

Department of Media and Communication

Master's thesis

Period Shift

How Streaming Era Film and Television Reinvent and Subvert Menstrual Tropes

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Abstract

Period Shift: How Streaming Era Film and Television Reinvent and Subvert Menstrual Tropes is a study of original content from commercial streaming networks, and how they represent menstruation and the female body. This master's thesis looks at how historically menstruation and menstruating bodies have been represented in on screen media through a patriarchal lens, that vilifies the feminine and created the trope of the *Menstrual Monster*. Through a limited study, using feminist film and literature theory from a psychoanalytical approach, which includes Laura Mulvey's theories of the *male gaze*, Julia Kristeva's *abjection* theory, and Barbara Creed's theory on the *Menstrual Monster* trope in horror, this thesis seeks to answer the question: *How has the representation of menstruation and female bodies changed in the post Me Too streaming era in Anglocentric film and television?* This question is approached with a close textual analysis on menstrual representation in Disney +'s original film *Turning Red*, Netflix's original animated sit-com *Big Mouth* and HBO Max's original series *I May Destroy You*, and how they subvert and reinvent menstrual tropes. The way menstruation is shown, discussed and treated on the streaming screen is moving away from a patriarchal depiction of menstruation as embarrassing, disgusting and funny to a more realistic representation, through a *female gaze*, of menstruating being mundane, normal and simply a part of life.

Preface and Acknowledgements

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Period Shift: How Streaming Era Film and Television Reinvent and Subvert Menstrual Tropes

1 Introduction

“Everybody bleeds!” Sings the tampon that looks like Mark Stipe in Nick Kroll’s animated television sit-com *Big Mouth* (2017).¹ According to a UNICEF press release from 2018, 26 % of the world population has a menstrual cycle.² That is roughly 1.8 billion people, qualifying it as a universal and central part of the human experience. Yet, its representation in visual media has historically been lacking. Lauren Rosewarne, the Associate Professor in the School of Social and Political Sciences at Melbourne University, anthologises the history of menstruation as represented in screen media in her 2012 book *Periods in Pop Culture: Menstruation in Film and Television*. Rosewarne questions this lack of representation and discovered only about 200 scenes in film and television that portray menstruation in some form. This is not a large number but Rosewarne shows that menstruation on screen has been present. However, the way that menstruation has been represented has not been the most positive, progressive or realistic. Rosewarne noted that when menstruation is represented it is treated as a nuisance that causes bad moods, men grief, and ruins sex lives. “Overwhelmingly the screen presents menstruation as not only a dramatic event, but as a pretty awful plight for everybody”.³ Another great contributor to studying the representation of menstruation in cinema history is Barbara Creed, the professor of Cinema Studies in the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne. Creed wrote her book *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* in 1993, in which she recognises a representational pattern, that when female bodies and menstruation is represented on screen it is often through the medium of horror. Identifying the characteristics that define the

¹ *Big Mouth*, season 1, episode 2, "Everybody Bleeds," directed by Bryan Francis 2017.

² "FAST FACTS: Nine things you didn't know about menstruation," 2018, accessed 28.11.2022, <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/fast-facts-nine-things-you-didnt-know-about-menstruation>.

³ Lauren Rosewarne, *Periods in pop culture : menstruation in film and television* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2012), 4.

monstrous female or the *Menstrual Monster*, Creed offers a psychoanalytical approach to defining how and why the feminine has often been vilified on screen.

I argue that the discussion around female issues truly started shifting in the later part of the 2010's. The "Me Too" movement, a feminist social media movement that highlighted discrimination and sexual harassment in the entertainment industry, that started in October of 2017, can be credited for the positive shift in representation. However visual media's move to online platforms and streaming sites, and thus their increased accessibility has also played a crucial part. The examples of film and television that Creed and Rosewarne use to analyse representation of menstruation, precede film and televisions shift to, and availability on, streaming platforms. They also precede the "Me Too" movements effects on representation on screen. I argue that the way fictional screen narratives in the streaming era, or TV IV as it has been coined by media scholar Marieke Jenner, display and discuss menstruation is changing and paving the way for a new narrative around menstruating bodies. The way menstruation is shown, discussed and treated on the streaming screen is moving away from a patriarchal depiction of menstruation as embarrassing, disgusting and funny to a more realistic representation, through a *female gaze*, of menstruating being mundane, normal and simply a part of life. Menstruation through the female gaze also allows acknowledgment of the struggles, pains and discomfort that comes with menstruation.

Some questions explored in this thesis are: what are the changes around menstrual narratives that have happened in TV IV era screen media? Have the narratives around female body issues, and menstruation moved away from metaphoric narratives, language and visualisation, and towards narrative, linguistic and visual realism around the female body? What do we see and hear about menstruation in streaming shows and movies in the last six years that differs so much from the pre-streaming era?

This thesis will explore the representation of menstruation in television and film distributed through streaming services in the late 2010s and early 2020s. Because there has been a rise in popularity of menstrual narratives, it is high time to revisit analysing representation of menstruation in visual media in the streaming era and look closer at some of the original content from the streaming platforms Netflix, Disney + and HBO Max. I attempt to demonstrate that since Rosewarne and Creed did their studies, the representation, and language used to represent menstruation on screen has changed positively.

1.1 Research question and Method and Thesis Structure

This thesis is a limited study consisting of a literature review and close textual analysis of three separate examples of film and television, which were released between the years 2017 and 2022. I will conduct a literature review followed by the close textual analyses and discussions of the relevant media and apply a theoretical approach to them.

The primary research question for this thesis is:

1. *How has the representation of menstruation and female bodies changed in the post Me Too streaming era in Anglocentric film and television?*

Each following chapter has a sub-research question to further an answer to the main research question.

1. *How does Disney +’s Turning Red reinvent the Menstrual Monster as defined by Barbara Creed?*
2. *How does Netflix’s Big Mouth subvert the negative tropes and euphemistic language created historically around menstruating bodies through the visual media of animation?*
3. *What is Menstrual Realism and how does HBO’s I May Destroy You use it to represent menstruation realistically?*

To answer, explore and discuss my questions my first chapter will be a literature review of relevant texts. The literature review is followed by three chapters, in which I will look closer at three original streaming productions, written or directed by women, in the comedy and drama genre that mention or discuss menstruation and explored how this representation differs or subverts the ones that Creed and Rosewarne discuss.

The first chapter is a literature review. I will start by mapping out a history of menstrual representation through the anthology created by Rosewarne, including defining common menstrual tropes in film and television in order contextualise my thesis to Rosewarne’s anthological findings in the pre-streaming era. This is followed by a definition of the Menstrual Monster trope as theorised by Creed, and a further look on how Creed based her theories on feminist philosopher Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytical studies of the powers of horror in literature. This includes situating menstrual film theory in Kristeva’s semiotic

theories of horror as *abjection*. This is followed by defining feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey's theory on visual pleasure and defining the *gaze*. Finally, I will situate my analysis in the middlebrow approach, by will demonstrating how representation menstruation in film and television automatically situates itself in the middlebrow and why this is important for menstrual representation in media.

In my second chapter titled, "*I'm a Gross Red Monster*": *How Pixar's Turning Red Tames the Menstrual Monster*, I will conduct a close textual analysis on Disney's *Turning Red* (2022). I will analyse it through the lens of horror by using Creed and Kristeva as my main theories. My main argument in this chapter is that the red panda that the protagonist Mei turns in to in this film, is a Menstrual Monster as defined by Creed. However, *Turning Red* also subverts the tropes that create the Menstrual Monster and ends up taming it.

In my third chapter titled, "*There is Blood Coming Out of My Vagina*": *The Representation of Female Bodily Fluids Through Realistic Language in Big Mouth*, I will explore *Big Mouth* (2017), the adult animated sit-com series created by, Nick Kroll, and how *Big Mouth* represents menstruation and the pubescent menstruating experience through the visual medium of animation. I argue *Big Mouth* does this through the use of 'smart' comedy as defined by Eddie Falvey and by visualisation of blood in a comedic yet realistic way, by taking subjective experiences that are simultaneously universal, and treating these themes without metaphors, through realistic representations and subverting the negative tropes created historically around menstruating bodies through the visual media of animation.

My fourth and final chapter titled, "*It's a Blood Clot*": *Period Realism on the Streaming Screen as Demonstrated by I May Destroy You*, I will analyse an episode of Michaela Coel's drama series *I May Destroy You* (2020). I will explore menstrual realism in live action media, define why menstruation is often situated in the bathroom, the importance of representation and define the *menstrual gaze*.

In my conclusion I will summarise my findings but also display what discussions the media analysed in this thesis has triggered in the public. I have discovered in the media analysed in this thesis, that there is finally an ongoing public discussion on the representation of menstruation. By showing menstruation on the screen, and the intimate, private and subjective moments that come with it, without shame and without metaphors, has triggered discussions and actual societal change.

1.2 Limitations

For the purpose of this thesis, I will mainly be displaying and discussing the representation of cis-gendered females with a normally functioning reproduction system, that is persons who identify as female and have regular monthly periods. There is a lack of representation for individuals who suffer from ailments that may restrict or complicate menstruating, like PCOS, or endometriosis. There is also virtually no representation found for trans and nonbinary people who menstruate. This unfortunately means that these identities will be largely excluded in my analysis. However, I want to highlight that when I use the word “woman” or “female”, I am referring to the individual’s biological sex and reproductive system. Trans individuals who have female reproductive systems have been subjected to the same patriarchal treatment and prejudice as cis-gendered women when it comes to their menstruation. As for trans-women, they have also been subjected to the societal prejudices that come with being a woman. Possible future study could analyse this issue from a more inclusive lens.

My main subjects of study are all Anglocentric streaming media produced after the year 2016. I have limited myself to streaming productions, as that is the main way audiences consume visual media today. The year 2016 and after was chosen due to its prevalence in being after the main “Me Too” movement that pushed female and menstrual narratives to be more representative and realistic. Possible future study could analyse the media that precedes the “Me Too” movement and perhaps lead to it, as well as what representations and narratives are visible in linear media.

I have limited myself to three main pieces of streaming screen media, to ensure that I can give a full analysis of the ones chosen. A further, wider study could potentially include a wider study pool.

2 Literature Review



Figure 1 Screenshot from *Superbad* (2009) where a partygoer menstruates on Jonah Hill's character Seth's leg

This first chapter will act as a literature review for the analysis performed in the following chapters. I will now define the theories used to approach the analytical chapters, and their relevance to menstrual representation on screen.

2.1 A Look Back on Menstrual Representation in the Pre-Streaming Era

Historically menstruation on screen has been negatively presented or at least as an inconvenience. In 2012 Lauren Rosewarne published her book *Periods in Pop Culture: Menstruation in Film and Television*. In the introduction to her book, she reveals that writing it was a result of an observation made as a child. “I was long stuck on the idea that something so widely discussed amongst my friends, something so common and so seemingly normal, was absent from film and television. Just where were all the menstruators?”.⁴ This question highlights that there has been, and still is, a lack of representation of menstruation in film and television, however they do exist. Rosewarne continues, “There may not be thousands of

⁴ Rosewarne, *Periods in pop culture : menstruation in film and television*, 2.

scenes, menstruation may seldom get a starring role, and a lot of the presentations discussed may be completely awful—if not thoroughly misogynist—but examples do exist”.⁵ The book anthologises the representations of menstruation and the female body on screen up to the 2010s, by defining the main tropes and imagery that is used to represent it. Most notably she found that the genres of situational and romantic comedies have been notorious for including plot points around the horrors of menstruation and *menarche*, or the first menstrual cycle, by using them as a punchline of a joke, an insult or an excuse.

Starting with menarche, Lauren Rosewarne lists some examples from western cinema and how they display menarche as the border between childhood and womanhood. In director Amy Heckerling’s romantic comedy *I Could Never Be Your Woman* (2007), and director Tony Goldwyn’s romantic drama *A Walk on the Moon* (1999), when the young female characters go through menarche their family members congratulate them on becoming a woman.⁶ Similarly this celebration of menarche is displayed in the 1980’s and -90’s sitcom *Roseanne* (1988), where Rosanne’s (Roseanne Barr) eleven year old daughter Darlene (Sara Gilbert) gets her period and Rosanne tells her to be proud because “this is the beginning of a lot of really wonderful things in your life”.⁷ Rosewarne writes that “menstruation is celebrated not just as a generic developmental milestone, but one with life-giving properties; the girl is being welcomed into a community of those who can procreate, notably by the woman who gave her life”.⁸ Menarche is often framed as a rite of passage where the girls become women, and the mother or maternal figure is often present in these scenes. However, it is also framed as a secret club through coded language and explained through euphemisms. The girls are taught by their elders to keep it secret and hidden.

Menstruation on screen has commonly been so taboo, it has historically rarely been talked of or shown realistically on screen.⁹ Culturally when speaking of menstruating it is often shrouded in metaphoric language. Swedish academic author Hanna Sveen did a linguistic study for the journal *Women’s Health* on common menstrual expressions and found 211

⁵ Rosewarne, *Periods in pop culture : menstruation in film and television*, 2.

⁶ Rosewarne, *Periods in pop culture : menstruation in film and television*, 40.

⁷ *Roseanne*, season 1, episode 15, "Nightmare on Oak Street," directed by John Pasquin 1989.

⁸ Rosewarne, *Periods in pop culture : menstruation in film and television*, 42.

⁹ Rosewarne, *Periods in pop culture : menstruation in film and television*.

examples of English expressions to symbolise menstruation. Sveen writes, “As menstruation is a cultural taboo, it triggers the need for circumventational ways of addressing this phenomenon”.¹⁰ Sveen categorised the terms in different semantic categories with the most prevalent ones being euphemisms that allude to the colour red, blood and flow, terms alluding to sanitary protection and menstruation as a visitor. These euphemisms are a common way that menstruation has been represented on screen historically. In director Amy Heckerlyn’s teen comedy *Clueless* (1995) when Cher Horowitz (Alicia Silverstone) is accused by her teacher Mr. Hall (Wallace Shawn) for being late to class she gets away without punishment with the excuse “I was surfing the crimson wave. I had to haul ass to the ladies”.¹¹ The term “being on the rag” is often used by male counterparts towards menstruating characters. Rosewarne exemplifies this with a scene from *Juno* (2007), where an argument between a male and female character ended with the male party “Call me when you get off the rag!”.¹² The Rag here is alluding to sanitary products and being on the rag has been slang for menstruation and synonymous with irritation since the 1940’s.¹³ Similar euphemistic language in film and television has been used for female anatomy. In Elizabeth Meriwether’s sit-com *New Girl* (2011) episode “Menzie’s”, the protagonist Jess (Zooey Deschanel) is menstruating, and uses the word “baby box” instead of uterus.¹⁴ Jess’s inability to use biologically correct terminology repeatedly comes up throughout the seven seasons of the show.

If, and when correct terms are used in screen narratives, they have often been a punchline in a joke or to initiate disgust. In director Greg Mottola’s teen buddy comedy film *Superbad* (2007). Actor Jonah Hill’s character, the horny teenager Seth is dancing intimately with a girl at a house party. He soon afterwards sees a stain on his jeans, and shouts, “She perioded on my fucking leg!” and threatens to throw up.¹⁵ Similarly, at the start of the same *New Girl*

¹⁰ Hanna Sveen, "Lava or Code Red: A Linguistic Study of Menstrual Expressions in English and Swedish," *Women's Reproductive Health* 3, no. 3 (2016/09/01 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1080/23293691.2016.1237712>, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23293691.2016.1237712>.

¹¹ Amy Heckerling, "Clueless," (USA: Paramount Pictures, 1995).

¹² Rosewarne, *Periods in pop culture : menstruation in film and television*, 94.

¹³ Rosewarne, *Periods in pop culture : menstruation in film and television*, 99.

¹⁴ *New Girl*, season 2, episode 7, "Menzie's," directed by Trent O'Donnell 2012, on 20th Century Fox Television.

¹⁵ Greg Mottola, "Superbad," (USA: Sony Pictures Entertainment, 2007).

episode where Jess calls her uterus a “baby box”, when tells her three male roommates that she is “PMSing” and should not be challenged, the three men all gag in disgust.¹⁶

These negative examples of menstrual representation in television and film does not mean that there has not been attempts at positive and neutral representation. In the romantic comedy *No strings Attached* (2011), when Adam (Ashton Kutcher) visits his love interest Emma (Natalie Portman) whilst she is menstruating, he finds that Emma and her female flatmates are all menstruating. He brings them cupcakes and a period mixtape of songs that are very on the nose. This includes Leona Lewis’s *Bleeding Love*, where the titular lyrics are “I keep bleeding love”.¹⁷ With an air of sarcasm and aware of the reaction he will get Adam says, “You’re women and I think that’s a beautiful thing”.¹⁸ This is met with groans and Emma’s flatmate Patrice (Greta Gerwig) answers with “It’s like a crime scene in my pants”.¹⁹ This scene represents both the realities of the messy period, whilst not portraying it as inherently disgusting. In the British football comedy *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002), we see another type of positive period representation. When Jess (Parminder Nagra), joins an all-girl football team for her first practice, one of her fellow teammates Mel (Shaznay Lewis) casually pulls out a tampon whilst discussing play strategies and smilingly states that the “painter’s and decorators are in town”.²⁰ Here we see representations of a casual interaction with menstruation, and as not something that fully incapacitates women from physical activity. However, both instances still use euphemisms to indicate menstruation and avoid discussing it completely without stigma.

