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## Done to Death: The Slasher Cycle

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Abstract: The slasher cycle emerged in the late 1970s. During the boom-period of slasher film production in the early 1980s, these films were vilified in press reviews, decried by many second wave feminist activists, and raised concerns for American parent groups. Slasher films have stood accused of propagating callous attitudes to murder, promoting misogyny, being pornographic, and repeating the same one-dimensional formula until audiences lost interest. This article charts the subgenre's development, making a case that slasher filmmakers have continued to innovate across the 1980s to the present day. The subgenre has been charged with lacking artistry, yet the subgenre's development evidences its abundant creativity. Despite also being accused of lacking "tradition", the slasher built on an existing lineage of 1960s-1970s horror, and is now firmly established as a key part of the horror genre.

Keywords: horror, genre, popular culture, gender

The slasher – also known as the 'stalk and slash' or 'slice and dice' movie – is a staple horror subgenre. That status was hard-won: although popular with audiences, the subgenre was openly disparaged by critics during the boom-period of slasher film production in the late 1970s to early 1980s. As Kate Egan (2007: 31) observes, the slasher subgenre was criticised for its supposed lack of artistry and tradition. These two aspects are coupled in such criticism, insinuating that being of the past ('tradition') automatically confers credibility and creativity ('artistry'). In contrast, the slasher film is associated with commerciality and transient pleasure. Instead of unpicking those aspects of the slasher, critics predominantly dismiss the slasher film simply by offering a sweeping precis of its conventions. To illustrate, Kevin Johnson (2007) lists characteristics – 'large body counts, quick killings by superhuman bogeymen, and...the sex-means-death equation' – in order to suggest that individual films comprising the subgenre are unworthy of attention. Such summation is unsatisfactory but ubiquitous. The purpose of this short article is to take stock of the slasher film's (relatively brief) history, identifying conventions ('tradition') that have grown out of the subgenre, and the creativity ('artistry') that has sustained the subgenre since its heyday in the 1980s.

The slasher film did not just appear out of nowhere. The slasher's lineage demonstrates that it is part of a horror tradition, while its innovations illustrate its creativity. The subgenre's origin point is murky precisely because the subgenre grew organically out of preceding movements. Two seminal influences include *Peeping Tom* (1960) and *Psycho* (1960), which set a track for the slasher film in two key ways. First, both films centre on human killers (as opposed to monsters, vampires or ghosts). In both *Psycho* and *Peeping Tom*, the killer is the film's protagonist. This positioning of a human killer as the lead character would later become a core trait of the slasher film multi-sequel series. Second, both films were critically vilified on their release, despite their respective directors' credibility.<sup>1</sup> The latter established the critical trends Egan identifies. A slightly later point of influence is found in Italian Giallo movies such as *The Bird with Crystal Plumage* (1970) and *A Bay of Blood* (1971), which were popular on the international market during the 1970s (see Koven, 2006: 162-8). Gialli are essentially murder-mysteries, featuring unseen killers attacking victims with bladed weapons. These films would later influence slasher films such as *Graduation Day* (1981) and *Terror Train* (1980), which follow the murder-mystery structure, while also retaining the Giallo's leaning towards filming from the killer's point-of-view (to obscure her or his identity). As the 1970s progressed, several proto-slasher movies were released including *Torso* (1973), *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) and *The Town that Dreaded Sundown* (1976). Each of these proto-slasher films features masked killers picking off victims within a closed location, which would become a standard trope of the slasher movie in the 1980s. Any of these titles could lay claim to being the first slasher film. Indeed, director of *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* (1980)

Sean Cunningham has declared that '*Halloween* [1978] copied *Black Christmas* [1974]' (Grove, 2005: 16).

However, both *Halloween* and *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* are more commonly recognised as the first proper slasher films. These movies distilled a formula that would carry forward into the slasher's production boom-period in the early 1980s. Both films follow a killer as the lead character who murders teenagers,. However, *Halloween* and *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* replace the somewhat sympathetic portrayals of murderers offered in *Peeping Tom* and *Psycho* with a combination of the Giallo's mysterious unknowable killer and the proto-slasher's anonymity. So, the killers who would come to define the *Halloween* and *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* series (Michael Myers and Jason Voorhees) are present and masked, but they are also blank. Emphasis is placed on killing (consequence) rather than on their intentions in these films. Their backstories are sparse, and they are terrifying because of their seemingly insufficient motives for widespread slaughter.

