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**Author(s):** Kosonen, Heidi S.; Greenhill, Pauline

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**Blood-Red Relations In and Out of Place:**

**Women's Self-Harm and Supernatural Crime in *The Moth Diaries***

Heidi S. Kosonen, University of Jyväskylä, [heidi.s.kosonen@jyu.fi](mailto:heidi.s.kosonen@jyu.fi)

Pauline Greenhill, University of Winnipeg, [p.greenhill@uwinnipeg.ca](mailto:p.greenhill@uwinnipeg.ca) (corresponding author)

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**Abstract:**

In Canadian filmmaker Mary Harron's *The Moth Diaries* (a Canadian/American/Irish co-production, 2011), exploring adolescent girls' friendships and self-harm in a boarding school setting, *blood is out of place*. It drips from the protagonist's father's wrist artery, willingly shed in suicide; involuntarily tarnishes her nightgown as menstrual blood and falls on the school director's china figurines as nosebleed; and pours in the school library as a vampire-invoked rain. *Moth* uses blood to manifest the suicide contagion that Rebecca fears she has inherited from her artist father. Blood also signifies her resistance and recovery, enabled by her difficult relationship with her schoolmates, erstwhile best friend Lucy, and vampire Ernessa. Blood functions as a material marker of transition from girls' childhood relationships that mainstream Anglo-American films often render passive and vulnerable, and marks same-sex attractions of different types of friendship and love. It symbolizes and draws attention to harms and crimes in interpersonal violence, paternal abandonment, and self-damage. Our focus on relationships between so called "blood kin" and the idea of blood relations weaves into our discussion of female agency, woman identification, and queer affinities through *Moth's* out-of-place ontologies for blood as not only conventionally abject, but also a sacralised substance and symbol.

**Keywords:**

*The Moth Diaries*, Mary Harron, vampires, blood, feminist film analysis

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**Biographical Notes:**

**Heidi S. Kosonen** is a Postdoctoral Fellow in Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Winnipeg. She defended her dissertation from the University of Jyväskylä in October 2020, specializing in suicide cinema from the perspectives of taboo and biopower, and has since been examining the implications of factual and fictional media in exploring social and ecological justice issues from intersectional perspectives. Kosonen has published in both Finnish and English on suicide cinema and television (including case studies on *13 Reasons Why*, *Bird Box*, *Bridgend*, *Midsommar*, *The Moth Diaries*, *Vanilla Sky*, and *Unfriended*), taboo, biopower, death and mourning, and other affective phenomena in media culture and contemporary artworlds, including disgust and hate speech. She has published in scholarly journals including *The Journal of Somaesthetics*; *Popular Inquiry*; *Lähikuva* (in press); *Sukupuolentutkimus – Kvinnoforskning*; *Tahiti*; and *Thanatos*.

**Pauline Greenhill** is Professor of Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. Her recent grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada deal with narrative and justice in media. Her recent books include *Reality, Magic, and Other Lies: Fairy-Tale Film Truths* (Wayne State University Press, 2020), *Fairy-Tale TV* (Routledge Television Guidebooks, 2021, Jill Terry Rudy co-author); and *Clever Maids, Fearless Jacks, and a Cat: Fairy Tales from a Living Oral Tradition* (Utah State University Press, 2019, Anita Best and Martin Lovelace co-authors and co-editors). She has published in scholarly journals including *Signs*; *parallax*; *Theoretical Criminology*; *Movels & Tales*; *Resources for Feminist Research*; *Studies in European Cinema*; *Feral Feminisms*; *Narrative Culture*; *Law, Culture and the Humanities*; and *The Journal of American Folklore*.

In Canadian filmmaker Mary Harron's *The Moth Diaries* (a Canadian/American/Irish co-production, 2011), exploring adolescent girls' friendships and self-harm in a boarding school setting, *blood is out of place*. It drips from the protagonist's father's wrist artery, willingly shed in suicide; involuntarily tarnishes her nightgown as menstrual blood; falls on the school director's china figurines as nosebleed; and pours in the school library as a vampire-invoked rain. The film (henceforth *Moth*) uses blood to manifest the suicide contagion that Rebecca (played by Irish actor Sarah Bolger) fears she has inherited from her artist father. Blood as well signifies her resistance and recovery, enabled by her difficult relationship with her schoolmates, erstwhile best friend Lucy (played by Canadian actor Sarah Gadon), and vampire Ernessa (played by English actor Lily Cole). *Blood functions as a material marker of transition from girls' childhood relationships that mainstream Anglo-American films often render passive and vulnerable, and marks same-sex attractions of different types of both friendship and love. It also symbolizes and draws attention to harms and crimes.*

We offer a feminist reading of Harron's film and its visual depictions of blood functioning as a visual and thematic destabilizer of conventional filmic representations of suicide and girls' and women's maturation--the transformation of focus on relationships between so called "blood kin" and those of chosen families. The idea of blood relations weaves into our discussion of female agency, woman identification, and queer affinities through *Moth's* out-of-place ontologies for blood as not only conventionally abject, but also sometimes sacralised substance. As Melissa L. Meyer argues, "humans have extensively symbolized and ritualized blood as one of the most powerfully meaningful and multivocal bodily substances" (2005, 2).

