

Psychopathic Dismemberment and Psychic Slaughter:
Spectatorship, Affect, and Gender in the Slasher Cycle

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Before the Carnage Begins...

At some point during the conclusion of the 1970's, a mutation of the horror genre invaded theaters across the United States and abroad. These films, which, thanks to the likes of Carol Clover, are now colloquially referred to as Slashers, garnered national attention during the beginning of the 1980's.¹ The name slasher was only retroactively applied to the cycle, as early on academia and the popular media took to referring to these films as "women in danger films," "splatter films" and "stalker films".^{2 3} Initially hugely successful and often independently produced, this theater of the macabre was virtually unlike any strain of cinematic horror that had existed prior to that point. Through a massive uptick in production in the early 80's, the Slasher film quickly differentiated itself from other horror sub genres through a strict adherence to a certain set of rigid narrative parameters which revolve around ruthless acts of violence, which are often sexually charged in nature.

Although public awareness of the film type has lessened over time, in its heyday the Slasher showed itself to be a cultural phenomena. A number of films in this cycle, as it has been historically understood, enjoyed massive albeit short lived popularity amongst youth demographics during a span of three or four years lasting from 1978 to 1981.⁴ In fact, from January of 1980 to April of 1982 the American film market released 15 Slashers, 10 of which were hosted in American theaters from May 1980-August 1981, a ratio of one film every six

¹ Carol J. Clover, "Her Body, Himself" in *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), Proquest Ebook Central.

² Vera Dika. *Games of Terror: Halloween, Friday the 13th, and the Film of the Stalker Cycle* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1990).

³ Nowell, Richard. *Blood Money: A History of the First Teen Slasher Film Cycle* (New York: Continuum, 2011), Proquest Ebook Central.

⁴ Dika, *Games of Terror*; 14.

weeks.⁵ Through the successes of cycle cornerstones like *Halloween* (1978) and *Friday the 13th* (1980), the Slasher emerged as a legitimate box office force and became thoroughly embedded in the public consciousness for much of the coming decade. The surge in popularity evident during the early stages of this period led to an increased willingness on behalf of studios to produce and distribute these films, which resulted in the release of a slew of releases that ultimately crystallised the genre model and solidified the Slasher blueprint as an easily reproducible and recognizable film type.⁶ Harnessing the spirit of the exploitation films of the late 60's and early 70's, these productions were markedly independent products, making use of miniscule budgets and emphasizing gore and visual effects over narrative complexity, established actors or directors, or any kind of intellectual or emotional depth. Despite the low production costs which are synonymous with the art house and exploitation sectors, these films targeted commercial audiences, and initially generated massive returns on these miniscule budgets, predictably attracting the attention of mainstream distributors.

After this brief period of boom, the Slasher experienced one of the sharpest declines in profit, production, and attendance perhaps of any film cycle to date. This decline, which began around the end of 1982, was a result of a confluence of wide scale criticism and controversy in both journalism and academia. This blowback is perhaps best illustrated by Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel in 1981 in their lengthy crusade against the Slasher in which they characterized the Slasher as a film type which “systematically demean[s] the human race” through their representations of sadistic violence against women.⁷ Furthermore, in the academic realm these films were, at least initially, either neglected entirely or condemned for the ubiquitous presence

⁵ Nowell, *Blood Money*, 5.

⁶ Nowell, *Blood Money*, 188.

⁷ Nowell, *Blood Money*, 227.

of debased gendered violence. Scholars like Vera Dika (1990)⁸, Barbara Creed (1986)⁹ and, in less derisive fashion, Carol Clover (1992),¹⁰ survey the sadistic nature of Slasher violence through processes of gendered identification and psychoanalysis, all of which oftentimes leads to deprecatory, although not incorrect, conclusions.

With that said, my aim here is to analyze the Slasher film using a more holistic approach than has traditionally been applied to the cycle, as it is severely limiting to only engage with these films solely through the lenses of gender, production and reception. The cycle is representative of more than cinema's violently misogynistic response to the social upheaval of the 1970's. The slasher's impact on the cultural and cinematic landscape of the 1980's was integral to the film culture of the 20th century, and its lasting association with the decade should not be discounted in any assessment of the cycle. Also, the formal tactics employed by these films are a truly singular formulation of cinema which demands further scrutiny. The Slasher's intentionality in foregrounding issues of spectatorship through a frustration of viewer identification and a disruption of the passive stasis of normal film viewership, as well as its articulation of violent spectacle through a unique aesthesis of affective representations of bodily destruction are entirely specific to the cycle, and even unique within horror cinema. These discrete parts distill down and make visible the prime elements of filmmaking and film viewing, despite the cycle being a markedly low brow cinematic product.

To this end, I will center my reading of this set of films around their formal construction, with particular attention paid to questions of spectatorship, affect and spectacle in addition to

⁸ Dika, *Games of Terror*.

⁹ Barbara Creed "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection," in *The Dread of Difference : Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 37-67. Proquest Ebook Library.

¹⁰ Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*.

gender. These issues are the definitive elements of the cycle, and not only do they differentiate the Slasher from other subgenres of horror, but they also dramatically refigure the conventions surrounding film form, narrative structure and the viewing experience in ways that are demonstrable and meticulously constructed. Additionally, rather than opting to focus my efforts on the period of heightened activity which has been retroactively prescribed to the cycle, I aim to illustrate the presence and development of the aesthetic and thematic tenets beyond the previously acknowledged temporal and geographic boundaries, which neglect a broader history which spans across decades and borders. The Slasher cycle has been relegated to the fringes of film criticism for far too long. Many of these films refigured the formal tenets of the horror genre in a way that cultivated a distinct mode of viewership predicated on the visceral, experiential and individual qualities of film viewing with more nuance than the cycle has historically been credited.

Before we begin, I would like to define and briefly trace the lineage of the Slasher film as I see it, beginning in the 1960's and ending around the turn of the millenium, although certain aesthetic elements are visible in films released to this day. It is widely agreed upon that the cycle's progenitor was Alfred Hitchcock's seminal film *Psycho* (1960). Many of the cycle's chief concerns are articulated in some fashion by Hitchcock's film. The affective mode employed during representations of violence or shock, the spectacle of violent death, and the thematic emphasis on abnormal psychology are all hallmarks of the Slasher and position *Psycho* as a clear antecedent to later films. As an alternative point of origin, I would also contend that Micheal Powell's *Peeping Tom* (1960), is perhaps even more germane to the aesthetic and thematic content of the cycle, despite having faded into relative obscurity. The film's preoccupation with

spectatorship, perspective and its emphasis on the act of film viewing in its depiction of a psychopathic killer are the motivating factors behind much of the cinematic form, and align it more closely with later films.

As the 1960's wore on the principle elements of the cycle were further solidified, particularly in the realm of spectacle. Italian director Mario Bava's 1963 "giallo" *Blood and Black Lace* revels in the same kind of hyper violent surrealism that films like *Driller Killer* (1979) and *Maniac* (1980) would harness two decades later. Concurrently the burgeoning exploitation sector in the United States, spearheaded by Herschell Gordon Lewis and his contemporaries, produced films that also bore many similarities to the coming Slasher. Lewis' 1963 gore flick *Blood Feast*, for instance, would push representations of on screen violence to new levels of indulgent spectacle, not only laying the groundwork for the Slasher in content, but also creating a model for inexpensive and independently financed productions. With that said, it was not until 1974 that the Slasher had fully evolved into a distinct generic form. That year, a Canadian film directed by Bob Clark entitled *Black Christmas* (1974) took elements of the aforementioned films and relocated them within a milieu that was at once familiar and terribly unsettling, pitting youthful suburban stereotypes against an anonymous menace in an emphatically mundane setting. It was also the first film to employ the now infamous POV shot in order to align the viewer with a monstrous and oftentimes violently masculine force, a tactic that would come to inform much of the formal and narrative logic of the Slasher film.

Clark's film is the most obvious predecessor to the rest of the canon, and perhaps most notably of all to John Carpenter's *Halloween*, which is widely considered the first film of the "classical" cycle, which, as is noted above, began with its release in 1978. This is not to

minimize the impact of this hugely influential and deceptively complex blockbuster, as it is undoubtedly responsible for the wave of Slashers released in the years following its release. Films like Tony Maylam's *The Burning* (1981), *Friday the 13th* and its manifold sequels, *Terror Train* (1980), *My Bloody Valentine* (1981), *The Dorm That Dripped Blood* (1982), *Pieces* (1982), *Sleepaway Camp* (1983), *The Slumber Party Massacre* series (1982-1990), and *Prom Night* (1980) all faithfully adhered to the mold set by Carpenter's film. This framework quickly became endemic to the cycle, and, due to its high degree of narrative reproducibility, plot inevitably became entirely inconsequential to these films, with attention shifting instead to new ways of generating affect and exploring alternative modes of spectatorship as opposed to focusing on character depth or emotional resonance. Also, in my assessment of the Slasher I have opted to include films that I feel have been arbitrarily neglected by the academic writing surrounding the topic. For my purposes these films are Abel Ferrara's *Driller Killer*, William Lustig's film *Maniac* and Buddy Cooper's anomalous *The Mutilator* (1985), all of which now enjoy cult success thanks to recent releases from modern distribution companies like Arrow Video.

