

Between care and threat: the figure of the grandmother in contemporary horror cinema

Entre cuidado e ameaça: a figura da avó no cinema de horror contemporâneo

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ABSTRACT: *This article investigates representations of grandmotherhood in contemporary horror cinema, with particular attention to the cultural tensions associated with women's aging. Drawing on debates about gender, aging, and representations of the body in media culture, the article examines how horror cinema mobilizes older women as sources of narrative unease. The study situates the film The Grandmother (La Abuela, Paco Plaza, Spain, 2021) within a broader group of recent horror films in which older characters become central to the production of fear. Methodologically, the article undertakes a film analysis of The Grandmother, treating it as a case study of contemporary representations of women's aging in horror cinema. The analysis shows how the grandmother-granddaughter relationship shifts from care to threat, revealing cultural tensions surrounding the overvaluation of youth and the expectations placed on women within family structures.*

Keywords: *contemporary cinema; horror; female aging; grandmotherhood; old age.*

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RESUMO: *Este artigo investiga as representações da avosidade no cinema de horror contemporâneo, com foco nas tensões culturais associadas ao envelhecimento feminino. Partindo de debates sobre gênero, envelhecimento e representações do corpo na cultura midiática, discute-se como a figura da mulher idosa pode ser mobilizada pelo horror como elemento de inquietação narrativa. O estudo situa o filme A Avó (La Abuela, Paco Plaza, Espanha, 2021) dentro de um contexto mais amplo de produções recentes que exploram personagens idosas como elementos centrais na produção do medo. Metodologicamente, realiza-se uma análise fílmica da obra, compreendendo-a como estudo de caso de um fenômeno contemporâneo nas representações da velhice no horror. A análise evidencia como a relação entre as personagens da avó e da neta no filme é deslocada do campo do cuidado para o da ameaça, revelando tensões culturais relacionadas ao envelhecimento feminino, à supervalorização da juventude e às expectativas sociais atribuídas às mulheres nas estruturas familiares.*

Palavras-chave: *cinema contemporâneo; horror; envelhecimento feminino; avosidade; velhice.*

Introduction

Representations of motherhood, grandmotherhood¹, and family relationships occupy a central place in contemporary media culture. In the cultural imagination, mothers and grandmothers are often associated with care, protection, and affection across generations. In various cultural narratives, the grandmother appears as a symbolic extension of motherhood, ensuring continuity within the family and providing emotional support to younger generations. This cultural construction frequently associates the grandmother with wisdom, experience, and stability within the domestic sphere.

In the field of communication studies in Brazil, recent research has also examined how motherhood, aging, and family relationships are represented in contemporary media. Castro (2018) observes that media representations of motherhood and family actively participate in the construction of symbolic values associated with care, the body, and female identities. These representations not only reflect social expectations but also contribute to producing cultural models of what it means to be a woman at different stages of life. When audiovisual narratives transform the grandmother from a caregiving figure into a threatening presence, they expose anxieties surrounding women's aging and the cultural meanings attached to the grandmother role.

Media representations of these figures are not static and may reveal tensions related to gender, the body, and aging. As many studies on aging and culture have observed, older women occupy an ambiguous position in the cultural imagination. On the one hand, societies often associate them with experience and family care; on the other, societies that privilege youth frequently render them socially invisible and diminish their symbolic value (SONTAG, 1972; WOODWARD, 1991). In this context,

1 In this article, *grandmotherhood* is employed as a conceptual translation of the Portuguese term *avosidade*. Rather than referring solely to the familial status of being a grandmother, the term encompasses the cultural, symbolic, and social meanings historically associated with this role.

women's aging may generate conflicts between social expectations and embodied experience.

Horror cinema constitutes a particularly fertile field for exploring these tensions. As Cherry (2009) observes, the genre frequently mobilizes cultural anxieties related to the body, death, and physical deterioration, exploring what societies tend to repress or marginalize. In this regard, aging may become central to the construction of horror, as it exposes the fragility of the body and the inevitability of the passage of time.

In recent decades, a significant body of horror films has explored older characters as sources of unease and fear. Works such as *The Taking of Deborah Logan* (Adam Robitel, United States, 2014), *Relic* (Natalie Erika James, Australia, 2020), and *X* (Ti West, United States, 2022), for example, place older women at the center of the construction of fear. These films frequently articulate themes such as physical deterioration, memory loss, and generational resentment, transforming aging into a disturbing element within the narrative.

