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## "I Want to Know What I'm Looking at": Surveilling Gender as a Response to Cultural Anxieties in *Halloween*, *Sleepaway Camp*, and *Scream*

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**“I WANT TO KNOW WHAT I’M LOOKING AT”: SURVEILLING GENDER AS A  
RESPONSE TO CULTURAL ANXIETIES IN *HALLOWEEN*, *SLEEPAWAY CAMP*, AND**

***SCREAM***

by

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## ABSTRACT

### “I WANT TO KNOW WHAT I’M LOOKING AT”: SURVEILLING GENDER AS A RESPONSE TO CULTURAL ANXIETIES IN *HALLOWEEN*, *SLEEPAWAY CAMP*, AND *SCREAM*

Jennifer Jacinda McLawhorn  
Old Dominion University, 2022  
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The purpose of this thesis is to investigate slasher films and how they use gendered tropes to respond to and perpetuate cultural anxieties. The methodology primarily uses textual analysis that includes close attention to content, context, and discourse. The study reveals structural patterns and problems that emerge within slasher films, specifically within the Final Girl trope and the behaviors that govern it. In surveilling the Final Girl’s gender performativity, it is apparent that abjection, or a gut reaction to something that exists between two distinct boundaries or categories, is provoked when the Final Girl crosses a socially established gender boundary. Her behaviors are closely monitored by herself and others. In reading the ways that these behaviors are exhibited through the body of the female lead, the thesis focuses on how panopticism, or bodily self-regulation in response to biopolitical power, is primarily expressed through these characters. Michel Foucault’s concept of internal surveillance proves to be a salient concept for examining the character development within slasher films, speaking to the power of self-regulation within gendered power relations. Cultural anxieties around gender are mobilized within American horror films, in ways that speak to both gender performativity and the desire to shore up gender categories as incontrovertible truths.

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This thesis is dedicated to my parents and my siblings, Amanda and Justin, who supported my entire academic career.

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## CHAPTER 1

### WHY HORROR?

As Casey Becker, played by Drew Barrymore, pops popcorn in the first few minutes of *Scream*, an unknown caller asks her questions about her favorite scary movies. Smiling to herself, Casey plays along and answers his questions. When the caller continues to pry over learning her name, she asks why. He replies, “because I want to know who I’m looking at.” (*Scream*, 0:02:31-0:02:33). Up until this point, Casey has been strolling through her home, seemingly feeling safe in this private, domestic space. As soon as the caller reveals that he is watching her, Casey’s eyes widen, and she goes on high alert. She checks the porch outside and locks the doors. Her behavior has changed due to an outside influence. Through the possible surveillance of an unknown observer, Casey must modify her own actions to survive against a stalker. The phrase “I want to know who I’m looking at” is the verbal tipping point for both Casey and the audience and perfectly captures the slasher tradition of using surveillance against a would-be Final Girl, or female survivor, of the film’s male antagonistic slasher.

“Like the low-mythic tradition of which it is a part, horror is organized around functions that are understood to preexist and constitute character.” (Clover 12) In the first few pages of her book on gender and horror, Carol Clover situates her argument around the functions of character types within a horror space. The assigning of genders to certain character roles is one that predates the horror genre. (12) It is interesting then to see how the subgenre of slashers has both subverted and constituted gender roles through the Final Girl trope. Within the world of slasher films, the Final Girl “is 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 . . . [and] lives with the knowledge [that she could die] for long minutes or hours.” (35) The Final

Girl exemplifies a standard of gender performativity that characters must live up to if they want to survive within a slasher film. She is simultaneously the hero and a site of gender anxiety. As such, the Final Girl's gender is performative, and she must consistently keep up a high level of self-surveillance and performance if she wants to survive against her slasher. If gender performativity, the repetition of gendered acts, explains how gender is socially constructed, then it is logical to assume that there are motivating factors to such construction. The purpose of this thesis is to examine the slasher film subgenre and how this subgenre responds to specific cultural anxieties regarding gender. To do this work, I first examine the ways in which the Final Girl trope operates within *Halloween*, as well as the ways that the character of Michael Myers embodies a kind of everyman figure, contextualizing these figures within the cultural ferment of the 1960s and 1970s generated in part by the emergence of second-wave Feminism. I build on this analysis of gender anxieties by considering the ways that the trans body is figured as a site of abjection within *Sleepaway Camp*. Finally, I examine how panopticism influences gender performativity through an analysis of the meta-slasher film *Scream*. This research reveals the structural gendered patterns that emerge in slasher films, specifically within the Final Girl trope and the behaviors that govern it, behaviors that point to an internal self-surveillance. With slasher films' mix of fear, social commentary, and constant surveillance of characters, the subgenre provides a rich site for analysis of cultural anxieties.

This thesis builds on scholarship within the interconnecting fields of horror films and gender studies. Clover's definition of the Final Girl has made its way into both popular culture and academic scholarship. Secondly, Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection is a theoretical tool to understand the lasting social implications these slasher films, particularly *Sleepaway Camp*, have on society. My work breaks down the behaviors and motivations of the Final Girl herself because

it is where we can see evidence of Michel Foucault's version of a panopticon at play. The panopticon style of prison that Foucault describes in *Discipline and Punish* is one that relies on prisoners' own self-surveillance and modification of behavior for the observer to dispense discipline. This alteration of behavior coincides with the awareness of an outside force found in horror films. Therefore, panopticism is a major factor in a character's gender performativity, especially in the Final Girl. By showing the relation and causation that panopticism and abjection have on gender performativity in a popular character trope, I am demonstrating the lasting connections between gender and film. As such, my thesis provides evidentiary support in why we must look toward the future of slasher films with these theoretical tools in mind.

Horror is often a space for negotiation. In this thesis, slashers as a subgenre provide a space in which we can negotiate, complicate, extract, and dissect anxieties about gender. Each film I have chosen to analyze—*Halloween*, *Sleepaway Camp*, and *Scream*—represents a cultural anxiety, fear, or worry. These cultural anxieties include fears about sexual liberation, gender fluidity, and a reclamation of one's gender identity. In responding to gendered anxieties, slasher films also contribute to the formation of culture. Culture can be defined as an amalgamation of identity formation within a community. In other words, everything from how a person talks, dresses, interacts with others, and even what they eat contribute to the process of making up a culture. In *Culture and Conflict Resolution*, Kevin Avruch argues that "culture is a derivative of individual experience, something learned or created by individuals themselves or passed on to them socially by contemporaries or ancestors." (6-7) By extension, a subculture is more narrowly focused in its makeup, and we see this reflected in communities surrounding slasher films. Slasher subculture focuses more on the horror film community's shared love of the subgenre and their experiences and reception of slasher films. In this sense, slasher films pass along and build

on existing cultural anxieties: their play in these cultural fears may explain their attraction to viewers and why they often attain a cult-like status. The onscreen experiences in a slasher film relate to experiences regarding anxieties off-screen. In looking at what processes naturalize gendered cultural roles, we must look toward media.

Feminism and issues of gender are touched on in media. *Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women's Movement Since 1970* focuses on television, but author Bonnie J. Dow's argument touches on media and culture. "Programs," she writes, "offer visions of what feminism 'means'. . . . However, to deny that they influence our thinking about women, women's roles, and the impact of social change is, it seems to me, to be dangerously naïve." (Dow 5) This influence Dow speaks of is evident in slashers due to their consistent use of gender tropes. A repeated use of a gender trope like the Final Girl adds to and cements a type of thinking within our culture.

Culture-defining happens in film. To look at the slasher subgenre, there are three specific films that lend themselves well to the production of truths regarding gender. To explore these truths further, we start in the 1970s. *Halloween* is not the first slasher film created, but it is where we see a clear beginning to the Final Girl trope as a product of cultural anxiety and the use of surveillance as a means of policing gender. *Halloween* explores the consequences of sexually provocative behavior amongst young women in contrast with its Final Girl. During the high popularity of slashers in the 1980s, one film sticks out in its play on gender performativity and use of abjection via the Final Girl. In responding to anxiety on gender fluidity, *Sleepaway Camp* intentionally muddles the line between binary genders and capitalizes on ensuing audience reactions to the presence of gender fluidity. After the inception, growth, and peak of slasher films in the 1970s and 1980s, the 1990s saw a dwindling popularity until *Scream* was released in 1996.

In looking back at the slasher subgenre and the Final Girl trope, *Scream* wraps up my arc of three distinct cultural anxieties. This film provides a hyperaware take on the slasher that involves a Final Girl who reclaims her identity whilst under the pressures of her gender role. Each film uses a trajectory of the Final Girl in such a way as to illustrate the anxieties of each decade. The Final Girl and her slasher are the physical embodiments used to represent these cultural worries. Combining panopticism, abjection, and gender performativity, these films support and reinforce the idea of irrefutable gender roles.

## **1.1 METHODOLOGY**

It is important and necessary to look at a visual representation to understand how these films uphold gender roles. My thesis uses content analysis and contextual analysis in order to argue that slasher films contribute to culture-making through their use of gendered tropes and panoptical discipline. My work will include an analysis of popular horror films of the mid- to late-twentieth century. Because while the birth of slashers as a subgenre can be argued to have occurred decades prior, the mid to late 1970s provide a more substantial starting point for the Final Girl character. Additionally, the trajectory of the Final Girl peaks in the 1980s before slowing in the 1990s. Moreover, textual analysis will also involve looking into specific frames of each film and demonstrating how these scenes explicate my argument. Screenshots of specific scenes provide indisputably clear images of gendered behavior within the Final Girl character. This method is also a way of seeing Foucault's concept of a social panopticon at play with respect to the observer, i.e., the slasher. Analyzing both slasher and Final Girl characters will be vital to understanding how panopticism, abjection, and gender performativity work together to fortify gender constructions.

In addition to looking at the content within a film, a contextual analysis will also be beneficial. It is important to not only look at the horror texts themselves, but I need to look at factors surrounding these films in social, cultural, and historical contexts. These three categories can provide information about what was important and valued during the time periods in which these films were made. In *Projected Fears: Horror Films and American Culture*, Kendall Phillips touches on the success of such films during this time period. They argue that certain horror films, most of which are slashers, are successful and remembered because they can trace back to “broader cultural anxieties into which they somehow tapped.” (Phillips 3) Indeed, the external factors that influence an audience’s reaction to such films leads itself to the internal self-surveillance we see in the films. Here, I will consider the marketing materials for each film and demonstrate how these external social factors play into the panoptical horror and self-fashioning within the films. Movie posters and other promotional materials are just as important as the film itself when considering widespread cultural anxieties. With that in mind, contextual analysis includes historical research into topics that are closely related to the American horror film industry during the latter half of the twentieth century. By extension, I will see how those values have had an enduring impact on modern horror texts.

In gaps that exist in previous academic scholarship, there are social and cultural elements of American horror films that speak to panopticism and abjection, and it is necessary to see how that plays a hand in gender performativity of female characters. (Clover 2015; Dow 1996; and Ojha 2017) Contextual analysis is crucial in helping answer this question. The context surrounding the American horror genre is filled with moral values and historical issues and anxieties. Those surrounding factors play a role in both the construction of the horror film and its reception by audiences. By using contextual analysis, I could see if these female representations

had anything to do with a film's success. On the other hand, it can be argued that *Sleepaway Camp*'s twist ending was the reason for less than favorable reviews in newspapers.

Similarly, genre analysis is an effective research methodology in responding to my research topic. I look at the comparisons between three female characters in American slasher films and how they might have differed from each other, despite being reiterations of the same character archetype. Analyzing female characters in this way results in locating differences that could provide an answer to why female characters behave the way they do in horror and slasher movies. Knowing this information is useful in learning how horror films are created and the reasons behind creative storytelling and character choices. Combining these three types of analyses provides a substantial starting point in beginning to answer my research question.

## 1.2 CHAPTER OVERVIEW

In Chapter One, I will analyze the 1978 American horror film, *Halloween*. By doing so, I will look at a specific character type that Jamie Lee Curtis's character, Laurie Strode, exemplifies and how that character is essentially a blueprint for other female characters who play similar roles in subsequent slasher movies. Her role as a Final Girl also solidified the character's typical interactions with her slasher, Michael Myers. Myers functions as a Final Girl counterpart in that he represents society at large. His actions mirror society's anxieties over a growing sexual liberation amongst younger generations. Clover mentions a switch in Strode's character that sets her apart from female characters in scary movies. Her switch from "passive to active defense" is what sets her apart and begins the era of the Final Girl. (Clover 37) That switch is presumably from more feminine behavior that is traditionally seen as weaker to a more masculine character that fights back against her aggressor. As such, this film provides the necessary information in



understanding how horror films contextualize societal fears about gender. I will argue in the following chapter how *Halloween* responds to and reinforces gender truths about sexual liberation via the Final Girl character.

While *Halloween* is not the first slasher film to feature a main character with gendered behavior, it is commonly accepted among horror fans as one of the best original depictions of the Final Girl. In an editorial written for Dread Central, writer Jenn Adams echoes public sentiment in her article, “Matriarchy Rising: Laurie Strode Guides a New Generation of Final Girls.” In it, she argues, “Laurie Strode is the undisputed queen of the final girls. She leads an elite group of phenomenal women who have fought off masked killers for decades. . . [and] her seminal story has helped define one of the most iconic subgenres in horror history: the slasher.” (Adams n.p.) Following the trajectory of the slasher film popularity, we come to the 80s, a decade in which the slasher grew to its height, to see how gender performativity is depicted in response to cultural anxieties.

