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## ***Kill Me Please: Being a Final Girl in Times of Fear, Terror, and Nightmare***

Natalia Christofolletti Barrenha, Universidade Estadual de Campinas (UNICAMP), Brazil

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### **Abstract**

This article explores how the film *Mate-me por favor/Kill Me Please* (dir. Anita Rocha da Silveira, 2015) appropriates and subverts horror tropes in order to consider class, gender and generational concerns in contemporary Rio de Janeiro. It questions what the use of horror elements seeks to promote, and how this approach to the genre can be productive in discussions of the fears of growing up in a violent and sexist society.

### **Keywords**

Horror, Slasher, Final Girl, Coming of Age, Brazilian Contemporary Cinema, *Mate-me por favor*, Anita Rocha da Silveira

***Kill Me Please:***  
**Being a Final Girl in Times of Fear, Terror, and Nightmare<sup>1</sup>**

Natalia Christofolletti Barrenha  
Universidade Estadual de Campinas – UNICAMP, Brazil<sup>2</sup>

*We would have him drive really fast, then slam on the brakes, or go around and around the traffic island at the city's entrance. We had him speed up around corners and make us bounce over speed bumps. [...] We would shout and fall on top of each other; it was better than a roller coaster and better than alcohol. Sprawled in the darkness, we felt like every blow to the head could be our last and, sometimes, when Andrea's boyfriend had to stop because he got held up at a red light, we sought each other out in the darkness to be sure we were all still alive. And we roared with laughter, sweaty, sometimes bloody [...].*

Mariana Enríquez, "The Intoxicated Years," 50.

*Mate-me por favor/Kill Me Please* (2015), the feature-length debut of director and screenwriter Anita Rocha da Silveira (Rio de Janeiro, 1985), enacts a fruitful *tête-à-tête* with the horror genre in order to reflect on generational anxieties, class, and gender in contemporary Rio de Janeiro. In this article, I explore how the film appropriates and subverts horror tropes, constituting a trend in recent Brazilian cinema that researcher Laura Cánepa (2013, 2016, 2017) calls "social" horror. The horror genre has a long history within cinema that has often gone unnoticed by academia, mainly because of horror's exile from the canon. The scarce material on the topic largely deals with American filmography, with occasional attention to British, Japanese or Italian (and, to a lesser extent, French and Spanish) films. This absence of material often leads to the erroneous conclusion that horror in Latin American cinema is non-existent and/or insignificant. Such a perception has been challenged by studies that have emerged recently, especially focused in building/recovering a history of the genre in the region. I aim to contribute to this burgeoning scholarship on Brazilian horror cinema and new trends that emerged in the 2010s, putting the newest studies produced in Brazil on the genre into dialogue with Anglophone film theory (most of the authors discussed here have never been translated into Portuguese or even Spanish).

I begin with a brief overview of contemporary Brazilian horror films, and how the genre has infiltrated "realistic" cinema to highlight or underline social tensions. I then examine *slasher* films (a subgenre of horror within which I place *Kill Me Please*), relying upon the feminist film theories of Vera Dika (1987) and Carol Clover (1987)

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for a counter-reading of the subgenre. In the following sections, I develop a close reading of Rocha da Silveira's film supported by social and cultural contextual insights, discussing topics such as the female gaze, the pains and delights of adolescence, female sexual awakening and the dangers of desire, the paranoia and violence that has beset contemporary Rio de Janeiro, and how horror aesthetics and narrative power are used innovatively to translate the fear(s) of being a young woman in a Brazilian metropolis in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **“Social” horror in contemporary Brazilian film**

Over the last decade, there has been significant growth in horror cinema in Brazil. Cánepa noticed a “revival” of the genre on the country's big screens beginning in the mid-2000s. She divides the recent surge of horror in Brazilian cinema into two spheres: the “standard” or “activist” sphere, which adopts the canon models of the genre and reaches a niche audience; and the “social” sphere, which employs a hybrid form together with other genres—films that can hardly be included in the horror category but may interact with it. In the second sphere, where this article's interests are concentrated, Cánepa focuses on the emergence of works that flirt with horror in a less methodical way (2013):

[...] o chamado horror artístico, por lidar com a expressão de um sentimento disseminado na experiência humana—o da ansiedade e especulação em torno da possibilidade ou iminência da morte e destruição do corpo—pode se apresentar com grandes variações, não precisando seguir estruturas ou modelos tão estáveis quanto os que se tornaram canônicos no gênero. Essa percepção mais difusa do horror pode contribuir para o debate sobre [...] longas brasileiros lançados na segunda década dos anos 2000, nos quais ansiedades geracionais e questões nacionais ganharam uma abordagem híbrida com o universo do horror.

(Cánepa 2016, 135–136)

The researcher lists a set of recent films that present neighbouring experiences to horror such as *Meu nome é Dindi/My Name Is Dindi* (Bruno Safadi, 2007), *Os famosos e os duendes da morte/The Famous and the Dead* (Esmir Filho, 2009) and *Os inquilinos/The Tenants* (Sérgio Bianchi, 2010), among others, that include certain stylistic features typical of the genre, such as sharp noises intended to provoke fear, labyrinthine scenery, and images of violated bodies, in addition to introducing narrative fragments which relate to horror stories though they are not part of the main plot. According to Cánepa (2017), these films seem to favour themes that address the threats faced by the middle class in a society that still has deep inequalities yet has seen brisk upward mobility in the working class, leading to greater social tension.

Other studies about recent films such as *Trabalhar cansa/Hard Labour* (Juliana Rojas & Marco Dutra, 2011) and *O som ao redor/Neighbouring Sounds* (Kleber Mendonça Filho, 2012) like the ones by Cristiane da Silveira Lima & Milene Migliano (2013), Kim Wilhelm Dória (2015), and Mariana Souto (2019a) also drew attention to how such works portray daily life, whilst distancing themselves from Bazinian realism to embrace the subtle mannerisms of horror tropes:

Pensados a partir do ponto de vista de um diálogo com o horror, pode-se sugerir que esses filmes abordam aspectos ainda não resolvidos das tensões que vivemos no Brasil. De certa forma, as relações pessoais, sociais e de trabalho no país, ainda muito próximas de suas origens atrasadas e escravistas, podem estar começando a ser abordadas do ponto de vista do horror—entendido como a representação do que sentimos diante da ameaça de uma explosão mortal de violência. Essa origem de nossa sociedade já foi abordada pelo cinema brasileiro em diferentes chaves ao longo de sua história (cômica, carnavalesca, melodramática, revolucionária, anárquica, policialesca, etc.), mas é possível que as novas gerações tenham encontrado agora um novo olhar—horrífico—para elas.

