

# Ideology and gender discourse in slasher films 'halloween' (1978) and 'friday the...



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In order to analyse any slasher movie, we must first consider: what is a slasher? The

“ slasher is not easily defined... It is a rogue genre, and like the films it encompasses it is tough, problematic and fiercely individualistic. However, there are some distinctive and consistent elements which are prevalent in enough films that a workable, however malleable, definition of the slasher can be formed” (Rockoff, 2002: 5).

Benshoff and Griffin define the slasher as a

“ low-budget subgenre of the horror film... which] usually features a knife-wielding maniac killing women and teenagers in various gruesome ways” (Benshoff and Griffin, : 279).

Slasher films have been widely criticised for the gender discourses that are portrayed to their audiences. Among the most famous and successful slasher films are Halloween (1978) and Friday the 13th (1980). Although there are a range of slasher films which portray ideologies and gender discourse in Western culture, for the purpose of the movie we see a young Michael at age six murder his older sister- Judith Myers- soon after she has made love, while he makes no attempt to harm her male partner as he leaves the house before the ordeal. This representation of women as victimised and sexually promiscuous is emphasised by the fact Judith is naked when she is killed, as is Annie later in the film whereas her sexual partner- Bob- is fully clothed at the time of his murder. The body count in Halloween should not be overlooked in this context.

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There are a similar number of victims with regard to gender but concerning the reasons behind these murders this is extremely significant. The first male was killed by Myers so that he could obtain his clothing, and it is very debatable that the second was only killed because he came into direct contact with Michael while he had meant to leave Annie for a short while as he went down to the kitchen. Females, on the other hand, seem to be periodically victimised in this particular slasher film.

The same can be accounted for in Sean Cunningham's Friday the 13th, as it is noticeable that males in the film seem to come to the killer whereas females are chased. Friday the 13th follows a group of young teenagers who re-open an abandoned camp site known as Camp Crystal Lake, years after a young boy had drowned in the site's lake. One by one, the teens fall victim to a mysterious killer. The film was inspired by the success of Halloween, and we can see various similarities between the two.

In the opening scene of Friday the 13th, before the two counsellors are killed, the boy stands up and practically approaches the killer, unaware of her intentions, while the girl runs away. This phenomenon continues throughout the course of the film, such as when Ned is killed after he curiously follows the killer into a cabin. The most prominent of this notion however, is after Jack and Marcie make love- Jack remains there to be killed, unaware that the killer is under the bed, yet Marcie leaves and has to be tracked later by the killer.

Thus one would argue that acts of violence upon females in this movie mirrors a misogynistic discourse which is then actively interpreted by the

audience, reinforcing the existing representations of females as inferior. However, there has been research which found results against this stance. Cowan and O'Brien (1990) content analysed 56 randomly selected horror movies regarding the number of male and female victims, and no significant correlation was found.

Two other similar studies were carried out by Weaver (1991) and Molitor and Sapolsky (1993), and the same result was established (Weaver and Tamborini, 1996: 38). These studies together looked at a total of 83 different slasher films and all found that females are not purposely chosen for attack in such films any more than males. But what we can ascertain is that female suffering is exposed on screen far more than male suffering in Friday the 13th. While both men and women are victims, women are all killed brutally in full view whereas men are usually killed off-screen.

We see Annie's throat slit and an axe driven through Marcie's head, however we do not see the deaths of two of the male victims and Steve we presume is stabbed in the stomach but we are only shown this victim's face. With regard to discourse, one would argue that the cinematic attacks on women in this text are both a reflection and product of male backlash over feminist gains. However, many would claim that slasher films are more than simply misogynist.

As Wells and Hakanin state:

“ although attention has been paid to critics who have claimed that females are inordinately victimized [sic], less attention has been

given to those who focus on the female as survivor, hero and victor” (Wells and Hakanin, 1997: 473).

Feminist scholar, Clover, falls into this notion. She claimed that regardless of the violence against women in slasher films, the ‘ final girl’ is represented as a heroine. Both Halloween and Friday the 13th feature a strong final girl.

