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Female Victimization in the 1970s and 1980s Slasher Film

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Introduction

In the 1970s, Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) and John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978), emerged to mark a new era of horror. From 1974, the slasher sub-genre prospered and evolved as it concerned itself with the representation of women and the roles women assume as victims (Clover, 1992).

The late 1960s into the 1970s was an anxious time for the United States with the Vietnam War and societal unrest. Film professor and theorist, Carol J. Clover, defines the start of contemporary slasher to be 1974 and bookended by *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre II* in 1986 (Clover, 1992). This era of slasher films “responds to the values of the late sixties and early seventies” (Clover, 1992, p. 26). This time period from 1974 to 1986 will serve as the focus of this paper's research by examining the role of women in slasher films. This topic bears great significance because this second phase of slasher horror – the first from 1960 to 1974 – influenced the genre given its formulaic nature and is still relevant nearly 50 years later, which will later be analyzed in this paper.

There was a notable shift in popular culture as the horror genre gained popularity, specifically the slasher sub-genre. In the sub-genre, a faceless killer serially murders a group of teens while one lone female survivor prevails, and with this audiences are reminded of their fears. There are many genres in horror that branch out from psychological horror to rape-revenge, but horror films “plays on fears about the environment” (Bordwell, Thompson, & Smith, 2020, p. 342) and comment on the dangers faced within our neighborhoods, camps, schools, and hospitals. For women, these fears may be different than men, such as the fear of being sexually assaulted, drugged, or brutally killed while walking alone at night.

Slasher films differ from traditional horror and other sub-genres due to explicit violence primarily directed toward women (Donnerstein, Linz, & Penrod, 1987). Violence in slashers is often paired with sexual behavior (Linz, Donnerstein, & Penrod, 1988). These scenes are the basis of the

plot and appeal to male audiences; viewers do not want to see a man pleading for his life, but instead, a woman in provocative, bloody clothing screaming.

This paper will examine this misogynistic representation of women in slasher films from the 1970s and 1980s and how these films engage the audience in the suffering of female characters. Although research states that men are killed more in slashers, conflicting with slasher film definitions, content analyses have found scenes of women being tortured are extended for the pleasure of the male audience. Due to these findings, I will argue that women are still the victims of slasher films.

To examine this portrayal of women in 1970s and 1980s slashers, I will first provide background on the genre using the influential films *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) and *Halloween* (1978), and from there I will define the genre in accordance with its characteristics and formulaic conventions. Clover's groundbreaking work (1987; 1992), offers a feminist perspective on slasher films and will provide substantial evidence throughout my paper. Then, I will compare and contrast multiple content analyses from the 1980s to the 2000s that use empirical studies to evaluate the degree to which women are victimized in slashers by the duration of scenes and the juxtaposition of sex. Lastly, this research brings forth the audience perspective and the male gaze, which will also be evaluated in the context of slasher.

Slasher Background

Since their release, Hooper's *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and Carpenter's *Halloween* have become incorporated into popular culture with substantial commercial success spawning an onslaught of sequels, as well as contributing to scholarly research in film. For this reason, these two have been chosen to be further evaluated in this paper. The original *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* with its small budget of \$140,000, grossed \$30.2 million at the box office (*The Texas Chainsaw*

Massacre; Franchise: *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*) and generated eight additional movies. *Halloween* grossed more than \$75 million within the first six years of its release with a budget of \$320,000 (Clover, 1992, p. 23). These films shaped the sub-genre with tropes and themes that have been replicated in subsequent slashers. However, the slasher sub-genre was not new in the 1970s – it can be traced back to Alfred Hitchcock’s 1960 film *Psycho*, the “appointed ancestor” and Michael Powell’s *Peeping Tom*, which both laid the groundwork for the genre (Clover, 1992, p. 23).