(Cánepa 2016, 137–138)

More recently, films such as *Açúcar/Sugar* (Renata Pinheiro & Sérgio Oliveira, 2018), *Mormaço/Sultry* (Marina Meliande, 2018), *O clube dos canibais/The Cannibal Club* (Guto Parente, 2018), *Os jovens Baumann/The Young Baumanns* (Bruna Carvalho Almeida, 2018), and the works of Gabriela Amaral Almeida, share the same characteristics described by Cánepa: they cast a critical eye over social tensions and combine fantasy figures with the subtlety and minimalism of contemporary realistic scenery. They attempt to describe Brazilian social reality through the creative use of similar aesthetic gestures (Souto 2019b). As Noël Carroll suggests,

It is frequently remarked that horror cycles emerge in times of social stress, and that the genre is a means through which the anxieties of an era can be expressed. That the horror genre should be serviceable in this regard comes as no surprise, since its specialty is fear and anxiety. What presumably happens in certain historical circumstances is that the horror genre is capable of incorporating or assimilating general social anxieties into its iconography of fear and distress.

(1990, 207)

Therefore, horror cinema seems to resourcefully and singularly codify the anxieties of a certain age. As Luiz Nazário stresses, “cada crise social que modifica a perspectiva do futuro produz uma nova geração de monstros no cinema” (1998, 175).

### ***Slasher* films, *Stalker* films and Final Girls**

*Kill Me Please* film follows the daily life of four 15-year-old friends: Bia, Mari, Michele, and Renata. While in the midst of the angst and pleasures of that age (love affairs, sexual curiosity, rivalries, changing bodies, self-image, the search for identity), the girls face a wave of murders of young women in the neighbourhood where they live, Barra da Tijuca (Rio de Janeiro). These two narrative focal points are interwoven in a permanent tensioning and slackening that oscillates between realism, fantasy and dream sequences, and the use of *coming of age* and horror motifs, in addition to parodies of these. The plot includes a serial killer who targets adolescents, allowing us to link the film to the horror subgenre of *slasher* films, which are characterized by the stalking

and violent death of teenagers (predominantly women) in middle class and hitherto calm neighbourhoods. *Slashers* flourished in the United States in the mid-1970s, a period that witnessed a wave of backlash against the civil rights and counterculture movements of the 1960s. Criticisms of feminism, homosexuality, abortion, divorce, and the “lack of social authority” started to become more frequent and articulate. For Robin Wood (2002, 28), the most aggressive horror films of the time could be considered examples of this criticism: for example, in *Carrie* (Brian De Palma, 1976), female desire is repressed and treated with distrust, as depicted by the main character developing abnormal and monstrous behaviour linked to the adolescent discovery of sexuality.

*Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978), recognized as the founder of the subgenre together with *Friday the 13th* (Sean Cunningham, 1980) and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven, 1984), enshrined and consolidated the *slasher* (giving rise to numerous successful sequels).<sup>3</sup> These films exhibit graphic violence towards whoever yields to sexual curiosity and “deviant” behaviour, and they carry a conservative subtext in relation to sexuality and family in line with moral values in vogue at the time. With teens as the main target,<sup>4</sup> youthful irresponsibility and its consequent punishment is a constant in these films.<sup>5</sup> As Gabriela Müller Larocca affirms, the *slasher* is intrinsically connected to the legacy left by the abundance of *teen films* released from 1950 to 1960, which created the image of delinquency associated with this stage of life, perpetuating the adolescence-delinquency pairing and presenting two interdependent paradigms: the “domesticated” adolescent, seen as the ideal, and the “delinquent” (2016, 53). According to Müller Larocca, “o cinema de horror *slasher* também incorpora essa diáde para demarcar e diferenciar as personagens (principalmente as femininas) que irão morrer daquelas que irão sobreviver” (2016, 54).

In *slashers*, a murderer hunts down the teens, killing them one by one, until he is overcome by one of the survivors of the group. The surviving character is, in nearly all cases, a woman that stands out from the others by being more wary, clever, and less reprehensible. One of the most prominent characteristics of this stereotype is that, as opposed to her friends, she is not sexually active. The most she does is have sex with a boyfriend, but only on the premise of loving feelings and a stable relationship, and that such relations, if they materialize, happen off-screen. Different from the female victims who die as a form of punishment for their behaviour and actions, their bodies mutilated, the survivors prevail precisely because they fit the pattern of conservative, traditional femininity and youth. In spite of public success, *slashers* encountered mostly negative reactions from critics, specifically in relation to misogyny, extreme violence, and a moralistic reactionism against sexuality. Roger Ebert, who referred to them as “woman-in-danger films,” considered this type of work to be dangerous for its encouragement

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<sup>3</sup> *Black Christmas* (Bob Clark, 1974) and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1976) are at times considered to be the first *slasher* films, while at others are seen as relevant precursors that took fundamental elements from the subgenre. *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) is also seen as an important forerunner for bringing the figure of the “American psycho” to the popular imagination of horror at the same time that there was a change in the monster figure, trading in a predominantly supernatural character for one that is more mundane. The Italian *giallo*—which emerged simultaneously with *Psycho* and would go on to span three decades with a handful of standout productions from the likes of Mario Bava, Dario Argento, and Lucio Fulci, among others—with its sexy detective murder stories is another important influence on the *slasher*. For an interesting historiography on the subgenre, see Petridis (2014).

<sup>4</sup> Even though the majority of these films are rated “R” (restricted for those under age 17), they were primarily viewed by adolescents aged 12 and up (Dika 1987, 87).

<sup>5</sup> Before the label *slasher* took hold, these films were called *teenie-kill pics* by the magazine *Variety* (Hutchings 2004, 194).

of violence and the way it allows the viewer to identify with the murderer and his motivations (1981, 54).

In 1987, two important theoretical analyses of the *slasher* were published and have since become canonical: Vera Dika's more structuralist approach, and Carol Clover's analysis directed at the question of genre, known as the "Final Girl theory."<sup>6</sup> These analyses went against the grain of the then mainstream reading of the subgenre by re-examining its supposed masculine essence with an emphasis on the flow between the point of view and the identification of the viewer.<sup>7</sup> Dika (who preferred the label *stalker film*) considered the subgenre to be a cohesive mix of narrative and cinematographic elements, and their repetition is one of its defining characteristics. The murderer is the main character of these films, while the victims are merely discardable. He is kept masked or off-screen for a large part of the film and his presence is generally indicated by the soundtrack and a series of distinct takes, such as a point-of-view shot that, with the use of angles and cropping, indicate his presence without confirming his position in space, fragmenting him and disorienting both the victim and the viewer. With so much recurrence, these tools have become conventions responsible for creating expectation and suspense, as they always precede the murderer's attack.