Rosewarne focuses a lot on the hidden period, the shame and stigma around it, whereas I want to challenge a new approach and look at how television and film in TV IV, of the late 2010s and early 2020s, are making periods visible and destigmatising it. Looking at my findings together with Rosewarne’s, historically menstruation as represented on screen has been heavily affected by patriarchal systemic ideology and discourse. These examples are attempting some kind of realism but do so by avoiding engaging with menstruation head on.

¹⁶ *New Girl*.

¹⁷ Leona Lewis, "Bleeding Love," (Syco Music, 2007).

¹⁸ Ivan Reitman, "No Strings Attached," (USA: Paramount Pictures, 2011).

¹⁹ Reitman, "No Strings Attached."

²⁰ Gurinder Chadha, "Bend it Like Beckham," (United Kingdom: Kintop Pictures, 2002).

In the next section I will discuss menstrual imagery as represented through metaphor, allegory, euphemism and the phantastic, specifically in the genre of horror and the concept of the “Menstrual Monster”.

2.2 Who is the *Menstrual Monster*?



Figure 2 Carrie in the Movie *Carrie* (1970) is assaulted with sanitary products by her peers in the school showers.

Menstruation on screen has also been represented metaphorically through the vilification of female bodies and function in the Menstrual Monster trope. The main genre of media that set the standard of visual and linguistic representation of narratives surrounding menstruation and vaginas through metaphor lies historically in horror. Barbara Creed, a professor of cinema studies at Melbourne University, famously explores the long history of the monstrous female body depicted throughout history of storytelling in her 1993 book *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*.²¹ Creed writes, “The horror film is populated by female monsters, many of which seem to have evolved from images that haunted the dreams, myths and artistic practices of our forebears many centuries ago.”²² Creed argues that femininity represented as monstrous has roots in the history on how women have been

²¹ Barbara Creed, *The monstrous-feminine : film, feminism, psychoanalysis*, Popular fictions series, (London: Routledge, 1993).

²² Creed, *The monstrous-feminine : film, feminism, psychoanalysis*, 1.

represented in stories like the uterine depictions of hell in Christian paintings, menstruation as a result of the “curse of Eve”, and the vulva monsters inspired by the legend of *Vagina Dentata*, the vagina with teeth, in modern horror movies.

Possibly the most famous example of the vilification of menstruation in visual media is Brian De Palma’s film adaptation of Stephen King’s 1974 novel *Carrie* (1976). Carrie White (Sissy Spacek) is a shy and bullied 16-year-old girl, who whilst masturbating, goes through menarche in her school’s public shower after a gym class. Carrie, who is brought up by a religiously fanatic and abusive mother, Margaret (Piper Laurie) who has failed to educate her on menarche, thinks that she is dying. Panicked she seeks help from her peers, but instead of helping Carrie, the other girls assault her with sanitary products and tease her. Carrie’s mother tells her that menstruation is caused by sin, and Carrie soon finds out that she has telekinetic powers. During the school prom, the prom queen election is rigged in Carrie’s favour, and her peers prank her by dumping a bucket of pig’s blood on Carrie during her acceptance of the title. In her anger Carrie kills almost everyone in attendance of the prom using her telekinetic powers. Returning home, bloody, she continues her murderous rampage and kills her mother and finally herself by destroying their house.²³ Creed highlights the connection that menstruating has had to the accusation of witchcraft and menstruation as the sign of sin in *Carrie*. Creed writes about the infamous prom scene where the namesake character is drenched in pigs blood, “which symbolizes menstrual blood in the terms set up by the film: women are referred to in the film as ‘pigs’, women ‘bleed like pigs’, and the pig’s blood runs down Carrie’s body at a moment of intense pleasure, just as her own menstrual blood ran down her legs during a similar pleasurable moment when she enjoyed her body in the shower”.²⁴ *Carrie* set the standard for menstrual horror, which has been repeatedly represented in the horror genre; blood, humiliation and the female body as sinful.

Creed’s work is largely based on philosopher Julia Kristeva’s book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* published in 1980. Julia Kristeva argued that *abjection* is the central driving force of horror. In defining the term Kristeva says it is the thing between subject and object, and anything that triggers feelings of loathing, nausea or a wish to separate oneself

²³ Brian De Palma, "Carrie," (USA: United Artists 1976).

²⁴ Creed, *The monstrous-feminine : film, feminism, psychoanalysis*, 14.

from the object that triggers these emotions.²⁵ It is the border between the proper and improper, the clean and unclean, the alive and dead and the good and evil. When an object triggers such powerful emotions in the subject, that they cannot but separate from it, this is *abjection*. In the concept of the Menstrual Monster the menstrual body is the abject body from the clean and untarnished pre-menstruating body. Menarche is often depicted as the trigger for the Menstrual Monster.

Interestingly in the episode of *Rosanne* where Darlene gets her first period, Darlene struggles with sleeping. Rosanne first suspects that Darlene's insomnia and nightmares are due to a horror movie they watched together. Rosanne and Darlene have the following discussion:

“Darlene: Can everybody shut up about nightmares? I didn't have a nightmare!

Roseanne: Well then, why'd you have trouble going to sleep?

Dan: Were you worried about your basketball game?

Darlene: No, I wasn't worried about my basketball game.

Roseanne: Did you screw up in history again, Darlene?

Darlene: No I didn't screw up in history again.

Roseanne: Well then, what is the matter?

Darlene: I got my period! Okay?”²⁶

Even in *Roseanne* there is an allusion to menarche and the genre of horror. Darlene's menarche is in a way triggered by the horror movie. Even Roseanne's sister Jackie highlights the horrors of menstruation by being shocked that Darlene at the age of eleven has already

²⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of horror : an essay on abjection*, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

²⁶ *Roseanne*.

menarched and saying, “The poor kid's just been sentenced to 35 years of monthly inconvenience”.²⁷

Menstruating is also what differentiate the sexes, here meaning biologically those who have or do not have a female reproductive system. Before puberty, there is no major bodily difference between the sexes, but at once a person starts menstruating, they are abject to the un-menstruating bodies as a whole, who are largely male. Kristeva writes that menstrual blood “stands for the danger issuing from within the identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference”.²⁸ From the moment of menarche there is a sexual difference between the sexes. Both Creed and Kristeva connects this to Sigmund Freud’s theory on *castration anxiety*, and that “the woman horrifies because she is castrated”, because she lacks male genitalia.²⁹ This psychoanalytical approach to explaining why female bodies and femininity is often represented as monstrous is a patriarchal ideology that the castrated body poses a threat to masculinity. Creed calls it an “erroneous belief” and a “misconception”, and that it functions “to attest to the perversity of the patriarchal order founded”.³⁰ The theory is mainly based on masculine fears, rather than reality, but since many of the Menstrual Monsters are created by men, castration anxiety has found an unorthodox place in feminist film theory, to define the Menstrual Monster. Creed writes, “The notion of the castrated woman is a phantasy intended to ameliorate man's real fear of what woman might do to him.”³¹ The Menstrual Monster is monstrous, because she threatens the patriarchal systemic discourse and ideology, whilst simultaneously being the product of it.

As demonstrated in *Carrie*, female puberty in film has historically been linked to sexuality. Carrie’s telekinetic powers emerge after she masturbates in the school showers and gets her first period. Simultaneously puberty for girls on screen has become almost unanimous with menstruation as demonstrated by Rosewarne’s study of menarche and the common ‘you’re a woman now’ phrase. The way these scenes represent is that when a girl hits puberty they lose

²⁷ Roseanne.

²⁸ Kristeva, *Powers of horror : an essay on abjection*, 71.

²⁹ Creed, *The monstrous-feminine : film, feminism, psychoanalysis*, 5.

³⁰ Creed, *The monstrous-feminine : film, feminism, psychoanalysis*, 5.

³¹ Creed, *The monstrous-feminine : film, feminism, psychoanalysis*, 6.

their innocence but gain the ability to be fertilized, sexualized but also turned monstrous. Puberty and menstruation for girls is filled with sin. This is mainly a Western view on female puberty and is rooted in Christian ideologies of the original sin. Rosewarne comments on this ideology as follows. “Dating back to the biblical story of Eve using her feminine wiles to tempt Adam, the idea of women—of *female sexuality*—as being evil—or at least instigating evil consequences”.³² The idea of menstruation as a curse and a representation of evil is repeated both on film and in scholarly texts. Both authors Karen Houppert and Janice Delainy named their books on menstrual taboos “the Curse”. In the 2013 remake of *Carrie* by, Margaret (Julianne Moore) lectures Carrie (Chloë Grace Moretz) after what happened to her in the school showers. “And God made Eve from the rib of Adam. And what, Carrie? Say it. Say it. And Eve was weak. And the first sin was the sin of intercourse. And God visited Eve with a curse. And the curse was a curse of blood”.³³ In the 2001 drama *My Louisiana Sky* when teenager Tiger Ann (Kelsey Keel) gets her first period her grandmother Jewel (Shirley Knight), calls it “the curse”.³⁴ In both instances the idea of menstruation as a curse comes from the “maternal authority”, but also the Christian authority. Biblical imagery and the idea of menstruation as a curse is kept alive by this type of representation.

Representing menstruation as a curse on screen has generically been more common as a metaphor. Another film that is often mentioned when discussing the Menstrual Monster is John Fawcett’s teen horror movie *Ginger Snaps (2000)*. The cult movie follows two teenage sisters Ginger (Katharine Isabelle) and Brigitte (Emily Perkins). Ginger, the older sister, is bitten by a werewolf on the same night she gets her first period, and she gets infected with lycanthropy. This results in a physical transformation of Ginger’s red hair turning white, her teeth become pointy, eyes yellow and growing furlike body hair and a tail. Ginger filled with sexual power and bloodlust, goes on a murderous rampage around their school, and uses her newfound sexuality to lure men under her spell. Brigitte attempts to find a cure for her sister but ultimately fails and the film ends with Ginger dead after undergoing a full body transformation to a werewolf.³⁵ Ginger’s menarche is used to visualise the initial

³² Rosewarne, *Periods in pop culture : menstruation in film and television*, 68.

³³ Kimberly Pearce, "Carrie," (USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), 2013).

³⁴ Adam Arkin, "My Louisiana Sky," (USA: Showtime Networks 2001).

³⁵ John Fawcett, "Ginger Snaps," (Canada: Motion International, 2000).

transformation she undergoes after being infected and the film is filled with imagery of heavy flows, unbearable cramps and over the top mood swings.



Figure 3 Ginger from *Ginger Snaps* (2000)

Aviva Briefel argues that horror presents us with “two contrasting modes of monstrous suffering: masochism and menstruation”.³⁶ Masochism, in this case is the male monster in horror who “initiate their sadistic rampages with acts of self-mutilation”.³⁷ The male monster thus causes their monstrosity by creating it themselves. Briefel uses Rouben Mamoulian’s film adaptation *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1931) as an example, in which Dr. Henry Jekyll (Fredric March) creates his evil alter ego willingly, by splitting his personality in two. Another example is *Nightmare on Elm Street* series, in which Freddie Krueger (Robert Englund) attacks his victims through their dreams, has a tendency to preface his attacks with an act of self-mutilation with his knifelike fingers. Briefel writes that “the monster’s masochism does not allow for sympathetic identifications”.³⁸ Because the male monster deliberately causes their own monstrosity, there is little sympathy for them. The male

³⁶ Aviva Briefel, "Monster Pains: Masochism, Menstruation, and Identification in the Horror Film," *Film quarterly* 58, no. 3 (2005): 16, <https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2005.58.3.16>.

³⁷ Briefel, "Monster Pains: Masochism, Menstruation, and Identification in the Horror Film," 16.

³⁸ Briefel, "Monster Pains: Masochism, Menstruation, and Identification in the Horror Film," 18.

monster ends up being, rather than born out of fear what the monster may do to him, a reflection on the monstrous in masculinity itself.

Briefel argues that the female counterpart to masochism is menstruation. "Female monsters do not inflict pain on themselves before undertaking their sadistic rampages. On the contrary, they tend to commit acts of violence out of revenge for earlier abuse by parents, partners, rapists, and other offenders".³⁹ Ginger's act of violence is triggered by the werewolf attack. Another example is director Karyn Kusama's teen horror movie *Jennifer's Body* (2009). Jennifer (Megan Fox), a popular and sexually active high schooler is kidnapped and murdered by local boy band. Jennifer had lied to the boys that she is a virgin, which prompted the kidnapping, as they plan to sacrifice her to the devil in return for commercial success for their band. The sacrifice is successful, but does not kill Jennifer, leaving her turned in to a power-hungry succubus who has taken Jennifer's form. The succubus starts kills the teenage boys in the town one after another by luring them to meet with her alone and after engaging in sexual acts with them. Jennifer's monster seeks to lay vengeance to all men for what they did to her body. "When the female monster engages in masochistic acts, she does so either by coercion from an outside force or as a way of terminating her monstrosity".⁴⁰ *Jennifer's Body* is the ultimate revenge story for the Menstrual Monster.

The Menstrual Monster is defined by being born out of menarche or acts of violence by men. She is sexualised in her fertility, and a demonic depiction of the angry woman. Rather than engaging in acts of violence just because she is evil, her violent behaviour is born out of revenge, or in order to cure her monstrosity. She is abject of the clean, pure pre-menstrual virginal body of the young girl, as well as the un-castrated, proper body of man.

³⁹ Briefel, "Monster Pains: Masochism, Menstruation, and Identification in the Horror Film," 20.

⁴⁰ Briefel, "Monster Pains: Masochism, Menstruation, and Identification in the Horror Film," 21.

2.3 The Streaming Era, or TV IV

All the main media analysed in this thesis are original productions by American streaming networks, and have been accessed through commercial streaming sites online. It is hard to pinpoint when the shift for visual media being available online happened. Media scholars like Marieke Jenner, Vivi Theodoropoulou, Kevin McDonald and Daniel Smith-Rowsey bring up the year 2007 with the launch of BBC iPlayer in the UK and Netflix's launch of the "Watch Instantly" option as a sign of television distribution moving online.^{41 42 43} Another big year for online streaming is 2010, when Netflix introduced a separate "streaming only" plan.⁴⁴ 2010 is also the year that "marks a significant turning point because of developments that year that made internet distribution technology more useable" as pointed out by American TV-scholar Amanda Lotz.⁴⁵

Jenner explores how Netflix re-invented television for the 21st century, and the digital age in her book *Netflix and the Reinvention of Television*. Netflix is not the only streaming platform that contributed to the shift in our viewing practices, however Jenner does argue that Netflix is one of the main platforms that pushed us in to what she defines as TV IV.⁴⁶ Media scholar John Ellis categorised the different eras of television production, viewing and quality practices in to three categories: TV I, II, and III. The first era is characterized by a few channels broadcasting for part of the day only. It was the era of scarcity, which lasted for most countries until the late 1970s or early 1980s. As broadcasting developed, the era of scarcity gradually gave way to an era of availability, where several channels broadcasting

⁴¹ Marieke Jenner, *Netflix and the re-invention of television* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 2.

⁴² Vivi Theodoropoulou, "From Interactive Digital Television to Internet "Instant" Television: Netflix, Shifts in Power and Emerging Audience Practices from an Evolutionary Perspective", in *The Age of Netflix : critical essays on streaming media, digital delivery and instant access*, ed. Cory Barker and Myc Wiatrowski (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland & Company, 2017), 182.

⁴³ Kevin McDonald and Daniel Smith-Rowsey, *The Netflix effect : technology and entertainment in the 21st century*, 1st Edition. ed. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Inc, 2016), 7.

⁴⁴ McDonald and Smith-Rowsey, *The Netflix effect : technology and entertainment in the 21st century*, 7.

⁴⁵ Amanda D. Lotz, *Portals: A Treatise on Internet-Distributed Television* (Ann Arbor MI: Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library, 2017), 302, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/maize/mpub9699689>, <https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mpub.9699689>.

⁴⁶ Jenner, *Netflix and the re-invention of television*, 14.

continuously jostled for attention, often with more competition in the shape of cable or satellite services. The third era, the era of plenty, is confidently predicted by the television industry itself. It is foreseen as an era in which television programmes (or, as they will be known, ‘content’ or ‘product’) will be accessible through a variety of technologies, the sum of which will give consumers the new phenomenon of ‘television on demand’ as well as ‘interactive television’.⁴⁷ Others argue that the era we are in at the moment is still a part of TV III, however Jenner argues that the transnational nature of streaming today, the globalisation of television viewing culture, the continuing rise of quality, and smart television and the distancing from linear television is different enough from Ellis’ original definition of TV III, that it has given birth to TV IV. The category of TV III, with an emphasis on technological change (the digital) and content (‘quality’ TV) is inadequate to contain the significant changes streaming providers Netflix, Amazon and Hulu make to television itself’.⁴⁸

So, what does TV IV do to the narratives we see on the Netflix era screen? Jenner focuses heavily in her book on the globalisation and trans nationalisation of viewing practices but also on the convergences of style, and “how different media forms are united online through a variety of texts and practices”.⁴⁹ The word “cinematic” is today used rather than to describe the mode in which the media is presented, to describe its style. TV IV has blurred the lines between cinema and television, as both are equally accessible for audiences. She also mentions how Netflix to an even broader aspect reflects many of the sociocultural and political changes happening globally at the moment. Television is no longer just American and “content is no longer inherently tied to the television set and it established itself as transnational broadcaster”.⁵⁰

Marieke Jenner, and another film scholar Justin Grandinetti also mention 2012 being a breakthrough year for streaming, as this is when Netflix started producing original content

⁴⁷ John Ellis, *Seeing Things: Television in the Age of Uncertainty*, 1 ed. (London: I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd, 2000), 2. <http://www.bloomsburycollections.com/book/seeing-things-television-in-the-age-of-uncertainty/>.

