


2016

Gender in the Slasher Film Genre

Brandon Bosch

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, bbosch2@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sociologyfacpub>

 Part of the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Gender and Sexuality Commons](#), [Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication Commons](#), [Mass Communication Commons](#), [Other Film and Media Studies Commons](#), and the [Sociology of Culture Commons](#)

Bosch, Brandon, "Gender in the Slasher Film Genre" (2016). *Sociology Department, Faculty Publications*. 333.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sociologyfacpub/333>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Sociology, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sociology Department, Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

GENDER IN THE SLASHER FILM GENRE

Note: Much of the framework and some of the examples come from Carol Clover's influential *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* (1993).

It slices, it dices, it has entertained and scared audiences for decades—it's the *slasher film*. Despite being dismissed by critics, the slasher film refuses to go away. Even if you don't go to these movies, they are hard to escape, as every Halloween at least a few trick or treaters will dress up as a character from these movies. Given the longevity and popularity of this genre, I want to spend today talking about how these films often represent gender.

Scholars have also studied slasher films, and have provided a more formal definition than the one that I just provided. Molitor and Spolsky (1993) formally define the slasher film as follows:

A commercially-released, feature-length film containing suspense-evoking scenes in which an antagonist who is usually a male acting alone, attacks one or more victims. The accentuation in these films is on extreme graphic violence. Scenes that dwell on the victim's fear and explicitly portray the attack and its aftermath are the central focus of the slasher film (p. 235)

THE MAIN ATTRACTION: THE KILLERS



In superhero movies, the main draw is often the villain, and in slasher films, the star is typically the killer. In most cases, the killer is male. Of course, having the star of a film be male is nothing special. However, what *is* special is that these villains generally do not fit the idealized form of masculinity in our society. Instead, they tend to have child-like and/or feminine markers.

In terms of their motivations, the male villains often kill out of just being “evil” (for example, in *Halloween*, psychologist Dr. Sam Loomis describes Michael Myers as “pure evil”) or being motivated out of revenge and/or a loyalty to mom.

By the way, the picture comes from <http://moviepilot.com/posts/1257102>



HALLOWEEN (1978)

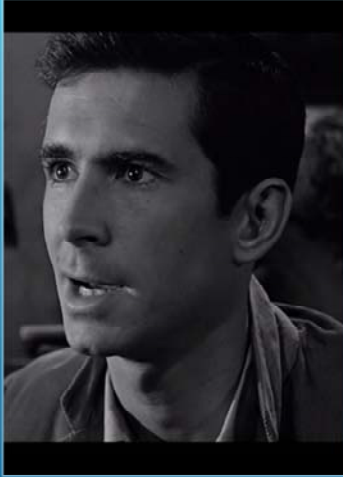
Take Michael Myers, for example. The film *Halloween* opens with a six-year-old Michael Myers killing his sister, which suggests that he is inherently evil. The reboot gives his childhood some more backstory, but the basic message is the same: this guy is incurably evil.

Also, whether in kid-form or adult, Michael Myers has a child-like quality about him, being mute and obsessively stalking his sister.



FRIDAY THE 13TH FRANCHISE

A similar case is Jason, the murderous zombie man-child from the *Friday the 13th* movies. One of Jason's main motivations in the film is to avenge the murder of his mom, and he is shown keeping a shrine with lit candles for his mom's decapitated head (such a sweet boy).



PSYCHO (1960)

Psycho has a great twist ending, so I don't want to say too much. However, I will say that Norman Bates seems like a nice guy, but his mom has such a firm control over his life that he can't help but become a villain. He isn't a man-child like Jason, but some might call him a "momma's boy," and it leads to his downfall. There is a *Bates Motel* tv show that began in 2013 that also explores this unhealthy relationship between mother and son.



CHILD'S PLAY (1988)

In terms of feminine markers, the serial killer Charles Lee Ray has longer hair and transfers his soul into a “Chucky” doll. In this movie, Charles Lee Ray kills for fun and tries to transfer his soul back into another human body.

[Note: Ask the class if they know who the protagonist is, which is a bit unusual for a slasher film].

The protagonist is Andy, a six-year old boy.



THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE (1974)

Like a lot of these films, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* has had sequels, as well as reboots. Here, we can see Leatherface (who wears a mask made of human skin) in lipstick and wearing a wig. Leatherface doesn't always dress like this, but he did during a scene at a family supper, presumably to be the "mom" since there are no females in the family.