In the second chapter, I analyze the continuing, evolving gender anxieties that were still prevalent years after the success of *Halloween*. As mentioned above, Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity can be defined as a series of actions that create and sustain one’s gender identity. To further consider cultural anxieties regarding gender fluidity and trans embodiment, I will then analyze the 1983 horror film, *Sleepaway Camp*. The film’s depictions of its Final Girl and slasher are meant to shock audiences into abjective repulsion. Although viewers are meant to see the Final Girl, Angela, as the victim of a slasher, it is revealed at the very end of the movie that *she* is the slasher while also showing her with a penis. The audience is left with the revelation that Angela was born male but was forced to transition to female under the influence of her aunt. The performativity of Angela’s character, by being forced to present as female, is

where the story's proposed horror takes place. Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection in conjunction with the theory of gender performativity explains society's fear of gender fluidity. The inflexible societal line regarding binary gender roles begins to blur in this movie. Felissa Rose as Angela also engages in self-surveillance throughout the entire film. Before the slasher begins murdering campers, Angela is shown to audiences as a quiet Final Girl-type. She is obedient and subservient when conversing with her aunt and does not engage in typical teenage girl behavior when she arrives at summer camp. Angela falls into the Final Girl archetype when she does not participate in sexual behavior. When a boy shows interest in Angela, that is when the film reveals its plot twist. By showing its Final Girl and slasher at the end as one person fully nude in a still frame, it perpetuates audiences' fear of those who cross the socially constructed boundaries of gender. The prolonging shot forces audiences to sit with the reveal and to sit in their possible discomfort at the presence of gender fluidity. At the end of the film, spectators are left with the shocking reveal of Angela's gender, not her status as the slasher. It exposes and illustrates a fear within society of those who do not conform to binary biological gender.

For the third and final film, I wrap up the trajectory of the Final Girl with a meta-slasher film that is aware of its own tropes. The 1996 film *Scream* proves the limits of the Final Girl archetype. Sidney is a Final Girl and realizes her position as one. Using Foucault's concept of panopticism, I analyze the way this character self-surveils and performs her gender in such a way to ensure her survival. Sidney is aware of her chances of survival given that the characters discuss their situation in slasher film terms. If the 1990s sees a self-aware Final Girl, where does that leave the subgenre of slashers for the future, particularly since slashers rely on the existence of the Final Girl opposite a male slasher? Sidney's character arc as a Final Girl gives us clues as

to what cultural anxieties existed regarding gender in the mid to late 1990s. Ghostface is the observer and Sidney is the observed. Sidney redefines what the Final Girl can do during a slasher film in that she does not necessarily have to abide by the original Final Girl blueprint molded in the 1970s. She can engage in sexual behavior and still survive against Ghostface at the end of the film. In this redefinition, the film exposes a cultural anxiety regarding a reclamation of one's gender identity. Echoed in their own work, Kendall Phillips writes, "[i]n the end, Sidney is saved not through knowledge of the genre . . . but by her own inner strength of character." (179) Sidney is a feminine and sexually active Final Girl, but she does not succumb to the blueprint set before her. Neve Campbell's portrayal of Sidney suggests the end of the original archetype, or at least the end of its limits as defined by *Halloween*. These films secure their place in the slasher canon through their ability to both create terror in the audience and respond to cultural anxieties. I assert that films, and popular culture as a whole, operate as social commentary. They are successful at this if cultural anxieties can be found in the films analyzed and if it can be argued that the film is contributing to said anxiety.

In understanding culture-making, we need to look toward popular culture and its influence on society. Horror is a broad film genre that plays a part in defining gender, but it is in the slasher subgenre where this is explicitly clear. Slashers must follow a clear-cut blueprint, and part of that blueprint relies upon gendered tropes to function. How does the slasher acknowledge and answer to gender anxieties in our society? How does the slasher play a part in culture-making? *Halloween*, *Sleepaway Camp*, and *Scream* are three films in three chronological decades that use the slasher film formula to answer and contribute to gender truths. Slasher films recognize the existing cultural anxieties regarding gender and capitalize on, critique, and hold up these gender truths through their reinforcement of the Final Girl.

## CHAPTER 2

### *HALLOWEEN'S MICHAEL MYERS: "THE SHAPE" THAT SURVEILS*

Laurie: Annie, look!

Annie: Look where? I don't see anything.

Laurie: That guy who passed us in the car before, the one you yelled at!

Annie: Subtle, isn't he?

Second Wave Feminism as it occurred in the 1970s did not happen in a vacuum.

Centuries of feminist work compounded, and as a result, sexual liberation spilled over into the 1970s. The rise in 1970s feminist activism is well-documented in Gender Studies literature.

Alice Echols' *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* clearly shows the social conditions that led to a radical feminism that took over the zeitgeist of the early 70s. As Echols writes, radical feminism "fought for safe, effective, accessible contraception: the repeal of all abortions laws; the creation of high-quality, community-controlled child-care centers; and an end to the media's objectification of women." (Echols 4) Turning away from what Echols describes as "a socialist revolution . . . and the liberal feminist solution," radical feminism "articulated the earliest and most provocative critiques of the family, marriage, love, normative heterosexuality, and rape." (3-4) The culmination of rapidly spreading feminist movements resulted in a change to how American society views feminism, and this change is mirrored within the early slasher films of the 1970s.

As America entered the decade, feminist movements grew and gained traction. Perhaps most notably, Betty Friedan's "Women's Strike for Equality" on August 26, 1970 helped usher in a new feminism that built off the work of other feminists and gatherings like the Seneca Falls Convention one hundred years earlier. ("Women Strike For Equality") Second wave feminism

turned from voting rights to bodily rights. In *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, journalist Susan Faludi remarks this movement and its “progress on the twin fronts of employment and fertility” that achieved the mobility and independence for women in the middle of the twentieth century. (Faludi 55) The focus of feminism turned toward individuals and their bodily autonomy.

While feminist thought spread across the country, it was not without its detractors. The introduction of new sociocultural thought brings with it societal anxiety. Seeing the discrepancy between generational values, there were those who blamed women for their own unhappiness because they were “enslaved by their own liberation.” (Faludi x) As Dow has argued, social aspirations of sexual purity, heteronormativity, and nuclear families destabilized through the rise of radical feminism. The abandonment of these traditional values in favor of the “violence” of radical feminist causes “produced the rise in slasher movies.” (Faludi xi) Faludi introduces the concept of backlash to describe this negative response to the growth of feminism in the United States. In chronicling its history, she writes, “[t]he most recent round of backlash first surfaced in the late ‘70s on the fringes, among the evangelical right. . . Just when women’s quest for equal rights seemed closest to achieving its objectives, the backlash struck it down.” (Faludi xix) The anxieties over the newly liberated female body dominated conversations in American society. Going further, she looks at films throughout the twentieth century. If we look back at the films of the 1950s, there is an obvious “backlash cinema” and “independent women are finally silenced by pushing them off screen.” (Faludi 138) As Faludi has suggested in her introduction, there were attempts at shutting down any argument for feminism and those reached popular culture through the medium of films. In the seventies, at the start of the slasher subgenre, there was a space where these anxieties could be negotiated for younger audiences.

Sexual liberation was an unknown and caused anxiety over what the future might look like, as well. French philosopher Michel Foucault wrote about proliferation of sexual identities in his book, *The History of Sexuality, Volume One*. He argues that power functions through subjectivity, and sexuality is one of those avenues because “there is no escaping from power.” (Foucault 82) To document and express these newfound anxieties, creators turned to various forms of media, including film. Anxieties stemming from heteronormativity could be played out in this medium, particularly within the horror genre. Horror provided a canvas on which to act out society’s worst fears. They have historically offered their audiences catharsis, a way to navigate their fears in a controlled environment. The seventies and eighties saw an explosion of slasher films. Due to the growing fear about the consequences of sexual freedom among young people, popular media geared toward younger age groups tackled these social anxieties.

## **2.1 THE “SLASHER” SUBGENRE**

In establishing the rules of the slasher subgenre, it is important to first look at the word and its etymology. The word “slasher” has been in use since the sixteenth century, meaning “one who slashes; a fighter, a bully; a slashing fellow.” (“slasher”) The use of the word to describe an antagonist has not changed over the last five hundred or so years. However, it was not until the 1970s where it was used to definitively describe a subgenre of film. Its definition also makes sure to include the slasher’s main choice of weapon, a blade. (“slasher”) In the early slasher films, some form of a blade has always been used. 1974’s *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* saw the use of a chainsaw, no doubt having an effect on later slasher films, such as 1978’s *Halloween*. Interestingly, in looking at the same entry in the Oxford English Dictionary, its use in newspapers and magazines of the 1970s was interchangeable with “snuff films.” (“slasher”)

Snuff films, while a similar definition of “slasher,” now refer to films with actual murder. (“snuff”) Of course, the popular slasher films of the 1970s through today would not be considered “snuff” films by mainstream audiences. Naturally, this type of film may not be socially acceptable and would not be used to describe the slasher subgenre. This deviation to a more universally accepted definition has allowed the slasher film genre to accumulate a cult-like following that has lasted through the last five decades.

While scholar Sotiris Petridis makes the argument that ‘pre-slashers’ had an influence on John Carpenter’s 1978 film, *Halloween*, these earlier films’ production “was not so systematic” of the slasher subgenre. (Petridis 9) Slasher films in this particular subgenre follow a set of conventions and expectations that have allowed them to become successful since the 1970s. It is *because* of the particular formula in *Halloween* that has solidified it as a true, original slasher film that has made an impression on the entire genre of horror. Slasher films depicting sexually active American youth almost all feature the same tropes. Sexually active female characters appear to suffer identical fates at the hands of homicidal male antagonists while those who remain chaste or adhere to traditionally feminine domestic roles survive against the almost always male villains. It has become so well-known that the phenomenon was coined the Final Girl trope by Carol Clover in her book, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. Final Girls follow a pattern of behavior that toes the line between the traditionalism of the fifties and the growing feminist movement of the seventies. Final Girls exhibit feminist behavior and exercise agency, but they do so while remaining chaste. Even in a violent body genre such as horror, there still exists a conservative message that can be parceled out. In *Projected Fears: Horror Films and American Culture*, Kendall R. Phillips writes that “[i]n the midst of a disco and a growing sexual revolution, the seeds of a new, more conservative

American culture were beginning to sprout. It was in the midst of this cultural sea change that John Carpenter's *Halloween* struck such a sensitive nerve." (Phillips 129) *Halloween* showcases one of the earliest depictions of the Final Girl trope in horror in slashers. The film pits virtuous Laurie Strode against Michael Myers, an escaped mental patient who stalks and kills several of Laurie's promiscuous friends. By doing so, the male killer is a physical embodiment of society's rebuttal against feminist sex positivity.

## 2.2 AN EVERYMAN AMONG WOMEN

*Halloween* is one of the most prevalent slasher films from the decade to feature such an antagonist in the form of Michael Myers. As a character with no spoken dialogue in the first film, Myers' lack of facial expressions and looming size are what encompass his entire character profile. It is within the culturally established rules of the horror slasher movie genre to have a masculine-presenting villain. The recurring monster trope solidifies for audiences the monstrous masculinity that is prevalent within popular culture and society at large. Tony Moran, who plays Michael Myers in the original 1978 film, stands at six feet tall with broad shoulders. In the inevitable sequels that followed, filmmakers were sure to cast actors with similar physiques, cementing the uber-masculine image audiences are familiar with today. In the film's credits, Tony Moran was originally not credited for the character of "Michael Myers" at the end. His name was beside "The Shape." (Tyler) The question then becomes how does Michael Myers exhibit autonomy in the film, despite the lack of a name in the credits? Why was it important to Carpenter and the writers to name Myers in the film? Naming a character gives them agency. It justifies Myers' ability to move about the film with intent. However, in leaving out his name in the credits, the writers have relegated Myers to a nameless everyman. The character



objectification of Myers within the written credits is combined with the plain jumpsuit and mask he wears. Michael Myers is not meant to be specific or individualistic as a character. Phillips, in referring Michael Myers to a “punishing bogeyman,” remarks that this representation of his character “heralds a cultural return to a more conservative set of cultural values.” (Phillips 134-135) Myers represents a soulless, everyday monster who lurks within suburban towns.

The rise of slasher films presents an interesting conversation concerning social anxieties. While the films of the first half of the twentieth century focused on mythical or supernatural beings as antagonists, early films like *Psycho*, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, and *Halloween* feature seemingly real men as weapon-slinging killers. Fear associated with the possibility of being chased by a slasher happening to a viewer lent itself to the rise and success of these horror slasher films. *Halloween*'s Michael Myers is a prime example of the type of fear that is rendered possible by an uber-masculine everyman. His actions are predicated on and informed by patriarchal values that have been instilled in American society. The slasher films of the latter half of the century mirrored the real-life monsters that murdered dozens of people during those same decades. Coverage of serial killers like Ted Bundy, John Wayne Gacy, and Richard Ramirez dealt a hand in the success of these films as part of the horror genre.

Horror is meant to incite a bodily reaction among its viewers. Filmmakers of the genre hope that those who see their films are left feeling scared, shaken, or with physical symptoms, like nausea and vomiting. In order to achieve these reactions, the film has its roots in real life inspiration. At the time, American hysteria over serial killers (and to an extent, satanism) let them experience and play out that horror in slasher films. In an article for *The New York Times*, Dr. Harold Schechter said, “[p]articuliar killers who capture the attention of the public reflect the fears of specific eras . . . For instance, Charles Manson represented the ‘perfect materialization of

these 1960's fears of these drug-crazed, sex-crazed, demon hippy types'." (Stone Lombardi) Seeing a film like *Halloween* that places Michael Myers so prominently as a dominating male killer evokes anxiety. Here is a character who not only presents a very real threat to the other characters but also who could be anyone. Viewers do not see his face as an adult, so they are left with placing an identity to Myers. This is how Myers is able to function as a typical slasher antagonist and how his character established a slasher mimicry that continued for at least the next two decades.

Myers sports a blank yet unmistakably masculine face mask and represents a patriarchal society's values. The choice of the mask for Michael Myers is a weighted one. Instead of going down the grotesque route, the costume designers opted for a human-like mask. The mask itself was fashioned out of a Star Trek Captain Kirk mask that was stretched and spray-painted white. This choice left Michael Myers with a vaguely similar face that audiences could find somewhat familiar. It was a deliberate choice to keep Michael Myers as human as possible. This is not a monster from the early films of the twentieth century among the likes of Dracula, the mummy, or the creature from the Blue Lagoon, wherein these figures are character-specific and therefore are less likely to be wholly replicated. Michael is fitted in a plain mask with hair and a fitted jumpsuit. Through the costume design, Michael Myers is fashioned into an "everyman." In tying in the medieval morality play of the same name from the fifteenth century, the plot of *Halloween* and Michael's character can be read as a moral warning, a moral "everyman," among 1970s audiences.