Although superficial, the explanations for the slashers' killing sprees are worth outlining as one of the subgenre's repeated trope sets. These motives help to further explicate the connections between slasher films and their forbears, and also explains why the subgenre initially developed as it did. Before progressing however, it is important to note that this buoyant subgenre is replete with variety. Any gesture towards mapping commonalities requires skirting over the sublimely idiosyncratic motives underpinning *The Dentist* (1996), for instance, in which the titular antagonist killer reveals the pressures inspiring his murder spree in the declaration 'you don't know what it's like: the discipline, the long hours, the lack of respect in a world that goes on ignoring dental hygiene!'. With this caveat in mind, one of the commonplace motives offered in the slasher movie is influenced by both *Psycho* and the real-world serial killer cases that inspired Robert Bloch's novel is the spectre of the overbearing mother. This figure is echoed explicitly in *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> Part 2* (1981): rather than keeping his mother's desiccated body in the fruit cellar as *Psycho*'s Norman Bates does, Jason ensconces his mother's decomposing decapitated head on a shrine in his hovel. In both cases, the killer images their deceased matriarch commanding them to kill from beyond the grave, and it is implied that the killer's homicidal tendencies at least partially result from the mothers' flawed childrearing practices.

Elsewhere, a different type of obsession drives slasher killers. Drawing influence from *Black Christmas*, *Halloween* and *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>*, slashers seem to be preoccupied with killing on specific anniversaries and calendar dates. This focus is reflected in titles such as *Mother's Day* (1980), *Happy Birthday to Me* (1981), *My Bloody Valentine* (1981) and *April Fool's Day* (1986). Of these, the majority are oriented around the winter festive period, encompassing films such as *Silent Night Bloody Night* (1972), *New Year's Evil* (1980), *Don't Open Till Christmas* (1984), and *Bloody New Year* (1987). This trend has continued forward into and continuing forward into *Santa's Slay* (2005), *Silent Night* (2012) and *All Through the House* (2015), for example. The emphasis on particular dates (and the subgenre's concentration on Christmas in particular) helps to anchor the notion that the killers are singularly focused obsessives who will ceaselessly pursue a goal.

In many cases, the killer appears to be triggered by something like a revenge motive, but some care is needed here. For example, *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>*'s Jason might initially appear to be taking revenge on teen camp counsellors over the death of his mother. However, Jason completes this revenge in the opening scene of *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> Part 2* when he dispatches his mother's killer (Alice). Beyond that moment, Jason targets other camp counsellors, this is a form of type-based misdirected violence rather than revenge. Regardless, Jason murders a variety of people, not just teen camp counsellors: these include Crazy Ralph, the middle-aged local harbinger of doom (*Part 2*) and a collective of paintballers (*Part 6*). Jason primarily kills anyone who trespasses onto his perceived territory (Camp Crystal Lake). The same emphasis on territory echoed in Michael Myers' obsession with his childhood home in the *Halloween* series and Norman Bates' inability to control himself when attractive women book into his motel in *Psycho*. The territory motive extends across the subgenre, being reflected in location-based titles such as *Hospital Massacre* (1981), *Home Sweet Home* (1981), *Blood Theater* (1984) and *Nightmare Beach* (1988).

The slasher film's diegetic spaces are rarely governed by apparatuses that could curb the ensuing slaughter. Authority figures such as police, parents and teachers are ineffective, usually becoming victims if they attempt to intervene (see Rockoff, 2002: 11-12). Being set in rural areas (away from stable municipal structures) is one way of establishing these risks. For this reason (and following in the footsteps of films such as *Texas Chain Saw Massacre*), the 'cabin in the woods' is a commonplace setting for slasher movies. Another popular location is the college campus, which is emphasised in titles such as *Prom Night* (1980), *Final Exam* (1981), *The House on Sorority Row* (1983) and *Sorority House Massacre* (1986). Instead of finding excuses for teens to travel to rural locations, these films are rather more efficient, bringing the killer to locations pre-populated with large numbers of potential teenage victims.

Given that slasher films primarily focus on groups of teen victims, much of each film's runtime is spent following the protagonists as they engage in stereotypical teen behaviour, such as listening to music, swimming, playing pranks on one another, and so forth. The most commonly, however, viewers witness teens drinking, smoking weed and participating in pre-marital sex. Here we have a central clue as to why these films caused anxiety among parent groups (see, for example, Silver, 1988). Following from a diegetic focus on teen protagonists, it is presumed that the audience for these films is also primarily comprised of young people (see Dika, 1990: 9). Parents might have been anxious about the way teen life is portrayed in these films either because these films might encourage young people to engage in vices or because the behaviours depicted onscreen might reflect their own offspring's attitudes. Although the behaviours depicted are mostly harmless in nature, some are more concerning. To illustrate, *Sleepaway Camp II: Unhappy Campers* (1988) presents a teen couple (Ally and Rob) hooking up for casual sex. On completion of the act, Ally immediately asks 'listen, you don't have AIDS or anything do you?', and when Rob replies in the negative, she simply responds 'Great. See you' as she leaves. Although played for laughs, the film was released at the height of 1980s HIV panic, and so it is easy to see why a protective parent might be concerned about this character's recklessness.