Alternatively, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and *Halloween*, both introduced a new monster, which remained the norm for future slasher films. Leatherface of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and Michael Myer of *Halloween's* only purpose is to be superhuman killers. Whereas in *Psycho*, Norman Bates possesses multiple personalities, these killers have no normal side, “they are emphatic misfits and outsiders” (Clover, 1992, p. 30). Leatherface is a deformed outcast and Michael rises up from each seemingly fatal blow. The elements in these films are familiar and established a basis for the popular sub-genre.

As Carpenter said, “horror is a reaction, not a genre” (Portner, 2015, para. 4). For the clarity of this paper, I will specifically refer to horror as a genre and slasher as a sub-genre since this is the commonly accepted idea of categorization that all moviegoers have. However, the legendary director of *Halloween* thinks of horror less as a rigid definition and more of a response. Slasher is known to be a sub-genre of the larger category of horror. This categorization naturally occurs, for example, we know what genre a movie falls into without even putting significant thought into it. And moviegoers often seek out a movie because it is a genre that they like. But genre labels can be broad and specified even further. Sub-genres, such as slasher films, “have distinct conventions of their own and perhaps appeal to different viewers” (Bordwell et al., 2020, p. 331).

Slasher is recognized for being predictable and this predictability is part of the experience for moviegoers. In slasher films, there is a “high level of replication, in terms of narrative structure and

mise-en-scene” (Creed, 1993, pp. 124-125). This narrative structure is the story of a “psychokiller who slashes to death a string of mostly female victims, one by one, until he is subdued or killed, usually by one girl who has survived” (Clover, 1992, p. 21). A major convention of slasher, as defined by Clover (1992), are the “cinematographic moves...that rub our noses in camerawork” (p. 10) such as point-of-view shots that show “what the character would see” (Bordwell et al., 2020, p. G-3).

However, this camera work is not gender-free and has a certain way of looking at women, which will later be described using Laura Mulvey’s influential research on the male gaze. Bordwell et al. (2020), defines horror conventions with its aims “to shock, disgust, repel—in short, to horrify...this impulse is what shapes the genre’s other conventions” (p. 341). Bordwell’s text does not go into defining the sub-genre of slasher, but according to the authors, the main convention is the monster that horrifies us. In this case, it is Leatherface and Michael Myers.

It is known that horror organizes “around functions that are understood to preexist and constitute character” (Clover, 1992, p. 12). Clover understands that gender and function adhere to each other; the victim is represented by a female, and the monster or hero by a male, “a figure does not cry and cower because she is a woman; she is a woman because she cries and cowers” (Clover, 1992, p. 13). Horror films are inherently gender-oriented; characters behave according to their gender. This definition of gender in a slasher is not clear cut with several exceptions of weak gender distinctions between characters, but Clover suggests function comes first, and then a character is assigned to that function. In other words, slasher is informed by stereotypes of gender.

Clover goes a step further in investigating slasher film tropes by using *Psycho* as the benchmark. She characterizes five components of the slasher: killer, locale, weapons, victims, and shock effects (Clover, 1992). The killer is often a psychotic, childlike male reeling from the effects of a troubled home and the victim is a beautiful, sexually active young woman. Contrasting the victims is the sole survivor – or final girl – also a young woman, but one with “boyish” traits, who does not

engage in sex (Clover, 1992, p. 44). The terror occurs at an often abandoned “Terrible Place,” the villain kills with a signature weapon, and the shocking attack is from the victim’s POV (Clover, 1992, pp. 23-24). Whereas in *Psycho* there was one victim, in slashers from the 1970s and 1980s there are a string of victims, usually female (Clover, 1992).

In *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Hooper, 1974), the horror is simple and follows this format set by Clover. Five young people travel rural Texas in a van and come across an abandoned house. A family of ex-slaughterhouse workers, turned cannibals live in this house of horrors, and the travelers are murdered. The sole survivor is Sally Hardesty (see figure 1), who witnesses the death of her friends and escapes in a passing truck. The final scene of Sally drenched in blood and screaming in the back of the pick-up while Leatherface swings his chainsaw is a memorable image of horror.

