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EVOLUTION OF THE FINAL GIRL: EXPLORING FEMINISM AND FEMININITY
IN *HALLOWEEN* (1978-2018)

by
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Preface

I was interested in the macabre way before I was interested in feminism, before I even had the slightest inkling of the social ills plaguing women in media. 10-year-old me would peek through my fingers at films like *28 Days Later* and *Ju-on*, simultaneously disturbed and deeply curious. Horror films also afforded me an avenue into the “big boys’ club” at an early age, as I’d often watch them with friends who were like older brothers to me. In middle school, I felt proud in declaring that I had seen most of the classics, and honored to be invited to an “exclusively male” viewing of the *Final Destination* series. We laughed, gasped, and poked fun at the garish nature of every character’s death.

Soon, making fun of horror films became a communal ritual. One was allowed to enjoy these movies, but never to the point of actually finding it truly good. Even at a young age, there was awareness, albeit a little hazy, of the low-brow, cheap thrills image that the horror genre projected in our collective consciousness. In hindsight, my early experiences also foreshadowed a fact that I would soon learn: that many horror films, and subsequently film theorists, position the typical viewer as a young, heterosexual male.

My ironic distancing from these films started to take on different meaning when I became more engaged in feminist ideas. Even as I soaked up messages about equality and liberation, I kept coming back to these films that featured women being stripped, dismembered, mutilated and disrespected. At that time, lambasting the entire horror genre as superficial and unworthy of deeper analysis seemed to me an appropriate way of dealing with my cognitive dissonance.

It was too easy of a dismissal. Decades of horror film research and theorizations have shown us that there is a reason why this particular genre has been an important part of film history from the beginning, and has never fallen from public popularity. To write off an entire

genre is to miss out on its deeper implications—namely, the idea that horror both reflects and shapes our historically and culturally specific anxieties. By providing viewers with vicarious but controlled thrills, horror films also offer a catharsis of our collective and individual fears. They probe at the extremities of physical vulnerability, the sway of animal emotions, the repressed and the taboo lurking under the surface of everyday life. Films dating back even to the early 20's like Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* are evidence of this: the monstrous characters of Dr. Caligari and Cesare served as abstractions of social fears in Weimar Republic Germany, "the incarnations of demonic forces of a nightmarish world that the bourgeoisie was afraid to acknowledge, where self-assertion is pushed to...power over others" (Barlow).

Given the complexity of the horror genre's implications, it would make sense then to take these films quite seriously, especially when contemplating matters of the unconscious, human psyche, sexual difference, violence and desire. In other words, issues that are extremely relevant to the feminist project.

The Slasher Film and Feminist Film Theory

In 1981, Roger Ebert published an essay "Why Movie Audiences Aren't Safe Anymore." In this essay, Ebert described the "brutal directness of style" of films like *I Spit on Your Grave* (Zarchi, 1978), considering it to be more nefarious and vile than that of the films he had seen up to this point. For Ebert, these films were clearly an attack on women, an act of masculine revenge particularly on those who dared to be sexual. This was a viewpoint widely taken up by second-wave feminists. It comes as no surprise that in its first cycle, the slasher film was taken at face value and incited many decries of misogyny and male sadistic-voyeuristic desire against the female body.

In 1992, Carol Clover proposed a more dynamic approach to this popular interpretation, arguing that slasher films actually called on viewers to take on a variety of positions, not simply that of the male killer. Supporting this is the cinematic trope of the Final Girl, “who alone looks death in the face, but...who finds the strength either to stay the killer long enough to be rescued, or to kill him herself. But in either case, from 1974 on, the survivor figure has been female” (Clover, 35). Going through terror but eventually triumphing, the Final Girl embodied a more complicated gender position, with male spectators experiencing masochism via identification with the female body.

This shifted the overall tone of the subgenre from an oppressive one to one of feminist possibility. Clover’s psychoanalytic approach serves as an homage and response to an influential essay preceding hers, Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” Mulvey argues that Woman exists in the phallogentric order only to symbolize lack; she is that which the male is not, his binary opposite. She is the “bearer of meaning” but never the “maker of meaning,” subjugating her to a passive position for men to live out their “phantasies and obsessions” (621). The image of the woman is thus raw material for men to look at in an active manner, and serve as an erotic object both for the male characters within the film and for the spectators of the film itself. The male figure is what drives the narrative forward, and acts as a surrogate for the spectator’s gaze and ego, thus conferring “a satisfying sense of omnipotence” (626). In breaking down the act of looking, Mulvey claims that mainstream film forms depend on two contradictory types of visual pleasure: scopophilia and narcissistic identification. Scopophilia is defined as the pleasure in looking at another as a sexual object, an act usually inflicted on the women of the film. Narcissistic identification traces back to the male figure, as the cinema has structures of fascination strong enough to demand identification of the ego with the character on the screen.