The grandmother occupies a particularly ambivalent position in this context. Cultural narratives traditionally associate grandmotherhood with care, protection, and the continuity of family relationships. When horror subverts these expectations and presents the grandmother as a threatening figure, it destabilizes deeply rooted cultural meanings. As Renner (2019) argues, older women in horror frequently emerge as transgressive figures who challenge expectations of female docility and passivity.

Kristeva's (1982) concept of abjection helps explain this symbolic inversion. According to the author, the abject emerges when the symbolic boundaries that organize social experience begin to collapse. In representations of women's aging in horror, the aging body may become a privileged site of abjection because it exposes bodily processes that challenge cultural ideals of control, purity, and youth.

Several recent horror films portray grandmothers as unsettling figures, including *The Visit* (M. Night Shyamalan, United States, 2015), *Hereditary* (Ari Aster, United States, 2018), and *Relic* (Natalie Erika James, Australia, 2020). Among these works, *The Grandmother* (*La Abuela*, Paco

Plaza, Spain, 2021) stands out for exploring tensions involving aging, youth, and generational transmission. The relationship between a young model and her grandmother reveals conflicts associated with women's aging and the desire to escape bodily deterioration.

Building on these discussions, this article examines how contemporary horror cinema transforms the grandmother into a source of estrangement. The analysis focuses on *The Grandmother*, treating the film as a case study within a broader phenomenon of representations of women's aging and grandmotherhood in contemporary horror. Rather than treating the film as an isolated case, the article uses it as an entry point into a broader group of productions that place older women and intergenerational relationships at the center of the horror experience.

As the analysis demonstrates, *The Grandmother* foregrounds grandmotherhood as a narrative axis by articulating care, inheritance, and bodily appropriation. Despite its thematic and aesthetic relevance, scholarly literature on the film remains limited, particularly in Portuguese.

This study adopts film analysis as its interpretive procedure. At this stage of the research, the discussion emphasizes thematic dimensions through a descriptive examination of the plot and the relationships among the characters. Whenever greater analytical detail is required, the analysis incorporates specific stylistic and narrative elements, including framing, cinematography, *mise-en-scène*, and sound design. This approach connects formal and thematic dimensions, examining the film both as an audiovisual construction and as an expression of cultural meanings surrounding aging, gender, and grandmotherhood.

Women, Aging, and Horror

The representation of older women in contemporary horror cinema cannot be understood as a sporadic occurrence or merely as a device of characterization. Rather, it constitutes a recurring motif through which the genre articulates tensions surrounding the body, aging, the loss of social value, and the expectations historically associated with women.

In societies that privilege youth, beauty, autonomy, and productivity, the aging female body often comes to signify decline, inadequacy, and excess. When horror places this body at the center of the narrative, it condenses broader anxieties surrounding physical deterioration, mortality, and the instability of gender identities.

Sontag (1972) discusses the existence of a “double standard of aging,” according to which men and women are perceived differently as they grow older. While men’s aging may, in certain cultural contexts, be associated with experience, maturity, and authority, women’s aging is more frequently interpreted as a loss of social value, particularly in societies that associate femininity with youth, beauty, and physical attractiveness. This asymmetry helps explain why the aging female body often becomes an object of cultural and visual discomfort. Contemporary horror reinforces this dynamic by foregrounding physical deterioration and proximity to death, exposing the tension between aging and dominant ideals of youth, beauty, and bodily control.

Cherry (2009) argues that horror consistently engages with anxieties surrounding the body, death, and physical vulnerability. Aging therefore emerges as one of the means through which the genre makes visible collective fears related to bodily deterioration and the loss of control. Discussing the concept of the “monstrous-feminine,” Creed (1993) argues that horror cinema frequently portrays female characters as threatening when they challenge cultural expectations of normative femininity. She demonstrates that many monstrous representations originate in bodily experiences historically associated with women, including motherhood, sexuality, and reproductive capacity. These experiences become disturbing because they expose aspects of the female body that culture seeks to regulate or control. Although Creed’s (1993) discussion focuses primarily on figures such as the monstrous mother, the witch, and the possessed woman, her framework also helps explain other forms of deviation from dominant models of femininity.

Within this perspective, the female body that falls outside dominant standards of youth, beauty, and attractiveness may also become

a privileged site of the monstrous. Older women occupy a particularly ambiguous position because the aging female body no longer conforms to prevailing expectations of femininity. In societies that closely associate women's social value with youth and physical appearance, aging frequently represents a rupture with these ideals. By exploring this rupture, horror transforms bodily aging into one of its principal sources of narrative tension.