Figure 1



Sally Hardesty escapes in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, 1974. (Hooper, 1974)

Four years later, *Halloween* (Carpenter, 1978), considered to have started the slasher craze by film professor Barbara Creed (1993) and Clover (1992), also combines these elements but is set against a different plot. A masked psychopath, Michael Myers, escapes from the asylum he was imprisoned in after murdering his sister and terrorizes his hometown. Michael goes on a rampage and kills several unsuspecting teens with his butcher knife while his doctor attempts to hunt him

down. Michael's only survivor is teenage babysitter Laurie Strode (see figure 2), who survives by her wits and ends his bloodbath. This life-and-death struggle continues in subsequent sequels with Michael hunting down Laurie to enact revenge on her for her survival. And although the women in these films suffer both prolonged pain and fright, they rise up to challenge their oppressors.

Figure 2



Laurie Strode and Michael Myers in *Halloween*, 1978. (Carpenter, 1978)

Literature Review

Slasher Definitions

Clover (1992), Creed (1993), and Bordwell et al. (2020) define the slasher film sub-genre using these cinematic formulas and components, but other researchers define slasher by using sex and violence as criteria. Divergent arguments have arisen in response to the wave of 1970s and 1980s slasher flicks about whether women bear the brunt of violence more than their male counterparts. Film critics Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert covered the topic of slashers in a 1980 episode of their hit television program *Sneak Previews*. Although not huge fans of slasher films, the duo termed this genre as “women-in-danger” films, characterized by extreme violence directed at young women (Sneak Previews, 1980).

In comparison, film critic Janet Maslin (1982) argues slasher provides a “spectacle of pure killing” of men and women being killed in equal measure (para. 4). Maslin (1982) observes killing attractive women excites the killer the most, but he will butcher anyone that crosses his path. Dickstein (1984) is consistent with Maslin in suggesting the equitable victimization of males and females is essential for the slasher film viewing experience and development. Similarly, Molitor and Sapolsky (1993) define slasher as “containing suspense-evoking scenes in which an antagonist, who is usually a male acting alone, attacks one or more victims” (p. 234). These scenes focus on the victim’s fear, with the central focus on the brutal attack. This leads to the prized question in slasher of “who will the central villain get next and by what method?” and therefore creates a series of expectations and suspense for the viewers (Tudor, 1989).

According to these definitions, the masked killer may not discriminate. However, filmmakers do. Donnerstein et al. (1987) argue violence is “overwhelmingly directed at women” (p. 113). Linz et al. (1988) advance this argument by taking it a step further and pairing victimization with sexually-charged scenes. They maintain the slasher sub-genre is made up of “sexually violent films” with “scenes of explicit violence primarily directed toward women, often occurring during or juxtaposed to mildly erotic scenes” (p. 759). This is disturbing because prolonged exposure to fictional violence against women can cause viewers to become desensitized to actual violence. This concern of exposure to degrading scenes will later be explained in my paper. Clover (1992) similarly asserts the majority of slasher deaths are female but she does not conduct a content analysis to back her claim and bases it solely on observation.

Violence in Slasher

Content analyses have been a common way for film researchers to investigate how misogyny manifests itself in the slasher genre and what type of people survive or are immediately killed by the villain's wrath. As women assume charge in leadership positions and challenge gender roles, women want to see better representation on screen (Seger, 2003). However, the slasher sub-genre has a reputation for violence toward women. Research has challenged this popular belief by addressing diverse perspectives over whether male or female characters suffer more from the gruesome slaughter characterized by slasher definitions and if there is a linkage between sex and violence.

This research emerged in the 1980s following the commercial success of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and *Halloween* and has garnered a scholarly conversation since (Weaver, 1991). In each empirical study, authors start off by acknowledging the slasher tropes from the 1970s that form the basis of the genre and evaluate past research before conducting their own. Weaver (1991), Molitor and Sapolsky (1993), and Cowan and O'Brien (1990) all challenge this assumption that women are the predominant targets of fictional violence. Together they analyzed 96 slasher flicks spanning the 1970s to the late 1980s and consistently found violence in slasher was not primarily directed toward women.