⁴⁸ Jenner, *Netflix and the re-invention of television*, 14.

⁴⁹ Jenner, *Netflix and the re-invention of television*, 16.

⁵⁰ Jenner, *Netflix and the re-invention of television*, 4.

with *Lilyhammer*.⁵¹ ⁵² Original content allowed Netflix exclusivity in distribution rights and with the popularity of Netflix Original shows like *Orange is the New Black* (2013), *Hemlock Grove* (2013) and *House of Cards* (2013), other American distributors soon launched streaming platforms with original content including Hulu who gained initial popularity with their original drama *The Handmaid's Tale* (2015) and Amazon Prime with *Mr Robot* (.⁵³

The popularity of streaming can be largely attributed to the rise in popularity for binge watching. According to researcher Deborah Castro the term binge watching is defined by Netflix when a viewer consumes “two to six episodes of the same show in one sitting”.⁵⁴ Castro quotes a study done by Ericson Consumer lab that “forty-two percent of international viewers said they binge-watched more TV series in 2017 than they did 5 years ago”.⁵⁵ Netflix and other streaming platforms have also made cinema more available to a wider audience. In 2020 Netflix earned more Oscar nominations than any other film studio, which launched an international debate on the weather films should be eligible for the Academy Awards without a full theatrical release.⁵⁶ Since the launch of Netflix, almost all of the large American Distributors have launched subscription-based services that have reached international popularity. HBO Max, Disney + and Amazon Prime are the largest competitors to Netflix when it comes to producing original content and distribution of film and television

⁵¹ Jenner, *Netflix and the re-invention of television*, 2.

⁵² Justin Grandinetti, "From Primetime to Anytime: Streaming Video, Temporality and the Future of Communal Television," in *The Age of Netflix : critical essays on streaming media, digital delivery and instant access*, ed. Cory Barker and Myc Wiatrowski (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland & Company, 2017), 11.

⁵³Jenner, *Netflix and the re-invention of television*, 3.

⁵⁴ Deborah Castro Marino et al., "The binge-watcher's journey: Investigating motivations, contexts, and affective states surrounding Netflix viewing," *Convergence (London, England)* 27, no. 1 (2019): 5, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856519890856>.

⁵⁵ Castro Marino et al., "The binge-watcher's journey: Investigating motivations, contexts, and affective states surrounding Netflix viewing," 4.

⁵⁶ Jacob Stolworthy, "Netflix defeats Steven Spielberg in its Oscars 2020 battle," *The Independent* 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/netflix-films-steven-spielberg-oscars-2020-the-irishman-martin-scorsese-a8883646.html>.

and together, they have over 600 million global subscribers.⁵⁷ Streaming is the main way general audiences consume film and television today.

I feel it is important to mention one specific cultural event that has had a major effect on representational issues, the #MeToo movement, when women and other marginalised groups shared on social media of their experiences of harassment or discrimination under the hashtag. This feminist social media phenomenon shook the media industry out of its patriarchal patterns and set a chain of events in motion that changed the whole cultural industry. The Me Too-movement did not start overnight but gained traction in October 2017 with actress Alyssa Milano tweeting about sexual harassment and assault in the film industry under the hashtag #MeToo. ‘Within moments, there were 30,000 responses and over 12 million reactions and posts via Snapchat, Facebook, and other platforms in two days.’⁵⁸ This led to several public accusations, investigations and discussions around harassment, assault and misconduct in the film and television industry, as well as discussions around gender inequality and representation in visual media. As a result, more effort has been visible to push diversity, equality and better representation of marginalised groups in all parts of film and television production. This naturally included what are generally considered women’s issues like the discussion around how menstruation is represented.

⁵⁷ Tony Maglio, "Disney+ Soars, Netflix Sinks: Here’s How Many Subscribers 10 Key Streamers Have Now," *Indie Wire* 2022, <https://www.indiewire.com/2022/08/how-many-subscribers-netflix-hbo-max-disney-plus-1234744445/>.

⁵⁸ Camille Gibson, Shannon Davenport, Tina Fowler, Colette B. Harris, Melanie Prudhomme, Serita Whiting, and Sherri Simmons-Horton. “Understanding the 2017 ‘Me Too’ Movement’s Timing.” *Humanity & Society* 43, no. 2 (May 2019): 217–24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0160597619832047>.

2.4 Menstruation in the Middlebrow

I will be exercising a middlebrow approach to parts of my textual analysis, I will draw on Sarah Faulkner's book *Middlebrow Cinema*, a collection of 11 essays which map out the different approaches to middlebrow tastes in cinema and television, to discuss how plot points that revolve around menstruation pushes the content into the middlebrow, and what sociocultural effects this has. The middlebrow is something that lies between the high and the lowbrow and is usually coined as pop culture or mainstream media. 'High production values, serious – but not challenging – subject matter, high – but not obscure – cultural references, and accessible form'.⁵⁹ Faulkner defines it as a taste category that often deals with the Foucauldian idea of the Other, the outsider and the fringed identities of femininity, queerness, race and class. 'It is an adjective that might attach to audience, text or institution – is bound up with issues of identity'.⁶⁰ These are texts that have generally been left outside of the canon as they deal with themes that could be considered controversial or taboo, but at the same time not too obscure so that they are left outside of public recognition. Soap operas, sitcoms, period dramas and any content that engaged with Otherness is deemed by Faulkner as middlebrow. As the abject is often also consider an the Other, representing menstruation on screen will by default push a text into the middlebrow. Television, which has historically been connected to feminine identity, both as a medium and in content, is the natural vessel to bring on this shift.

⁵⁹ Will Higbee. "Counter-heritage, middlebrow and the fiction patrimoniale: Reframing 'middleness' in the contemporary French historical film" in *Middlebrow Cinema*, edited by Sally Faulkner (London: Routledge, 2016), 144.

⁶⁰ Faulkner, Sally. "Introduction. Approaching the Middlebrow: Audience; Text; Institution." In *Middlebrow Cinema*, edited by Sally Faulkner, (London: Routledge, 2016), 1.

2.5 Defining the Gaze

This discussion will naturally also include the classic text from the 1970s, *Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema* by Laura Mulvey, in which she argues that female bodies on screen exist only as a form of visual pleasure for the male spectator. Originally written in 1973 feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey wrote *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* in order to demonstrate how women are represented on screen to be “looked at” in an unrealistic and objectifying way through what she coined the *male gaze*. Mulvey writes, “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly”.⁶¹ Mulvey argued that the pleasure of watching a movie derives from a phallogentric desire to look, where ‘looking itself is a source of pleasure’.⁶²

Mulvey’s original argument is quite limited and does not look beyond heterosexuality. Her theories of visual pleasure and the framing of cinema through the male gaze has since been applied, amended and referenced almost any time film is read through a feminist lens. Mulvey herself amended her theory in 1990 with *Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' inspired by King Vidor's Duel in the Sun (1946)*. In this she addresses the female spectator and how it is “possible that the female spectator may find herself so out of key with the pleasure on offer, with its 'masculinisation', that the spell of fascination is broken”.⁶³ Mulvey admits that when women represented through the male gaze, women are alienated from the material, and do not feel represented. On the other hand, Mulvey counteracts this with the idea that because the female spectator cannot relate to the femininity presented through the male gaze, she “may find herself secretly, unconsciously almost, enjoying the freedom of action and control over the diegetic world that identification with a hero provides”.⁶⁴ Meaning that she identifies herself in the passive female that screen media presents, because that is how men view her in real life as well.

⁶¹ Laura Mulvey, "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema," in *Film Theory and Criticism*, ed. Leo and Cohen Braudy, Marshal (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 19.

⁶² Mulvey, "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema," 16.

⁶³ Laura Mulvey, "Afterthoughts on "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema" inspired by *Duel in the sun*," (New York: Routledge, 1990), 29.

⁶⁴ Mulvey, "Afterthoughts on "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema" inspired by *Duel in the sun*," 29.

Still Mulvey does not engage fully with the idea of the female gaze, the one where the active viewer is feminine, and femininity is represented realistically and in an empowering way. When the active spectator is female, the objects that produce visual pleasure are catered for the feminine viewer. The gaze moves from the male, to the Other, the queer, marginalised and feminine. Mulvey's theory has been adapted beyond heterosexual ideologies by feminist film theorist Linda Williams, who subverted the gaze to a lesbian perspective in her essay *Blue is the Warmest Color: or the afterlife of 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. Williams asked this very question: "What happens in the cinema when women do 'look'? My answer, perfectly in tune with Mulvey's manifesto, was the example of horror cinema in which the women who exercised their look, were punished by the sight of the monster, whatever violence followed".⁶⁵ According to Williams, if women looked, they could "only be identifying with a masculine sadistic point of view".⁶⁶ This concept has changed, and women can, should and do look in cinema with an active gaze that empowers the feminine and the Other.

In this thesis I will argue and demonstrate that TV IV represents an active female gaze when representing menstruation on screen. Through the female gaze, menstruating has an opportunity to free itself from the monstrous feminine and the patriarchal structures that the male gaze has historically ordered it in to. To understand the gaze and from where it derives in a scene, is in its core, how we understand film through feminist theory.

⁶⁵ Linda Williams, "Blue is the Warmest Color: or the after-life of 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 15, no. 4 (2017): 465.

⁶⁶ Williams, "Blue is the Warmest Color: or the after-life of 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'," 465.

3 “I’m a Gross Red Monster”: How Pixar’s *Turning Red* Tames the Menstrual Monster



Figure 4 Poster for *Turning Red* (2022)

As Meilin Lee awoke one morning from uneasy dreams she found herself transformed in her bed into a gigantic red panda.⁶⁷ Pixar’s *Turning Red* (2022), by director Domee Si, is a modern coming of age story, about the challenges of female puberty and the anxieties of

⁶⁷ A reference to the first sentence in Franz Kafka’s novella *Metamorphosis* (1915), in which a young salesman Gregor Samsa wakes up one morning to find himself transformed in to a giant insect.

growing up and finding one's independence. In Meilin "Mei" Lee's family when women reach puberty, they gain an ability to turn in to a red panda. After Mei has a sexual awakening the red panda spirit in her is awoken, and she has to learn to control this new and unfamiliar body in order to keep it secret. Mei's red panda in *Turning Red* shares many of the tropes that define the Menstrual Monster as theorised by feminist film scholar Barbara Creed and in this chapter, I will demonstrate how the red panda is a Menstrual Monster according to Creed's theory. Creed argued the prevalence of the feminine monster and Menstrual Monster in horror movies and narratives, and that the monstrous feminine has its roots in two psychoanalytical theories, Julia Kristeva's *abjection* theory and Sigmund Freud's theories of *castration anxiety*. The panda is a result of Mei's sexual awakening and Mei's abjection of her mother, and her pubertal self. After defining the panda as a Menstrual Monster, I will show how the red panda tames the Menstrual Monster trope, subverts it to more of a menstrual mascot and with that heals generational female trauma related to menstruation shame and pubertal anxiety. In the end Pixar's *Turning Red* challenges menstrual tropes and makes them accessible for a young audience. By bringing the Menstrual Monster outside the horror genre, the monster is tamed.

3.1 Synopsis.



Figure 5 Mei and her friends Abby, Priya and Miriam

Mei (Rosalie Chiang) is a thirteen-year-old girl from Toronto's Chinatown. Mei asserts herself as unapologetically herself and not afraid to do her own thing. She values her family and Chinese heritage and excels academically, whilst simultaneously sharing an obsession for teen fantasy books, karaoke and most importantly, boyband "4*Town", with her best friends Miriam (Ava Morse), Priya (Maitreyi Ramakrishnan) and Abby (Hyein Park). Above all Mei desires her controlling yet loving mother, Ming's, (Sandra Oh) approval, and keeps her personal interests a secret in order to protect their relationship. One evening as Mei is in her room doing homework and secretly listening to 4*town, Mei starts doodling sexy images of Devon (Addie Chandler), the local corner shop employee whom she has developed a crush on. Ming finds the pictures, and rushes to the store to accuse Devon of defiling her daughter. Mei's classmate and nemesis Tyler (Tristan Allerick Chen) witnesses everything. Ashamed, panicked and angry Mei falls asleep that night. When Mei wakes up, she has turned in to a giant red panda. Panicking she locks herself in the bathroom, making her mother believe she has had her period. Mei manages to sneak back to her room and learns that by calming herself down she can turn back human, but any emotional outburst will trigger the panda to emerge. Ming soon finds out and reveals that the condition is hereditary, tracing back to their ancestor Sun Yee. Every woman in Mei's family by reaching puberty gains the ability to turn in to a red panda. However, there is a ritual that allows Mei to detach herself from the red panda spirit, tying the spirit to an amulet, and turning her back to normal. This can only be done

during a red moon and Mei has to control the panda until then. Ming also warns Mei that there is a darkness to the panda, and to be careful.

Mei feeling betrayed and blindsided by her mother not warning her and decides to not listen to Ming's advice. Instead, Mei, and her friends, start a business at school, selling panda pictures and merch, as they are trying to collect money for a 4*town concert. Mei is increasingly stressed as she tries to keep her facade up at home and fulfil her panda duties. When Tyler offers her the last money needed in return for attending his birthday as the panda Mei agrees. At the party Mei find's out that the concert and ritual land on the same night, and the built-up stress culminates in an outburst, which leaves Tyler injured. Mei's mother finds out what her daughter has been up to, and storms the party accusing Mei's friends for distracting and using her daughter for profit. Mei, in a moment of panic, does not object and has a fallout with her friends.

Mei's transformation brings her grandmother-Wu (Wai Ching Ho), and aunts to town, who are going to help with the ritual. Mei's mother and grandmother have a strained relationship as Ming in her teen years let her panda out of control that left Wu with a large scar across her face. On the night of the ritual Wu holds a speech to Mei. "Like all the women around this table, you too will banish the beast within and finally become your true self".⁶⁸ Mei is a reluctant to do the ceremony, but ultimately gets ready and accepts to travel to the astral realm in order to break the panda-connection. Here she meets Sun Yee and decides last minute to keep the panda. Interrupting the ritual Mei has a showdown with her mother and runs away to crash the 4*town concert. Mei apologises to her friends and they forgive her.

Whilst trying to prevent Mei's escape, Ming's amulet that held her panda spirit breaks and she turns in to a monstrous red panda. Angered that her daughter lied and is no longer her perfect little daughter, Ming's panda takes full control, and she attacks the stadium and interrupts the concert. With the help of her friends, the other women in her family, who all freed their panda spirits to help, and the boys of 4*Town they manage to complete the ritual. Mei's second time in the astral realm, she finds her mother, a teenager crying about how she is tired of being perfect for her mother. Mei helps Ming and Wu resolve their conflict and

⁶⁸ Domee Shi, "Turning Red," (USA: Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2022).

forgive each other. The women all decide to complete the ritual and not keep the panda connection, except Mei. The red moon passes, and all is well.

3.2 The Panda is a *Menstrual Monster*

The Menstrual Monster often consists of a two-part transformation, a mental and a physical. The mental transformation is when the subject experiences some form of mental abjection. Julia Kristeva defined the abject as something that is neither subject nor object, but the *in between*, “ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable”.⁶⁹ The push and pull created by a change or experience that is so powerful it creates a third hypothetical existence of being, triggering powerful emotions and “sickened, it rejects”.⁷⁰ Abjection is thus birthed from conflict.

In the introductory montage of *Turning Red* we are met with a conflicted child. Mei tells us that is unafraid of being herself, “Ever since I turned 13, I wear what I want, say what I want. 24/7, 365”.⁷¹ She considers herself a grown up, since turning to a teen, and invites the responsibilities that come with it verbally. However, what we see is a girl, confused and living a double life. At school and around her friends she is a boy crazy, pop music loving, outspoken individual, but when the bell rings, she rushes home to follow her mother’s strict rules, cleaning regime and perform her duties as the perfect little “Mei-Mei” her mother expects her to be. When Mei’s friends ask her if she wants to go and sing karaoke with them after school, she declines by saying it is cleaning day. To which her friends point out that every day is cleaning day when her mother is involved, and call Mei “brainwashed”. Mei’s sexual awakening ultimately triggers an identity crisis and results in a wish to separate, or *abject*, from her mother.

Julia Kristeva argued that the first forms of abjection a person experiences is that when a child attempts to distance themselves from their parent, specifically mother. She calls this a “kind of *narcissistic crisis*” when a child realises that their wishes and desires are independent and more important than that of the mothers.⁷² The emotions that the situation

⁶⁹ Kristeva, *Powers of horror : an essay on abjection*.

⁷⁰ Kristeva, *Powers of horror : an essay on abjection*.

⁷¹ Shi, "Turning Red."

⁷² Kristeva, *Powers of horror : an essay on abjection*.

triggers for Mei is loathing that her mother has made her and loathing for being. Ultimately this is also an abjection of self, which Kristeva calls a “recognition of the want on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded”.⁷³ Mei wants to go sing karaoke with her friends and openly say she loves 4*town, is interested in boys, yet her love, respect, and fear of disappointing her mother holds her back, thus awaking the monster within. The first instance of the conflict and Mei’s abjection for her mother and herself is right when she wakes up after her first transformation. Mei hides in the bathroom so Ming mistakes that Mei has gotten her period. Instead of asking Mei directly, Ming asks if the “red peony has bloomed”. This results in a misunderstanding from both counterparts.