Leatherface really doesn't have complicated motivations-- he kills people for his family's barbecue business (the secret is not just in the sauce) and trespassers who might discover their business secret.

It is worth noting that the more recent reboots make Leatherface more masculine-looking, although he still keeps a mask with lipstick/blush.

In addition to the feminine markers, Leatherface also appears to be a dimwitted man-child whose entire vocabulary consists of grunts and screams.



NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET (1984, 2010)

This picture comes from the rebooted *Nightmare on Elmstreet*. A group of adults deliberately burned Freddy Krueger to death in an act of vigilante-style justice (depending on the film, Freddy had killed or sexually abused children). Freddy now seeks revenge for his murder by killing people in their dreams. Again, nothing too complicated about this guy's motivations.



SAW FRANCHISE

The *Saw* series (named after the tool, not the past tense of “see”) is often called “torture porn” because much of the attraction to the films stems from the creative and agonizing ways in which people are killed.

In terms of gender, the killer Jigsaw is somewhat less masculine as he is an older male and also often represents himself with a creepy doll.

In terms of motivations, Jigsaw is a bit different. Dying of cancer, Jigsaw attempts to commit suicide. Rather than killing him, the attempted suicide inspires Jigsaw to take on a new appreciation of life, which he then tries to inspire in others. Specifically, Jigsaw targets individuals who are in his view throwing their lives away (e.g., drug users, prostitutes, thieves), placing them in traps in which they must pass through some horrific trial of fire in order to survive (and thus prove to Jigsaw that they appreciate life enough to be worthy of continuing to live). These traps often have a symbolic nature, such as forcing a drug user to dig through a bathtub full of syringe needles in order to find a key to set the victim free.

As we can see, what is different about this type of killer is that Jigsaw has a “higher” motivation than simple revenge or being evil.

THE FEMALE KILLER

As I said, the killers in slasher films are typically a man. However, we do occasionally have female killers. Can anyone think of one? If so, what types of qualities did this person have (sometimes someone can think of something, but it is pretty rare). Pay careful attention, as you may see a pattern with their motivations for killing.



I SPIT ON YOUR GRAVE (1978, 2010)

The film has taken some heat. For example, reviewing the original film, Roger Ebert called the movie “A vile bag of garbage” and said “Attending it was one of the most depressing experience of my life.”

The female lead Jennifer Hills is beaten and raped on three separate occasions in the movie. Weeks later, Jennifer uses her feminine charms to seduce the men that assaulted her. Each man is brutally murdered after she has seduced them into a sexually compromised position.



MS. 45 (1981)

Like Jennifer Hills, Thana is raped multiple times in the film. In response, she decides to be the aggressor and hunt would-be aggressors. Now granted, this really isn't a slasher film *per se*. In fact, it is closer to the *Death Wish* series with Charles Bronson. However, whereas Bronson kills criminals to avenge his family, Thana (like Jennifer Hills) kills people to avenge her own rape.



SUDDEN IMPACT (1983)

Okay, this is my last non-slasher film, which comes out of the *Dirty Harry* franchise. However, it carries a similar theme—a woman (and her sister, who is now in a catatonic state) is raped and then goes on a killing rampage to avenge herself. Dirty Harry figures out at the end of the movie that she is the killer, but doesn't really care, underscoring that we are meant to root for this type of killer.

Seriously, can you think of any movie where the male character does this? If you can think of one, *please* let me know—I would love to have an example!



FRIDAY THE 13TH (1980)

Pamela Voorhees kills to avenge the death of her son Jason, who drowned at Camp Crystal Lake because the counselors were too busy “making love” to notice him. Her obsession is so great that she even says “Kill her Mommy!” in her son’s voice.



SCREAM 2 (1997)

In Scream 2, the killer (Debbie Salt) turns out to be the mom of the son who was murdered in the original scream. This motivation is similar to *Friday the 13th*.



URBAN LEGEND (1998)

Okay, another slightly more recent film with a masked killer that turns out to be...gasp...a woman. Brenda Bates begins killing people to avenge the death of her boyfriend, who accidentally died as a result of a prank gone wrong (specifically, he died when a group of teenagers turned off the headlights on their car and began to follow him as a prank. Sadly, the man was scared by the prank and died in a car crash).



SCREAM QUEENS (2015)

Scream Queens is a slasher television show which features Jamie Lee Curtis of *Halloween* fame. The “Red Devil” is a woman who kills to avenge the death of her mom, who died because her sorority sisters could not be bothered. Again, this has some similarities to *Friday the 13th*.