Though the viewer is positioned to identify with the villain by repeatedly occupying his point of view, the camera is never turned to show who embodies it, hindering this process from being complete while at the same time "depersonalizing" the character. Additionally, the murderer character makes the viewer prefer to be on the heroine's side, as she has more screen time than any other character and is often pictured in close-ups, resulting in a closer proximity between the viewer and the heroine: "The sum of these techniques then allows for a shifting of identifications between the killer and the heroine, maximizing the spectator's involvement in the screened events while also allowing her or him to maintain a degree of moral distance" (Dika 1987, 89).

These two characters stand out from the rest of the cast for their strategic and perceptive abilities, for being the only ones to use violence, and for being responsible for advancing the narrative. The other adolescents do not carry out any significant action, being, as they are, merely transitory placeholders whose sole purpose is to be killed. The vast majority of the time they are presented as sexual objects, played by attractive people, and are generally doing something that uses their bodies to trigger the viewer's voyeurism (e.g., taking a bath, having sex, or playing sports). According to Dika, though the murderer could be a man or a woman, their dominating and controlling perspective is identified as masculine—they are always the observer and never the object.<sup>8</sup> While the victims, whether they be men or women, occupy a female position,

[...] because their narrative and cinematic enfeeblement has rendered them functionally castrated. Caught by a relentless and controlling gaze, incapable of sight and narrative action, they are the helpless objects of the film. [...] This play of sexual tension is then

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<sup>6</sup> The ideas developed in these articles would be later expanded and published in the books: *Games of Terror: Halloween, Friday the 13th, and the Films of the Stalker Cycle*, by Vera Dika (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1990), and *Men, Women and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, by Carol Clover (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992; re-edited in 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Dika (1987, 87), for example, sought to understand why 55% of the audience of these films is female.

<sup>8</sup> Here Dika relies on feminist theory assumptions about the dynamic of the gaze inherent in classical narrative cinema, especially the article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" by Mulvey (1975). For Mulvey, the pleasure derived from the gaze has been inscribed in cinema in such a way that reflects the unconscious structures of the dominant patriarchy.

literalized in the character of the heroine. Although this lead character is most often represented as a woman, there is usually a certain ambiguity to her sexual identity. Since she is both like the killer in her ability to see and to use violence, and like the victims in her civilized normality and in her initial inability to see, she is portrayed with both male and female characteristics.

(Dika 1987, 90)

Dika's analyses overlap with Clover's on various points. Clover considers the *slasher* to be essentially a sexual fighting ground and argues that these films, deemed particularly misogynistic, could be useful for feminism. Clover identifies six crucial elements in the structure of the subgenre: 1. The murderer, generally a male outsider, sexually disturbed and hypermasculinized; 2. The various victims, young and usually female. Wrongdoing, and sexual transgression above all, is part of their identities: whoever smokes, does drugs, or has sex will be destroyed; 3. The terrible place, a protected area that becomes dangerous; 4. The Final Girl, a female character that becomes the protagonist and is presented as such at the start of the plot. She is more psychologically developed, intelligent, alert and the first to notice that there is something strange happening—in addition to not being a “wrongdoer”. She always survives, like Dika's heroine; 5. The weapons, frequently pre-technological, e.g., chainsaws, knives, axes, ice picks, shears, and every type of blade (hence the term *slasher*). They are extensions of the body and are commonly used as phallic symbols that possess power; 6. The violent confrontation between the murderer and the Final Girl, in which the girl oftentimes hijacks the weapon to emerge as victor.

The Final Girl, the core of Clover's analysis, is characterized as being, from the outset, visibly different from the other teens by her clothes, haircut, behaviour, speech, or decisions made during the film. As Dika also notes, she is the only one in the group to notice the small warning signs that precede tragedy, and at times she is considered to be paranoid—yet it is this special sensitivity that allows for her survival. She is prudent, responsible, and, contrary to her brutally murdered friends, never loses control over her burgeoning sexuality. Above all, she is intelligent and resourceful in extreme situations, and, in spite of always being smaller and weaker than the murderer, deals with him in a compelling and forceful way.

The Final Girls are passive characters that turn into active ones over the course of the plot: if the antagonists begin and steer the direction of the story, at a certain point the Final Girls take over its direction and decide when it finishes. In the process of growth that occurs as they face their “mission”, they absorb characteristics that are otherwise typically masculine such as strength, competency, and anger, combined with typically female characteristics like crying, yelling, and fear. As women, the Final Girls have the right to these feelings that men are not permitted to have, but as heroines it is necessary for them to take on masculine attributes. According to Clover, the lack of the Final Girl's femininity is marked by the use of the “active investigative gaze”: in the beginning it is a blind groping, and later becomes more aggressive as the character pursues the murderer, bringing the gaze to the viewer's consideration. Thus, in these films, the masculine and feminine categories as traditionally embodied by men and women respectively are collapsed into one person who is anatomically female and whose point of view is shared with the viewer.<sup>9</sup> To confuse these roles yet further,

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<sup>9</sup> The “masculinization” of the Final Girl, the fact that this character is put to the service of patriarchal society in order to defeat the murderer and restore the status quo, and her exaltation as a feminist icon are some of the more controversial points of Clover's theory, whose questions I will not discuss here.

Clover reminds us that the *slasher* murderers have a lot in common with the monsters of the first period of horror cinema (i.e., Frankenstein, the Phantom of the Opera, Dracula, King Kong, etc.) that, in the words of Linda Williams, represent not only “an eruption of the normally repressed animal sexuality of the civilized male” but also “the feared power and potency of a different kind of sexuality,” castrated, non-phallic, in which the monster could be a mirror image of the women (2015, 22). Hence, “to the extent that the monster is constructed as feminine, the horror film thus expresses female desire only to show how monstrous it is” (Clover 1987, 209).