However, what makes Myers different is that he has not yet made that leap to "god-like" status at the film's start. Myers can be read as a somewhat organized homicidal slasher. He methodically waits until Halloween night, on the anniversary of his sister's murder, to commit

the murders of Laurie Strode's friends. In his slasher style, Myers opts for a butcher's knife, leading to bloody and chaotic murder scenes. Myers carrying out his morals in this way is what laid the foundation of the male slasher. His motivations show up from his very first scene in the film with his sister, Judith, to the last scene where he somehow survives falling out of a second-story window. In one instance, Laurie and Dr. Loomis, the doctor who has been looking for Michael Myers after his escape from a psychiatric hospital, look out of the window at Michael's seemingly lifeless body. In the next scene only seconds later, Myers' body is gone. This almost supernatural speed of movement suggests Myers' lack of mortality and humanity. He is not subject to the same laws of physics. He can fall out of a second-story window, survive, and maintain his same level of physicality. While his physical body is larger-than-life with unnatural abilities, it is not solely what paints Myers as a slasher archetype. What makes Michael Myers stand out as one of the first slashers is his motivating factor. In the original film, Myers kills almost only female-identifying characters, most of whom are sexually active.

### **2.3 SEXUAL LIBERATION AS CULTURAL ANXIETY**

In a decade of sexual revolution, this liberation was socially transgressive. When Michael Myers stalks and murders his sister and, later, Laurie Strode's friends, he is doing so with a moral motivation. In the act of killing, he is imposing his own patriarchal morals and inflicting punishment upon the characters who cross this socio-moral boundary of sexual purity and sexual agency. The sexual social boundary that society established and has perpetuated for so long cannot be crossed without Americans needing some form of disciplinary action. Contemporary audiences would have expected sexually active teenagers who shirk babysitting duties to receive some form of punishment, even if they did not explicitly say "murder." What does not fit into

this definition of a slasher is Michael's fascination with Laurie Strode, a virginal character who does not fit the archetype of "promiscuous teenager." It is here where his motivation begins to deviate and the audience is left questioning Myers' obsession with murdering a babysitter who, for all intents and purposes, fits into the domesticity that patriarchal society smiles upon. In his fixation on a virginal character who comes to embody the Final Girl trope, Michael's character as a slasher is solidified. He is now focused on hunting down Laurie Strode, who fits into the social hegemonic narrative. The creation of Michael Myers' character introduces to audiences a slasher that inspired (and still continues to inspire to this day) an everyman mimicry in the slasher films of the next few decades. It is important to delve into Michael's motivations regarding Laurie Strode as the film plays out a slasher/Final Girl dichotomy. To understand Myer's preconception with murder and his fascination with Jamie Lee Curtis' Laurie Strode, it is important to look into the first scene with Michael Myers and his sister, Judith.

## **2.4 VOYEURISM AS A RESPONSE TO ANXIETY**

The film's beginning sequence starts with Michael Myer's childhood and his first murder in 1963. In the opening scenes, *Halloween* places the audience within the point of view of a voyeur. As the viewer, we see a teenage girl and boy engaged in a display of affection within a suburban home. They move throughout the house as the camera pans outside, and we only see the teenagers through the windows. The two head upstairs, and it is insinuated that the two have sex while home alone. Keeping with the voyeuristic point of view, we are then shown that we are seeing through the eyes of a child in a Halloween costume as they place a mask over the camera, leaving two eye holes through which the audience watches the rest of the scene. The child's hand grabs a butcher knife, and it is only after the male teenager leaves that we are led upstairs. The

audience later learns that they have taken the point of view of Michael Myers, the film's antagonist and slasher. Michael stalks and kills his sister as she sits topless while brushing her hair.

The entire murder scene is filmed through Michael Myers' point of view, with the camera situated behind the eyeholes of the mask he is wearing. It is also the first and only scene we see of Judith. By showing the audience Judith's semi-naked and post-coital body through child Myer's eyes signals to the audience that this is what American society would identify as a promiscuous teenager. In doing so, the film provokes a 1978 audience to conclude that Judith's death was deserved, a product of a "she was asking for it" mentality. There are no other reasons that the film gives for Michael's act of violence. While some may assume that this opening sequence is designed to show that Michael Myers is without emotion and will commit a horrendous crime at a young age, it is more complex than that. It is not just that he is a violent killer, but he appears to have a killing agenda that directly stems from culturally ingrained gender roles that were the source of a growing social anxiety and that he is doing so through voyeurism. In the scene with his sister Judith, Michael Myers would have been around six years old in 1963, putting his birth year in 1957. He is the byproduct of parents who lived through the social idealism of the fifties and raised Myers with those same ideals in mind. Similarly, young audience members would have included viewers who could have been Michael Myers' peers. The well-established gender roles did not only exist in fiction. Audiences could relate to the same social and cultural norms that are at the heart of Myers' motivation.

Placing the audience into that role of observer and sadistic killer was done so with reason. An audience member is forced to identify with Myers and his motives. It compels the viewer to try to understand why Michael has done what he has. *Halloween* allows a voyeuristic view into

the mind of a slasher. By occupying the observer's gaze, a viewer inhabits the patriarchal values that a character like Michael Myers holds. It complicates the narrative. It would be easy to simply show a knife-wielding slasher in a horror film for the sake of the genre, but the film goes a step further with Myers' character. Audiences must reconcile what they are being shown with why these few particular scenes were filmed this way. Contemporary audiences would have been aware of the sexual social context. Myers targeted his sister who had done nothing toward her younger brother, at least on-screen, that would lead us to believe her death was warranted. Judith simply engaged in consensual sexual behavior. Additionally, Judith's death does little more than serve as a catalyst for Michael's future behavior and character evolution as a true slasher.

Even though Myers is posed as a murderous character, he only targets characters that are seen by contemporary audiences as sexually promiscuous and/or have just had pre-marital sex. The people, mainly women, he murders are all in consenting relationships, and yet, to convince the audience that these women are promiscuous, the effectiveness of Michael Myers' character relies on the pre-existing social biases of a contemporary audience. The shifting paradigm of what was socially and culturally accepted of the earlier decades was changing before the start of this film. An audience viewing this during its initial release would have to contend with that paradigm shift. To desire sex and to be open about it, the film places Myers' victims well within the culturally ingrained and socially arbitrary definition of promiscuity. However, as far as what the film tells us, these women do not sleep with any other characters. They are simply vocal about deriving sexual pleasure from their partners. Because of this, they are targeted by Michael Myers in what has since become a trope, or an established pattern of character and plot, of the slasher genre. Laurie Strode, *Halloween's* Final Girl, does not vocalize such a desire. This is what solidifies her as a Final Girl.

## 2.5. OBSERVING THE FINAL GIRL

Fifteen years after the murder of his sister, Michael Myers has escaped from the facility at which he was being held and adopts a blank mask and jumpsuit to begin his reign of patriarchal terror. *Halloween* introduces Laurie Strode, the main character and Final Girl of the film, played by Jamie Lee Curtis. Immediately, Strode is coded as a “good girl” type. She wears modest, conservative clothing with little to no skin showing. Wearing a skirt and stockings, behaviors gendered by society as feminine, the costume designer’s choices signal to the audience that Laurie Strode is performing her gender in a way that does not go against the established hegemony. This is where Michael Myers sees her for the first time. As she drops off a set of keys at the Myers’ now abandoned home for her realtor father, Myers, who has been standing in the house looking out, catches a glimpse of Laurie Strode. As she walks away with a young boy whom she will be babysitting that night, Myers continues his voyeurism. His actions codify him as an observer, and Laurie is the observed. Based on how Strode is framed as a modestly dressed young woman who appears to carry a domestic or maternal role with this child, it intrigues Michael enough that he continues to follow her around throughout the first act of the film. As Laurie walks away in this scene, presumably to school, the camera is placed right behind the left shoulder of Michael Myers. Different than the eye-hole camera placement of the opening scene, this shot still establishes the same effect as the audience possession of Judith Myers’ murder. We hear Michael’s breathing. We are placed next to him and are forced to watch Laurie walk away, placing her into an objective male gaze.

It is here where the slasher definition comes into play in regard to Michael’s motivation. He spends the entirety of the movie going after sexually active teens, but he also tries to murder Laurie Strode, who is not coded as sexually active or even promiscuous by society’s definition.

Michael turns his homicidal attention toward Laurie because she represents the opposite side of the masculine/feminine spectrum. While her costuming is feminine, her gender performativity begins to verge too close toward the masculine as the film progresses and therefore causes another social anxiety that Michael feels he must rectify. It is necessary to assess and deconstruct the scenes with Michael Myers and Laurie Strode's friends in order to appreciate the motivations behind the character relationship between Myers and Strode.



Figure 1: Laurie, Annie, and Lynda.

Once Laurie has left school and is walking home with her friends, Lynda and Annie, Michael continues his fixation and follows them home. As the three teenage girls discuss their plans for that Halloween night, spectators see how the girls' gender is performed. As fashion became more androgynous and slasher films featuring more masculine women grew in popularity, gender became increasingly flexible and less rigid of a construction. Jamie Lee Curtis' portrayal of Laurie Strode featured a Final Girl who opted for androgynous clothing, namely jeans. Combined with a mostly male audience turned the Final Girl into a character that



male viewers related to. The Final Girl is not simply a female heroine. She is “a hero, who rises to the occasion and defeats the adversary with his own wit and hands.” (Clover 59) Her clothing affords her mobility, both physically and within her gender.

Laurie’s outfit, shown in Figure 1, is coded as feminine while Lynda and Annie are both wearing jeans. Their outfits are more in line with the youth of the seventies and break away from the gender performative fashion of the fifties. The choices of costuming in this scene reflect the differences between the older generations and the younger ones influenced by sexual liberation and second-wave feminism. Lynda and Annie dress more modern in ways that show off their figure as they speak about potential sexual exploits that evening. Laurie, in her feminine garb, makes no comments about a possible sexual interaction. She only speaks about her babysitting duties that evening. In contrast, Lynda directly makes a comment about “[getting] out of taking my little brother trick or treating” so she can meet up with her boyfriend and presumably engage in sexual behavior. (*Halloween* 00:23:23-00:23:26) Immediately after, Annie and Laurie spot Michael Myers watching them from behind a hedge. Instead of performing a more feminine, victim role, Annie shouts at Michael, approaches him, and calls him a “creep.” (*Halloween* 00:24:03-00:24:05) Her forward behavior and teasing nature toward Laurie marks her as an aggressive and inflammatory character to the audience that still hold pre-second-wave feminism values, and it can be assumed that her actions are what put her under Michael Myers’ patriarchal and homicidal radar. As the film goes on, we see Laurie start to engage in behavior that aligns more with seventies youth than the fifties’ ideals. As she spends screen time with Annie, she smokes and changes her outfit to one similar to Lynda’s and Annie’s, favoring jeans. Michael Myers witnesses this change in Laurie’s gender performativity whilst following them in a stolen car, and it is here when his obsession with Laurie grows.

## 2.6 THE GENDER PERFORMATIVITY OF LAURIE STRODE AND CO.

In the reveal of Laurie's character complexity lies the social anxiety with which Michael has a hard time contending or understanding. Laurie, when we are first introduced to her, is seemingly a flat, static female character who performs her gender in ways that align with gender hegemony. She wears feminine coded clothing. However, as audiences continue to watch her on screen, we see that she is more complex than the simple domestic female main character she appears to be. There are different sides to Laurie that manifest in ways that create tension within Myers. By showing a more dynamic woman that possesses many sides in a slasher film, it sets up the possibility of confusion in those who strictly abide by social conventions. Confusion has the ability to grow into a larger anxiety. With anxiety comes a need to rectify that tension. As the film demonstrates the power of showing Myers's exact point of view, society can look at Michael Myers as the one to address the social discrepancy on screen.

In a scene that follows, Michael is outside of Annie's house listening in and watching her. In a similar way to Laurie, Anne is placed into a subjective spectacle view. After getting her clothes dirty while cooking, Annie takes off her top, and the audience sees her bare back. While there is no full-frontal chest shot, this small snippet still shows Annie in an eroticized point of view. She undressed in the lit kitchen in front of an open window where Michael Myers is watching in his trademark voyeuristic fashion. As Annie throws on a button-down shirt that appears to belong to a man, Michael, in a fit of childish rage, pulls down on a hanging potted plant. It crashes to the ground outside, and before Annie can look over to see what made the sound, Myers has already left.

Spectators who have identified with Michael Myers' fifties idealism can guess what will happen next based on his actions toward his sister at the film's start. The primary urge that

Myers focuses on is sexual desire. To see a female character who is not doing anything explicitly or graphically sexual in nature and to react the way he does, Myers is viewing Annie through a 1950s lens. In his mind, Annie should not have been semi-nude in the full view of whomever may be passing by as he appears to equate nudity with promiscuity. The sexuality of characters and their comfort regarding their own bodies, particularly those who identify as female, irritate and enrage him. This is evident by his murder of his own sister and by his outburst when Annie undresses in the kitchen light in front of open windows. Later on, Annie begins to wash the clothes she dirtied, and spectators see her perform a feminine-coded chore. When Michael watches her from the other side of the door, he does not attack her or have any sort of outburst as he did in an earlier scene. It is because she is performing gender in a non-anxious way. Myers locks Annie in the laundry room to keep her in this household position and away from sexual temptation. He physically imposes his older values on Annie by trapping her in a domestic space. When Annie finds her way out of the laundry room, she makes plans with her boyfriend to hook up and asks Laurie to watch Lindsey as well as the child she is already baby-sitting. In shirking her domesticity and leaving the household, Myers murders Annie for not adhering to socially established gender norms.

## **2.7 PROMISCUITY VS. DOMESTICITY**

As an overall juxtaposing character, the film shoots to Laurie, who is babysitting a young boy and watching *The Thing*, a film from the early fifties directed by Howard Hawks. This editing shows the opposition between Laurie Strode and Annie. Annie was not in the same room as the child she was babysitting, Lindsey. Laurie is on the couch, firmly sat in domesticity, watching a film that nostalgic audiences would have recognized. In this scene, Laurie should not

be causing any anxiety within Michael Myers or the audience based on her behavior. She engages in activities that the child would be interested in on Halloween night, such as carving pumpkins. When Annie arrives to ask Laurie to babysit both children so she can meet up with her boyfriend, Laurie is in the kitchen with a towel over her shoulder and an apron around her waist. Fashioned as a housewife from the fifties, the audience distinguishes Laurie's actions with Annie's. At this point in the film, Laurie is not yet the target of Myers' homicidal patriarchal rage. Instead, Myers follows Annie and murders her in her car, dealing out a physical form of moral punishment for transgressing the social line of her gender.