This dynamic becomes even more evident in the ways horror represents older women. Many monstrous female characters challenge cultural norms of control, purity, and stability through their bodies. As Creed (1993) suggests, the monstrous-feminine emerges when what should remain hidden or controlled becomes visible. Applied to representations of women's aging, this perspective reveals how bodily transformation conflicts with dominant ideals of permanence, vitality, and beauty. By emphasizing these transformations, horror amplifies the unease associated with the passage of time.

Older women occupy an ambivalent position in horror narratives. They may appear as physically fragile or dependent figures while simultaneously emerging as sources of threat when they challenge expectations of female docility and social invisibility. This tension explains why older female characters frequently occupy unstable positions within the genre, oscillating between vulnerability and menace.

This ambivalence becomes particularly significant when horror places older women in family roles traditionally associated with care, especially that of the grandmother. Cultural narratives commonly associate grandmothers with protection, affection, and family continuity. By transforming this familiar figure into a source of threat, the genre destabilizes these expectations and reconfigures the symbolic meanings attached to intergenerational care. In this sense, the monstrous grandmother evokes fear not simply because of her age, but because her body and social role challenge dominant ideals of femininity, caregiving, and family continuity.

Renner (2019) argues that older women frequently appear in horror films as characters who embody broader anxieties surrounding aging. They often emerge as unpredictable, grotesque, or threatening figures associated with physical deterioration and the loss of bodily control. Rather than serving merely as narrative antagonists, these characters expose wider concerns about the ways contemporary societies respond to women's aging.

This issue becomes even more complex when horror places older women in family roles traditionally associated with care. Arnold (2013) argues that the genre frequently subverts family structures conventionally linked to safety, particularly motherhood and the domestic sphere. By transforming caregiving figures into sources of threat, horror challenges deeply rooted expectations concerning protection, affection, and emotional responsibility. In the case of the grandmother, this inversion becomes especially disturbing because grandmotherhood is culturally understood as an extension of motherhood and intergenerational care.

The grandmother occupies a central symbolic role in representations of the family. She is commonly associated with wisdom, protection, emotional support, and the continuity of intergenerational relationships. When horror transforms this familiar figure into a source of threat, it challenges these expectations and recasts the home as a space of uncertainty rather than safety.

Woodward (1991) argues that aging, particularly in the case of women, is frequently associated with processes that render older women socially invisible and marginalize them. The aging body is often portrayed as a sign of social devaluation and increasing distance from dominant ideals of beauty and productivity. By drawing on these representations, horror expresses broader anxieties surrounding the passage of time, physical decline, and mortality.

In contemporary horror cinema, these tensions take different forms. Some films portray older characters as ambivalent figures who oscillate between vulnerability and threat, whereas others associate aging with supernatural practices or forms of power that challenge the social

order. In both cases, older women become focal points through which the genre explores fears surrounding the body, aging, and changing family relationships.

Alexander (2020) suggests that the monstrous-feminine may be understood as a manifestation of anxieties connected to women's transgressive power. Applied to representations of women's aging, this concept helps explain why older female characters frequently occupy ambivalent positions, simultaneously embodying vulnerability and threat. Although they often experience social marginalization, they also challenge dominant norms by resisting the social invisibility imposed upon them.

Batch and Ryan (2024) argue that contemporary horror maintains an ambivalent relationship with aging. Some films foreground experiences of abandonment, neglect, and medicalization affecting older adults, whereas others reinforce associations between aging, bodily deterioration, threat, and the loss of humanity. This ambiguity makes the genre particularly valuable for examining how contemporary societies respond to aging.

Representations of older women in horror should not be understood merely as narrative characterizations, but as sites where anxieties surrounding the body, aging, and changing family relationships converge. By transforming older women into figures of estrangement and threat, horror reveals broader conflicts concerning the place of aging women in contemporary society.

It is within this broader framework that *The Grandmother* can be examined as a particularly productive case study. The film explores the relationship between women's aging, intergenerational care, and horror, revealing tensions surrounding dependency and intergenerational transmission. By subverting the image of the grandmother as a protective figure, the narrative challenges established expectations and transforms family relationships into spaces of unease and symbolic conflict.

In the Brazilian context, recent research has also examined changing representations of motherhood, family, and intergenerational relationships in the media. Discussing constructions of motherhood in the media, Mendonça and Cesarotto (2018) argue that these representations

frequently reinforce expectations of care, affection, and responsibility assigned to women. Accordingly, mothers and grandmothers are commonly positioned as responsible for preserving emotional bonds and transmitting values across generations.