In Halloween, although it is Dr. Loomis who saves Laurie in the end, Laurie fought against Myers and had he been a normal man she would have killed him. Hence, one would assert that some females are portrayed as strong and brave in the slasher film. Although these representations challenge ideological images of femininity, this is interesting in regard to gender representation, as Laurie takes up a non-traditional gender stereotype, due to her intellect and ability to sense danger, as well as her disinterest in men.

Thus Laurie is this presented as somewhat of a tomboy, hereby lessening the significance of the portrayal of females as heroines due to the fact that the viewer does not associate this character with femininity. The same can be accounted for in Friday the 13th as Alice is presented as the final girl who is able to defeat the killer in the end. It is clear from the outset that Alice is not an ordinary female. In one scene, we see camp owner, Steve Christy, standing shirtless looking at Alice’s drawings while Alice is on a ladder doing DIY with a hammer.

This sense of boyishness is furthered by her short hair style, and these together give a sense of cross-gender identification, which is particularly prominent after the wild finale when Alice decapitates the killer’s head. With

Alice being the sole survivor whom is able to defeat the killer, such  
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representations challenge discourses which position women as inferior to men. Friday the 13th confronts normative gender constructions in various other ways.

This is particularly the case with the premise of aggression as for a vast number of reasons, especially where war discourses are concerned, we have learned to associate this with notions of manliness, which is perplexing in this context as the killer is female. The killer's identity is not revealed until the final scene, and throughout the film it is implied that the character is male. We are given the idea that " he is not only tough, he is immortal. He is not only strong, but powerful enough to string his victims up as human booby traps for their horrified friends to find.

He is not only aggressive, he is psychotic" (Rockoff, 2002: 6). This notion is achieved through the use of subjective camera shots and visual cues, such as the shots of work boots as well as the murder weapons used- arrows and axes. Such artillery is symbolical as it can be thought to denote male sexuality and aggression. When we finally see that the killer is a small and kind looking female this creates a paradox, as the killer- Mrs Voorhees'- acts place her in direct opposition to what society deems a woman ' should' be like- " collective, caring and relational" (Burns, 1999: 410).

One would indeed argue that this is in conjunction with the sense of gender confusion in the time period when the film was released. Gender roles are socially constructed by discourses of power to a vast extent, and this is prevalent in Halloween and Friday the 13th. In the case of Halloween, it is Dr. Loomis- the heroic male figure who represents protection- who saves Laurie

in the end, positioning her as the subsequently helpless female victim. Thus the sense of masculinity and male superiority in this context can be seen as a heroic discourse on violence.

In Friday the 13th, on the other hand, “conventions of gender and sexuality are... being actively tampered with” (Taylor and Francis, 1987: 127). This could be seen as reflecting the then existing attitudes concerning gender in society which were precedent to the revolutionary restructuring of cultural power between the sexes. This was a phenomenon of the late 1980s which was claimed by materialistic feminist ideology (Wilmeth, 2007: 256). In Halloween, the representation of Michael Myers with regard to gender is interesting.

He is powerful in his ability to kill, and we associate killing with aggression. Although it is arguable whether this places a facet of the male gender under this representation in the film as the audience cannot relate to Myers on any level. Thus one would assert that Myers represents an emotionless killing machine that is virtually inhuman, irrelevant to any connection with the representation of gender as he does not feel, thus he does not embody humans in any sense. He is portrayed instead as a monster.

Halloween (1978) and Friday the 13th (1980) critically communicate key theories of gender through utilising stereotypical Hollywood gender formulas such as the model female, the male hero and the villain. Despite their partial deviance from stereotypical Hollywood gender formulas, females are still predominantly depicted as weak victims: even if they are to fight back, they are still saved by a male in the end. This thesis is complex regarding Friday

the 13th as it cannot be overlooked that Alice wins the battle with the killer, but ultimately the killer is female and Alice is pulled out of the lake by a male police officer in the end.

It is credible that such gender representations reflect the existing power relations between the sexes during the time period in which these films were released. I would not perceive this as an intentional backlash against feminist gains as such, but as mirroring the structure of power relations at the time in that the power men wielded in society is what distinguished women from men. In both these films, the female protagonists survive, but as Myers does not die and Mrs. Voorhees's son Jason reveals himself from the lake, the conclusion is clear: the heroine is not free.

**References:**

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