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Literature Review

Style used: MLA

Cultural Shifts: A Meta Analysis of Female Representation in Slasher Films

**Introduction**

Slasher films, a common subgenre of horror movies, are characterized by their plotline of a “psycho-killer who slashes to death a string of mostly female victims, one by one, until he is subdued or killed” (Clover 21). The female characters in these films are frequently portrayed as hysterical victims or as sexual objects. If popularity stands as a qualifier for an element’s worthiness of academic examination, slasher films are without a doubt a compelling form of study. The 1979 original *Halloween*, for example, grossed more than 75,000,000 dollars within six years of its release (Clover 23). For over 40 years, audiences have continued to watch this movie particularly during Halloween. Given this, it is important to consider how the portrayal of female characters in this subgenre contributes to the societal injustice and oppression of women.

This paper will use the method of cluster criticism to analyze scholarly material and explore prevalent tropes and stereotypes related to female characters in slasher movies. In the context of this study, slasher films are categorized as a horror movie that follows a male antagonist who exhibits psychotic tendencies but is yet recognizable as having human physical qualities. This person uses knives or other bladed instruments as their preferred weapon, pursuing and brutally killing a group of people.

This paper will also look at prevalent tropes and stereotypes emergent since the rise of the genre in the 1960s. The lens through which slasher films will be analyzed in this paper is feminist media theory. The definition of feminism in communications is multifaceted and spans across many topics, but all these perspectives share a common goal to end sexist oppression and change existing power relations between women and men (Foss 165). Emerging as an extension of feminist theory, feminist media theory has a strong emphasis on exploring “how, and to whose avail, particular ideological constructs of femininity are produced in media content” (Harp 5).

Research on this topic, along with the identification of stereotypes of women in different eras of slasher films, is vital for gaining insight into how media mirrors society’s damaging ideologies against females. This cycle, in turn, aids in the continual disenfranchisement of women. This study presents a specialized and diverse approach to the scholarship of gender in media, filling a gap in the discipline by focusing solely on the slasher film subgenre, examining slasher films from both the past and present, and applying feminist media theory to assist in changing existing patriarchal power dynamics.

**Literature Review**

It is important to first build a solid understanding of the method I will be employing to investigate the use of rhetoric; cluster criticism. Cluster criticism is one of several methods of rhetorical criticism. It is based on the theories of Kenneth Burke, who intended for it to be a means of helping critics discover a rhetor’s worldview (Foss 63). In this method, “the meanings that key symbols have for the rhetor are discovered by charting the symbols that cluster around those key symbols in the rhetorical artifact” (Foss 64). A three-step process is used in cluster rhetorical criticism to analyze an artifact. The first step is to identify key terms or ideas within a text, the second step is to group these concepts by their relationships with other words in the text, and the next third step is to find patterns in these clusters (Foss 65-66). The work of Kenneth Burke has provided a theoretical framework for rhetorical criticism, and as scholars like Peter J. Marston, Bambi Rockwell, and Sonja K. Foss continue to delve deeper into the subject, its influence grows and changes.

After establishing the fundamental importance of cluster criticism in the analysis of rhetoric, this paper now turns its focus to the background of feminism as it directly ties into the theoretical framework of feminist media theory. The progress of feminist theory, which has evolved significantly since the term “feminism” gained widespread use in the 1970s, closely parallels the development of the four waves of feminist movements (Singh 363). Feminism's first wave, which occurred in the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, concentrated on women's suffrage, equal contract rights, and property rights. The second wave of feminism occurred between the 1960s and 1980s, following the end of WWII. This wave emphasized equal rights in a variety of contexts, including the “workplace, sexuality, family, and reproductive” (Singh 364). The third wave of feminism began in the early 1990s, as a response to the second wave’s limitations and flaws. Third-wave feminists focused on micropolitics. They worked to redefine traditional notions and promote a more diverse and individualistic perspective (Singh 364). The fourth wave of feminism began in 2012 and is still ongoing today with Women's Marches and the #MeToo movement playing a major role. The strong usage of social media and technology is often linked to this wave of feminism. Its main goals are to advocate for women’s justice in cases of “rape, workplace and street violence, and campus sexual assault” (Ibid).