Figure 6 Ming outside the bathroom checking in on Mei

Aviva Briefel states in her article *Monster Pains: Masochism, Menstruation, and Identification in the Horror Film* that “while male monsters wound themselves before turning to violence, female monsters menstruate”.⁷⁴ Although Mei is not menstruating, the thought that she is enough to connect her to the female monsters. Because the panda connection is triggered out of Mei’s fear of accepting the emotions and changes that her puberty brings with it, the allegorical connection to menstruating imagery is enough for even Mei’s mother to think the situation to be Mei’s menarche. Ming rushes to get a box filled with menstrual

⁷³ Kristeva, *Powers of horror : an essay on abjection*.

⁷⁴ Briefel, "Monster Pains: Masochism, Menstruation, and Identification in the Horror Film."

pads, painkillers and a hot water bottle whilst Mei hides in the shower. As Mei hides behind the shower curtain and Ming keeps fussing, Mei finally snaps and shouts for her mother to “Get out!”. They are both silenced by shock as Mei is usually so well behaved. Immediately afterwards as a reaction Mei cries and shouts “I’m a gross red monster.” The first emotion is anger, frustration and a wish for the mother to disappear. Mei is independent, does not need help and needs to separate from Ming, that is abjection of the mother. The emotion that immediately follows is shame, disgust and loathing of the self, which is abjection of the self. In the end Mei has not had her period as far as we know, but the panda as an allegory of menarche is undeniable.

The other thing that defines the Menstrual Monster is the physical change. Creed that horror films “construct a border between what Kristeva refers to as 'the clean and proper body' and the abject body, or the body which has lost its form and integrity”.⁷⁵ The panda, as non-human represents the unclean body. The reaction that Mei has after her first transformation is truly like a horror movie scene. Screaming she cannot accept the change and tries forcefully to change back. Ginger in *Ginger Snaps* attempts to cut off her werewolf tail in order to stop the transformation, but in both girls’ case, their violent reactions do nothing. Mei calls her panda a “curse”, directly connecting it to the Christian ideologies of menstruation as a curse. Kristeva, when defining the abject body in horror, highlights what she calls “maternal authority”. It is the maternal figures job and role to teach their children to identify what is proper and improper when considering the body. “Through frustrations and prohibitions, this authority shapes the body into a territory having areas, orifices, points and lines, surfaces and hollows, where the archaic power of mastery and neglect, of the differentiation of proper-clean and improper-dirty, possible and impossible, is impressed and exerted”.⁷⁶ It is the mother who identifies the abject body, as abject through her teachings.

Rosewarne mentions that “western culture is often considered as one which neglects to appropriately commemorate menstruation as a coming-of-age milestone for girls”.⁷⁷ She

⁷⁵ Creed, *The monstrous-feminine : film, feminism, psychoanalysis*, 8.

⁷⁶ Michael Schneider, “‘Big Mouth’ Creator Nick Kroll on Convincing Netflix to Let Him Make a ‘Perverted Wonder Years’ — Turn It On Podcast,” *IndieWire* (Web Article), 2017, <https://www.indiewire.com/2017/10/big-mouth-netflix-nick-kroll-season-one-turn-it-on-podcast-1201886638/>.

⁷⁷ Rosewarne, *Periods in pop culture : menstruation in film and television*, 39.

mentions that anthropologists have documented that coming-of-age rituals and celebrations around the first menstruation cycle is present in *other* cultures, yet made hidden, secret and even humiliating in western culture. She exemplifies this through a *Tampax* tampon advert campaign from 2007 with the slogan “Keep your period private with Tampax”.⁷⁸ Rosewarne writes, “The fact that it is not celebrated and rarely publicly even discussed conveys the impression that there is something wrong with it, or at the very least, there exist reasons to feel uncomfortable about it”.⁷⁹ After Ginger has been bitten by the werewolf, she experiences a very difficult menstruation and goes to the school nurse explaining her symptoms complaining about the excessive amount of blood, hair and pain. The nurse simply answers that it “comes with the territory”.⁸⁰ This convinces Ginger that her physical symptoms, whilst actually the symptoms of lycanthropy, are normal for menstruating women. Ming also normalises Mei’s panda transformation by attempting to trivialise it and telling her of the ritual that will cure her.

Rosewarne mentions that when menarche is celebrated it is seen as a of rite of passage, or the invitation to the secret club of fertile women, which are often done by the teenager’s maternal figures. “The girl is being welcomed into a community of those who can procreate, notably by the woman who gave her life”.⁸¹ These scenes rarely include men, and even when they do, what is highlighted is the entry to the stage of womanhood. If a father or another man is present, they have been so only in a way to replace the maternal figure. In addition, I want to highlight that in all the scenes Rosewarne studied, the girls seemed to be unaware of what was happening to them until the moment of the first drop of blood. Simultaneously as the maternal authority invites the girl into the sacred sisterhood, they are performing the necessary education around the matter. This is exactly what happened to Mei as well. Ming only revealed what the panda was after the transformation had happened, and only then taught Mei the history of it and how to get rid of it. Ming reveals the hereditary nature of the panda, she describes it as a blessing turned inconvenience, that only affects the women of

⁷⁸ Rosewarne, *Periods in pop culture : menstruation in film and television*, 8.

⁷⁹ Rosewarne, *Periods in pop culture : menstruation in film and television*, 39.

⁸⁰ Fawcett, "Ginger Snaps."

⁸¹ Rosewarne, *Periods in pop culture : menstruation in film and television*, 42.

Mei's family. This scene mirrors those "you're a woman now" moments where the mother teaches the daughter how to control menstruation but in Mei's case it is the panda.

Barbara Creed adds to Kristeva's argument on the maternal authority that she sees "the mother-child relation as one marked by conflict: the child struggles to break free but the mother is reluctant to release it".⁸² In Mei's case her mother controls every move Mei makes. When Ming suspects that Mei may have gotten her period, she follows Mei to her school and spies on her through the window. She openly calls Mei's friends weird and their interests a distraction and unhealthy. But Ming ultimately struggles with accepting that her girl is growing up to become independent and a teenager. When Ming finds the sexy images Mei drew of Devon, her reaction is not to recognise her emotions as an unwillingness to relinquish control, and instead anger towards the innocent boy. Journalist Pat Brown explains the scene spectacularly, "Instead of recognizing her daughter's Mei's desire as fundamentally innocent, she confronts the boy at work with Mei's sketches, as if he were to blame for the girl's idle fantasies".⁸³



Figure 7 Ming's monstrous panda

⁸² Creed, *The monstrous-feminine : film, feminism, psychoanalysis*, 11.

⁸³ Pat Brown, "Turning Red Review: A Sweet, If Stretched-Thin, Metaphor of Adolescent Change," *Slant Magazine*, 2022, <https://www.slantmagazine.com/film/turning-red-review-pixar/>.

But it is not only Mei's panda that is a Menstrual Monster. This word juxtaposed with the fact that it only affects the matriarchal line directly connects the ailment to the monstrous feminine. Ming has at one point experienced the same thing that Mei is now going through, but she is also a mother. Creed argues that "when woman is represented as monstrous it is almost always in relation to her mothering and reproductive functions."⁸⁴ Carrie's monstrous ability to kill people through telekinesis is triggered when she masturbates in the school shower and gets her first period. In *Ginger Snaps*, the protagonist is bitten by a werewolf just as she gets her first menstruation and she becomes a werewolf, and in *Turning Red* Mei's monster is roused by Mei's lewd thoughts. Ming's panda is triggered by her maternal instincts, after realizing that she cannot control her daughter. Creed connected the imagery of the cursed feminine imagery in Christian art to the birthing feminine monster through her analysis of the 1979 body horror film *The Brood*, in which a disturbed asylum patient Nola Carveth (Samantha Eggar) births sexless bloodthirsty childlike monsters to enact revenge on her doctor Hal Raglan (Oliver Reed) and ex-husband Frank (Art Hindle) who are keeping her from seeing her daughter. Creed calls them "physical manifestations of her enraged psyche who have been born directly from her body", and "represent symbolically the horrifying results of permitting the mother too much power".⁸⁵ In the final showdown between Ming and Mei, Ming releases her panda and shows the panda's full monstrous powers. Ming's panda in her size and destructive power can be likened to the giantess Nancy Archer in the science fiction horror movie *Attack of the 50 Foot Woman* (1958), or the giant lizard monster Godzilla from the Japanese film series of the same name. She towers over a full sized sports stadium, which she ultimately destroys in her maternal rage. Like Creed writes about Nola and how her "ability to give birth links her directly to the animal world and to the great cycle of birth, decay and death",⁸⁶ so is the animalistic horror awoken in Ming through her maternal authority. Ming thus represents the true Menstrual Monster, as she fully submits to her monstrous urges.

In the next section I will argue that Mei, contrary to Ming actually tames the Menstrual Monster, and turns it from an abject of herself to one wholesome entity.

⁸⁴ Creed, *The monstrous-feminine : film, feminism, psychoanalysis*, 7.

⁸⁵ Creed, *The monstrous-feminine : film, feminism, psychoanalysis*, 43.

⁸⁶ Creed, *The monstrous-feminine : film, feminism, psychoanalysis*, 9.

3.3 Taming the *Menstrual Monster*.



Figure 8 Mei and her friends hugging

As established in the earlier section Mei struggles with balancing her wish to please her mother and coming to terms with her burgeoning independence and sexuality. Mei decides to not listen to her mother's advice and soon comes to realise that the panda is not so much a monster, but a way to liberate herself from the structures put upon her by her mother. When Mei does not turn up to school after her transformation, Abby, Priya and Miriam sneak through Mei's bedroom window with a box of tampons, they find her curled up on her bedroom floor crying about not being able to control her panda. Mei fully expects her friend to be scared, but instead they think this new body cute and cool and accept it immediately. Like Ming, Mei's friends think that she has had her period, but unlike Carrie's school friends, when Mei is in need of help, they gift her sanitary products and shower her with love. Mei realises that thinking of her friends and how much they care allows her to keep her panda form in control, and she can switch back and forth at will. Neither Ginger, Carry nor Jennifer were not allowed this ability, and this is the first sign that breaks the Menstrual Monster trope. Soon all her schoolmates know, and everyone welcomes Mei's panda with open arms. She becomes the most popular girl ins school, but not due to her newfound sexuality, as in the case of Ginger and Jennifer, but due to her honesty and lovability. However, the panda soon becomes more popular than Mei in her human form. At toby's birthday party Mei does

not want to be in her panda form, but herself, but is pressured by her peers to transform and ultimately caves. It is Abby who first questions if Mei should consider keeping the panda, but this is right after she had asked Mei for “a hit” of panda to help her calm down. Mei soon experiences similar pressure but from different sides of the spectrum.

The second way Mei’s panda differs from the other Menstrual Monster’s is that she does not create abjections but heals them. Ming, Wu and all the other women in Mei’s family are stuck in the thought pattern that the panda is an inconvenience and a curse. On the day of the ritual, Wu holds a speech where she says, “Like all the women around this table, you too will banish the beast within and finally become your true self”.⁸⁷ This is a clear sign that self without the panda is the true self, the clean body, they all need to strive to be. What Mei and her family thinks of as a monster, is by others seen as a wonderful and almost preferred form.

Interestingly it is Mei’s father, Jin (Orion Lee) who helps her accept herself. This breaks many of the tropes of representing menstruation on screen as something a father cannot understand. Rosewarne highlights the trope that normally fathers are explicitly removed from being a part of the experience of menarche. “Keeping secret from dad reflects the internalized dictum that menstruation is a woman’s problem and having fathers know about it would be embarrassing”.⁸⁸ When Ming thinks that Mei has had her period, there is a visual gag happening in the background. Jin reacts to the panicked discussion through the bathroom door between Mei and Ming and first gets up from the kitchen table to see if he can help. But when Ming asks if the “red peony” has bloomed, he quickly starts backing up and leaves the room. This is the societal reaction expected from the father in these situations. Rosewarne also writes that “men’s comparative lack of knowledge is routinely presented on screen as a source of humor”.⁸⁹ This is represented in the scenes discussed in chapter one from *Superbad* and *New Girl*, when the men react to menstruation with gagging and sounds of disgust in order to be humorous. Although Jin’s reaction to menarche follows the traditional representation of men and menstruation, Jin subverts this expectation through his reaction to the panda.

⁸⁷ Shi, "Turning Red."

⁸⁸ Rosewarne, *Periods in pop culture : menstruation in film and television*, 10.

⁸⁹ Rosewarne, *Periods in pop culture : menstruation in film and television*, 26.

On the night of the ritual where Mei's grandmother holds the speech about "banishing the beast within", Jin is the only one who reacts to Mei's apprehension. After dinner Jin finds a tape Mei and her friends made of themselves and Mei as a panda dancing and having fun. Jin goes to check in on Mei who is defeated and convinced that the panda is dangerous and out of control. Jin tells Mei that her words remind him of Ming. He also tells Mei about Ming's panda, how it was destructive and big, but also incredible. Mei is confused and answers "But I'm a monster". Jin is silent for a moment and responds, "People have all kinds of sides to them, Mei, and some sides are messy [...] Erase it if you want, but this side of you made me laugh".⁹⁰ Jin is the first one who gives Mei a choice. Unlike his wife and her family, he is not trying to convince Mei to go through the ritual, even if it may make his daughter's life easier. Also, unlike Mei's friends, he is not attempting to convince Mei to keep the panda connection, even if he sees how happy being her true self makes her. Jin is aware that the panda holds dual emotions for Mei and is the reason for the abjection of herself. The abjection which is between pleasing her family and respecting their traditions and being true to her own wants. Jin is giving the power to Mei to listen to herself. He is allowing Mei to heal the abjection of self and realise that the panda, whilst representing her independence also represents family and tradition. Mei can be true to herself with and without the panda, but the choice is with her.

If we compare this situation to *Ginger Snaps* and the werewolf, or *Jennifer's Body* and the demon, the animalistic embodiment of teenage abjection and sexuality is purely framed as a curse. Jennifer or Ginger have no other choice than die if they want to be freed from the curse, there is no choice for acceptance, because the choice is taken away from them by the cause of the curse, the werewolf attack for Ginger and Jennifer's human sacrifice. This mirrors a misconception that menstruation is a curse without choice. In fact, menstruating, like any issues of the female body, is very much a choice. Some who menstruate choose to go on certain contraceptives, like an IUD or an implant that often reduce or stop the bleeding completely, whereas for other's menstruating is essential to be pregnant. For some getting their period is a relief and for some a disappointment. Some use menstrual cups, pads or tampons, and others choose to bleed freely. The importance here is that there is a choice. Menstruation is not a blessing, or a curse, it simply is, and it is each menstruating body's own

⁹⁰ Shi, "Turning Red."

choice how they view it. By allowing Mei a choice, Mei has the power to tame the panda or get rid of it, and whichever she chooses is honoring both herself and her family.

The theme of choice comes up in one more scene. Once Ming's panda is freed and she has stormed the stadium, Mei attempts to control Min's panda on her own. Her grandmother and aunts chose to free their panda spirits in order to help Mei and Ming, and they all together accept their panda's so as to be able to perform the ritual as planned. When they travel to the astral realm however, Ming, Mei's grandmother and aunts all choose to separate from the spirit again, but this time accepting Mei's decision to stay united. Ming has a final moment of bargaining with Mei and attempts to get her to change her mind, but ultimately accepts the choice. Once the red moon has passed, and Mei's decision is final, Mei meets the spirit of Sun Yee who embraces Mei with open arms and they fly together towards the moon.

3.4 Menstrual Mascot

In the words of *Empire Magazine* film critic Ben Travis, Dome Shi's film successfully "externalises Mei's inner transformation into an allegory for bodily changes and evolving interpersonal relationships".⁹¹ Mei's transformation acts as a beautiful allegory for the realities of girlhood and coming-of-age. Mei's panda, whilst fulfilling the criteria of the Menstrual Monster, does not finish her story as one. Shi has taken the tropes from horror, that an adult audience is used to recognising, and by situating them in a children's animated movie, heals the tropes from their patriarchal origins. Instead of shame, disgust and fear, Mei's panda triggers emotions of love, defiance and acceptance. Shi turns the Menstrual Monster into a Menstrual Mascot, that everyone who has experienced menarche and coming-of-age can relate to.

⁹¹ Ben Travis, "Turning Red Review," *Empire Magazine* 2022, <https://www.empireonline.com/movies/reviews/turning-red/>.

4 “There is Blood Coming Out of My Vagina”: The Representation of Female Bodily Fluids Through Realistic Language in *Big Mouth*



Figure 9 Jessi riding her "crimson wave" on a giant tampon in *Big Mouth* episode "Hugest Period Ever" (2020)

In this chapter I will explore the way TV IV shows may represent female bodily fluids, body parts and the language around menstruation. I argue that since televisions move to streaming based platforms, the wider audience reach of western and American television shows have adapted to the need for more visibility, and discussion around menstruation and menstruating bodies. I also argue that the language around menstruation and menstruating bodies has moved from metaphoric and discriminatory language to a more realistic, empowering and representational language. I will be using adult animated television show *Big Mouth* (2017) as my main example and focus on two episodes; *Everybody Bleeds* (2017) from season one and the *Hugest Period Ever* (2020) from season two.