As Michael Myers continues his slasher reign through the film, Dr. Loomis has been trying to find Michael Myers after his escape. He remarks to a Haddonfield police officer that he "watched him for fifteen years, sitting in a room, staring at a wall, not seeing the wall, looking past the wall, looking at this night, inhumanly patient. Waiting for some secret silent alarm to trigger him off." (*Halloween* 00:57:32-00:00:57:50) As a film antagonist that was born out of 1950s values, Michael's trigger came in the form of his feelings of patriarchal superiority culminating in urges to dole out physical punishment to those he considered to be sexually transgressive. Michael embarked on a mission of fifties morals that directly appealed to the conservative populations in America at the time of the film's release.

In a true performance as a slasher, Michael Myers turns toward another teenager in the film. His sense of superiority grew after murdering Annie. Laurie's other friend, Lynda, was tasked with taking her younger brother trick-or-treating. Instead, the film cuts to her and her boyfriend drinking while driving and making plans to have sex that evening. In showing the pair immediately inebriated whilst driving a motor vehicle signals to the audience that these characters behave in a far more debaucherously manner than Annie. Soon after they arrive at the

house where Annie is supposed to be babysitting, they have sex where Michael waits and watches. By this point in the film, the audience expects that Michael is lurking nearby, observing in his panoptical way. Similar to Michael's sister, Lynda and her boyfriend have sex in a room that is not theirs. As Lynda's boyfriend leaves the room after their sexual tryst, he finds himself locked in just as Annie had been. Myers comes out of a closet and kills Bob, Lynda's boyfriend, by stabbing him and pinning him to the wall. In doing so, he elevates Bob in a higher position on the wall that affords Bob's corpse the ability to observe just as Myers does.

Interestingly, Michael appears to escalate his own behaviors. For the first time in the film, Michael Myers wears a sheet over his head with Bob's glasses and pretends to be Lynda's boyfriend as he walks over to kill her as well. For the entirety of the film, the film places the audience in the point of view of Michael, possessing an observing slasher's point of view. Here, Michael is inhabiting a different persona. This action does not fall in line with the typical behavior the audience has seen thus far. Lynda sits up in bed, and the sheets fall down, revealing her bare chest. She does not truly know that it is Bob under the sheet. Her promiscuity enrages Myers, and he starts to choke her. In a struggle, she tries to call Laurie. Myers kills Lynda in the same fashion that he kills Annie. Strangulation, often seen as a crime of passion, is reserved for the female characters in this movie, except for his sister, Judith. A crime of passion, as defined by The Legal Information Institute at Cornell Law School, "is a crime committed in the 'heat of passion' in response to provocation, as opposed to one that was premeditated or deliberated." ("Crime of Passion") Myers kills these women only after they engage in behavior he does not like. His murders are not planned out to a meticulous degree. Instead, Myers murders impulsively. The contradiction between Bob's death and most of the women in this film suggest that Michael is holding a double standard of murder methods that stem from his own sexist

upbringing. With Bob, he resorted to stabbing, a more violent, bloody mode. When murdering the women in this film, Myers chose strangulation, suggesting that there is a highly emotional, even sexual, reaction that Michael is having toward these women. It explains why he reserved stabbing for his own sister as opposed to strangulation. As Michael continues to kill, the audience members can recognize the differences in how Michael murders his victims.

Laurie, after growing suspicious at the sudden disappearances of her friends, heads over to the house where Annie and Lynda supposedly were. Dressed in a masculine-presenting outfit of a button-down and jeans, Laurie heads upstairs where she discovers Annie's body laid out on the bed with a headstone that reads "Our Beloved Daughter, Judith Myers." (*Halloween* 01:15:41 01:15:55) Michael, for the first time that the audience sees, has manipulated a body post-death. While Lynda's actions were more in line with Judith's prior to her death, Michael chose Annie to represent his late sister. A seventies audience may have been questioning Myers' motives at this point. If one were to analyze the anxieties caused by Laurie, Annie, and Lynda, a viewer expects to see Michael Myers place Lynda in this position as her actions closely resembled his sister's. Is there another reason why Myers would choose Annie for this placement? The answer in how Annie performs her gender. In contrast to Lynda's appearance, Annie aligns more so with Laurie's representation of gender. Both are tomboy-ish in nature and favor shorter hair and jeans. When Annie spilled food on her clothing in an earlier scene, she chose to wear a men's shirt while she cleaned her clothes. The combination of her gender performativity along with her socially deemed promiscuous behavior prove to be highly motivating for Myers, as evidenced by her murder and subsequent body placement.

## 2.8 LAURIE STRODE'S ROLE REVERSAL

While Laurie's actions in this scene suggest a 'good girl' persona, her gender performativity is still causing tension for Myers. As she views her dead friends, she displays grief as Michael watches her from behind. His obsession with Laurie and her performativity reaches a high point as he finally makes a move toward her. In the growing climax of the movie, Myers chases Laurie extensively, trying to stab her as he did with Bob. By trying to stab Laurie instead of strangling her to death as he did to her friends, this proves that he sees her performativity as too masculine. Her masculinity causes too much anxiety for Myers. While an audience is supposed to identify with Laurie as she is the main character, her screen time has not been very high throughout the film. The film up until this point has focused solely on Myers and his victims. By changing the camera shots and showing Laurie as subject instead of as object, the path to the film's climax is centered solely around Laurie. The audience is no longer placed into the point of view of Michael and the male gaze. Instead, audience goers must now reconcile with Laurie's role as the Final Girl.

Interestingly, as Michael tries to stab Laurie, she too picks up another phallic shape and stabs Michael in the neck. This role reversal affirms Laurie's more masculine representation and gives her more agency through the film's last scenes. Her character portrayal evolved from the beginning of the film where she embodied the fifties ideals and values to the end where she represents a seventies youth. Her actions while being stalked and attacked by Michael Myers are indicative of someone with agency, a role largely left to males both in fictional stories in film as well as society at large. She is able to keep Lindsey and Tommy safe, cementing her domestic, maternal side, while she pretends to have escaped by opening a door that leads to the outside. As she hides in a closet, hoping that Michael will follow the fake path outside, Laurie demonstrates

a knowledge that few female characters have been shown to have in films like these. However, Michael is able to see through Laurie's ruse and breaks down the closet where she is hiding. In the midst of panic, Laurie has the mind to grab a wire hanger from above and quickly fashion it into a weapon as Michael is beating down the door. In her role, she exhibits an ability to exert autonomy and stabs Myers face once more with a now-phallic-looking object. She also takes Michael's knife from him and stabs him with it. This does not kill Michael. Instead, he resorts to an attempt at strangulation, a method of murder he reserved for Annie and Lynda. By using both stabbing and strangulation techniques with Laurie, he is demonstrating to the audience her complexity as a character and the complexity of gender performativity. Laurie's conduct, while in line with a younger seventies' generation, proves to incite tension within an older audience by way of Michael Myers' slasher persona. Be that as it may, Myers is only able to function as an unknown assailant because he has remained masked. When Myers tries to strangle Laurie and she pulls his mask off, his ability to move about the film as "The Shape" is hindered.



Figure 2: *Halloween* 1978 Movie Poster.



As mentioned, Myers has been able to function as a slasher due to a combination of factors. He had to have been masked in order to achieve an ‘everyman’ appearance. Indeed, even the original movie poster, as shown in Figure 2, indicates a level of anonymity until he is unmasked. The new specificity to his character profile forces the audience to view Myers through a new gaze, but he is still very much “The Shape” as his bodily size and physicality has not changed. His face is somewhat deformed, and this places Michael into a role for younger audiences with which to view him. A younger audience, while more familiar and comfortable with changing attitudes regarding sexual liberation, would have included a diverse range of morals and beliefs.

Those who agreed with sexual liberation and second-wave feminism would have found Michael’s character as monstrous and indicative of a bygone era. For those in the audience who still held on fervently to their older beliefs about sexuality, Myers represents something different. He places the mask back on seconds after Laurie unmasks him. Despite the change in appearance, Myers still embodies a fifties nostalgia through his character. He did not kill every person he came across just for the sake of killing them. His motives are set in the beginning of the film with the murder of his sister. He did not harm children, and it can be assumed that his motives rest with “promiscuous” teenage women as that is who he was shown to be obsessed with. As the movie ends with Dr. Loomis, a male doctor who was familiar with Michael and his impulses, shooting him five times, Michael falls out of a second-story window. While most people who have been shot and fall from that height are presumed to be dead, Michael’s character does not suggest such a thing to an audience who has viewed his character thus far. Seconds after falling to his supposed death, Michael Myers has vanished. In his ability to survive being shot, falling from a second-story height, and walking off-screen within seconds, Michael

Myers has reclaimed and solidified his character as a founding slasher in the horror subgenre.

The repairment of his function as a slasher allows for subsequent slasher films to feature a similar character that resembles “The Shape.” Additionally, the trajectory of the Final Girl from its inception in Laurie Strode continues to rise as the slasher subgenre spills over to the 1980s.

### CHAPTER 3

#### REPULSIVE REACTIONS: TRANSGENDER ABJECTION IN *SLEEPAWAY CAMP*

In my first viewing of the 1983 slasher classic, *Sleepaway Camp*, I experienced the film just as teenagers in the early 80s might have. Having gone into this film expecting a run-of-the-mill slasher, I spent the film's entirety trying to parse out clues as to who the slasher was. It could have been the summer camp cook with his predatory tendencies. Or perhaps it was the main character's brother who never seemed to be around when the unknown slasher murdered other campers. As the film reached its inevitable climax, flashbacks to Angela Baker's, the female main character, past made it clear that she was the slasher. And more importantly, it revealed that she was trans. As the last frame stilled, I sat there and took in what I was seeing. With blasting horns and hissing sounds, with Angela's mouth agape in a scream, the camera froze on her naked figure, solidifying the fact that Angela had a penis. And as the screen went to black, I sat there shocked and uncomfortable. The presentation of a trans character as monstrous was disturbing to say the least. Perhaps 1980s audiences felt differently. Perhaps it was the mere existence of a trans character that caused a reaction among them. Some may argue that by that reaction, this film had fulfilled its purpose as a horror slasher. It provoked a reaction that left me thinking about the fluidity of gender and gender performativity for days after. I began to think about why that was. Why had filmmakers chosen this particular character reveal?

There might be those that contend that it does not serve us well to look to popular culture as a way to understand systems of power. As evidenced in *Against Academia*, Ray Broadus Browne (1989) opens with "[Academics in Humanities] did not feel that new methods should be tried to alter old points of view and old methodologies because they were not needed." (Broadus Browne 2) Instead of looking toward popular culture as a way 're-canonize' the Humanities,

academics double down on the current canon in their work. While Browne focused on the creation of the Popular Culture Association and its growth and development in America, he touches on an important point in his introduction. Popular culture was not always a priority when researching questions of gender, sexuality, or any other discipline within the field of humanities. Yet, popular culture is exactly where the effects of our systems lie. A quick search shows plenty of various books on gender and popular culture. Perhaps to the chagrin of some academics, the work on popular culture is taking place. Issues of gender and sexuality, of power and control, are enacted through mediums in popular culture. They give us a space to negotiate deeply held anxieties. It is important to not disregard popular culture when it comes to addressing these larger issues. In this way, films act as social mirrors. The 1983 slasher film, *Sleepaway Camp*, follows a typical slasher story narrative about a group of teenagers at a summer camp. As the film progresses, an unknown slasher murders campers in increasingly brutal and violent ways, culminating in a shocking reveal of the murderer's true identity. Held up to American society in the 1980s, *Sleepaway Camp* reveals and responds to a cultural anxiety about the performativity and fluidity of gender.

To better understand how *Sleepaway Camp* functions as a cultural response to gender anxiety, it is important to look at how the slasher film frames its Final Girl and how it markets itself as a follower of slasher film rules to audiences. A film's poster or Blu-ray cover sends a message to the audience and what they should expect. It is just as important to look at marketing materials as it is looking at the film itself, particularly a horror film. Slashers, like others in the overall horror genre, rely on fear and repulsion to terrify its audiences. Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection is one such way a slasher film can scare its audience while at the same time commenting on gender.

### 3.1 ABJECTION

The theory of abjection can be easily applied to this film, especially in audiences' reactions to the last scene. In *Approaching Abjection*, Julia Kristeva (1980) explains abjection as “not then an absence of health or cleanliness which makes something abject, but that which perturbs an identity, a system, an order; that which does not respect limits, places or rules. It is the between, the ambiguous, the mixed.” (127) Abjection deals with the reaction to what exists in a state that is not definite. These reactions include feelings of disgust that stem from fear of the in-between. *Sleepaway Camp* exposes the cultural belief that identities that do not fit into gender normativity fall into this in-between category, causing a societal ‘Othering’. In this film, the audience assumes Angela is a cisgender female because they have not been given any reason to believe otherwise. The film plays into societal assumptions regarding gender and the fear when someone does not match up to those assumptions. When what is assumed or believed does not match up with reality, it can lead to the repulsion and horror that makes up the bulk of this film’s climax. It is precisely that social horror the film relies on to succeed culturally in the 1980s. By combining the protagonist with the antagonist and subsequently queering that character, the filmmakers made a conscious effort to elicit a specific type of abjective audience reception.

The assumption for horror films at that time was that no one went into their first viewing of a horror movie with the prediction that the slasher was feminine presenting, let alone transgender. Critical reception of this film leads one to believe that audiences felt ‘tricked’ by Angela’s gender performativity. Calling it “offensive” and “sleazy,” Keith Roysdon, a staff writer at the Muncie Evening Press in Indiana wrote that “the final moment of the movie features a gender-switching surprise that explains the sick stuff we’ve seen before. This ‘twist ending’ reveals more about the twisted minds behind the camera than the mind of the murderer.”

(Roysdon 21) Roysdon's reaction soon after the film's release falls within the definition of abjection. Using words like "sick" and "twisted," words commonly found in the horror movie genre, show that the writer and filmmakers achieved their goal of stimulating feelings of repulsion. The prolonged exposure of Angela's genitalia for a horror audience met their need for a reaction, and that the abject is where the film's final horror comes from.