Sex was included frequently in these films for another reason: it is a selling point. The inclusion of nudity as a commercial spectacle had become so prevalent in filmmaking by the late 1970s that the term 'T&A' ('tits and ass') entered the Merriam Webster dictionary in 1979.<sup>2</sup> As this phrase suggests, emphasis is placed on female nudity in particular. A related concern with slasher films then stems from assumptions about the ways in which the female body is depicted onscreen or used instrumentally in these narratives. Those concerns were fuelled by the rise of second-wave feminism across the 1970s and into the 1980s. Firstly, and as the phrase 'T&A' suggests, female nudity is gratuitous inasmuch as it is unnecessary for advancing the plot. One of the most overt examples of this trend is offered in *Cheerleader Massacre* (2003) – a loose sequel to *The Slumber Party Massacre* (1982) – in which one character tells a 'ghost story' involving three stranded women who find an empty cabin and proceed to bathe together. The events are reified as part of *Cheerleader Massacre*. Eventually, the three naked women discover bath-side bottles of chocolate syrup and elect to smear the confectionary on their bodies, licking the sauce from each other's breasts. This two-minute sequence has no bearing on *Cheerleader Massacre*'s plot, and is akin to softcore pornography. In fact, the comparison to pornography carries weight given that the slasher film's narrative structure has been borrowed by several hardcore porn filmmakers. Porn 'slasher' films such as *Camp Cuddly Pines Powertool Massacre* (2005) and *Zero-Tolerance's Official Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> Parody* (2010) intensify the stereotyped horror-slasher motif of teens having sex in the woods then being killed, showing intercourse at-length and in genitally-explicit detail. In that regard, the porn versions develop organically from their horror originators' inclusion of sex sequences: those sex sequences are simply prolonged, and their explicitness is augmented.<sup>3</sup>

That said, the notion that slasher films commonly associated sex with death is over-asserted. In their content analysis of slasher films, Barry Sapolsky and Fred Molitor (1996: 46) demonstrate that juxtapositions of sex and murder are relatively rare in slasher films. They propose slasher movies' reputation for combining sex and murder stems from misperception; when juxtapositions do occur,

they are remembered more vividly than other incidents because those juxtapositions offend audiences' sensibilities. Such juxtapositions will be prominent in an offended audience member's memory of the film as a complete piece. Consequently, when recalling the film, the offended individual will recall sex and death being juxtaposed, while forgetting other happenings, leaving them with the impression that more of the runtime was devoted to such juxtapositions than was actually the case.<sup>4</sup> The associations between slasher films and pornographic titillation do no favours for the subgenre's reputation, amplifying feminist concerns about what slasher films are and do. For example, during the 'Minneapolis Public Hearings on Ordinances to add Pornography as Discrimination Against Women' in 1983, Ed Donnerstein referred to the infamous horror film *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* as 'porn' in which 'women are killed in sexual ways' (Everywoman 1988: 19-20). Yet, the film contains no sex or nudity: the alleged 'sexual overtone' that makes *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* a 'classic' example for Donnerstein (Everywoman 1988: 20) is entirely of his own imagining. The same confusion is evident in Jane Caputi's essay "Advertising Femicide: Violence Against Women in Pornography and Gorenography" (1992: 218), which includes an image of a guerilla feminist protest outside a screening of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* in 1980, presented in the context of anti-pornography discussion. In 1980, influential film critics Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert used an episode of their series *Sneak Previews* to warn the public about 'a disturbing new trend at the movie box office... thrillers featuring extreme violence directed at young women' which they alleged depicted 'a lot of teenage girls being raped or stabbed to death, usually both'. These examples elucidate how the slasher film gained a reputation for being misogynistic (over and above their depictions of killers being inspired by overbearing matriarchs). Reputation aside, the filmic content does not substantiate these presumptions. In their content analysis of 56 slasher films, Gloria Cowan and Margaret O'Brien found that 'women were not more likely to be victims of slashers nor were they less likely to survive when victimized. In fact, they were more likely to survive than male victims' (1990: 194). Given the climate in which cultural representations of women were being flagged as politically problematic by second-wave feminists, audiences were primed to be sensitive to depictions of women being stalked and killed by men, whereas depictions of men killing men were less likely to be perceived as problematic. Since the facts of the films do not support the case that slasher films associated sex with death, some academics have sought to forge metaphorical links instead. Mostly, such connections are rooted in psychoanalytic interpretation, which, Andrew Tudor observes, were commonplace in early horror studies analyses (1997: 446). Twitchell (1985), Clover (1993) and Creed (1993) opt for this mode, intertwining sex and horror in a manner that is typical of Freudian psychoanalysis. That such associations were connected to feminist debate are also unsurprising given that 'much of the feminist film theory that developed rapidly in the 1970s had strong psychoanalytic bases' (Slocum, 2001: 14). In the context of slasher criticism, the leaning towards Freudianism is an uncomfortable fit with feminism. Freud saw the female body as reifying a state of lack: women are "missing" a penis, and this lack equates to a lack in phallic power (even though the penis and phallic power do not correlate in a physical sense). This underpinning phallogocentric stance pervades much discussion of the slasher film's supposed symbolic meanings. In films where the killer commonly dispatches victims with bladed weapons, various scholars have posited that male killers exert phallic power by penetrating female bodies.<sup>5</sup> In this interpretation, murder replaces sex (see Heba 1995: 113), and that reading has become so commonplace that some contend that 'orgiastic thrusting motions [of] the knife...obviously functions as phallus. *Everyone* knows...what such violence "means"' (Freeland 2000: 181, my emphasis). This equivalence became so prevalent so early on in slasher film history that *The Slumber Party Massacre* set out to play with those assumptions. The film features a killer (Russ Thorn) whose weapon of choice is a drill with an exaggeratedly long drill-bit. As the film's poster art indicates, Thorn spends much of the film holding the drill at crotch level so that the connection between drill-bit and phallus are underlined. When he strikes during the titular sleepover, Thorn looms over Trish, making statements that echo rape apologists' excuses, such as 'you know you want it, you love it'. In order to defeat Thorn, Valerie runs to the basement looking for an equivalent weapon. Initially, she picks up her own normal-sized drill-bit but immediately discards it because it is clearly inadequate. In the

