

From Beneficent Elderly to Obscene and Vile M'otherers: Familial Relations, Cannibalism,
and The Uncanny in Troma's *Rabid Grannies* (1988)

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"A glimpse into the world proves that horror is nothing other than reality."

Alfred Hitchcock

In 1988 Troma Entertainment released an obscure Belgian horror film titled *Rabid Grannies*. A natural choice for a company already well known for releasing independent films that blended the ridiculous with underlying social commentary, it was an instant success. Troma aficionados enthusiastically celebrated the film's adolescent combination of wit, gore, and familial subject matter, while it topped the list of "video-nasties" in the UK and Canada. Initially banned in those nations and pilloried by the mainstream media globally, it remains notorious to this day.

The film follows the 92nd birthday party of two beneficent elderly aunts, attended by grasping family members who hope to inherit the family estate. Their ostracized, devil-worshipping nephew sends a mysterious gift that transforms the aunts into twin cannibalistic demons, and what follows is a night of hell, in which the relatives are hunted down and consumed in a surreal display of grotesquery and slapstick cannibalism.

Rabid Grannies is a surreal inversion of Freud's primal act of murder and cannibalism. The Freudian primal "obscene Father" is an archetypal character used to explain the origins of societal laws and religion through prohibitions, transgressions, and guilt. Freud draws parallels between the origins of civilization and the Oedipal scene, with the alpha father figure dominating access to the society's females and thus controlling and curtailng the desire of his sons and other males. In Freud's story, this domination over desire is the ultimate anxiety-inducing prohibition. It is a prohibition with such palpable ambivalence

between respect for power and hatred of control that it drove the sons to transgress any notion of law or order—they murder and consume the father. This act allowed for the symbolic absorption of his strength, but also gave rise to the need for prohibitions grounded in guilt. It is from this dialectic that new structures of meaning emerge.

Heavily influenced by both structural anthropology and linguistics, the French psychiatrist Jacques Lacan diverged from Freud's work by linking the emotion of anxiety to the function of desire in the unconscious mind. Lacan used this coupling to create the phase of human subjectivity he called the *Symbolic* register of language and social authority. Rather than follow Freud's insistence on sex and libidinal impulses, Lacan's *Symbolic* is somewhat comparable to Freud's notion of the super ego, and is formed by the colonizing power of language. It is the register of human subjectivity. We first enter what Lacan called the *Imaginary* register of image identification—a register comparable to the Freudian Ego, where early subjectivity is formed through identification with the imaginary otherness of our fathers and mothers. It is also in this nascent phase of identity that we lay the foundations of our own conflicting relationships with authority, and are dominated by the otherness of social authority—a perspective from which our unconscious minds are being gazed upon by a relentless and invisible prescience.

Freud was consumed by fear of the breakdown of the authority of patriarchal society. However, Troma's *Rabid Grannies* confronts viewers with a subversive inversion and surreal doubling of his ideas. The story of *Rabid Grannies* is dominated by a dualistic and cannibalistic twin maternal image. The dominating 'Otherness' of the father is replaced by a surreal dualism of maternal authority—one that oscillates uncannily between beneficial "nannas" who we know and love as the "spoilers" of children and the "rabid" elderly persecutors of familial desires and guilt.

Faced with these conflicting images, viewers are continually unsure of the perspectives from which to interpret the film. Whether beneficent or obscene, the desire of this maternal authority dominates the despicable family and film narrative; it is a portrayal of an aged M'othering desire, and its guilty enjoyment functions to hold together meaning.

“All sorts of things in this world behave like mirrors.”

Jacques Lacan, Seminar II

Troma had, by 1988, a vast stable of distributed films—including *The Toxic Avenger* (1984), which featured a nerdy social misfit transformed by chemical waste into a type of rhetorical superhero who evolved over numerous sequels to espouse “...viewpoints that are anti-religion, anti-police, anti-capitalist, anti-Washington, anti-hippie, anti-Hollywood, anti-woman, anti-good taste, and anti-pretty much everything!”¹ In short, Troma offered the type of releases that college students of the 1980s, in search of meaningful countercultural icons, skipped class to see simply because they were considered so bad they *had* to be good.