### 3.2 GENDER PERFORMATIVITY

Gender performativity, the belief that gender is not essentialist, but that it is a series of repeated and stylized behaviors, comes from Judith Butler. Butler argues that gender norms are illusions and that "gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts." (Butler 179) It is only through these acts that meaning has been given to gender norms, and history has allowed time for these stylized gestures to spread, repeat, and be enforced for years. By that understanding, gender norms only *appear* innate and tied to biological sex because they have been perpetuated for centuries. Rather, it is the constant performativity of these acts and gestures that give gender norms any weight in the first place.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler also brings up an interesting point on sexuality and surveillance that explains the ending of *Sleepaway Camp*. In tying her own ideas to Kristeva's theory of abjection, Butler argues that abjection is a tool society uses to keep gender norms in place. These norms heavily rely on the repulsion and social exclusion of Other identities that are not part of the cisgender and heteronormative social narrative. Looking at this combination of theoretical work, it demonstrates exactly how these gender norms have continued to exist in horror films well into the second half of the twentieth century. Using Butler's understanding of

Kristeva's work, I am arguing that the use of female main characters who exist outside of that social narrative in horror are framed with explicit abjection. As we see in this film, the main character in the horror film *Sleepaway Camp* turns out to be a trans slasher, and the way in which that last revealing frame of genitalia is shot is done so purposefully in a way to make the audience feel some level of repulsion toward this character. The shrill, piercing music with the monstrous hiss prove that abjection is powerful in forcing these gender performativities to keep existing and functioning as they do. By weighing a gender reveal as more shocking than a slasher reveal, the film has enforced the arbitrary social construction that is gender. As I discuss later in conjunction with established slasher subgenre rules, we gain a clearer picture as to the views on gender performativity and abjection during that time.

### 3.3 SLASHER RULES

Because of the films that came before it, such as *Halloween* and *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Sleepaway Camp* is consistent with a firm set of genre rules in the 1980s of what a slasher film looks like. Namely, the film must include a female main character that acts as a Final Girl, or the last surviving woman who has remained virginal throughout the film. (Clover 35) According to Carol Clover. The inclusion of a specific locale is a “venerable element of horror . . . [which] may at first seem a safe haven, but the same walls that promise to keep the killer out quickly become, once the killer penetrates them, the walls that hold the victim in.” (Clover 30-31) In addition, there must be an antagonist who utilizes a phallic-shaped weapon to slash his victims. This slasher is also almost always male. There are also stipulations involving time and place. Having a set of subgenre rules in place, audiences now know what to expect when they buy a ticket to a slasher film. The combination of these factors is what classifies

*Sleepaway Camp* as a typical slasher film and convinces audiences going in that they know what they are in for. And yet, *Sleepaway Camp* tries to subvert audience expectations by using abjection as its main source of horror.

The resulting horror in this film comes from the violation of gender norms. It is in the final scene where the filmmakers go a step further in exposing the main character as a transgender villain. It is not enough to simply name Angela as the slasher. She is framed fully nude for the audience to see. In filming and exploiting bodies in this way, filmmakers hope to provoke a range of responses from their audiences. Scholar Jack Halberstam explains the motivation behind the use of this film technique when he argues that horror “exercises power” in tandem with “[inciting] pleasure and/or disgust.” (Halberstam 17) This can provide evidence of motivation for the use of gender abjection. Kristeva’s concept of abjection can also explain the reasoning for this type of response that horror films prompt. It is necessary then to address these filmmaker’s choices and use them as a way of understanding cultural attitudes in this decade.

### **3.4 THE MURDERS**

Following in the footsteps of contemporary films like *Friday the 13th*, *Sleepaway Camp* relies on the suspense of an unknown slasher. As the characters onscreen are chased by a mysterious assailant, both those on-screen and off-screen are tasked with the intriguing question of their killer’s identity. *Friday the 13th* subverted expectations of a male slasher by employing the most obvious suspect’s mother as the actual killer. The surprise left a lasting impression on the audience, and the film spawned a multi-installment franchise that continues to the present. As audience members are continuing to attend slasher films with the hope of experiencing the bodily reaction of an adrenaline rush, *Sleepaway Camp* was released in 1983. After a traumatic boating



accident results in the loss of her father and sibling, Angela sent to live with extended family. However, the film does not show which sibling dies in the accident. It is assumed by the audience that the brother dies while the sister, Angela, lives. This is evidenced by the fact that in the film's opening, the credits list Jonathan Tierston as Ricky before Felissa Rose as Angela. (*Sleepaway Camp* 0:00:44-0:00:59) These credits are not listed alphabetically, so it is naturally thought that Ricky is going to be our main character throughout the film's entirety.

Years later, we see Angela living with her aunt and cousin Ricky. Angela's aunt Martha can be described as manic and forgetful. Evoking the behaviors of a fifties TV housewife with her manicured hand placed under her chin and her seemingly trademark phrase, "I'm afraid that wouldn't do," she tries to get Angela and Ricky ready for Summer camp. (*Sleepaway Camp* 0:07:23-0:07:26) In a bit of foreshadowing, she remembers to give both her son and niece two physical records that are required for campers. In viewers' first clue, Martha says "Just be careful not to tell anyone how you got them. Oh no, I'm afraid they wouldn't approve of that at all. Even though they know that I am a doctor." (*Sleepaway Camp* 0:08:35-0:08:45) While the film has not given viewers a concrete reason to believe otherwise, her manner and paranoia regarding the validity of the childrens' physical records lead one to believe that these physicals may not be entirely accurate. It is also in this scene where audiences are made aware of the fact that Angela does not speak. Angela is relegated to the background in a submissive female role. For first time viewers, they may believe this to be, in part, due to Angela's traumatic childhood when she lost her father. Spending the entire scene completely mute, she lacks any kind of linguistic autonomy. This lack of agency shows up throughout the film, particularly at the end.

As this is a slasher, the film sets up its first interaction with the killer. Artie, the head chef and noted pedophile, meets Angela for the first time when she is brought back to the kitchen

after refusing to eat. Artie leads Angela to the walk-in, and he tries to assault her when Ricky walks in and stops Artie. Later that evening, the unknown slasher stalks Artie in the kitchen. Emulating John Carpenter's *Halloween* point of view shots, the camera takes the point of view of the slasher. By possessing the view of the observer, audiences surveil what is happening and the performativity of each character. The slasher hides before pulling the chair out from under Artie, causing him to fall with the boiling pot falling on top of him. Set up to look like an accident, Artie is badly burned and sent to the hospital. Based on what happened in the previous scene, it would appear that Ricky would be the one who hurt Artie, particularly due to the fact that Angela has not exerted any type of control or authority since the film started. In fact, Angela has not emoted at all since her arrival at the camp. It is not until a social evening a week into the Summer when Ricky's friend, Paul, introduces himself to Angela that she begins to communicate through body language and facial expressions. The audience is able to pick up on her attraction to Paul through her raised eyebrows and demeanor. As Paul is walking away, she utters "goodnight" to the shock of him and the surrounding campers.

Knowing the slasher is Angela, the very next scene begins to make sense. As two young campers, a boy and a girl, make their way out to the lake at night, the boy teases the girl he is with and ends up tipping their boat over. The girl swims off, upset, while the boy hides in the overturned boat calling out to the girl. Suddenly, a head pops up from the water. The boy questions, "[w]hat the hell are you doing here? I bet the rest of the boys'll be interested in seeing you" just before he is shoved underwater. (*Sleepaway Camp* 0:34:25-0:34:35) As Angela has not been able to exert any control over her situation in her childhood, at her home with her aunt Martha, or at camp, she tries to assume control. Starting with Artie, the cook, Angela tries

punishing those who have done something morally wrong. In this case, a boy was making another camper uncomfortable, and Angela took it upon herself to try to rectify the situation.

Even so, her autonomy does not last long. Even as she goes through the film murdering campers she deems as deserving of it, she is not able to truly have agency. As seen in the final sequence of the film, her identity had been shaped by an external force in the form of her aunt Martha. She has never had a genuine control over her own body. Her aunt has dictated and manipulated her gender performativity. For audiences, it is not until the final shot of the film where the audience realizes that the sister was the one who died and that the brother was sent to live with an aunt who raised the child in a forced transgender identity. Aunt Martha remarks to a sullen-looking child that “we already have a boy. So, another one simply would not do. Oh, no, absolutely not. A little girl would be so much nicer. Don’t you think so, Angela?” (*Sleepaway Camp* 01:19:58-01:20:09) Through these lines of dialogue, aunt Martha has revealed that she has changed Angela’s identity to fit Martha’s own wishes of having a daughter. Originally born as Peter, Martha raised Angela as a trans girl. As soon as the film flashes back to the present, Angela stands up after having murdered Paul and reveals her body.

During the film’s reveal of the slasher, the last camera shot freezes on Angela’s naked body while animalistic noises come from her mouth. It is a scene that is filmed solely to shock, repulse, and instill fear in the audience. Just before the film freezes on the final frame of Angela’s naked body, another character yells, “My God, She’s a boy!” (*Sleepaway Camp* 01:20:36-01:20:37) The last line of dialogue that the audience is left with does not have to do with the film’s premise of an unknown slasher at a summer camp. Instead, the plot twist relies solely upon the revelation of Angela’s transgender identity. Her body becomes the shocking spectacle. The audience operates as an observer through a cisgender gaze. In its definition, “The

‘cis gaze’ refers to the ways in which the world and trans people are presented in such a way as to make them appear as if they exist *for scrutiny by, and the entertainment of, cis people.*” (Mitchell n.p.) Audiences expect a cisgender Final Girl that fits the mold created in previous slasher films. As the camera freezes on this frame, forcing the audience to reconcile with not only the transgender plot twist but to grapple with Angela’s physicality. Via a cisgender gaze, audiences experience abjection based on this character reveal. To an audience in the 1980s, Angela’s body represents a visual representation of the in-between. In this scene, her body does not fit into the female/male gender binary. It is not easily placed into one heteronormative category or another. To have the film linger on this final scene for several, long seconds hopes to prompt a horror-like abjection response. Coupled with the transgender tableau, eerie music plays through the speakers in a way that only adds to the social commentary that transgender people are monsters and murderers. In her article on the cisgender gaze, Nissa Mitchell argues that there are “two modes of representation trans people have in the media . . . as a joke . . . [or] as a ‘pathetic’ person. . . portrayed by a cis person, trying and failing to appear as the gender they identify as.” (Mitchell n.p.) However, *Sleepaway Camp* shows a third mode of representation, one of abject horror and a subsequent repelling of her identity.

### 3.5 THE REVEAL

Writing an unknown killer in a slasher film entices the audience to try to figure out who they are. The slasher reveal that doubles as the film’s climax was not a new technique to *Sleepaway Camp*. Other films of the same time period utilize the same method. *Friday the 13th*, which *Sleepaway Camp* has often been compared to, is one of these films. The revelation that the *Friday the 13th* slasher was not Jason in a hockey mask but his mother all along invites a gender-

switch storytelling tactic used to shock audiences. Looking back at the rules of slasher films, one rule comes up frequently. With slashers, their identity remains a secret until the very end.

(Murray n.p.) When the Final Girl succeeds against her slasher, their identity is revealed, taking away their agency as an unknown observer. The reveal surprised moviegoers who expected to see a cisgender man as the movie's killer. However, *Sleepaway Camp* goes past the gender-switch technique. The reveal does not solely include a character of another gender but one who is transgender. Angela's character reveal follows a pattern among transgender characters in film.

The bait and switch tactic seen here is a way of viewing an assumed cisgender character and critiquing her reveal that she is trans. Juanjo Bermudez de Castro critiques this type of storytelling technique in his own analysis of transgender identities in American television. They call this type of cisgender presentation of trans characters as "cheating. . . that is supposed to create fear in the audience" and that by removing the articles of clothing, it "is presented as the right thing to do to solve 'the mystery'." (de Castro) "Cheating" here refers to the gender switch that *Sleepaway Camp* uses when exposing the cisgender gaze of the audience. The inherent success of this film as a slasher is dependent on this revelation of Angela's physicality. Her body is exposed as soon as the audience finds out she is the killer. While *Sleepaway Camp* does not present Angela's trans identity as a mystery in the beginning of the film, the climax presents a retrospective look at Angela's character that would inevitably prompt a second viewing for audiences in order to go back and see if any hints were dropped concerning Angela's gender. During that second viewing, audiences would be exposed to a prolonged abjection given that they know how the film ends. They go into a second viewing of the movie with the knowledge of Angela's gender and expectation to re-solve "the mystery" as de Castro points out. It makes audiences re-live the transgender abjection, a repetition of a social response that has been

cultivated over time. Evidence of these gender abjection reactions show up in film critics' reviews.

### 3.6 PUBLIC RECEPTION

Horror films often expose our own social and cultural fears. In inciting feelings of terror and adrenaline, this is how they are successful at the box office. In order to have a plot twist ending that would leave people talking about the film long after its release, the film includes a transgender character reveal. The very idea that not only a young woman would be a killer, but a transgender woman, reveals the social fear that lies within the audience. It is in these horror films where the true fears of society are revealed. Society's transphobia is put on display. In looking at a film review from around the time of the film's release, Rick Lyman from *The Philadelphia Inquirer* bemoans the entire premise of the film and its ending. Heeding his readers, he writes, "I should warn you - in case your editor makes *you* go see it - that the people behind *Sleepaway Camp* seem to think that the climax is a real shocker. A big surprise." (Lyman 57) Lyman does not seem to think this ending is as shocking as others may have. Instead, his main issue with the film is the acting, stating that "[t]he people in this movie appear to have graduated from the Actor's Toolshed." (57) It is apparent in both Lyman's and Roysdon's reviews that other moviegoers have picked up on the film's ultimate motive. The film's attempt to be shocking in a genre of horror where it is easy to get desensitized to the violence is transparent. In the decades since *Sleepaway Camp* has been released and newer generations have seen the film, the climactic scene has seen success in shocking and evoking distaste in its viewers. And yet, we also need to look at the marketing of the film in order to understand how far reaching abjection and gender performativity go with both 1980s and modern audiences.