As we can see, female killers are often motivated out of a desire to avenge being raped or the loss of a loved one, whereas male villains are often inherently evil or simply kill for revenge (not including Jigsaw from *Saw*).

[Note: A lot of people (almost all women) were familiar with this example, and some others had not seen it yet but wanted to. For this reason, I think it is very important to include this example but avoid discussing big spoilers in the class.]

SLASHER FILMS AS MISOGYNISTIC?

As we can see, female killers are often motivated out to avenge being raped or the loss of a loved one, whereas male villains are often inherently evil or simply kill for revenge. We will now discuss the debate surrounding whether slasher films are misogynistic.

SLASHER FILMS AS MISOGYNISTIC?

- Women being sexualized, frightened, and killed often at approximately the same time.
- Women punished for "bad" behavior.
- Welsh (2010) finds that sexually active females died more often than nonsexual females, and featured longer onscreen deaths. However, sexual activity was not related to the fate of males.

Has anyone heard slasher and horror films being criticized for being misogynistic? If so, what is the basis for these claims? Do you agree with this argument [give them a few moments to think about it]?

[Note: Many students have heard this argument, but the extent to which they agree with it varies.]

One of the most common complaints about the slasher genre (beyond that it is very formulaic) is that women are sexualized a lot in these films, and often seem to be "punished" for their bad behavior. That is, women who smoke weed, engage in sex, or act "slutty" tend to get the axe.

Moreover, women are often killed while they are undressing or right before, during, or after sex. A lot of people have complained that mixing sexual imagery and violence might be an unhealthy combination, especially when consumed by younger audiences. These criticisms of the genre remain strong in a time of renewed concerns about rape and domestic violence.

There is an interesting content analysis done by Welsh that looks into this a bit. In the study, Welsh content analyzed 50 slasher films from 1960 to 2009. Sex had *nothing* to do with the survival rate of men in these films. Of course, outside of the villain, men often are not the last people standing in these films. However, sexual female characters were not only more likely to die than non-sexual female characters, but they tended to have longer onscreen deaths. So yes, claims of the slasher films punishing women for having sex seem to have at least some merit.

THE FINAL GIRL



However, that does not necessarily mean that slasher films are irredeemably misogynistic. In particular, we must try to make sense of that famous female character in slasher films—the Final Girl! The Final Girl is the “last man standing” who happens to be a woman. As we will see, this character tends to be more gender neutral, and sometimes even a bit masculine.

[Note: In case anyone asks, these Final Girls are from left to right: Laurie Strode (*Halloween*), Nancy Thompson (*A Nightmare on Elm Street*), and Sidney Prescott (*Scream*)].

Note: The image is from
http://www.people.com/people/package/article/0,,20058392_20958951,00.html



HALLOWEEN (1978)

Laurie Strode (played by Jamie Lee Curtis) is a good student, babysitter, worried about using marijuana, and does not get involved with guys. She is also resourceful when it counts, using a coat hanger and a cooking knife to defend herself against Michael Meyers. Also, the name "Laurie" was often a nickname for Lawrence, so there is something less feminine about the name.



ALIEN(S) (1979, 1986, 1992)

Alien has been likened to a horror movie in outer space, where the alien villain picks off people on the space station. Roger Ebert has written that *Alien* shares a “kinship” with Michael Myers in *Halloween*, and that the film is “basically just an intergalactic haunted house thriller set inside a spaceship.” Carol Clover explicitly calls Ripley a “Final Girl” in *Alien* in her book *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*.

Incidentally, Ripley allegedly was first written as a male character in the script, and then later pitched as a female lead. Ripley is the cool-headed one of the bunch, and is shown telling others to get a grip on themselves. She is particularly strong and resourceful in *Aliens*, and comfortably handles heavy machinery and guns. That said, she is feminized a bit as a caretaker, looking after the cat Jones in *Alien*, looking after the young girl Newt in *Aliens*, and playing a bit of a maternal role in *Alien: Resurrection*.



THE FOG (1980, 2005)

John Carpenter—who also directed *Halloween*—came up with *The Fog* (1980), which was also remade in 2005. The Final Girl of the film is radio DJ Stevie Wayne. Stevie's name, plaid, and pulled back hair position her as being less feminine.



FRIDAY THE 13TH PART 2 (1981)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zElqJ4321TE>

[Note: Play Clip First].