Feminist media theory, which has its roots in broader feminist criticism, is a byproduct of the feminist or women's liberation movement, which is a social and political movement devoted to improving the conditions of women (Foss 165). Feminist media theory relies heavily on feminist theory by applying “philosophies, concepts, and logics articulating feminist principles and concepts to media processes…” (Steiner 359). This aligns with a fundamental feminist consensus that “cultural forms and expressions rarely reflect women’s experiences, perspectives, and meanings.” This gap exists because, in a patriarchal culture, “men have the greatest opportunity to create culture, doing so naturally from their own point of view and centering themselves” (Foss 167). Due to this, the components of traditional gender stereotypes, such as “beauty, gentility, and sexual morality,” are compatible with the inherent bias within a patriarchal culture (Brewer 14). Research of slasher films has long revealed that female characters are depicted more frequently in moments of terror, screams, and cowering than male characters. Feminists claim that these larger instances of misogyny are a way for men to “live out their carnal desires in the safety of a dark theater” at the expense of its negative impacts on the female gender (Brewer 19). In general, these stereotypes and tropes work against issues that the feminist movement is striving to rectify.

The recurring victimization of female protagonists in slasher films is a noteworthy topic for academic analysis. These stereotypes in slasher films harm the social status of women by reinforcing harmful gender biases and contributing to the perpetuation of gender inequality. Additionally, by depicting violence against women, these movies expose viewers to common social preconceptions that support the idea that women are defenseless. This portrayal not only reinforces these preconceptions, but also helps to legitimize them in society (Brewer 14). By using feminist media theory as a critical lens, this research aims to add to the ongoing dialogue regarding gender studies in media and pave the way for more inclusive representations.

**Methods**

The purpose of this study is to examine the portrayal of women in slasher films through the lens of feminist media theory. The analysis of relevant scholarly materials will be directed using cluster criticism to uncover patterns and themes in the slasher subgenre.

To reach this purpose, a meta-analysis was conducted using a systematic approach to identify and review relevant sources. To identify these sources, the process began with a basic search on Google Scholar using the specific keyword “slasher films portrayal of women,” from a variety of academic databases. Google Scholar pooled a starting set of about 7,480 scholarly sources. Additionally, references at the end of scholarly materials were examined to uncover supplementary sources that could contribute to the study.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were then established to ensure that all sources were of quality and relevance to this study. The inclusion criteria for this study focused on selecting scholarly sources that specifically examined how women are portrayed in slasher films. Exclusion criteria aimed to eliminate studies that did not fit the original definition of slasher films as given at the start of this paper. Additionally, texts that were not accessible to the public or could not be obtained using Berry College library resources were also excluded. After conducting the initial search and applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, the selection process left me with approximately 11 sources.

The next step involved data extraction which entailed cataloging various source details. This process involved noting authors, publication titles, and publication information. Additional details like volume, issue, and page numbers, along with database name, and DOIs were also recorded.

These sources were then screened to identify primary themes related to the portrayal of women in slasher films focusing on key ideals feminists seek to challenge. These ideals include gender stereotypes that depict women as weak, emotional, and helpless. Additionally, it incorporates themes that a female's likelihood of survival is based upon her perceived purity. Cases of sexual objectification, which women to their physical appearance and desirability, were also considered.

Similar to other studies, it is essential to acknowledge the potential for personal biases to influence the interpretation of information. To address this concern, the study placed a strong emphasis on cluster criticism using it as a methodological approach to uncover patterns and themes within collected scholarly material. The study also incorporated feminist media theory as an analytical framework to guide the interpretation of these identified patterns and themes.

**Findings**

In this meta-analysis, 11 scholarly sources were examined that explored the representation of women in slasher films, covering diverse viewpoints, historical contexts, and themes. This analysis revealed prominent themes and trends within the genre that offer valuable insights into how women have been depicted over decades.

**Theme 1: The Interplay of Gender and Sexuality**

The first category examined was gender in relation to sexual activity. The portrayal of women in the slasher subgenre is a prominent element influenced by sexual behavior. An observed pattern across various sources reveals a consistent motif in both early and recently released slasher films. In this subgenre, the motif is that survival as a female strongly correlates with a lack of sexual behavior. This relationship between gender, sexuality, and survival outcomes reflects a widespread cultural expectation that women should remain pure and virtuous, with significance placed on female virginity.

Within the broader context of slasher film analysis, literature indicates that females characterized by overtly sexualized traits and who are involved in sexual activity, tend to statistically exhibit a lower chance of survival compared to their other female counterparts. A 1990 study by Cowan and O'Brien on early slasher films such as *Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Friday the 13th*, and *Halloween* identified and observed this recurring pattern.