4.1 What is smart sit-com?

In *Situating Netflix's Original Adult Animation: Observing Taste Cultures and the Legacies of 'Quality' Television through BoJack Horseman and Big Mouth* author Eddie Falvey reflects on how the original Netflix adult animated series “reflect developments occurring within the sitcom format post-TV III”⁹² He bases his argument on Marieke Jenner’s work on Netflix comedies. Eddie connects the dots between ‘quality’ television, which had its rise through HBO and ‘smart’ cinema popularised in 1990s. Falvey defines Netflix adult animated smart sitcom as something “that depends upon complex knowledge of form [...] demonstrates a clear and influential awareness of the cultural (and subcultural) capital of intertextuality [...] capitalize on the subcultural currency generated by a culturally literate audience keen on close reading”.⁹³ To understand smart comedy, an audience needs to have a knowledge of popular culture, events and cinematic tropes in general. As Jenner argued in her book, a global and more educated audience that Netflix caters to, wants stimulation in a different way than the audiences of linear sitcoms.⁹⁴ Sitcoms that reference to ongoing political discourse, social and global events and challenges the audience’s referential knowledge has truly been popularised by adult animation shows like *Rick and Morty* (2013), *Archer* (2009), *BoJack Horseman* (2014) and *Big Mouth* (2017). Falvey continues to talk about *Big Mouth* and how it “makes creative use of the limited animation format to achieve a greater economy of visual humour and style with a focus on complex dialogue and characterization, complemented by an idiosyncratic intertextuality”.⁹⁵ By taking universal experiences surrounding the western high school experience, puberty and coming of age, *Big Mouth* ensures that its target audience will continuously find something to relate to, and understand the ‘smart’ comedic moments it supplies. “Part of the shows’ appeal depends on enveloping discourses that relay and reinforce (the viewer’s) ‘smartness’, rendered here in

⁹² Eddie Falvey, "Situating Netflix's Original Adult Animation: Observing Taste Cultures and the Legacies of 'Quality' Television through BoJack Horseman and Big Mouth," *Animation* 15, no. 2 (2020): 116, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1746847720933791>, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1746847720933791>.

⁹³ Falvey, "Situating Netflix's Original Adult Animation: Observing Taste Cultures and the Legacies of 'Quality' Television through BoJack Horseman and Big Mouth," 118-19.

⁹⁴ Jenner, *Netflix and the re-invention of television*.

⁹⁵ Falvey, "Situating Netflix's Original Adult Animation: Observing Taste Cultures and the Legacies of 'Quality' Television through BoJack Horseman and Big Mouth," 119.

overt intertextuality”.⁹⁶ The audience of smart comedy, thus not only need to be smart, they also want to feel smart in relation to the narratives on screen. Another word for this is they want to feel represented, and relate to the narratives, thus making them a part of the club who understands the comedic value of the show. In the next section I will demonstrate how ‘smart’ comedy is used to represent the menstruating teenage body in *Big Mouth*.

4.2 Everybody Bleeds: Subverting the Coming-of-Age narrative.

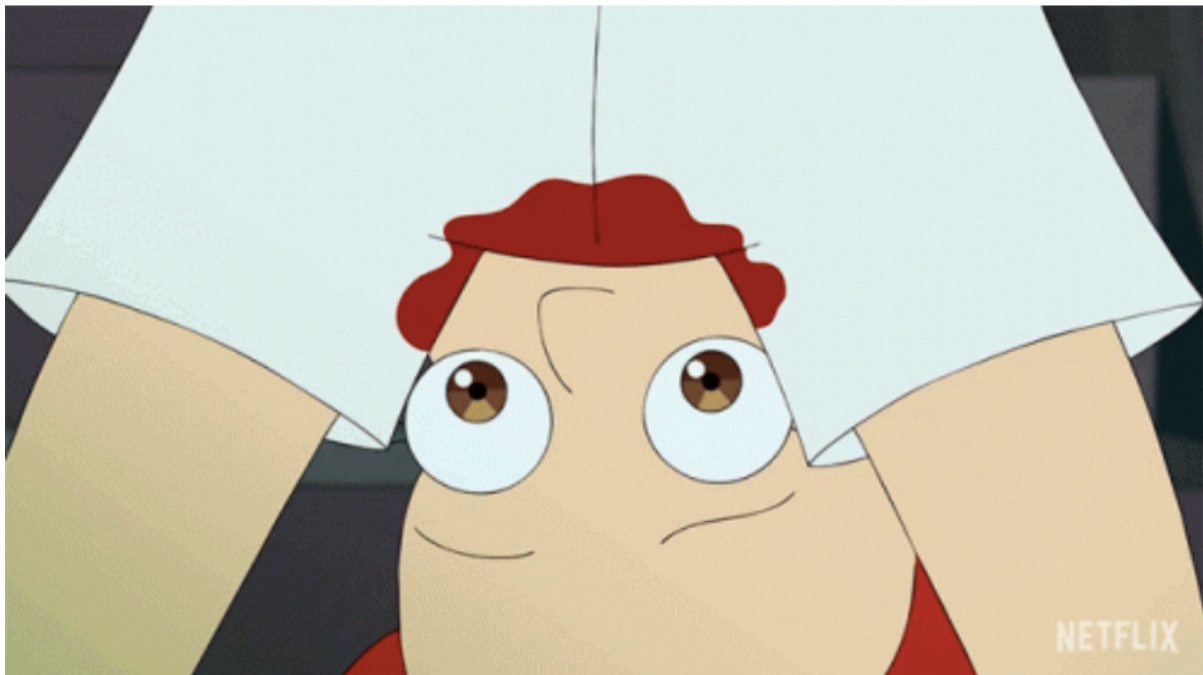


Figure 10 Jessi bleeds through her white shorts

Big Mouth (2017) is an animated sit-com series on Netflix, created by comedian Nick Kroll, directed at an adult audience. It follows a group of American 7th graders as they work their ways through the trials and tribulations of their puberty, guided by their very own hormone monsters. Whilst the show is about teenagers, it is directed to an adult audience who relate to the narratives through their own experiences as teenagers. Unlike other streaming sit-coms that engage in coming-of-age narratives like Netflix’s *Sex Education* (2019) and HBO Max’s *Euphoria* (2019) who strictly stick to live action and realism, *Big Mouth* uses animation and the genre of fantasy to mediate the modern teen experience. Falvey writes, “not only does it

⁹⁶ Falvey, "Situating Netflix’s Original Adult Animation: Observing Taste Cultures and the Legacies of ‘Quality’ Television through BoJack Horseman and Big Mouth," 119.

manage to circumvent the ethical implications of using child actors for a show of this nature, but the form provides a platform for surreal experimentation that might not be possible outside of the animated medium”.⁹⁷ Kroll uses situational comedy, and ‘smart’ references to real life experiences, in order to make fun of the absurdity of bodily functions, and puberty, without making fun of them. Each of the characters have their own challenges that come with puberty to overcome. Nick (Nick Kroll), the protagonist has challenges with triggering his sexuality and accepting his new pubertal self and explores this with his hormone monster Maury (Nick Kroll). Andrew (John Mulaney), Nick’s best friend, struggles with situating his sexuality as gay or straight. The hypersexual Jay (Jason Mantzoukas) struggles with taming his urges and obsessive masturbation. The character I will concentrate on is the main female character Jessi (Jessi Klein), and how her menarche and menstruation is represented in *Big Mouth*.

In *Big Mouth* season one, episode two *Everybody Bleeds*, Jessi gets her first period on a school trip to the statue of liberty. Unfortunately, Jessi is wearing white shorts and bleeds through. This leads to Andrew asking if Jessi happened to sit in some strawberry ice cream. Jessi bends down, and to her horror, her whole crotch area is red with blood. Realising the reality of the situation she rushes to the bathroom, closely followed by Andrew to make sure she is ok.⁹⁸ As established in the previous chapter through Rosewarne’s studies of menarche on screen, most of the girls who got their period were unaware of what was happening until their maternal authorities explained the situation to them. The introduction of Jessi getting her first period already differs from how audiences are used to seeing this coming-of-age trope on screen. Rather than cowering away in a bathroom, waiting for a trusted female adult to help her navigate this new and strange body, Jessi bleeds through her clothes in a public setting and has to rely on the help of a male peer. The scene does continue in a bathroom setting, yet Jessi openly invites Andrew to enter this segregated space, in order to get the help that she needs. When Jessi tells Andrew what is wrong, Jessi has full understanding of the situation. She seems educated and knowledgeable of what her body is going through and does not show uncertainty about how to handle the situation. Falvey argues that *Everybody Bleeds* acts as a sort of proof of the lack of sexual education in American schools. “By offering a nuanced,

⁹⁷ Falvey, "Situating Netflix’s Original Adult Animation: Observing Taste Cultures and the Legacies of ‘Quality’ Television through *BoJack Horseman* and *Big Mouth*," 120.

⁹⁸ *Big Mouth*.

sensitive and metatextual examination of teen representation, *Big Mouth* makes a clear argument for the need to create a transparent discourse on sex education for the benefit of young people”.⁹⁹ The characters’ lack of knowledge, in the examples presented by Rosewarne, on what is happening in their bodies, seems like proof of the decades of poor sexual health education in America. Rosewarne also mentions the bathroom as the standard backdrop for on-screen menstruation, “a space achieving both privacy and separation from men”.¹⁰⁰ Yet, also giving the impression that menstruation is an act that has to be done in a bathroom similar to defecation and urination. However, Jessi willingly invites Andrew into the girl’s bathroom so that she can get help from a trusted friend, rather than a strange adult.

When Jessi reveals that she is menstruating, Andrew’s reaction to this is to throw up.¹⁰¹ This scene has many references to the scene in *Superbad* (2009), where a girl perioded on Jonah Hill’s character Seth’s leg. The girl who bled through on Seth’s leg is unnamed and only present in the scene for the act of menstruating, after which she is reduced to a joke and an object of horror and disgust. Both Jessi and the unnamed girl bleed through their clothing, and both instances resulted in a male peer vomiting from disgust. Andrew’s reaction to finding out that Jessi got her period is mirroring that of Seth’s in *Superbad*. However, contrary to the unnamed period girl in *Superbad*, Jessi is allowed to defend herself and de-escalate the situation on her terms. She is not made a laughingstock or shamed by Andrew for menstruating. Andrew’s reaction may well be the one he was taught to have, rather than want to have. Between his belches, Andrew apologises repeatedly, and Jessi sees an opportunity to educate Andrew and allow him to overcome his stigma, by forcing Andrew to help her out. Jessi does not cover away from truly expressing what is happening in her body at that moment. She openly shares this with her friend and asks for his help. “There is blood coming out of my vagina!” Jessi screams as she urges Andrew to find her some pads or another collection method in the gift shop.¹⁰² Although disgusted, Andrew agrees and leaves the bathroom to help Jessi out.

⁹⁹ Falvey, "Situating Netflix’s Original Adult Animation: Observing Taste Cultures and the Legacies of ‘Quality’ Television through *BoJack Horseman* and *Big Mouth*," 124.

¹⁰⁰ Rosewarne, *Periods in pop culture : menstruation in film and television*, 10.

¹⁰¹ *Big Mouth*.

¹⁰² *Big Mouth*.

The word “perioded” in *Superbad* creates an idea of menstruation as a wilful act, women can control. However, the pure notion of being able to bleed through one’s clothes proves that it is not a wilful act and happens whether the menstruating person wants or not. The act of “bleeding through” is a very personal, and often humiliating experience yet shared by most menstruating people at some point in their lives. The use of a shameful, yet weirdly funny, situation that audiences can relate to through their own experience is proof of how Kroll uses ‘smart’ references to empower female bodies on screen. Falvey also highlights how this episode highlights the lack of proper sexual education in the American school system, through Andrew’s inability to recognise the situation, as well as his “superbad” reaction to Jessi bleeding. “The episode finds currency in the various problems that arise out of a vague and unhelpful national discourse on child sexual development”.¹⁰³ If Andrew had been educated in menstruation and female bodily functions as well as Jessi, his reaction may well have been less explosive.

Jessi is of course mortified by her experience. As Jessi is forced to shove toilet paper in her panties and wrap a “9-11 Never Forget” towel brought by Andrew around her waist to hide her bloody shorts, she can safely return to her peers. Jessi’s boyfriend Nick asks where she was, and Andrew lets the truth slip without thinking. Nick instinctively apologises to which Jessi shouts “Don’t be sorry! It’s not a disease it’s totally normal. And I know nobody talks about it, but everyone gets it and now I got mine, in white fucking shorts!”¹⁰⁴ The whole class hears this, and Jessi’s shame is apparent. However, the embarrassment is not around the act of bleeding itself and rather around her outburst in front of her whole class, and their reactions. Jessi is not embarrassed about her period; she only feels embarrassed after the reactions, charged with prejudice created by the western culture of period secrecy, from her peers make her feel that she should be embarrassed.

Everybody Bleeds also comments and criticises the trope of the period celebration and invitation to the sisterhood of menstruating bodies that Rosewarne highlighted and I discussed in the previous chapter. Once Andrew has left the bathroom to find some sort of collection method, Jessi feels safe to express her concerns around the situation. This triggers

¹⁰³ Falvey, "Situating Netflix’s Original Adult Animation: Observing Taste Cultures and the Legacies of ‘Quality’ Television through *BoJack Horseman* and *Big Mouth*," 120.

¹⁰⁴ *Big Mouth*.

a dream sequence where the hand of the statue of liberty smashes through the roof, grab Jessi and pulls her outside. “As the largest woman in the world, I welcome you to the covenant of menstruation” she states with a thick French accent and a cigarette in her mouth.¹⁰⁵ Jessi is relieved to finally speak to a woman and she calmly states that she is afraid, that there is so much blood and wonders if she will be ok. The statue of liberty explains what a misery being a woman is. “Nothing but unwanted babies from terrible lovers, and worst of all; *le cramp*”.¹⁰⁶ Jessi is not sure if she wants to be a woman. But the statue tells her that change comes whether you want it or not. Jessi wonders if there is anything good about becoming a woman. She tells Jessi that if she is lucky men will jack off at her on the subway, “so no!” The Statue of Liberty replaces the role of the educating celebrative maternal authority figure that Rosewarne mentions, and Kristeva argues. Rather than filling Jessi’s head with promises of womanhood, and the beauty of fertility, the statue takes the opposite road and highlights the trials of menstruation. Still the vilification of menstruation does not happen. Rather, the information is centred around how stigma, generations of menstruation fear among men, and sexism affect the modern mature woman, as well as the danger of sexualisation of teenage bodies. Although Jessi is not a Menstrual Monster, the discussion around her menarche highlights the patriarchal systems that created the Menstrual Monster.

Kroll’s show does not shy away from using correct terminology surrounding pubertal bodies. On the way home from the school trip, Jessi sits sad and ashamed in the bus. In the background plays a parody version of American rock band R.E.M’s song *Everybody Hurts*, called *Everybody Bleeds*, that is sung by a humanoid tampon that looks and sounds like Michael Stipe, the lead singer of R.E.M. In this comedic rendition we are treated to the introductory lines:

“When the ovum first descends,
it is expelled, and it's expelled with the uterine lining.
And the flow, and the menstrual flow begins.
Out the vagina, out the vagina it all comes sliding”.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ *Big Mouth*.

¹⁰⁶ *Big Mouth*.

¹⁰⁷ *Big Mouth*.



Figure 11 The giant humanoid tampon who looks like Mike Stipe singing "Everybody Bleeds"

If we compare the language of this to pre streaming narratives around menstruation that Rosewarne mentions, we are as far away from “completely awful” and “thoroughly misogynist” as we can get. Unlike Cher Hortwitz in *Clueless* (1995) who “rode the crimson wave”, or Mei in *Turning Red* who’s “red peony bloomed”, Jessi’s experience is explained with biologically correct terms throughout the episode. Although this is a more realistic and empowering language to use for menstruation, because it challenges the tropes and language audiences are used to hearing, the scene ends up almost shocking. I say almost, because the terms are spoken through a parody song, by a humanoid tampon. This juxtaposition makes the scene both incredibly effective in its inclusivity and representational qualities, whilst simultaneously being utterly ridiculous. Kroll uses situational comedy, and smart references to real life experiences, in order to make fun of the absurdity of bodily functions, and puberty, without making fun of menstruation, women or the experience itself. It takes an uncomfortable and personal topic, that is easily made into crude jokes, but through cultural and intellectual references it creates discourse around the subject, and thus legitimacy in its narratives around menstruation.

Later on, in the episode, Jessi is home, and her mother tries to help her, by taking the classic role of maternal authority figure. Instead of welcoming her into the covenant of menstruation, she contextualises menstruation as an inconvenience. “Did you know that tampons are taxed

as a luxury item? Yeah, it's a real luxury to stick a wad of cotton up your crotch".¹⁰⁸ Jessi wonders if she could show her how to use one. Jessi's mum laughs and tells her that she is not quite ready for a tampon yet, and that they should start with just pads. She also reassures Jessi that everything will be ok. Jessi says that it is so unfair. Jessi's mum laughs and says that if men had their period, it would be an Olympic sport and they would compete about who would have the heaviest flow.¹⁰⁹ Jessi's mother acts as a foil character to the Statue of Liberty. Rather than being fully bitter and just accepting her horrible fate as a woman, Jessi's mother takes a path of action. She brings up valid arguments of period inequality in society, although in this very moment that is irrelevant. Her daughter is left asking for help and attempts to bring the conversation back but is quickly shut down. But she also listens and acknowledges the feeling of unfairness.

At the end of the episode Jessi is introduced to her own hormone monstress, Connie. Connie assures her that the Statue of Liberty and her mother are wrong, and that becoming a woman can be amazing. "These are going to be the greatest years of your life, now let's fling ourselves on the bed and cry so hard no sound comes out".¹¹⁰ Which she does. After all the maturity and levelheadedness that Jessi has been displaying during this episode, she is also given an opportunity to be hormonal. Being hormonal is a side effect of puberty and menstruating and deserves to be acknowledged. In the same way narratives should not cover away from discussing blood or periods, they should also not be afraid to show what hormones do to the body. Connie is the first female that fully gives her permission to feel the things she is feeling and do the things she wants to do, at the same times as she celebrates her newly found sexuality and body.