However, since woman de facto signifies the threat of castration, the male unconscious' anxiety needs to be appeased by one of two avenues: voyeurism, or fetishistic scopophilia. Voyeurism works by "asserting control and subjecting the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness," a kind of sadism that "fits in well with narrative...[and] demands a story" (627). While Mulvey states that this is typical in film noir, one can also see the sadistic elements of punishment playing out in horror films from the 1960's till now, where female characters are brutally assaulted, dismembered, or raped, and essentially punished for their outright femininity/sexuality. Fetishistic scopophilia, on the other hand, disavows castration altogether by fetishizing the woman, thus making her reassuring rather than dangerous. In summation, because film is an advanced system of representation (like language), the structure of dominant cinema both reflects and reinforces the prevailing patriarchy as structured by men's desires. Therefore, Mulvey states that feminism should be very interested in an alternate type of film, one that reveals a different societal structure.

In *Men, Women and Chain Saws*, Clover reverses Mulvey's theoretical take on the gendering of film. While Mulvey establishes a clear binary of male and female in her analysis, Clover argues that gender is actually a permeable membrane, as evidenced by the sexual ambiguity of the Final Girl trope and the "cross-gender identification" often found in slasher films (556). First, she counters Mulvey's notion of narcissistic identification by stating that male spectators often find it difficult to identify with any of the men in the movie. The "good" characters are for the most part "marginal, undeveloped characters" who die earlier on or are depicted as incompetent (554). The character on the "bad" side (i.e. the killer) is often unseen, masked, or deformed in some way, thus refuting any chance of spectator empathy.

Most current feminist studies of horror films are psychodynamic¹, emphasizing viewer's motives and interests in watching horror films and the psychological effects they may have. In doing so, they run the risk of overlooking more thematic aspects within the film such as plot, cinematography, mise-en-scène and more. This is why I aim to strike a balance between employing psychoanalytic theory and dissecting elements of the movies themselves. By analyzing a more contemporary example of the slasher genre, I also hope to address a gap in traditional psychoanalytic discourse: in insisting upon equating the spectator's mastery of the image with the male viewer, it has failed to offer an account for the female spectator that doesn't rely on either masochism or the adoption of a transvestite² identity.

In this paper, I explore the victimization of women and femininity in slasher films (choosing the Halloween films (1978 and 2018) as focus points for my analysis). By analyzing films from these two time periods, I trace the progression of female protagonists/characters and see whether a more modern film accurately reflects the increasing role of feminism in society, or sticks to traditional conventions of misogyny and male-dominated visual pleasure. Placing the newer film in the context of the #MeToo era will also allow me to address more contemporary anxieties over trauma, sexual assault and female anger.

¹ The psychodynamic approach includes all the theories in psychology that see human functioning based upon the interaction of drives and forces within the person, particularly unconscious, and between the different structures of the personality. Psychoanalysis is one such theory.

² In Laura Mulvey's 1981 follow-up to her influential "Visual Pleasure In Narrative Cinema" (1974), she argues that the female spectator can receive pleasure from identifying with a film's hero, but only by shifting to a masculine identification not fixed in femininity—a "trans-sex" or "transvestite" identification.

Halloween (1978) and the Original Final Girl

The beginning sequence of *Halloween* places us in the point of view of Michael Myers, so that we see everything unfold exclusively through his eyes. The erratic movements of the handheld camera mimic his footsteps as he approaches the house, and his heavy breathing gradually blends in with ours as we watch Judith and her boyfriend kissing. At first we as viewers are limited to identification with the killer, thus becoming implicated in Myers' erotic voyeurism. Even after the brutal slaughter of the couple, we are still trapped in his perspective, with a mounting, nauseating sense of claustrophobia as our vision is limited to the two holes in Myers' mask. However, Myers' parents quickly arrive to the scene and rip off his mask, freeing us from our optical and symbolic prison and allowing us the first glimpse of our killer: a 6-year-old clutching a bloody knife. This jolting revelation, along with the camera's quick retreat during this scene both cements and mimics our flighty departure/detachment from any identification with Myers.