Cult films are strange creatures. To many non-Troma aficionados *Rabid Grannies* appeared to be the ultimate Troma release, in that it went out of its way to defy audience expectations. The film contains neither grandmothers nor a case of rabies. Moreover, it did not contain the visceral horror that was promised during promotion, with gore cutscenes released separately from the main feature. The film was so heavily censored and edited by third parties to remove scenes of cannibalism that the original Troma release seemingly contained little in the way of a working narrative. The film's first-time director Emmanuel Kervyn even complained about the film's lack of meaning, arguing that the excision of the special effects—intended to hold the text of the film together as parodic mimicry of old B movies—left him feeling as if he was watching John Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever* with all the dance sequences removed.² However, for Troma's audience the film was still an

exquisite spectacle despite, or even because of, its meaninglessness. Even severely cut, the film reflected Troma's flair for the transgressive and comically absurd, the obscure, the burlesque, the gratuitous, the grotesque, the titillating, and the downright disgusting (all frequently combined within a single title).³

Falling out of vogue in the 1970s, Lacanian film theory missed the advent of the splatter films of the 1980s. This essay however, furthers a renewed interest in Lacanian criticism by reintegrating the role of the spectator through the irrepressible effects of the *Real* inherent in film's text.⁴ The *Real* is the third of Lacan's registers of subjectivity and is similar to the Freudian id. It is the register of human subjectivity that resists articulation; a range of bodily affects that can neither be signified nor controlled which, together with the *Imaginary* and *Symbolic*, fully constitutes the human condition. Encounters with the *Real* are destabilizing—simultaneously enthralling and intolerable—like the repeated picking of a scab or the realization one has been unconsciously picking one's nose in public.⁵ The unearthing of the *Real* is similar to the destabilizing bodily affects we encounter when confronted with Freud's *uncanny*—the surfacing of dark entities from the unconscious mind. This essay frames *Rabid Grannies* as an encounter with the *Real*, and a means through which the uncanny prompts viewers to negotiate understandings of their own identities. If, as McGowan and Kunkle contend, the Self is the “stumbling block of sense,”⁶ then the cinematic fantasy of *Rabid Grannies* exists in the space between the interior identity created by the Self and the social identity promoted by American culture in the 1980s.

“If youth knew; if age could.”

Sigmund Freud

The ambivalent emotions we harbor toward the elderly contort our lives and our fantasies. Freud, intent on tracing the origins of the stories we embrace about ourselves,

repeatedly found himself excavating the complicated networks of family histories that reached back over generations.⁷ The individual in a family is already situated before birth within a constellation of networks of kinship. How we love within the family unit is not a simple exercise; we are all at the mercy of the ambivalence of emotions and the language of expression. Simultaneously, we love and hate those who provide for us and for whom we provide. We wish them success, yet envy their good fortune and wish them ill. We revere them, yet unconsciously wish them dead as part of the natural progression of kinship, so that we may consume (and thus absorb) the power and authority that they wield(ed) in life.

These ambivalences of death and desire, particularly the unconscious wish for the death of our parents, cause us terrible anxiety. For Freud, this did much to cement the foundations of civilization and simultaneously cause society-wide neuroses. He theorized that desire for the death of our elderly, and the consummation of their desires as our own, formed the spiritual belief systems of early civilizations, and that it rooted fear of the dead, and of their demonic return, in the repressed origins of societal laws, customs, and rituals. Belief in the need for religion to contain and control the violent retribution of the dead, fear of demonic forces, and anxiety over transformational powers such as lycanthropy originated, for Freud, in the unconscious psychic mechanisms of the familial unit.⁸

It is within this strange world of kinship and unconscious perspectives that we are situated, as viewers, within Kervyn's *Rabid Grannies*. We enter via a shaky and improperly lit long-shot of a gothic cathedral, as Father Percival requests leave to attend his Aunt's birthday party. What follows sets the scene for the entire cutting and editing style of the film. It is a segue into a world continually viewed from divergent and doubling angles. Scenes are quick-cut from off-angled third person perspectives to first person perspectives and back again, often shifting in height and scope with disconcerting irregularity. Jumps to first-person perspectives vary in height, while including shots of autonomous disembodied hands, leaving

viewers in a peculiar relation to the images on the screen. They are forced unconsciously to ask on whose authority, and from whose perspective, they are being forced to view the events unfolding on screen.