¹⁰⁸ *Big Mouth*.

¹⁰⁹ *Big Mouth*.

¹¹⁰ *Big Mouth*.

4.3 *Hugest Period Ever* and the importance of realistic representation.



Figure 12 Jessi has the hugest period ever

Big Mouth's return to the theme of menstruation does not happen until 2020 in season four in the episode *The Hugest Period Ever*. However, they return guns blazing. In this second episode that explores Jessi's menstruation, Jessi, as the title suggests gets the hugest period ever during her summer camp stay. From the start of the episode, all to the end, Nick Kroll makes sure that we really do get the message of that what Jessi is experiencing, is the hugest period ever! The amount of animated blood in this episode is unparalleled. The episode starts with Jessi waking up, covered in blood and discovering blood clots in the bed followed by visuals of Jessi's vagina, a recurring character voiced by comedian Kristen Wiig, burping out even more blood and clots. The episode includes two dream sequences of Jessi drowning and later surfing on a tsunami wave of blood as well as Jessi's blood-soaked pad drinking up the whole lake as she attempts to swim during her period refusing to wear a tampon.¹¹¹ This episode hyper visualises the experiences of having a heavy flow and utilises the common menstruation tropes to visualise this. However, the main focus in the narrative of this episode is in Jessi learning to manage her new heavier period flow, through the use of tampons. After

¹¹¹ *Big Mouth*, season 4, episode 2, "The Hugest Period Ever," directed by Bryan Francis 2020.

the shock of her bloody pad slipping out of her swimwear and soaking up the entire lake, Jessi decides to get over her tampon fear and try to learn to use one.

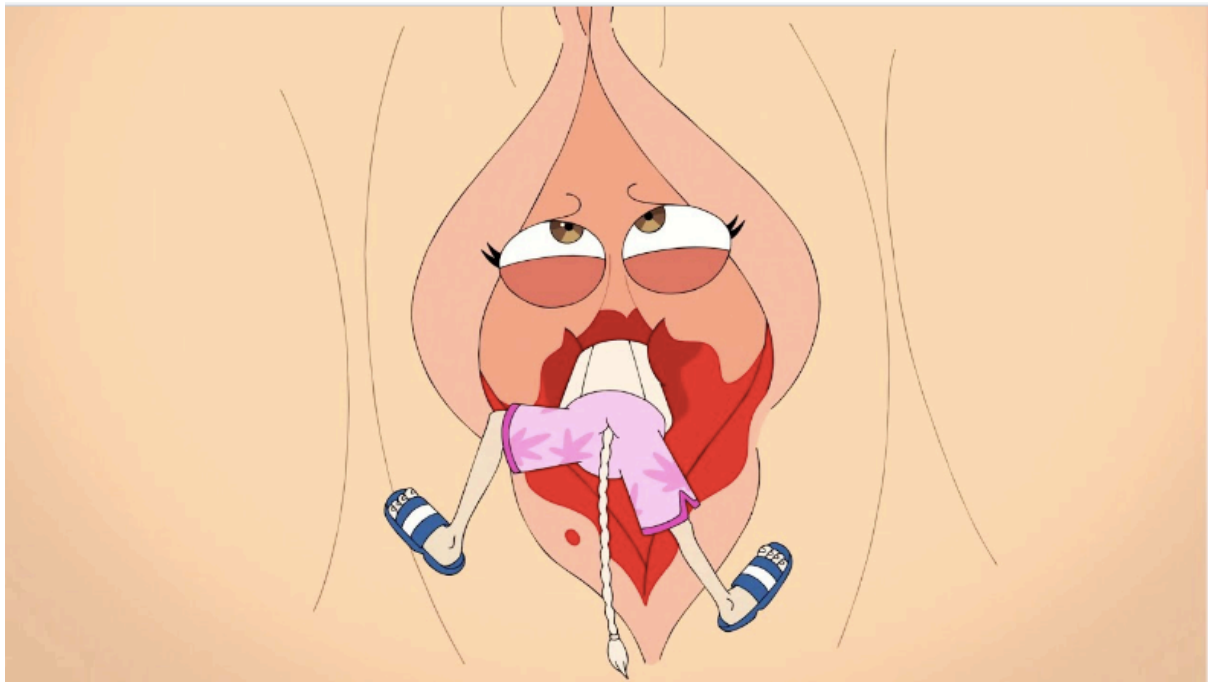


Figure 13 Jessi's vulva, and a wrongly inserted tampon

Tampon terror is a common theme connected to menstruation fear, and disgust of menstruation collection products is often one way in which menstruation disgust is represented on screen. Rosewarne depicts the many ways in which television and cinema depicts tampons and pads as scary and alien to the women who use them and disgusting and even unsanitary to the men who are in the proximity of these products.¹¹² In the movie *She's the Man* (200), where the main character Viola (Amy) poses as her brother Sebastian at his university in order to be accepted on the men's football team, her new roommate find a box of tampons in her bag. "They jumped back from them as though they were somehow filthy, as though menstruation and femininity were contagious" writes Rosewarne.¹¹³ Viola quickly comes up with an excuse that they use the tampons to stifle nosebleeds. In *Carrie* when the main character's menstruation is discovered by her classmates, they proceed to throw tampons at Carrie and verbally abusing her to "plug it up!".¹¹⁴ Rosewarne argues that Carrie

¹¹² Rosewarne, *Periods in pop culture : menstruation in film and television*, 11.

¹¹³ Rosewarne, *Periods in pop culture : menstruation in film and television*, 11.

¹¹⁴ Palma, "Carrie."

“was being pummelled with objects widely considered—even by women—as awful, that she was being insulted based on what makes her inferior and weak”.¹¹⁵ Tampons mean blood, blood means menstruation, and menstruation means something disgusting and horrific.

Jessi returns to the bathroom scenery in this episode, but this time instead of a male peer, or a cynical French statue, Jessi is joined by her hormone monstress, Connie and Jessi’s animated vulva. Jessi has made her way to the bathroom in order to learn how to use tampons, which are also animated, and given humanoid characteristics. She has found a box of regular sized tampons (after being scared by light and max sized tampons for not being suitable), that introduce themselves to Jessi in a relaxed nineties surfer boy voice. “Salutations, we’re just right for you mamacita. And totally stoked to ride your crimson wave.” To which Connie tells Jessi that they should go and “put them in your vagina so they can drink up your period”.¹¹⁶ Kroll has made sure to not avoid terms like “vagina” or “period” when Connie and Jessi speak, yet decided on using the term “crimson wave” for the tampons. I believe this is intentional, in order to point out how ridiculous and detrimental the use of euphemisms can be. By distancing the term from the action, it depicts through a euphemism, it mystifies the act of menstruation and support its stature as a taboo. Kroll himself fell into this trap in *Everybody Bleeds*, where Jessi’s mother supports the claim that tampons are somehow more challenging, dangerous and more difficult than other collection methods, mystifying this collection method even more. There is a sense of attempting to rectify his mistake in the earlier season of *Big Mouth*, by updating the “smart” references to social discourse that are relevant for 2020. Jessi has made it to the bathroom with her odd support crew, wondering how to use the tampon. She pushes one out with the applicator, who introduces himself as Mark. “I’m stoked, let’s get in there!”. Jessi’s vulva does not seem ready and tells Mark to buy her dinner first. Scared she asks Jessi to do a practice round. Jessi plays with the tampon applicator and wonders if she should pull or push. Jessi pushes too hard and Mark the tampon flies out the applicator and lands on the floor. Mark accepts his fate that he belongs to the floor now, and Jessi is ready to try again. She pulls out another tampon and pushes it halfway out of the applicator. The second tampon also introduces himself as Mark, who is stoked to be here. Jessi tries to get it in her vagina, but she is having a hard time finding the opening.

¹¹⁵ Rosewarne, *Periods in pop culture : menstruation in film and television*, 107.

¹¹⁶ *Big Mouth*.

She finally finds it but when we see Jessi's vulva the tampon is only halfway in her mouth (the vaginal opening). Jessi's vulva, Mark-the-tampon and Connie all panicked asks Jessi to pull it out. Jessi tells them to shut up as she rips Mark-the-tampon out of her vagina. Jessi screams that that was bad. "It was too dry" says Connie. "Yeah, it stuck to the sides" says Jessi. Her vulva says she definitely did not like that. They are down to the last tampon. He introduces himself as Mark, who is stoked to be here. This time Jessi goes straight in and pushes. "Did I do it?", Jessi asks. Mark screams a muffled answer out of Jessi's vagina, as the string dangles from her vulva's mouth. "I'm in, and it is beautiful!". They all cheer and congratulate Jessi on being a tampon user.¹¹⁷ Falvey writes on this scene that the "episode places into the mouth of a tampon the common experience of female menstruation and, in doing so, vocalizes a prevailing frustration over the lack of a functional discourse on sexual development".¹¹⁸ Similar to the "bleeding through" in *Everybody Bleeds* the experience of learning to use a tampon is a universally shared experience amongst menstruating people. In the context of visual media pre-Netflix, Rosewarne writes about menstruation representation through tampons. "One subtle way (menstruation) could be conveyed is through the use of a tampon string: by showing a tampon string, a woman's genitals could be concealed by underwear, but a period still conveyed without a blood display. Such a scene, of course, is an exceptionally rare sight".¹¹⁹ She also writes that "it is unlikely for any bodily fluids to ever be shown actually excreting from genitals in mainstream cinema because genitals themselves are rarely shown".¹²⁰ Although it is done through the medium of animation, *Big Mouth*, a mainstream sitcom on the biggest television show platform has done all of the things Rosewarne said are unlikely to happen. Not only by showing blood, tampons and vulvas, but also representing the menstruating body in an empowering, non-demonising and realistic way.

¹¹⁷ *Big Mouth*.

¹¹⁸ Falvey, "Situating Netflix's Original Adult Animation: Observing Taste Cultures and the Legacies of 'Quality' Television through BoJack Horseman and Big Mouth," 120.

¹¹⁹ Rosewarne, *Periods in pop culture : menstruation in film and television*, 215.

¹²⁰ Rosewarne, *Periods in pop culture : menstruation in film and television*, 215.

4.4 Seeing Red: Menstrual Blood is Visible in TV IV Streaming Shows



Whilst *Big Mouth* has been my example for this chapter, I want to highlight that since *Everybody Bleeds*, many other shows have represented menstruation through realism in the age of TV IV, using live action. One worth mentioning is from Netflix's *Orange is the New Black* (2013). In the first episode of the fifth season titled *Riot FOMO* (2017), a riot is ongoing in the women's penitentiary, and one of the guards, Luscheck (Matt Peters) has locked himself in the office in order to hide. One of the inmates Gina (Abigail Savage) is knocking on the door for Luscheck to let her in, who refuses. Gina has an idea and puts her hand in her trousers. When she pulls it out her hand is covered in period blood and she paints her face with the blood and fakes being injured. Luscheck lets Gina in when he sees the blood, who immediately drops the injured act and demands that Luscheck turns off the alarm which is "making everybody nuts".¹²¹ Luscheck confused asks if and where she is hurt to which Gina answers, "Oh, no, I'm fine. It's period blood. Heavy flow".¹²² In Netflix's *The*

¹²¹ *Orange is the New Black*, season 5, episode 1, "Riot FOMO," directed by Andrew McCarthy 2017, on Netflix.

¹²² *Orange is the New Black*.

Queen's Gambit (2020) we see period blood again, when protagonist Beth Harmon (Anya Taylor-Joy) gets her first period mid chess match and rushes to lock herself in a bathroom cubicle to hide. The only other girl in the tournament finds her in the bathroom and offers her a tampon, but instead of attempting to learn how to use it, she walks out of the bathroom, blood dripping down her leg.¹²³ Now, one may argue that this scene falls under the category of negative representation as the main character does not learn how to, but in the context of the show being in the 1960's and growing up with a drug abusing mother, who most likely did not educate her, just showing blood on screen without demonising the bleeder is already subverting tropes. My final example is a period-sex scene in HBO' Max's *I May Destroy You* (2020), which includes the male counterpart pulling out a bloody tampon and playing with a blood clot. This scene will be discussed further in the next chapter, on period realism, and the menstrual gaze.

Scenes like the ones in *Big Mouth* are important because it opens up discussions about the menstruating bodies experiences in society. It inspires discussion around menstruation, decreases stigma, and makes sure that the conversation goes beyond female spaces, outside of the sisterhood, so to speak. Both the scenes depicted by Rosewarne and the scene with the Statue of Liberty in *Everybody Bleeds*, still exclude others than cis-gendered females from the menstrual sisterhood. The reality is that not all those who bleed monthly are women, and not all women bleed monthly. There is a plethora of reasons why a woman does not bleed, included but not limited to; persons on hormone contraceptives, persons who do not ovulate due to medical reasons, and transgender women and other genders who do not have the physical means to menstruate. However, menstruation can be experienced by said groups hormonally, even without actual bleeding. By representing menstruation in many and varied ways, without excluding non-menstruating people from the discussion, post streaming media can start breaking down the stigma around menstruating bodies that centuries of vilifying uteri and menstruation has created.

In *Everybody Bleeds* we are treated to sweet scene between Andrew and Nick discussing what Jessi experienced on the field trip. Andrew wisely says that when you bleed out of your vagina once a month that shit will change you. In this scene we get a teenage boy's perspective to the situation. Whilst we may wonder, "do we need this?" I argue that it is

¹²³ *The Queen's Gambit*, season 1, episode 2, "Exchanges," directed by Scott Frank 2020, on Netflix.

transparency and integration that are the key steps to the destigmatisation of periods. Jessi's willingness to be open about her experience, allows Andrew and Nick to discuss menstruation in a safe and open way. They are in their conversation proving that openness and education is the way to change the way the discussions around menstruation is held. It is important to note the lack of metaphors and crudeness in Nick's and Andrew's discussion as well. This claim is supported by Falvey. He writes "that the issues facing young people should be discussed with them, and that generating a transparent discourse on sex is important to the safeguarding of children"¹²⁴ Rather than hiding and mystifying menstruation, actually being open about it, may be the answer. Nick Kroll said in an interview for *IndieWire* about *Big Mouth*; "[I would] love for parents to watch it with their kids . . . it is very dirty [but] my hope is it gives kids and parents some version of tools and a language to communicate what the kids are going through and the parents are going through".¹²⁵ It is not only teenagers who need to update the way they treat female bodies and its functions. When the people who are responsible to educate the younger generation on these themes stop using euphemisms and leaving educating to the last minute, that is when the change truly happens.

¹²⁴ Falvey, "Situating Netflix's Original Adult Animation: Observing Taste Cultures and the Legacies of 'Quality' Television through *BoJack Horseman* and *Big Mouth*," 123.

¹²⁵ Schneider, "'Big Mouth' Creator Nick Kroll on Convincing Netflix to Let Him Make a 'Perverted Wonder Years' — Turn It On Podcast."

5 “It’s a Blood Clot”: Period Realism on the Streaming Screen as Demonstrated by *I May Destroy You*.



Figure 14 Arabella inserting a sanitary pad in her underwear on *I May Destroy You* (2020)

5.1 Dear Toilet Scene

“Thank you for adding that glint of grit the movie needs. An avant-garde way to make the audience know this movie is the real thing. That it's willing to go to any corner, down any street. Unzip itself for relief. The scene that shows us all how little the female lead cares for veils of decorum. Panties pulled low-women, in real life, never pee- her motivation flows upon the water's still face, its mouth happy to receive.

Nothing advances plotlines like the destruction of porcelain bowls by drunk-assed decisions to shit with the door open. Nothing shows how far this character's grown beyond sexist expectations

of having it all- job! babies! bouncily quaffed hair!
*Such authenticity. That toilet will make her a star”.*¹²⁶

This poem by Sarah Burge celebrates the toilet scene and the many way it challenges how women are represented on screen. Susan Fraiman, author and professor of English at the University of Virginia coins the term “bathroom realism” in her article *Bathroom Realism and the Women of Cable TV*. In this article she explores three cable television shows: *Broad City* (2014), *Insecure* (2016), and *Girls* (2012), and their utilization of bathrooms as a televised space. Fraiman argues that bathrooms on the television screen, “combine elimination with grooming, toilets with sinks and mirrors, conceptions of dirtiness with those of hygiene and beauty, dynamics of concealment with those of display”.¹²⁷ The bathroom is a private space made public through the action of displaying it on the screen. She also argues that bathrooms, as the setting for a scene, act as a feminist space. A space to subvert stereotypes around femininity. Fraiman writes: “I am out to affirm a set of reality effects centered on aspects of female experience more often obscured as either boring or disgusting”.¹²⁸ This last part of the sentence “disgusting” is what I will focus on in this chapter. I argue that deriving from Fraiman’s idea of bathroom realism, the subgenre of period realism has become a way to liberate women from the narrative boxes that they often are put in visual storytelling. In this chapter I will explore menstruation through the lens of realism in 21st century streaming television, focusing on the bathroom as a feminine space and visual blood as a medium for female liberation. How does showing real, or at least realistic, period blood and period narratives on television further the feminist agenda? Is period realism, ultimately the *female gaze*, as Laura Mulvey defined it, visualised?

What then is period realism? I argue this is a sub-genre of bathroom realism, in that it often crosses over with Fraiman’s example. This type of realism uses similar structures to the scenes that Fraiman discusses, however, they take more influence from the horror genre by displaying blood, discussing bodily fluids and in general normalising the discussion around

¹²⁶ Sara Burge, "Dear Toilet Scene," *Prairie Schooner* 90, no. 3 (2016).