symbolic interpretation, Valerie cannot find an equivalent of Thorn's mighty phallus. Eventually, however, she discovers a machete – a bladed weapon more substantial than Thorn's – and when their weapons collide, his drill-bit snaps off. Having been symbolically castrated (and thereby disempowered), Valerie has exerted her power and therefore can defeat him.

This understanding of the slasher film does not require the films to be literally pornographic (as contemporary porn-slasher films are). The very structure of slasher films is akin to porn in this view. It is stereotypical that in porn features, the narrative is perfunctory; the main impetus is to superficially set up situations in which sex can occur. The slasher film corollary is that the narrative is designed to loosely tie together (and fill time between) prolonged, realistic, graphic death sequences. The idea that these horror films are one-dimensional conduits for murder is clear in the disparaging tone of labels such as 'slasher' or the alternatives 'stalk n slash' or 'slice 'em up'. If the thrusting of the knife is a metaphor for sexual penetration in this view, bloodshed is the equivalent of ejaculation. Murder, to use porn parlance, is the "money shot".

This interpretation is allegedly augmented by the use of killer-point-of-view camera in slasher films, which supposedly puts the viewer in the killer's position so that the viewer can vicariously share in the killer's pleasure. Inspired by feminist psychoanalytic film studies, and Laura Mulvey's thesis of the Male Gaze (1975) in particular, theorists such as Dika apply this way of thinking to the slasher film, asserting that 'the characters presented by the point of view shot are the objects of sexual investigation and/or the intended victims of the killer. The viewer is allowed to participate in this kind of involvement, but, because of the structure of identification, is freed from sharing the emotional or moral implications of this act' (1990: 89; see also Freeland, 2000: 18).

This line of reasoning rests on two core assumptions. First, the audience is presumed to be primarily comprised of men (see Clover, 1993: 6, 18 and 23; Harbord, 1996: 146; Williams, 1989: 208; Modleski, 1984), despite a lack of empirical data to substantiate that assumption.<sup>6</sup> Second, it is assumed that the killers are almost always male, that the victims are usually women, or that shots of female deaths tend to 'linger' in a way that is not true of male deaths (see Clover, 1993: 35). There are several problems with this contention. Slasher films did indeed tend to use point-of-view camerawork, especially in the production boom period of the late 1970s to mid-1980s. The convention stems from notable examples such as the opening sequence of *Halloween* and the majority of *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>*. The convention was inspired by Gialli where killer point-of-view was used to hide the killer's identity from the audience. Both *Halloween* and *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* employ the technique in order to reveal an "unexpected" killer: a child (Michael Myers) in the opening of *Halloween*, and a middle-aged woman (Pamela Voorhees) in *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>*. Rather than confirming that the killer point-of-view is male then, these influential convention-starters used point-of-view to thwart the assumption that the killer is always a man. These films highlight a significant problem for the killer-identification model: namely that the point-of-view shot does not provide a locus for identification. One might contend that the point-of-view shot somehow allows the viewer to share the killer's perspective, but it is hard to make a case that the audience simply identifies with the killer. Such a view is implicit in Waller's assertion that 'the genre's propensity for depicting...independent women as victims and for suggesting that the (male) monster is something of a superhero figure' make the slasher film an equivalent of 'X-rated pornographic displays of rape and other male fantasies of sadism and exploitation' (1987: 8). Even in cases where the killer is identified as a man, slasher killers tend to be one-dimensional, mute, misanthropic killing-machines. The victim, in contrast, is an average person, making them a much more viable locus for identification. When we see from the slasher's point-of-view as they stalk a victim, it is more likely to inspire fear *for* the victim, not identification with the killer. The *raison d'être* of horror cinema is to horrify. By aligning the viewer's perspective with the killer's, the filmmaker underlines that the viewer is helpless to stop the murders despite witnessing them first-hand. Thus, some scholars posit that the viewer is primed to identify with the victims (see Humphries, 2002: 143-4; Pole, 1983; Paglia, 1996: 38). While some critics have refuted the identification model altogether (see, for example, Rockett, 1988: 2), others have challenged the idea that the victims are more identifiable than the killers. Martha Wolfenstein and Nathan Leites (1950: 233) assert that American