“When someone abuses me I can defend myself, but against praise I am defenseless.”

Sigmund Freud

This spectral discord seems to give the film’s characters, locations, and props divergent proportions that are uncannily redoubled by badly dubbed and lip-synced audio. The surrealist imagery then ups its own game. We are introduced to a cast of characters straight from the gothic naturalist oeuvre in the rapid-fire exposition of 1980s contextual filmmaking. The elderly twin spinsters, raised in an era when public demonstrations of faith were routine and expected, faithfully attend prayers at a gothic cathedral. They live in an aging chateau staffed by a pompous Indian Raj butler, an earthy cook who likens the family to a maggot infested stillborn calf, and a demure but pathetic maid (Patricia Davia) whose peculiarly captivating lazy eye gives her the air of a broken doll.

We are then introduced to the party guests as they begin their journey to the aunts’ home. Kervyn’s dizzy visual style and exposition giving the narrative a sense of stilted forward motion. We meet a corpulent industrialist and his trophy wife, who make a living manufacturing condoms, polluting the environment, and profiting from the AIDS epidemic. There is a slick armaments manufacturer who wishes to sell weapons in the Middle East in order to propagate World War Three. We are also introduced to a bullying middle-aged fashion mogul, accompanied by an attractive personal assistant who is also her jealousy controlled lesbian lover. There is the middle-class liberal family with young son and daughter, who in an argument over sharing cookies unmask their parents’ contemptuous greed. We also meet a tragic middle-aged spinster—the “family virgin”—who cycles to the

party while carrying on an out-of-place internal monologue with her own domineering mother. She is run off the road by an arrogant young playboy in a sports car, who proves to be the final invitee. Picking sides for the upcoming contest is simply not possible. None of the characters are likeable; a generation earlier, before the late-eighties cultural moment from which the film is inseparable, they would have been inconceivable.

Comprehension is shattered and fragmented in *Rabid Grannies*, mirroring the social fragmentation and cultural upheavals that came to a climax in America as the Reagan era drew to a close. Grasping greed had become “good,” and consumption had been enshrined as virtuous, as the monied elites abandoned the broad-based manufacturing economy of that sustained the “American century” for the creation of wealth through elaborate financial manipulations encouraged by “Reaganomics.” New ideas of authority emphasized deregulation and the unfettered production of capital, not for reinvestment in society, but for hoarding and public display as vast *personal* wealth. The Cold War (and the ever-present threat of actual war) was profitable, and the military-industrial complex completed its decades-long takeover of the economy. Its pursuit of high-tech weapons drove the burgeoning digitization of Western civilization, and laid the foundations for a post-industrial, knowledge-based society defined, for its rank-and-file workers, by debt and perpetual job insecurity. Freud’s patriarchal society—defined by restraint and prohibition—had begun to unravel in the late 1960s, and was, two decades later, gone entirely. In its place stood a society that, though equally beholden to patriarchal authority, was defined by its embrace of unfettered consumption. By the late 1980s, prohibition was out; fun and self-gratification, regardless of their social cost, were in.

The plot of *Rabid Grannies* hinges on wealth and its unbridled pursuit, but the film is not, ultimately, a commentary on wealth—or even economics. The Aunts’ estate is a McGuffin, and thus narratively meaningless, except as a catalyst for the action. The

filmmakers' real interest, and the film's real meaning, is hidden in the fractured family dynamics onscreen.

As the party begins, guests drink heavily and make underhand comments to each other that seem to go unnoticed by their elderly hosts, until a mystery guest arrives at the gate. An elderly lady with strange unblinking eyes delivers a gift from the long-disinherited, devil-worshipping Christopher: a plain and unspectacular jewelry box. There is an outbreak of contrived morality among the guests as presents—including Christopher's seemingly innocuous box—are opened and the cake arrives at the table. What follows is as bizarre as it is enthralling: As the family begins a ritual handclapping chant for "a knife for a cake," the aunts transform into rubber-faced demons. One grows an arm that shoots the length of the table, grabs the elder of the lesbians in a clawed hand, eats her head, belches and giggles. The young boy laughs and says, "that's smashing," Percival shouts, "Holy Shit," and quite literally all hell breaks loose. Viewers are again left with nowhere to turn.