### 3.7 MARKETING

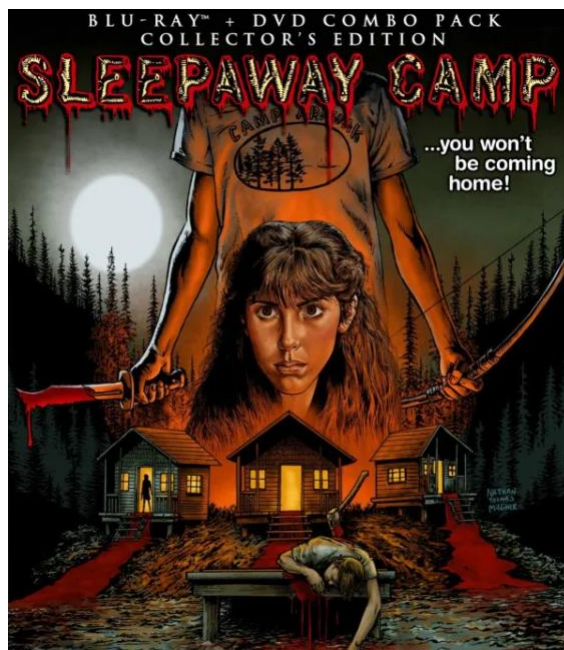


Figure 3: *Sleepaway Camp* 2014 Blu-ray Cover.

In 2014, Scream Factory released a collector's edition Blu-ray copy of *Sleepaway Camp* that featured the work of Nathan Thomas Milliner. As shown in Figure 3, he places Angela's face over the lower half of a slasher who remains faceless in the poster. This artistic move plays around with the film's "gotcha" moment. In emphasizing Angela's face in this way, it hints at the plot reveal shown in this film. For those who may be unfamiliar with the film's reveal of Angela's trans identity, this movie cover looks to highlight the Final Girl and a slasher as separate characters. In reality, those who have seen the film pick up on the irony. Angela is not a Final Girl in the way that Jamie Lee Curtis' character, Laurie Strode in *Halloween*, was portrayed. Instead, the character archetypes of Final Girl and Slasher are conflated into one unified character. While illuminating as this image is, it was not released until the twenty-first

century and was not what audiences were seeing as they made their way to theatres in the early 1980s. As such, it plays upon modern audiences' expectations of the film. The slasher film definition has not changed since its inception. A movie cover like this one still refers to a typical slasher film in which there is a slasher character and a Final Girl and the film takes place at a separate locale. With these tropes in mind, a current viewer looks at the redesigned cover by Milliner and concludes that this is a slasher film that will follow a simple formula. The cover features Angela front and center and does not show her as she is in the film's ending. Instead, it shows her as the audience views her, under a cisgender gaze. If a viewer who has no previous knowledge of the film sees this particular cover, they are under the assumption that the Final Girl Angela is a cisgender character and is subject to the traditional Final Girl character arc. By extension via the cisgender gaze, that same viewer is also subject to the same abjection that inhabits first-time viewers of *Sleepaway Camp*. This modern Blu-ray cover divulges more information about the film, but it still does not let the viewer know about Angela's trans identity.

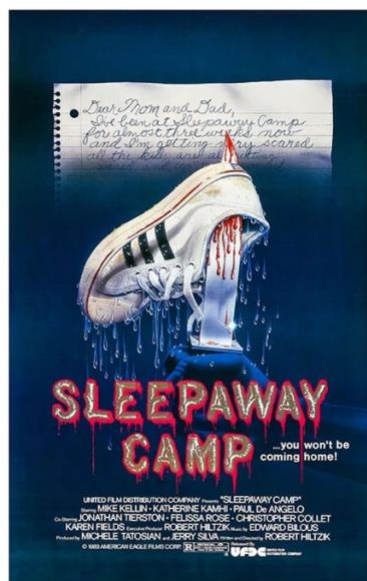


Figure 4: *Sleepaway Camp* 1983 Movie Poster.



Instead, 1980s audiences were shown Figure 4 on their quest to the movie theatre. Figure 4 features no specific characters and only suggests a horror slasher film that should supposedly fall in line with the rules of the genre. With a style reminiscent of R.L. Stine's horror books of the same decade, it is a basic movie poster that seems to do its job of enticing audiences to see the film. It gives no particular details as to exact plot, and instead, it prompts passersby to fill in their own details. Based on their own knowledge of slashers, or "teen-splatter movies," they can begin imagining a storyline that involves the most essential elements of a horror slasher movie. (Lyman 57) While this could be read as an attempt to not spoil the film to potential audiences, the original movie poster purposefully offers no details and no mentions or assumptions of the gender performativity and abjection that run through the film. As such, the film's ending proves to be even more surprising to audiences *because* they have no real details of what to expect.

*Sleepaway Camp* exploits social fears about those who are not cisgender and manipulates their representation to form a transgender villain. If the film did not include the exposure of Angela as a transgender villain but a cisgendered one, would that provide enough of a plot twist that contributes to its place as a movie with a shocking ending in horror movie culture? The reactions to the last scene mentioned earlier proves that this film uses Kristeva's theory of abjection in conjunction with gender performativity. I have argued that *Sleepaway Camp* capitalizes on the unease felt by society regarding non-cisnormative identities. The discomfort shown in reviews such as Roysdon's and Lyman's film reviews prove my argument that there exists an ongoing anxiety with identities that do not fall into neat socially-constructed categories. As horror films fit into a genre that largely relies on bodily reactions, slasher films need audiences to be shocked in order to succeed. Such a reaction was one I shared during my first viewing. The surprise and confusion that I was feeling mimicked exactly what filmmakers were

hoping for. If an audience had any reaction, good or bad, it meant the film was successful in its duties as a horror.

## CHAPTER 4

### OBSERVING SIDNEY PRESCOTT IN *SCREAM*

For American society entering the last decade of the twentieth century, slasher films were solidly formulaic. They followed a trusted blueprint to which audiences would respond. As they stayed popular, filmmakers of the genre worked to keep the slasher film feeling fresh and innovative. Director Wes Craven of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise helmed a new story that featured a subversive and self-referential take on the slasher film. The 1996 film, *Scream*, both toyed with well-known slasher tropes, such as the Final Girl, and exposed a social anxiety growing in American society. The fear of being watched and judged is not a new one. However, *Scream* delicately plays with the idea of panopticism to evoke the same kind of fear that audiences would have been accustomed to when viewing horror. In doing so, he was able to simultaneously revive the genre and comment on social anxieties.

It is necessary to ask what horror films expose for us as viewers. And in particular, what is it about 1996's *Scream* that causes us to confront our social anxieties? Horror films involve a production of knowledge and truth through the use of fear and surveillance. For slasher films, they produce ideas of what female behavior should look like. Slasher films are reinforcing and sustaining knowledge about gender behavior which is then perpetuated afterward as a truth. Looking back at previous slasher films, one can easily see the patterns of behavior of female characters. *Scream* tries to subvert those expectations and give audiences a newer, more modern Final Girl. In doing so, the film also works in producing a new truth about gender, that it is aware of outside influences and that it is easily changed due to said surroundings. Proving Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, *Scream* exposes a social anxiety that contains within it

a fear of being watched and a fear of what happens when one crosses the boundary of socially established gender roles.

This social anxiety is evident throughout the characters' behaviors in the film. First, I dive into the film's text and show how this film utilizes the concepts of panoptical discipline and gender performativity within their characters. To understand this, I look at both how this film complicates the slasher genre and how the marketing materials of this film illustrate and explicate the cultural fear of being watched. In addition, I examine the character of Ghostface and how he functions as an all-seeing character that observes and tracks the movements and behaviors of the other characters. To do this, one needs to determine what tools are at Ghostface's disposal and how those allow him the mobility of an omnipresent slasher. With Ghostface acting as a central observer in this film, it causes an awareness in the other characters about how they should act. It is necessary to view films like *Scream* through a panoptical lens because they directly reflect our own cultural worries.

#### **4.1 SELF-REFLEXIVITY AND INTERTEXTUAL REFERENCES**

The film achieves its chief motivation of terrifying its audience through its subversive rendition of a slasher. As mentioned earlier in a previous chapter, slasher films follow a set of well-established rules. These genre rules involve a Final Girl, a slasher antagonist, and a locale that appears to be a place of refuge but instead becomes a place where the climax of the film takes place. (Clover 30-31) As more and more slasher films were released, it was inevitable that audiences would pick up on the rules and predict exactly who would die and who the slasher would be. It became harder and harder to keep the genre fresh and to come up with new ideas. The popularity of traditional slashers began to wane during the early to mid-nineties, but *Scream*

disrupts the genre with a film that was aware of its role as a slasher film. Its awareness as a meta-slasher lent itself to the film's success. Heralding a new era of horror, the *Scream* franchise inspired countless re-creations of self-aware films.

In "The *Scream* Trilogy, 'Hyperpostmodernism', and the Late-Nineties Teen Slasher Film," Valerie Wee argues that the *Scream* trilogy revived the slasher genre in the nineties due to its self-reflexive nature and that it is because of the self-referentiality that forms the text itself.

Wee lays out their argument, stating that:

[A] significant proportion of the intertextual referencing in the *Scream* films functions as *text*. The films consist of multiple sequences in which characters engage in self-conscious, highly self-reflexive, sustained discussions and commentaries on the nature and conventions of the genre itself. The characters in all three films obsessively and self-reflexively discuss other media texts, particularly teen slasher films. They are all media-saturated individuals who are self-consciously conversant in the signs and codes of the classic slasher film. (Wee 47)

While the text of the film does come from the intertextual references, the film uses this style of storytelling specifically to expose a social anxiety among nineties audiences. Self-reflexivity and self-consciousness are the product of self-surveillance. The self-consciousness that Wee speaks of is clearly seen in Final Girl Sidney Prescott. By viewing her behaviors through the lens of panoptical discipline, we can begin to understand her motivations.

#### **4.2 PANOPTICISM AS IT RELATES TO GENDER PERFORMATIVITY**

Panopticism refers to the feeling of being watched and adopting one's behavior in response. This internal surveillance is well-documented in philosopher Michel Foucault's book,

*Discipline and Punish*. He postulated that discipline could be administered against individuals using an alternative method as opposed to physical punishment. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault illustrated his theory on the development of the panopticon. In a panoptical prison, cells filled with people are arranged in a circle with only one guard in the middle. The theory states that because of supposed surveillance, the people in the cells are less likely to commit acts of criminal behavior, and therefore “power should be visible and unverifiable. Visible: the inmate will constantly have before his eyes the tall outline of the central tower from which he is spied upon. Unverifiable: the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so.” (Foucault 201) Foucault’s thought experiment theorizes that power is distributed through visuals. It is this reason why panoptical discipline shows up often in film. A visual form of storytelling that revolves around the actions of characters, specifically characters that fall into heavily gendered roles, lends itself well to panoptical lens. This applies itself easily to society and gender performance. Based on set societal norms for gender roles, one feels one must always adhere to their prescribed gender role in society and perform accordingly. There is a sense that one is constantly being watched, and if they do not behave according to those standards, they might be punished by that society. Using the panopticon as a guide, he argues that surveillance is a greater form of discipline because “visibility is a trap.” (200) This surveillance is evidenced in Neve Campbell’s portrayal of Final Girl Sydney in Craven’s *Scream*.

While one could argue that all Final Girls essentially perform gender via panopticism, it is precisely Sydney’s subversive character that shows the limits of the Final Girl. Throughout the film, Sydney is aware that she is a target of Ghostface, the masked slasher. Based on a knowledge of previous slasher movies, including *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th*, she knows that

her gender role marks her as the main focus of Ghostface. In her development of the theory of gender performativity, Judith Butler writes that gender is constituted through a “stylized repetition of acts.” (Butler 179) The stylized aspect of the act is what could be interpreted as what happens because of panopticism. The only reason that instinct to perform gender a certain way is there is due to the feeling of being watched, either by society at large or something specific externally. Without the surveillance, what other motive could there be for gender performativity? As seen in Sydney’s character, she performs in a specific way because she knows she is being watched. This cause and effect of surveillance and performativity lead to the Final Girl trope manifesting in Sydney’s character.

#### **4.3 FIRST ENCOUNTER**

Setting the stage for the slasher and Final Girl, their encounter begins in a similar way to the opening scene. In their first interaction with each other, Ghostface calls Sidney to mock, harass, and threaten her. Immediately, Sidney behaves differently than the Final Girls that have come before her. Alarmed but determined to keep her wits about her, she is aware of her main character role and tries not to fall into the Final Girl trope of “running up the stairs when she should be going out the front door” because “it’s insulting.” (*Scream*, 0:26:16-0:26:24) Due to Sydney’s aforementioned knowledge of the Final Girl trope, she attempts to do the opposite in the hopes of not falling to the slasher film plot. However, because this *is* a slasher film, a genre that historically relies on well-established conventions, Sidney’s character does exactly what she disavowed because she is forced to. When Ghostface breaks into the house and chases her, Sidney goes upstairs instead of heading outside through the front door. (*Scream*, 0:29:02-0:29:14) In fact, there are several instances throughout the film where Sydney fails to do the

opposite and ends up doing exactly what Final Girls have done in films before her. Her efforts at subversion only succeed toward the end of the film where she engages in sexual intercourse with her boyfriend, an act that is viewed as a mark of death among slasher films. Despite this, she lives and does not succumb to the bloody murder that is often handed to American young women who have sex in horror movies. Her actions in this particular scene with Ghostface are indicative of an internal surveillance and based on a knowledge of other slasher films. The first encounter between a Final Girl and the antagonist is important because it establishes the pace and atmosphere of a true slasher movie. For *Scream*, this scene not only achieves this, but it also solidifies the theme of panopticism that was marketed before and during the film's release. In film, the use of visuals is vital in conveying the story as well as any underlying message. It is imperative and necessary to include the film's marketing materials and images in the analysis of panopticism.



#### 4.4 MARKETING THE GAZE



Figure 5: *Scream* 1996 Movie Poster.

The movie poster is one of the first pieces of media that audiences interact with before seeing the film. In one snapshot, it must properly capture the essence of the film and hook the viewer without giving away spoilers and ruining the viewing experience. For film, the poster, which is often displayed outside of movie theaters and in shopping malls, gives filmmakers and marketing officials the opportunity to entice potential audiences. For 1996's *Scream*, their choice of movie poster was a thoughtful and strategic one. First, the use of Drew Barrymore on the poster leads a first-time viewer to believe that she is the main character and the supposed Final Girl. Not only is she in the front of a group of teenagers and young adults, but it is also her eyes that grace the top three quarters of the poster. With a wide-eyed expression of shock and fear, it grabs the attention of passersby and also tricks them into thinking they know how this slasher movie is going to play out. Instead, Williamson's screenplay kills off Drew Barrymore's

character in the first scene and viewers are left with the immediate impression that this particular film will toy with established genre rules.