films tend to negate opportunities for audience engagement with characters who are earmarked for death; 'death is denied by furious activity...there is hardly time to identify or count the corpses, much less mourn them'. The slasher film epitomises this trend for many. To illustrate, Lake Crane refers to slasher victims 'anonymous...faceless masses' (1994: 145-148).

The latter is challenged by another convention of the subgenre. The lead protagonist in a slasher film is typically a resourceful female who eventually defeats the killer. This archetype is known as the Final Girl. The slasher film's tendency to prioritize a lead female provides a partial antidote to (or, less charitably, superficially counters) some of the accusations of misogyny allayed at the subgenre. Slasher films may include 'T&A' and may feature killers induced into murder by overbearing matriarchs, but at their core is a tenacious woman who survives while her (male) peers cannot. Although this archetype was pinned down by feminist-psychoanalytic critics, the Final Girl came packaged with some surprisingly non-feminist sentiments. To illustrate, since she conceives of action, violence, control and power as masculine, but conceives of being victimised, enfeebled, trapped, caught, controlled, killed, hurt, disempowered, objectified, and sought as feminine traits, Clover theorises that the Final Girl must be masculine: she is 'boyish' and 'not fully feminine' because of her 'smartness, gravity, competence in mechanical and other practical matters' (Clover, 1993: 40). Clover insists that the Final Girl must become further 'masculinised' as the narrative progresses in order to defeat the killer (1993: 50). Similar assumptions are pervasive because these associations are embedded in Freudian psychoanalysis. So, Badley theorises that the heroine 'appropriates the male gaze and the phallus (knife)' (Badley, 1995: 119), and Dika declares that the heroine is 'valued' by her community and the audience for her 'personal restraint in sexual matters' and other such traits of modest "femininity", defining the heroine's 'strength' in relation to her symbolic 'castrated' state (Dika, 1990: 135). In this view, women can become powerful only if they rescind femininity, because (these thinkers presume) one can only be powerful if one is masculine. Such a conception seems to be at least as misogynistic as the most callous representations found within the slasher subgenre.

It is true that the Final Girl did not appear to be a very strong character initially. For instance, *Texas Chain Saw Massacre's* Sally and *Halloween's* Laurie are heroes in their respective narratives only inasmuch as they survive. Sally spends the final thirty minutes of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* screaming and crying while being attacked. When she finally escapes, she is characterised by desperation and trauma rather than being victorious. Blood-soaked and wild-eyed, Sally's shrieking laughter indicates panic and madness as much as celebration. Laurie spends much of *Halloween's* final act cowering and whimpering, eventually being rescued by Dr Loomis, who shoots Michael. Neither of these Final Girls displays much agency. They react to the killers' movements (rather than initiating action) and survive only because others arrive to help them. Moving into the 1980s however, the depictions shift somewhat. In 1981, *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> Part 2's* Ginny uses her intelligence (her training in child psychology) to manipulate Jason. Donning his mother's sweater, she subdues Jason by making commands ('Jason, your mother is talking to you'), and subsequently attacks him with a machete. Moreover, *A Nightmare on Elm Street's* Nancy is commonly overlooked by feminist-psychoanalytic scholars because she displays ferocious tenacity, intelligence and strength throughout the film, leading her to triumph over her assailant. She does not simply respond to Freddy; instead, she seeks him out and lays traps for him. Neither Ginny nor Nancy are 'boyish' or 'unfeminine' in the way Clover contends. By 2010, the Final Girl becomes overtly active in her narrative position as the individual who stands up to the killer, despite the odds. In the closing sequence of *Hatchet II* (2010), for instance, Marybeth attacks the killer (Victor) with an axe, repeatedly hacking at his face until it is nothing but a pulp. As she walks away, the audience is treated to a close-up of Victor's finger twitching, as if he will return. At that point, Marybeth returns, having left only to fetch a shotgun, and with a final yell of 'FUCK YOU', she blasts what is left of Victor's head across the floor. The progression between Laurie being rescued by Loomis's (ultimately ineffective) gunshots and Marybeth's attack on Victor is notable, with the latter being indicative of the slasher film's approach on the whole.