Through Dika’s and Clover’s theories, Sotiris Petridis (2014) defines what would be the “classic period” of the *slasher* as mid-1970s to the end of the 1980s. In addition to the backlash movement and Reagan’s ascension to power, she adds the AIDS epidemic as one more “reason” for the punishment of sex and free sexuality in these films. According to Petridis, the decline of the *slasher* resulted from the predictability of its scripts and the endless sequences and remakes. The repetition, however, would be the central theme of what the author calls the “postmodern period” of the subgenre, which began in the mid-1990s and whose prominent films include *New Nightmare* (Wes Craven, 1994), *Scream* (Wes Craven, 1996) and *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (Jim Gillespie, 1997). As the conventions of the *slasher* were widely recognized and predictable, the films of the postmodern period started playing with this by making fun of clichés through parodies, introducing intertextual and self-references, and including characters that are so hyperconscious of the formula of the subgenre that they try to save themselves by using this knowledge. This period was short but important to separate the genre from the idea of reprimanding sexuality and to let go of standardized conventions.

### **When the Woman Looks**

According to Noël Carroll (1990, 12–58), the works that purport to be horror must contain two fundamental components: provoke the audience to feel what gives the genre its name, and include a monster. In *Kill Me Please*, these two components are ambiguous and variable, as the director appropriates them at times and subverts them at others. The same thing happens with *slasher*-specific components, which are employed, at times, in close harmony with the values of the postmodern period (drawing from and reassigning meaning to a handful of references) and, at others, directly allude to the structures and themes of the classic period. This is not to mention the particularities of the time and place of production which inject new fears and concerns into the script.

Right from the opening cut, the film shows that it is in *slasher* territory and delineates some editing, audio, and visual strategies that go on to be systematically repeated, establishing the mood that the film plays with. A pretty teen girl faces the camera in a close-up that is centralized on her face (fig. 1); it is night and we cannot see anything around her besides dots of unfocused, colourful lights behind her. We hear a non-diegetic romantic, antiquated melody until the girl’s eyes brim with tears and a teardrop escapes, at which point a hard cut briskly takes us away from the dreamlike aura. The shot widens to reveal that the girl is alone at a gas station, while at a distance other teens are having fun listening to electronic music, drinking, and kissing.

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For more details about these debates, see Williams (1991), Trencansky (2001), Christensen (2011), and Greven (2011).





Figure 1. *Kill Me Please* opening scene.

In the next scene, we see that she is a little drunk, waiting for the bus, while the noise from the music is further off. The following cut accompanies her as she walks alone in the dark, silent night, with the points of light lining up once again in the background, some moving and revealing themselves to be cars when they approach the girl and the camera. She makes a subtle movement to attempt to hail a taxi but holds back even before leaning towards the road, letting the vehicle pass. This soft, incomplete movement seems like a bad omen when we are presented with the path that she will have to follow: a deserted street with cool lighting occupies only a fraction of the shot while the rest is immersed in darkness (fig. 2). This view is followed by a wide shot of the city, also immersed in darkness, in which few lights shine and a mysterious violet pyramid stands out. The discreet white noise of the far-off city is superimposed by a tension-generating synth pad of sounds: an electric piano forms the bass, chords and treble, a synthesizer, beats, rhythms, and other artificial effects *crescendo* while we return to accompany the girl. She breathes more and more heavily and walks faster and faster, glancing behind her, through what appears to be a clearing hidden in the shadows, blanketed by fog and far from the lights. The image is seamlessly interrupted by a fade out and returns halfway with a fade in. This manoeuvre between what is shown and what is hidden, together with the teen's despair, increases the discomfort and suspense fostered by the soundtrack.



Figure 2. Will she continue down this dark and deserted street?

The character finally trips and falls on the ground, suddenly disappearing from the screen. The soundtrack fades away bit by bit, lowering in volume until it becomes a remote reverberation replaced by cricket chirps, so defined and crystalline that they

underline the silence of the place. This silence is immediately and abruptly broken by a series of screams from the girl as she looks towards the camera, her face captured in a high-angle close-up. A smear of blood is on her forehead; its red colour is artificial and almost luminescent. The framing assumes a threatening point of view and the situation can only result in the death of the girl—two clichés of the subgenre, according to Dika: the point-of-view of the murderer ready to attack, and the violent murder of a woman (fig. 3). The teen’s scream resonates into the next sequence, after the title card, and becomes the siren of an ambulance (a sound that persists throughout the film).

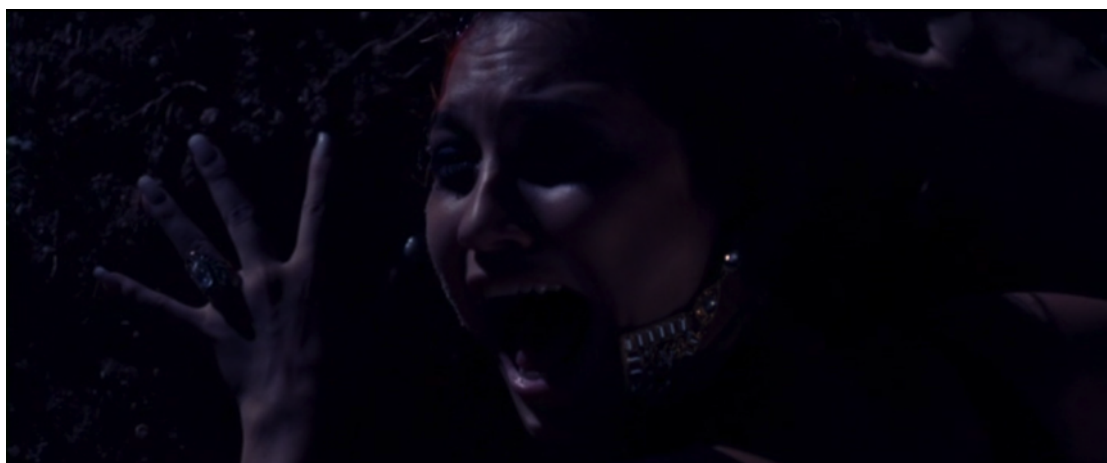


Figure 3. The victim is seen from the murderer’s point-of-view: a *slasher* cliché.

After, another teen girl faces the camera in a centralized close shot. This will be a recurring way of capturing the characters, but the feel given off by each one is different. The tearful, lost look of the first girl (the first victim, Nanda, whose name we learn in passing) demonstrates fragility (fig. 4). The second girl, Bia, who becomes the protagonist, directs a sharper gaze, also used with Mari, during her dance and after the glass in a school window breaks (fig. 5), Michele, when she tells one of her macabre stories (fig. 6), and Renata, while we are the only abettors to her hair-pulling disorder (fig. 7). These girls look, stare challengingly, and include the viewer in the diegesis in such a penetrating way that could even break the fourth wall. Aside from the power of their gaze, they also present themselves to be looked at—not passively, but always in an active, inviting, and at times threatening way.



