

**Twisting
Conventions**
**A Feminist
Indigenous
Perspective on
the Horror Genre**
by Vanessa
Dion Fletcher

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The 2012-13 Vtape Fellowship Essays
3 essays produced in association with the
Curatorial Incubator v.10:

**PARTY OF ONE:
Going Solo**

For the third consecutive year, Vtape's Curatorial Incubator called for proposals from emerging curators that focused critical attention onto the work of one individual, rather than a program that gathers together disparate titles under a particular theme. Although she is a well-published writer and critic, Deborah Root was new to curating when she was awarded the 2012-13 curatorial residency at Vtape with her solo exhibition of Jorge Lozano's single channel and installation works. Here she assembled a thoughtful cross-section of Lozano's work drawn from the past 30 years of his practice, mounting the first major survey of this key figure in the independent media arts scene in Toronto and Canada.

As part of the selection process, two other emerging curators - Fraser McCallum and Vanessa Dion Fletcher - were awarded Fellowship opportunities which included support for their research and professional editing for their essay on the artist of their choice.

We are deeply grateful to the editors for this year's fellowship essays. They are: Jason Ryle, award-winning filmmaker on the Vtape Board of Directors and Executive Director of imagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival who edited Vanessa Dion Fletcher's essay on the work of Ariel Smith and Thirza Cuthand; and Jon Davies, Curatorial Associate at the Oakville Galleries, who edited Fraser McCallum's essay on *Sahara Sahara* by Geoffrey Pugen.