By transforming the grandmother from a caregiving figure into a source of threat, horror challenges these expectations and reveals how meanings associated with grandmotherhood continue to be redefined across different media contexts.

The Monstrous Grandmother: Grandmotherhood and Generational Conflict in *The Grandmother* (La Abuela, Paco Plaza, 2021)

Directed by Paco Plaza, *The Grandmother* builds its narrative around a specific family relationship: the bond between a grandmother and her granddaughter. By placing this relationship at the center of the narrative, the film transforms a figure traditionally associated with care and protection into a source of threat and symbolic violence. This inversion makes the film especially relevant to discussions of grandmotherhood in contemporary cinema.

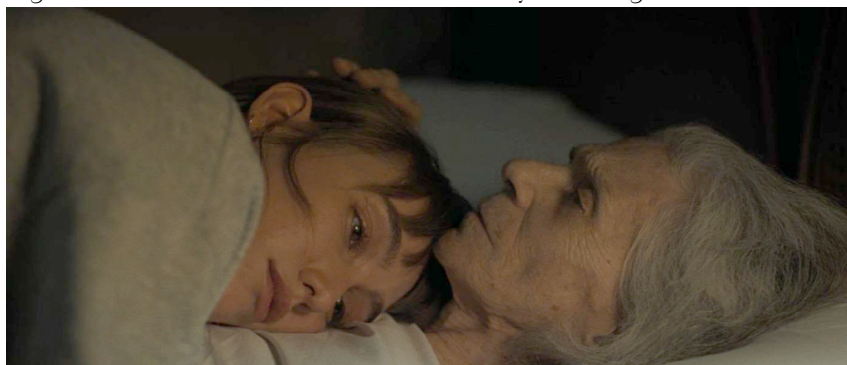
In the narrative, Susana is a young model living in Paris who returns to Madrid after her grandmother, Pilar, suffers a stroke that leaves her physically dependent. With no other family members available to assume caregiving responsibilities, Susana becomes her grandmother's primary caregiver. This initial situation directly engages with expectations surrounding intergenerational care, in which young women are often expected to care for and support older relatives.

The relationship between Susana and Pilar is initially established through a pre-existing emotional bond. The film suggests that Pilar played an important role in her granddaughter's childhood, becoming a figure of care and emotional support. This dynamic reinforces the image of the grandmother as an extension of the maternal figure, associated with protection, the transmission of values, and family continuity. Arnold (2013) argues that media representations of motherhood and

other caregiving roles frequently reinforce the expectation that women should assume primary emotional responsibility within the family. Within this framework, the grandmother is often understood as a continuation of this role.

It is precisely this expectation that the film gradually destabilizes throughout the narrative. As Susana assumes the role of caregiver, the relationship between grandmother and granddaughter is no longer defined solely by affection but gradually becomes marked by ambivalence and unease. Pilar's physical dependence, initially presented as a condition requiring care and compassion, gradually emerges as a source of instability within the family relationship. The intimacy and intergenerational tension structuring this bond are visually summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1 – Pilar and Susana in a scene of intimacy and intergenerational tension.



Source: *La Abuela* (Paco Plaza, Spain, 2021).

The horror in *The Grandmother* relies not only on its narrative development but also on formal strategies that intensify the perception of threat. Paco Plaza uses close framing, subtle camera movements, and cinematography dominated by cold tones and low-key lighting to reinforce the apartment's claustrophobic atmosphere. The *mise-en-scène* emphasizes the physical proximity between grandmother and granddaughter, frequently placing them within the same frame in ways that create visual

discomfort and suggest the gradual dissolution of the boundaries separating the two characters.

Sound design also plays a central role in creating unease. Extended moments of silence are interrupted by subtle sounds, including breathing, footsteps, and other bodily noises, drawing the viewer's attention to Pilar's physical presence. These sounds emphasize the materiality of the aging body and reinforce its unsettling presence within the narrative.

Although films such as *The Taking of Deborah Logan* and *Relic* also explore women's aging as a source of horror, *The Grandmother* stands out for placing the relationship between grandmother and granddaughter at the center of the narrative. While *The Taking of Deborah Logan* focuses on neurodegenerative disease and *Relic* on the deterioration of memory and domestic space, *The Grandmother* articulates grandmotherhood more explicitly as an ambivalent bond.