Figure 4. When the woman looks...



Figures 5, 6, 7. When the woman looks...

While the girls spend the entire film looking at us and at each other (whether it be out of curiosity, desire, or jealousy), the camera that adopts the point of view of the murderer is used only once, in the first sequence previously described. Thus, though the actions of the serial killer trigger the plot, it does not reveal the slightest interest in discovering his identity or what motivates him, making him play a supporting role that forces his presence to quickly dissipate. As in other *slashers*, his personality is mysterious and elusive, but in contrast to other films in the subgenre, it is not revealed

at the end—and neither do we miss it. Indeed, the figure of the murderer could be considered to be more metaphorical than literal, serving only as an opening to reveal other fears and questions.

The murders hold a similar status—nothing is learned about them. This loathsome fact lurks in the entire film yet it is shown very little; it is narrated, though never in an objective way. We have access only to what the quartet of girls speculates about the crimes, which they reconstruct with precision and cruel finesse: “They stabbed her whole body,” “She didn’t have a single toenail,” “She was raped in the vag and the butt, they split her open,” “Her clothes were torn.” The narrations are not factual, but rather are the products of the girls’ imagination and of what they hear or read on social networks. “She lived in the same building as my cousin,” “His sister was in the same prep course as one of the murdered girls,” “The princeling’s friend was questioned,” “Bernardo published the link on Facebook,” “My brother’s friend’s mom works at the police station,” are examples of information sources. This form of facing the horror transforms it into something banal at times and fascinating at others. It is even funny on occasion, from the tone of cheap gossip or the morbid pleasure that the speakers express their knowledge of or proximity to the tragedy.

The reports intertwine with urban legends and nightmares, which are also a common discussion topic among the four girls. They share various elements and situations, among which sex and blood stand out. In the story about the “bathroom blonde” and Michele’s nightmare (she is the one most inclined to morbidity and the most anxious to talk about it), sexual adventures turn into violence, blood, and death. The relation between these elements is reflected in the constant question, murder after murder, about if the victim was raped. At no point is rape mentioned, but the possibility flows nonstop among the girls’ worries. There is blood in the teens’ mouths (including literally, fig. 8)<sup>10</sup> when they tell their stories and also when they imagine the crimes: “I realized I was bleeding a lot, nonstop,” “She was thrown there, bleeding to death,” “There was blood everywhere.” Visually, the blood punctuates the film with an ultra-artificial red (which can be recognized as a nod to *giallo* films), and at one point runs across the entire screen (fig. 9).



Figure 8. The girls talk about blood and also taste it (sometimes figuratively or imaginatively).

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<sup>10</sup> One scene stands out: Bia, staring at the mirror (the camera) in a bathroom—a setting that is repeated various times, making the space so intimate for the girls that it, at times, could be referring to a place in their imaginations—drools blood in an explicit reference to the iconic scene with Helena Ignez in *A família do barulho/The Family of Disorder* (Júlio Bressane, 1970), a film that shows the daily life of a prostitute that lives with two gay people in Rio de Janeiro.



Figure 9. The girls talk about blood and also taste it (sometimes figuratively or imaginatively).

### **The intoxicated years**

Bia is obsessed with finding physical similarities between herself and the murdered girls and simultaneously desires them, even kissing one of the corpses. She identifies with the victims and seeks to be one of them by putting herself in danger and walking alone at night in the same places where the murders happened (fig. 10). In the same vein, she practices the ritual to invoke the “bathroom blonde” (a popular urban legend in Brazilian schools that takes on a double meaning here): she flushes the toilet and stands in front of the mirror waiting for the blonde to appear so that she can frantically kiss her.



Figure 10. The characters become more and more careless: Bia, for example, walks alone at night in the same places where the murders happened.

The same happens to her friends: Mari is in love with Bia’s brother João, who stalked his ex-girlfriend and, according to Renata, “looks like a psychopath.” Neither does Michele mind going out with the “prince,” a friend of one of the murder suspects. In one of the more entertaining dialogues of the film, upon being questioned about the possibility of the said friend killing someone, Michele responds, “But that doesn’t

matter. What matters is that he asked me to go to the movies,” flicking her hair aside to show off a hickey on her neck.

Instead of being careful, the characters become more and more careless. This enchantment with death, however, appears to have more to do with the typical adolescent desire to live life intensely.<sup>11</sup> This phase is the moment of social integration when the individual discovers and develops new possibilities in various aspects of life: they are no longer a child restricted to family and school environments, but they now have to deal with new relationships, new groups, and new institutions, which enable new feelings and emotions—multiplied, in our times, by technology, which offers a myriad of stimuli and information (Souto 2011). *Kill Me Please* is outstanding in its exploration of this. As the film critic Fábio Andrade observed about *Handebol/Handball* (2010), the previous short-film by the same director,<sup>12</sup> the construction of the film incorporates an adolescent mood, and adolescence is constructed not just as a demographic universe, but as a wealth of aesthetic potential:

*Handball* percebe na idade a zona mista entre uma primeira tábula rasa social [...] e a plena convencionalidade da vida adulta. É justamente aí que está seu maior interesse temático, pois essa oscilação entre estados contraditórios é também característica da própria criação artística. A adolescência interessa, portanto, por ser algo em constante transformação, flutuando entre o conhecido e o desconhecido, o diegético e o não diegético, a infância (com toda a carga metafórica de curiosidade, descobrimento e sensualidade que o termo carrega) e a vida adulta.

(Andrade 2010)



Figure 11. Teenage mood: tired or lazy bodies piled up on the floor prompt a familiarity between the absent-minded and the shameless.

<sup>11</sup> The title of the film appears to make a reference to the book *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk* (Legs McNeil and Gillian McCain, 1996) and to the no-limits experiences that frequently took various musicians and bandmates of the punk movement to the brink of death.

<sup>12</sup> Anita Rocha da Silveira’s filmography is completed with the shorts *O vampiro do meio-dia/The Noon Vampire* (2008) and *Os mortos-vivos/The Living Dead* (2012) that, like *Handball*, address topics of coming of age and horror as present in *Kill Me Please*. All of the director’s shorts are available on her Vimeo channel: <https://vimeo.com/anitarochadasilveira>.



Figure 12. Teenage mood: tired or lazy bodies piled up on the floor prompt a familiarity between the absent-minded and the shameless.