Weaver (1991) observed 10 slashers with a total of 406 scenes from the 1970s and 1980s with some of the highest box office earnings. He reported no evidence of systematic bias among gender. Only six scenes out of the 406 observed depicted the death or injury of a female character following sexual behavior. However, female victims are displayed on screen in fear longer than their male counterparts. The average death scene for female characters was 217.2 seconds compared to the scenes involving males at 107.7 seconds. Although, women are victimized at a greater time length, Weaver (1991) did not go into depth on how on screen suffering for females might have been more graphic compared to males. However, Weaver's (1991) findings are limited because he

only evaluated slasher films that had significant success in movie theaters and excluded movies from nontraditional outlets. Slashers that achieved less box office success such as those distributed via video rental could offer up a different viewpoint in their portrayal of violence among genders. These could show violence in equal measures. Comparatively, Molitor and Sapolsky (1993) and Cowan and O'Brien (1990) also assessed slasher movies from alternative outlets on top of popular films like *Halloween*, *Friday the 13th*, and *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, which are all analyzed across these studies.

In the study conducted by Cowan and O'Brien (1990), they similarly examined the relationship between gender and death in slasher films, but with a wider selection. The pair coded 56 films from the 1970s and 1980s – some outside my time range – with a total of 474 victims. They found female and male victims were portrayed equally. However, when discussing survival, women were more likely to survive than men, going against the common conception in slasher definitions and public perception. This is echoed in their results; of 242 male victims, 90% resulted in death. Cowan and O'Brien also examined the intermingling of sex and violence in scenes, which contradicts Weaver's (1991) findings. Their research revealed a large portion – 33% to 35% – of all nonsurviving victims engaged in sex prior to their death, suggesting and supporting similar research that with sex, comes violence. Cowan and O'Brien (1990) also went a step further than Weaver and investigated the differences in sexual indicators and personality traits such as provocative clothing, obscene language, and promiscuity. Female nonsurvivors were more promiscuous than male nonsurvivors by wearing revealing clothing or showing nudity on screen and therefore, they more frequently engaged in sexual acts before their deaths. As for the qualities that female and male characters possess, survivors of both genders were more likely to be “intelligent, heroic, resourceful, and level-headed” while female nonsurvivors were more physically attractive than female survivors (Cowan & O'Brien, 1990, pp. 192-193).

This is in line with Clover's (1987;1992) observations and implies the overall message of slasher films are that sexually-active women get brutally slashed in lengthy scenes whereas the pure, less attractive women survive. The lone woman who survives at the end is the final girl, a term originally coined by Clover in her 1987 work *Her Body, Himself*. Clover (1987) describes the final girl as "the one who encounters the mutilated bodies of her friends and perceives the full extent of the preceding horror and her own peril; who is chased, cornered, wounded..." (p. 201). This character is later observed by Clover (1992) to be "intelligent, watchful, level-headed; the first character to sense that something is amiss" (p. 44), and she is understood to be the main character from her first scene. Circling back to Clover's (1992) argument that function precedes gender, the women who are brutally killed are portrayed as sexy, promiscuous women whereas "the final girl is boyish" (p. 40). She is easily distinguishable from her friends and peers and it is known from the start that this resourceful, studious, and quick-witted character will prevail even alone in the face of death.

Halloween, begins with a POV shot of Michael killing his little sister, but then viewers meet Laurie – note the masculine name – and identify with her. Laurie and Michael go on a cat-and-mouse game, but Laurie beats the infamous masked killer in the end. Viewers understand Laurie to be a bookworm since she is seen holding books and is also teased by her friends for not dating, rendering her as sexually inactive (Clover, 1992). In *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, Sally is the last remaining of her friends and the audience's sympathies are directed toward her. She manages to merely escape from Leatherface's chainsaw, although her sexuality is not greatly touched upon. Cowan and O'Brien (1990) contend that "the good woman is asexual and the bad (and therefore dead) woman is sexual" (p. 195).

