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Literature Review

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**Introduction**

Slasher films, a common genre of horror movies is 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 victims, in distress, 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. For instance, the 1979 original *Halloween* grossed more than 75,000,000 dollars within six years of its release (Clover 23). Given that slasher movies like *Halloween* are watched by a huge audience year-round, it is important to consider how the portrayal of female characters in this genre contributes to the societal injustice and oppression of women.

This paper will be using the method of cluster criticism to analyze and explore prevalent tropes and stereotypes related to female characters in slasher movies. In the context of this study, slasher films are characterized by narratives from the point of view of a male antagonist with psychotic tendencies, but someone who can be recognized as having human physical characteristics. This antagonist relentlessly pursues and violently murders a group of people, frequently using knives or other sharp, bladed tools as their weapon of choice. This paper will also look at prevalent tropes and stereotypes  since the rise of the genre in the 1960s. The lens which slasher films will be analyzed through 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 genre, 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's important to first build a solid understanding of the method I will be employing to investigate the use of rhetoric: Cluster criticism, 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 a critic 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). In this method, the meanings that key symbols have for the rhetor are discovered by charting what symbols cluster around those key symbols in the rhetoric (Burke 59). Three important components to cluster criticism our identification, consubstantial, and persuasion. Identification is when individuals form selves or identities through various properties for substances such as physical objects, occupations, Friends, activities, beliefs, and values. As two entities are united in substance, through common ideas, attitudes, material possessions, or other properties they will exemplify consubstantial entities; “one in the same, but separate” (Burke 60).

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. As digital media and technology reshape communication practices, the application of cluster criticism to new media forms and platforms offers promising areas for research. Furthermore, there is ongoing interest in refining the methodology and addressing the concerns regarding subjectivity and interpretation.

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). During the first wave, which took place in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in America, feminism primarily focused on women's suffrage, as well as on their struggle for equal contract and property rights. The second wave of feminism occurred between the 1960s-1980s immediately following the end of WWII. This wave focused on rights of equality in different spheres, including workplace rights, sexuality, family, and reproductive rights (Singh 364).

The third wave of feminism began in the early 1990s, as a response to the second wave’s shortcomings and failures. Third-wave feminists focused on “micropolitics,” to redefine traditional notions of what is in women’s best interests to ultimately promote a more diverse and inclusive perspective (Singh 364). Around 2012, the fourth wave of feminism began, and it is still ongoing today, with Women's Marches and the #MeToo movement playing a major role. This wave of feminism is commonly associated with the strong use of social media and technology. Its core focus is on advocating for women’s justice and opposing sexual harassment and violence. This includes instances of campus sexual assault, street and workplace violence, and rape culture (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 such as hiring, production, and distribution; to patterns of representation in news and entertainment across platforms” (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). The components of traditional gender stereotypes, such as “beauty, gentility, and sexual morality,” are compatible with this formula (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 detrimental effect 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. These preconceptions are not only reinforced by this portrayal, but they also help 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.

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