It is possible to say the same thing about *Kill Me Please* and how it achieves these feelings, according to Andrade, through the use of ambiguity: as described earlier, the frequent eroticism is fused with violence, the records of the real and fantasy merge, what appears to be terrible becomes comical. For example, tired or lazy bodies piled up on the floor prompt a familiarity between the absent-minded and the shameless (figs. 11 & 12); or with the use of a visual style intrinsic to social media fervently used by this generation, as when the four friends with their injured faces look at themselves in the mirror in a framing typical of *selfies*—even though, contrary to the highlights usually posted on Instagram, the girls look rueful (figs. 13, 14 & 15); or the videoclips that interrupt the narrative (without explicitly talking about the narrative as they would in a musical, but as random inserts).



Figure 13. Instagram framework.



Figures 14 & 15. Instagram framework.

In the same way, the couple making out in various scenes, both in focus and at the edge of the screen (figs. 16, 17 & 18), embodies and constantly reminds the viewer of the high libido of the characters—nobody in the group has the “good girl” profile typical of *Final Girls*: the excitement and curiosity of their own sexual discovery assaults all of them, without exception (even Pedro, Bia’s boyfriend, who tries to resist and is never able to). Even religion fails as a method against hormonal impulses, appearing reconfigured (a mix between Catholicism and prevalent neo-Pentecostal movements) as a product aimed at teens that presents Jesus as a pop star, appropriates typically raunchy music styles like *funk carioca*, and has a sexy young woman pastor (fig. 19).





Figures 16, 17 & 18. Teenage mood: kisses, kisses, and kisses.

There is also the bewilderment of constantly being at the ready, expressed as a montage sequence of a handball game (reclaimed from *Handball*).<sup>13</sup> In handball, a

<sup>13</sup> Thinking of all the moments described, Anita Rocha da Silveira's influences are clear, as cited in various interviews: *The Virgin Suicides* (Sofia Coppola, 1999), with the blurry photography linked to the girls' melancholy as they are on the path to a conscious and desired death; *Elephant* (2003) and *Paranoid Park* (2007) by Gus Van Sant, with the slow-mo camera that seeks to capture the numbness of the characters in extreme circumstances or when they remember those extreme situations (the attack at the school in the former; the skate tricks and the guard's death while taking a bath in the latter); and the films

competitive sport practiced by high school girls in Brazil, being hit is inevitable, and in the film this is central to the girls' transformation from victims of violence to potential authors of it (fig. 20).



Figure 19. Sexy woman pastor.

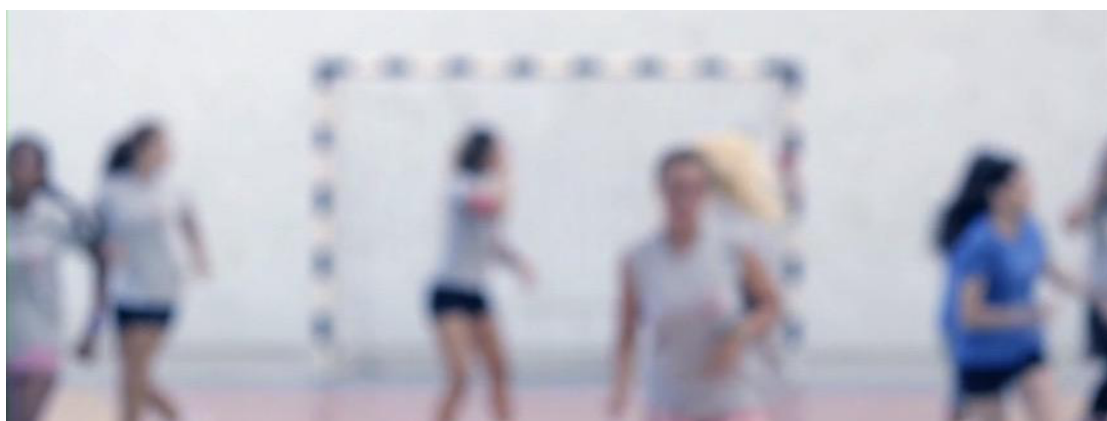


Figure 20. Flow and *flou*: handball.

### **Vampires, zombies, female sexuality and other monstrosities**

In *Bia*, this transformation is most visible when she kisses the cadaver (fig. 21), thus changing the *mise-en-scène* and bringing the film emphatically into horror territory. After tasting blood, her trysts with Pedro are more voracious and during one of them she tries to strangle him; her gaze becomes more attuned to the bodies of her friends, with whom she seeks out more intense physical contact that even becomes aggressive; her dog begins to shy away from her, a revival of the genre cliché of animals having a sixth sense. “Blood is life,” Bia says to her boyfriend, purporting to repeat the pastor’s words—the phrase does indeed recall Biblical language and can be found in both Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* and in its Hollywood adaptation directed by Tod Browning in 1931.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, the film slowly adapts its blue tonality to become purple—a colour conventionally associated with the vampire universe.

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of Larry Clark such as *Kids* (1995) and *Ken Park* (2002), with the layering of numerous elements and events in the scenes, and quick cuts, both of which assimilate the frenzy of the altered teens. See Cortéz (2015).

<sup>14</sup> For more on the influence of the Bible on vampire literature, see Lima (2016).



Figure 21. The kiss on the corpse: a turning point for Bia.

Besides *Dracula*, Bia's new persona makes countless other horror film references, best encapsulated during a scene at Amanda's *quinceañera* party.<sup>15</sup> After trying to strangle Pedro while making out in the emergency exit stairwell, she attempts to leave the hideaway and return to the party. Stationed in front of a backdrop curtain in yet another centralized close-up, she recalls *Carrie*, from the film of the same name, during her crowning at prom and before the bucket of pig's blood is dumped on her head, unleashing her supernatural fury and provoking a massacre (fig. 22). While this happens, spiral lighting is projected on her face, citing scenes from *L'enfer/Inferno* (1964), the unfinished film by Henri-Georges Clouzot.<sup>16</sup> The effects of the movement of lights on Bia, shadowing and deforming her features, evoke typical lighting techniques used by Mario Bava. The background changes colour as she walks, accompanied by a dolly out, bringing to mind scenes from *Suspiria* (Dario Argento, 1977). The sequence ends with smoke alerting to a possible fire and starting a stampede in the party, as also happens in De Palma's *Carrie*. All of these works, and *Carrie* in particular, touch on the theme of female sexuality as something dangerous.



Figure 22. Bia/Carrie.