Molitor and Sapolsky (1993) added to the research done by Weaver (1991) and Cowan and O'Brien (1990), and attempted to resolve their differences regarding the relationship between sex and violence. Instead of evaluating scenes, they used behavior as the unit of analysis. Molitor and

Sapolsky sampled 30 slashers from the 1980s – 1980, 1985, and 1989 – and coded for violent behavior. Some of these findings are outside my time period, but they observed that less than half of the overall victims in slashers are female – 44.4% female and 55.6% male, supporting the previous studies. But when it comes to sexual actions and death, Molitor and Sapolsky agree with Weaver (1991). The juxtaposition of violence following sex rarely occurred. Of the 1,877 violent incidents coded, there were only 92 scenes that displayed violence during or preceding sexual activity, regardless of gender. When considering female characters, there were only 40 instances of death or injury paired with sex. These numbers are statistically insignificant. However, Molitor and Sapolsky observed that slashers dwell on female suffering. They examined the extent to which characters are shown in fear and found slasher films put fear on display for an average of 679.8 seconds. According to the researchers, women were shown in fear for an average of 566.1 seconds and men for only 113.7 seconds. Molitor and Sapolsky (1993) have a larger sample size of movies than Weaver (1991), but the average duration of women in fear that they found is much longer. This can be because Molitor and Sapolsky observed films released in 1989, which included more excessive violence than earlier films. Cowan and O'Brien's (1990) study did not examine the average duration of injury and death. It would have been helpful to compare these three studies on a broader scale regarding the length to which women are filmed in terror. But Weaver (1991) and Molitor and Sapolsky (1993) still emphasized the greater duration of women suffering.

The analyses mentioned detail the victimization of women in slashers, but subsequent studies build by cross analyzing slasher films with different genres. King (2005) tests slasher films against mean girl movies in the 1990s and Sapolsky, Molitor, and Luque (2003) advance past research examining how 1990-era action-adventure films compare to slasher films. Sapolsky et al. (2003) found slashers from the 1990s mix scenes of sex and violence less often than in previous decades. There is more violence in action-adventure films, but it is directed more toward men (Sapolsky et al.,

2003). But their findings relating to slasher victims from the 1970s to the 1990s still remain the same – males are more often victims of violence, but women are shown in fear for longer. King uses Sapolsky et al.'s (2003) research and found that although the violence in mean girl movies is not fatal, this sub-genre shows men in fear longer than women, reversing the pattern set by slashers. King's work suggests slasher films have a preference for prolonged violence against women. However, additional research has to be done to see if this victimization is specific to slashers or if this inequitable violence occurs in other genres.

Regardless of differences among findings and units of analysis, all of these studies challenge the assumption that women are singled out because of their gender. The data and insight provided by Weaver (1991), Molitor and Sapolsky (1993), and Cowan and O'Brien (1990) are inconsistent with the slasher film definition provided by Siskel and Ebert in *Sneak Previews* as “women-in-danger” films and Donnerstein et al. (1987) who argue slasher films are characterized by violence inflicted toward female characters. Cowan and O'Brien (1990) explain why these findings challenge the assertions made by Donnerstein et al. and popular belief. They theorize women may be perceived as more frequent victims because violent scenes against them may be the most memorable especially when it involves promiscuity. The rules of chivalry may also impact the public perception of representation in slashers when “women's seemingly protected status may make instances of the murder of females more salient” (Cowan & O'Brien, 1990, p. 194). The research conducted, qualitative done by Donnerstein et al. (1987) and Clover (1992) and quantitative, by Weaver (1991), Molitor and Sapolsky (1993), and Cowan and O'Brien (1990) may account for the differences in the results of on-screen representation, but more research is needed to see if this difference is significant.

