of the female body clearly signal evidence of contradictory appreciation and celebration of an alternative take on the subgenre’s foundations without being all too sure where it would end up. In fact, the positive reception even surprised its creators. As Fawcett has commented:

“I thought that women were really going to hate this movie. In fact, the reverse was true. Women loved it! I had more criticism of this movie from men who felt very uncomfortable with some of the themes that we raised. This is quite a unique thing, because women largely don’t watch horror films. I know that is to generalise, but it is still largely considered as a male genre. So to create a movie that was effectively a horror film with all the blood, special effects and very
‘male’ stuff that I wanted to do coupled with very female themes turned it into something special that women really responded to.” (Fawcett, in Mendik, 2004).

It usually took critics only one or two lines to identify the film’s unusual representations of gender and link this to a wider consideration of identity. Suzie Young, for instance, swiftly shifts from an acknowledgement of the gendered body identities towards a consideration of political identities, developing a crude allegory in which Isabelle equates the US and Perkins represents Canada, to hammer home an argument about border-identities (Young, 2005). Vatnsdal’s review of the series also situates it within a national tradition of terror, noting that “the words ‘Canadian horror movies’ were given some twenty-first century relevance, and it was badly needed” (Vatnsdal, 2004: 222). Similarly, Dominic Marceau, in an interview with Perkins, Devonshire and DOP Michael Marschall employs a reference to the appearance of the quintessentially quaint Canadian hardrock band April Wine on the soundtrack of Ginger Snaps Unleashed to progress from gender to national identity issues, ending with an unabashed celebration of the “Great White North”, against current American ignorance (Marceau, 2004).

Fur and Fandom: The Ginger Snaps Audience Project
As the comments of makers, reviewers and critics confirm, concerns of gender representation/national identity were very much on the agenda during the production of Ginger Snaps as well as its reception. Therefore, it is only logical they are similarly received by the attuned audiences that make up the fan base for the franchise. In order to assess such activities and detect the possible sexual/national positions underpinning such activity, we surveyed different audiences’ responses to the films across a number of different test sites. A first run of the audience research (with a screening of the first
film to an all-female audience) was staged in Northampton, in November 2004. A second (screening the first film to a mixed gender audience) run took place in Aberystwyth, in February 2005. A third run (with an international audience watching the premiere of the third film), and an intermediate panel on results, happened at the Brussels International Fantasy Film Festival, March 2005. A DVD documentary of the first results, *Menstrual Monsters: the Ginger Snaps Trilogy* (Mendik, 2005) was premiered at this festival. A fourth run (of the second and third films, with a mixed gender audience) took place in Aberystwyth again, in May 2005. A second intermediate panel was organised at the Puchon International Fantastic Film Festival, in Korea, in July 2005, against a screening of all three films, and the documentary. The first final results were presented at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference, in Vancouver, March 2006.

From the different audience formations we researched (gender-specific, mixed, national, international) it quickly became clear that there was indeed a strong will to see the clues towards gender and identity as key tools for making sense of the films. The ability to read these cues was in part due to the fact that our respondents positioned themselves as what we would like to call ‘critical fans.’ By this we mean fans whose dedication and appreciation has to be ‘won over’ by the films, and whose criticism is less concerned with petty preferences and objections about characters and narrative logic (such as Ginger’s manifestation as a ghost in *Ginger Snaps Unleashed* or the historical leap in *Ginger Snaps Back* as part of the game). However, these critical fans could get quite worked up over thematic coherence, and a definite source for their overall approval of the films is the trilogy’s care for such coherence, especially in its explorations of gender and identity, set up through the intimate collaborations during production.
The identification of gender and identity issues in the films usually happens through the characters. Obviously audience care a lot about the two Fitzgerald sisters, in differing ways. It matters to them that Emily Perkins’ Brigitte wears a gothic outfit (though they have reservations about whether she actually ‘is’ a goth) and that she is the intellectual of the two sisters, well-read and emotionally sensitive but also psychologically shrewd, the same way it matters to them Katherine Isabelle’s Ginger is powerful, emancipated and intimidating.

It is not surprising that the way into a lot of appreciation of subtexts goes via the characters, and, together with the audiences’ awareness of how preciously rare strong female characters are in horror films. What is significant however, is that an appreciation of the issues of gender and identity raised in Ginger Snaps series assisted a decoding of its subtexts that clearly exceeded a knowledge of genre codes.

This is borne out by data gathered from the study sample conducted in May 2005. Here, we asked audiences first about their experience of watching horror films. [See graph 1 for a breakdown of these figures.] It turned out that only 27% of respondents saw themselves as experienced horror viewers (though no one actually saw themselves as ‘very experienced’). 33% of the audience sample saw themselves as inexperienced (with 13% as very inexperienced), and the remaining 40% (almost half of them) see themselves as neutral, neither experienced nor inexperienced.