<sup>15</sup> The characters of Amanda and her two faithful followers are also syntheses of important references: *Clueless* (Amy Heckerling, 1995) and *Mean Girls* (Mark Waters, 2004). More related to American *coming of age* films, both still have their own touch of horror with the violence contained by the covert brutality of the school environment—present also in *Kill Me Please*.

<sup>16</sup> Clouzot's experiments with light on the face of actor Romy Schneider became well known after the dissemination of some images via the documentary *L'enfer de Henri-Georges Clouzot/Henri-Georges Clouzot's Inferno* (Serge Bromberg & Ruxandra Medrea, 2009).

Bia also starts to pass through a process of discreet physical change that recalls another figure from the horror genre: the zombie. Her skin turns ghastly pale in contrast to the others; her eyes become sunken; she appears detached and moves about based on automation and instinct as if she were in a trance; her apathetic expression covers up an inner voracity that might explode at any moment. Her classmates, ostensibly to avoid being alone and surprised by the murderer, begin walking together slowly around the school or neighbourhood in a typical zombie shuffle (fig. 23).



Figure 23. Zombie shuffle.

As this is happening, in a religious ceremony meant to console the survivors, the pastor describes this movement in a song (“walking, living-dead I am”) and praises it by comparing it to the story of Lazarus, “the first living-dead of the Lord,” according to the lyrics. Just as zombies decompose, marks of violence increasingly accumulate on the students’ bodies: in the beginning, someone with a black eye or broken arm randomly flashes by in the background, until the four main characters reveal their wounds (in the aforementioned mirror sequence) and a scene showing the students entering the classrooms allows us to see a steady flow of bandages, crutches, cuts, bruises, and other injuries (figs. 24 & 25).<sup>17</sup>



Figure 24. The injured bodies multiply.

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<sup>17</sup> These wounds could also connote the painful vestiges typical of the passage into adulthood.



Figure 25. The injured bodies multiply.

The final scene reinforces this relation and also the bout of uncertainties unfolded throughout the entire film: at dawn in an open field with large buildings on the horizon, Bia gets up from the middle of the undergrowth where she spent the night and starts walking away. Unexpectedly, other teens also stand up slowly, one by one, and walk away like the protagonist, forming another small procession, as if they will continue being resurrected ad infinitum to face yet another day of the horrific adolescent routine (fig. 26).



Figure 26. *Kill Me Please* ending scene.

### **A sunny as well as dark Rio**

This empty field surrounded by construction could be another monster in *Kill Me Please*, in addition to fully incorporating the meaning of Clover's "terrible place". The film takes teens from an idyllic suburb and puts them at risk time and again, and not even places like school or home are able to provide protection—a feeling of abandonment reinforced by the complete absence of adults.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, the film

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<sup>18</sup> According to Pat Gill, in *slasher* films, there is, besides the teenagers, generally a group of older people: parents, teachers, doctors, police. However, these authority figures have lost their power and do not have the slightest possibility of altering the events of the film or even to protect the adolescents: "Slasher films show teenagers in peril, with no hope of help from their parents. Mostly these parents are

presents an unusual Rio de Janeiro, far from the one that populates the general imagination: without beaches, nature, tourist landmarks, composed instead of scrubland and empty fields surrounded by large buildings, billboards advertising new businesses, and highways. The plot is unmistakably set in Barra da Tijuca, and the neighbourhood's name is reiterated in the dialogues, bus stops, protest signs against the murders, worship service handouts, radio shows, and even the name of the school (figs. 27 and 28):

Barra emerged in the 1970s as a “solution” to Rio’s urban crisis, providing a large, unexploited space for the middle classes to insulate themselves from the growing disorder and violence of the inner city. Designed using rational modernist principles, it grew into a landscape of gated condominiums and shopping malls connected by car-strewn expressways. [...] In recent years, meanwhile, the hosting of the Olympic Games and other mega-events has brought a massive wave of speculative development to the area, producing new liminal spaces and intensified flows of people that have jeopardized residents’ sense of control.

(Richmond 2017, 177)



Figure 27 & 28. Unusual Rio de Janeiro landscape.

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generally too busy or too involved in their own problems or pleasures to help. Even caring, concerned parents are impotent, often they are hapless and distracted, unaware of their children’s problems and likely to dismiss or discount their warnings and fears. [...] What is striking about most of these films is the notable uselessness of parents, their absence, physically and emotionally, from their children’s lives. Teens must deal with the extraordinarily resilient monsters on their own” (Gill 2002, 17).

Barra da Tijuca was modeled by architect Lúcio Costa, one of the creators of Brasília, who sought to ensure that the urbanization of the area would happen in an orderly fashion, avoiding the congestion that plagued other parts of the city, *favelas*, and infrastructure gaps. In spite of the high level of planning, the growth dictated by the real estate market resulted in an urban form that is highly individualistic and characterized by segregation and the privatisation of public space—a situation that is aggravated by mega-events. As Matthew Richmond affirms, after decades of explosive development, Barra da Tijuca bears the marks of the history that gave it a double identity: on the one hand, it was birthed in an immaculate conception, the product of urban planning that expanded its borders to include the Carioca<sup>19</sup> middle class during a period of urban crisis; on the other hand, the process destroyed the biodiversity of the region, transforming it into a monotonous landscape of buildings where the residents prioritize their safety through self-imprisonment (Richmond 2017, 179–180).

*Kill Me Please* attempts to enact one of the facets of the weakness that comes with this type of urbanization, a kind of “American dream” of the tropics that promises to fix all problems and offer a perfect life. Miami is a recurring model of this dream for coastal Latin American cities, and it is present in the film through its dance music classics that became global hits at the end of the ‘80s (for example, “In My Eyes”, by Stevie B., and the Floor Bangas’ version of “Don’t Stop the Rock”), when Florida was trendy and became a beacon for the subcontinent’s upper class. Just as everything in the film is two-sided, the soundtrack serves as a shadow of an area that you want to get away from, rounded out by a blatantly Carioca pop music style birthed in Rio’s *favelas*, *funk melody*. “Nosso sonho” by Claudinho & Buchecha is one of the most celebrated songs of this style. In another *slasher* appropriation—in which the places that are removed from the dangers of the big city not only fail to protect the residents but also become a nursery for living nightmares—Silveira’s film mocks the bourgeois desire to reside in suburban areas where even the most innocuous movement is suspect and the commonplace is threatening.