Suicide's gendering on film reflects *Moth's* exploration of the possibility that protagonists Rebecca and Ernessa share their respective fathers' suicidality literally as genetic

inheritance, in their blood. We address this idea through examining scenes in which the word “blood” or related concepts appears, or in which focuses on or flashes of the colour red--scarlet or crimson--or visual representations of blood itself manifest in the foregrounds of scenes.<sup>1</sup> These references signal crucial relations between characters directly or indirectly implicating their attitudes to death and marking their (sexual) maturation.

The images stand out because most of the film uses a primarily brown- and blue-toned colour scheme. Colloquial associations in English link “blue” with sadness, sadness with depression, and depression with suicide, especially for women (see Emmons 2010). However, most psychological analyses distinguish feeling blue (a transient state) from chronic and/or clinical illness: “a defining feature of depression as a clinical disorder is the presence of a dysphoric mood, consisting of feeling sad, blue, ‘down in the dumps,’ or depressed. However, such feelings are common in a normal population and do not necessarily indicate clinical impairment” (Newmann 1987, 455). Blue’s pervasive use in *Moth* surrounds the main characters.<sup>2</sup> Again in contrast, green usually links to Rebecca’s dreams and visions of (at first) joyful memories of her father, including the vividly lime green Luna moth<sup>3</sup> that the two saw together, her happiest memory with him. Images of the insect emerging from its chrysalis background the opening credits, and underline the thematically central transition from the girl’s

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<sup>1</sup> Colour hues are affected by viewing equipment and individual perception, but we sought consensus. In one case blood red was foregrounded as a matter of necessity--the fire truck.

<sup>2</sup> Similar use of blue as a marker of depression and suicidality marks also many North American and international films, such as *A Single Man* (2009) or *Melancholia* (2011).

<sup>3</sup> Luna moth *Actias luna* (Linnaeus, 1758) (Butterflies and Moths of North America 2019).

“blue” state.

Nearly without exception, horror films include red images and representations of blood. However, *Moth*, as Harron herself notes, does not uncomplicatedly fit that genre: “in order to get it made we pretended it was a horror movie, but it really isn’t. It’s not that frightening. What interested me was just the study of female friendship. With the mythic elements. Some fairy-tale elements. And so to me that was beautiful and unfamiliar” (2017). *Moth* generally avoids some signal horror functions--“to scare, shock, revolt or otherwise horrify the reader” (Cherry 2009, 4). But along with its relative lack of concern with conventional male perspectives and indeed with men themselves, since “horror films tap into the cultural moment by encoding the anxieties of the moment into their depictions of monstrosity” (11), we see in common with horror *Moth*’s interest in fear of women. The film’s use of the vampire expresses everyday, ordinary life turned topsy turvy not only by suicide, but also by the incursion of the supernatural, taking the form of female power. And it does so in a specific context of Canadian films (see Preston 2019).

While crimes and harms manifest in *Moth*, it is no conventional crime film. Though viewers share Rebecca’s certainty that Ernessa is responsible for at least three deaths, and Rebecca in turn executes Ernessa, the supernatural events and vampire/ghost take the action away from identification and punishment. And the suicides haunting both protagonists, a form of reflexive violence, is no longer included in Western jurisdictions as a punishable crime, and similarly receives a humane treatment against mainstream fiction’s marginalization (Kosonen 2020). *Moth* thus more resembles what criminologist and media scholar Nicole Rafter (2006) sees as critical, alternative, and morally ambiguous films. We would argue that its particular manifestation and exploration of crime and harm reflects Canadian films’ realism. Yet its international linkages, including the director’s, take it toward a more magical realism, or a

preternatural fairy-tale realism also seen, for example, in Micheline Lanctôt's *Le piège d'Issoudun* (2004, see Greenhill 2017).<sup>4</sup> Here we consider the ways Harron's feminist film challenges gendered Anglo-American (suicide) cinema, offering a feminist rendering of blood, suicide's contagion as an illness surging through the veins, and recovery far removed from heteronormative rescue stories.

### ***The Moth Diaries* and Suicide's and Sexuality's Blood Red**

Harron's film, based on Rachel Klein's (2002) novel, concerns sixteen-year-old Rebecca who returns to her boarding school (Brangwyn Hall, formerly the Brangwyn Hotel) for the third year after her poet father committed suicide. She particularly looks forward to seeing her best friend Lucy, but mysterious new student, Ernessa, Jewish like Rebecca, whose father also committed suicide, supplants Rebecca in Lucy's affections. Various members of the school community leave or die, including Lucy, who becomes Ernessa's lover, and succumbs to anorexia. Rebecca blames these events on Ernessa, who she thinks is a vampire, based on readings from a literature course with new English teacher Mr. Davies (played by English-born, Canadian-raised actor Scott Speedman), a poet whose sexual attraction to Rebecca links to his admiration for her father. Having returned as a restless spirit, a late nineteenth century suicide, Ernessa also tempts Rebecca with death.