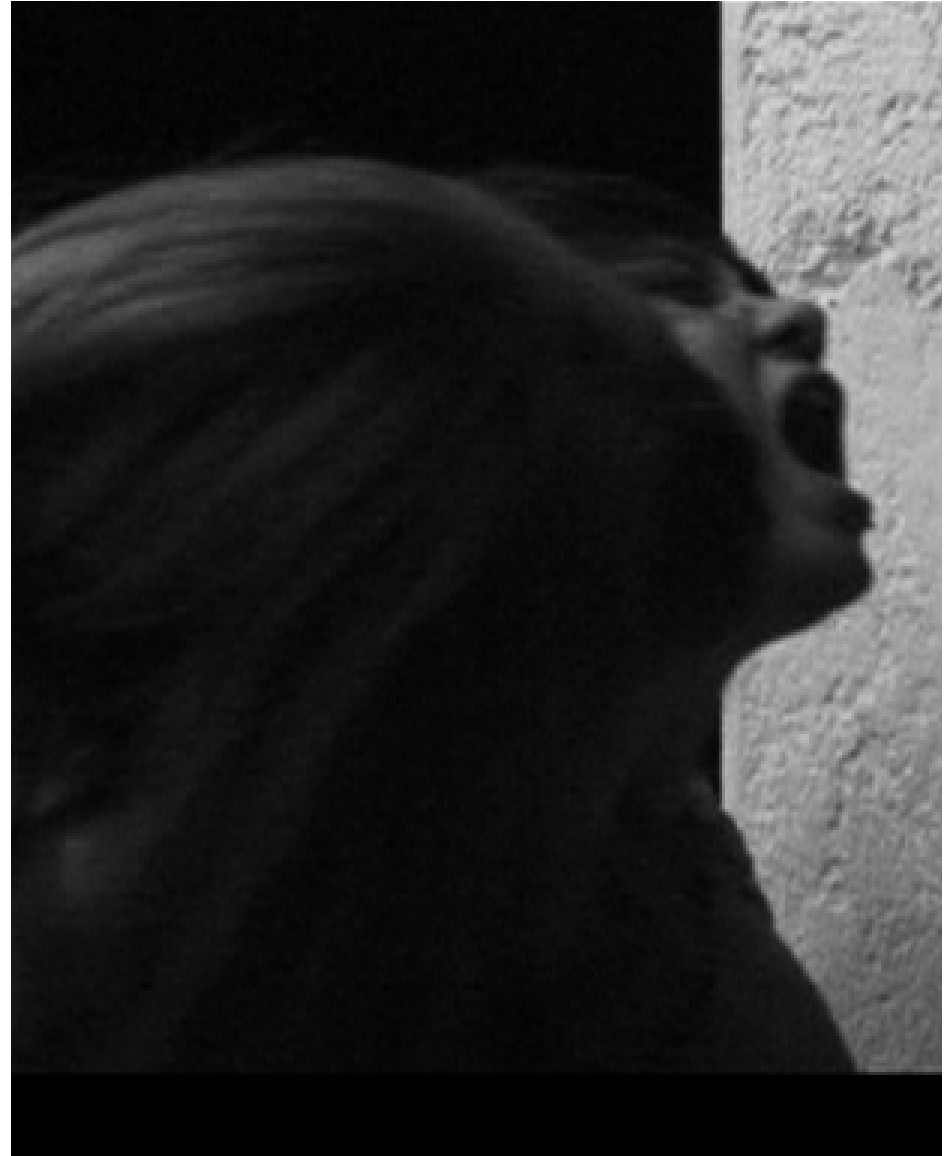


**Twisting Conventions: A Feminist Indigenous
Perspective on the Horror Genre**

by Vanessa Dion Fletcher

The horror genre in Hollywood film is one of the most explicit examples of patriarchal images positioning woman as either helpless victims or aggressive monsters. From Janet Leigh in *Psycho* to the xenomorph queen in *Aliens*, Hollywood has imprinted these roles onto contemporary consciousness. While these portrayals persist (think of the countless women brutally murdered every week on all versions of *CSI*), a new wave of independent Indigenous female artists have seized the reins of the horror genre and are twisting its conventions to express their own fears, desires and personal demons. Two such women, Thirza Cuthand and Ariel Smith - both mid-career Aboriginal film and video artists from Canada - utilize conventions and themes of the horror genre in their works *You are a Lesbian Vampire* (2008), *Helpless Maiden Makes an "I" Statement* (1999), *1,2,3 Knockup* (2006) and *Saviour Complex* (2008). However, rather than reinforce, their works subvert and challenge mainstream portraits of the "monstrous-feminine" and speak to a psychoanalytic feminist and Indigenous film theory.

In her book *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, Barbara Creed analyzes the portrayal of the monstrous-feminine in popular horror films. Creed argues that when



Thirza Jean Cuthand - "You are a Lesbian Vampire"



women (as opposed to men) are portrayed as monstrous, their sexuality is a primary element of what is fearful about them. Her analysis is split into two sections. The first identifies archetypes or "faces" of the monstrous-feminine in relation to women's reproductive functions (the archaic mother, the monstrous womb, the witch, the vampire, and the possessed woman). The second section identifies the monstrous-feminine in relation to sexual desire and castration (the *femme castratrice*, the castrating mother, and *vagina dentata*). Creed's argument counters the dominant portrayal of woman as victim in horror films, but still casts their roles in a patriarchal light:

I am not arguing that simply because the monstrous-feminine is constructed as an active rather than passive figure that this image is 'feminist' or 'liberated'. The presence of the monstrous-feminine in the popular horror film speaks to us more about male fears than about female desire or female subjectivity.²

As Cuthand and Smith reference the horror genre thematically in their works, they both make use of the monstrous-feminine: several of her faces can be identified in their films and videos (the vampire, the witch, woman as monstrous womb and the *femme castratrice*). However, what makes Cuthand and Smith's portrayals of the monstrous-feminine so compelling is that, contrary to popular horror films, these two artists use the same archetypes to tell feminist stories that speak to female subjectivity and desire while contributing to the growing body of feminist Indigenous art.

For Cuthand and Smith, it is their protagonists that embody the monstrous-feminine. And it is through their characters that Cuthand and Smith interrogate patriarchal images and subvert the horror genre's monstrous-feminine by employing an Indigenous lens to reveal a more complex, less dichotomous understanding of female sexuality, gender, and woman as monster. Feminist positions and Indigenous perspectives in fact converge in important and powerful ways. Joyce Green argues "the emerging Aboriginal feminist literature and politic, while the terrain of a minority of activists and scholars, must be taken seriously as a critique of colonialism, decolonization and gender and race power relations in both settler and Indigenous communities."³ Indigenous art is an important site of production for Indigenous feminist ideas. Like Alanis Obomsawin, Shelley Niro, and Rebecca Belmore, Cuthand and Smith actively engage feminist themes in their art to contribute to the decolonization of gender and identity.