As for the association between sex and violence, these findings suggest the purpose of sex is to convey the message “boys and girls who play around get murdered by the maniac while the virginal [or at least abstemious] heroine survives” (Polan, 1984, p. 202). However, because the data

suggests there is no systematic bias among gender, this does not mean women are not victims. Men might die more, but women's terror is drawn out, and when women do die their scenes are more graphic (Creed, 1993). Clover's view is that women are selected as victims more than their counterparts because they are allowed a greater range of emotional expression. "Angry displays of force may belong to the male, but crying, cowering, screaming, fainting, trembling, begging for mercy belong to the female. Abject terror, in short, is gendered feminine" (Clover, 1987, p. 212). To Clover, the woman is victimized in particular ways because coinciding with gender roles, she fulfills these functions.

Weaver (1991) asserts this victimization is not "entirely equitable" (p. 5). Although women are more likely to survive, there is this common trend of female pain and suffering dragged out for the fanfare. Men are killed more quickly, resulting in more male deaths, but women more slowly for the pleasure of the audience. And the boyish, androgynous, and sexually-inexperienced woman that does survive is the final girl. The final girl may be perceived as empowering, but she still goes through hell and back to rightfully earn that prestigious title.

The Slasher Audience and the Male Gaze

Paired with the duration of scenes, it is also the identity of the audience that makes women the victims in slashers from the 1970s and 1980s (1987;1992). Clover asserts that the implied audience of horror films are young males "who cheer the killer on as he assaults his victims, then reverse their sympathies to cheer the survivor on as she assaults the killer" (Clover, 1992, p. 23). This can be problematic when you take into account the length to which women are shown in terror (Molitor and Sapolsky, 1993; Weaver, 1991). When young males are the predominant audience, this torture is dragged out so that male viewers can relish it. It is not known if this is the purpose for torture scenes involving women to be prolonged, but Clover (1992) argues identification happens

easily across gender lines. Because the final girl can be perceived as a masculine female, this provides a way for the mostly male audience to masochistically identify with her and thereby “indulge his vanity as protector of the helpless female” (Wood, 1983, p. 64). By having prolonged scenes of women suffering and a prevailing final girl, allows the male audience to derive pleasure from the experience. The pickup truck in Sally’s case and Michael’s psychiatrist, Dr. Loomis only appear once the final girl’s anguish has been put on display; brutally chased, harmed, or assaulted by the “masked, fat, deformed, or dressed as a woman” killer (Clover, 1992, p. 44).

Weaver (1991) provides a different explanation of why men enjoy horror films by referring to the gender-role socialization model of affect done by Zillmann, Weaver, Mundorf, and Aust (1986). The research by Zillmann et al. (1986) based on this model analyzed the relationship between an opposite-gender companion and the responses to a segment from a contemporary horror movie. It found that men enjoy the movies most when in the company of a distressed woman whereas women find enjoyment in their male partner who shows a mastery of indifference in their responses to gory depictions (Zillmann et al., 1986). Mundorf, Weaver, and Zillmann (1989) similarly found men enjoy graphic representations more than women, which may contribute to why their fictional victimization is shown at greater lengths. These findings can be problematic, especially when slasher pairs sex and violence. Movies that are violent and degrading toward women may cause viewers to be desensitized to actual violence and unsympathetic to victims. There is also the concern that prolonged exposure to pornographic materials might contribute to the development of negative and discriminatory attitudes toward women (Linz et al., 1988). Even if the material is not overly violent, pornography inherently depicts women as subordinate to men, which could lead to these real-life effects.

This perspective is dependent on the viewer and their reactions, but Clover (1992) further acknowledges the female audience and questions whether they have different viewing responses and

experiences because of their gender. This argument strays from my thesis and offers a different perspective about the motivations behind watching horror. However, the fact that the death of male characters is presented in a straightforward manner, with little fanfare should minimize the anxiety of the male viewer and provide him with mastery of indifference to be awed at by their companion (Weaver, 1991). And scenes depicting the victimization of women provide a chance for the female viewer to show anxiety and be comforted by the male. Creed (1993) and Clover (1992) contend that males face castration anxiety since the final girl can be interpreted as a castrating figure, but this goes beyond the scope of my paper.