However, there are also films that do not fall into this category of imitator that I would argue should be deserving of the ignominious classification of Slasher film. Wes Craven's previously mentioned surreal 1983 film *Nightmare on Elm Street*, for instance, bears some resemblance to *Black Christmas* and *Halloween*, and although it has been labeled a Slasher it seems to resist categorization as such. Craven's film engages in an active frustration of the principle characteristics of the cycle via visual experimentation with representations of on screen space, a subversion of the conventional slasher narrative formula, and a general surrealist bent

which many films that are typically grouped with *Nightmare* lack. The same goes for a film like Dario Argento's *Deep Red* (1975) which also employs a highly stylized formal approach, particularly with regard to its representations of cinematic violence. With that said, Argento's frenetic and spectacular symphonies of violence are not wholly dissimilar from the American films which would be released in the 1980's, despite its belonging to an entirely different national film culture. Along with Craven's postmodern reflection on the cycle, 1996's *Scream*, this selection of films is representative of both the lineage and transformation of the cycle from its birth to the obscurity it enjoys today, and also aptly recapitulate and embody the issues which I laid out in the incipient portion of this paper.

Femme Fatalities - The Final Girl, Misogyny and Subversion

Representations of gender are essential to the Slasher film. Issues of gendered violence, reproductions of hegemonic gender ideologies and a generally phallogocentric approach to portrayals of gender roles are all clearly visible within the cycle. Over the course of its development, a specified and recognizable set of tropes was thoroughly embedded into the fabric of the film type. Representations of gender habitually revolve around issues of sexuality as it exists in the male/female binary and assuredly result in swift and brutal punishment for any sort of sexually liberated or promiscuous behaviour. The on screen presence of conventional femininity or feminine sexuality in these films is as consistent a harbinger of doom as the trademark stalking POV or the close up of a deadly weapon. The cycle's preoccupation with female sexuality also heavily impacts the role of spectator, reinforcing these binaries through

heavily gendered subjective camera work. However, it is important to note that despite the pronounced misogyny exhibited by many of these films, some manage to subvert or reflect on questions of gender and processes of identification in more complex ways than have been typically accredited to the cycle.

The financial success and ostensible adoration of the Slasher's aforementioned gendered traits resulted in the affixation of normative and harmful representations of gender to the very fabric of the Slasher, and cemented these aspects as integral to the formal and thematic content of the film type. Klaus Reiser reflects on the blatant sexism of this dynamic in his essay "Masculinity and Monstrosity," noting that "in filmic terms, these girls are useful as titillation, as teasers, and are then, in a classical projective manner, taken to task for it. Rather than...repressing sexuality *tout-court*, slasher films are very clear about punishing almost exclusively the promiscuity and activity of these girls".¹¹ This overt tendency towards gendered punishment of sexuality is not only central to these films' narrative structure, but also in their formal construction. The camera's function as surrogate for the spectator illustrates the gendered paradigms of viewership well. The audience's witnessing of suggestive behavior, either through POV or objective camerawork, often bears violent consequences for the camera's subjects who are almost always women. Generally speaking, once the objective lens afforded to the presumed male viewer renders him unable to fulfill his fantasy for the object of his gaze, the POV or subjective camera of the murderer overtakes the film's visual logic, allowing them to enact his masculine rage on the film's subject.

¹¹ Klaus Reiser. "Masculinity and Monstrosity: Characterization and Identification in the Slasher Film." *Men and Masculinities* 3, no. 4 (April 2001): 376. DOI:10.1177/1097184X01003004002.

To illustrate these concerns briefly, let us turn to the original theatrical trailer for Paul Lynch's *Prom Night*. The trailer articulates the typical generic approach to questions of sexuality and femininity and the ensuing masculine response to these questions. Opening with a series of shots of women bathed in kaleidoscopic disco light, the trailer does not hesitate to establish femininity as a desirable on screen presence. Close ups of their bodies ensue, and the voice over pronounces that prom night is "a night to be beautiful, to be desirable, to break all the rules," which is followed by a montage of couples engaged in intimate behavior, kissing and fondling. These images represent a brand of femininity that is explicitly sexual in nature, on display to entice a masculine viewing audience. However, this idealized feminine sexuality is quickly supplanted visually by the introduction of an anonymous and clearly psychopathic presence, which the viewer is encouraged to identify with throughout the trailer. The manner in which the trailer unfolds, from the voyeuristic distance which characterizes the principal glamorous promiscuity of *Discomania Prom Night*, to the much more personal camerawork employed to connote the lurking monstrosity of the masculine killer, makes the cycle's desire for gendered punishment overt.

Academic debate has historically centered around the performance of gender as it is understood through psychoanalysis, emphasizing Freud's conceptions of lack, the oedipal complex, and castration anxiety, as well as exploring the dichotomy of sadism and masochism within the camera's gaze. Carol Clover is perhaps the foremost scholar within this arena, and has written a wide breadth of historically important and influential work on the subject. The psychoanalytic dimension of Slasher viewing is best encapsulated by the presence of what Carol

Clover coins the “final girl”¹², an atypically strong and seemingly empowered female character who is able to resist and overcome the threat of violent masculinity in the climactic moments.

To this end, Clover notes that the Slasher can be seen as a film type that maintains the illusion of a “strong female presence” evident in the final girl, who in actuality is “a male surrogate in things oedipal, a homoerotic stand-in, the audience incorporate; to the extent she means ‘girl’ at all, it is only for purposes of signifying male lack, and even that meaning is nullified in the final scenes,” providing a site for which the male’s sadomasochistic fantasies are able to play out.¹³ This process, on a psychic level, destabilizes gendered identification within the male viewer, forcing an alignment with the powerful female presence, confusing and potentially subverting their own masculine understanding of self and encouraging “cross gender identification”.¹⁴ The male viewer is confronted with their own oedipal and precognitive sexual desire and projects this confusion onto the female lead, who is “phallicized” in her victory over the murderer and thus reaffirms the masculinity of the spectator.¹⁵ The nebulous gendered space inhabited by the viewer during cross gender identification functions as a way to potentially undermine the fantasy of heterosexual desire which the cycle openly embraces.

In order to further assess with any accuracy the intricacies of gendered paradigms of violence and identification, it is helpful to consult and reassess the claims that form the basis of existing scholarship on the gendered film viewership. In this regard Laura Mulvey’s pioneering essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” written in 1975, is an excellent place to begin, as it provides an oft referenced framework for understanding the ways in which patriarchy has been

¹² Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*.

¹³ *Ibid*, 53.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 43

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 43

inherently inscribed into cinematic form. Mulvey's work takes on a slightly different, if no less important, meaning when placed in dialogue with the Slasher, as her conception of "pleasure" as it is understood through psychoanalysis, sexuality, looking, and spectator identification seems to take on new meaning. For Mulvey, the woman serves as an erotic spectacle which "freeze[s] the flow of action" in order to provide an object of interest which is distinct from the male spectator.

¹⁶ This act of looking, or "scopophilia," is then "fixated into a perversion, producing obsessive voyeurs...whose only sexual satisfaction can come from watching, in an active controlling sense, an objectified other".¹⁷ These voyeurs project themselves into the film world onto a surrogate self in the form of a male protagonist, which reaffirms feelings of patriarchal dominance within the spectator despite the separation of reality and the cinema.¹⁸ In the context of the Slasher, this gazing is rendered formally through the optical POV, a device that is rarely seen in Hollywood cinema, recreating for the viewer the voyeuristic pleasures experienced by the characters within the film world. The use of subjective camera work allows for an erosion of the boundary between the "objectified other" and the viewer to take place, embracing the scopophilic aspect of cinema to the fullest extent.

In this way, the Slasher complicates conventional understanding of gendered viewing. While certain elements of viewership are intrinsic to all cinema, the relationship between viewer and image is fundamentally altered in the Slasher. These films literalize the subdued violence of objectification, punishing women for "freezing the flow of action" through sexuality and embedding the perverse satisfaction of voyeurism within their visual language through formal

¹⁶ Laura Mulvey. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Fall 1975): 4.
<http://theslideprojector.com/pdffiles/art6/visualpleasureandnarrativecinema.pdf>

¹⁷ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 2.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

means like the POV shot.¹⁹ Furthermore, this heightened degree of reflexivity ensures that audiences are made aware of their sadistic gaze, regularly forcing the viewer to inhabit a space which is markedly masochistic, that of the victim or object of the gaze during moments of mortal danger. This is not to herald the slasher as some sort of progressive, and indeed conscious refutation of Mulvey's formulation of viewership, as many of these films are undeniably sexist and debased in their punishment of feminine sexuality, but it is important to note their deviation from the sort of film Mulvey is critiquing.