Since she began making experimental videos in 1997, Thirza Cuthand, who is a Métis woman of Cree and Scottish decent, has used personal narrative to explore a wide range of topics, including lesbian and Indigenous identity, and mental health. Her videos take a feminist approach to the horror aesthetics and themes she uses as a basis to create her own personal brand of "monsters." Cuthand works exclusively in video, often using DIY sets. These stylistic choices enhance and contribute to a sense of honesty and realism in her work. Cuthand often purposefully breaks the diegesis of the scene,



making the viewer aware that the scene they are watching is recorded through a camera's lens.

Issues of sexuality are often central to her work, employing characters and themes from popular horror films such as vampires, aliens and the supernatural as a place to start her critiques.

You are A Lesbian Vampire is a short video using narrative monologue to describe the frustrations, difficulties and benefits of being a lesbian vampire. In the video, Cuthand's own monologue is paired with images of two women making out on a dark night. Lesbians and vampires might seem to be an unlikely, even humorous pairing to explore, however, it is actually a fitting combination and one that has been depicted in many horror films and analyzed by several authors.⁴

Barbara Creed explains, "The combination of 'lesbian' and 'vampire' is a happy one since both figures are represented in popular culture as sexually aggressive women."⁵ *You Are a Lesbian Vampire* is a personal narrative told from the perspective of the lesbian vampire (Cuthand herself), positioning this character not as monstrous other, but rather as a sympathetic entity dealing with everyday troubles and tribulations that are magnified by her vampirism.

The idea of a lesbian vampire is particularly interesting in Cuthand's case, where, in addition to the correlations between lesbians and vampires as discussed in literature, viewers can also replace "vampire" with "Aboriginal" or perhaps more fittingly for Cuthand, Métis. The turmoil of having multiple "Otherness" is a reoccurring theme in Cuthand's work. In addition to her



Thirza Jean Cuthand - "You are a Lesbian Vampire"



Aboriginal identity and the complexities this can embody, "...to top it all off I was a dyke which meant I was doubly oppressed."⁶ Vampires are monstrous because they transgress the boundary between human and monster, "born" from mixing blood. The vampire serves as a fitting allegory for Cuthand's own complex identity. Historically the Métis people have been stigmatized by both Native and White communities as being outsiders from both.

While "The Other" is often considered to be repellent, it can also be portrayed as desirable. At the end of the video, Cuthand recognizes the pitfall of romanticising otherness and pokes fun at this tendency in her monologue: "At first she might think it's one of those suave, sexy Anne Rice novels, but soon she's going to realize your relationship is a B-rated movie, the plot is corny, the dialogue 800 years old, your velvet capes are moth eaten, and you actually prefer to hunt at night in a track suit."⁷ This humorous ending shows Cuthand's subtle awareness of simultaneously revealing the monster as sympathetic and likeable without romanticizing her. It is this balance that makes the video a potent feminist commentary on the portrayal of lesbians as sexually aggressive women. Cuthand's awareness of the dichotomies between the repellent versus romanticized "Other" also applies to her Métis identity.

Helpless Maiden Makes an "I" Statement is performed in Cuthand's signature style as a monologue. In this short video Cuthand takes on the persona of the helpless maiden breaking up

with her partner, a wicked witch. She explains to her lover why she is no longer happy in their BDSM relationship: "We've gotten to a place where you don't particularly care for me anymore."⁸ As Creed explains, "In the horror film, the representation of the witch continues to foreground her essentially sexual nature, she is usually depicted as a monstrous figure with supernatural powers and a desire for evil."⁹ It is this essential sexual nature of the wicked witch/queen character that Cuthand summons. In this six-minute video, the viewer sees the protagonist, played by Cuthand, sitting against a wall seemingly naked save for leather handcuffs. The camera limits our view to a tight shot of her face and shoulders, implying nudity without actually showing it. This allows the helpless maiden to be recognized as a sexual being while at the same time keeping the focus on her monologue rather than her naked body.