*Scream* is a subversive slasher, and the filmmakers have hinted at that in the poster. However, upon closer inspection, the poster also reveals the film's heavy use of panopticism. For the size of the poster itself, which typically spans twenty-seven inches by forty-one inches, it is large enough to catch the eye of anyone that walks by. (Scream) But, it is the position and size of Drew Barrymore's eyes at the top of the poster that cause a second-glance. The gaze looms large over the entirety of the cast, suggesting that they are all being watched from an outside vantage point. It is inescapable and omnipresent. The constant surveillance puts forward a belief that there is no safe space away from the gaze. The characters have to learn how to function underneath said gaze. In the film, Sidney Prescott, played by Neve Campbell, is the focus, and audiences see how she navigates her gender performativity and subsequent survival under the gaze of her antagonist. Yet, the gaze of Ghostface is shrouded and hidden beneath a mask. It performs a different function than the larger than life eyes on the movie poster.

#### 4.5 GHOSTFACE'S MASK



Figure 6: Ghostface Enters.

As the film opens with a phone ringing, viewers are immediately introduced to Drew Barrymore's character, Casey Becker. An unknown male caller toys with Casey, making her believe that he is a harmless person who simply called the wrong number. As their conversation continues, Casey's fear grows, and she realizes that she is probably being watched. (*Scream*, 0:02:34) She immediately begins to check the windows of her house. The hyper awareness of Casey's character marks the beginning of the theme of surveillance that ties the film together. For Ghostface, being on the outside looking in, quite literally, gives him a distinct power advantage. Casey does not know who she is speaking to, where this speaker is located in relation to her own home, or what this person looks like. She simply knows that there is a real possibility that she is being watched by a stranger. It is only when Ghostface makes an accurate remark about the color of her hair that causes Casey to run throughout the rest of the house, frantically

locking each door. (*Scream*, 0:03:47-0:04:00) Specifically, Ghostface asks as Casey looks out of the window above the front door, “Can you see me?” (*Scream*, 0:04:00-0:04:01) By doing so, he is making two things clear. The first is that he is letting Casey know that he can see her looking out of the window, searching for him and that he is still surveilling her every move as she tries to secure her home and herself. Second, he is cluing audiences in on his own identity. For the first few minutes of the film, as he has been talking to Casey on the phone, viewers never see his face and therefore never even know if he is wearing a mask. The question Ghostface asks Casey can be asked of the audience.

When Ghostface is finally shown in his hooded cloak, Casey, and by extension the audience, is still unaware of his identity because of his mask. As filmmakers worked to sketch out Ghostface’s physical identity, they found a mask created by the costume company, Fun World. (Barton) The costume itself leads police to more dead ends as it is sold “at every five-and-dime in the state” and can not be tracked by police. (*Scream*, 0:35:02-0:35:10) Ghostface’s choice of costume is purposeful. By selecting a Halloween costume that can be bought by anyone at any party supply store, it succeeds in keeping Ghostface anonymous for as long as possible. Yet, it is the mask that gives Ghostface his name and is a true instrument of surveillance. As shown in Figure 6, the mask is primarily white and elongated like a ghost with a large, gaping mouth. The mask’s shape does not indicate the gender of the wearer, giving viewers no extra information on who Ghostface really is. Additionally, it is the black, seemingly endless eye holes that hold the power of fear. When Ghostface shows up after terrorizing Casey over the phone, there is no possibility of knowing his true identity. I argue that the eyes are one of the first things a person sees and that eye contact is important in discerning a person’s character. If Casey and the viewers are not afforded that ability when encountering Ghostface,

then Ghostface is the one who holds power in his interactions. He is given the ability to monitor and surveil those around him at all times without the same being given in return. Therefore, the mask itself is a tool that Ghostface uses that is just as important as his cell phone as it affords him the mutability and mobility to move about the film as an all-seeing character.

#### **4.6 A SECOND TOOL OF SURVEILLANCE: GHOSTFACE'S CELL PHONE**

*Scream* relies upon an analog form of surveillance in the Ghostface mask, but one cannot rule out the importance of technology as another source. In *The Journal of Kitsch, Camp and Mass Culture*, Sini Mononen argues for the pan-auditory power that lies at the heart of slasher films like *Scream* and *When A Stranger Calls*. As they put it, “pan-auditory power is the sonic equivalent of panopticism.” (Mononen 18) The difference is that the “surveilled subject is constantly being listened to as well as addressed auditively,” and the resulting “surveillance is in essence about virtual imprisonment, a theatre of power.” (18) The ubiquity of the cell phone lends itself well to surveillance analysis. The sound of a phone ringing and breaking the silence is a theme that is started at the very first second of the film. As mentioned, when Ghostface is first introduced, it is through a phone call only. Over the course of five minutes at the film’s start, Casey begins to dread the sound of a phone call. The phones Casey uses in the film are distinctly landlines, a cellular technology that was firmly established by the mid-nineties. As Casey answers the phone and speaks to the male caller, it is easy for the viewer to assume that this phone call comes from another landline, putting distance between the two callers. The “landline telephone does not reveal the caller’s identity in the same way as the mobile telephone does,” but a mobile phone allows the other caller “to change location and follow the victim while creating an ongoing sense of constant (interpersonal) surveillance.” (5)

The phone is a surveillance tool that gives Ghostface the ability to monitor many different characters from a distance. Similarly, a mobile phone that functions as a “burner phone” gives the caller another degree of privacy. Unlike a landline that comes with the possibility of showing up in a phone book, a mobile phone that is also a burner phone does not come with such transparency. A burner phone can be purchased and used without being tied to a specific identity, giving Ghostface exactly the amount of obscurity he desires. After Sidney, the main character, is attacked by Ghostface for the first time, her boyfriend, Billy Loomis is brought in for questioning by police due to his possession of a mobile phone. When asked, “[w]hat're you doin' with a cellular telephone, son?” Billy replies that everyone has them now and that he did not make those calls. (*Scream*, 0:33:10-0:33:20) The sheriff also says the police department is waiting on phone call records to see if Billy had indeed made those calls as Ghostface. Later in the film, when the phone call records come back, the police conclude that Billy must not be the one who made those calls as they did not match with his phone. Instead, they find that “those calls are listed to Neil Prescott, Sidney’s father.” (*Scream*, 0:59:43-0:59:48) The new technology of cloning a cell phone is questioned by Deputy Dewey, played by David Arquette, but his accurate claim is ignored by his former superior. (*Scream*, 0:59:53-0:59:55) What Dewey closely predicted has proved that Ghostface is working with technology that has enabled him to have those calls traced to another person. Of course, viewers become aware at the end of the film that there are two Ghostface killers working together which explains Billy’s supposed innocence after the first interaction with the police.

#### 4.7 THE OBSERVER

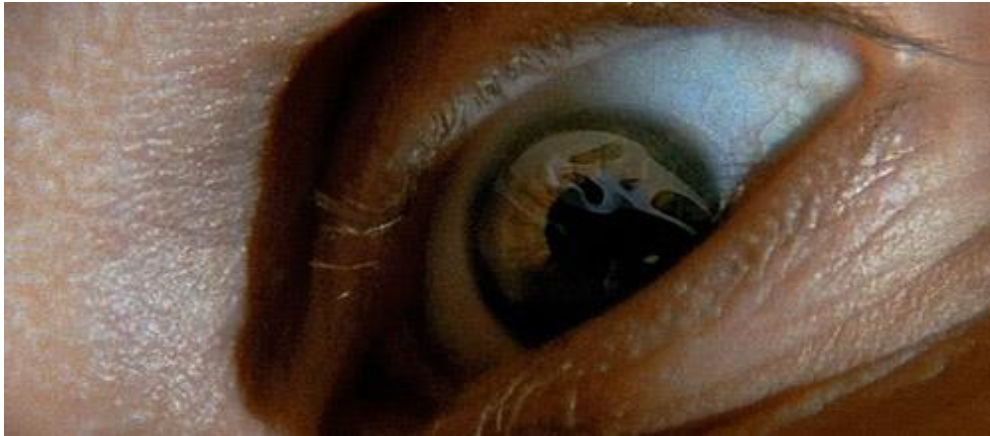


Figure 7: Ghostface's Reflection in the Eye.

After Sidney's encounter with Ghostface, the school decides to release students early due to Sidney's peers who use the situation to further antagonize their peers. Now alone in the school, Principal Himby, played by Henry Winkler, is scrutinizing a replica Ghostface mask that he confiscated when he hears a noise that lures him out of his office. After checking out the noise and believing it to be a janitor, he enters his office again. Ghostface, who had been hiding behind the door, leaps out and stabs the principal. As Principal Himby dies, the camera freezes on a zoomed in shot of Winkler's eye. In Figure 7, viewers can see the reflection of Ghostface. (*Scream*, 0:53:00-0:53:20) This shot perfectly encapsulates the ever-watchful nature of Ghostface. Even after death, Ghostface is exercising a panoptical view of his victims. Therefore, the surveillance never ceases. It is constant and even breaks into the private spaces, not allowing those in the film a chance to escape the gaze. Ghostface's spying does not only exist in the public sphere. It breaks into spaces that characters may have previously considered safe. For example, the home is a location normally associated with safety and security. It is where one may be the

most comfortable. However, throughout the entire film, Ghostface has shown up at the homes of victims and infiltrated that space, both physically and through the use of his mobile phone.

As seen in the next scene only seconds later, a quick shot of Sidney and her friend Tatum having a conversation at her home indicates that they are being watched. The camera flashes from a typical shot of Sidney and Tatum to one that is on the outside of the porch on which they are sitting. The shot moves slowly, suggesting that it is mimicking the observer's stalking prowl. (*Scream*, 0:53:55-0:54:01) As Sidney gets up and walks away, Tatum follows her and looks behind her. (*Scream*, 0:54:12-0:54:22) Tatum's face suggests a hint of confusion at not seeing anything behind her, but it is obvious that she must have felt as if someone was in the bushes watching them. Just as quickly as she looked concerned, it is as if she brushes the feeling away because she is at home in the daylight with another person. She feels safe enough that she does not need to alarm Sidney, who has been oblivious to the gaze of Ghostface in this scene. However, the suspicions of Tatum and the audience are confirmed when Sidney and Tatum go back inside to get ready for the party that evening and Ghostface is seen running through bushes and trees in full costume. (*Scream*, 0:54:40-0:54:41) Since the film's start, both the characters and the audience have been under the impression that Ghostface is one person. If this is true, then the omnipresence of the character cannot be understated. In the span of a few minutes of film time and most likely no more than an hour or two of the characters' time, Ghostface has killed a principal and been spotted in a completely different location. The movability of Ghostface has caused him to appear as ubiquitous as possible. Again, a few scenes later, we see Ghostface in full costume watching Tatum and Sidney in the grocery store. Presumably, there are other patrons in the store who would have seen a person dressed as Ghostface, and therefore, we



can conclude that that specific shot of Ghostface in the reflection of the freezer door is more representative of the kind of character Ghostface is and how he functions.

As mentioned, the characters in this film believe that home is a place of security away from the gaze of Ghostface. Despite evidence to the contrary, Dewey drops off Sidney and Tatum at their friend's, Stu's, house for a party. Sidney believes that she will be safe as she will be in someone's home surrounded by plenty of other people. While sitting on the couch appearing comfortable, journalist Gale Weathers has shown up and discreetly places a video camera next to the television. (*Scream*, 01:04:10-01:04:15) By doing this, Gale has added a second layer of surveillance to the upcoming scenes in which we reach the climax of the film and Ghostface is unmasked. This is important because, as we see as the rest of the film unfolds, Gale will start to function as an additional observer. While her motives differ from Ghostface's in that she only wants to further her own career, the surveillance that occurs is complex. Ghostface's surveillance of the characters is in real time, while Gale's camera captures video and returns it to the receiver less than a minute later. The delay is indicative of the types of surveillance each can perform on the characters. Ghostface's added mask, mobility, and use of a cellular phone give the advantage of real-time surveillance. With the use of Gale's video feed recording the moves of the characters, it has created the "theatre of power" that Mononen spoke of regarding pan-auditory power. (Mononen 18) Gale Weathers and her assistant can see as the audience sees because of the placement of the camera. It faces the characters directly as they watch the 1978 film, *Halloween*. As this scene interlaces with shots of Sidney and Billy having sex upstairs, Sidney's friend, Randy, comments on the survivability of Final Girls based on their virginity. He remarks that is "why she [Jamie Lee Curtis' character] always outsmarted the killer in the big chase scene at the end. Only virgins can do that. Don't you know the rules?" (*Scream*, 01:12:55-

01:13:01) His question can be asked to the audience watching, both the viewers and to Gale Weathers watching from her news van. The implication of Sidney's sexual behavior complicates her position as a Final Girl.

#### **4.8 SIDNEY AND HER GENDER, OBSERVED**

When analyzing the gender performativity and behavior of Sidney, we must first look at her counterpart, Tatum, in order to understand the differences. Tatum follows the typical stereotype of a teenager. She parties, is sexually active with her boyfriend, Stu, and is somewhat vapid. Following the rules of the genre, audiences can assume that Tatum will be a victim of Ghostface. As the film ramps up toward its inevitable climax, Tatum is tasked with grabbing more beer from the refrigerator in the garage. As she does so, the lights go out, and she is met face to face with Ghostface. (*Scream*, 01:05:23-01:05:53) Interestingly, Tatum is not terrified of Ghostface the way Casey was at the beginning of the film. In a playful take at assuming the role of a "helpless victim" in a movie, Tatum proclaims, "[n]o, please don't kill me, Mr. Ghostface. I wanna be in the sequel!" (*Scream*, 01:06:10-01:06:18) Her performance as a Final Girl continues and becomes more real when she tries to fight against Ghostface when she realizes that this masked person really is Ghostface and not an imposter. When she tries to escape the garage, she is inevitably killed. Audiences familiar with the tropes of slasher films may have already seen this coming due to her own character. The difference is that Tatum's character led her to be cast as the helpless victim while Sidney assumes the actual Final Girl role.