The shift from patterns of gender identification associated with Hollywood to the mutation apparent in the Slasher makes up the bulk of scholarship on the cycle. Barbara Creed's work on the notion of abjection in horror provides one explanation for the muddling of identification. Creed, citing Julia Kristeva, identifies abjection as something that is fundamentally different from the "human," an idea which leads her to conclude that the human experience of the nonhuman, particularly the morbid and grotesque, is the point from which all horror is derived.²⁰ Creed continues on to state that these experiences force "a confrontation with the abject... in order, finally, to eject the abject and redraw the boundaries between the human and nonhuman," a process which provides a similar fascination to the kind described by Mulvey.²¹ For Creed, this process is intertwined with Oedipal and patriarchal processes of identification and the self, which, after a period of brief transcendence, return to maintain the status quo of patriarchal cinema. In horror specifically, Creed suggests that the confrontation with the abject necessitates the presence of the female body, as it is figured as monstrous through mutilation and destruction, acting as tribute for masculine anxieties surrounding castration and monstrous

¹⁹ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 4.

²⁰ Creed, "Monstrous Feminine," 38-41.

²¹ *Ibid*, 48.

feminine sexuality.²² Klaus Rieser views Creed's assessment as fundamentally at odds with Mulvey's, as the rejection of voyeurism forces a reconsideration of the masculine spectator's position in the viewing of the object, at least before ultimately restoring conventional hierarchies of gender.²³

Carol Clover posits an even sharper critique of Mulvey in her seminal and highly influential work *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*. For Clover, lines of identification in the Slasher film are not drawn along binary lines of masculine/feminine, rather they are frustrated by the processes of identification which are derived from the cycle's neglect of convention. In essence, the Slasher repeatedly forces spectators of any gender to inhabit a vague and ill defined identity in its presentation of spectacle, prompting a reevaluation of gendered position on behalf of the viewer in a way that is not dissimilar from Creed's. In her words, this "fluidity of engaged perspective" allows for "the threat function and the victim function to coexist in the same unconscious, regardless of anatomical sex".²⁴ Take, for instance, a sequence from Bob Clark's *Black Christmas* in which a sorority house mom is impaled by an anonymous killer as an early example of this dichotomy. The killer's presence in the house, while established for the viewers, is unknown to Mrs. Mac, who is cautiously searching for her cat in the attic. During the sequence, the camera assumes multiple subjectivities which are represented via an optical POV. At first, the camera assumes Mrs. Mac's investigative gaze, panning around the house as she searches for her lost cat. However, once she enters the attic, the frame cuts to an even more pronounced subjective camera which shows a pair of hands aiming a hook at Mrs. Mac's

²² Creed, "Monstrous Feminine," 46.

²³ Klaus Rieser. "Masculinity and Monstrosity: Characterization and Identification in the Slasher Film," *Men and Masculinities* 3, no. 4 (April 2001): 373, DOI:10.1177/1097184X01003004002.

²⁴ Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, 47-48.

unwitting head. It is also important to note here that the killer's actual spatial position is obscured by the POV, heightening the spectator's sense of spatial uncertainty. Once the threat is spotted by Mrs. Mac, the hook is released and the camera alternates rapidly between the two established perspectives, halting abruptly once she has been killed. The fluctuation between these two viewpoints serves as an excellent illustration of the uncertainty in identity which the Slasher film so meticulously constructs, as there is no fixed diegetic presence for the gendered spectator to identify with.

This oscillation between the camera's gaze and the multiple gendered subjectivities it represents along with the more objective spectator position coalesce to create a space which Clover claims represents deeper psychological and societal impulses. For her, Slashers "represent not just 'an eruption of the normally repressed animal sexual energy of the civilized male' but also the 'power and potency of a non-phallic sexuality'".²⁵ The film type then, is symptomatic of a distinctly masculine and Oedipal compulsion to simultaneously embody the feminine and, through a symbolic phallicization, destroy it in order to reaffirm itself, a dynamic which is rendered formally through the multiplicity of perspectives represented by the camera.

Clover's evaluation of gender in the Slasher comes to a head in her formulation of the "final girl." The "final girl" theory has become so widespread that it is now widely known amongst even casual fans, and the import of her theory to the study of the cycle cannot be understated. For Clover, the final girl is the ultimate embodiment of the commingling of masculine and feminine, she is "abject terror personified," a role historically reserved for women, and concurrently a capable and ultimately triumphant defender of the social group to

²⁵ Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, 47.

which she belongs, a role generally associated with masculinity.²⁶ To this end Clover reflects that she is “a homoerotic stand-in, the audience incorporate; to the extent she means "girl" at all, it is only for purposes of signifying male lack, and even that meaning is nullified in the final scenes”.

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Her inevitable triumph over the murderer, who is often shown as emasculated, helpless, or impotent to begin with, reinstates the male spectators dominance and indeed his presumed masculinity.²⁸ Cinematically, this plays out in the final girl’s ability to exercise the typically masculine “active investigating gaze” over the killer, which almost always proves to be fatal within the diegesis.²⁹ As Clover astutely notes, this dynamic is encapsulated by one of the most iconic sequences in *Halloween’s* climactic moments. In the moments leading up to Micheal Meyers defeat, rather than assuming his gaze as was the case for most of the film, the camera assumes Laurie Strode’s POV as she battles and defeats her murderous foe. For instance, after Laurie escapes Micheal’s clutches and retreats back to her house as he slowly stalks behind her, we are provided with Laurie’s field of vision rather than that of her stalker. Quite literally it is her ability to commandeer the camera’s eye and assume agency over its movements which ultimately is responsible for her ability to survive Meyer's assault.

The violent ramifications of the seizure of the camera’s gaze shows the gendered significance of the look in these films and the importance of subjectivity within the visual language of the cycle. With that said, it should be noted that the subversive potential of this mode of thought has been criticized since its time of publication. Klaus Rieser rightly argues that there

²⁶ Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, 36,60.

²⁷ Ibid, 53.

²⁸ Ibid, 47, 50.

²⁹ Ibid, 48.

is a clear air of feminine disempowerment in the final girl's inevitable return to heterosexual normalcy during the conclusion of the prototypical slasher film. In his view, the final girl, after having been adequately terrified, is either driven to insanity or reassimilated into patriarchal convention, thus rejecting the presence of "non hegemonic masculinity" entirely.³⁰ Additionally, the final girl's general lack of sexual bravado and feminine signifiers also communicates a fear of femininity that runs counter to readings of the final girl as radical or subversive.

There are films within the cycle, however, that complicate these understandings of gender and identification. One instance of such a film is William Lustig's *Maniac*, which follows Frank Zito, a revolting schizophrenic murderer played by the film's screenwriter Joe Spinell, as he stalks and mercilessly kills scores of beautiful women, whose scalps he sutures onto the heads of mannequins in a squalid pit of an apartment. What differentiates Lustig's film from the more conventional Slashers made during the same period is its lack of adherence to the narrative and thematic framework established by the genre's forerunners. Rather than electing to set the film in a decidedly suburban milieu populated by uninhibited, sexually active youth, *Maniac* is set within a grimy and claustrophobic Lower East Side Manhattan as it exists through the eyes of the film's protagonist, who is immediately exposed as a psychotic and detestable monstrosity. There are relatively few female characters, and the women that do inhabit this world enjoy a disproportionately small amount of screen time relative to what a "final girl" normally would. To this end, there are noticeably few formal efforts in regard to prompting viewer identification with the female victims. Instead the film regularly adopts the subjectivity of Frank, forcing the viewer

³⁰ Rieser, *Masculinity and Monstrosity*, 388.

to inhabit his hallucinatory derrangement for every portion of the film that does not involve stalking or murder.

The first death scene in the film exemplifies *Maniac*'s unique approach to gendered viewership. After eliciting the services of a prostitute in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, Frank and the woman are shown in a hotel room through a notably objective series of shots. While it is clear that the woman is in mortal danger, there is no POV - no reactive gaze, rather the encounter, at least initially, is shot using a more conventional formal logic than is typically the case in potentially fatal moments. The woman "models" for Frank, flaunting her feminine form in a medium two shot with Frank reclining on the bed, positioning the viewer as the kind of anonymous voyeur which Mulvey describes in "Visual Pleasure."