The partner in the relationship is revealed as the archetypal wicked witch or queen through a series of clips of such characters from popular movies, including well-known animated queens from a variety of Disney movies. Cuthand challenges the dichotomy between monster and victim, showing the latter as a consensual participant in a BDSM relationship with the wicked witch. For her part, the witch is also no longer exclusively evil nor is the heroine simply a damsel in distress: "I know I would feel a certain amount of anxiety about being chased around with flaming torches and pitch forks all the time, but that's no reason to take it out on your lover,"¹⁰ she states. In *Helpless Maiden Makes an "I" Statement*



we see the dichotomous positions of monster and victim dismantled. Cuthand tells a story where the wicked witch remains a sexual character but is now a desired sexual character. The helpless maiden is no longer a victim but a sexual being and consensual partner who has the agency to both consent to the relationship and decide when it is over. The two are co-existing as partners in the relationship, however, in the end we are all still cheering for the helpless maiden's assertion of agency.

Where Cuthand cleverly subverts Hollywood horror archetypes, Ariel Smith's darker, short experimental films are inspired by the film noir aesthetic and "the 'everyday horrors' of being a girl."¹¹ Making films and videos since 2001 Smith is of Cree/Ojibway/Roma/Jewish decent. Her works have been described as "highly stylized, dark as well as humorous"¹². Referencing film noir, but employing identifiable horror themes, she has made nine pieces to date, working in both digital video and film. Smith confidently explores feminist themes and sexuality in ways not often seen in works made by Indigenous female media artists. *1,2,3 Knockup* is a seven-minute digital video about the experience of an unwanted pregnancy. Smith explains the work's three parts symbolize "the three trimesters of a full term pregnancy as well as three archetypal stages in a woman's life: childhood, adolescence and motherhood."¹³ In addition to its stylistic references to horror films *1,2,3 Knockup's* female characters represents Creed's "woman as monstrous womb." For Creed, the womb represents "the utmost in abjection for it contains a new



Ariel Smith - "1,2,3 Knockup"



life from which will pass from inside to outside bringing with it traces of contamination - blood, after birth, faeces. The horror film exploits the abject nature of the womb by depicting the human female and male giving birth to the monstrous."

1,2,3 *Knockup* avoids depicting the physical "horror" of pregnancy and birth instead focusing on the "horror" of the physiological aspects of an unwanted pregnancy on a young woman.

The opening shot of this video zooms in from a dark hallway to an opening door revealing a dimly lit and sparsely furnished room. The setting is Smith's first reference to the womb. Within this first scene, in addition to the dark mood created by the lighting effects, small bones appear hanging from a child's mobile. A young woman is seen wearing a pink dress, white face paint and a blond wig. She fills baby bottles with the same small bones that hang from the mobile. This action seems to be a perverse echo of the ritual preparation for a new baby as an iconic lullaby plays and becomes distorted and degraded as the scene progresses. The audio becomes increasingly dramatic and horrific throughout the video. At the transition between the second and third acts, scratchy white noise turns into audible screaming that shifts from the scream of an infant to that of an adult. The screaming is cut off by a rhyming voice that suggests the audio in the film is the voice of the monstrous fetus, evoking the spirit of Rosemary's Baby:

I am an impostor

I do not belong here
I am filled with evil
I am so much stronger

The camera angle pans over the room showing both the position of the mother looking down on the crib and the baby looking up at the mobile. It is the loss of boundaries in pregnancy and birth that the horror film emphasizes and identifies as monstrous.¹⁵ This depiction of both perspectives is an example of the blurring of boundaries between the mother and fetuses and is an example of how Smith uses the convention of monstrous-feminine in *1,2,3 Knockup*.

The credits of the video reveal that that a different actress has played the protagonist in each scene, a significant observation given that the wigs, make-up and costuming have made it difficult for the viewer to discern this fact while watching. This experience contributes to the non-linear narrative common to Smith's work. It also contributes to the confusing and conflating images of woman and girl, making it hard for the audience to identify the female character as mother or child. Are we seeing the woman as mother, or the woman remembering herself as a child or the future of the grown up fetus? The women in *1,2,3 Knockup* are stuck in a cycle of perpetually imposed gender roles over which they have little control. This is where Smith's "horrors of being a girl" are laid bare including the fear of bringing a new life into the world, one that is destined to become part of a seemingly perpetual cycle of patriarchy. Although *1,2,3 Knockup* uses the archetype of the monstrous

womb, the true horror in this film is not pregnancy or birth but a woman's horror of not being in control of her body.