The vampire, Rebecca's uncanny double, usurps her relationship with Lucy, whose

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<sup>4</sup> Supernatural links with crimes and harms occur in many other Canadian-made and Canadian-set fairy-tale films, including *Mama* (2013), *Babine* (2008), and *Ésimésac* (2012) (discussed in Greenhill 2020), as well as *Tideland* (2005), *The Marsh* (2006), *The Shape of Water* (2017), and many more.



anorexic wasting echoes the vampire's effects. Ernessa also supplants the protagonist's father as the source of her suicidal intentions. Rebecca's and Ernessa's interest in self-harm connects to popular fears of suicide as hereditary. Medical epistemology, too, suggests self-harm increases with exposure to suicidal behaviour, especially through one's family or peer-group (see Cook 2015), particularly in children bereaved by a parent's suicide (see Cerel, Jordan and Duberstein 2008, Shneidman 1973). And yet the causes of this "suicide contagion" are contested but terrifyingly vague, varyingly related to ideas, role models, genetics, trauma, and mourning.

Rebecca's condition taps into the thematic of "disenfranchised grief" (Doka 1999)--lack of family and community support to the bereaved that impedes mourning because suicide itself is so socially disreputable--recognized as one reason children exposed to family suicidal fatality may cherish suicidal intentions themselves. Rebecca's central task as a growing adolescent character, to separate from her father and rely on her own ideas rather than on her connection with him, proves mainly successful. This thematic is pursued through the vampire, who seeks to substitute the happy memories of her father that Rebecca chooses, encouraging her to enfranchise her grief by manifesting the negative emotions she suppresses. Through Ernessa, these feelings surface to threaten the childishly doting post-mortem relationship Rebecca works to preserve with her father. Her transformation is visually marked in the film in red and by references to blood. These sometimes indicate the characters' maturation in menses and sexual awakening, and other times stand in for death and the upsurge of Rebecca's repressed memories of her father's suicide that keep her from moving on. We here discuss every scene in which red or blood is foregrounded.

The way blood marks sexuality's and death's transformative qualities is set up even before red appears in the diegesis, when teacher Davies writes on the classroom blackboard as he

introduces vampire literature and its relation to female sexuality. He notes that every vampire story includes "sex, blood, and death." The scene directly follows the first face-to-face interaction between vampire Ernessa and her soon-to-be-lover Lucy, which instantiates the connections the teacher introduces. It also foreshadows the relationship between Rebecca and Davies, clearly implicating all three aspects (as we explore below).

The first foregrounded appearances of blood red immediately follow Rebecca's seeing Ernessa mysteriously walking barefoot below her window at night--the first suggestion she isn't the same as any other new student. Before Rebecca starts discussing this experience with Lucy, a perfectly formed blood-red drop falls on Lucy's thumb in extreme close-up, centred. Lucy is painting her nails; what appears to be blood is actually nail polish, invoking mature feminine sexuality, but also anticipating the vampire's sexual interest in her. Rebecca eats from a red popcorn bowl that reappears in a later scene, and marks food as part of Rebecca's and Lucy's connection with each other, but also with their many school friends, relationships rendered fragile or destroyed by Ernessa. From this point on, red viscous substances on skin or objects are blood.

The next two relevant scenes depict Ernessa voicing Rebecca's similarity to her father, and supplanting her in their relationship. Rebecca discovers Ernessa skillfully playing Chopin's melancholy Nocturne op. 9 no. 1 in B-flat minor in a room she used for practising. Rebecca enquires how Ernessa can play so well, without looking at the (sheet) music. Ernessa replies: "My father was a musician. I inherited everything from him. As you did, from your father." Taken aback, Rebecca denies, "I didn't inherit anything from my father," but Ernessa questions her claim. "Are you sure?" she asks with a curving smile, ominously. Rebecca rushes from the room. She dreams that she and her father walk in a vibrantly green labyrinthine garden, absorbed

in tender, posthumous reminiscing until she witnesses a nightmarish move. Instead of herself, Ernessa is wrapped in Rebecca's father's arms--both the threat of being supplanted but later also a promise of recovery. Ernessa's lipstick is bright red, like Lucy's red nail polish, a mark of mature femininity. Despite the film's setting in an all-girls boarding school, red lipstick only appears on the vampire, indicating the creature's transgressive sexuality (Spencer 1992) and relationship to death.

In a later scene, Lucy emerges from her bath; Rebecca sits in her nightgown in Lucy's room, reading vampire book *Carmilla* Davies sets to his class.<sup>5</sup> Ernessa walks in as Rebecca describes the novella as "Gothic fiction." Ernessa says to Lucy "You're burning red. How do you stand such hot water on your skin?" Identifying Lucy as "red" calls to Ernessa's vampire interest in the blood near her skin that renders her appearance thus. Rebecca, deflecting, answers "We always take hot baths before bedtime. It's relaxing." Ernessa ignores her, and sits on the bed with Lucy to do schoolwork. Lucy's look dismisses Rebecca and she leaves. As Rebecca reads in her room, her voiceover quotes the novella "The vampire is prone to be fascinated by particular persons...." and her point of view shows an illustration of the title vampire reaching toward her prey in bed. Her conflation of Lucy with Laura (the vampire's lover in *Carmilla*), and Ernessa with Carmilla herself, is confirmed in the next scene in Davies's office. The teacher describes how the vampire needs the victim's consent. Rebecca says to herself "It's Lucy's fault" but when queried quickly amends: "No, I mean Laura."

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<sup>5</sup> As *Moth* indicates, *Carmilla*, Joseph Sherican Le Fanu's gothic novella (1872, see Le Fanu 2013) with its lesbian vampire, influenced later work including Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897, see Stoker 1997).