This ambivalence resonates with Woodward's (1991) analysis of the ways in which women's aging is frequently associated with the loss of autonomy and increasing dependence on others. In the film, the grandmother's physical debilitation places Susana in a position of constant responsibility, highlighting the emotional and material dimensions of intergenerational care. At the same time, the narrative suggests that this dependence also creates tensions within the relationship between the two characters.

Gradually, Pilar's behavior makes Susana increasingly uneasy. Small gestures, looks, and apparently inexplicable situations suggest that the grandmother exercises a form of control over her granddaughter that exceeds the limits of a traditional caregiving relationship. This displacement is fundamental to understanding how horror operates in the narrative: fear emerges not only from the presence of aging, but also from the transformation of grandmotherhood into a relationship marked by threat.

In this sense, Pilar's character may be interpreted in light of the concept of the "monstrous-feminine" proposed by Creed (1993). The author argues that horror frequently portrays female figures as threatening when they challenge dominant expectations of

femininity. In *The Grandmother*, this transgression occurs within a family relationship traditionally structured around care. The grandmother ceases to occupy the symbolic role of protector and gradually assumes a predatory position.

The film's central revelation — that Pilar intends to transfer her consciousness into her granddaughter's body — intensifies this symbolic inversion. The relationship between grandmother and granddaughter ceases to be one of generational transmission in the traditional sense and is instead presented as a form of bodily appropriation. Rather than transmitting experiences, values, or memories, the grandmother seeks to literally occupy the body of the next generation.

This dynamic may be interpreted as a metaphor for tensions surrounding women's aging in societies that value youth and productivity. Sontag (1972) observes that women's aging is frequently associated with the loss of social value in contexts that privilege youth and physical appearance. In this sense, Pilar's desire to occupy her granddaughter's young body may be interpreted as an extreme response to the social marginalization associated with old age. Figure 2 reinforces this tension by framing Pilar through the mirror, visually associating aging, youth, and the conflict between grandmother and granddaughter.

Figure 2 – Pilar reflected in the mirror, suggesting the tension between youth and aging in the relationship between grandmother and granddaughter.



Source: *La Abuela* (Paco Plaza, Spain, 2021).

Renner (2019) highlights that older characters in horror frequently express anxieties related to aging and physical deterioration. In *The Grandmother*, this anxiety is articulated through the intergenerational relationship between Pilar and Susana. The granddaughter's young body becomes an object of desire not only as a symbol of vitality but also as a means of escaping physical decay and the proximity of death.

This symbolic appropriation of the young body may also be related to the concept of abjection formulated by Kristeva (1982). The grandmother's aging body challenges the boundaries between life and death, autonomy and dependence. By attempting to occupy her granddaughter's body, Pilar seeks to transcend these boundaries, transforming the family relationship into a site of symbolic transgression.

The relationship between grandmother and granddaughter thus becomes the main narrative device through which the film articulates its central tensions. Horror arises not only from the presence of a supernatural element but from the transformation of a familial bond into a space of conflict and threat. By subverting the image of the protective grandmother, *The Grandmother* shows how contemporary horror cinema explores intergenerational relationships to express anxieties surrounding aging, youth, and the expectations placed upon women.

In this sense, the film engages directly with contemporary debates on grandmotherhood and women's aging. Pilar's character does not represent merely an isolated monstrous figure but rather a narrative construction that exposes broader tensions surrounding the place of older women in society. By transforming the caregiving relationship between grandmother and granddaughter into a space of bodily and symbolic conflict, *The Grandmother* reveals how horror may problematize expectations associated with women's aging and intergenerational family dynamics.

Final Considerations

The analysis of *The Grandmother* shows how contemporary horror cinema explores the figure of the grandmother to address tensions surrounding

women's aging. By placing the relationship between grandmother and granddaughter at the center of the narrative, the film transforms a bond traditionally associated with care and protection into a source of threat.

Pilar embodies the ambivalence characteristic of many representations of aging in contemporary horror. Initially presented as a fragile and dependent figure, she gradually becomes a threatening presence, expressing fears related to physical deterioration, the loss of autonomy, and the desire to escape mortality.

The formal analysis of the film shows that this transformation is constructed not only through the plot but also through formal choices, such as close framing, dark cinematography, the use of mirrors, and minimalist sound design. Together, these elements intensify the sense of claustrophobia and visually suggest the gradual dissolution of the boundaries between grandmother and granddaughter.

By subverting the image of the protective grandmother, *The Grandmother* reveals how horror cinema challenges the values associated with grandmotherhood, making visible conflicts linked to the overvaluation of youth and to the place of older women in contemporary society.

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