¹²⁷ Susan Fraiman, "Bathroom Realism and the Women of Cable TV," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 47, no. 3 (2022): 589, <https://doi.org/10.1086/717698>.

¹²⁸ Fraiman, "Bathroom Realism and the Women of Cable TV," 593.

menstruating bodies. Instead of triggering sense of fear and vulnerability, period realism trigger something else; recognition.

5.2 Series Synopsis

I May Destroy You (2020) is the HBO comedy-drama series by British actor, director and screen writer Michaela Coel. The twelve-episode series explores sexuality, dating, substance abuse, sexual violence towards women and British blackness in the 21st century. Journalist Caetlin Benson-Allott writes, ‘Over summer 2020, this formally and narratively provocative show rocked Anglophone television culture as it explored how three Black British millennials help each other cope with rape—and the racism, misogyny, homophobia, and classism that compound their distress.’¹²⁹

The protagonist Arabella “Bella” Essiedu, played by Coel, is a writer who whilst struggling to write her second novel decides to go out with some friends. During that evening she is intoxicated and at some point, is assaulted and raped in a bathroom. The show explores her coming to terms with her assault and the episode I will focus on in this chapter, is episode three, *Don’t Forget the Sea*. The events of this episode happen before Bella’s assault and rape and gives the audience an insight to events before her assault. The episode is set in Italy, where Bella’s friend Terry is working at the time, and we follow the events of Bella’s first day. I will focus on two main scenes. The scene where Bella and Terry are getting ready to go out clubbing in the apartment bathroom, and a later scene where Bella attempts to have sex with her love interest Biagio whilst Bella is on her period. These scenes represent two types of period realism: with and without blood. I want to explore how the presence and absence of blood may affect the scene, story and message, and how they both hold an equally important role when it comes to representation.

5.1 Situating Menstruation in the Bathroom

The link between bathrooms and menstruation are undeniable. It is in the bathroom menstruation is the most visible, as a person might change their tampon or pad, empty a

¹²⁹ Caetlin Benson-Allott, "How i may destroy you reinvents rape television," *Film Quarterly* 74, no. 2 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1525/FQ.2020.74.2.100>.

menstrual cup, or clean oneself off here. This rings true for the representation of both in cinema and television. In the introduction we established that the first examples of menstruation on screen have its origin in horror. It is worth noting that this applies for the bathroom too. The obvious early example is the introductory scene in *Carrie* (1974), where both bathrooms and menstruation meet in a horror movie setting. After getting her period, Carrie not knowing what is happening, seeks help from her classmates in horror, but gets assaulted with pads and tampons instead as they chant “plug it up”.¹³⁰ Before discussing this scene further, I want to make a few more examples, focusing on bathrooms only. One of the earlier, and probably the most famous bathroom scene in cinema history is the shower murder scene in Alfred Hitchcock’s horror movie *Psycho* (1960). The protagonist Marion Crane (Janet Leigh), whilst seemingly secure in her motel bathroom taking a shower, is stabbed repeatedly, and murdered by the movie villain, Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins).¹³¹ Twenty years later director Stanley Kubrick, in his horror movie *The Shining* (1980) has Jack Nicholson’s character Jack Torrance in a murderous rage, break the door with an axe to the bathroom where his terrified wife and son are hiding, to the iconic line “Here’s Johnny”.¹³² Kubrick’s *The Shining* also displays multiple other scenes in bathrooms and toilets. In director Wes Craven’s slasher movie *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), Freddie Krueger (Robert Englund), who attacks his victims through their dreams, attacks heroine Nancy Thompson (Heather Langenkamp) after she falls asleep in the bath. It is safe to say that the bathroom, or toilet has become a favourite scene for horror. Bathrooms and toilets are generally considered private spaces where people can feel safe in a vulnerable state, as one is often in a bathroom half, or fully naked. Freiman writes, “To judge from the movies, a woman need only take a shower to be naturally, by virtue of her silhouetted curves, susceptible to harm”.¹³³ The theme of male assault of women in bathrooms rings true through most of these examples, except for Carrie, who was assaulted by her peers. Even if Carrie is assaulted by other women, the way the scene is set up, is through the male gaze. Carrie is introduced through sexualised imagery of her naked, taking a shower and touching herself. She is shown through the male gaze which caters to the male viewer, and although she is not murdered, her body is used to evoke visual pleasure. Having these feminine spaces

¹³⁰Palma, "Carrie."

¹³¹ Fraiman, "Bathroom Realism and the Women of Cable TV," 596.

¹³² Stanley Kubrick, "The Shining," (Warner Home Video, 1980).

¹³³ Fraiman, "Bathroom Realism and the Women of Cable TV," 597.

violated by a murderer, demon or even your classmates, hits especially hard, as people expect the spaces to be safe.

Fraiman writes, “Bathroom behaviors evoke feelings of vulnerability coded as feminine.”¹³⁴ I would go a step further and argue that due to the bathroom’s private nature, often windowless and secret, something to hide and be ashamed of, yet also expected to be clean demure, groomed and pristine, the bathroom often ends up as visual allegory for the female body. As Norman Bates attacks Marian, he is dressed up as a woman. He enters the private space of Marian, a space that is coded feminine, dressed up as a woman and violates it with her murder. The victim in this scene is seen to be even more vulnerable due to her nudity. This vulnerability is repeated in the opening scene to *Carrie*, as the protagonist is the only one naked in this scene. Carrie is scared, vulnerable and traumatised, but is met with the worst reaction possible, where her peers instead of supporting and helping her, violate and assault her.

Freiman also makes the point, that although men on screen also are murdered in bathrooms, this is often staged as an unmasculine and humiliating death. She exemplifies this through Quentin Tarantino’s film *Pulp Fiction* (1994) where Vincent Vega (John Travolta) is murdered whilst sitting down on the toilet, reading a magazine. Vega in this instance has his guard down, and instead of being in the conventionally masculine position of standing whilst on the toilet, he is sitting down. Freiman writes, “For straight-identified men to be caught with their pants down—exposed in all their true leakiness and permeability—is thus to be both feminized and homosexualized”.¹³⁵ So even when men use the bathroom it is coded feminine. Carrie is not murdered in the bathroom, but she is assaulted in a humiliating and dehumanising way which ultimately leads her to her murderous actions. The bathroom, a space that is supposed to be safe, clean and feminine, is violated by the violent actions of men, and tarnished with blood. Linda Williams writes ‘According to the Mulveyan paradigm, if women viewers enjoyed watching films with terrorized and mutilated women, they could only be identifying with a masculine sadistic point of view. And masochism, we all certainly thought then, was anathema to women’.¹³⁶ I argue that it is through shifting the gaze and the

¹³⁴ Fraiman, "Bathroom Realism and the Women of Cable TV," 597.

¹³⁵ Fraiman, "Bathroom Realism and the Women of Cable TV," 597.

¹³⁶ Williams, "Blue is the Warmest Color: or the after-life of ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’," 465. 465

usage of realism on screen that film and television break the patterns and tropes that early horror bestowed upon women.

5.1 Period Realism and the Absence of Blood

In episode three of *I May Destroy You* titled *Don't Forget the Sea*, Terry and Bella are in the apartment bathroom, getting ready to go out. Bella is lying in the dry tub, looking distant. Terry is researching clubs in the area on her phone, whilst doing her make up in front of the sink mirror. All the clubs that Terry suggest have the word café in them, which prompts Bella to jump up from the tub to tease Terry. The camera follows Bella out of the bathroom, and we see her wearing only a t-shirt and pants. Bella suggests calling a local girl they met earlier. Camera pans back to Terry who shuts the idea down, as she does not want to go to a house party full of basketball players. 'Or my neck to be hurting me. Of my brain to be parched thirsty for substance. I want quantum physics, my hight.' Camera cuts to Bella as she walks back in the bathroom and takes a shot from an egg cup. Bella hands another egg cup shot to Terry, and as the camera pans to follow her, in the same motion she pulls down her pants and sits down on the toilet, saying defeatedly 'Okey, well, fine, well go to the café.' She pauses to reach for a menstrual pad from the side of the toilet. As she opens the pad, Bella decides to tease Terry about how cafes usually low ceilings have, to deter basketball players. We pan over to Terry who is still fixing her brows in the mirror and as a response to Bella's teasing, she cuts her off annoyedly with a 'Shut up!' followed by mock mimicry of Bella. The camera pans back to Bella as she lets out a loud guffaw and fastens the wings of her pad. Bella decides to diffuse the annoyed atmosphere by starting a chant 'Where is my shot glass? Can't you see I'm drinking shots.' Terry is shown joining in and twerking. The scene ends by cutting to the club.¹³⁷

As established in my introduction, the bathroom has in pre streaming media been either a scene of murder and horror, or a place to hide feminine body issues. Fraiman's article explores how cable television shows have broken the trope of the bathroom as a representation of the violated through what she calls "bathroom realism". Bathrooms and toilets are generally considered private spaces, so when using them as a set in a series, the

¹³⁷ *I May Destroy You*, season 1, episode 3, "Don't Forget the Sea," directed by Michaela Coel and Sam Miller2020, on HBO.

show creators are opening a door to the private lives of the characters on screen. Many television shows use the bathroom as a space for private conversations, secret meetings. These private bathroom talks are seen again, and again in television shows. Fraiman in her essay focuses on scenes in *Broad City* (2014), *Girls* (2012) and *Insecure* (2016), but there are several others that I can think of. Sit-com *New Girl* (2012) uses the shared bathroom as one of their most common settings. This is where the protagonist Jess (Zooey Deschanel) pulls her best friend, Cece (Hannah Simone) to talk about the things she cannot talk with her male roommates. In *Orange is The New Black* (2012), the communal shower and toilet room is the only space in prison where the women can get some privacy, and where most of the scheming between the inmates happen. In *Euphoria* (2019) the teenage girls often meet in the school toilets to hash out arguments, hide from each other or have discussions away from the prying eyes of teachers and fellow classmates. The bathroom as a space is a place to be vulnerable, honest and where women can be themselves without male interference. What has changed from the horror scenes exemplified in chapter one, is that women are often seen together in the bathroom setting. They are still portraying intimate scenes in a private space, but they are no longer vulnerable in their loneliness or nakedness. The realism portrayed in the scenes explored by Fraiman subverts the expectations of violence in the bathroom setting. “These three are notable for their repeated use—we might almost say their signature use—of the bathroom as both setting and symbol in women’s everyday lives”.¹³⁸ This same subversion happens in *I May Destroy You*.

In film and television, bathroom conversations are often used as a space where two women can talk to each other without being disturbed. Fraiman writes, ‘There’s something about a small space, with room for only one or two, that encourages honest speech. Then again, bathroom honesty may mean no more (or less) than outing the facts of our shared animality’.¹³⁹ However, in this scene the door is left open which indicates that this scene is not private. Structurally, the scene uses minimal cuts between shots, and most of the time the camera uses one shot that pans between the two women. This type of visual representation gives the audience the sensation of being an observer. Because the camera mimics the movement of the natural eye. Through natural panning between which party is speaking, rather than being an objective medium through traditional editing, the audience feels as if

¹³⁸ Fraiman, "Bathroom Realism and the Women of Cable TV," 592.

¹³⁹ Fraiman, "Bathroom Realism and the Women of Cable TV," 596.

they are standing in the room with Bella and Terry and invited to view this moment. There is little editing done to the shots, which give agency to the women rather than the image. The audience is an objective observer who is invited to watch, but not to interfere. There are no visual walls put up. Bella repeatedly leaves and enters the space, and the two women are both comfortably engaging in the bathroom. I should point out that this scene happens in a flashback episode, before Bella's subsequent assault and rape, so there is no trauma for them to feel unsafe in the bathroom setting either.

Bella also openly changes her sanitary pad as she is discussing their night with Terry. Bella's menstruation is never mentioned out loud in this scene. The object of the scene is to represent the tensions between the two women and set expectations for the night. Bella sitting down to put in a menstrual pad is neither remarked upon nor hidden. It is simply there. There is also a lot of tension created by active and passive actions and movements. The scene is visually giving a lot of information at once, and so is the dialogue. I argue this tension is created by using active and passive actions and letting Terry and Bella take opposing roles in turn. Terry is mostly stationary for the entire scene. Apart from the few seconds at the beginning of the scene where she is researching clubs on her phone, Terry is brushing her eyebrows and looking at herself in the mirror. Bella however is constantly moving. The camera follows her as she does her various actions: leaving the bathroom, returning, using the toilet and drinking. In the dialogue however it is Terry who is the driving force. She is talking about what she wants, needs, and expects from the night, and in the end, she also convinces Bella to go along with her wishes. What is said and what is done in this scene does not always match, which creates a tense atmosphere between the women. This is also represented visually as Terry is almost ready to go out, whilst Bella is in her underwear.

I argue that this example of bathroom realism is also what I would call period realism. The conflicting energies, and actions allegorically mimic and represent the inner turmoil Bella is going through. She is excited to be visiting her friend, but her body might not quite be up for it. The scene starts with Bella in the bathtub looking distant and passive, which may initially be seen as her reaction on coming down from their previous high. As the scene progresses however, the audience is revealed that Bella is on her period and gives a whole other meaning to the conflicting emotions and sensations evoked. There are little visual cues to menstruation, apart from the pad Bella inserts at the end of the scene. Showing the pad is not done to shock, break taboo or raise awareness. It is used as a visual foreshadower, and the

focus of the scene is in building the relationship between the women. The pad does however do all of the above anyway. The casual way Bella does this shows that she is not embarrassed, that this is routine action and that she is not even thinking about what she is doing. Her action is a necessary part of evening prep, but the focus is on getting drunk and partying. Terry also does not draw attention to the action, which confirms that the audience does not need to feel uncomfortable. The thing that does make the audience uncomfortable is the tension between the women.

As Bellas menstruation comes back in a later scene as the focus, this small visual is necessary to introduce the theme for later in the show. The shot does not show blood, neither do any of the women mention that Bella is menstruating at that point. However, the simple shot of visually showing Bella put on a pad, builds up information for future scenes, and at the same time does break taboo, increase representation, and raise awareness. Menstruation is not a debilitating and disgusting ailment, that will stop Bella from going out, getting high or be intimate with someone. However, there is a conflict between body and mind.

5.1 Period realism and the presence of blood



Figure 15 Biagio pulling out Bella's tampon

Bella and Biagio are in their underwear kissing on Bella's bed. Biagio takes Bella's underwear off and a glimpse the pad from earlier is shown. He leans over and as Bella's breathing quicken, it is indicated that he is pleasuring her with his hands. Bella's breathing stops as Biagio stops kissing her and looks at Bella. He asks, "can I take this out?".¹⁴⁰ Bella says yes. We see Biagio lifting out a bloody tampon and putting it on the side of the bed. Bella asks if he has a condom, and he says yes. He attempts to continue his previous action but stops as he sees something on the sheets. Sitting upright he asks what it is. Bella also sits up to look and says in a slightly defeated tone "It's a blood clot".¹⁴¹ Biagio is now fully distracted by the clot. "I've never seen anything like this before" he says in an intriguing tone.¹⁴² Bella is visibly uncomfortable by the comment and makes a joke about them not being on the high streets or anything. The camera pans down to the bed and we see the blood clot lying on a towel. Biagio picks it up saying "wow it's so soft".¹⁴³ He lifts it up and the camera follows showing both faces. "When it comes out, can you feel it?" he asks and

¹⁴⁰ *I May Destroy You.*

¹⁴¹ *I May Destroy You.*

¹⁴² *I May Destroy You.*

¹⁴³ *I May Destroy You.*

continues touching and looking at the clot in his hand.¹⁴⁴ The camera cuts to focus on Bella's face which is disgusted and shocked. She ignores the question and says to herself under her breath "OK" as she stands up and puts her pants back on. As she does this, she slaps his hand that is holding the clot softly which makes Biagio's gaze move from the clot back to Bella, and he also understands that they will not continue further tonight. She says defeatedly "we tried".¹⁴⁵ Biagio says he will take her somewhere, that is not far. Arabella nods and gets dressed. "You've done really well today. Don't hurt me".¹⁴⁶ Before they leave, we see Biagio walking in the bathroom carrying the dirty towel and throws the clot in the toilet, and the towel in a hamper. In this scene we are seeing many of the patriarchal walls broken by Coel. First, is destigmatising the showing of menstrual blood, second is destigmatising female sexuality during menstruation, third, is male interaction with menstruation, and fourth is the importance of consent and being able to change one's mind. This scene is exhilarating, sexy, weird and educative all in one.

Period realism in showing blood is easier to read than through the allegorical actions of discussion or related visual cues. The blood clot makes this scene almost a hyperbole of the expected way that periods can be represented in television. Biagio, not only address Bella's period, but he also touches it, is fascinated by it, and plays with it. In order to talk about the presence of blood, we need to identify why period blood on screen is so stigmatized. Ingrid Johnston-Robledo and Joan C. Chrisler call period blood in their essay, *The Menstrual Mark: Menstruation as Social Stigma*, "nature's most stigmatized fluids".¹⁴⁷ On the screen blood from a wound is less stigmatised than the more natural and less traumatising blood from a womb. But even more importantly, female bodily fluids have been generally more stigmatised than male bodily fluids. Semen, urine and faeces are generally considered more acceptable on screen than menstruation blood. In order to understand why the stigma around menstruation is changing we must first discuss the stigma existing around it. They argue that the stigma has deep societal, cultural and religious roots that mark period blood as more

¹⁴⁴ *I May Destroy You*.

¹⁴⁵ *I May Destroy You*.

¹⁴⁶ *I May Destroy You*.