In the first sight of actual blood, it suddenly drops on a little shepherd girl figurine when, alone in school director Mrs. Rood's (played by English actor Judy Parfitt) study, Rebecca examines her teacher's china ornaments. Her nose is bleeding, and suddenly Ernessa appears next to her. "When I was little girl the farmers said that nosebleed was a sign of good luck," she says and licks the blood from her finger, having dipped it into the dripped liquid. "You really shouldn't be sad about these cheap sentimental things. I feel like sweeping them all into a pile on the floor." Rebecca is upset. "That's cruel. Mrs. Rood lost her husband. She needs these things to go on living." "I don't need things to remember my father," Ernessa retorts, disclosing that Rebecca really talks about herself, the kitschy objects representing how she clings to her own cloying memories." Neither do I," Rebecca rejoinders, then rushes away. She looks in a bathroom mirror, blood covering her nose, mouth, chin, and hand, and a flashback turns to her father's bloodied hand, and a razor blade lying in a red pool. Blood accompanies these suppressed memories of the suicide, emerging as encouraged by the vampire's endorsement of the girl's nosebleed. It visually links Rebecca to her father: the former's bloodied face, then hand, move to the latter's bloodied hand.

The dynamics between impeded mourning and Rebecca's suicidality are illustrated in two scenes set in the chapel-like school library with mirroring content. In the first, the camera pans to Rebecca's hand, writing in her diary, then the young woman sitting at a table, deep in thought. Rebecca's voiceover intones, first quoting the caption of an illustration she contemplates: "'A person may become a vampyre if he dies unseen.' My father wanted to die unseen, like an animal who wants to curl up and die alone." As Rebecca lifts her gaze, she sees Ernessa, wearing red lipstick as in her dream, sitting across from her, and recoils. Ernessa speaks. "Don't feel bad about your father," she says. "Some of the greatest artists went mad or

committed suicide. Some people find great joy in the prospect of death. Just thinking about it can be a comfort, like lying in your bed and pulling up the covers.” She leans forward: “The moment of death is ecstatic. It’s the most joyful sensation. You’re being born into a new existence.”

Ernessa’s gaze directs down toward the table. Rebecca’s follows, and she discovers a razor blade within her hand’s reach. She raises it, reflectively. When she looks up, Ernessa has disappeared.

That night, in bed, Rebecca studies the blade. “Is my father’s illness in my blood too?” she wonders in voiceover, and imitates cutting her immaculate wrists. “I wonder when he did it. How much did it hurt? And did it really take the pain away?” The scene confirms the girl’s conflicted relationship to suicide, figured as a paternal *blood* heritage that she both denies and tentatively embraces, and merges child and parent together with their counterpart vampire. For the first time, the film studies the girl considering her father’s traumatizing death instead of her happy memories of him. In the next scene she lights a red candle in a close-up--with her father’s photograph in the background--to mark the anniversary of his death. As Rebecca’s contemplation of his death changes, red now refers to her memories.

The party sequence that follows links sex, blood, and death showing flashes of red--again the popcorn bowl. Rebecca discusses with classmate Sofia (played by Canadian actor Laurence Hamelin) the girl’s plan to lose her virginity. Further, the first person associated with the school to die, Dora (played by American actor Melissa Farman) wears a red plaid shirt, literally marking her for death. And Rebecca, her head against a red pillow, overcome from smoking weed Ernessa brings, listens as the latter strokes her hair and narrates a flashback (presented in black and white with people in late 19th century dress) telling her that she had arrived at the then Brangwyn Hotel “with the same secret you did: a father’s suicide.”

Soon after, Dora jumps or falls from her bedroom window after she and Rebecca see

Ernessa walk through a closed window, which Dora dismisses as a trick of the light. Blood on her white nightgown and a pool surrounding her head and torso mark her twisted body.

The party sequence's conflation of red with sexual maturation is actualized when Rebecca and Kiki (played by Canadian actor Gia Sandhu) have kept watch outside overnight while Sofia loses her virginity. As earlier, sex links to death and blood; as the three return to school, they discover school teacher Miss Bobbie's (played by Canadian actor Kathleen Fee) body, her bloodstained socks visible after she inexplicably died violently. Miss Bobbie's death bears ominous connection to Ernessa: Rebecca witnesses the vampire floundering vulnerably in the school swimming pool, forced there by Miss Bobbie.

The next sequence follows Rebecca's complaint at a meal about her menstrual cramps. "I feel like I'm hemorrhaging" she says, but Lucy replies that she hasn't had her period "in months." At night Rebecca awakens to menstrual pains, blood visible on her stained sheets and nightgown. Voices draw her to the corridor. Opening the door to Lucy's bedroom, she witnesses Ernessa sexually ravaging her now anorexic friend, cementing both Ernessa's vampirism and Lucy's surrender to her influence. The next morning Lucy is hospitalised. The blood red tulips Rebecca brings her quickly fade at her bedside after Ernessa visits. Rebecca's transformation, marked by her menstrual blood, is juxtaposed with Lucy's fading, her menses impeded by the anorexia linked to her sexual relationship with the vampire. The colour-drained tulips mark the end of the girls' relationship and Lucy's impending death. With the cessation of her menses (red flowers); blood and red link to death in life.<sup>6</sup> After Rebecca confronts Lucy about her anorexia,

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<sup>6</sup> Emily Martin unpacks medical discourses that describe menstruation as *failure* to become pregnant, the unfertilized egg's hopeless death (1992, 46-49).

and Lucy rejects her, Rebecca goes to her room, and her attitude to red and blood changes. On her dressing table is a picture of young Rebecca with her father, wearing a red shirt. She puts away photographs of Lucy, covering her own red notebook. At Lucy's funeral the background of the stained glass in the chapel is red.