"The helpless child is gendered feminine," Clover states, highlighting the emasculation and early onset of base instincts in the slasher film's killer (*Her Body*, 211). In a nod to the Freudian id, these monsters are governed not by logic but by base compulsion, rooted in some way to sexual immaturity or deviancy (think Norman Bates' Oedipal ties to his mother, Freddy Krueger's status as a child molester, and of course, Myers' eerie obsession with his sister). Psychically doomed to exist in this immature abject stage, the monster can never fully enter what Lacan calls the "symbolic." He never grasps the ability to utilize language as a signifying system, and thus articulate and recognize a solid sense of self (i.e. a subjectivity). Even his possession of a phallic object (e.g. a knife or Krueger's bladed nails) is rendered meaningless by his sexual immaturity and psychic position within the abject. In *Halloween*, the idea of the

virginal or sexually inert killer is reflected from the very beginning of the film in the most shocking way, as the killer is introduced to us as a prepubescent boy with long hair bordering on a feminine style. The teenage Myers in Rob Zombie's 2007 remake reaffirms this image—sickly pale visage, stringy translucent long hair and all.

Given all this, the spectator has no choice but to “belong in the end to the Final Girl; there is no alternative” (Clover, 556). She is characterized as being intelligent, watchful, and unfeminine from the outset, shown by her “active investigating gaze” and use of phallic-like weapons. Despite all this, Clover echoes some of Mulvey's sentiments by arguing that “if the slasher film is ‘on the face of it’ a genre with at least a strong female presence, it is... a thoroughly male exercise, one that finally has very little to do with femaleness and very much to do with phallogentrism” (562). While Mulvey lists out two avenues that the male unconscious utilizes to appease castration anxiety, Clover adds onto that by arguing that “the slasher film resolves it either through eliminating the woman (earlier victims) or reconstituting her as masculine (Final Girl)” (559). She argues that for a horror film to be successful, the final, surviving character has to be female because viewers are inclined to accept abject terror experienced by a “beautiful woman” as opposed to a “husky man” (552). Women are often vessels for abject terror in various horror films; “crying, cowering, screaming, fainting, trembling, begging for mercy.” Therefore, the Final Girl is simply a way for the male spectator to act out sadomasochistic fantasies without her presence disturbing the “structures of male competence and sexuality” (560).

As an iconic film that influenced generations of slasher films and remakes that followed, Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978) is a useful text with which to flesh out the origins of the Final Girl. Set in the suburban fictional town of Haddonfield, Illinois, the movie follows killer Michael

Myers' escape from a psychiatric hospital and his subsequent murder of a number of teenagers, while his psychiatrist Dr. Loomis attempts to track and stop him. The film centers mostly on teen protagonist Laurie Strode, who by all definitions is very much the epitome of Clover's Final Girl. According to Clover's theorizations, *Halloween* ultimately resolves lack by removing the outright feminine characters like Annie and Lynda earlier in the film, while allowing Laurie to remain only by reconstituting her as masculine. With her unisex name, boyish-looking button-downs and collared shirts, and her sexual reluctance, Laurie has all the hallmarks of the "incipient masculinity" that make up the archetype (Clover, 559). She possesses "masculine" gender traits like intelligence and strength, providing a sharp contrast to her friends Annie and Lynda, who hold little interest for academia and seem quite underdeveloped next to Laurie. Her quick and eloquent response in the classroom scene even when distracted by Myers standing outside the window showcases the ease with which she flaunts this intelligence. Meanwhile, at one point Lynda even declares, "Who cares? I always forget my chemistry book and my math book, and my English book... Well, who needs books anyway?" Annie and Lynda's vacuous interest in female pleasure and sex is soon punished in the sadistic manner that Mulvey describes, so that they are brutally strangled and stabbed.