Indeed, the subgenre's valorisation of the Final Girl – a normal person who succeeds in extraordinarily adverse circumstances – is indicative of the slasher film's outlook more generally. As a popular genre, horror has been tarnished with the reputation of being 'lowbrow' (Hawkins, 2000, 2007; Heffernan, 2004: 225), and the slasher film's immense popularity in the early 1980s meant that it was dismissed by critics in precisely this manner. However, such disparagement provides relative freedom for filmmakers who wish to push against ideological norms. The centralisation of strong female leads was uncommon in cinema of the period. Indeed, such depictions were well ahead of the scholars who (mis)interpreted the material. The Final Girl embodied a feminist sensibility in an era of backlash against second-wave feminism in mainstream American culture. The slasher film has continued to centralise under-represented groups including the LGBT community in films such as *Hellbent* (2004) (see Elliott-Smith, 2016), or black and ethnic minority protagonists in films such as *Holla* (2006).

The subgenre leant itself to diverse representations because of an industrial factor in its early development. The enormous popularity of slasher films led to a production boom, particularly between 1980-1981 (see Nowell, 2011: 188). Consequently, the same ideas and approaches were replicated dozens of times in a very short time-frame. This market saturation meant that the formula – the establishing of tropes such as the Final Girl – occurred rapidly. Saturation also required that slasher filmmakers found ways to diversify, and the critical tenor surrounding these films provided relative freedom to branch out in a variety of directions (so long as the films remained profitable at the box office). One core area that seems to have concerned filmmakers arguably stems from the subgenre's reputation. If audiences attended to see the kills above all else (as they were reputed to), slashers needed to provide variety in this regard. To put it crassly 'there are only so many ways you can skin a nubile teen' (Ober, 2003) before the spectacle and novelty diminish. Indeed, proto-slashers such as *The Town that Dreaded Sundown* set the bar high in this regard. In one sequence, the masked killer ties a victim to a tree, finds a trombone on the forest floor, tapes a knife to the slide, then stabs his victim by aggressively playing the instrument, thrusting the slide forward so that the knife stabs her in the back. This bizarre sequence took a highly creative approach to knife-based homicide long before the market became saturated.

Moving into the 1980s, kills became increasingly elaborate partially due to the development of practical makeup FX technology and expertise. The spectacle of a bandsaw cutting through Dave's face in *Intruder* (1989) is arguably rooted in the pleasure of watching the FX illusion unfold as much as the sequence's novelty. However, this emphasis on spectacle supported the critical complaints that the victims are homogenous fodder, that deaths are akin to splattery 'money shots' in these films, and that audiences were encouraged to take pleasure in anonymous people's gruesome deaths. Lake Crane (1994: 148) disparagingly alleges that slasher fans' attitude towards onscreen victims can be summated with three questions: '[h]ow did they live? Who cares?...How did they die?'.<sup>7</sup> Whether this attitude was exhibited by slasher audiences is a matter of conjecture given that we have no empirical data about audience responses from the period. However, critics have embedded that reputation in their descriptions of slasher audiences and their presumed pleasures.

These factors – market saturation, the need for diversification, and developments of practical make-up effects – coalesce around the major slasher film series, which help to explain the subgenre's development in the mid-1980s. By 1984, the market was so saturated that it seemed as if the subgenre had burnt itself out. An indicative benchmark is that *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* announced its fourth instalment would be its *Final Chapter*. Of course, the series would return the following year (and for five more instalments, a spin-off, and a remake after that). In order to bring the franchise back, the writers took a risk – replacing the now definitively deceased killer Jason with what was revealed to be a copycat – but that move was a misfire.<sup>8</sup> The *Halloween* series also suffered a similar misfire. In an attempt to extend the series' longevity, *Halloween III: Season of the Witch* (1982) forsook lead killer Michael Myers in favour of an entirely unrelated story. Again, the resultant film was a misfire. Both series returned to their core antagonists in the next instalments. However, both series faced the same problem: how to balance defeating the killers by the end of one film only to bring them back again in the next movie. In the interim, one film provided a solution by breathing new life into the subgenre.

In 1984, *A Nightmare on Elm Street* achieved extraordinary financial success via the story of its now-iconic killer Freddy Krueger. Freddy begins the series as a supernatural entity who stalks teenagers in their dreams. This premise allowed Freddy to return with relative ease: it did not matter that he was killed off because he was dead from the outset. His supernatural state provided flexibility for writers who were seeking to bring Freddy back from the grave for each sequel. After its unsuccessful attempt to replace Jason in *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>: A New Beginning* (1985), the *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* series followed *Elm Street*'s supernatural style, turning Jason into an undead ghoul.