From the opening scenes, when we meet the elderly ladies, the film explicitly places them as being simultaneously at home and not at home. In a brief exposition, they inform the audience that after 92 years of residence, they know their own home, and they clearly have significance as elders in the wider community. Yet the reality that viewers can plainly see is that their despicable relatives are attending the birthday party simply to scheme their way into the lion's share of the inheritance. From the outset, Kervyn's story and techniques trouble the deeply rooted social norms that govern family gatherings: being homely, familial and politely blind to the reality of how unhomely home can be. The film—a cascade of discombobulating perspectives, obsessed with eyes, seeing, and scopic doubling—forces the audience into the realm of the psychoanalytic uncanny. Freud, who coined the concept in 1919, argued that we can grasp the reality of the uncanny in fiction, yet appeared to deny that fiction can play a role in our search to uncover something of who we really are.⁹ Immersion

in the uncanny world of *Rabid Grannies* suggests, however, that Freud's embrace of fiction as a path to understanding is more plausible than his denial.

“In his essay... Das Unheimliche, Freud said that the uncanny is the only feeling which is more powerfully experienced in art than in life. If the horror genre required any justification, I should think this alone would serve as its credentials...”

Stanley Kubrick

Kervyn's style was, by his own admission, shaped by the film's ultra-low-budget and other constraints imposed from outside the set. The directorial techniques they necessitated all but guaranteed a sense of disruption.¹⁰ *Rabid Grannies* was made on a budget of \$150,000 with a 79-cent advance from Troma for exclusive distribution rights. No one was paid for the any work on the production, cast and crew were interchangeable, often fulfilling multiple production roles as well as acting. There was only a smattering of professional actors on set, with most roles being played by amateurs and friends of the director. The chateau itself had minimal improvised lighting, and camera setups were chosen and executed “on-the-fly” to maximize atmosphere and minimize expense and the whole production was shot over 6 weeks of 16-hour work days.¹¹

Having set out with his crew to film “the most horrific horror film ever,” Kervyn quickly realized that time, budget, and special effects would not allow for it. He responded by making the film a parodic horror-comedy with grotesque special effects and minimal alterations to the script and dialogue. The special effects and horror scenes could only be shot in one take, so careful consideration was given to selecting the most efficient camera angles to optimize the effects, hide props and tricks from the camera, and save costs and time.¹²

What resulted is a film filled with uncanny visual perspectives that mimicked gothic B-movie horror conventions while combining them with surreal folkloric grotesquery.

The film's visual ambiguity is compounded by auditory dissonance. Only two of the actors could speak English, so Kervyn made the cast pronounce the words of their lines phonetically, and then had the lines dubbed by Belgian actors who *did* speak English, albeit as a second language.¹³ The result is a disconcerting meaninglessness in word and image, intensified by third-party editing and Troma's own censoring of the gore effects. When the main investor in the film demanded that it include a sex scene and a nude, Kervyn quickly added one involving the young lesbian (now bisexual) personal assistant and the arrogant playboy, which was reduced by editors to two people disliking each other and then quickly jumping into bed together. The changes erased any trace of motivation from an already arbitrary scene, turning the film's supposed heroine into someone willing to casually sleep with a distasteful misogynist.¹⁴

As the aunts change into slavering, vomiting, cannibalistic party animals, the guests fight back, cutting off hands that quickly grow back and gouging out eyes that *don't* grow back. The rabid aunts also exhibit animalistic behavior swinging from light fixtures in their old nursery, where they capture, dismember, and eat the legs of the young niece.¹⁵ They devolve into childlike entities who partake in games of riddles, rhymes, and spite. They survive multiple gunshots and function with their internal organs removed—at one point throwing them onto the floor for guests to slip on like slapstick banana skins, while the spinster delivers a soliloquy about being unable to escape one's destiny.