But Rebecca's suicidal spin ends. With Dora and Lucy dead; Charley (played by Canadian actor Valerie Tian) expelled under Ernessa's influence; and Sofia taken home after Miss Bobbie's death, Rebecca feels abandoned by her only remaining friend, Kiki. She recalls walking into her home bathroom and discovering her father's dead body in a vibrantly coloured pool of blood—he has slit his wrists. She leans against a doorframe and cries as she remembers.

Then follows the second of the two paired scenes set in the library. Rebecca again sits at a table, once more interrupted by red-lipsticked Ernessa, telling her she has no saviour--not books, writing, her past, Mr. Davies, or her father. Rebecca replies that she remembers her father's love and "The good things....the walks we took, the fairy tales he read to me." Ernessa counters, "He read you other fairy tales that you forgot," and sings, from the traditional folktale "The Juniper Tree": "My mother, she butchered me/My father, he ate me/My sister, little Anne-Marie/She gathered up the bones of me/And tied them in a silken cloth/ to lay under the juniper./Tweet, tweet/What a pretty bird am I." Continuing "It's time to free yourself," she slices her own wrist.

Blood spurts into Rebecca's face and onto an open book, and rains from above on both young women. Ernessa's pose is ecstatic, saintly even--then suddenly it's all over. The blood has disappeared. Rebecca, in an unspoiled library, looks down onto the immaculate table, and again reprising the earlier scene, reaches for a razor blade, now lying in front of her open book. She takes the implement, turns it over, and closes her hands around it. The sequence's use of blood

excessively reiterates earlier scenes where blood links to suicide, both in the return of Rebecca's memories of her father's death and in her experience of suicidal temptation in the vampire's performance. The sequence also marks a turning point for Rebecca, who becomes very active in its wake, culminating in her fiery destruction of Ernessa and with her, temptation to suicide.

In the next sequence, Rebecca sees a dead bloody bird on the basement floor just before she discovers Ernessa's trunk. Ernessa's suicide scene appears in flashback as Rebecca pours kerosene on her trunk. The flashback is in black and white, but Ernessa's voiceover describes her suicide "by the time the water turned red, I could no longer see." In this sequence, the dead bird, an image of vulnerability, connects with Ernessa and her suicide by exsanguination, coloring the bath water blood red, as she mentions—a fate Rebecca with her razor blade escapes.

### **Do Vampires Menstruate? Reading Blood's Gendered Object/Sacralised Ontologies**

The vampire's seduction of Lucy links with the way Ernessa manifests Rebecca's suicidal temptation, connected to the father's suicide she tries to forget, where blood signifies both the perils threatening her and her possibilities for recovery, as it connects to death, sexuality, maturation, and remembrance. In its bloody semantics Harron's feminist rendering challenges the gendered Anglo-American suicide cinema that the film's narrative also reflects. Aided by the affordances of horror film, *Moth* studies Rebecca's recovery through blood's association with the vampire, a figure connected with death and sexual transgression, and through blood's association with women's maturation. Ernessa's gradually revealed fatal story, also a suicide caused by artist father's self-accomplished death, both makes Rebecca's suicidal ideation tangible and helps her defy it through her dramatization of it: a death that is both her father's and her own potentially impending one.

Yet Rebecca parallels not only Ernessa, who supplants Rebecca in her dreams,



personifying what she could become--a restless suicide and monstrous female--but also Lucy. Her anorexic wasting under Ernessa's spell contrasts with but directly invokes Rebecca as she wakes up bleeding. The three characters' intertwining storylines, marked by blood, underline the theme of Rebecca breaking free from the patriarchal order that permeates suicide cinema. In particular, Harron's visuals of red and blood offer a variation on the traditional imagery with masculine, altruistic self-sacrifices differentiated from feminine, egoistic self-destruction, and women's blood differentiated from men's blood in similar hierarchical disparities between sublimation and demotion (Meyer 2005, 17).

Invoking *Moth*'s central dynamics, the library sequences--supported by the other scenes marked in/by red--craft but undermine a politics of cinematically representing blood and suicide. In twenty-first century film fiction, suicide often appears as pertinent to girls and young women specifically (Aaron 2014), whose recovery (if any) usually takes the form of heteronormative rescue by male lovers and doctors (Kosonen 2020). The silver screen also heavily divides moral evaluation along gender lines, juxtaposing "egoistic" against "altruistic" suicides (invoking Durkheim 1966). Respectively, they deny both agency and glory to female characters ideating suicide, yet pardon male characters as offering sacrificial deaths (Jaworski 2014). For instance, in Rian Johnson's 2012 sci-fi thriller *Looper*, the male protagonist kills himself to save the world. Demoting suicide from serious, heroic, masculine act to weak, passive, feminine reaction, movies like James Mangold's 1999 *Girl, Interrupted* instead locate young women's suicides with the mental illness of privileged White folks.

