Cultural Transgression and Subversion: The Abject Slasher Subgenre

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"Horror film hates women. I have concluded that there is no other explanation for the explicit and cold-hearted treatment of women and the female body in fictional stories." This is how I began my very first informal writing assignment. I began by expressing blatant exasperation after only one movie and roughly two classes discussing the gender binary. "I literally don't know what this is supposed to reflect," I complained. I wrestled with the pragmatic part of me that generally feels the need to attribute everything to some secular purpose or meaning, but instead, what I found was myself at a loss for explanation. Granted, of course, my claims were premature. I was only just beginning to become aware of the abusive role the slasher-horror genre plays in the sustenance of the gender binary. But, now, filled with more coherent and comprehensive knowledge on the topic, I am stuck competing theories. It is a question that has plagued me since that first writing assignment: why do people watch horror? It seems insufficient to relegate the answer to some carnal desire to see guts and gore. Sure, on the surface, those attributes particular to the genre possess their own distinct appeal, but I now believe that there is another reason we indulge in a subgenre that is literally popular for its repetitive and predictable storylines. How does that one phrase go? If you've seen one, you've seen 'em all? How appropriate.

In general, slasher film partly has a bad rap for its characteristically foreseeable plot, plot twists, climaxes, and resolutions. It is quite rare that the subgenre strays from that characteristic because most of its movies tend to pay homage to iconic classics, or feature prominent themes from older films. Although, still, Sarah Trencansky and Jody Keisner both agree that the chief reason for

its being labeled as "hyper-sensational low culture art" is primarily due to its consistently poor depiction of targeted female victims (Keisner 421). Not to mention, excessive murder or torture stamp the horror genre so it is regularly dubbed over-the-top, as well as a grueling experience to sit through particularly for older age groups. Then, there are the concerning, yet staple tropes of the subgenre such as the seemingly obligatory air of rampant misogyny, an uncanny tendency to punish any sexual deviance, and the troubling 'Final Girl' archetype (coupled with the excluded 'Other') which also exist. So, it becomes fairly easy to see what critics of the genre are able to point to if one wanted to criticize slasher-horror's vices. However, just like relegating the reason for watching horror to a frivolous desire for carnage, it seems impetuous to subject slasher to the "bottom of the horror heap" (Clover 20), undeserving of any real academic interpretation or critical consideration due to these qualities. Slasher films have importance as cultural texts in part because of their "firmly entrenched status as 'outsider' cinema" (Trencansky 64). Dismissing these films as low culture is too simplistic. It glosses over the issues that films in general have the ability to highlight in ways that only film can. But, alas, I cannot completely criticize this viewpoint because prior to studying the components and cultural implications of slasher-horror, I, too, was guilty of having regarded the genre as superficial, silly, and quite frankly, undeserving of any real academic interpretation. But, just like my rash conclusions of horror film's depiction of women, this, too, deserved to be revaluated.

In "Do You Want to Watch?", Jody Keisner explores the thesis that (horror) movies are narratives in that they tell us about ourselves by exploring perceptions of reality. Of course, it is certainly odd to invite the idea that there could be anything even remotely real (or even theoretically) worth reflecting in slasher-horrors because of the simple fact that they are so cruel. However, this is exactly where the slasher-horror film meets postmodernism. Isabel Cristina Pinedo writes, "Postmodern horror constructs a nihilistic universe in which causal logic collapses and one cannot rely on the efficacy of science or authority figures" (5). It includes the usual abject 'Other' who

threatens a social order; it occurs in a world where the likeliness of survival is contingent upon how privy and different a character is to previously determined unacceptable societal norms; and it erases binary logic by blurring the lines between good and evil, real and not real. All of these attributes of postmodern horror exist so as to create an environment where all order seems to be thrown out of the window. It ends up that the audience's only connection to some modicum of normalcy is flaunted through the characters' suddenly brazen—and questionable—survival instincts.

Pinedo emphasizes that postmodernism is tricky because it involves the transgressing of genres and an "aggressive blurring of boundaries" (10), hence resulting in the creation of a general "incoherence" (14). Yet, perhaps this may be why it thrives so well in the horror universe—because what better place to have oddity and to indulge in abject impulses (and furthermore, reflect something in ourselves) than in a genre where it is already the norm and actually expected? In other words, it becomes safe to entertain generally deemed unacceptable feelings and anchor it in something fictional. As English professor Mark Edmundson explains: "The [horror film] ... gathers up anxiety that is free-floating in the reader or viewer and binds it to a narrative. Thus the anxiety is displaced and brought under temporary, tenuous control" (Keisner 413). Consider it a cathartic release?