In *Saviour Complex*, a six-minute, 16mm film, Smith takes on the archetype of the "hooker with a heart of gold." Like *1,2,3 Knockup*, *Saviour Complex* is split into three sections, showing three interactions between the "hooker" and her clients. However, unlike her clichéd counterpart, the sex trade worker in *Saviour Complex* has no desire to be "saved" by her clients. In Smith's version of the story, the sex trade worker is the *femme castratrice*, whose primary role, according to Creed, is to expose male fears of castration. She takes revenge on her client by tying him up, physically hurting him and stealing his money; in essence, she emasculates her john, figuratively castrating him and leaving him powerless and subservient. While her position might be an active and powerful one, it does not depict a female/feminist perspective. The *femme castratrice* is one of the more deadly forms of the monstrous-feminine – a modern day Siren – a woman who conforms to stereotypical forms of beauty but one who "castrates, or kills the male during coition."¹⁸ The fact that the act of castration happens during or around sex reinforces women's sexuality as a primary element in their monstrosity.

For Smith, the *femme castratrice* as a foil to the "hooker with a heart of gold" who, in Hollywood films, is a more morally acceptable form of prostitution. However, Smith stresses that while this may be more acceptable it doesn't change the

power dynamic: the sex trade worker will remain in a subservient position to the client. This reality is revealed in the nursery rhyme-like lyrics heard throughout *Saviour Complex*:

Big Daddy, Big Daddy
know you want to save me,

Big Daddy Big Daddy
know you want to take me,

Off the stroll and home with you
you'll not have to pay me,

Think I'm better than these streets I work
well guess again I'm born from dirt.

Don't never ever, ever, ever quote my worth,
I ain't no hooker with a heart of gold,

Mine's made of stone,
my blood runs cold,

And you don't know nothing
about sell and be sold.¹⁹

These lyrics expose the client's desire to be saviour, and not the sex trade worker's desire to be saved.

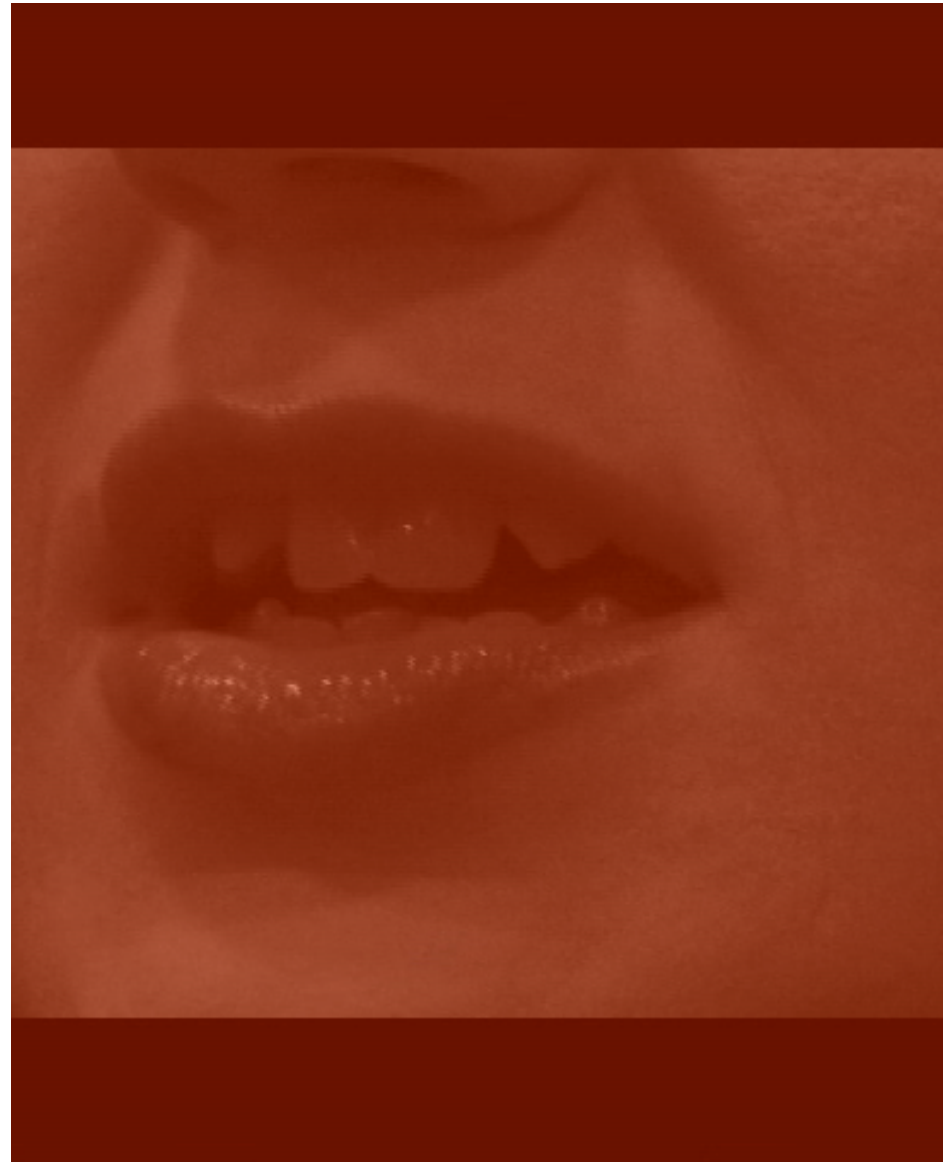
The purposeful use of audio is in fact integral to the works of Cuthand and Smith, just as music and sound effects are key to creating tension and building anticipation in horror films. For both artists, audio is a tool for challenging the patriarchal modes of the horror genre to which they are responding. "Disembodying the female voice is seen as liberating in these [experimental feminist] films as it is primarily as a body, surveyed by the male gaze, that woman is constructed in classic cinema narrative"²⁰. In