Furthermore, in these juxtapositions, a suicidal figure's agency--dangerously crafting voluntary death a cogitated action--is often restricted to male agents, contrasting with female suicides, objectified in their vulnerability. Sylvia Canetto notes that: "Even in their suicidal

action, women are not viewed as tragic or heroic, but rather as dependent, immature, weak, passive, and hysterical” (1993, 5). Suicide’s gendering in cinematic representations complies with the biopowered regulation of voluntary death (Marsh 2011) that transgresses the life-affirmative moral values at the root of the Western system. That transgressors are gendered female and queered (Aaron 2014, Cover 2012) poses a problem for feminist film-making. On the surface, these gendered dynamics are also played out in *Moth*’s library scenes, which juxtapose the dependent and debased suicide, voiced by mourning Rebecca, with Ernessa’s glorification of (male) artist suicides--but also her own, as the viewer later understands.

On the other hand, if suicide is polarized between an abject state of feminine vulnerability and masculine heroism, a similar juxtaposition appears in blood symbolism. Meyer argues that cultures have recognized ”a tension between women's blood...and men's blood” (2005, 17), associated respectively with fertility and death, and birth and hunt, with menses fluctuating between these two polar opposites as feminine, often abject substance. Thus blood is in *Moth* connected with girls and women, as well as with implicitly feminised passive artist fathers, and featured as excessive residue both voluntarily shed (dripping from Rebecca’s father’s wrists) and resulting from an involuntary bodily response (nosebleed and menstruation). Blood and red underline demoted suicides and point to their femininity in menses, in the hues of Lucy’s skin, and in Ernessa’s cosmetics.

Yet blood’s significations in *Moth* also vary. They inscribe Ernessa as certainly supernatural though apparently human, in particular as she invokes the blood rain from the ceiling (as if as a memory of her demise in water turned red). Red also marks characters as her prey, and accompanies Rebecca in the scenes where she, under Ernessa’s influence and incitement, starts to remember the trauma her father caused: here it links to remembering death

as much as to death itself. In these manifestations, blood sometimes takes a demoted status, rendered filthy and defiling by having left the body as matter out of place (Douglas 1966). Yet in particular the blood-rain scene exposes out-of-place ontologies--outside the body but also inappropriately in the library--as not only conventionally abject but also as sacralised substance. Its elevation into deistic imagery distinguishes it from the preceding bathroom scene, where the father's blood gleams vibrant and defiling against the tiles, dark red against pure white.

The blood-rain's deistic elements accompany Ernessa's defiance of the gendered suicide canon in an image more reminiscent of altruistic self-sacrifices rather than of victimized egoistic suicides. Whether by happy coincidence or deliberate choice, *Moth's* library scenes take place in a chapel of the former monastery near Oka, Quebec, and both the milieu and actor Cole's Pre-Raphaelite looks and posture link her to the heyday of Christian iconography in the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance. Harron recognizes the scene's influence from an image of Kali, goddess of death:

I think Lily Cole or I found an image of that Indian goddess, holding her arms up. And to me Ernessa was a great goddess of destruction--that she was unleashing the heavens on Rebecca....There's Catholic imagery in the film too, and Lily Cole's image does have this beatific quality. (2017)

In particular, Ernessa's raised arms and slightly open-mouthed positioning as the blood rains down recall images of dying saints, which give the vampire a martyr-like quality. Her initial unblinking stare, her slightly tilted head, and the upward camera angle recall representations of Christ on the cross. The blood rain is her invocation (originating from her mind), but also stems from her action (as it originally spurts from the cuts she slashes on her wrists). Thus vampire blood, simultaneously abject and sublime, ethereal and corporeal, filmicly transforms to the

sacred. The contrast to blood's conventional presentation in suicidal iconography is strong. Both Ernessa's saintly look and the transcendent quality of blood here render her performance a glorious death, not the ignominious result of mental illness. Martyrdom and suicide, men's blood and women's blood (menstruation) become complementary categories, with martyrs historically differentiated from suicides as morally justified sacrifices. For instance in historical representations, Christ's ultimate sacrifice, suffering so that others may live, is juxtaposed to the immorality and irrationality of Judas Iscariot's self-harm (Brown 2001; Camille 1989). In this scene, Harron disrupts that asymmetry, reflected also in the contemporary differentiations between sacrificial (male) suicides and egoistic (female) suicides.

Thus Barbara Creed's nomination of female (lesbian) vampires (1993) as "menstrual monsters" relates to this scene, wherein the lesbian vampire challenges the gendered iconography as a self-sacrificial figure. The deistic blood rain invokes menstrual blood, literally elevated from its usual out-of-place status. After all, vampires are generally linked to blood through its ingestion, not shedding it. Also, when blood in *Moth* marks moments of transition—from girlhood to adulthood, from suppressed memories to remembering, from passivity to agency—the blood rain as a sacralised marker of maturation parallels the more conventional stains on Rebecca's gown and sheets.