The best example of a film that utilized all of the elements of postmodern horror and its generally low culture status, tinkered with it, and generated a multimillion dollar cult classic can only be known as Scream. In 111 minutes, Wes Craven's 1996 slasher movie managed to reinvent several significant horror tropes and became responsible for helping to inspire a new wave of slasher-horror films. A little bit prior to the mid-1990s and Scream's release, teen slasher's popularity had waned considerably after the success of movies like Friday the 13th and A Nightmare on Elm Street. Tired was the genre's formulaic nature and excessive repetition; audiences had grown bored and

overfamiliar with its plots (of course ironic because the audience's familiarity of its conventions is

partially what made it popular in the first place). Dimension chief Bob Weinstein explained that just

prior to Scream's 1996 release, "There were no movies being made for teenagers. It had become an

adult-oriented business. I knew there was an audience that was not being satisfied" (Wee 53).

Additionally, by the mid-1990s in the real world, America was standing witness to the

sudden rise in spending power by its teens. Teenagers craved a way to assert their independence and

found what better way to do so than by establishing a distinct economic presence. However,

Weinstein knew that "media obsessed," as well as "pop culture literate, extremely self-aware and

cynical," this new and perfectly viable niche market "would never accept a mere retread of the old

genre" (Wee 54). "Furthermore," Valerie Wee adds, "while the previous conventional target

audience for slasher films was adolescent boys, in the mid-1990s, adolescent girls were emerging as

the more significant film-going demographic" (54). Rom-coms such as William Shakespeare's

Romeo and Juliet (1996) and Clueless (1995) grossed well over $40 and $50 million each and

revealed that there was a new audience to be considered if a film desired success. It was these social

changes which signaled that, for movie producers and directors looking to find a gold mine amongst

an audience, there was no better time to cater to the freshly exposed and eager age group.

There is undoubtedly a certain charm to the 1996 Scream movie that even its sequels and

imitators could not quite capture. In order to reinvent the genre, Wes Craven and screenwriter

Kevin Williamson decided they needed to create a film that would comment on the genre's highly

formulaic nature (and low culture status) while also playing off of its established traditions (Wee 54).

Of course, this was chiefly done with the help of postmodern elements. As stated previously,

postmodernism exists as an unstable, paranoid universe. It exudes pluralism and cultural diversity; it

is one in which "traditional (dichotomous) categories break down, boundaries blur, institutions fall

into question, Enlightenment narratives collapse, the inevitability of progress crumbles, and the master status of the universal (read male, white, monied, heterosexual) subject deteriorates" (Pinedo 11).

Scream has a similar plot to most other slasher films by featuring an unknown killer who terrorizes a small town. The slight difference, though, is that in Scream, the characters/victims have seen slasher films before. Several times do the teenagers in the movie demonstrate their knowledge on the tropes of the genre (thus indicating self-awareness similarly to their young viewer demographic). And second, the movie also breaks down the cultural divide between high and low art as Edvard Munch's avant-garde expressionist painting "The Scream" is reimagined by Craven and Williamson in a mainstream slasher film. Then, quite notably, the film hints at a particularly reprehensible blurring of reality and fiction first when Ghostface spurs copycats in his wake; and second, when the boys behind his identity, Stu and Billy, explain that they learned everything they know from the horror films they watch. It appears that Craven and Williamson knew they would be catering to an audience of cinephiles and sudden fandom craze which meant that if they wanted to satisfy their viewers, it would mean enhancing the conventions of the genre and updating their content.

Nevertheless, it was not just postmodernism's guiding themes that contributed to the film's reinvention and ultimate success. The film can also be recognized for its integration of social issues into its plot. Valerie Wee argues that the film's reconsideration of the slasher villain helped to reshape the genre and offered "interesting insights into contemporary social and cultural concerns and ideologies" (54).

It is typical of slasher-horror to depict its villains as "indestructible beings who seem able to be everywhere and do anything" (Gill 24). More often than not, the wretched monster will

transgress binary logic by ignoring the boundaries that separate living from dead, human from supernatural, male from female, et cetera . . . Craven and Williamson decided to do away with this tradition by gracing its viewers with very mortal villains and added mystery. In Scream, the identity behind the masked villain is not immediately known to the audience. In fact, the audience is in the same boat as the movie's victims as they all come to find out the identity of the killer together. Once the identity is revealed, it becomes all the more shocking that the killers! were someone from the "inside" rather than the "outside." This time, the 'Other' are attractive, popular, and seemingly normal people. Instead of being the "marginalized monsters" such that of Freddy Krueger and Michael Myers, the killers are revealed to be an evil within (Wee 55). To Wee, this reinterpretation of the villain to be indecipherable amongst a group of friends seemed particularly "contemporary and relevant" in the midst of incidents of high school violence occurring across the country in real life (55). As Trencansky explains, "Each decade embraces the monsters that speak to it: If the villains of popular late 1990s slashers are embraced by the adolescents today, perhaps it is because, in a culture of sudden random violence, exemplified in the school shootings that originate from one of their own, a villain that looks just like them makes sense" (73).