Laura Mulvey's influential 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" addressed the concept of camera-identification and gender for the first time by using Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. She argues the cinematic gaze is not gender-free, in fact, it places the spectator in the male position, perpetuating the male gaze especially when the camera observes a woman (Mulvey, 1975). Similar to Creed (1993) and Clover (1992), Mulvey presents that sexual differences pose a threat of castration, and because of this male viewers channels their anxiety through fetishization or investigating the woman (Mulvey, 1975). Although Mulvey's essay was written pre-*Halloween* and does not account for the female spectator like in Zillmann et al.'s (1986) theory, this idea can still be observed in slasher movies. Slasher is inherently a victim-identified genre that organizes itself around the highly-ritualistic conventions and facilitates two ways of looking at women (Clover, 1992; Mulvey, 1975). Both of these looks assume a masculine gaze. The sadistic-voyeuristic look is a controlling gaze of unpleasure at a woman with sadism offering a sexual attraction (Mulvey, 1975). Similarly, the fetishistic-scopophilic look has the gazer fetishizing the female body (Mulvey, 1975). According to Mulvey, voyeurism coincides with sadism because the "pleasure lies in ascertaining guilt (immediately associated with castration), asserting control, and subjecting the guilty person through punishment of forgiveness." (p. 15). With the research, it is clear to say that slashers spend considerable time

looking at women and finding pleasure in the powerless female with dragged-out scenes that exploit her identity. For example, the 10-minute dinner table scene of Sally being tortured by the cannibals in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* emphasizes this (Hooper, 1974). This uncomfortable scene places Sally in a vulnerable position. This is done by close-ups of her horrified eyes paired with fast-paced shots of the men punishing and mocking her, enacting both of Mulvey's "looks." This idea of women as the petrified victim and being sexualized is so intertwined with the plot and themes of slasher films that it is difficult to think of the sub-genre being otherwise.

Conclusion

The 1970s marked a shift in the movies people were afraid of. Horror movies shifted in tone to focus on a group of teenagers who encounter a psychotic killer and it is up to one woman – the final girl – to stop him. The research on slasher films informs us although content analyses show men are killed more than women, women's terror is often prolonged for the viewer's satisfaction, a finding that is consistent with Mulvey's concept of the "male gaze." The empirical research performed by Weaver (1991), Molitor and Sapolsky (1993), and Cowan and O'Brien (1990) contradicts the definitions of slasher provided by Siskel and Ebert (Sneak Previews, 1980) and Donnerstein et al. (1987) that the genre is characterized by disproportionate violence toward women. But the findings still suggest that gender roles are crucial to the development of slasher films and the conventions, which make up the genre. Women may survive more than men with a female lone survivor, but their outlasting, persistent nature is not enough to make 1970s and 1980s slasher empowering and of positive representation. As Clover (1992) makes clear, gender correlates to a character's survival and victimization. The woman who is smart, slightly masculine, and not sexually active, stands apart from the others and survives in the end to defeat the male villain. And those characters who are more promiscuous and indulge in sex die. Gender roles are also involved in

the audience's perspective. Zillmann et al. (1986) assert men show the mastery of indifference in response to graphic images and Mundorf et al. (1989) found men enjoy gruesome scenes more than women.

More research is needed to further support my argument. If more time permitted, future work would examine the motivations to why people watch slashers and if it differs among genders. These findings could further back Mulvey (1975), Zillmann et al (1986), and Mundorf et al. (1989) to see if reactions, especially to violent scenes, fall in line with gender or if these reactions transcend these boundaries and are more based on personality or behavior. It would also be interesting to research if watching slasher has desensitizing effects over time and if this is done on an act-by-act basis or dependent on the movie. The literature examined may have touched upon that men enjoy graphic scenes in slasher more than women. However, the content analyses did not closely evaluate how graphic depictions of female deaths may differ from men, as they only used sexual behaviors and personality traits in characters to indicate a difference between genders. Creed (1993) discussed female deaths are designed to be more graphic in slashers but did not give specific examples, such as if blood and sexual assault are more likely involved. The screen time committed to violent scenes may indicate a heightened level of gore, but more research is needed to see if women are victimized beyond being shown in terror for longer periods of time.