Simultaneously, Sidney is ready to return to the presumed safety of her own home before the city-imposed curfew. Instead, she meets with Billy after their continued conflict over his possible involvement in the murders. When Billy remarks that their life is "one great big movie.

Only you can't pick your genre," Sidney asks, "Why can't I be a Meg Ryan movie?" (*Scream*, 01:10:54-01:11:35) Sidney's response proves her awareness of her position as a Final Girl. She knows, based on a knowledge of slasher films, that she is constantly being watched by Ghostface, and she understands his ubiquity as an all-knowing observer. With the added mobility of new technology, Ghostface is given more power as a slasher than his predecessors. With this knowledge, Sidney has tried to go against slasher movie rules. In a move that defies the Final Girl trope of previous slashers, Sidney is the one who instigates having sex with Billy. In slasher films, a woman having sex would have marked her as the slasher's next victim, and audiences would have expected that going into a movie like this one. However, this film has so far subverted the stereotypes based on its awareness as its role as a slasher film, and therefore, audiences no longer know what to expect in the film's finale.

#### **4.9 FINAL GIRL AND SURVEILLANCE**

As Sidney is chased by Ghostface and falls out of a two-story window in a similar way to Michael Myers in *Halloween* and survives, the film cuts to Randy sitting on the couch watching the same film. As a tongue-in-cheek nod to the film's status as a meta slasher, Randy, played by Jamie Kennedy, is telling Jamie Lee Curtis on the screen to "watch out, Jamie. You know he's around." (*Scream*, 01:22:23-01:22:30) Audiences watching *Scream* and Gale's assistant in his van watching Randy could be saying the same thing to their own screens. The awareness of their situation in the statement "you know he's around" has been clear throughout the entire movie. By this point in the film, the characters must assume that Ghostface could always be watching from the shadows, and they will have to monitor and/or alter their own behavior as needed in order to survive the rules of the slasher film.

For the characters, the realization that there are two people masquerading as Ghostface is revealed as Sidney struggles being left alone against Billy and Stu. The reasoning behind their choices to don a Ghostface costume and murder those closest to Sidney is because Sidney's mother was having an affair with Billy's father, and Billy blames them for why his own mother left. After a small diversion created by Gale Weathers, Sidney takes the voice changer Billy and Stu used as Ghostface and hides. In a reversal, she calls the house phone and, with the voice changer, asks, "are you alone in the house?" (*Scream*, 01:38:16-01:38:19) Through taking the tools Ghostface used for surveillance and using them herself, Sidney has upended the slasher film formula. The change in what Sidney can do in this film is notable when one looks at the Final Girl trope. The embrace of Ghostface's former power is what "breaks the orthodox convention that the hero will save the heroine as she cries and pleads for her life." (Ojha 248) In a paper written for the *International Journal of Innovative Research and Advanced Studies*, Shubham Ojha looks at popular slasher films and analyzes the differences in the female main characters. Sidney's character sticks out for fans because she is one who defies the genre rules set out for her. This is especially evident in the final few scenes.

Enraged and full of fear, Billy rips through the house looking for Sidney. Meanwhile, Sidney has been hiding in the hallway closet, listening and watching in the same manner as Ghostface. The collapse of the Final Girl and slasher is fully realized when she pushes her way out of the closet, donning the costume, and stabs Billy in the chest with an umbrella. (*Scream*, 01:39:52-01:40:05) In this scene, Sidney's gender performativity is subverted according to traditional Final Girl standards. She assumes the place of the slasher in order to vanquish the antagonist.

In a chapter written for *The Cell Phone Reader: Essays in Social Transformation*, author Allison Whitney refers to this specific scene and argues that:

she literally reverses the trajectory of violence, emerging from the enclosed space to defend herself and take control of the scene. Indeed, Sidney makes her relationship to the genre's gender traditions clear by defending herself by both biting and penetrating – forms of attack associated with violent fantasies about female and male sex organs.

(Whitney 136)

Through her taking up the costume, mask, and voice changer, Sidney is successful in fighting against the ever-present surveillance that has occurred since the film's start. She has had the ability to perform her gender in ways that defy socially-entrenched gender roles. Even when she has sex with Billy, it is a choice that she makes because she feels ready to do so, and she does not succumb to the murder that usually awaits sexually active teenagers in these situations. After being attacked by Billy after she thought he was dead, Sidney picks up the gun again and shoots him in the head, exclaiming, "not in my movie." (*Scream*, 01:42:04-01:42:26) Freely taking the gun in another show of power and control, Sidney warps gender performativity expectations.

By viewing these last scenes, audiences come face to face with their own social ideas about gender performativity and surveillance. Just because a woman has sex or dresses a certain way does not necessitate a specific kind of ending, even when they are being watched by other people as closely as someone like Ghostface. There is no need for one to change their own behavior or actions based on the socially-acceptable gender roles constructed and constantly reinforced by society. *Scream* does several things at once. It exposes the social fear of having to fashion one's self in order to adhere to gender standards. By showing what happens when a Final

Girl does perform their gender in a different way, the film also upends the slasher genre and redefines what a Final Girl can do. No longer does having sex in a slasher film mark one for death.

The exercises of power as seen in this film are reminiscent of what Foucault writes in *The History of Sexuality*. Instead of power being an institution that is present and functions from the top-down, he argues that it is “the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization.” (Foucault 92) For *Scream*, the power comes from the relationships between the characters themselves, as well as the characters and the movies they reference. They twist the rules of the slasher movies into rules in which they should live by. The characters are reinforcing these power relations. Specifically, the gender performativity, and the surveillance by which it survives, is another power relation that is only deemed powerful because it is exercised often by the characters in this film. The reinforcement is what is giving the Final Girl trope its power. For Sidney to get around the traditions of the Final Girl and still survive at the end, it shows that this specific representation of gender performativity in film is fluid.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE FUTURE OF SLASHERS

*Halloween*, *Sleepaway Camp*, and *Scream* are only three films in a canon that seek to explore human fear and behavior. As one of the first horror slasher films, *Halloween* lays down a solid foundation for the genre and its expectations. It exploits a fear of sexual liberation in its ninety-minute runtime. In so doing, the film begins to mark out female character behavior when confronted with fear for the horror genre. Thereby, it produces a social truth that we take as unquestionable: that all female characters and, by extension, women in general will behave in a particular way if they follow the trope laid out in the film. We can also infer that when a character falls out of line with the established character trope that they will be dealt justice in the form of dying before the film's end. For example, if a female main character like Jamie Lee Curtis' portrayal of Final Girl Laurie Strode stays virginal and does not engage in breaking society's previously held rules on teenage behavior, then she will come out victorious against the film's slasher villain. *Sleepaway Camp* and *Scream* build off the established Final Girl template in *Halloween* in their characterization of Angela Baker and Sidney Prescott.

If we look at horror as a space in which anxieties are explored, as I have argued previously, in *Halloween*, the male killer is a physical representation of society's fear of sexual liberation. The knife-wielding Michael Myers is society's way of dispensing justice against rule-breaking, sexually active teenage women. Laurie Strode's friends are brutally murdered and their bodies manipulated in a highly visual display, held up to a contemporary audience as if to say, "this is what may happen to sexually active women who engage in sinful behaviors." It is through Laurie's refusal to participate in her friends' activities on Halloween night, instead seeking nurturing domesticity in the form of babysitting, that allow her the advantage of best-ing

her film's slasher. Indeed, it is her choice to remain virginal that ensures her survival and cements her image as the original Final Girl, an archetype that many future slasher films followed.

The unwritten rules of the early American slasher films like *Halloween* seek to carve out a genre that holds up this Final Girl behavior as the standard. Once those genre rules are defined and reinforced, then a film will seek to go outside of the box and produce a new idea or truth, as seen in *Sleepaway Camp*.

It is *Sleepaway Camp* that disrupted this archetype in its endeavor to negotiate a social fear. The film plays with the gender expectations that audiences had come to understand as "truth." Typically, a slasher film features a Final Girl who triumphs against the male slasher after he has killed all of her friends. *Sleepaway Camp* conflated these two character archetypes into one and makes Final Girl Angela into a transgender slasher. By blurring the lines between two established character types, the film exposes a societal fear of gender fluidity and of trans bodies. Merging Angela's Final Girl with the slasher forced the audience to sit with a character that obscures the boundaries of reinforced binary gender. The prolonged spectacle made of Angela's body compelled audiences to sit with their discomfort long after the film ends. The reason for their shock and disgust stems from a reaction to the in-between. Angela does not fit into a cisnormative category concerning gender. The disconnect between who audiences believed Angela to be and who she actually is demonstrates society's anxiety of identities that do not fit into neat, previously established and reinforced categories. Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection is precisely why audiences and reviewers wrote of their repulsion toward the film's reveal. It is a reaction to who exists outside of two distinct boxes, to who exists in the in-between. Using theories of gender performativity and abjection, I argued that both ideas provide an insight into



the reasoning behind that fear. Theoretical frameworks such as these help provide insight into why slasher films succeed.

Like *Sleepaway Camp*, *Scream* breaks through the deeply-laid mold of the slasher film formula with its meta take on the horror genre. Using Michel Foucault's view of discipline via the panopticon, I argued that films like *Scream* explore the innate human fear of being watched. Through a hyper self-awareness of its main characters, combined with tools of surveillance, *Scream* capitalized on this fear, while also exposing the gendered elements of the gaze. Ghostface functioned as an all-knowing observer of the Final Girl. As such, it led to and sustained an internal self-surveillance in Sidney. I argued that external fear or cultural anxiety is how Ghostface and the Final Girl were able to function in their established character archetypes. A fear that, despite Final Girl Sidney's well-informed attempts at subverting the trope, comes to fruition one way or another. Sidney still had to witness the destruction and carnage around her. She had to outsmart her observer/slasher at the end of the film in order to survive. Through its opening scene of the murder of Drew Barrymore's Casey Becker to the additional surveillance placed by journalist Gale Weathers, the film concerns itself with the behaviors and whereabouts of its female characters, particularly Neve Campbell's Sidney. Ghostface, a masked assailant, observes these characters from a distance, like the guard watching in the middle of a panopticon prison. The mere thought of being watched by a slasher in the shadows is enough to put Sidney on high alert. Even then, she is aware of her position in the film and works to avoid falling to the same fate as those who came before her. By the film's end, Sidney has simultaneously broken out of and reinforced the Final Girl trope by vanquishing her film's slasher even after violating her character's previously laid-out rule of staying virginal. There exists a layer of surveillance in slasher films that stems from cultural anxieties.

Horror films rely on physical, bodily reactions. They rely on viewers' hearts racing, jumping out of their seats, cringing, screaming, or even vomiting. Horror films, and slasher films specifically, have used their niche genre to take a deep dive into the parts of society and culture that we would rather not talk about. Topics involving violence, sex, fears, and the deep recesses of the human mind are all free to play with in a horror film. Horror as a genre provides a space in which we can confront our fears and watch them play out in a safe and detached way.

We use popular culture as a means of mirroring our own society at large. Social issues that society has a hard time negotiating often show up in films. The use of fear within horror allows a reliable space to negotiate these anxieties. Additionally, horror films function as a means through which cultural anxieties can be reinforced. For example, the narrative regarding the behavior of women, especially during a time of crisis, is shown in slasher films through the use of a Final Girl character. Audiences are meant to relate to the main characters. By showing the Final Girls' struggles against a masked slasher and her success at vanquishing the monster, the film produces a truth about how we view women, which is that we only see these women as worth saving, worth showing, if they submit to the established gender roles. Interestingly, the portrayal of a Final Girl as a "tomboy" in order for male viewers to align with, shows a possibility of a view of women as self-sufficient and independent. No one necessarily helps these women in these slasher films. They help themselves. They alone fight against the slasher and emerge victorious.

This research is important to the field of Gender Studies and Media Studies because it seeks to understand why we resonate with these characters. A fear of surveillance is not a new one, but horror has enabled a contemporary means of negotiating that fear through an established and successful form of media. As I have discussed, research within the fields of Gender Studies

and Film Studies has long included the Final Girl trope. The behaviors of characters, particularly those who identify as female, have been scrutinized and theorized about since the inception of the Slasher film. And while much has also been written about panopticism in general, I believe that panopticism is a key factor in truly understanding the power and influence that surveillance has on gender, especially if we are to take the behaviors of such characters in slasher films as representative of our own.

Panopticism gives us another avenue in which to explore and try to understand the behaviors of people, specifically when it comes to gender performativity. Horror is a great space for that because it is genre that often deals with the human body and its reactions. It contributes to the production of knowledge and truth. What we do, how we act, behave, dress, etc. is informed by many outside factors, and horror is simply a space for us to negotiate anxieties we have about it. Looking at slasher films provides a rich collection of texts for analysis that are both timely and historical, as well as encompasses many different areas of society.

There have been many articles, essays, chapters, and entire books dedicated to the Final Girl archetype in horror films, but there has not been much written about exactly why the Final Girl behaves the way she does. Hence why I have argued the use of panopticism in these films is a major component of said behavior. It does not only reach the Final Girl character. The surveillance felt by characters is experienced in films of other genres as well as real life. It is precisely the limits placed on the character that are derived from that internal self-surveillance. As shown in the work I have written so far, if we include Foucault's idea of biopower via panopticism, it explains the reasoning behind these character tropes and why we continue to see them in slasher films. To share the experience of being watched invites the shared feeling of terror that these films seek hard to evoke. The slasher film is only successful if it achieves this. It

is precisely what makes it a horror film. It is in the horror film genre that we see these social truths formed and perpetuated.

Cultural anxieties will not dissipate. As we evolve as a society, there will always be those who push against progress within Gender Studies. And with the existence of anxieties, so continues the existence of film as a medium with which to negotiate cultural anxieties.

Therefore, we will continue to see these gender anxieties replicated and reinforced within slasher films. Because of this, we will also see the use of Foucault's panopticon as a way of regulating gender performativity as a response to social anxieties. As younger audiences become more aware of slasher film tropes, slasher films will try to shake up the established formula just as *Scream* did in the 1990s. The trajectory of the Final Girl arc through future decades may see some tweaks, but as long as gendered anxieties exist, so will the Final Girl trope as a way of managing gender.

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