Feminine Manners of Unfolding in Horror Cinema:

Unpacking Karen Lam’s Short Film *Doll Parts*

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Cinema and film making can be effective means of transmitting creative ideas through storytelling. As a medium, film offers viewers a multi-sensory experience in order to impart affective messages to them visually, auditorily, and conceptually. Continued developments in cinema as an artistic medium are opening up wider offerings to audiences. These include the emerging presence of strong female film makers who employ film making as a method to communicate decidedly feminine perspectives. Local Vancouver film maker and producer Karen Lam enacts feminine manners of unfolding through her films; specifically through *Doll Parts*. *Doll Parts*’ dynamic set of material choices and conceptual processes may be observed in considering the short film an exemplar of Lam’s feminine manners of unfolding. To examine these, we may consider where *Doll Parts*’ feminine manners of unfolding coincide with theoretical concepts discovered throughout Enfolding Unfolding Aesthetics. The film’s characters may be established as Leibniz-ian monads that function autonomously as well as in a complex relationship to camera and viewer monads. This unique perspective takes into consideration the film maker’s material and conceptual choices in ascribing agency and monadic properties to the camera. Transmitting Lam’s feminine sensibilities through her film may be described as an appropriation of Dr. Marks’ 3-Ply Model of Unfolding information to the viewer from the infinite, as discussed in seminar. Better accessing these theories is best started at the beginning, and ascending through *Doll Parts*’ levels of material and conceptual composition.

*Doll Parts*, produced in 2011, is a short film just under 10 minutes long. It follows the actions and interactions of 2 main characters, Edward and Evangeline. The film begins with Edward driving through a rural area along a sparsely populated and largely empty road. Edward stops to pick up a female hitch hiker, but drives off in alarm when her male traveling companion appears. We see from Edward’s nervous and frustrated behavior, and from some equipment in his car including ropes and a knife, he is looking for a victim to prey on. Edward encounters what seems to be the perfect potential victim when he nearly runs over Evangeline; a young woman standing alone, and shivering with cold, at the side of the road. Coaxing her into his car with the offer of a ride and some food, Edward spirits her off. Edwards’ intentions, foreshadowed by his menacing equipment and search for a woman like Evangeline, are realized as we next see Evangeline bound and gagged in his car. Immediately after this we see Edward sexually violating Evangeline’s dead body in an isolated woodland location. This is not,
however, the end of Evangeline’s story. Evangeline returns in an altered state, cracked and
dismembered like a weathered doll, to take her revenge on Edward. Evangeline murders Edward,
leaving him in the woods. Returning to the roadside, Evangeline regains her complexion, and
waits for the next car to pull over for her. Examining Lam’s character building, material, and
conceptual choices will tell more of *Doll Parts*’ story in greater detail.

*Doll Parts* reveals a brief view of interactions between two characters we may determine
to be monads under Leibniz principles of Monadology\(^1\). Leibniz opens Monadology with several
brief and accessible tenants, including describing monads as being simple substances. Without
parts, monads exist as a singular substance derived from the universe, having been created by
God. When Leibniz states “a monad can only come into being or come to an end all at once”\(^2\) he
describes a singular event of creation of, and within, the universe. As Leibniz continues, monads
may inhabit a physical body, and the body may die, however the monad exists as it always has
and always will. If taken to be true, Edward and Evangeline have existed in monadic form long
before enacting the plot in *Doll Parts*. Through the expression of the film, Edward and
Evangeline are ascribed physical bodies with distinguishable characteristics\(^3\), and the potentiality
for change\(^4\). In this way, Lam’s film sets before us a solid exemplification of the way a monad
can exist interchangeably before, between, and after physical manifestation. Leibniz purports that

“Every present state of a simple substance is naturally a consequence of its preceding
state, in such a way that its present is big with its future.”\(^5\)

In considering this we can recognize the physical manifestation of the characters Edward and
Evangeline as simple substances experiencing, in the film, a present state of physicality. This is a
consequence of their preceding state having been conceptualized by film maker Karen Lam. This
process of constructing these characters and plot is an articulation of monads, Edward and
Evangeline, whom have existed in an infinite form. Conceptualization was in itself its own
process of articulating the abstract, present, and psychically unrealized state of these monads. At
each stage of articulation, Edward and Evangeline are monads “big with [their own] future”,
cycling through a series of present forms towards physical actualization in the film. They
individuate, as Simondon would argue, as a process that occurred before their discrete physical
individuation\(^6\). As preexisting monads actualized through a process of conception from the
infinite to an abstract idea, Edward and Evangeline individuated at this point of necessity, before their physical forms became concretized.