In various ways, *Halloween's* Final Girl embodies many of the values of the second-wave, radical feminism that burgeoned from the 1960's to the late 80's, when the film was released. As I have argued previously, films serve as a critical lens into the beliefs and ideologies of a given period. Knowing that, it makes sense to explore how radical feminist discussions of gender and sexuality may align with elements in the first *Halloween's* depiction of Laurie Strode. Second-wave radical feminism rejected patriarchal society's assumption that there is a necessary connection between one's sex (male or female) and one's gender (masculine and

feminine). They saw the rigid binary of gender as a way to keep women passive, and men active. To counter this polarity, women should take on masculine traits as well as feminine, so that their ambiguous androgyny would break down any prescribed gender roles or attributes. In many ways, Laurie exemplifies this kind of androgyny. With her tomboyish appearance and a closet that consists mostly of conservative button-downs and trousers, it's easy to see how Laurie complicates the patriarchal ties between gender and sex. As radical feminist Mary Daly puts it, Laurie "[does] not strive to be 'feminine,' and reject[s] the seemingly 'good' aspects of femininity as well as the obviously 'bad' ones," such as vacuity or vanity (Tong, 61). She also displays some of the active attributes that characterize men, such as her tenacity and resourcefulness when she defends herself against Myers by fashioning a weapon out of a closet hanger. In this way, we can see how film, and the character tropes it utilizes, often draws parallels with the dominant ideology of its time.

Despite all this, Laurie (and the female empowerment she symbolizes) is overshadowed by several details, perhaps reflecting the long strides that society needed and had yet to make regarding feminism during the late 80's and onwards. First, despite Laurie's importance to the plot, much of her action towards the climax of the film serves only in response to Myer's actions. Throughout the chase, Laurie is intent on defending herself by escaping, and her tenacity only kicks in as a result of Myers approaching closer to her. At several points, she seems just as helpless and weak as the other female characters, awkwardly lurching her way to different houses for help and wailing in a child-like manner, "The keys! Oh, the keys!" as she fumbles in her pocket. There is none of the "active investigating gaze" nor the aggressive "tracking" that Clover mentions in her excerpt (558). Instead, Laurie plays a passive role, only ever going on the offense when she is forced by Myers to confront him during the closet sequence. From all this it

seems that “woman [is] still tied to her place as a bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning,” and as the passive Other by which active Man can define himself in the binary system that dominates cultural thought (Mulvey, 621). It is also very telling that a man is the one who ultimately “ends” Myers and drives the narrative to its ultimate conclusion: Dr. Loomis, who shoots the killer as Laurie sits against the wall cowering in fear, and who symbolizes a reestablishment of pre-feminist patriarchal authority. This ending seems especially anti-feminist because it reads as a warning to women: *Do not try to play the role of the man, as you will fail disastrously.*

Another reason why Laurie as the Final Girl may be ineffective for the feminist project is her choice of weapons. Many radical feminists might praise her for using “phallic symbols” and turning them onto Man himself, but the fact that the weapons she uses are blatantly feminine items (i.e. knitting needles, clothes hanger) complicates such a symbolic victory (Clover, 558). This is further compounded by the fact that Laurie is depicted as the most powerless when she steps foot outside of the house, as no one will help her and she is completely devoid of defenses. It is almost as if she is symbolically shackled to the home, so much so that even her defensive/offensive strategies must utilize domestic elements from within it. This echoes many of the issues that feminists were grappling with during this time period, such as the increasing devaluing of women’s labor in the workplace, and the sense of exhaustion by working mothers who were expected to tend to their homes while fighting income inequality (Tong, 51). As second-wave feminist Betty Friedan inquires in her seminal text *The Feminine Mystique*, “How can any woman see the whole truth within the bounds of her own life?” (30). Or in Laurie’s case, the bounds of her domestic realm.

Updating the Theory: A Revised Look at Female Spectatorship

Before delving into a comparative reading of *Halloween* (2018), it's worth taking another look at existing theory and some of its misgivings, especially in the updated context of a postmodern society where women make up a growing percentage of horror filmgoers, and the national obsession with true crime and murder shows have become an almost uniquely female phenomenon. For example, popular true crime podcast "My Favorite Murder" had an audience that was 80% female, according to stats collected in 2017 (Joyce).

As mentioned earlier on, what previous theorists like Mulvey and Clover have not addressed sufficiently enough is the female spectator. Focusing mostly on the male viewer (or the female viewer that "tries on" masculinity for the duration of the film), these scholars assume that the female viewer derives no comparable pleasure from the contemporary horror film, and that the genre "does not speak *to* women but only *about* them" (Pinedo, 70). As Linda Williams states in "When the Woman Looks," "Whenever the movie screen holds a particularly effective image of terror, little boys and grown men make it a point of honor to look, while little girls and grown women cover their eyes or hide behind the shoulders of their dates" (Williams, 83). For the woman, to look would be to bear witness to her own powerlessness in the gruesome face of mutilation, rape and murder.