As the scene continues the woman attempts to disrobe and Frank tells her to "leave her clothes on," a reply which is inexplicably met with a passionate embrace shown in a series of close ups that eventually find Frank on top of the woman, pinning her arms to the bed and throttling her. Suddenly, the score is overtaken by Frank's grunts and the woman's screams, with the soundtrack launching into a doom laden electronic drone. We are given two perspectives here, one of the woman's POV gazing up at Frank's contorted snarl and a more objective medium shot of the two on the bed. The woman's gaze here is impossibly close to Frank's face, and while it is clear the shot is representative of her field of vision, the camera's proximity to his countenance, the soundtrack and the score all work to emphasize his psychic derangement over the victim's pain. It is also interesting to note that the eyeline matches of the victim gazing up at Frank continue after she has expired and her eyes are no longer open, suggesting that the spectator was not actually inhabiting her optical view but rather an autonomous perspective

which is not bound to the diegesis. Also, Frank's clear disinterest in the woman as a sexual object represents the film being purely concerned with sadism and masochism and less so with providing voyeuristic pleasure for the viewer.

The emphasis on the psychology and subjectivity of the perpetrator as opposed to the victim in *Maniac* frustrates any sort of identification with the film's female characters and demands acknowledgement of the abominable and distinctly masculine forces that motivate gendered violence across films of the cycle. The final sequence of the film encapsulates the disparity between patterns of identification in a conventional slasher and *Maniac* exceptionally well. The scene opens with a static medium shot which sees a severely wounded Frank stumble into his apartment, which is adorned with cut outs of faces with their eyes removed amongst other grotesque and bizarre decorum, and slowly approach the camera. As he moves forward, the film cuts to a blurred POV shot showing his mother in close up reaching out for an embrace. This image is met with a loudening of Frank's agonized moans, thus alerting the viewer to the fact that they are inhabiting his subjectivity. The film quickly cuts back to an extreme close up of Frank's face - now contorted with pain and manically eyeing the apartment, which is populated with the mannequin trophies of his victims. The camera cuts to reveal the objects of Frank's gaze, the mannequins, which are represented via an assemblage of spatially fluid and frenetic POV shots as if to indicate that Frank, who we know to be indisposed across the room, is mere inches away from their faces and staring directly at them. This montage is supplemented with the same heavy breathing that earlier in the film indicated Frank's presence as stalker and soon to be killer. The mannequins then proceed to reanimate and decapitate Frank, which again we view via

interwoven POV shots and top down medium shots of his body as it is dismembered in his hallucination.

This concluding sequence is a relative anomaly within the cycle, as the role of final girl is assumed here by the legion of female cadavers who have been brutally murdered over the course of the film, and the protagonist occupies a dual space of murderer and victim. This dichotomy complicates viewer identification with Frank, as the POV in this sequence recalls (via soundtrack) earlier moments in which he possessed cinematic and physical control over his victims. At this juncture, however, he is shown to be totally impotent and disoriented - with his psychic state being mimicked by the camerawork. Frank here has literally become "abject terror personified," yet at no point during this sequence, or indeed at any point throughout the entirety of the film, does the "active investigating gaze" transition to a character other than the murderer. Alternatively *Maniac* seems to be more concerned with punishing both Frank and the viewer for their joint sadism in committing/viewing the film's heinous and brutal acts of violence, while simultaneously refusing to offer any sort of gendered misidentification which Clover speaks of in her survey of the cycle. This is not to say that the film does not indulge in the same sorts of sadistic and violently gendered punishment that defines so many other films of the cycle, as *Maniac* does so willingly and often. The redemptive element of the film comes with its acknowledgment of the male viewer's surrogate in the Slasher as despicable and repulsive, and its perpetual forced identification with the titular maniac is testament to this fact.

It is important to note here that this oscillation between multiple subjectivities is not always bound to the binaries of Male/Female and Victim/Killer. Instead the changeability of the spectatorial role opens a space which is ungendered in nature, creating an uncertainty that is

meant to disrupt and complicate conventional patterns of identification. In the following section, I will demonstrate how the cycle's filmic tactics function in a genderless capacity, as they very clearly visualize and aestheticize the literal act of viewing a film in a way that differentiates the Slasher from most other film types.

The Morbid Gaze of Doom - Spectatorship and Slashers

The previously referenced psychoanalytic approach to film is one that has historically, and understandably, has led to a general consensus amongst academia to center readings of the cycle around misogyny and gender in film form and the politics that arise therewithin. Spectatorship, as a discrete element, has generally been overshadowed by the overwhelming focus on paradigms of gender which excludes many of its other interesting facets. To neglect the various spectatorial alignments that have become synonymous with the cycle and the idiosyncrasies they generate is to ignore one of the Slasher's most prominent features. The act of watching, both on behalf of spectators and within the film world itself, is perhaps the definitive trait of the cycle. The formal preoccupation with the gaze and viewership is meticulously constructed so as to implicate the spectator within a given film in ways unlike any other genre of film, horror included. This imbues the camera's gaze with a dimension of reflexivity that fundamentally alters the experiential qualities of film viewing, and complicates conventional patterns of viewer identification, particularly with regard to gender. The role of spectator within the Slasher film is in a perpetual state of upheaval, prompting the viewer to engage with multiple

gendered subjectivities in a way that demands an active and self-conscious viewer, regardless of their own gender identity.

Formally, the cycle's concern with its viewing audience is manifest in many demonstrable and recognizable ways. This is perhaps best represented by the Slasher's most salient feature - the aforementioned POV shot. This shot is invoked in virtually every film of the cycle, even in its fledgling stages, and for this reason has been the subject of much academic debate. The initial death scene from *Sleepaway Camp* embodies the function that the optical point of view shot serves within the Slasher film well. The scene opens with a pedophilic camp chef preparing a massive cauldron of boiling water, which is shot in a relatively conventional style. The camera then cuts to a shaky, handheld frame which recreates for the viewer a specific and distinctly human field of vision that allows for the physical construction of the set to obscure view and funnel the viewer's attention much in the same way of the human eye. The shift to POV here not only signifies impending doom, but also conceals the identity of the anonymous surveiller, opening a space of uncertainty in both gender and viewer position. With that said, these films do more than simply align the viewer with a single subjectivity. Audiences are regularly positioned as entirely passive observers as well as victims, consequently rendering them helpless. The oscillation between these two positions is the primary modality through which the Slasher film's distinctive breed of spectatorship is explored, as we as an audience are figured as both active participants within the film world while simultaneously and intentionally isolated from it. While these shifting perspectives are routinely deployed, as I will discuss later, in an effort to attain and enhance a unique breed of cinematic affect, they also are responsible for the singularity of the Slasher's formal and structural composition.

Gilles Deleuze's formulations on spectatorship are relevant here, particularly those regarding the processes of fusion that implicate the viewer within a film. In his assessment of Deleuze's spectator in *Screen*, Richard Rushton delineates two modes of experience within Deleuze's theorization of film viewing; absorption and immersion. For Rushton, these modes occupy two disparate spaces, "one in which the spectator is drawn into the film," immersion, "and an opposite one whereby the film comes out towards the spectator – and each offers a significantly different mode of engagement," absorption.³¹ The latter of these two modes involves projection of oneself onto or into the image, whereas the former allows one to maintain a comfortable distance from the image in passivity. Both of these approaches are rendered filmically through specific formal devices, with immersion being represented through a continuity style and motivated camera movement, and the absorptive mode taking the form of the POV and other subjective tactics that align viewers with a specific character through emotional or somatic identification.

The passive spectator within the context of the Slasher is immersed in the film world. They are, by way of the visual language of the film, excluded from the image, and thus unconsciously forced to acknowledge their distance by their feeling of exclusion. The spectator is rendered helpless and their look is powerless, their gaze is subject to the movement of the camera and there is no illusion of control. The agency afforded to the viewer through POV and the projection of self common to absorption is absent in the immersive mode, denying the viewer any kind of authority over the image. Immersion lulls you into passivity through continuity, and allows for the spectator to resign and simply ingest the imagery presented by the camera's

³¹ Richard Rushton "Deleuzian Spectatorship." *Screen* 50, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 45–53.
<https://doi-org.oca.ucsc.edu/10.1093/screen/hjn086>

anonymous gaze. This mode of viewership is common across genre lines, yet the Slasher cycle complicates this convention through an interplay between immersion and absorption as they exist in the film's formal language.

The absorptive mode of viewership in Slashers is generally rendered through some manner of subjective device, normally the optical point of view shot, which forces viewers to identify with an ulterior subjectivity, oftentimes with monstrous and brutal consequence. The transposition of the viewer's gaze onto that of a character who exists within the diegesis is accompanied by a pronounced change in aesthetics. While the POV shot is not a unique feature of the Slasher film, the visceral nature of the Slasher's pioneering usage of steadicam POV distinguishes it from other genres. The visibly unsteady camera, the auditory presence of heavy breathing and the obfuscation of vision through framing and mimicry of the human eye are meant to generate a realism that absorbs the viewer to a greater extent than is generally the case in cinema. The overtness with which these two foundational cinematic elements are on display in the cycle, and the spectatorial flux that arises thereof, is what differentiates the Slasher from other styles of filmmaking.