Further research is also needed to examine nonbinary roles and representation as campy slashers and queer horror become more popular in movies such as Netflix's *Fear Street*. LGBTQ+ themes in horror are not new. Horror films as early as the 1930s had a queer subtext, but it was not until the 21st-century that Hollywood began to fully embrace queer characters by giving them protagonist roles and allowing them to exist outside of their sexuality (Crucchiola, 2018). Since my research ranges from the 1980s to the early 2000s it does not account for queer representation in slasher films. However, it would be interesting to analyze the roles that queer characters assume and

if they are type-casted as sexual deviants, outcasts, or tragic victims and compare this to their straight counterparts, similar to the groundwork that was laid in previous content analyses.

Lastly, additional research could be applied to movies after 1986 and into the 1990s and 21st century. Slasher films beyond 1986 have redefined the final girl with a female audience in mind, building on top of the definition that it is a women-centric genre. Within the last two decades, slasher has diversified its female characters, challenging the traditional conventions and misogynistic tropes. *Jennifer's Body* has gained a cult following since its release in 2009 and explores themes of violence, but this time with a man-eating, sexually-active young woman as the villain reimagining slasher tropes from the 1970s and 1980s. *Happy Death Day* (2017) blends different sub-genres together in this black comedy slasher satirizing the teen slashers of years past, but without the exploitation of its female characters. And Ari Aster's hit 2019 movie *Midsommar* may not be a slasher film on the surface with its idyllic Swedish village setting, but the slasher undertones are clear as things get sinister before ending in female triumph. These movies have reworked female representation into a positive portrayal that does not perpetuate violence with the message that a woman must fulfill certain roles because of their feminine traits. This does not mean that viewers should not watch classic slashers and take inspiration in movies such as *Halloween* and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* for their preference toward female victimization. But as Hollywood movies reflect changes in society, modern-day slasher films should be held accountable in moving toward gender equality and fairness. *Jennifer's Body*, *Happy Death Day*, and *Midsommar* show that slasher movies can still be cinematic, frightening, and suspenseful without putting the female body at risk. And these films display that the female experience can be empowering.

There are two major limitations of this review that are notable. The literature discussed does not account for advances in the slasher genre. Updated research could have been consulted to see if public perception of slasher films as a violent genre that focuses on women as victims has changed

since it emerged in the 1970s and if the representation of women has been improved beyond my time frame.

Secondly, the research consulted did not state if there are more male characters in slashers and if this is why men are killed more by the villain than women. Further research needs to be conducted on the representation of men in slashers to see if the data is unfavorably skewed toward women.

Additionally, the commercially-successful slashers, *Halloween* and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* were the only two films discussed in depth in relation to the topic. And although a majority of the research evaluated these two films to a great extent, they were also chosen because I have a preference for these two films compared to other slashers from the time period. If time allowed, other impactful slashers discussed could be *Black Christmas* (1974), *Dressed to Kill* (1980), *Friday the 13th* (1980), and *Prom Night* (1980). These popular slashers from the time frame would provide more valuable insight into the portrayal of women in slasher films.

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Appendix

Notable Slasher Film Characters

The Texas Chain Saw Massacre, 1974, directed by Tobe Hooper (stream [here](#))

- Sally Hardesty, the Final Girl.....Marilyn Burns
- Leatherface, the Monster.....Gunnar Hansen

Halloween, 1978, directed by John Carpenter (stream [here](#))

- Laurie Strode, the Final Girl.....Jamie Lee Curtis
- Michael Myers, the Monster.....Nick Castle
- Dr. Samuel Loomis, Michael's doctor.....Donald Pleasence