As monads Edward and Evangeline interact in the film when their clear areas of perception overlap, in a physical near-collision. Lam’s material processes in documenting Edward and Evangeline shape our viewing percepts and affects. At the opening of the film we hear music that sounds as though it is played through a radio giving it a faraway quality. We hear the singer voice lyrics “Once in a while a love comes along…” As Edward becomes frustrated in the car looking for his sunglasses, we see his hand move out of frame, and hear a distinct click. The music stops at that moment. This is a significant establishment of shared perspective between Edward and the viewer. Lam’s choice to downplay Edward’s hand gesture to the radio, while emphasized the synchronized cutting of the music, breaks a barrier between the viewer and Edward. At this time we are not viewers listening to a music track in the opening of the film, but our zone of clear expression perceives Edward’s environment and situates us inside it. At this moment we know he heard a song about love coming along, as he drives down the road looking for a victim to rape and murder.

Visually, Lam’s film employs a specific material strategy to unfold horror and distress as an affective experience to viewers. Lam’s film uses two discrete cut scenes, where the films cuts to black for a moment, to transition between the abduction and murder scenarios. As viewers we see Evangeline having been lured into Edwards car, then after a brief cut to black, the camera depicts her tied up in the back seat of Edwards’ car. The same strategy is used a short moment later to transition between Edward regarding Evangeline, and the depiction of her lying beaten and dead on a plastic tarp. Choosing to use black cut scenes at these junctures enfolds the events that take place back within the film. In terms of Dr. Marks’ 3-Ply Model of Unfolding, these scenarios in the narrative are pleats of matter that unfold information from the Infinite, through an Information layer, and present them as Images in Doll Parts. We see in Doll Parts that Evangeline and Edward are maneuvered into position for assault and murder to take place, and we see evidence of both situations after cut scenes; we know they happen. However it is at the moments of prehension of Edward’s assault and then murder of Evangeline that Doll Parts enfolds in on itself. The assault and murder are pulled inside, back into the film, back through the
realm of information and back up into the infinite of universal potentiality\textsuperscript{9}. The beginning and end of the event are marked by the two ends of the fold, cinched together like a drawstring bag, where the cut to black screen remains to bridge the edges of the fold.\textsuperscript{10} As demonstrated in Figure 1:

![Image of diagram](image)

Enfolding these narrative scenarios is a markedly feminine manner of unfolding the affect of horror to the viewer when we compare it to expectations and recurring instances of horror cinema directed by men. There is a propensity towards increasing visual disclosure and explicit enactment of what audiences have come to expect; increasing appearance of movie monsters and on-screen depictions of horrific torture, rape and killing. These film instances are facilitated in an almost exclusively male-dominated environment of unfolding using high profile celebrity film makers, swollen production budgets, homogenous distribution companies and advancements in computer graphics, makeup and set design. Examples such as these may be encountered in a male unfolding of a Stephen King film or installation of the Saw\textsuperscript{11} franchise. A detailed
comparison to these male manners of unfolding is a fruitful avenue, though unmanageable within
the scope of this exploration. However we can see in Lam’s film that there is a specific turning
away from those aforementioned manners of unfolding horror. Lam resists explicit depiction of
these scenarios, and in doing so establishes these scenarios as frightening elements in Doll Parts.
These moments enfold in on themselves, leaving our creative imagination and observation of
available clues to fill in the blanks. We know Evangeline is assaulted and tied up, however, we
do not witness it explicitly.