To demonstrate, I will turn my attention to two films released during the classical period of Slasher production, John Carpenter's *Halloween* and Tony Maylam's *The Burning*. Both of these films recapitulate these approaches excellently, particularly in the sequences of surveillance, and the resulting violence which said surveillance leads to. In *Halloween*, for instance, Michael Myers possesses an almost supernatural ability to survey and stalk his victims without detection, an ability which aligns him with the role of the camera, but also allows for viewer identification to occur with greater ease. With that said, the spectator only shares Meyer's

specific subjectivity during the opening scene of the film, which is comprised of an extended POV shot that sees a child aged Michael murder his sister. The integration of viewer and character perspective here foregrounds the act of viewing a film, encouraging a self consciousness which horror films generally aim to avoid.

After this merger occurs, it becomes clear that the film's formal construction is meant to recreate cinematically a specific subjectivity, forcibly prompting the spectator to identify with a discrete sensorial experience that is not their own. The audience's vision is obscured when Michael adorns a mask, the camera shakes and is held at eye level, subtly lurching with each movement and ensuring that the spectator knows they are, at least for the moment, inhabiting somebody else's cognitive apparatus. Once the act of murder has concluded, however, the camera leaves this mode of filmmaking, and returns to a more conventional, third person approach, restoring cinematic normalcy. This, however, is the lone instance in *Halloween* in which the spectator's POV is shared with Michael, as instead the film begins to position the spectator as present in the film, appearing and disappearing with Michael, yet as an entirely separate entity. Take one of the first murders of the film as an instance of the disparity between spectator position and subjectivity that is seen after the initial sequence. For a majority of this sequence, Michael Meyers is stalking his victim, Nancy, from the outside of a house where she is babysitting, moving with inexplicable ease and freedom across the carefully constructed claustrophobic terrain of the home. Multiple times throughout this portion of the film, we are given a handheld, eye level medium shot of Nancy seen through a window, which is always accompanied by the sound of heavy breathing.

Typically within the cycle, and even in other genres, this formal combination announces that we have assumed the identity of the killer. However, *Halloween* complicates things by having Michael Myers form present in the frame, almost as if to suggest that the film is aware of the viewer's presence, explicitly refusing any kind of viewer passivity by inserting the viewer into the diegesis. His presence in the frame disrupts conventional patterns of viewership, as it visualizes the transition from immersion to absorption and intentionally precludes the sort of certainty in spatial constitution that continuity filmmaking generally aims to fulfill. Later in the sequence, our gaze returns to a more objective and passive state, as the camera, now static and untethered to a specific perspective, is situated inside with Nancy who is unaware of Michael's voyeuristic surveillance. The camera reveals Michael who is visible outside, only now his violent gaze is directed at the spectator, rendering the viewer powerless and ridding them of the agency which the subjective camera affords. These two spectatorial positions clearly demarcate the divergence between the absorptive and immersive modes through Michael and Nancy's subjectivities respectively. The interplay and fluidity of these positions place the identity of the viewer in a space which, despite the undertones of gendered violence, is oftentimes too turbulent to sustain prolonged identification with any one gender in the film, placing viewers, regardless of gender identity, in an ambiguous and genderless position.

The films that followed the blueprint laid by *Halloween* generally do not employ such a sophisticated approach to spectatorship, but the same kind of fluidity between these two paradigms of spectatorship are present. In the aforementioned film *The Burning*, the parameters of these approaches are much more well defined. Multiple sequences over the course of the film display the two modes of viewership that coexist in the Slasher, yet one in particular seems

relevant. In this scene, two summer campers are revealed to be having sex through a slow track of a procession of clothing littered about an isolated and remote area away from their campsite. Everything about this scene is borrowed from the sort of raunchy teenage comedies of the era, ala Bob Clark's *Porky's* (1981), although interspersed between these images are blurred POV shots of a hedge clipper wielding murderer. The juxtaposition of these two shots are clearly meant to generate tension, as the passive continuity of the hormonal summer camp romance offers a stark contrast to the sinister voyeurism of the unseen menace, which is habitually shown through POV. Once the male counterpart leaves the area, the secondary, more active mode takes over entirely, and the killer, and by proxy the spectator, moves slowly in for a kill which is shown off screen. The procession of different viewer positions during this scene, beginning with a passive, objective camera and moving to an actively voyeuristic, and eventually fatal gaze is an excellent illustration of how these spectatorial alignments are utilized in the representation of violence. The transition from passive to active is marked by violent outburst, almost as if the uncertainty of viewer position necessitates the death of a character in order to restore stability and objectivity for the viewer. The witnessing and enacting of violence is meant to be visceral and affective in the Slasher, and it is for this reason that these sequences require a more engaged and active point of view which in this context is supplied by the killer's POV. Once the threat of violence has either been realized or negated through some kind of diegetic intervention, objectivity and continuity take over once again, but when the threat of violence is announced via POV, the fluidity in the spectator's alignment overrides the film's visual language. In the case of *The Burning*, once the two campers have been dispatched, there is no more usage of the optical

point of view and the film returns to a setting characterized by both narrative and formal normalcy thus restoring the viewer's independence.

This scene was essentially reproduced in other films countless times before and after *The Burning's* release in 1981, and for this reason it is relatively unremarkable in the greater context of the cycle. However, given the framework provided by Rushton in his assessment of Deleuze the film takes on greater import. *The Burning* assumes the viewer has a knowledge of the danger facing the sequestered intimate couple within the context of the Slasher, and swiftly aligns the spectator with the source of that danger almost as if to provide a counter to the pedestrian aesthesis of the film world. This alignment is accompanied by a striking shift in film form, and clearly explicates for the audience that the kind of viewership required by the film has changed. It is almost as if the film has exploited this mode of absorptive viewership as a means to maintain attention, highlighting the indispensability of this approach to the cycle.

The locus of the tension described above also reveals itself in the cinematic gaze or 'eye' of a film. Both the diegetic gaze of characters and the purportedly objective gaze of the spectator inform not only a given Slasher's filmic form, but also the action of the diegesis. The ambiguity of perspective generated by this approach in the cycle becomes a structuring element in and of itself, affecting film form at a fundamental level. To this end, Carol Clover reflects in *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* that the project of horror is to "to tease, confuse, block, and threaten the spectator's own vision," perceptively noting that the spectator's vision provides the central motivation of the genre's aesthesis.³² The chief modalities through which this is achieved are the frustration of the gaze and the fluctuation between two distinctive types of camera work which

³² Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, 166.

creates an uncertainty in visual truth and spectatorial position. To this end, there is no stasis in the Slasher, instead the film's construction is highly variable in nature, constantly shifting between profoundly different aesthetic frameworks which impede the viewer's ability to identify with any singular force in the film. They are bereft of the stability which a sustained objectivity provides, and the film meticulously inculcates an ambiguity of self in relation to the images being shown.

In conventional filmmaking practice the gaze of the audience is shared by the camera's eye, although it is markedly unobtrusive and imperceptible within the film world. In horror films, however, and even more so in Slashers, this act of looking is more consequential. Gazing in Slasher films motivates film form and predicts onscreen action via violence or death, implicating the viewer within the film even further. The camera's shifting from the masochistic, although largely typical, subjectivity of the victim to the sadistic perspective of the killer imbues the look of the camera with a literal violent authority over the image. These gazes are generally associated with the absorptive filmmaking described above, although, like most things in the Slasher, this is not a forgone conclusion.

The dual presence of these two spectatorial experiences in Slashers, which Clover describes as the typically masculine "assaultive" and the feminine "reactive" gazes, ultimately define the cycle's formal tactics. She describes these perspectives in greater detail noting that "assaultive gazing is associated with those who hold the camera and reactive gazing with those who stare at the screen after the fact".³³ Clover also notes that, in Slashers specifically, "collusion" is key to this process. Through the reactive gaze, audiences are invited to enact a

³³ Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, 204.

control over the film world through a surrogate gaze realized by the movie camera, often predicting and motivating filmic violence, while the reactive gaze is more conventional in its form, and invites empathy and identification through normal filmic avenues.³⁴ While this is, broadly speaking, accurate, there is a good deal of variation on the reactive and assaultive gazing than these definitions allow for. The cycle's seeming rejection of sustained certainty in spectator position and identity results in the creation of a distinctive set of aesthetic conventions.

To begin an assessment of these two approaches to spectatorship within the cycle, it is important to define their cinematic lineage. In this regard Alfred Hitchcock's 1960 *Psycho* is particularly useful. In *Psycho*, there is a near constant sense of being surveilled, both for characters within the diegetic space and for spectators themselves, which draws attention to the spectator's own presence within the arrangement of the cinematic apparatus while concurrently and quite literally inserting them in the midst of the action in slightly different terms than is the case with *Halloween*. Throughout the film, the spectator is invited to partake in a sadistic voyeurism similar to that of murderer Norman Bates, while simultaneously, and almost paradoxically, being forced into the role of victim in moments of fright or violence.

