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[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



The representation of women within horror films is a particularly controversial subject and has generally failed to evolve over the years despite the open disapproval of the subject from the public as well as within the media industry itself. Gender and its representation has often been a crucial aspect of horror films, previously the only role women played in many of the iconic horror films was running around in a sense of dismay, half naked before screaming and being brutally murdered, emphasising the fact that they were overly sexualised and objectified, playing no role of substance within the film itself. I will be dissecting this one-dimensional representation which can be separated into two distinct categories and has undoubtedly had a negative effect on a huge number of people. Women within horror films, specifically women that were openly sexualised were often represented within mainstream horror films during this period particularly negatively.

Also in the 1970s, final girls and victims alike suffered from what Syracuse University professor Kendall Phillips calls "sexualized terror," where any woman who was sexually active was killed off, normally in a particularly barbaric way. The promiscuity and sense of liberation within primarily young female characters is clearly emphasised and portrayed as negatively as possible. This is emphasised in one of the most well-known films from this era, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. The 1974 American horror film was directed by Tobe Hooper and written and co-produced by Hooper and Kim Henkel.

This is a prime example of how women were represented in horror films, one of the main characters Pam is blatantly sexualised, she wears more revealing clothing and throughout the film and contrasts one of the characters who she is

portrayed alongside who is evidently more conservative. Even the poster from the original 1974 film features an image of Pam screaming in terror behind the film's antagonist 'Leatherface', reinforcing the idea that the majority of women within horror films are portrayed as nothing more than "damsels in distress" and are positioned simply for the male gaze. Theorist Ann Kaplan reinforces this message saying, "Within the film itself, men gaze at women, who become objects of the gaze; the spectator, in turn, is made to identify with the male gaze, and to objectify the women on the screen". This is emphasised in the narrative of the film itself, the three male protagonists meet a swift yet brutal death whilst the women in film are tortured and their deaths are prolonged for a significant amount of time. Even during their unnecessarily prolonged death scenes the women are presented for the female gaze. The cult classic was even remade in 2003 much to the delight of the fan base the film had built over the decades, yet despite the time between the two films and the huge strides made in feminism and equality there is still a clear and purposeful representation of the overly sexualised young women in the film. Sexuality is the biggest and most clear psychoanalytic desire targeted in this and other horror films.

From the occasional sex scene amongst the teens, to the almost non-existent choices of costume for the female characters as they run from the killers, it is obvious that the film is playing to those desires. Laura Mulvey speaks about the subject in her article *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* as she discusses women as images in film, "Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the

auditorium"(Mulvey751). This is clearly the case in this film in which Jessica Biel stars as the main girl. The audience is supposed to lust over the female victims and the killer also has sexual desires for these characters. However, as society developed and alongside it so did feminism, it appeared there was a turning point in mainstream horror films. Neve Campbell in *Scream* the 1996 American slasher film directed by Wes Craven and written by Kevin Williamson, is regarded as the first non-virgin, purposely sexualised character that survives the seemingly inevitable death that women seemed to face prior to this in horror films.

Campbell, whose character Sidney Prescott is clearly sexualised in the film, survives her attacker. Her mother however, who is clearly seen committing adultery within the film, consolidating the idea that sexualised characters are less likely to survive, evidently isn't so lucky... I believe "Scream" portrayed many of the stereotypical aspects of a slasher horror film from this era, but the main character (Sidney Prescott) subverted the stereotype that female characters within the genre of horror had been attempting to escape for decades. Sexuality and a sense of bravery for women for a long time were mutually exclusive and even now there is a distinct lack of overt, uninhibited women within this genre enjoyed by a vast array of people, many of which are women.///As mentioned above, the slasher films draw a comparison between sex and death, something that Wes Craven commented on during his 1996 hit film *Scream*. In a slasher film if you have sex then you die, the ultimate response to the ultimate immoral act - sex before marriage or some form of sexual transgression is a sure fire way of stepping into the killer's line of sight. This became a convention of horror films over the years and

became almost expected. *Scream*, while being a humorous commentary on the path the slasher film took, is also recognition from within the genre of the very things that make the genre tick.

While not being an attempt to right the wrong it certainly is a knowing nod to the audience that we know what's going on, we know the rules.