Other slasher films explicitly followed in *Elm Street*'s footsteps. Where *Prom Night* was a standard school-based murder mystery slasher movie, *Prom Night 2: Hello Mary Lou* (1987) is a supernatural FX bonanza featuring a rocking horse that comes to life, a chalkboard that turns into a vortex, and a school locker that crushes one teen to death at the behest of its ghostly antagonist (Mary Lou). The move towards supernatural killers such as Freddy and Mary Lou allowed filmmakers to extend their range in terms of how victims could die. Rather than simply stabbing someone, Freddy could slice open limbs and control the victim like a gruesome marionette (as happens to Philip in *A Nightmare on Elm Street Part 3: Dream Warriors* (1987)). This strategy allowed filmmakers to experiment with practical and optical FX, creating spectacle and variety. Slasher movies increasingly focused on supernatural antagonists in the late 1980s and early 1990s, including *Child's Play* (1988, a toy doll possessed by a killer's spirit), *Shocker* (1989, an executed criminal who exists as electricity), *Candyman* (1992, the vengeful spirit of a lynched man turned into an urban legend), *Jack Frost* (1997, the 'mutant killer snowman', as he is described in the sequel's subtitle), and *The Gingerdead Man* (2005, homicidal baked produce). As is evident, *Elm Street*'s supernatural leanings allowed the slasher to move into different directions.

The movement away from strict realism also allowed the subgenre to branch out further in terms of locations. Rather than being set on a college campus, for example, films such as *Leprechaun 4: In Space* (1996) and *Jason X* (2001) are set on space stations in the future. These films further diversify the subgenre by introducing elements from outsider horror: here, notably, from science fiction. This tendency to cannibalise from other genres allowed filmmakers to add flavour to the slasher formula. Elsewhere, elements of the martial arts film are combined with the slasher formula in *Silent Rage* (1982), *Pieces* (1982) and *A Nightmare on Elm Street Part 4: The Dream Master* (1988), for example. Many of these films – including *Leprechaun 4*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street Part 4*, and *Jason X* also combine comedy with horror, further diversifying the standard slasher formula.

A further shift is widely perceived as happening in the mid-1990s when the slasher ostensibly turned towards a postmodern ironic sensibility (see Lockwood, 2008: 41; Prince, 2009: 283; Murray, 2008: 1). The initiator for this trend is often pegged as *Scream* (1996), which displays an explicit understanding of slasher film conventions in its script, and depicts teens watching and discussing slasher films including *Halloween*. Despite this received wisdom, *Scream*'s reputation for innovation is exaggerated. First, self-reflexive humour had been part of the subgenre for at least a decade by the time *Scream* was released. Films such as *Student Bodies* (1981), *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> Part VI: Jason Lives* (1986), and *Hand of Death Part 25: Jackson's Back* (1989) are all overtly humorous films that riff on slasher film conventions. *Return to Horror High* (1987) is a slasher film set around the filming of a slasher film, and thus beats efforts such as *New Nightmare* (1994) and *The Final Girls* (2015) to that form of self-reflexivity by a considerable margin. Second, *Scream* works only because it functions as a sharply made murder-mystery slasher film. The supposedly postmodern elements interfere with that success (on this see Thrower 2003: 6-10). What *Scream* – and subsequent films such as *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997), *Urban Legend* (1998) and *Valentine* (2001) – added to the mix was a higher calibre of teen actor, culled from teen drama television, who could provide a more robust iteration of the narrative angst and romance that comprises the majority of a slasher film's run-time.

More recently, slashers have shifted towards a more overtly metamodern sensibility, combining "postmodern" irony and knowingness with nostalgia and sincerity.<sup>9</sup> This sensibility manifests in films such as *I Didn't Come Here to Die* (2010), which takes the now-tired premise of teens in the woods being killed one-by-one, and even seeks to mimic an analogue aesthetic (using digital filmstock

damage emulation filters in postproduction) so as to anchor a comparison to the slasher's heyday. However, rather than seeking to mock generic conventions, *I Didn't Come Here to Die* draws a comparison to the past to underline its innovation: the film removes the typical masked killer from the equation. Instead, the teens are killed by their own recklessness. The result is a film that relies on knowledge of the repeated "teens in the woods" slasher convention in order for the viewer to understand the significance of its innovation. This approach is worlds apart from *Scream's* smug superiority. Elsewhere, a film such as *Dude Bro Party Massacre III* (2015) is more overtly comedic in its approach but also seeks to nostalgically replicate traits that made the slasher genre so successful. Even if the filmmakers augment those traits in order to emphasise them, the film nostalgises about the past while acknowledging its own anachronism. As such, it comes across as a love letter to slasher films rather than a distanced ironic appropriation or depthless homage comprised of empty 'references' to other films. The latter is characteristic of a "postmodern" sensibility that only serves to display the filmmaker's (and presumed target demographic's) self-congratulatory stockpiling of decontextualized trivia.

There are attempts to establish new slasher icons in the contemporary era – notable examples include films such as *The Orphan Killer* (2011) and *Terrifier* (2016) – but it is more common for contemporary slashers to remake or reboot subgenre originators, including *When a Stranger Calls* (2006), *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (2010), and *Halloween* (2018). In contrast to metamodern slasher movies, reboots and remakes seek to replicate established plot trajectories and conventions while updating aesthetics. Resultantly, these films are modelled after the glossy look of contemporary digital filmmaking. Although routinely dismissed as 'cash-ins', the critical damnation surrounding these remakes/reboots echoes the critical negation and derision the original slashers faced in their contemporaneous setting (see Nowell, 2011: 49-55). As such, reboots and remakes share more with the originals than fans of the 'classics' might care to admit.