One by one the guests and house staff are killed and consumed, in as many unique ways as Kervyn's intuitive style, budget, and knowledge of horror repertoire would allow. The industrialist is eaten alive from the waist down; the arms dealer is dismembered and castrated with a medieval weapon. The father of the children, who has fled from his family to

save himself, is the last to die. Admitting his cowardice, he sacrifices himself to the aunts—literally bent over backwards and snapped in half—in order that the spinster can flee to the chapel and destroy the mystery box. Eventually, only the spinster, the (now nymphomaniac) bisexual assistant, the son, and his now-insane mother remain, and the curse is broken. The aunts revert to banal normality, with organs and appendages intact and no memory of their rampage.

The film's ending is equally surreal. The day dawns and the grannies are back to normal, the chateau is full of dead and partially-eaten relatives, the police are called, and the personal assistant—our nominal heroine—and the young boy sit together pondering the night's events. The boy remarks on his now-certain knowledge that God does not exist, to which our heroine replies that he had to go through this ordeal to prove how brave he is: "Nobody could ever prove anything if the solutions were handed down from above.....see what I mean?" Meanwhile, the spinster, whose destruction of the box with a crucifix broke the curse, catches a taxi out of town. The driver asks if they should stop to eat, at which point she suddenly transforms into a bile-vomiting demon and eats the driver.

"Mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an
itself that is behind. The effect of mimicry is camouflage... It is not a question of
harmonizing with the background...[it's] like the technique of camouflage practiced in
human warfare."

Jacques Lacan *Of the Gaze*

In contemporary psychoanalytic film theory, mimicry, surrealism, and cannibalism have a direct relationship to clinical concepts of the uncanny. Lacan was influenced by Roger Caillois' fascination with mimicry and his discovery that mimicry in nature had no

evolutionary benefit. For Lacan mimicry was not a case of evolutionary biology but a violent cannibalizing of an image to structure identity.

There is no conceptual word for “uncanny” in French, so Lacan developed the concept of *extimité*: the point of meaninglessness between interiority and exteriority—the barrier between mind/body subject/object conscious/unconscious.¹⁶ It leads back to what is old and familiar in the self, to the formation of self-identity. It is at this point we begin to develop the gamut of repulse and fascination at our own interiority: the gag at the site of vomit, the recoil at the sight of excrement, the vertigo at the sight of blood and internal organs. Lacan framed this concept to account for the space occupied by the Freudian death drive (the bodily instinct to return to an inorganic state before subjective existence) that in his theory of the uncanny drives humans to compulsively repeat troubling and traumatic occurrences in their lives. This space of pure drive to return to a ‘non’ existence is visible in our fictions as what Lacan called “between the two deaths”, a representation of existing between symbolic and real death related to the paradoxical world of the undead.

It is why we unconsciously fear our elderly, especially those beneficent elderly who accept that, in the eyes of a youth-obsessed society, they are no longer truly alive, and await the finality of death without fear. Having embraced this status, they become not-of-reality, able to tap into the intuitive psychic insights of childhood and access childlike knowledge that makes conformity appear foolish. We visit this realm in horror fiction every chance we get, because—as Freud knew—we cannot imagine our own death, but merely conceive of it as spectators. Repulsed and drawn to it, we watch the death of the other repetitively, compulsively; there is no death in the unconscious, no negation of life. Even our notions of afterlife connote this psychic realm between two deaths—we die to exist as undead-selves in an afterlife, awaiting the further non-death of final judgment.

Kervyn's style is relentless in its uncanniness. Not only is the visual content overtly parodic in its relation to folkloric tales and the thematic content of tragic myth, the imagery and spectral experience is also uncanny in the form of its own medium, as if the very celluloid is itself uncanny. It is as if the viewer has no locus or fixed perspective. In this, Kervyn moves beyond Troma's trademark mimicry of previous B-movie titles, lifting genre concepts wholesale from past generations of Gothic horror narratives with a zesty, youthful, self-referential twist. Prefiguring Troma's later penchant for recycling scenes, props, artifacts, effects, and locations from the company's own stable of films.¹⁷ Cultural theorists have noted that this mimicry plays a critical role in canonizing and formalizing genre conceits,¹⁸ just as Troma films have been credited with establishing the genre specifics of "splatter-cinema." *Rabid Grannies*, however, goes beyond such play with genre-boundaries, transgressing—and thus calling attention to—social boundaries as well.