However, there must be a way for us to talk about the pleasure that women can derive from horror films without resorting to simplistic discussions of self-hating masochism or apologist tendencies. Female spectatorship of horror is a much neglected topic, and to see the horror genre as wholly detrimental to female subjectivity is to overlook the complexity with which modern (read: more self-aware, more feminist) audiences respond to it. Williams' portrayal of the "little girl" may be true in some cases, but doesn't necessarily align with my

personal experiences as a someone who grew up totally enraptured by slashers and who instead of averting my gaze, would lean in closer to the screen during some of the most terrifying scenes. Do I derive pleasure from watching horror films? Absolutely. Would I characterize myself as an traitor to my own gender or a self-hating feminist? No. There are many other female-identifying individuals today who would also disagree with Williams' characterization: horror fans who work in the film industry, who run websites dedicated to the genre, who edit fan magazines and engage in intellectual discourse about their preferences and interpretations of popular horror films. They too stare upon the screens with eager eyes. The temporal limitations of earlier theory thus give us reason to question its relevancy and validity in today's world, where the horror genre, slasher subgenre and its corresponding audiences and reception have evolved rapidly since the 80's.

Along with an increasingly female viewership, much has changed for the horror film itself in this postmodern era. Films have become increasingly self-reflexive, with pastiche becoming an emblem for postmodern aesthetics' appeal to spectatorial self-consciousness. Although in theory postmodernism erodes binaries such as modernism's distinction between high (art) culture and low (mass) culture, it is perhaps an ironic twist that many postmodernists inadvertently reproduce this separation in their reviews of horror films like *Halloween*, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Scream* and more. In part through the evocation of a "jaded" and "emotionless" postmodern audience, these critics "cast the signature gestures of postmodern horror aesthetics—'knowing deconstruction,' 'critique and reflexivity'—in the register of emotional exhaustion and ennui" (Duncan). According to critics, postmodern horror movies now reflect only on previous texts of the genre, instead of the emotions and fears of the audience. As film critic Kim Newman states, the campiness and comic turn of the postmodern horror movie

signals “a degeneration, a dying out of the genre’s capacity to depict ‘the horrors and neuroses of the age’” (Pinedo, 28).

This comic turn, however, can be read alternatively as a subversive move to distinguish contemporary films from the more classical horror films and ultimately prove their self-reflexivity. While critics like Newman might read the recycling of old tropes as an example of what Jean Baudrillard calls “simulacra”—objects or ideas that reference an empty concept—what they fail to recognize is that postmodern films utilize clichés such that it is possible to acknowledge and highlight their own transgression. As Linda Hutcheon writes in *The Politics of Postmodernism*, this “parodic reprise of the past is not nostalgic; it is always critical. It is also not ahistorical or de-historicizing; it does not wrest past art from its original context and reassemble it into some sort of presentist spectacle.” She argues that appropriation of established allusions serve to denaturalize in a double process of “installing and ironizing” past representations, consequently foregrounding the social and political implications of these stereotypes (Hutcheon, 93).

Drew Goddard and Joss Whedon’s satirical film *Cabin in the Woods* (2012) is arguably one of the most widely recognized examples of the kind of double process that Hutcheon writes about. As what Kimberly Jackson coins “metahorror” in her text *Technology, Monstrosity, and Reproduction in the Twenty-First Century Horror*, *Cabin in the Woods* self-consciously refers to its own construction and the genre conventions with which it operates. In fact, it is a film about the very act of filmmaking and spectatorship itself. The surface level of the film is symbolized by the clichéd banality unfolding “upstairs” in the cabin: the dumb blonde and jock commit infuriatingly stupid mistakes, window jump scares are aplenty, a fun weekend getaway turns into a twisted nightmare and more. The “downstairs” plot is the self-reflexive twist: we discover a

production lab full of workers who have orchestrated everything that is happening above, relying on everything from pheromone mists to weather control to manipulate the behavior of the protagonists in accordance to tried-and-true tropes. They work tirelessly to appease the “Ancient Ones,” who stand as a metaphor for audiences with established and bloodthirsty expectations of how a horror film must play out. As Philip Brophy states in “Horrorality—The Textuality of Contemporary Horror Films,” “The contemporary Horror film knows that you’ve seen it before; it knows that you know what is about to happen; and it knows that you know it knows you know” (5).