So, indeed, the movie captured the evil within essence that plagued the time period it stood in, however it went further than offering its viewers a potentially recognizable and terrifyingly familiar villain. Its portrayal of the seemingly ordinary teen turned serial killer (with no clear motive!) is a direct commentary on the demons that impacted actual teen life in the wake of such senseless violence in American schools (Wee 55). Therefore, Scream can be recognized for offering its viewers a form of cathartic release by exploring very real fears and paranoia rampant at the time.

This instance of slasher-horror alluding to actual fears is not the only indication that slasher-horror was reacting to contemporary cultural issues either. Take, for example, the increased desire of

self-fulfillment, individual growth, and a newfound "obligation to the self," which contributed to the skyrocketing divorce rate in the 1960s (Gill 18). Family dynamics were shifted in favor of adults and adolescents seemed to suffer the most in effect. But, television shows such as The Brady Bunch (1969-1974) emerged offering an early example of a blended family working their way through the mild adversity of stitching their families together. Plenty of viewers were dealing with similar situations at the time, also trying to figure out how to join families from disparate parts. Naturally, of course, though, slasher film rejected this ode to comfortability and continued depicting parental ignorance and teen torment. In fact, Pat Gill noticed the delight that slasher film seemed to take in undoing the comfortable and supportive domestic life depiction of the television era, and regressing it to a weak and neglectful family structure. In slasher-horror, authority figures and anything associated with it are depicted negatively. Family is more often a hindrance than a help (A Nightmare on Elm Street), law enforcement proves ridiculously ineffective (Scream), and surviving requires transgressing into and adopting dreaded adult-like characteristics (Gill 22). Slasher films typically see teenagers struggling to survive on their own without adult help or interference. To Gill, this is an indication of the absence of "the family as a resource for coping with growing up" (19). Therefore, the (absent) role of family in slasher, and the consequential inclination of its teens being drawn to fulfill parental roles throughout in order to survive, mirrors a genuine fear of the generation, and the slasher subgenre can be recognized for projecting real cultural issues into its plot.

Moreover, through Sarah Trencansky's analysis of the Final Girl in early 1980s slashers such as A Nightmare on Elm Street and Friday the 13th, she hypothesizes that the slasher that is popular for a specific time period may actually speak to the interests and fears of that particular generation. For example, using 1980s slasher film's deviation from the original script of the controversial Final Girl archetype, she argues that its divergent path from "renaissance"-like films of the 70s is an

indication of the genre subverting mainstream expectations (which further highlights the genre's cultural complexity and importance) (Trencansky 64). 1990s slashers such as Scream and I Know What You Did Last Summer are typically lauded for taking slasher in a new direction while its previous decade is regularly wholly dismissed (Trencansky 64). However, Trencansky contends that the 1980s cannot be ignored for it also reinvented a fundamental theme in slasher . . . and what's more is that it did so in "an era pathologically affirming conservative family values" (73).

Carol Clover explained how the classic Final Girl character seemed to transition from "passive defense" particularly in The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974), to that of "active defense" in Halloween (1978) just a few short years later (Trencansky 64). Trencansky noticed this evolution further sustain itself in films such as Friday the 13th (1980) and A Nightmare on Elm Street (1984). In these films, the Final Girl is remarkable for her "unflinching determination and strength" (Trencansky 64): where 1970 slasher films depict her as a character mechanically going through the motions necessary to survive, 1980s slashers also keep up with this, but the grander fight for female agency in general more noticeably dominates the narrative. For example, it is typical of the male role in cinema to drive the plot forward; they are the "active" ones, the ones that "advance the story, making things happen" (Mulvey 163). In A Nightmare on Elm Street, that role is "systematically reversed" (Trencansky 67). If Freddy represents the indispensable character of the film who retains most of the power, it is Final Girl Nancy who ultimately gets to "decide how and when the story will end" (Trencansky 67). She proves her cunningness and competence by setting traps for him around her house that he consistently falls victim to. She also learns to control when Freddy can appear either by withholding sleep or inducing it in order to initiate their final battle. Through this, the Final Girl represents a female heroine that refuses to stand secondary or passive to her counterpart.