The Final Girl in *Friday the 13th Part 2* is Ginny Field, who is interested in child psychology and plays chess. She is able to stay calm in the face of certain doom, attacks Jason, and uses her intelligence into tricking Jason into thinking that she is his mother. As noted earlier, you can see the little shrine that Jason has built for his mother.

Also, I'm curious...what do you think about Jason's burlap sack mask? Do you think the hockey mask was an improvement? In case you are wondering, he began wearing the hockey mask with the third movie and never looked back.



A NIGHTMARE ON ELMSTREET (1984)

Nancy Thompson is shown to be intelligent throughout the film. Like others in the film, Nancy is being stalked by Freddy Kruger in her dreams, but Nancy is the first to realize that Freddy can be brought from the dream world into the real world (she wakes up holding his hat). With this knowledge, Nancy sets *Home Alone*-style traps, and then instructs her dad to wake her up in 20 minutes to allow herself enough time to fall asleep, find Freddy, and bring him into the real world. Somehow, this actually works, and Freddy falls prey to the traps that she laid in the house (for good measure, she also sets him on fire!). So, using her intelligence, Nancy is able to defeat Freddy (or does she?!?).



YOU'RE NEXT (2011)

Similar to Nancy Thompson, Erin uses her intelligence to set traps and defeat killers in the black comedy *You're Next*. Erin is shown to be strong and determined, and also has a more gender neutral name, with Aaron being the male equivalent to her name.

IS THE FINAL GIRL “FINAL?”

So, we just considered to what extent the Final Girl is actually a “girl” in the sense that she is stereotypically feminine (e.g., needing rescue, over-emotional and fearful, having long hair, wearing pink and skirts). As we have seen, The Final Girl is often more androgynous, and sometimes acts more stereotypically “male” in some ways (rationale, complex thinking, relatively stoic). Also worth noting is that the Final Girl is usually a more virginal “good girl” who generally abstains from drugs, alcohol, and premarital sex. Okay, now let’s consider the extent to which the Final Girl is actually “final” in terms of being the lone survivor (or among a small group of survivors).



THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE (1974)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vqPZNkyPeVM>

I'm going to show you the final few minutes of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, which is regarded as one of the classics of the genre. The Final Girl Sally has endured most of the film being chased, beaten, and jumps out of a two-story bedroom earlier in the film (that is why she runs with a limp).

[Note: Ask them what they think of this "Final Girl" in terms of her toughness and being "Final" (that is, surviving the ordeal)].

[Note: Students will often ask about the truck driver. It is his first appearance in the scene, and he really only serves to save the girl. I often link this to an example of a racial minority character having no other purpose in a film other than to serve/save a white character, sometimes at their own expense].



THE FUNHOUSE (1981)

Like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *The Funhouse* is also directed by Tobe Hooper. This film ends with the Final Girl Amy Harper slowly exiting the deadly funhouse. The close-up emphasizes that she is still emotionally stunned and disturbed, and the final scene is shot from above and is a long shot, which emphasizes how small and alone Amy feels.



The Final Girls Alice (1980), Ginny (1981) and Chris (1982) of the *Friday the 13th* Film franchise all end each film unsettled and afraid.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RObb2QfBnUs>

The first three *Friday the 13th* films show the Final Girls Alice, Ginny, and Chris (again, note more gender-neutral names) having to be calmed by authorities who don't really believe their incredible tales. From a more feminist lens, one could argue that despite surviving it all, the female character still needs to be comforted by men.

[Note: If I have time, I like to show the clip from the ending of the first *Friday the 13th* film to give students a flavor of these endings, but it is not essential. If doing so, you need to set-up the scene a bit, as it occurs after Alice killed Jason's mom, who had been killing people at the camp for letting her child Jason drown. The figure that grabs Alice is Jason (or was that attack just a dream?)]



FRIDAY THE 13TH PART 2 (1981)

Remember that nice, but traumatized Alice from the first *Friday the 13th*? Well, she gets killed by Jason in the beginning of the sequel. So, a Final Girl for one film, but not the other.



FRIDAY THE 13TH (2009)

This reboot shakes things up by not even having a Final Girl, as Whitney appears to die in the last frame of the movie as Jason bursts through the dock for a sneak attack.



ALIEN 3 (1992)

Ripley beats the odds and survives the first two Alien films, but ends up being implanted with an alien in the third movie. The film ends with Ripley throwing herself into a vat of molten lead to kill the alien. Ripley would come back as some strange alien-hybrid clone in *Alien Resurrection*, but that may be best forgotten.