For example, Dana is introduced as having just ended an affair with her professor, yet is chemically induced to take on the role of the virginal Final Girl, so much so that she characterizes herself that way when making out with Holden (a.k.a. “The Scholar”). Even her choice in a romantic partner for the weekend (and the fact that her room is filled with books) plays seamlessly into the traditional characterization of the Final Girl as intelligent and demure. In contrast, Jules is literally shoehorned into the Dumb Blonde role—the hair dye she used recently to lighten her hair is tampered with by the downstairs production department to emit chemicals that slow cognition.

In a DVD commentary, Whedon describes his film as a “very loving hate letter to all horror cinema” (Whedon). Indeed, *Cabin in the Woods* is a metafictional critique of all the abuses and excesses of Hollywood and horror cinema. The reason why it works is because both directors and audiences in our modern age are becoming increasingly aware of the artifice of the genre, yet can’t help but desire a continuous return to its rules and conventions. In both utilizing and subverting familiar tropes, *Cabin in the Woods* forces viewers to walk the tightrope between the “moral and political unacceptability of horror fantasy” and an assertion of its “timeless

inescapability” (Canavan, 10). We are pushed to make our way “downstairs,” moving one level lower, one level deeper to uncover the true nature of our spectatorial desires and choices.

The Contemporary Horror Film as an Exercise in Control

In his commentary, Whedon also poses several questions that are critical for the next portion of my project:

“...Not only why do we like to see this, but why do we like to see this exactly? Why do we keep coming back to this formula? You look at something as ugly, stupid and morally bankrupt as the remake of *Texas Chainsaw* and you go, ‘Not only do we keep performing this ritual, but it’s clearly degenerating.’ So why do we keep doing it? Why do we keep returning to it?” (Whedon).

The level of comfort we derive from repetitive formulas goes beyond the pleasure of the familiar. In *Recreational Terror, Women, and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing*, Isabel Pinedo argues that as much as the horror film is an exercise in terror, it is “simultaneously an exercise in mastery in which controlled loss substitutes for loss of control” (xxi). Much like a rollercoaster ride, horror films provide us with a bounded experience of fear, and it’s precisely that boundedness that allows us to “safely” explore repressed thoughts and fears. We walk into a theater or pop in a DVD with the comforting knowledge that we can avert our eyes, press pause or leave at any time.

Furthermore, amplification of cliché features such as suspenseful music, “don’t go in there” scenes, and character tropes as in the case of *Cabin in the Woods* allows viewers to fully engage in that “exercise in mastery.” Narrative pleasure stems from the intelligibility of the genre. Insider knowledge provides us with enough security as to allow us to explore our

repressed desires and fears in a way that doesn't become too overwhelming or fearsome. Consequently, artifice and repetition (and awareness of the two) are not flaws to the genre but rather essential components of bounded terror. "The combination of realism and artifice...allows the bored viewer who needs to spike the experience to focus on the realism while simultaneously allowing the overstimulated viewer verging on terror to focus on the artifice..." (Pinedo, 5). Considering all this, we can now look a little more critically at Newman's critique of postmodern horror as fatigued and incapable of depicting "the horrors and neuroses of the age." In reality, it's the recycling of conventions that allows contemporary horror films to do just as much (if not more) ideological work as their earlier counterparts.

The #MeToo Era

It is within this new era of horror cinema that David Gordon Green's *Halloween* (2018) was released. As the first direct sequel to the 1978 original that retcons the continuity of previous sequels, the most recent *Halloween* is a useful example of the way in which slasher films have evolved largely as a result of the ever-changing sociopolitical conditions of our society.

Feminism in particular has grown leaps and bounds since the early 80's. Women are no longer shackled to the home and are now given more opportunities to flourish outside the domestic sphere, whether in academia, the workplace, entertainment, athletics or more. Women are making more films about women *for* women, and the pursuit of pleasure has become a highly encouraged endeavor. 21st century feminists believe that it is no longer necessary for a woman to adopt masculine or androgynous traits in order to assert her power and autonomy. Nor does she have to be feminine; in fact, she can be whatever she chooses to be so long as it doesn't interfere

with the rights of others, a belief of the neoliberal feminist movement that has proven to be quite popular in today's world (Jaggar, 173).