Additionally, Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze is inverted in these early 1980s films to afford its female heroines greater jurisdiction over the narrative. Trencansky explains, "The Final Girl, far from being viewed as a passive ... object, is instead the viewer's identifying connection to the film" (67). Due to her agency, vigor, and (feminized) gallantry, she is embodied as "the more perfect, more complete, more powerful ideal ego" (Mulvey 163). Thus, the audience is encouraged to vicariously live through her and eventually succeed through the film. Trencansky even further points out that the killer's point-of-view camera technique present in Halloween is absent in the Nightmare films (67). "If anyone in the films is truly the object of the viewer's gaze, it is the monsters," says Trencansky (67). Freddy's and Jason's monstrous and arresting figures are "looked at and displayed" (Mulvey 162). Freddy's ugly burned skin is regularly paused on at length, making viewing him all the more uncomfortable. Jason remains masked until his monstrous face is revealed at the climax of the films, what Trencansky calls the "virtual equivalent of a mainstream film's nude scene" (67). When this scrutiny at their bodies is "extended" to promotional posters of the film, the transference of the greater desire to gawk at the Other more than the female body is accomplished (Trencansky 67).

And lastly, on the same token of not submitting to patriarchal notions, the theme of the Final Girl or female heroine in slasher film being desexualized in order to "subvert their femininity" is absent—unlike Halloween—in the Nightmare series (Trencansky 67). Besides arguably becoming "boyish" (Clover 40) by likening herself to "masculine interests" (Clover 48), the Final Girl of the 1980s is slightly remodeled to not only retain these typical characteristics, but this time, she is granted her sexuality. In the Nightmare on Elm Street series, Final Girls Nancy and Alice are allowed love interests with Alice even becoming pregnant in Nightmare on Elm Street 5: The Dream Child; Lisa of Nightmare 2 and Kristen of Nightmare 3 die but are still allowed their sexuality as well (Trencansky 67). So, although horror is regularly criticized for featuring female

nudity, 1980s slasher film began the transformation of the Final Girl or female character being allowed to retain her sexuality. A Nightmare on Elm Street rejected the typical female role and decided to place its concerns elsewhere, beyond the purview of punishing sexual deviance.

Therefore, through slasher film's reimagination of the Final Girl in the 1980s and its reconsideration of the villain in the 1990s, it becomes clear that the genre has undergone transformations in order to stay relevant to its changing viewership. When very real fears of a hidden evil amongst an unsuspecting few were lurking beneath the waters across the nation, slasher validated teenagers' angsts by anchoring them in fiction. Ultimately, Scream's refreshing deconstruction of the subgenre's conventions and the insertion of tongue-in-cheek intertextual and self-reflexive comments were revitalizing, and also helped to successfully establish it in the realm of postmodernism. Furthermore, as Sarah Trencansky pointed out, the 1980s was quite a time to try to establish a refined role for female characters reclaiming their sexuality and asserting their dominance. The political climate at the time was very much conservative, yet she argues that the Final Girl of the 1970s was remodeled in the 80s in order to "provoke ideas often left unstated in more exalted texts" (Trencansky 73). So, it seems that for a genre that is regularly dismissed as "the most disreputable form of the horror film," it can be credited for going where other particularly more esteemed genres did not wish to go (Pinedo 71). This can attest to slasher-horror's flexibility which allows it to mold itself to either be a positive or (usually) negative commentary on the times surrounding it. And besides, is that not the goal of film in the first place? To challenge institutions and illustrate what we may or may not yet be ready to consider? Indeed, it appears that horror movies have become postmodern in part because of this. Their exploring and questioning of reality pushes viewers to consider their own notions of what is real. Trencansky elucidates, "Reality for youth is a daily life-or-death struggle, and the nihilism inherent in these films is expressed by the dark, gloom-filled dream

worlds of Freddy, Jason ... bordering places where the threshold of reality is fluid and transgression is inevitable" (70).

So, the question may be asked again: why do people watch horror? It makes us scream, squeal, hide, nauseous, nervous, anxious, and frightened. In a way, we are obsessed with watching movies that kill us literally and figuratively. Some people may actively seek those feelings, others may not. However, regardless of the feelings people pursue when watching horror, I believe that the more neutral explanation lay in its refusal of 'normal' and binary codes, and more exceptionally in its acceptance of the opposite within its narrative. To quote myself earlier, dismissing these films as low culture is too simplistic. Slasher films have importance as cultural texts in part because of their "firmly entrenched status as 'outsider' cinema" (Trencansky 64). Thus, it is manifested as an anomaly: just like the malformed, unnatural and deviant monster in its films, horror blurs boundaries and mixes categories; it violates the taken-for-granted "natural" order. Just as the infamous shower scene in Psycho—which was iconic for it presented a shock value that was previously not portrayed in horror film—indicates, slasher films possess the power to drive new narratives forward, stimulating change and inspiring discussion. So, ironically enough, it would seem that after all, it is through slasher film's undermining of institutions and exploration of what is abject that it becomes welcome in a considerably all-too-complacent culture.

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