Cowan and O'Brien's analysis involved a total of 232 females, encompassing both survivors and non-survivors. When analyzing the percent presence of sexuality indicators among female characters non-surviving females were portrayed with a higher percentage (46%) of revealing clothing compared to their surviving counterparts, who did not wear such attire, registering at a rate of 23%. This representation serves as a reflection of the societal bias regarding how women should present themselves. In terms of nudity, undressing, and promiscuous behavior, non-surviving females exhibited these traits at higher rates (19%, 35%, and 21%) than surviving females (7%, 16%, and 0%). Regarding the percentages of non-surviving females that engaged in sexual language (32%) and the initiation of sex (21%), were much higher compared to the surviving females who engaged in this activity at 11% and 14% respectively (Cowan & O’Brien 192). Furthermore, when considering engagement in sexual activity, both prior to (33%) and at the time of the slashing (35%), non-surviving females significantly outnumbered their surviving counterparts (9% and 9%) (Cowan & O'Brien 192). These statistics and portrayals in slasher films cohesively mirror broader cultural implications. It is a direct representation of the penalization women face when they deviate from traditional ideals and embrace their agency and sexuality.

In 2010, Andrew Welsh analyzed 50 North American slasher films spanning the years 1960 to 2009. This study reaffirms the persistent motif of association between female characters, their involvement in sexual activity, and survival outcomes. Welsh offers a contemporary perspective, examining slasher films released more recently providing insights that were not available during Cowan and O'Brien's earlier study. Welsh specifically finds that characters who refrained from engaging in sexual activity had a substantially higher survival rate (28.1%) compared to those who did engage in such activity (13.3%) (Welsh 767-768). When comparing the survival and non-survival data of Cowan and O'Brien's earlier study with Welsh’s more recent analysis, it is evident that there is a persistent trend that holds up against many decades of female characters engaging in sexual activity having lower survival rates. It is also important to note that methodological differences between the two studies may have contributed to variations in the observed survival rates, but this information nonetheless reflects a continual pattern.

**Theme 2: Objectification on Screen**

The second category examined in this meta-analysis was gender in relation to the sexualization of characters in slasher films. This observed pattern across various sources points to a constant trend in slasher films meticulously tailoring their content to cater to male viewers’ tastes and preferences. The sexualization of female characters in this genre manifests in several ways, including constant scenes of women undressing, talking in sexually suggestive dialogue, wearing revealing clothing, and the use of strategic camera angles that often focus on specific body parts like legs and breasts. Also, camera visuals frequently linger from the murderer’s perspective highlighting this objectification. As a result, female characters are not perceived as supplementary to narratives.

The findings from Ashley Wellman’s 2021 study provide empirical evidence to support this observed pattern of sexualization in slasher films. Wellman’s research analyzed various dimensions of sexualization in 48 popular slasher films spanning from 1960 to 2018. This research revealed that over half of the female characters were depicted in a sexualized manner including attributes such as flirtatious attitudes (47.5%), engagement in foreplay or sexual activities (36.6%), and appearing nude in the films (32.4%). Only a minority, 37.3% of the female characters in this sample, were portrayed as non-sexualized (Wellman et al. 669). These findings reinforce the notion that female characters are often equated to being eye candy, used to entertain male audience members in both active and passive ways.

A 2018 study by Dana Menard and her colleagues, offers insight into how the sexualization of female characters in the slasher genre has evolved over decades. This research examined the ten highest-grossing films from the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, resulting in a selection of 30 films for analysis spanning the years 1980 to 2009. The study revealed a shifting pattern in the depiction of characters who were nude with a higher proportion in the 1980s (25%) and the 2000s (19%) (Dana et al. 630-631). Despite examining films across three decades, the findings of the study illustrate no discernable qualitative shift in the degree of sexualization of women. It is important to acknowledge that there has not been a discernable shift in these statistics so individuals can explore the underlying factors contributing to it. The limited qualitative shift can be attributed to the deep nature of sexualization engrained in our culture and society pointing towards bigger issues. Regardless, these statistics provide insight into the historical and contemporary conditions surrounding sexualization within the slasher film genre.

**Theme 3: Gender Stereotypes**

The final category examined in this meta-analysis was gender in relation to stereotypes. Across various sources, an observed pattern emerges, illustrating the constant stereotyping of women in the slasher genre. This category is essential to comprehending how individuals uphold and perpetrate societal norms, which are often rooted in traditional patriarchal values. As per Chad Brewer's insights, while media experts may claim that women's depictions have evolved in recent decades, stereotypes persist, particularly framing women as “cowardly, weak, and dependent on a man” (Brewer 19). Such stereotypes have historically confined women to narrow and limiting roles, reinforcing the established power dynamics.