More women are also speaking out about the symbolic and real violence inflicted upon women on a regular basis, whether that's gender discrimination, sexist Biopolitics, problematic media representations or domestic abuse. Sexual assault and harassment in particular has become a widely recognized issue in 2018, for two main reasons: 1) because it is viewed as one of the worst forms of encroachment on the kind of individual freedom that neoliberal feminists so greatly value and 2) women are banding together and becoming vocal about an issue that was largely silenced in the past, through large-scale movements like the #MeToo campaign.

Interestingly enough, *Halloween* (2018) was actually marketed as a film for the “#MeToo era.” In interviews preceding the film's release, Jamie Lee Curtis, who plays an older Laurie Strode, described the movie as one about trauma and as “a reflection of culture in this time period.” “We never make movies about what happens after the violence. We make movies about violence, we glorify it, but we never ask what happens [after],” she continued (Nyren). Curtis has a point: horror sequels rarely address the trauma that survivors must grapple with after terrifying ordeals, choosing to gloss over it in favor of piling even more violence onto its protagonists. Even the triumphant manner in which theorists like Clover describe the Final Girl highlights the lack of discussion about what happens to her when the monster is vanquished and she must now mourn the death of her friends, her innocence and her past life.

It is crucial that we examine and critique this lack, especially in the face of recent events like the Harvey Weinstein and Kavanaugh cases, where victims are dealing with trauma decades after they were assaulted and will most likely continue to do so even after the spotlight on them has faded. In centering its plot on the Final Girl's trauma and providing an updated look at the

slasher genre in general, *Halloween* (2018) is a highly important and useful text to analyze in the context of the #MeToo era.

The Final Girl in 2018

The new *Halloween* features Laurie Strode 40 years after she was viciously attacked by Michael Myers. She is now a mother and a grandmother and a self-made survivalist who anticipates Myer's inevitable return by turning her house in the woods into a mini-fortress, replete with a panic room and massive amounts of weaponry. Grappling with decades of trauma, two divorces and an estranged relationship with her family, the new Laurie is a prominent symbol of the long-lasting scars that assault can have on one's life trajectory.

As a direct sequel to the 1978 original, *Halloween* wouldn't be complete without intertextual references to both the first film and the slasher genre in general. Similar to how difficult it is to identify with any of the male characters in the original film, the male characters in the 2018 version are just as, if not more so, comically incompetent than their earlier counterparts. Laurie's son-in-law Ray, for example, is first introduced as being incapable of doing something as simple as setting up a mouse trap. "Aw man, I got peanut butter on my penis!" he groans like a child, much to the ridicule of his wife Karen and daughter Allyson. When Myers returns to Haddonfield, Ray rejects Laurie's offer to hide them in her house, claiming that he can protect his own family, thank you very much. In reality, this impotent, ineffectual "patriarch" can't even set a mousetrap—which is contrasted sharply at the end by the immaculate trap set by the Strode women that ultimately ends Myers' reign of terror. Other male characters like Officer Francis are introduced to us in a similar manner: we first see him enraptured in a game of pinball, totally oblivious to the catastrophe that Myers' return signals.

Once again, we have no choice but to put our hope onto Laurie and the Strode girls—but we knew that already this time.

Laurie’s agoraphobia and recluse status could also be a nod to the way in which the younger Laurie was “shackled to the home,” but there’s something different about her character in 2018. She forces her daughter to learn self-defense and shoot a gun at age 8, and to see monsters in every shadow. This causes a sharp rift in their relationship, as Karen mourns the early loss of her innocence and shields her own daughter from her mother’s “paranoia” and “pessimism.” This story, however, is painfully real. Trauma never sees a clean break; it is cyclical, complex, intergenerational and felt deeply in the bones of all women, especially in the context of today’s sociopolitical climate. The way in which Laurie teaches Karen to defend herself is symbolic of the challenge that mothers today face, wanting to inoculate their daughters from fully inheriting the trauma of all the women before them. For example, young women are taught to walk on the street with keys between their fingers as early as the age of twelve. The fact that the older Laurie is viewed by other characters as a paranoid freak show rather than survivor is also reminiscent of the paternalistic, demeaning way in which Dr. Christine Ford was suggested by skeptics to “seek help” for her “befuddled memory” (Carmon). Finally, the fact that Laurie has to shut herself off from headlines-hungry journalists and podcasters represents the sensationalization of trauma and the triggering nature of today’s news cycle. In this way, the new *Halloween* is extremely reflective of the anxieties and fears facing women in 2018, while also providing a realistic and nuanced depiction of trauma as cyclical, confusing and far-reaching.