The slasher formula has informed contemporary horror in other ways. Torture porn – a subgenre of films based around themes of abduction and imprisonment – develops on the slasher subgenre. In some ways, this lineage is quite explicit. For example, the 2003 remake of proto-slasher *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* was dubbed 'torture porn' by many critics (see Johnson 2007; Thompson 2007; Rodriguez 2009), and a slew of other torture porn films such as *Timber Falls* (2007), *Dying Breed* (2008), and *Manhunt* (2008) followed the redneck-based horror template established by *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. More broadly, critics have cited the slasher as a primary influence on torture porn filmmakers (see Hulse, 2007: 17; Kendrick, 2009: 17; Safire, 2007). Others have referred to torture porn films as slashers (see Platell's review of *Donkey Punch* (2008), for instance). The comparisons are apt given that torture porn borrows from the slasher formula. Slasher narratives typically entail killers stalking teenagers in a specific locale such as Camp Crystal Lake in *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>*, or the town of Haddonfield in *Halloween*. Torture porn's imprisonment themes distil that formula by making it harder for protagonists to evade threat. Since they are often confined, escaping their tormentor is more difficult for torture porn's captives than it is for the slasher's teens. Both subgenres dwell on a set-piece structure that centralizes homicide, and both subgenres make a spectacle of bodily harm. However, where slasher films were driven by the Final Girl as a lead protagonist who is marked for survival from the outset, torture porn adapts slasher films' stalking conventions to amplify tension. In torture porn, it is rare to find lead protagonists who are unambiguously destined to survive.<sup>10</sup> Torture porn adapts established slasher conventions to augment the horror since it is unclear whether any characters will still be alive when the end credits roll.

Just as the origins of the slasher are unclear because the subgenre developed by combining various elements from other horror cycles, the subgenre's future is equally foggy. However, what does seem certain is that despite its critical disparagement, the slasher has become an established horror subgenre, and will continue to evolve. Just as slasher killers such as Freddy Krueger and Michael Myers return time and time again, the slasher subgenre continues to be resurrected to provide audiences with more thrills.

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*Timber Falls* (2007, USA, dir. Tony Giglio)

*Torso (I corpi presentano tracce di violenza carnale)*, 1973, Italy, dir. Sergio Martino)

*The Town that Dreaded Sundown* (1976, USA, dir. Charles B. Pierce)

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*Valentine* (2001, USA, dir. Jamie Blanks)

*When a Stranger Calls* (2006, USA, dir. Simon West)

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<sup>1</sup> Famously, *Peeping Tom* ruined Michael Powell's career (Kerswell, 2010: 29). For a summary of the contemporaneous critical responses to *Psycho*, see Whittington 2014; Haeffner, 2014: 110.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/T%20&%20A>

<sup>3</sup> One of the more surprising slasher sources hardcore pornographers have drawn upon is *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984). Despite being a profoundly unsexy tale of a severely burned child murderer turned into a dream demon, the film has inspired an array of pornographic texts. See <http://www.horrorphilosophysex.com/2013/04/the-many-elm-street-porn-parodies.html>

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the same dynamic in relation to more recent horror films, see Jones, 2013: 137.

<sup>5</sup> For an example of this reductive equation in action see Guins (1996). One of the worst offenders is DeGraffenreid (2011), who makes spurious claims about 'vaginal' symbolism in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, which include fabricating the existence of 'a very vaginal red metal box' in a sequence that features no red metal box at all, let alone one that somehow resembles genitalia.

<sup>6</sup> Others have argued that horror is popular with women; see, for example, Barker and Petley (1998: 24) and Bragg (1998, 104).

<sup>7</sup> This same allegation has been employed by critics who seek to disparage torture porn and its fans. Echoing Lake Crane, Stephen Whitty (2009) uses the phrasing 'who's next? Who cares[?]' to suggest that torture porn films display little regard for protagonists. Whitty seems unaware that he is replicating complaints about the slasher, given that he also asserts that the 'original [1980s] slashers, at least, had characters to root for'.

<sup>8</sup> Various personnel involved in the fifth film iterate this perspective in the documentary *Crystal Lake Memories* (2013).

<sup>9</sup> Metamodernism is characterised by 'a yearning for meaning... oscillating between sincerity and irony, deconstruction and construction, apathy and affect' (Turner, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> There are some exceptions: Tammi in *Donkey Punch*, Jordan in *Hunger* (2009), and Beth in *Hostel: Part II* (2007) are female torture porn protagonists who are clearly marked as exceptional and likely to out-survive their peers.