both *1,2,3 Knockup* and *Saviour Complex*, Smith overlays a disembodied, altered voice over the action. In *You Are a Lesbian Vampire*, Cuthand speaks a monologue that is the omnipresent authoritative voice in the narrative whereas *Helpless Maiden Makes an "I" Statement* is one example where the voice and body are synchronized. These examples show diverse ways the artists construct the Indigenous and feminist voices in relationship to the physical body in their films/videos interrupting the synchronicity – and therefore the gaze – of the female body. In this way both Cuthand and Smith are able to use the conventions of the horror genre without falling into its patriarchal narratives.

Like the horror films they reference, sexuality is a dominant theme in both Cuthand and Smith's work. However, where mainstream horror films perpetuate what Creed identifies as woman-as-monster (and its inextricable link to their sexual objectivity), Cuthand and Smith use the faces of the monstrous-feminine from popular horror films turning them upside down into a world where witches are lovers, and helpless maidens break their hearts, lesbian vampires are endearing characters, fetuses are uncontrollable monsters, and a hooker with a heart of gold is a *femme castratrice*. The idea of making political commentaries through the inversion of established binaries is a strategy used by many artists. Author Richard William Hill discusses the concept in the introduction to *The World Upside Down*:

Inversion depends on dichotomy and because dichotomy is such a deep structure of human



Thirza Jean Cuthand - "You are a Lesbian Vampire"



thought and language, the possibility of inversion is always with us. Our dichotomous categories only require a fulcrum on which to turn and then turn they do in all cultures all over the world.²¹

Creed's analysis of woman-as-monster in popular horror films identifies the patriarchal nature of the monstrous-feminine. Cuthand and Smith have taken the disempowered positions of woman in the horror genre and used those positions to provide a commentary on women's subjectivities.

Decolonization begins with our bodies; as Indigenous women we need to have control and agency with regard to our own bodies and how our bodies are represented. Each of these four films provides an example of an Indigenous woman dismantling patriarchal images of women while at the same time revealing the filmmakers' own fears, desires and personal demons. As Leanne Simpson writes, "We use the creative, innovative intelligence imparted to us by Gzhwe Minidoo [the Creator] to create and voice our truths, to strategize our response, and ultimately to create new and better realities²²". This clearly describes the films and videos of Thirza Cuthand and Ariel Smith as they eloquently confront the representation of women in horror genres. ■

Endnotes

¹ Barbara Creed uses the term 'monstrous-feminine' instead of the term 'female monster' to emphasize that gender and sexuality are central to what is terrifying about female monsters. p3.