### **Moving to Woman-Identification: Reading the Lesbian Vampire's Blood Relations**

Deeply implicated in the lore of suicide's contagion, *Moth* offers the possibility that suicidality is an illness surging through the veins, as Rebecca herself reflects. This corresponds with the idea of blood relations (also called consanguinity--biological links, contrasting with legal connections like marriage or adoption), which anthropologist David M. Schneider (1980) argues is fundamental to (North) American kinship structures and national identifications.

Similarly, Meyer recognizes: “People have widely associated blood with lineage, even in today's world. Attributing to blood the ability to transmit or reflect the essence of the family, clan, lineage, people, nation, race, or ethnic group stemmed logically from the widespread association of blood with life and fertility” (2005, 8).

Here Ernessa offers another feminist variation to the suicide cinema ruled by heteronormative stories of exposure and recovery. Both Ernessa’s actual suicide and Rebecca’s suicidality link to overidentification with fathers, displaying an inability to separate from them and move on to the normative expectation that they’ll transfer their affections to heterosexual male objects. Yet in the overwhelmingly female context of the boarding school, the main actions are by women on other women, in addition to which Ernessa is a *lesbian* vampire (Zimmerman 1984, Horner and Zlosnik 2014)--that is, both a character longing for a loving same-sex(ual) companion, and a cannibalistic monster identified by her ingestion of blood. Here Ernessa’s vampiric figure helps *Moth* defy the economy of patriarchal exchanges of daughters (see Rubin 1975). The relationships she develops reject an allegedly normal cathexis where girls turn their loving attraction from their fathers toward young men, thus undermining social expectations and creating trouble for the heteropatriarchal order, which is maintained when women are exchanged among men.

In the vampire’s fictive circulation, this first folkloric then literary and cinematic sexualized figure, like suicide, represents fear of contagion, both of epidemic death and of this transgressive being’s ability to transform the living into its kind (Hakola 2015, Barber 1988). Instead of ingesting blood, as vampires usually do, Ernessa shares hers by making it rain. Her female agency is achieved though summoning this excess, reminiscent of the menstrual blood marking female transition to a state of womanhood. Here blood moves the suicidally bereaved

girl's path away from her relationship with her father towards woman-identification with a female monster, overcoming the suicide contagion suspected to roam in the girl's biology.

Ernessa here supplants Rebecca's father in the memories she worked to repress: as Ernessa forces Rebecca to acknowledge the pain he caused, she also offers herself as a target of identification, challenging adoration of the father—and offering a mirror defying the regular male objects Rebecca could turn to. As lesbian, Ernessa is woman-identified (see Radicalesbians 1973). And although her interest in Rebecca could easily be marked sexual, in the film's iconography, it is not Rebecca's blood Ernessa is truly after, although she licks it from her finger in the nosebleed scene. Rather, the two are identified through common/shared relations. The blood rain sequence overdetermines the relationship between Ernessa and Rebecca in terms of suicidality with its succession from father's (contagious, demoted) blood to the supernatural (independent, elevated) rain the vampire summons.

Remarkable in *Moth* is that the vampire's act of martyrdom helps Rebecca overcome the suicide threatening her through denial of the trauma caused by father, as Ernessa intimates, and through blood shared with father, as Rebecca herself considers. The execution is also arguably feminist as it opposes the male gaze permeating mainstream Anglo-American cinema with the passivization and sexualization of women characters, independent of whether they are dead or alive. As Laura Mulvey has famously asserted (1989), women are often subjugated to this presumed gaze as objects: devoid of agency, never looking back. Yet in the blood rain scene, the focalizations of the gaze ensure that Rebecca not only sees Ernessa but also witnesses herself and her father in death while visualising Ernessa's dramatisation of hers. The camera sees Rebecca and Ernessa, but also sees them seeing each other. The imminent shift in Rebecca's agency follows this scene; Ernessa's representation of her own suicidality sounds an alarm to Rebecca of

her own state. As Harron describes:

And for Rebecca, I think it was “this has gone too far”, you know? [all laugh] “I think I have to do something now.” And it’s either she’s going totally crazy or she has to just take action of some kind. Whether it’s her mind or not, it’s gone too far. After the blood rain in the library, you see Rebecca become very practical. (2017)

Ernessa’s actions, causing Rebecca to act as well, challenge the gendered passive-active binary which permeates suicide cinema. Following the blood-rain scene, the hitherto mainly passive Rebecca becomes active, suggesting Ernessa’s bloody martyr-like performance of self-damage saves Rebecca. She responds to the vampire’s call to “free herself” countering the methods with which Ernessa tempts her. Ultimately, she returns the favour, releasing Ernessa’s restless spirit:

She burns down the school, the coffin, the trunk. And she’s set them both free by resisting the lures; Ernessa has somehow managed to free Rebecca as well. And there’s kind of a reconciliation. That’s what’s meant when you see Lily Cole at the end, and she walks away in the nineteenth-century Edwardian dress. She has set them both free. And so in that way it’s sort of a happy ending. (Harron 2017)

This diversion from the passive-rendering heteronormative stories of recovery is even more explicit as Ernessa not only offers herself as a target of identification (that Rebecca either accepts or refuses in destroying her), but also disrupts the over-identification between Rebecca and potential love interest Davies. *Moth* avoids normalising heterosexuality, especially given it being a growth story set in the homosocial setting of the girls’ boarding school. Here the male teacher is not only the exception, but, in his sexual interest in Rebecca, part of the problem. Like Ernessa, Davies haunts Rebecca as the double of her dad, the boundaries between them blurred by shared qualities as poets. The teacher’s porous admiration of the latter channels to his flattery

of the daughter. Unlike the “manic pixie dream girls” (see Rabin 2014) of suicide cinema, Rebecca cannot expect heterosexual rescue from her suicidal intentions. Even the blackboard of Davies’s classroom promises “sex blood death”--the last two being the very things Rebecca’s father gives her.