Being shut out of viewing these actions, or these events\textsuperscript{12}, viewers are ascribed
imaginative creative agency to co-engineer our understanding of the plot. The viewer is
presented evidence after the first cut to black that Evangeline has been beaten and forcibly tied
up; her face is bruised, her jacket is off, her wrists are tied in a way she could not have tied
herself, and she opens her eyes in regaining consciousness. Evangeline being assaulted is an
event, as Deleuze might explain, it is a product of a chaotic unfolding that becomes crystalline
through our prehensions of its physical effects. Presenting the evidence of the aftermath of this
enfolded event, rather than unfolding it to us, imbues the viewer with an active agency to
engineer our understanding and experience of what has happened to Evangeline based on our
own percepts of that enfolded situation. In this way, there is dialogue between the camera, as
Lam’s film making monad, and the viewer as monads perceiving the unfolding of Lam’s
perspectives.

Karen Lam has a significantly female perspective on the concept of rape as it appears in
cinema. Detailing at length in discussion, Lam related an understanding as a woman that rape is a
repugnant and violent degradation by a perpetrator seeking control. This perspective is unfolded
to the viewer in \textit{Doll Parts} through the depiction of Edward as a rapist. A complex interplay of
material and conceptual executions reveal the rape as an event to be this way. Lam described her
process of unfolding details of the rape scene in the film as a struggle against the conventional
male expectations of others. Lam’s rape scene is sparse and non-descript, depicting Edward’s
upper body fully clothed and wearing a transparent plastic rain slicker. He makes punctuated,
awkward forward shuffling and thrusting motions. We hear rustling and rhythmic thuds of
Evangeline’s supposed dead weight rocking back and forth. Evangeline is depicted as limp, with
grey colour in her bruised face and hands. The viewer is not privy to glimpses of exposed flesh; we don’t see Evangeline’s breasts, hips, or legs. We don’t see clothes strewn on the ground, or a responsive victim. The absence of these elements is not so much enfolded as it is specifically excluded; Evangeline’s bra or camisole is still on her body, we may not imagine it is strewn provocatively on the ground. These elements are not enfolded the way Evangeline’s assault is, they are outright denied in instating a female manner of unfolding the concepts of rape.

Lam relates, in speaking about *Doll Parts*, that she encountered significant resistance to this type of portrayal of rape from male prospective project sponsors and distributors. The male expectation of rape in horror cinema, Lam explains, is that the female victim should be actively resisting, writhing in sexual motions, making sexual moaning noises, and the film maker should be constructing shots to depict sexually provocative and titillating captures of exposed skin, legs, breasts, and removed clothing. Male film making unfolds rape as a male-oriented sexual fantasy, and a romanticized, glorified sexual event. We see in other contemporary cinema that rape is sexualized in this way. The 2009 Swedish film *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo* incorporates a depiction of rape into the plot of the film. The protagonist is sexually abused off-screen, the rape is enfolded, but her experience immediately afterwards is unfolded to the viewer as she washes her mouth in the restroom. The female protagonist is depicted washing her mouth out with her hand in a sexualized way; the camera focuses close on her face and hand as she inserts her fingers into her mouth in and out, penetrating and rubbing. She makes repeated and increasingly deeper penetrating motions with her hand, mirroring and mimicking the sexual assault her character experienced. The film maker unfolds the rape through the protagonists’ mimicry, sexualizing her actions to titillate the viewer, and enact a sexualized fantasy to the viewer as a voyeur. In stark contrast to this, Lam unfolds a female perspective of rape as revolting and devoid of glorified sexual substance. Edwards’ monad dominates Evangeline physically. Edward prehends sexual arousal as an active expression of his monad’s perspective, experience, and a function of his point of view.

When we consider these strategies as evidence of a female manner of unfolding, through both material and conceptual elements, we recognize the film maker is present in the decision making of the camera. In *Doll Parts*, the camera becomes a singular entity standing in for, and
being employed as a communicative vehicle for, Lam’s unfolding of *Doll Parts*. Over the course of the film the camera takes up specific placements, and points of view. By positioning the camera in the passenger seat of Edwards’ car, we become companions as his monad travels along, expanding his clear zone of perception until it encounters and envelops Evangeline. In this way we are almost a companion to his travels, as he becomes increasingly frustrated with his failed attempts to victimize the first hitch hiker he encounters. The camera’s fixation on Edwards’ face, and elongated, tense position beside him, imparts the affect that the camera’s monad, and us by proxy, are fixed there with him. The camera then changes focus when Edward encounters Evangeline and opens the passenger door to her. The camera looks out at Evangeline from the driver's seat, across the vacancy of the passenger seat. The camera becomes a perpetrator luring Evangeline. Likewise, the camera becomes a companion to Evangeline’s plight after her assault; by positioning itself in front of her face, watching intently as she regains consciousness while tied in the back of the car, the camera’s interest as a singular voyeur is a description of a monadic characteristic as a subject.\(^{15}\)

