

Visual Violence Against Women in Hollywood

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Abstract: Slashers, a subdivision of horror peaked during the 1900s, had a lasting impact in the cinematic world as a wide range of audience continues to watch them today. Often centered around a masked killer that targeted their audience against female victims, an explosion of cinematic violence against women prevailed. Though young white males were initially the targeted audience, females craved slashers as well due to the genre's features of enabling them to acquire masculine traits, such as anger, frustrations and violence by overturning stereotypical gender roles propelled by women's movement during the period. Through diving into various elements of slashers, including motives of killers, reasons behind the audience's crave for slashers, characteristics of the survivors and the symbolic utilizations of pre-technological weapons in the genre, this paper examines this violence through contrasting typical female victims with the Final Girl, who becomes the only one that survived the seeming impossible. Aspects of film and literary theories, gender studies, and psychoanalysis were examined throughout research.

Keywords: Horror, Slashers, Final Girl, Film Studies

1. Introduction

If Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* introduces the figure of the psychotic killer to modern cinematic culture, John Carpenter's *Halloween* begins a genre: slasher that peaks in the 1990s, with Wes Craven's *Scream*. As a subdivision of horror films, slasher movies are centered around a psychotic killer. Given the fact that most of the killers are male and victims at least initially are female, the genre unsurprisingly emphasizes male violence against women. Early slashers often depict vulnerable women in hysterics, panicked by the relentless attacks of the male killer. These women are, in short, objectified, caught by the camera as by the killer – except for the mysterious “Final Girl” who is able to survive the violence. This paper proposes to explain the attraction of this cinematic violence against women in Hollywood and ponder the role of the Final Girl as the survivor.

2. Killers

There are variations in motives or reasons behind every killing spree of each killer in slashers. Each killer's reasons for killing varies, but is profoundly shaped by the act of vengeance. In Craven's *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, Fred Kruger's victims are the children of Elm Street -- the descendants of those people who killed him. Another example includes Billy Loomis in Craven's *Scream* whose motive for killing was to target the child of the woman who had a sexual relationship with his father. Vengeance can be both the cause and effect behind the killer's motives. Of course, there are other

reasons behind every killing spree, however, there are two main unconscious psychological identifications apparent in the slasher genre.

The murderous desire of the killer explodes out of repression. In usual circumstances, the first victim of the killer is a sexually active female. This can be Judith, in Carpenter's *Halloween*, as the six-year-old Michael Myers stabbed her to death after he witnessed his sister and her boyfriend having sex in their parents' bedroom. Another example is Claudette, the summer camp counselor in Cunningham's *Friday the 13th*, who was stabbed in the neck with a hunting knife, before her boyfriend, Barry is murdered. Although the male victims get slashed afterwards, the screen time between female and male victims is imbalanced, which suggests a general strategy of visual violence against women in Hollywood. "It is an imperative that crosses gender lines affecting males as well as females. The numbers are not equal, and the scenes not equally charged; but the fact remains that in most slasher films after 1978, men and boys who go after 'wrong' sex also die" [1]. Unauthorized sex is usually the primary reason that victims get murdered in movies either when they are engaged in the middle of the act or afterwards. This connection between illicit sex and death is embodied in both men and women, but men die differently. "The death of a male is always swift; even if the victim grasps what is happening to him, he has no time to react or register terror. He is dispatched and the camera moves on" [1]. Most male victims' death scenes are less elaborate compared to their female counterparts as they lack a distinct stylistic signature given to women victims. Their deaths are often hurried, in less graphic details and in shorter lengths.

3. Audience

Living as people do in a patriarchal society, slashers suggest a pleasure in torturing women. Moreover, women receive a masochistic pleasure watching themselves getting killed on screen. The pleasure in watching people get killed in formulaic ways can stimulate reactions both psychologically and sociologically. "...the abumbration of our infantile fears and desires, our memory sense of ourselves as tiny and vulnerable in the face of the enormous Other; but the Other is also finally another part of ourself, the projection of our repressed infantile rage and desire that we have had in the name of civilization to repudiate" [1]. The pleasure received from those that are killed stemmed from a release of repressed desire that both genders attempt to contain on a daily basis. Slashers stimulate pleasure in the audience by allowing them to watch people getting killed, as rational understanding gives way to raw terror. Females are enabled to express repressed desires or emotions that they had bottled up inside when they watch slashers, such as anger, fear or violence. The variety in interpretation of slashers aided them to acquire characteristics that are not permitted in society due to gender roles and further to release their frustration in norms that they were forced to follow.

Slashers peaked in 1960-1990s as more and more women entered higher education and asserted themselves in the workforce. Male viewers, "individuals lower in empathy and those higher in sensation seeking and aggressiveness report more enjoyment of fright and violence" [2]. However, the targeted audience included both men and women because not only do men enjoy seeing women being slashed, women enjoy it as well. Multiple reasons could be utilized as explanations including men's insecurities and their determination to resist the entry of women into the workforce as well as a response to the second and third waves of the feminist movement during the time.

Pleasure generated from voyeurism and fetishism results from watching victims murdered on screen by the killer. The phenomenon was first conceived by Sigmund Freud. "Voyeurism and fetishism are mechanisms the dominant cinema uses to construct the male spectator in accordance with the needs of his unconscious", where "the original eye of the camera, controlling and limiting what can be seen, is reproduced by the projector aperture which lights up one frame at a time" [3]. The filmmakers as they targeted their audience where the spectators are constantly viewing through a limited scopophilic view of sexualized women. The audience's view is controlled by objectification

and sexualization, in which the female threat is eliminated. These circumstances led to more underlying psychological phenomena portrayed by a wide range of audience when watching slashers.