As Gina Wisker notes, the female vampire often appears “as an object of desire or a fascinating icon of transgression” (2016, 150) and Ernessa is both, a saint and a goddess of death, Kali, as the latter not simply suffering so that others may live but also presenting death from a divine position. She is also vulnerable as a female suicide (associated to the dead bird Rebecca discovers), and dangerous as an icon of contagious death. In relation to the feminised and victimising suicide cinema, in particular, she thus offers a figure of female power.

### **Vampire and Canadian Cinematic Blood Relations**

Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik argue that “Some vampire stories daringly reconfigure gender in an imagining of future identities; others seem to challenge cultural configurations of gender only to recuperate normativity through exterminating the vampire” (2014, 69). Though Rebecca in *Moth* tries to get rid of Ernessa, she reappears in ghostly form after her trunk/coffin’s burning, suggesting she is not so easy to overcome. When women (like Rebecca) look at the lesbian vampire (like Ernessa), as Linda Williams’ (1984) work indicates, they are “en-tranced” themselves; there is a “shared identification between monster and woman...a special empathy” (Case 1991, 10). Ernessa exemplifies these characters as Wisker describes them:

Disruptive and troublesome, female vampires are an embodied oxymoron, a thrilling contradiction, fundamentally problematising received notions of women’s passivity, nurturing and social conformity. Female vampires destabilise such comfortable, culturally inflected investments and complacencies and reveal them as aspects of



constructed gender identity resulting from social and cultural hierarchies. (2016, 150)

*Moth's* subversive sacralisation of blood and suicide alike renders the vampire's performance of self-damage heroic, and stands against the expected abjection of suicide contagion in cinema's representative politics. Women's blood's excess now signifies resistance. Ernessa's disruptive lesbian vampire helps *Moth* defy not only the patriarchal economy of exchanges but also the conventional celluloid constructions of suicide wherein egoistic suicide is gendered feminine and altruism masculine. Thus *Moth*, in its complex use of blood as a symbolising object, offers a possibility of transgressing rather than repeating female self-harm. It uses the willed rain of blood as the material marker of the transition from the heteropatriarchal affinities that other films too often privilege as both causes and cures for female suicidality.

What can this text tell us as a critical reflection of always-emerging Canadian culture and media? Its production reflects the transnational qualities of English Canadian film with primarily Canadian, British, and American personnel on and off screen. Many Canadians easily recognise that *Moth's* vaguely eastern North American setting, which non-Canadian viewers (including Kosonen before she met Greenhill) read as American, is to most Canadians very distinctly Québec; urban scenes show classic Montreal townhouses and parks, and the school is the former monastery at Oka. Thus, as is all too familiar in Canadian movies (see e.g. Robinson 2019; Matheson 2005), Canadian locations once again become generic, lacking specificity--no-place. Its director's American work with American subjects like *Charlie Says* (2018), *Anna Nicole* (2013), and *The Notorious Bettie Page* (2005) lead to presumptions that she, too, is American. Even her arguably most famous film, *American Psycho* (2000), is a Canadian/American co-production. Many of *Moth's* actors are Canadian. Much of its funding and distribution are Canadian: Telefilm, Quebec Film and Television, Movie Central, The Movie Network, The

Harold Greenberg Fund, SODEC Québec (the Province of Québec Production Tax Credit), and the Canadian Film or Video Production Tax Credit (see Wagman 2019).

But we argue that in addition to these direct associations with Canada, *Moth*--despite its representation of magical or at least preternatural events--recalls a dominant style for Canadian fictional narrative films: “cinematic realism and naturalism” (Knight 1992, 126-127), including in its ambivalence about the supernatural events evident onscreen. Further, like the discourses of kinship we unpack, ideas of nation also link to blood (Schneider 1980). *Thus, as is often the case with Canadian films which successfully pass as American, nation, like blood, is out of place.*

Independent films offer directors opportunities to express their own transgressive viewpoints. Where Klein’s (American) novel clearly locates Rebecca’s problem as psychological rather than empirically real, Harron’s (Canadian) film with its blood out of place and realist aesthetic strongly suggests the supernatural. While demonstrating that suicide need not be located in the blood, *Moth* also figuratively links a vampire, magic, and imagination with a sanguine nation.

Many of Harron’s films deal more directly than *Moth* does with criminality—with real and fictional serial killers, and with male crimes and harms against women. But all reflect an arguably Canadian sensibility on the subject, that nuances not only those who commit crimes and harms, but also their victims. As in *Moth*, being victimised oneself can direct an individual toward actions against innocent and not-so-innocent others. Being overshadowed by powerful forces offers a metaphor for aspects of Canadian Indigenous and colonial cultures alike. In Harron’s films, women especially sometimes find their agency in less than positive actions, including murder. And they sometimes turn their anger against other women, in criminal blood relations.

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