Psycho's infamous shower scene, which is a clear precursor to other films that more clearly define the Slasher formula, encapsulates this dichotomy superbly well. The sequence begins with Norman Bates in a heavily shadowed medium shot, surrounded by taxidermied predatory animals mounted on the walls, intently staring around the room and towards the camera, then promptly unhooking a painting to observe an unaware Marion Crane. The animals which adorn the walls of the motel office gaze down at Marion and Norman, functioning as a

³⁴ Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, 199, 204.

symbolic manifestation of the film's preoccupation with surveillance, while Norman's own movement in the frame seems to suggest an awareness of his own being watched by the stuffed birds and the viewers of the film. As the scene unfolds, it becomes clear that Norman's gaze is not only malicious, but one of marked sadism, as we see in a close up that he is covertly observing an unsuspecting woman. The camera promptly cuts to match the object of Norman's assaultive gaze in POV, forcing the spectator to partake in his sadistic voyeurism.

Slightly later in this portion of the film, we take on a similar position of voyeurism, only this time it is unmediated by Norman's perspective. After this introduction to Marion, who has been positioned as oblivious and vulnerable to the gaze of the spectator, the audience is forced to witness her murder through a shared subjectivity and extreme proximity. In a series of shots we see her in the shower through rapidly shifting camera placements and angles, at one point even adopting her visual field via POV of a shower head. This aligns the spectator with her experience in a way that partially negates the scopophilic pleasures of conventional cinema. Then, in a medium shot, we see Norman, who is masquerading as his dead mother, approach from behind the closed shower curtain, tear open the barrier and murder Marion with a large kitchen knife. After her death, stasis is restored and the same POV of the shower head is reused as is an extreme close up of Marion's eye which recalls the earlier close up of Norman's.

The camerawork during this sequence is utterly frenetic and chaotic, rapidly cutting and racking focus and indiscriminately changing positions so as to partially obscure the actual violence of what is unfolding, but also to imitate Marion's experience of death. While the spectator does not share her subjectivity through POV shots during the murder, they are forced experientially by the violence of the film form to identify with the victim, each stab motivating a

cut or jump in camera position, and emphasizing via sound her suffering and terror, an approach which I would qualify as reactive. The recycling of the shower head POV shot after the fact and the emphasis on the eye after Marion has expired almost serves as an acknowledgement of the shared experience of the two parties with the close up of the eye linking the dual presence of Norman and his victim's perspectives. The amplification of reflexivity achieved by the close up of the eye also draws attention to the gaze of the audience in a similar way to the POV employed by films later in the cycle, obliging the spectator to acknowledge their role of witness and grapple with the violence of the act which they were just subjected to.

The role of spectator plays a singular and vital function in every film of the cycle. The active engagement on offer in *Slashers* is clearly meant to provide the entertainment value of the film, as the uncertainty in space and identity achieved through the alternation between immersion and absorption and their associated gazes creates a viewing experience centered around participation and reflexivity as opposed to passivity. The emphasis on watching and surveillance through formal means provides for an elision of the conventional distance between viewer and image to take place, bestowing an illusion of agency upon the spectator in a way that is unlike other film genres. It should also be said that these issues of spectatorship are heavily interrelated and dependent on one of the cycle's decisive elements: gore.

The Faces of Death - Spectacle and Affect in the Slasher Film

All of the aforementioned tactics which compose the Slasher's aesthetic language work in

service of a singular goal - the generation of affect. The cycle's unabashed commitment to bodily harm, dismemberment, and cinematic violence, all of which are rendered in lurid detail through practical effects work in service of this one aim. Indeed, if one watches enough of this particular breed of horror film it becomes abundantly clear that the composite parts of the Slasher coalesce to represent excessive and spectacular death sequences in all their macabre glory. It is for this reason that a particular brand of violent spectacle has become synonymous with the cycle's namesake, as its preoccupation with the exhibition of all manner of psychopathic butchery pervades its visual language.

Over the course of the canon's evolution there is a marked heightening in the intensity and realism with which the prototypical Slasher film's characters are dispatched, a trajectory that eventually resulted in a reshaping of the cycle's cinematic content around violence in a way that is utterly unique. Rather than attempt any sort of narrative innovation, Slasher films opted instead to expound the limits of cinematic violence in a way that was typically reserved only for the most distant fringes of cult and independent film. As the 1980's drew on, films of the cycle would readily exhibit a pronounced disregard for the historically requisite elements of commercial cinema, particularly in relation to issues of plot, character development and even continuity, instead electing to foreground on screen violence. While the aforementioned conventions are undoubtedly present, their importance to these films was supplanted by what I will refer to as an affective mode, a distinctive cinematic approach which privileges the sensational over the rational and the corporeal over the psychological through formal avenues. Eugenie Brinkema defines affect as that which "disrupt[s], interrupt[s], reinsert[s], demand[s], provoke[s], insist[s] on, remind[s] of, agitate[s] for: the body, sensation, movement, flesh and

skin and nerves, the visceral, stressing pains, feral frenzies, always rubbing against: what undoes, what unsettles, that thing I cannot name, what remains resistant, far away (haunting, and ever so beautiful); indefinable, it is said to be what cannot be written, what thaws the critical cold, messing all systems and subjects up".³⁵ In this sense, affect and its various cinematic manifestations in the Slasher film are articulated through devices like framing and structure, sound and mise-en-scene, often in ways which are fundamentally dissimilar from other generic approaches to cinema. To put it plainly, the affective mode is concerned with the body of the spectator, emphasizing the experiential qualities of film viewing through filmic violence in both content and form.

To further illustrate these points, it is again useful to return to prior academic debate on this subject. Anna Powell's assessments of Deleuze and Guattari's conceptions of aesthetics are useful here. In essence, Powell indicates that the experience of viewing a film is not one of embodied isolation, rather instead it involves a process through which the viewer is sutured into the actual viewing apparatus in a way not unlike the absorptive approach referenced in an earlier section. Guattari describes this process as achieved "not through representation, but through *affective* contamination," meaning the viewer's sensorial engagement with the imagery overrides a person's resting psychic state outside of the viewing apparatus.³⁶ The visceral impact of a film's visual information becomes "no longer visual in nature," and the spectator is subsumed by the merger of content and cognition.³⁷ In some sense the brand of spectatorship explicated in the previous section provides the site for this process to unfold, only the content and its ensuing relationship to the viewer's psychic apparatus takes on far greater significance. Within the

³⁵ Xavier A. Reyes. *Horror Film and Affect*. (New York: Routledge, 2016), 4. VitalSource Etextbooks.

³⁶ Anna Powell. *Deleuze and Horror Film*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 2005), 4.

³⁷ Powell. *Deleuze and Horror Film*, 4.

Slasher cycle, the literal witnessing of violent content forces a confrontation with mortal fragility in the most blatant sense, as bodies are dismembered, continuity is momentarily disrupted and the entire aesthesis is overtaken by a violently ulterior and affective force. Powell describes various formal devices as being integral to this affective mode, noting that in horror films, “camera shake, blurred focus, and extreme close ups... have a direct affect on our mechanisms of perception,” noting that “horror’s frequent undermining of normative perspective by fragmented images and blurred focus” allows for a kind of destabilizing of a conventional subjectivity in viewership to take place.³⁸ In essence, this disruption acts as a filmic contagion, precipitating a collective experience of reckoning with the frightening possibilities of bodily destruction.

The Slasher film encapsulates this affective mode even more effectively than most other brands of horror film. Given the cycle’s foregrounding of recursive violent spectacle byway of optical POV, the interplay of sadism and masochism apparent in its frequent use of a subjective camera, and the emphasis on heightened, cartoonish levels of gore, Powell’s evaluation takes on even greater cogency. In many ways, the Slasher is the ultimate embodiment of a horror film’s ability to threaten the preservation of a “normative perspective” in viewers, as the central project of the cycle is to instill feelings of discomfort, disgust and confusion within the viewer through formal means, especially once the slaughter begins. One of the most prime illustrations of this approach comes relatively early on in the trajectory of the Slasher with Dario Argento’s hallucinatory 1975 thriller *Deep Red*. Argento’s film was one of a wave of Italian “giallos” that would see widespread exhibition during the beginning of the 1970’s, and although their commercial appeal in the United States was negligible, their impact on the industry was more

³⁸Powell. *Deleuze and Horror Film*, 5.

widespread than box office numbers suggest.³⁹ The aesthetic impact these films would exhibit on American horror generally and the Slasher cycle specifically is easily demonstrable, particularly if one takes into account the use of extravagant set pieces and bizarre and intricate death scenes.