The older Laurie Strode may be a recluse, but in no way is she passive or powerless. In fact, director David Gordon Green deliberately set out to upend traditional conventions of the Final Girl in this sequel: “There have been so many clichés or tropes, or however you want to

look at it... We try to embrace them and then turn it upside down a little bit. So if your expectations of a Final Girl are of some kind of damsel-in-distress, you're not going to get that in this movie" (Taylor-Foster). Instead, our new Final Girl has upgraded from knitting needles and clothes hangers to an arsenal of heavy-duty assault rifles and hunting knives. She exhibits significantly more of the "active, investigating gaze" that Clover mentions, single-mindedly dedicating her life to one day confronting Myers again. When she gets wind of his return to town, Laurie first warns her family and then jumps into her truck, hastily chasing after Myers in the trail of destruction he has left behind. She does not wait for him to come to her. This time, she's going after him instead. In one suspenseful scene where she hunts him down, she yanks open the doors of a closet very similar to the one that she hid in 40 years ago. Most prominent is the way she mirrors Myers from the end of the first film when she falls off the balcony and lands on the ground below, only to disappear from view and come back with a vengeance. The blurring of their respective roles is cemented by the fact that in the last 30 minutes of the film, there are many moments where Myers is unaware of where Laurie is—an interesting inversion of the "seeing without being seen" power dynamic present in the 1978 film.

In this shift from pursued to pursuer, our updated Final Girl both reflects and bolsters the increasing acceptance of female anger and aggression, characteristics that have traditionally been viewed as at odds with the classic image of the passive and demure woman. In earlier slasher films, it seems that a female victim's violence is only allowed when there is absolutely no choice left. These films deliberately create a well-established horror that clearly necessitates her extreme actions, such as in *Halloween* (1978) where the spectacle of the killer's violence is made clear to the audience with Laurie stumbling upon the mutilated bodies of her friends. There has

to be some kind of narrative justification for women who use anger and violence to their advantage and thus trespass on traditionally male territory.

More recent slasher films like *Halloween* (2018) display a kind of violence that is permitted even without the terrible conditions pre-necessitating it. Laurie doesn't simply respond, she prepares and acts and ultimately triumphs, showing how anger can be productive in the context of the #MeToo era. It is with anger and a desire for retribution that survivors of Trump, Weinstein, Kavanaugh and many more came forward and shared their stories, inciting other women across the world to do the same and ultimately hold perpetrators accountable. The idea of the vengeant female is now a lot more acceptable given the increasingly feminist inclinations of our society, especially as more people are acknowledging that women have a *right* to be infuriated. It is perhaps for this reason that horror films like *Jennifer's Body* (2009) are being revived and renamed as "forgotten feminist classics." Jennifer, who is tortured by a group of men, turns her trauma against her attackers, "using her victimized, violated body to wreak bloody vengeance on the patriarchy" (Grady).

It is important to remember that the success of a feminist movement depends not only on critically examining women's oppression but also mobilizing their pleasure as well, and that includes creating a space for them to feel and express emotions that may ultimately be cathartic. Michael Myers' implied fiery death at the conclusion of the film is not only a triumph for the Strode women in the film, but for female viewers as well. As an icon of random and ceaseless violence, Myers represents the fear and anxiety women sense when walking down the street on a dark night, keys clutched tightly between their fingers. While previous sequels have faltered most egregiously in the past when they tried to explain Myers, the new *Halloween* returns him to his original characterization as "The Shape"—a voiceless, blank and ageless canvas that makes

him an universal stand-in for male violence everywhere. The Final Girl's ultimate victory over him is *catharsis*, but viewers are not given a glimpse of Myers' death, deliberately leaving his fate a narrative ambiguity. His threat continues to loom over Haddonfield, just as the threat of patriarchal violence continues to seep into our daily lives, even long after perpetrators have been held accountable and locked away. Like the Strode women, we must remain diligent and band together in hopes of finally overturning the reign of terror that has weighed on us for much too long.

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