Ariel Smith - "Saviour Complex"



Endnotes (continued)

- ² Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. (New York: Rutledge, 1993) p7.
- ³ Ed. Joyce Green, *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism*. (Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2007) 21.
- ⁴ Barry Keith Grant, ed. *Planks of Reason: Essay on the Horror Film* (Metuchen: Scarecrow, 2004) 153-63.
- ⁵ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. (New York: Rutledge, 1993) 59.
- ⁶ *Colonization: The Second Coming*. Dir. Thirza Jean Cuthand. 1996, 3:30 DVD. Full quote reads: "I explained to them that regardless of my white skin I was actually a treaty Indian and was coming from 500 years of oppression and genocide, and to top it all off I was a dyke which meant I was doubly oppressed, and of course being a woman on earth was hard as well."
- ⁷ *You Are A Lesbian Vampire*. Dir. Thirza Jean Cuthand. 2008, 2:59. DVD.
- ⁸ *Helpless Maiden Makes An 'I' statement*. Dir Thirza Jean Cuthand, 2:30. DVD
- ⁹ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. (New York: Rutledge, 1993) 76.
- ¹⁰ *Helpless Maiden Makes An 'I' statement*. Dir Thirza Jean Cuthand, 4:12. DVD
- ¹¹ "About" Ariel Smith Filmmaker/Media Artist/Critical Thinker. Sept 21 2012 <<http://arielsmith.com/About.html> >
- ¹² *ibid*
- ¹³ "Ariel Smith's Video's" Vimeo. Sept 22, 2012 <<https://vimeo.com/10444690>>
- ¹⁴ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. (New York: Rutledge, 1993) 49.

BIOGRAPHIES

Ariel Smith (Cree/Ojibway/Roma/Jewish) is an award-winning filmmaker and video artist who has been creating independent works since 2001. She has shown at festivals and galleries both in Canada and internationally, including imagineNATIVE. Her work is disturbing, darkly humorous, visceral and unapologetically feminist. Ariel currently sits as an Ontario Regional Director of the Independent Media Arts Alliance (IMAA). www.arielsmith.com

Thirza Jean Cuthand (Plains Cree/Scots) was born in Saskatchewan and grew up in Saskatoon where she currently lives. Since 1995 she has been making short experimental narrative videos and films about sexuality, madness, youth, love, and race, which have screened in festivals internationally, including Mix Brasil Festival of Sexual Diversity, Frameline, Vancouver Queer Film Festival, and Oberhausen International Short Film Festival where her short *Helpless Maiden Makes an 'I' Statement* won honourable mention. Her work has also screened at galleries including the Mendel, The Ottawa Art Gallery, and Urban Shaman. She has work in the collection at the National Gallery in Ottawa and at UCLA. She has written a feature screenplay and sometimes does performance art if she is in the mood. fitofpique.blogspot.com

Writer: Vanessa Dion Fletcher graduated from York University in 2009 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts and a Certificate in Indigenous Studies, since



Endnotes (continued)

¹⁵ Ibid. 58.

¹⁶ "Hookers with hearts of gold" are sometimes reluctant prostitutes selling their bodies due to either desperation or coercion from a pimp. This stock character is pervasive enough in various myths and cultures in the form of a tragic story of the concubine who falls in love with her patron/client or, alternatively, young and often poor lover.

Therefore, this might be considered not just an archetype but also fairly universal, and somewhat indicative of various societies' complex ideas about sexual decency and moral character. A variation on the theme, the dancer (stripper) with a heart of gold, is a tamer version of the character.

"Hooker with a heart of gold" *Wikipedia*. 27 Oct. 2012,

17 Nov. 2012

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hooker_with_a_heart_of_gold>

BIOGRAPHIES (continued)

then she has continued to live and work in Toronto. Dion Fletcher is a multidisciplinary artist who focuses on printmaking and performance. Dion Fletcher's work has been exhibited at The Art Gallery of Peterborough: *Jiigbiing - At The Edge Where The Water and Land Meet* and at Art Mûr in Montreal Quebec: *A Stake in the Ground: Contemporary Native Art Manifestation*. In addition to her own art practice, Dion Fletcher works with the T.D.S.B Aboriginal Artist collective on community arts projects and co-curated the exhibition *Emnowaangosjig || Coming Out: The Shifting and Multiple Self*. Her work is held in the Aboriginal Art Centre Collection.