The first death sequence in the film is an excellent illustration of the formal language of affect within the cycle. During the inceptive portion of the film, we are introduced to a telepath who is visiting Rome for a meeting of “The Congress of European Parapsychology.” During this sequence, the audience is made aware of the presence of a lurking psychopath inside the theater where the conference is taking place by Helga Ulmann, the telepathic keynote speaker, although the soon to be killer’s precise location is ambiguous. Ms. Ulmann’s knowledge of the psychopath’s presence in the room leaves her petrified, overcome with fear and unable to continue her lecture, a breakdown which is met with a cut to an optical point of view which is clearly marked as belonging to the anonymous threat. The spectator inhabits this subjectivity for the remainder of the sequence, as we see them put on black gloves and surveil the woman as she vacates the building following the conference’s conclusion. The voyeur’s view of the woman is also slightly obscured by the architecture of the theater, imbuing the spectator’s vision with an illusory realism in a similar manner to that of the absorptive mode described in the previous section. The score adds to the feeling of realism, as it is composed of a loud whirring sound which engenders a feeling of menace, fully enveloping the spectator, both sonically and visually, within a homicidally deranged mind. The combination of sound and the cycle’s trademark spectatorial ambiguity work here to signify the inevitability of death and danger, cultivating through sensory means a tense anticipation of witnessing a murder.

³⁹ Nowell, *Blood Money*, 130.

After Ulmann leaves, the film cuts to a slow track that sees a procession of morbid trinkets, childhood effects and potential murder weapons shown in close up, a stark contrast to the previous scene. The shift in imagery is met with an abrupt change in the film's score, which is now composed of Goblin's distinctively eerie and uptempo funk laden organ lines. There is a notably surreal quality in viewing these objects, as many of them suggest violence or death in some manner. Among the various things strewn about are crayon-scrawled pieces of paper featuring images of impaled bodies, an assortment of marbles and multicolored string, a number of dolls and finally a pair of rusted switchblades. The black gloved hand seen at the conference selects one of the dolls midway through the sequence, suggesting that this collection of ephemera is representative of the killer's psychosis.

The disjunct between sound, image and subject here serves as a way to muddle understanding of the visual information provided to viewer's by the film. The spatial disparity between the voyeurism of the optical POV in the previous scene and the extreme camera proximity of the tracking shot combine with the film's sound to create a space of confusion in which conventional cinema has become irrational. Both form and content here serve as a means of affecting the viewer, confusing and menacing them without providing an illumination as to narrative relevance or importance. Through intentionally inhibiting the spectator's understanding of space and narrative import, the tracking shot leaves viewers to make sense of the images through association and feeling derived from vague material representations of an intangible malignant presence, predicting or implying violence without necessarily representing it. To again borrow from Deleuze, Argento has created a visual language for "schizoanalysis" in which a shifting "constellation of affects" creates a "flux that overcomes barriers and codes",

encouraging the viewer to participate in and engage with an “anomalous states of consciousness”, to let oneself be affected by this cinematic representation of madness.⁴⁰

But it does not end there. Following the final frame of the tracking shot - a rusted switchblade, the film cuts to an extreme close up of Ullmann’s eye, reflexively drawing attention to both vulnerability of the human body and restoring spectatorial autonomy as the viewer assumes a more natural position of watcher once more, although the continued presence of Goblin’s score provides a haunting reminder of the threat she faces. The camera zooms out slowly at the soundtrack’s climactic moment, revealing that the eye indeed belongs to Helga Ullmann as she meticulously applies mascara, drawing the makeup brush laterally across her eye in a way that evokes the infamous eye slashing of *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) or Marion’s death scene in *Psycho*, effectively imbuing the image with a deadly resonance.

Suddenly, the score cuts out, and Mrs. Ullman is shown in medium to be on the phone with a friend. The notably mobile camera slowly pans away from the action and lingers on a dimly lit hallway, once again disrupting the visual narrative logic of the scene and instead probing the space and its sinister atmosphere before returning again to the woman’s phone call for an extended period. As soon as she says to her conversant “I’m alone,” an eerie and notably childish melody begins to infiltrate the film score, and again cinematic normalcy is interrupted as the frame begins to cut rapidly around the apartment. It becomes clear quickly to both viewer and Helga that this is a diegetic sound, and the psychic’s realization of this fact is reflected by the camera which cuts to an intensely low angled close up of her eyes, which are gazing suspiciously at the hallway.

⁴⁰ Powell, *Deleuze and Horror Film*, 21, 23.

As the scene progresses, the camera continues to frantically cut to close ups of various sources of sound around the apartment, and the chaotic din of the apartment fluctuates in volume based on the camera's proximity, overwhelming the viewer's senses and obscuring the narrative import of the scene. The telepath cautiously leaves her seat and moves slowly to the door which briefly restores stasis until a sudden and jarring gasp sends the film into visual pandemonium. The film assaults the viewer with a barrage of close ups beginning with the woman's face, the door being broken down with a loud splintering sound, and finally a butcher's knife being swung swiftly down into her shoulder, inflicting an oozing, bloody neon red gash. The score here bursts back into activity as well, with a tense syncopated groove blaring as a close up reveals the psychopaths feet advance on the now immobilized victim. After more wounds are inflicted, and shown with similarly close camera proximity, the camera inexplicably drifts throughout the apartment once again in an optical POV, before halting on a piece of paper which the same black gloved hand retrieves as the scene momentarily concludes. Perplexingly, the film then proceeds to show a prolonged conversation between two friends, one of whom is the protagonist, before returning again to the scene of the murder, which is reintroduced via more close ups of the now visibly mutilated victim as her body is thrown through a large glass window.

This sequence is an excellent encapsulation of the role affect plays within the slasher film. The instability in viewer position combines with the onslaught of sound and sight to generate an almost assualitive quality, with the violence of the act overtaking the actual formal logic of the film. The diegetic content here is recapitulated by the film's formal construction, which mimics and recreates for the spectator the actual affective, sensorial qualities of the experience of murder. The momentary respite of a dialogue between an uninvolved party makes

the return to the spectacular violence of the murder all the more impactful and affective. The visceral nature of this sequence sets a markedly corporeal engagement into action, as the assault on the telepath is reenacted on the viewer both through the experience of watching the film as well as the actual violence of the wounds suffered by Mrs. Ullmann. To again borrow from Powell, the images that compose this sequence act in two capacities, as while they assuredly “[carry] representational meaning” they also act as “material forces: shades of colour, intensities of light and timbres of sound. Every stylistic component is rich in affective gradations”.⁴¹ The actual cinematic motion and imagery of this sequence is rife with affective force, not just by virtue of what is being represented, but also by how it is presented.

Now let us turn to a domestic offshoot of the *giallo* to illustrate another avenue through which affect is made visible, abjection. Julia Kristeva, who coined the term, defines abjection as “anything immoral, sinister, scheming and shady: a terror that disassembles... a friend who stabs you,” and acknowledged that its viewing can provide a certain pleasure or *jouissance*.⁴² This conception of abjection, which elicits a bodily response similar to revulsion, is integral to the experience of viewing horror film, especially Slashers, and this human fascination with the abject serves as one of the prime motivations of these films. In his recently published book titled *Horror Film and Affect: Towards A Corporeal Model of Viewing*, Xavier Aldana Reyes draws on Kristeva in order to establish a working definition of “abjection,” a feeling which is a chief aim of filmic affect. He describes the experience of abjection in cinema as something that “forces bodies, both filmic and fleshly, into contact with one another...the graphic type, attempts to reinscribe the body into the film/text and thus aims to short circuit the distinction between

⁴¹ Powell, *Deleuze and the Horror Film*, 116.

⁴² Julia Kristeva. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982). 3,4,9.

thought and body”.⁴³ The act of viewing a body being mutilated on celluloid evokes the abject by affective means, literally confronting the audience by displaying the limits of corporeality, which, in the case of the Slasher film, is manifest through the grisly spectacle of death. The cycle’s specific brand of blood drenched spectacle was virtually unprecedented in film history, as the Slasher utilized a complex arrangement of frenetic and visceral formal construction to represent explicit and intensely graphic content with a realism that was meant to simultaneously entertain and disgust audiences.

Reyes notes that this “representational disgust” is linked heavily to real or “fearful disgust,” meaning the according somatic responses to witnessing “images of the abject” bear a psychic import that is not too far removed from the act of viewing a mutilated cadaver.⁴⁴ Reyes also notes that this process can be amplified by cinematic techniques, as the abject is made more visible through elements like camera proximity the combination of multiple images of bodily harm.⁴⁵ Slasher films undoubtedly operate within this terrain, as they not only represent the frailty of the human body but also affect the viewer insofar as they force audiences to “vicariously imagine a similar pain”.⁴⁶ While Reyes is primarily writing about more contemporary “torture films” in the ruptured vein of *Hostel* (2005) and *August Underground* (2001), the level of gratuity in the Slasher cycle should be seen as the historical precedent for the brutal violence which is of central concern to later horror films.