When examining original slasher films and their remakes, Brewer’s analysis revealed a disparity in the portrayal of female characters. In many of the original film’s women were often depicted as helpless damsels in distress, incapable of making rational decisions when left to make them alone. Brewers’ analysis, composed of eight original films, finds that only three of these films showcase female characters with intelligence that enables them to problem-solve critically and logically. Brewer uses the 1974 slasher film *Black Christmas*, to further this point. He draws attention to a character named Jess Bradford who, after being told by the police to put her phone down and go through the front door, decides to dash upstairs, deliberately moving in the direction of the murderer. (Brewer 33). Brewer also describes how this situation is similar to Laurie Strode's behavior in Halloween (1979), in which she runs about the home in a panic and screams, giving the killer Michael a clue as to where she is (Brewer 34).

However, a shift in this narrative emerges when analyzing remakes of these films over the decades. Brewer's research suggests that many of these remakes portray female characters, particularly the final girls, as highly intelligent and proficient problem solvers. An example of this shift is found in the character Jill Johnson in *When a Stranger Calls* (2006). When Jill realizes that the main phone line in the house has been compromised, she quickly chooses to utilize a separate phone line and seek shelter in the guesthouse (Ibid). This analysis shows how prejudices about female characters may have changed over time, with remakes portraying women as clever problem solvers and original films portraying them as weak and indecisive.

**Discussion**

**Theme 1: The Interplay of Gender and Sexuality**

How women are portrayed in slasher films directly parallels feminist criticism of traditional gender norms. Feminist movements have long advocated for women’s agency emphasizing how important it is for women to have control over their bodies and the freedom to do as they please with them. This includes the right to dress as they prefer, behave in ways that align with their individual choices, and experience sexual liberation. Instead, women are placed into similar binary categorizations of female characters in slasher films based on their sexual activity. These categories are good girls and bad girls. Bad girls are individuals who indulge in sexual behaviors, whereas good girls refrain from sexual activity and are considered pure. (Welsh 770). Death sequences in slasher movies had far longer dying moments for female characters who opted to have sex than for those who didn't. (Welsh 769). This dynamic highlights the idea that stepping outside the societal norms of how people think women should behave will result in consequences. In the case of the slasher genre, the consequence was bad girls being met with a more gruesome fate or prolonged death scene. If the perpetuation of stereotypes is evident even in fictional portrayals of women within media, it raises questions about the repercussions that real women face in their day-to-day lives when challenging or deviating from traditional gender norms. Women who defy traditional gender norms may encounter social stigmas, judgment, and resistance from individuals and institutions. This resistance can manifest in various aspects of life, from professional settings to personal relationships. Moreover, the significance of mental well-being cannot be underestimated because regular exposure to clichéd representations in the media can aid in the internalization of societal expectations.

**Theme 2: Objectification on Screen**

In cinema, the pervasive issue of women being portrayed as objects and being reduced to their physical attractiveness has garnered substantial scholarly attention. Numerous academic sources have discussed and emphasized this concern, shedding light on the broader implications of such depictions within the context of feminist media theory. Feminist media theory offers individuals a critical lens through which to analyze sexual objectification.

Within the specific subgenre of slasher films, the sexualization of female characters becomes notable with Ashley Wellman’s 2021 study revealing that over half of these characters were depicted in a sexualized manner. In this context, this portrayal of women perpetuates a cycle of objectification that extends far beyond cinema. This influence extends to how individuals perceive women contributing to a culture that normalizes sexism, harassment, and violence. Moreover, these portrayals directly impact how women perceive themselves, reinforcing narrow beauty standards that can lead to issues related to body image and self-esteem. Through a feminist critique, individuals can advocate for more empowering representations of women in media. This also paves the way for narratives where women are portrayed authentically and not as objects.

**Theme 3: Gender Stereotypes**

Feminists recognize that gender stereotypes constrain women to positions that are limiting, which in turn restricts their potential. Changes occurring in a variety of genres are both a celebration of feminists' efforts to rewrite media narratives and a sobering reminder of the obstacles that require more attention. Final Girls have made a significant contribution to the positive depiction of women in slasher films in this ever-evolving field. These strong female characters challenge gender norms by exhibiting resiliency, cleverness, and the capability to handle difficult circumstances on their own. These characters move away from constrictive representations of women and directly confront clichéd narratives of the damsel in distress. This portrayal promotes diversity by offering women more roles that reflect a range of backgrounds and empowers women to take control of their agency. While there is encouraging progress, feminist efforts are not over.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study contributes to the continuing conversation in gender studies by providing a distinct viewpoint on the slasher film subgenre. Through the application of feminist media theory, this study examines slasher films from various historical periods. The analysis illustrates that observed patterns in slasher films are not isolated; they are interconnected with broader issues in society like stereotypes and objectification. These issues continue to persist as viewers consume slasher movies old and new year-round. Furthermore, findings highlight the ongoing significance of advocating for more inclusive and diverse representations while attesting to the impact of feminist movements in changing societal structures.

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