Essas jovens [from *Kill Me Please*], que estudam e vivem em condomínios repletos de grades e seguranças, e que são quase sempre apartadas da realidade urbana para além das fronteiras de seu bairro, são obrigadas a lidar com a presença de um suposto intruso que elimina suas colegas uma a uma. Para elas, o espaço de circulação diária, antes visto como protegido de quaisquer ameaças externas, passa a ser ressignificado como um labirinto de onde pode surgir, a qualquer momento, uma explosão de violência (Cánepa 2017, 295).

Here it is possible to trace another one of the references frequently cited by the director: David Lynch. In many of his productions (with an emphasis on the television series *Twin Peaks*, 1990–91) where the places of action are peaceful rural towns in the United States, the director works with the space as if it were a parallel universe where strange things can happen, in spite of its apparent normalcy. The visual treatment turns humdrum settings into sinister ones,<sup>20</sup> suggesting failures in the so-called “American

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<sup>19</sup> Translator note: Carioca is the demonym of Rio de Janeiro.

<sup>20</sup> In *Kill Me Please*, this treatment is also modeled after the works of the American photographer Philip-Lorca diCorcia, with his series *Streetworks* (1993–1997) and *Heads* (2001) in particular. Like Lynch (albeit with his gaze turned towards big cities), diCorcia starts from the parameter of representing the

way of life”—failures that repeat and multiply in the sloppy copy that Barra da Tijuca has become. The contradictions in the characters, terrified and terrifying, seem to be outlined by the contradictions in the landscape.

### **“These are times of fear, terror, and nightmare”**

In *Kill Me Please*, “coexistence” with the murderer unleashes feelings and fears in the imaginations of the adolescent girls in Rio de Janeiro (and in large Brazilian cities in general), especially fantasies of trauma. Images of a vacant lot illuminated by a spotlight (key in police programs that report the crimes as they happen in the film) (fig. 29); the scene of a girl walking at night in a deserted place—and, due to the framing, the cars that pass close to her seem like they are going to either run her over or stop, both of which are threatening; or phrases like, “You can’t go walking around alone without a man anymore,” populate the film. Especially strong wording is broadcast by the radio: “These are times of fear, terror, and nightmare. It is necessary to be careful, walk in groups, and avoid going out at night. And remember: the gentlest faces can hide a murderer. As the famous serial killer Ted Bundy said, ‘We are your friends. We are your neighbours. We are everywhere.’”



Figure 29. A deserted, dark and dangerous place: this type of image is recurrent in the film.

Bia (and, in a way, her friends too) decides to confront this world; however, unlike a Final Girl, she does not intend to let go of anything nor to follow protocol. When she comes across the body (that still has a pulse!), a real encounter with death, she wants to feel alive at any cost—even though she is aware that this could be destructive. At the same time that she grasps the idea that being alive means experiencing everything first-hand, there is the perception that the body is perishable, fragile, and made of flesh and bone.<sup>21</sup> The character is willing to be considered a monster, making herself out to be the evil “bathroom girl” of the school that seduces Pedro, and causing suspicion due to her cool reaction when she hears the news about

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ordinary man to transform him into something uncertain and mysterious. Principally through illumination, the photographer alters what is captured in order to undermine document records.

<sup>21</sup> Here the influence of the French filmmaker Claire Denis’s work is important, especially *Beau Travail/Good Work* (1999) and *Trouble Every Day* (2001), films about flesh, the body, and their limits. It is also important to highlight the presence of the poems “Psicologia de um vencido” [Psychology of one who is overcome] and “Versos íntimos” [Intimate verses] by Augusto dos Anjos, about the grotesque body, read by Bia.



the discovery of a boy's body, compared to the excitement that animates her when she learns of the girls' murders.<sup>22</sup>

While the girls face the world with their desires, the male characters, besides not having much importance beyond their connections to the girls, drown in fear and denial. Pedro, in spite of keeping hold of his paternal and devoted profile (like when he says, "Do you promise to only go home by bus now? [...] You poor thing."), talks continuously of the dangers of sex, the need to go to church to rid oneself of sins, and the importance of marriage. João, edging on 30, lives with his mom who also supports him, doesn't work (his DJ career doesn't seem to have taken off), and is obsessed with a woman that ignores him, being alienated to the point of imagining that she died simply because she doesn't answer his messages and calls.

The girls speculate about connected events in real and supernatural ways: Michele, in keeping with her profile as a storyteller, creates legends that mix evil spirits and sexual crimes, while Bia searches for clues on the victims' social media profiles. When they tell their classmates about the girl they found and describe the suspect according to what they had seen on the news ("a white guy, 20 to 40 years old, five foot seven to maybe five-ten"), they are questioned by a boy to whom Michele responds, "There are people who like to watch women suffer. Torture, stab... real slow-like." When the rock breaks the school window, Michele believes that the building is haunted, Mari thinks that one of their classmates is mentally disturbed, and in a third theory they suspect a suspended student recently dumped by his girlfriend who was studying in the classroom adjacent to the one with the broken window.

On the one hand, the possibility of femicide is real, as evidenced by the famous story of Daniella Perez, a young actress that was stabbed to death with scissors by a fellow cast member and his wife in an empty field in Barra da Tijuca, after recording the soap opera that she starred in, in December 1992. On the other hand, is the discovery of sexuality and the power gained from it, generally pruned back by an upbringing that perceives sex as a duality of pleasure and danger, involving teenagers in a psychological terror film driven by questions of surveillance and perpetual vulnerability. The causes of the horror, accordingly, are connected to themes such as the isolation and alienation of the middle and upper classes and violence against women, embodying a state of paranoia and a language of violence so in vogue today. To this is added the exponential growth of the influence of religion in Brazilian society, especially of the more retrograde neo-Pentecostal branches and their misogynistic, homophobic and punitive discourses. Through "social" horror, *Kill Me Please* outlines the backlash that has taken over Brazil in recent years, and which has become increasingly aggressive and explicit in the years following the film's release.

*Kill Me Please* makes clear how frightening and dangerous the world can be for a young woman eager to enjoy and experience her nascent sexuality, at a time when certain taboos would seem to have been overcome in a conservative country that claims itself as a paradise of sexual freedom. At the same time, it vehemently criticizes restraint (mostly through humour, exposing the ridiculousness of certain "solutions"), the paralysis of desire, and fear as forms of protection. On the contrary: looking, attacking, and even taking the monster's place are painted as better strategies, not only to survive, but to live fully.

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<sup>22</sup> Though Bia appears uninterested by this crime, the news generates a much larger impact in the school community than the other occasions do: the students are released early, a warning is announced through the school intercom.

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