We also asked audiences about their enjoyment of watching the Ginger Snaps films. [See graph 2 for a breakdown of these figures.] 80% of viewers said they enjoyed watching it, with 27% stating they enjoyed it very much. 13% were neutral (or ambivalent) and 7% did not enjoy watching it (with no not enjoying it very much).

Correlating these two dimensions we found that only ¼ of viewers enjoying watching Ginger Snaps counted themselves as experienced horror viewers, and the remaining ¾
who enjoyed it claimed no particular affiliation with the genre. This means that in order to enjoy watching the Ginger Snaps films one doesn’t really have to be a fan of the genre.

**Subtexts for Smart People: Activating the Active Audience of Ginger Snaps**

A narrative twist late on in *Ginger Snaps Unleashed* poses a very interesting test-case of how such generically unaware or neutral audiences are still actively engaging and adapting their expectations around gender and identity to fit with subtexts present in the series. When we interviewed and surveyed audiences *Ginger Snaps Unleashed* was seen by most of our respondents as the best of the three (results from May 2005). Not only, as Matthew Leyland describes a “worthy follow-up” but also one which uses and expands the themes set in motion in the first film (Leyland, 2005: 77).

Having killed her sister at the end of the original, an already infected Brigitte finds herself incarcerated in a drug-rehabilitation facility. Without access to her Monkshood (a herbal remedy poisonous to werewolves), Brigitte’s own monstrous transformation garners speed. Here, the heroine has to fight off her own growing infection as well as the advances of abuse male staff such as Tyler (Eric Johnson), who are preying on female patients. Her only ally at the institution is Ghost (Tatiana Maslany), an immature, insecure girl effectively stranded at the institution after an apparent accident befalls her only guardian. Everything about Ghost speaks childlike, insecure and naive. She cannot even write properly – in her comic book we see that she has made a mistake, captioning her story about a vampire as a ‘reign or moral terror’, instead of the expected ‘mortal’.

Brigitte befriends Ghost, especially when she is picked on by some of the older girls in the facility – Brigitte almost literally ‘shows her teeth’ at one point, and
the relationship between the pair comes to reproduce the issues of close female bonding identified in the first film (with Ghost becoming the younger sister figure to Brigitte). And when Brigitte decides that she must escape or die (by becoming a werewolf), Ghost begs to go with her. After the pair escape from the facility, one of the female therapists finds them hiding out in Ghost’s grandmother’s house. And all together, from a vantage point in the attic, they wait to confront the werewolf which has penetrated the location. Brigitte, herself half-transformed, kills the beast in a scene that is largely unsurprising. Ghost herself then strikes what seems like a final blow for their freedom, by suddenly shooting and then killing the therapist with a hammer in an act of unmotivated murderous mayhem. But, when Brigitte – weak and now almost completely lupined – begs for death, Ghost, with a look of cool deliberation pushes her into the cellar and drops the trap door on her. As the final shots roll, her voice-over narrates the end of the film: this will be the beginning of her own “reign of moral terror”.

This is a demanding ending to the film, because it asks from audiences an alertness that goes beyond generic appreciation. It requires attention to the subtexts of gender, identity, and reflexivity through a range of clues. Up until the ending, Ghost has been presented as very innocent, soliciting audiences’ involvement, caring for her. She is presented as definitely pre-sexual and unlike the rest of the girls in the facility is not subject to Tyler’s advances. She dresses differently, and more child-like. Her love of comics, albeit with some very gothic stories, has a childlike edge to it. Not only these, but we see her make what seem like childlike mistakes – there is a clear temptation to read her ‘reign of moral terror’ as evidence of her incompetence. We, as audience, are entitled to ‘read’ her as a little girl in need of care and protection. In which case, the ending is a very particular shock.
Yet at the same time, a particular species of alertness to gender and identity issues could suggest a different set of personal qualities in Ghost. Her grandmother is fully swathed in bandages (itself suggestive of monstrosity and a play on the term ‘mummy’), and at the outset we see Ghost reading to her thus helpless relative. But as the film progresses, she appears, curiously, to bump into and move her grandmother’s bed, especially when she is restless and might seem to be reaching for a button to call for attention from the staff. Added to this is Ghost’s curious interest in sexual voyeurism, referenced in the scene where climbing to her escape through the ducts, she pauses to watch Tyler having sex with one of the other girls in the facility.