The quick-fire mimicry and uncanniness of Kervyn's film taps into the need for identifying a text as a frame for social action—that is in developing typified responses and rhetorical [re]actions to a singular crisis or anxiety that perturbs the real world.²⁰ In *Rabid Grannies*, this forces audiences to recognize that the ongoing social desires of the community in which they operate are meaningful signifiers of social behavior. *Rabid Grannies* is, therefore, a key film in the Troma stable. It identifies who benefits from the text of its commentary, who cannot participate in its meanings, and who has the power to recreate, alter, censor, and ultimately mimic its defining tropes.²¹

The "so bad it's good" appeal of *Rabid Grannies* lies in its ludicrous grotesquery, which situates the viewer in the midst of exactly what was repressed in the late 1980s drive for commodification and unfettered consumption: guilt over the destruction of relationships and diminishing of humanity brought about by those drives. The film is an example of the high-water mark of postmodernity and its cinema. It is an example of how a film that

received cult status due to its “badness” was in fact “good” because it demonstrates the independent filmmaker’s intuitive ability to surreally mimic, *uncannily* through notions of repressed affects and their relation to subjectivity, films visual power to challenge and critique the dominant ideology of its epoch.

Postmodernity in the late 1980s was identified by its repression of guilt and unqualified access to greed and desires of all kinds. It has been equated with the rise of the maternal super ego, a social authority that denies greed, and offers full access to the fulfillment of desire, in stark contrast to the prohibitive laws and ideologies of a patriarchal modernity. Psychoanalysis offers two subjective positions in relation to transgression, guilt, and desire, and unfettered access to the all-consuming desire of the M’otherer offers a forced choice between them. Knowing no desire of their own, the subject of the M’others desire is consumed as [an all-encompassing total truth and](#) is manifest as psychosis.

Alternately, the subject’s enjoyment becomes the object cause of the M’others desire; and manifests as clinical perversion. In his intuitive approach, Kervyn really had no choice but to mimic the very constellation of primal fears and repressions at the heart of this choice and present them in the very context that they appeared in 1988.

Viewed through the lens of psychoanalysis, *Rabid Grannies* illustrates that we can still see the primordial narratives that dominate our social lives and witness how these narratives have been further developed and elaborated by postmodern cinema and its conceits. *Rabid Grannies* is a narrative about greed and desire and the repressed emotions at the heart of the postmodern family, but it is also indicative of something more—this is a film that is a direct descendent of the independent “midnight movies” of the late 1960s and early 1970s—it is a film that brings together a constellation of tropes from postcolonial and modernist narratives, with new concerns about the changing nature of family and social institutions. Subversive in terms of filmmaking through its own reflexivity, *Rabid Grannies*

is also a commentary on the workings of guilt, shame, sex, and rapacious enjoyment that have come to be a well-cited embodiment of our postmodern condition.

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¹ (Bramesco 2016)

² (Kervyn 2012, DvD Extras Troma ed.)

³ (Troma Entertainment INC: 40 Years of Disrupting Media 2018) see also (Wikipedia 2018)

⁴ (McGowan and Kunkle 2004)

⁵ (Žižek, For they know not what they do: Enjoyment as a political factor 1991)

⁶ (McGowan and Kunkle 2004, pp. xvii-xviii)

⁷ (Kennedy 2014, 24-27)

⁸ (Freud, Totem and Taboo: Resemblances Between the Psychic Lives of Savages and Neurotics 1919)

⁹ For discussions of Freud's essay on the uncanny and its providence in modernist literature see: (Vine 2005) (Apter 1982) (Cixous 2005) (Koffman 2005) (Masschelein 2011) (Moller 2005)

¹⁰ (Kervyn 2012, DvD Extras Troma ed.)

¹¹ (ibid)

¹² (ibid)

¹³ (ibid)

¹⁴ (ibid)

¹⁵ In keeping with an 'uncanny' tradition a scene reminiscent of the dismemberment of Olimpia in the Powell and Pressburger epic *Tales of Hoffman* (1951).

¹⁶ (Dollar 1991)

¹⁷ (Troma Entertainment INC: 40 Years of Disrupting Media 2018) see also (Wikipedia 2018)

¹⁸ (Zizek 2005)

²⁰ (Miller 1984)

²¹ (Paré 2014)

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