During the early stages of casting for slashers, there were two specific expectations that needed to be met by the female actresses — “tits and scream”. One actress is cast for closeups on her tits, while another is cast for having a distinct scream when she is running around the house and getting chased by the masked killer. The utilization of camera work emphasizes killing young people through the lens of the male gaze. The visual violence against women displayed by female victims in slashers demonstrates the power of the male gaze. “The female body is sexuality [...] the female is given only powerless, victimized figures who, far from perfect, reinforce the basic sense of worthlessness that already exists” [3]. The male gaze diminishes the power of females in slashers as they are often objectified and viewed as a sexual object. The idealized male heroes gained control and a sense of mastery in the movie when compared to their female counterparts.

The emphasis on the camera when examining the movements of the killer through their point of view portrayed female objectification as well. In Clark’s *Black Christmas*, for example, the POV of the killer, Billy is shown. The narrative is designed to “make sure that the viewer is positioned also to believe and feel the threat” [4]. The hyperventilation of every single one of his breaths taken is incorporated in the manipulations of sound in order to manipulate the uncanniness that the audience experiences. “The look of the camera, the look of the spectator, and the intradiegetic look of each character within the film intersect, join and relay one another in a complex system which structures vision and meaning” [5]. The unsteadiness of the camera when the POV of the killer appears further strengthens the feeling of uncanniness when watching slashers due to the connection of believing that the killer is behind the camera and documenting every single one of his kill count when he slashes.

4. Final Girl

Of course, there are exceptions to slasher movies as the time progresses and survivors begin to emerge. One of the tropes, coined by Carol Clover in her article, “the one who encounters the mutilated bodies of her friends and perceives the full extent of the preceding horror and of her own peril; who is chased, cornered, wounded; whom we see scream, stagger, fall, rise, and scream again”, is the Final Girl [1]. The Final Girl theory by definition is “abject horror personified” [1]. The most prominent Final Girls for the genre included Sidney Prescott in Craven’s *Scream* and Nancy Thompson in Craven’s *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. Characteristics that both of these characters include “more courage and levelheadedness than their cringing male counterparts” as well as being “intelligent and resourceful in extreme circumstances” [1]. Because of these characteristics, the Final Girl’s fight with the killer transformed into an “empathetic climax”, according to Clover due to her ferocity in fighting with the killer. The last twenty minutes of the film embodies her traits of being different from other victims that got murdered in the movie due to her cleverness, in order to survive the seemingly impossible.

The appearance of the Final Girl brought the idea of the female gaze to the screen as slashers peaked. The rising power of reversed gender roles made the Final Girl’s male counterpart desirable, though seemingly unintelligent at times, acquiring similarities with other female victims that were slashed by the killer. “...this identification along gender lines authorizes impulses toward sexual violence in male” [1]. Some males along the slasher movies are deemed as desirable as the genre peaked during this period. The Final Girl brought contrast to the genre that demonstrated courage due to the male figures that left them on their own to fight in the final scene. Moreover, when traditional gender roles are reversed due to the Final Girl, the male counterpart becomes the sex object, which “women then takes on the ‘masculine role’ as bearer of the gaze and initiator of the action” [3]. The Final Girl, in this case, loses her traditional feminine characteristics and usurps the position of men by being “cold, driving, ambitious, manipulating” [3]. Historically speaking, women’s

movement from 1960-1990s contributed to the phenomenon as they moved out of factory settings and into administration.

5. Weapons

There are specific elements to slashers, but one of the most significant elements is the weapons. They are mainly pre-technological and “knives, hammers, axes, icepicks, hypodermic needles, red hot pokers, pitchforks” are most commonly used [1]. Reasons for utilizing such weapons are often connected to the Final Girl due to the establishments of phallic symbols. “The killer’s phallic purpose, as he thrusts his drill or knife into the trembling bodies of young women, is unmistakable” so in comparison of regular female victims to the Final Girl, her victory implied that “her incipient masculinity is not thwarted but realized” because she “is effectively phallicized is the moment that the plot halts and horror ceases” [1]. The phallicization of the killer is closely connected to the projection of the audience’s fears and desires, which is countered by the Final Girl through her attempt to fight the killer. She drafted a comparison between herself and the killer as she “thrusts” femininity into the killer to gain a sense of masculinity that the killer lacked from the beginning.

As the Final Girl acquires masculine traits that the killer has never seemingly gained due to traumas and repressed desires, the weapon that is used to eliminate the killer create a sense of implementation of masculine traits to the Final Girl as the power of male gaze and the act of objectifying women begin to fade during the process. Not only the targeted audience, young white males crave for slashers, but the non-targeted female audiences desire slasher movies as well. “The Final Girl is female not despite the maleness of the audience, but precisely because of it. The discourse is wholly masculine, and females figure in it only insofar as they ‘read’ some aspect of male experience” [1]. The Final Girl served as a representation of male desire that acts in unapproved ways for adult males, which disrupts the stereotypical expectations of females in society. Instead of being sexualized, angry displays of violence are permitted in females in contrast to slashed victims. The role of the Final Girl as the survivor slowly erases this type of visual violence created in slashers that the audience so desperately craves by fitting themselves into the narrative of Western Heroism.

6. Conclusions

Through analyzing desires of killers, as well as the desires in the audiences to watch slashers, through a differentiation between the female victims and the Final Girl, this paper ponders about the explosion of visual violence against women in Hollywood during the 1990s. The role of the Final Girl incorporates the rising power of reversed gender roles as she symbolizes power and strength through seizing masculine traits that diminishes the male gaze and objectifications of women. Since the 1990s, the effect of the slasher genre prevails to this day in the figure of Final Girl. Though the signature act of female victims screaming still has not lost its touch of uncanniness that the audience sense, the elevating power of women empowerment kindles adventurous spirits in young audiences.

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