HALLOWEEN: RESURRECTION (2002)

Jamie Lee Curtis reprised her role in the *Halloween* series after taking a few decades off. In the film before this, she seemingly kills Michael Myers for good, but it turns out that she killed an innocent man instead. When she is given the chance to kill Michael again in this movie, she hesitates because she is afraid that it might not be Michael again. This caution results in her death.

If that was not bad enough, Busta Rhymes defeats Michael Meyers using kung fu at the end of this movie (seriously).



A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET (1984, 1987, 2010)

Nancy Thompson has a complicated fate as the Final Girl. The first film ends with her apparently doomed as Freddy traps her in a car, and she returns in the third film *Dream Warriors* only to be killed near the end. In the recent reboot of the series, Nancy seems to live but the film ends with her screaming in horror as Freddy leaps through a mirror and kills her mom.

FINAL GIRLS AND MISOGYNY

- The Final Girl complicates the misogyny narrative about horror films.
- The Final Girl is the smart, often brave protagonist who survives the film.
- However, the final girl also tends to be more gender-neutral, and is later shown to be killed or traumatized. Whether the final girl is a more progressive representation of females is up for debate.

As we discussed earlier, slasher films have often been described as being misogynistic. However, I would argue that the Final Girl complicates this narrative a bit. Besides the villain, the Final Girl is the main character of the film with the most character development, meaning that the audience has the most investment in that character. The character is generally smart, resourceful, brave, and a survivor who sometimes takes on the villain head-on.

On the other hand, the character is often traumatized, sometimes killed in another film (or seems to die at the very end of the film), and is more gender neutral, with the more feminine women being axed by the killer (a killer, as noted earlier, who also tends to have some feminine qualities). Moreover, the decision to have the sole survivor be a female may stem from a desire to increase the underdog status of the main protagonist.

For this reason, some have suggested that the Final Girl is not *really* a girl, but a male character that is played by a female actor. In light of these things, I think dismissing the genre outright as being misogynistic can be a bit oversimplified.

SUMMING UP THE ELEMENTS

As you watch the following clips, what types of things do you see that are consistent with lecture? Do you see anything that is inconsistent with lecture?

Here is a clip from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* (1986). Stretch is the Final Girl. You will also meet Chop Top and Leatherface.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FdMuUbuNqwE&feature=youtu.be>

This second clip is from the ending of the same film, which has some gore for the first 8 seconds (you can close your eyes).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R6EelQrdaiQ>

Okay, now it is time for some applied Media Literacy. I'm going to show you some clips from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2*. I want you to think about what we have been talking about in lecture about the slasher film and gender, and use it to analyze these clips.

In terms of characters, in the first clip we have Stretch as the Final Girl (the DJ), Chop Top (the strange, wig-wearing burnt-out Vietnam Vet), and Leatherface. In the first clip, Chop Top will mention his Lefty request. Chop Top is referring to an on-the air call request which incidentally recorded people being chainsawed to death by Leatherface—Chop Top wants to destroy the incriminating tape. In the second clip (which comes from the very end of the film) we have Stretch and Chop Top again. Again, there is a bit of deliberate humor to the violence and mayhem.

[Note: Once the clips are done, have the students answers these questions. If I have time, I like to have them discuss it in groups for about one minute].

SUMMING UP THE ELEMENTS

- Female terrorized by male killers
- Final Girl Shows Some Courage
- Man-child killer (Leatherface)
- Stretch is sexualized by a shot that emphasizes her legs and denim shorts as she runs away
- Stretch has a gender-neutral name

We see Stretch—the Final Girl—is terrorized by creepy male characters. However, Stretch is also shown standing up to Chop Top, firmly telling him to leave. Leatherface acts like a man-child, doing a weird frustrated dance after missing her. Stretch is sexualized a bit as the camera focuses on her legs as she runs away screaming in terror. Also—Stretch is a pretty gender-neutral name.

SUMMING UP THE ELEMENTS

- Stretch is resourceful—she uses a fire extinguisher and a chainsaw
- Stretch might have gone insane (she does the same dance that Leatherface does at the end of the first movie)

Stretch is resourceful, using the fire extinguisher, quickly locks herself in the room for safety, and wields a chainsaw to save the day.

Stretch seems a bit affected by the whole experience. The strange dance that she does at the top of the cave closely resembles the dance that Leatherface did at the end of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, suggesting that it is either a dance of triumph, a humorous reference to the original, or perhaps suggesting that she has gone crazy and is like Leatherface now.