To illustrate the import of the sheer brutality that is characteristic of the cycle, I would like to briefly turn to two films which plainly exhibit the sorts of imagery and cinematic

⁴³ Reyes, *Horror Film and Affect*, 12.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 53.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 54.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 50.

techniques which are associated with these notions of disgust and abjection: the 1985 film *The Mutilator*, and the previously referenced *Maniac*. Let us begin with a scene from attorney turned first time filmmaker Buddy Cooper's film in which a woman is slowly and agonizingly sodomized with an oversized barbed hook, perhaps one of the most sexist and unapologetically sadistic murder scenes in the entirety of the cycle. The portion of the film immediately preceding this sequence consists of the normative conventions typically associated with continuity narrative filmmaking in admittedly amateurish fashion. However, as soon as the threat of bodily destruction, in this case the presence of a hulking, battle axe wielding single father, becomes apparent, not only does the film begin to cut more rapidly, but it also begins to emphasize discrete parts of the human body, using the limits of the frame to bisect its form to suggest impending mutilation.

As the sequence continues, the victim is splayed out in a way that maximizes visibility for the audience and the killer reveals a gleaming silver hook. Close ups of the hook being pushed through the victim's groin and out through her stomach are interspersed with her optical POV, and extreme close ups of her stupefied agony, all of which deservedly qualify this as the embodiment of abject imagery. The act of watching the degradation of a human body here makes use of the psychological apparatus of the spectator to generate fascination through revulsion, forcing a confrontation with the nonhuman in a visceral and literal manner. The intimacy with which the sequence unfolds adds to this effect, as the closeness of the camera emphasizes the physical act of mutilation in a way that demands the viewer's full attention. The sexual nature of this violence speaks to the sorts of rage felt by the presumed male viewer when their fantasy is not fulfilled by the object of their desire. Once the hormone fueled teenage hijinks are over and

the possibility of nudity becomes unlikely, the frustration stemming from a denial of sexual gratification is displaced onto the female victim, and, in the case of this scene, the woman is punished in the most debased and brutal fashion conceivable.

Lustig's film also employs a similarly affective approach to violent imagery and abjection, particularly during a sequence that features one of the more well known grisly practical ever concocted by wizard of gore Tom Savini. The sequence sees a man (played by Savini himself!) and a woman about to have sex in the back seat of a parked sedan in a secluded port somewhere in New York City. After a series of extreme close ups of images that are clearly meant to inspire erotic pleasure, the killer peers through the back seat window and momentarily reveals himself to the woman, who's POV is briefly shared by the spectator before quickly darting out of view of both the couple and the audience alike. The spatial uncertainty of his position is integral to the scene's affective potential, as Maarten Coëgnarts and Miklós Kiss reflect in their formalist evaluation of suspense in the Slasher cycle, which they posit is one of the primary modalities for the generation of affect. For them, suspense is premised on the interplay of "knowledge" and "helplessness" or the "absence of knowledge", and the frustration that arises from an inability to avail the film's character of their knowledge by virtue of the constraints of cinema.⁴⁷ These devices, along with their associated image schemas of shadow/light and emptiness/fullness, work to generate anticipation in the witnessing of abject violence.⁴⁸

All of these dynamics are visible in this sequence. As the sexually charged close ups of the unsuspecting couple make use of "fullness," rendering the audience unaware of the location

⁴⁷ Maarten Coëgnarts and Miklós Kiss. "Look Out Behind You!': Grounding Suspense in the Slasher Film" in *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 15, no. 3 (2017), 349. DOI: [10.1080/17400309.2017.1332844](https://doi.org/10.1080/17400309.2017.1332844)

⁴⁸ Coëgnarts and Kiss, *Look Out Behind You!*, 364.

of the killer because the images of the couple fill the entire frame. This engenders a feeling of helplessness in the viewer, as they are privy to the killer's presence, but the actual images which comprise the scene render them unable to assuage their doubt about his precise whereabouts. This uncertainty, which is achieved by the combination of a "full" frame and a claustrophobic and intimate subjective camera ensures that the threat of violence remains unpredictable yet ubiquitous, forcing the spectator to relinquish any semblance of control and await the couple's inevitable death. The close up reaction shots used during this sequence also work to this end. Once the killer is viewed by the soon to be victim, the film cuts to another close up of her face before returning to the now vacant or "empty", and darkened window. This signals to the viewers that indeed the killer is closing in, but, by virtue of the film's construction, they, along with the unsuspecting victims, remain unable to act on this knowledge, as the spatial dislocation of the killer makes resistance impossible. This vulnerability generates feelings of suspense, a notably distinct breed of affect, as the killer's presence (or lack thereof) signifies death without actually representing bodily destruction. Once the killer's location is revealed, the frame fills with light and he leaps onto the hood of the car and, in slow motion and a close up, obliterates the head of the man in the car with a shotgun.

The relationship between gore, which is a prime motivation of the above sequences as well as the cycle more generally, and the anticipatory suspense of the affective mode, is central to the slasher's aesthetic and formal sensibility. Suspense and uncertainty which are manifest through both the diegesis and the oscillation between various spectatorial alignments are prerequisites for any sort of confrontation with the abject. Paradigms of knowledge, viewer agency, and helplessness function as a way to signify the abject, and the association of these

terms with corporeal sensations like fright, suspense and disgust speak to their importance to the chief goal of the cycle - to force viewers to observe and contemplate the potentials and realities of bodily harm.

The Wake

As we move further away from the glorious gore drenched days of slaughter which defined the 15 year period in which the Slasher was widely seen, and feared, the cycle has taken on a character of obscurity. Hearing the name Michael Meyers no longer instills an image of a knife wielding masked intruder into the minds of Americans, rather the name is much more likely to conjure an image of an unfunny doltish ignoramus wearing a ruffled paisley shirt vomiting out inane catchphrases. Most people have forgotten entirely about the torrent of Slashers released during the 70's and 80's, and the lasting mark the cycle left on horror films has been generally forgotten. As I have pointed out already, by the midway point of the 1980's the Slasher had fallen from grace steeply and quickly. However, as the genre lost its commercial appeal, a much more niche community came to its aid. The ailing Slasher film was much the beneficiary of home video's meteoric rise, with independent video distribution companies like Key, Vestron, Media, Continental Wizard and Gorgon breathing new life into the cycle, and reestablishing the film type in a different, more niche capacity.⁴⁹

As Hollywood moved onto greener pastures, the Slasher film became a darling of cult film enthusiasts around the globe. The cycle's trademark camp and disregard for narrative

⁴⁹ Adam Rockoff. *Going to Pieces: The Rise and Fall of the Slasher Film, 1978-1986* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2002), 2.

innovation became endearing, and its sadistic violence entertaining as opposed to frightening or reprehensible. The ill repute which surrounded the Slasher was of little importance to these fringe audiences who were enraptured by the gruesome brutality which Ebert, Siskel, and the MPAA deemed unsuitable for mass audiences. Magazines like *Fangoria*, which began in 1979, were integral to the subterranean revival which the Slasher has experienced in the last 30 odd years. In the May 1983 issue, published well after the cycle's brief period of boom had ended, *Fangoria* published a multi-page interview with Tom Savini, complete with multipage pull out posters bearing the visage of one of his grisly cadavers, demonstrating the lasting influence the films made on certain portions of the filmgoing public.⁵⁰

The magazine, which is still published to this day, was the first fan publication to embrace the cycle's violent spectacle and celebrate its practitioners. The fascination with practical effects which comprises much of the magazine's content differentiates *Fangoria* from virtually all other mainstream film criticism, and helped to cement the cycle as a cult darling. The emphasis placed on the technical side of blood, guts and gore in these publications runs counter to the narrative prescribed to the Slasher by much of the film world. The cult film community's fixation with dismemberment and gore opposes the notion that the cycle's primary aim was to create an outlet for male viewers to enact their vile misogynistic fantasies on the opposite gender.

Even today this community still exists. Festivals like Beyond Fest and Cinematic Void routinely exhibit Slasher hallmarks on a weekly basis in major cities. Arrow Video and Bleeding Skull provide worldwide distribution for remastered and updated versions of many of the films I

⁵⁰ Multiple authors, *Fangoria* 27, May 1983.
https://issuu.com/fangoriafans/docs/fangoria_027_tom_savini_gore

have referenced in this essay, as well as countless others. The resilience of this cycle speaks to the impact it made on fans and producers of independent film, as it has survived despite the closure of video stores and the adoption of online streaming which cannot be said for many other similar film types. The fact that this cycle maintains even a semblance of relevance to this day is a testament to the powerful fanaticism of weird, lonely cult film freaks everywhere, and we have them to thank for the Slasher's supernatural ability to survive against all odds.

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