The camera as an active subject of female film making prerogatives shares an even more complex role in the dissemination of some of these female manners of unfolding. As previously discussed, there are lasting overtones of expectation within viewers. Viewers expecting horror to unfold based on pre-existing, male manner of unfolding, schemas may be have clear zones that do not yet perceive female manners of unfolding, and feminine film making sensibilities, as they unfold from the infinite. Here I posit the camera then acts as a prism in the way it receives feminine manners of unfolding a female film making sensibilities, and then refracts them into multiple projections towards the viewer. Viewer’s clear zones\(^ {16} \), much like our eye’s sensitivity to specific components of the light spectrum, may prehend some facets of events unfolded from the infinite, while being unable to perceive others\(^ {17} \). As demonstrated in Figure 2.
Within the film *Doll Parts* we see the rape is an event that concretizes and is prehended, and transmitted in response to that prehension, by the camera’s monad. This rape is the product of a female manner of unfolding the concept of rape as repugnant, through material and conceptual choices in depiction. These material and conceptual choices are refracted by the camera monad into separated rays of prehensions that may be perceived by the viewer monad. These prehensions include perceptions like the sound of Evangeline’s dead weight and the visibility of her grey skin. Micro-perceptions\(^1\) may also be prehended, such as change in viewer affect to disgust or increase in defensiveness, based on the complex and difficult to identify facial expression on Edwards’ face as he commits the rape. In a camera-monad-as-prism instance, some available prehensions unfolding from the infinite, through info, past the image\(^1\) may not be accessible to the viewer’s Leibnizian clear area. These many messages emanate as distant rays of potential affect unfolding from the infinite of the universe’s potentialities. The viewing monad may prehend these if their clear zone touches enough of the universe to make relevant connections. As significant as unfolding these female perspectives is, in this way there is also a potential for Lam’s female manners of unfolding, from her feminine perspective, to be unrealized by viewers unable or unwilling to prehend them. All artistic exploration is subject to this challenge of reaching and being prehended by clear zones. It is also what makes Lam’s film
an art work that sets itself apart from conventionally male manners of unfolding horror to a viewer who need not exercise themselves to prehend what can instead be thrust upon them.

We have seen that Karen Lam’s short film *Doll Parts* enacts multiple material and conceptual strategies to unfold a feminine perspective in film making. Lam’s film establishes characters and points of view that coincide with Leibniz-ian theories of the monad as a singular entity existing in, but not limited to, a physical being. *Doll Parts* unfolds a different perspective of what horror may be, when considered in relation to conventional male models of unfolding in film making. This sets *Doll Parts* apart in its sensibilities and prerogatives to pull from the infinite, through a 3-Ply Manner of Unfolding, through the realm of Information and into Image²⁰, a female perspective on horrific subject matter. The camera and viewer, as we’ve seen, are activated in a different way to be a co-creative engineer in experiencing *Doll Parts*. *Doll Parts* may unfold concepts and affect from the infinite that we prehend as uniquely feminine on the subject of rape and material impacts on affect. As a short film, *Doll Parts* offers substantial subject matter to consider, and is indicative of significant potentiality in actualizing feminine manners of unfolding from female perspectives, such as film maker Karen Lam's.

References


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2 Ibid., 6.
3 Ibid., 8.
4 Ibid., 10.
5 Ibid., 22.
8 Ibid., 78.
10 Figure 1.0
11 Wan & Whannell, Saw, Lions Gate Entertainment, 2003-Present.
12 Deleuze, *The Fold*, 76.
14 Ibid., 79.
16 Deleuze, *The Fold*, 85

17 Figure 2.0

18 Deleuze, *The Fold*, 86

19 Marks, *Enfoldment And Infinity*.

20 Ibid.