Now imagine a subtextually-alert audience watching the film, an audience ‘knowing’ something completely unexpected has to happen – and an audience frantically searching for clues towards that. A first rule of such a mode of attending might be: if this is to be any good as a horror film, then something completely unexpected has to happen. What might it be? By the time Brigitte and Ghost are in the grandmother’s house, everything is indicating that there is not long to go. The pace of events is speeding up; Brigitte is struggling to contain her transformation; editing is becoming faster; and the whole thing is approaching the typical length of a horror film. What characters are left who might be the locus of the surprise, and who could emerge holding the narrative reins? Brigitte had already had a surprise moment at the end of the first film – killing her sister, after all her pledges to her that they would be “together, forever”, but then hugging the corpse, had turned the film quite unexpectedly. Tyler might be the source of it, but the odds would be against that. First, in the main, werewolves here are being associated with the female line. Not only this, but his sexual predations had clearly marked him as someone deserving a bad death. It would be hard for an audience to plan ahead for him to survive and
emerge as any kind of victor. (This is confirmed in the finale when he is fatally ejected from the all-female location after Ghost falsely accuses him of trying to molest her.)

The therapist is another possibility, except she has had a very small narrative role, and one of adult incompetence in a film where (like its original predecessor) adults are presented as essentially uncomprehending and irrelevant, except in as much as they constrain and make problems. This leaves Ghost – too innocent by half, whether or not the particular moments identified above have been noticed, and always managing to turn up, knowingly, at the ‘right time’ – managing, for instance, to find Brigitte in the complex basement of the facility when Brigitte had apparently left her behind in her escape attempt. Ghost, then, is an anomaly awaiting exposure, a reversal needing to happen, a revelation in waiting. But of what kind? If the film is a ‘classic werewolf story’, she surely should turn out to be a werewolf. But if the generically-alert watcher has seen the first film, then foreknowledge from that could well indicate that this is precisely not going to be a standard tale. So, what might Ghost be? A ghost unleashed, like Ginger’s appearance in the film?

These modes of encountering the narrative twist depend upon building frames of interpretation from a set of available clues within the film, upon a will to find a coherent interpretive position, and upon the kind of orientation that audiences have taken up towards the film. When talking about these issues, the audiences we surveyed appeared to be very ingenious in discovering and constructing such subtexts. We also found them able to move beyond the creation of these fictional subjects in an appreciation of the wider issues raised by the franchise. These included their ability to praise the trilogy for its feminist (or ‘feminist-like’) stance through an incredibly wide variety of gender references (ranging from family bonding to lesbian sub-themes).
Similarly, they see issues of identity in the Canadian locations, the suburban surroundings, but also in age, and in more abstract loci such as ‘home’ and ‘school’. As tools, ‘gender’ and ‘identity’ can, then, mean a lot of things to audiences. But their significance in coming to that meaning is undeniable.

There was also a difference in how audiences use ‘gender’ and ‘identity’ for the individual films. For *Ginger Snaps* and *Ginger Snaps Unleashed*, ‘gender’ issues seem more important, while for *Ginger Snaps Back* identity issues are considered more crucial. But, interestingly, both are used as tools for all the films. It rather looks like of audiences are using a sliding scale from gender to identity when moving from the first, over the second, to the third film, but are prepared to return to any of the two when a particular cue in the film demands it. For instance, in *Ginger Snaps Back*, the entrance of the sisters in the all-male settlers’ dining room reminds audiences suddenly of the gender issue, the same way the Bailey Downs neighbourhood reinforce the Canadian stamp on the first when we see a neighbourhood child in full ice-hockey gear looking for his dog in Fawcett’s original film.

Finally, and surprisingly, ‘gender’ and identity’ also break open the genre shackles. References to puberty, growing up, menstruation, and bonding were seen as signs to take the viewing of these films beyond the boundaries of the horror genre, into a not-really well defined category of ‘coming of age’ metaphors. But, it also transpired that the liking of the film (and roughly 75% of the audience liked it a lot) was less a matter of being a fan of the genre than of an appreciation of the themes (about 1 out of 5 respondents declared themselves not to be experienced horror viewers). So, at the end, the themes/tools even outclass the very scope within which the trilogy was set up; a sign for us that when Fawcett and Walton declared they
wanted to make a “smart horror film” in order to get a little “broader audience” they
got exactly what they wanted, smartness included (Rue Morgue, 2000).

**Conclusion**

By fusing issues of gender and identity alongside traditional shock tactics and genre
imagery, the Ginger Snaps series has provided an interesting set of meanings and
associations for both fans and non-fans of the horror film. In the context of such
images, fans are often seen as overly subjective audiences, uncritically buying into
whatever aspect of their fan-object is being pushed down their throat. Not so our fake
fur and fang loving Ginger Snaps fans. Our research has shown that they are clever,
critical, and caring. It matters to them that films make sense, and when they discover,
in a film, they are prepared to lift it out of its generic constraints, onto a cult status.

*The Ginger Snaps* trilogy owes its cult reputation partly to the smart way in
which it updates established myths around the Werewolf to include female concerns,
extending the popularity of the horror genre to a wider range of viewing groups. And
while the discussion of key sexual and cultural issues raised in the cycle may remain
of interest to critics and theorists, the *Ginger Snaps* films also reveals the pivotal role
that film fans have in snapping back the meaning created by the contemporary terror
text.

**References**


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