¹⁴⁷ Ingrid Johnston-Robledo and Joan C. Chrisler, "The Menstrual Mark: Menstruation as Social Stigma," *Sex Roles* 68, no. 1 (2013/01/01 2013). 9

disgusting and abominable than other bodily fluids such as breastmilk or semen.¹⁴⁸ The societal discussion around menstruation has shifted over the course of history, and discussing it altogether is a fairly recent phenomenon.

What does Kristeva say about menstrual blood and bodily fluids? Firstly, that the cleanest form of bodily fluid is tears, and sperm, because neither “although they belong to borders of the body, have any polluting value”.¹⁴⁹ Outside of the clean, is the unclean and polluting bodily fluid. “While they always relate to corporeal orifices as to so many landmarks parceling-constituting the body's territory, polluting objects fall, schematically, into two types: excremental and menstrual”.¹⁵⁰ Kristeva categorises menstrual blood as represented in literature as its own category of bodily fluid. Menstrual blood is in Kristeva’s analysis, always abject, always the Other when it comes to bodily fluid. Excrement, whilst polluting is always semiotically linked to death, infection and disease, and thus threatens the identity “that comes from without”.¹⁵¹ As life is threatened by death, and an identity, and a healthy body is threatened by outside forces. “Menstrual blood, on the contrary, stands for the danger issuing from within the identity”.¹⁵² Menstrual blood is internally polluting and threatens the relationship between the sexes. Menstrual blood makes the woman a threat, and abject from the masculine, clean, unpolluted body. This is evident in the fact that menstrual blood has only ever been shown on screen in a horror context. Once again returning to *Carrie* and *Ginger Snaps*, we must recognise that these are the most notable examples where menstrual blood has been shown on screen. Film theorist Vivian Sobchack writes that *Carrie* in her lack of a phallus, and in that the “linguistic form of patriarchal discourse” that a phallus gives, her pubescent body “seek expression through Other means, through menses”.¹⁵³ Silenced by patriarchy *Carrie*’s “physical and bloody rage is an apocalyptic feminine explosion of the frustrated desire to speak”.¹⁵⁴ The capitalised “O” in “Other” insinuates that

¹⁴⁸ Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler, "The Menstrual Mark: Menstruation as Social Stigma.", 10.

¹⁴⁹ Kristeva, *Powers of horror : an essay on abjection*, 71.

¹⁵⁰ Kristeva, *Powers of horror : an essay on abjection*, 71.

¹⁵¹ Kristeva, *Powers of horror : an essay on abjection*, 71.

¹⁵² Kristeva, *Powers of horror : an essay on abjection*, 71.

¹⁵³ Vivian Sobchack, "6 Bringing It All Back Home: Family Economy and Generic Exchange," in *The Dread of Difference, 2nd ed.*, ed. Grant Barry Keith (New York, USA: University of Texas Press, 2015), 190; Sobchack, "6 Bringing It All Back Home: Family Economy and Generic Exchange," 190.

¹⁵⁴ Sobchack, "6 Bringing It All Back Home: Family Economy and Generic Exchange," 190.

the means that Shobchack argues Carrie expresses herself in her menstruation, is not only different from patriarchal means of expression, but directly threatening the patriarchal order. Carrie and Ginger remain silenced and remain the Other in the eyes of men. In order for menstrual blood to gain agency on screen and be freed from its polluting values, the way it is looked at needs to change.



Figure 16 Biagio playing with Bella's blood clot

So, what differentiate this scene from *I May Destroy You* from the pre-streaming depictions of menstrual blood in *Carrie* and *Ginger Snaps* for instance? I argue it is because the blood is not vilified, not abject. Biagio directly engages with Bella's menstruation, first by pulling out her tampon, and second when he plays with the blood clot. Neither Biagio nor Bella show any strong emotional reactions that would result in Bella's menstruation being abject. Kristeva defined menstrual blood as a threat to "the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate".¹⁵⁵ Biagio is not threatened or disgusted, and he still sees Bella just as

¹⁵⁵ Kristeva, *Powers of horror : an essay on abjection*, 71.

sexually attractive as before. It is Bella who in the end is uncomfortable with the situation and decides to stop.

I have alluded to the importance of the gaze in prior chapters of this thesis, but it is not until Bella's blood clot that the relevance is high enough for discussion. Laura Mulvey writes about the visual pleasure in cinema and focuses especially on the voyeuristic experience of the male spectator in her original manifesto *Visual pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. Mulvey, explores cinema from a psychoanalytic point of view, separates the experience of visual pleasure in to two: "The first, scopophilic, arise from pleasure in using another as an object of sexual stimulation through sight"¹⁵⁶ Scopophilia translated from Greek literally means "the pleasure of looking". In her original text, this was purely connected to the male gaze, but in her 1990 amendment Mulvey herself argued that the same principles of scopophilia can be adapted to the female gaze. Linda Williams adapted it to the queer gaze and to the middlebrow gaze. In the case of the scene in question I would argue that this is a representation of the female gaze, but more importantly the menstrual gaze. The spectator is finding pleasure in this scene in their voyeuristic state, but not because of the sexual act between Biagio and Bella. The voyeur receives pleasure through the experience of peeking in on this scene, because just like Biagio, the spectator is fascinated by the blood clot. There is an almost forbidden feeling of viewing the blood so realistically, that it ends up being exhilarating.

Mulvey also argued that beyond scopophilia, the other way to derive pleasure from looking, is a narcissistic desire to look. "The second, developed through narcissism and the constitution of the ego, comes from identification with the image seen".¹⁵⁷ This allows the audience to relate oneself with the image through their own real-life experiences and imagine oneself in the place of the character. Mulvey writes, "The cinema satisfies a primordial wish for pleasurable looking, but it also goes further, developing scopophilia in its narcissistic aspect [...] Here, curiosity and the wish to look intermingle with a fascination with, likeness and recognition".¹⁵⁸ This development of scopophilia in the narcissistic sense I argue is the key to subverting the male gaze to the Other gaze. It is the recognition that makes the

¹⁵⁶ Mulvey, "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema," 18.

¹⁵⁷ Mulvey, "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema," 18.

¹⁵⁸ Mulvey, "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema," 17.

bathroom realism and period realism a visual pleasure. By the viewers ability to relate to what they see, they can find pleasure in it. Coel, by opening the door to this intimate moment and showing menstrual blood through the lens of realism, allows audiences to see themselves represented, and makes the scene so much more pleasurable to watch. Because the spectator expects this moment to be humiliating and one of horror, and Coel's choice to instead make it one of acceptance and curiosity, results in a voyeuristic experience that feels simultaneously forbidden and triumphant. Thomas Elsaesser touches upon this in his chapter Cinema as Eye, where he discusses Mulvey's theory as follows. "While preceding feminist texts had concerned themselves primarily with women's roles in films, focusing therefore on representation understood as mimetic realism, resulting for example in an influential study on the depiction of women ranging from repression to rape".¹⁵⁹ Elsaesser understands that recognition and representation is the central driving factor for visual pleasure. Even when the subject of the scene is uncomfortable, like period sex, taboo, like displaying menstrual blood, or even traumatic, like rape, the experience of seeing oneself represented is a voyeuristic pleasure. Ultimately both bathroom- and period realism is in its core mimetic realism. Both seek to bring light to suppressed issues through the act of mimicry and by triggering the narcissistic desire to relate to that which is happening on screen.

Is period realism visual pleasure as Mulvey wanted it to be? Rather than the phallogocentric scopophilia she theorised, period realism through the lens of the female gaze allows pleasure in recognition. Is visual pleasure now the pleasure of feeling represented, seen and validated, rather than sexual, sensual and voyeuristic? Is the scopophilic actions that Coel invokes in these scenes meant to open the doors to fight oppression and normalise naturality rather than secrets forbidden fruit and shame? I think yes. It is high time we allow menstruation to be seen in its full guts and glory. Because even when it is messy, disgusting and inconvenient, it is real and a normal part of life. Even the blood clot, whilst an object of disgust, is visually enticing, exciting and a pleasure to see.

¹⁵⁹ Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, *Film theory : an introduction through the senses* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 94-95.

6 Conclusion

In this thesis I have argued and demonstrated how three different pieces of TV IV era screen media represent menstruation in their narratives. I have through my analysis answered my main research question, *How has the representation of menstruation and female bodies changed in the post Me Too streaming era in Anglocentric film and television?* With my literature review and subsequent analysis, I have answered the question as follows. The representation of menstruation and female bodies in screen media has changed towards a more realistic, inclusive and empowering mode of representation. In the chapter considering Disney's *Turning Red* (2022) I demonstrated how director Domee Shi has used Mei's red panda as an allegory for menstruation and puberty. In its animalistic and monstrous form, the panda is inspired by pre-streaming era depictions of the Menstrual Monster in horror as defined by Barbara Creed. However, Shi's depiction of Mei and her panda form, subverts expectations, and by allowing Mei a choice to be or not to be a panda, tames the monster and gives her power and agency. The abject monster is tamed to simply be a part of the teenage girl's identity.

In the following chapter I questioned how *Big Mouth* (2017) subvert the negative tropes and euphemistic language created historically around menstruating bodies through the visual media of animation. I argued that the way *Big Mouth* does this is by juxtaposing over the top fantastical imagery of menstrual tropes with realistic and biologically correct terminology. Because the terminology is something audiences are not used to hear in narrative television and cinema, it surprises and shocks the audiences from their comfort zone withing the patriarchal systemic ideologies that the pre-streaming media has made them expect. *Big Mouth*, through the medium of smart comedy, makes audiences realise how ridiculous the euphemistic language used to describe menstruation and female bodies is, by realising it in imagery, like the protagonist Jessi riding a giant menstrual "crimson wave" on a humanoid tampon. *Big Mouth* also challenges the stigmatisation of biologically correct terminology by not being afraid to use it in a casual and realistic manner from the mouths of teenagers.

In my final chapter I leave the mode of animation and metaphor behind and explore menstruation through true narrative realism in Michaela Coel's *I May Destroy You*. Coel displays the importance of the female gaze in female narratives, and the importance of realistic representation of the multifaceted nature of female sexuality. Coel breaks the stigma

that menstruation is inherently unclean and abject and shows not only that menstruation is not a limiting ailment that incapacitates women. By allowing Bella to be happy, sad, drunk, high and sexual during her period, Coel demonstrates that menstruation is simply just a part of the female experience as a whole.

What this shift in on screen representation of menstruation has resulted in is a more aware discourse around menstruation in western media in general. Seeing realistic and non-stigmatised depictions of menstrual bodies in media can educate the spectator on menstrual issues in a non-stigmatised way. As Falvey pointed out in analysing *Big Mouth*, sex education in American high schools is lacking. Many menstruating people do not know what a normal healthy period is and when to seek medical assistance. When *Big Mouth* and *I May Destroy You* frames blood clots as normal and normalise visual representation of menstrual blood in a realistic way, menstruators can also analyse when their menstruation is considered normal. Especially teenagers who are going through puberty, getting your period can be a very lonely experience, and knowing what to expect can be difficult. Television shows like *Big Mouth*, discussing female anatomy and bodily fluids in an open destigmatised way opens up doors for teenagers and other menstruators to explore what is normal and what is not. This way the media narrative takes the role of the “maternal authority” as defined by Kristeva.

The realistic menstrual scene also reaches its influence beyond the streaming screen. All three of the media analysed in this thesis triggered extensive discussions in online media publications on the work they have done for destigmatising periods. When *Turning Red* was released on Disney + in March 2022 the critics reviews were mainly positive. Film critic Ben Travis, who writes for *Empire Magazine* gave it four out of five stars and congratulates Domee Shi’s feature debut for “offering a new identity for Pixar”.¹⁶⁰ Travis praises the distinctive style of animation and visuals which sets it aside from Pixar’s earlier production by “incorporating anime speed-lines, face-filter emoji reactions, and a defiantly tween-girl pastel-pink sparkly sheen”.¹⁶¹ He also highlights the narrative risk that Shi takes by telling a coming-of age story that “doesn’t shy away from the specific realities of teen girlhood”.¹⁶² *Rolling Stone* critic Jessica Kiang starts her review by asking “What’s your favorite

¹⁶⁰ Travis, "Turning Red Review."

¹⁶¹ Travis, "Turning Red Review."

¹⁶² Travis, "Turning Red Review."

euphemism for menstruation?” and lists some of her favourites like “shark week” and “having the painters in”.¹⁶³ Kiang even addresses how feminist school of thought argues how “all such metaphorical language contributes to the stigmatization of this very natural process” and touches upon a more academic discussion of the film.¹⁶⁴ Kiang gives the film a rave review as a “bright, moving, funny, *happy* film about adolescent angst, that doesn’t condescend but also doesn’t overload” and finishes it with a suggestion of adding “releasing the Red Panda” to the list of menstruation euphemisms.¹⁶⁵ These are only two of the official review’s that praised *Turning Red* for its menstrual representation, and most of the public agreed with an IMDb score of 7.0/10 and a Rotten Tomato audience score of 71 %.^{166 167} Similarly *Big Mouth* was praised by *Vulture* critic for “how explicitly and sensitively *Big Mouth* depicts adolescent sexual exploration”, and the public praise Coel got after showing period blood and sanitary products on the screen was unparalleled. Twitter user @_emiliecousins wrote the following tweet after seeing the episode *Don’t Forget the Sea*:



Figure 17 Twitter user @_emilycousins tweets about Coel's menstrual representation

¹⁶³ Jessica Kiang, “Turning Red’: Pixar Tackles Puberty and Gives Us One for the Ages, Period.,” *Rolling Stone*, 2022, <https://www.rollingstone.com/tv-movies/tv-movie-reviews/turning-red-review-pixar-1316992/>.

¹⁶⁴ Kiang, “Turning Red’: Pixar Tackles Puberty and Gives Us One for the Ages, Period..”

¹⁶⁵ Kiang, “Turning Red’: Pixar Tackles Puberty and Gives Us One for the Ages, Period..”

¹⁶⁶ “Turning Red,” accessed 28.11.2022, https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/turning_red.

¹⁶⁷ “Turning Red.”

“#IMayDestroyYou is incredible - @MichaelaCoel’s storytelling, the realness of it, the period sex scene, and why is the first time I’m seeing someone on TV put a pad on? Content I never realised I was missing until now”.¹⁶⁸

There should be no illusion that all the discussion and critique surrounding the topic has been positive. *USA Today* journalist writes about the negative backlash given by some parents on social media for the way *Turning Red* deals with puberty, child sexuality, and rebelling against your parents. These reviews found the film inappropriate for young children, and one parent even shut the movie off when Ming brought in the box of pads and ibuprofen.¹⁶⁹ Similar sentimentalities are reported by *The New York Times* journalist Melinda Wenner Moyer, who after reading viewer reviews on the open online film review platform Rotten Tomatoes, found that many parents were “aghast that the movie discusses menstruation; others dislike its exploration of romantic crushes and sexuality; and still others are upset that the main character, 13-year-old Mei Lee, rebels against her parents by repeatedly lying and sneaking out”.¹⁷⁰ Interestingly both journalist follow these negative reviews with interviews of professional child psychologists and sex educators, that all come with the same basic message: you should discuss menstruation, puberty and sex with your children consistently and constructively. Judith Smetana, a psychologist at the University of Rochester who studies the relationships between parents and adolescents, is interviewed by *The New York Times* for their article, and she even suggests that *Turning Red* may be a great way to mediate the discussion to your child. “You could use the scene as an opportunity to explain the concept to them”.¹⁷¹ Another of the professionals interviewed by Moyer, Lauren Tetenbaum said, “she explained to her 5-year-old son that Mei got her period “because that’s what happens to girls when they become teenagers. He was like ‘OK, cool.’”.¹⁷² All of these examples prove that

¹⁶⁸ @_emilycousins, Twitter, 2020,

https://twitter.com/_emiliecousins/status/1275109596865146880?s=20&t=TEWd2CAccx4JeCIN30yXJA.

¹⁶⁹ Sara M Moniuszko, "Pixar's 'Turning Red' caught some parents off guard, but the film isn't the problem," *USA Today*, 2022, <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/life/health-wellness/2022/03/25/turning-red-period-talk-shocked-some-parents-why-shouldnt-have/7128789001/>.

¹⁷⁰ Melinda Wenner Moyer, "'Turning Red' Is a Good Conversation Starter — and Not Just for Girls," *The New York Times*, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/16/well/family/turning-red-periods-discussion.html>.

¹⁷¹ Moyer, "'Turning Red' Is a Good Conversation Starter — and Not Just for Girls."

¹⁷² Moyer, "'Turning Red' Is a Good Conversation Starter — and Not Just for Girls."

representation matters, because it creates discussion. And through discussion, we create discourse, which in its own turn creates change.

Although, many if not most of the narratives in the most popular streaming shows are America-centred, TV IV has forced a global social narrative to enter the discourse. The ones watching the shows, and affecting the viewer numbers are no longer just American, they are global, and must thus appeal to a more global taste. I argue that this shift has allowed a more diverse narrative to be pushed to the forefront because a more diverse audience craves more diverse stories. In TV IV's global era, if a narrative fails on being inclusive and/or diverse, the audiences will no longer stay quiet about it. Twitter, TikTok and other social media, have become public forums and global sounding boards to praise and scrutinise streaming shows. Thought the popculturisation of news and politics via social media as audiences become more aware of global politics, and popular culture, the narratives have to also become smarter. Diverse stories have to be written by diverse writers, which has opened the doors to women and other gendered writing as well. Post-network television is thus closely linked with the post-feminist movement. The global audiences want to see real life, rather than the glorified fictions of unrelatable white male heroes. The transnational viewer wants to see blood coming out of the vagina.

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