OBSERVING CHANGES IN GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN

SLASHER FILM FRANCHISES

by

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ABSTRACT

The connection between horror and gender is nothing new. The context of psychoanalytic feminist film theory lends itself to the discussion of gender within the films themselves, but treats the films as a universe in and of themselves without any connection to society. The question I am asking in this paper is whether or not there are changes in the treatment of gender and sexuality in slasher films over time. If changes are observed, how do these changes reflect changes in the treatment of gender and sexuality in society? By using a reflection theory approach and a "doing gender" approach, I will discuss how changes in these films reflect changing social attitudes towards gender. I will do so by making observations about the autonomy and agency of primary female characters in these films, particularly the character referred to as the "Final Girl."

INTRODUCTION

The connection between horror and gender is nothing new. Ancient legends depicted idiosyncratic women as monsters (e.g. Medusa and Arachnia). Freud claimed that all men faced the fear of castration when they saw female genitals (Freud 1922, 64) and went so far as to claim that monstrous women in ancient myths were metaphors for male castration anxiety (Freud 1927, 69). Today, the link between horror and gender is primarily relegated to the field of psychoanalytic feminist film theory. As Carol Clover suggests in her essay, "Her Body, Himself," the perfect place to discuss the monstrous-feminine is in the context of the modern horror film (1996, 69).

The context of psychoanalytic feminist film theory lends itself to the discussion of gender within the films themselves, but treats the films as a universe in and of themselves without any connection to society. The question I am asking in this paper is whether or not there are changes in the treatment of gender and sexuality in slasher films over time. If changes are observed, how do these changes reflect changes in the treatment of gender and sexuality in society? By using a reflection theory approach and a "doing gender" approach, I will discuss how changes in these films reflect changing social attitudes towards gender. I will do so by making observations about the autonomy and agency of primary female characters in these films, particularly the character referred to as the "Final Girl." Given the changes in women's rights in the United States in the past 30 years, as well as the progress made in the scholarly approach to understanding gender as a social phenomenon, I expect that the levels of autonomy and

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agency will increase in the Final Girl character in more recent installments of slasher film franchises.

My reason for choosing slasher films instead of any other genre, or even horror films in general, is that slasher films are traditionally produced with the express purpose of appealing to a specific audience while also trying to attract as much of the general movie-watching public as possible. They have no pretense of being art or even being intelligent. They stick to a formula of plot elements in order to generate the most box office revenue. While this can be said of many film genres today, horror films tend to do so in a manner that allows them to spend as little money as possible while attempting to make as much money as possible. Slasher films are rooted in a tradition of generating capital for other, larger projects. In the 2008 documentary film, *His Name Was Jason*, *Friday the 13th* (1980) producer/director Sean Cunningham put it succinctly when he stated that he and producer Steve Miner "had made a couple of children's movies and neither one of them was very successful and we had to do something to keep the lights on. And so we came up with this notion of doing *Friday the 13th*. We had a title and a need to make money."

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The slasher film made its debut in horror cinema in the late 1970s, the product of the cinematic contributions of two films, the overt characterization of sexuality in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) and the "slaughterhouse *mis-en-scene*…[and] contempt for the body" in Tobe Hooper's *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) (Wells 2000, 87). These two concepts were combined to create a formulaic plot style utilized

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by horror films called "slasher films." The first of these films was John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978). This film depicts a psychopathic killer stalking a group of teenage babysitters in suburban Illinois. Only two main characters survive the film, the killer's psychiatrist and one babysitter who managed to thwart the killer for the latter half of the movie. This latter character, the one surviving female, is referred to in film studies literature as the "Final Girl," a pure, virginal character who survives the killer's onslaught by either staying alive long enough to be rescued or killing him herself (Clover 1992, 35).

Taking a cue from *Halloween*'s influence on the plot lines of future slasher films, Clover states that the slasher film is defined as the "story of a psychokiller who slashes to death a string of mostly female victims, one by one, until he is subdued or killed, usually by the one girl who has survived" (1992, 21). However, this definition is vague, never explaining what sets a slasher film apart from any dramatic thriller or action film depicting a killer/victim relationship between main protagonists. It is also based on popular assumptions about the plots of these films. This has also led to confusion about which films are included in the genre (Nolan and Ryan 2000). Also, content analyses of slasher films have found that male characters are as likely to die as female characters and suffer almost twice as many violent deaths as females (Cowan and O'Brien 1990; Sapolsky, Molitor, and Luque 2003).

More pertinent aspects of the slasher film are discovered when reading through film studies literature. For example, slasher films are characterized by extreme graphic violence, usually enacted by a single male killer with some sort of blade or sharp

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apparatus (Waller 1987; Wells 2000; Rockoff 2002). They also contain a preponderance of highly suspenseful scenes that focus on the fear of the characters being stalked by the killer (Sapolsky et al. 2003). What is not made explicit in any definition of slasher films, but is implicit in every analysis of them, is that the killer-to-victim relationship is always human-to-human. The killer's humanity is crucial in differentiating the slasher film from other film genres such as natural horror (when non-human elements of nature attack humans) or science-fiction (where anything can become dangerous to anything by manipulating some scientific principle).

Empirical analysis of slasher films in academia has been almost wholly contained within the realm of psychoanalytic feminist film critique. The core authors in this field as it pertains to slasher film analysis, are Linda Williams, Barbara Creed, and Carol Clover. Both Williams (1996) and Creed (1996) take a standard psychoanalytic approach, claiming that the true horror in slasher films stems from the realization that certain characters (specifically the killer and the Final Girl) do not necessarily allow their biological sex categories to determine their gendered behaviors. These characters transcend "borders," by which we mean the socio-normative categories that represent the difference between socially acceptable and taboo characteristics of a person (e.g. male and female versus androgynous, good versus evil, etc.). The transition of borders is deemed horrific because it defies conventional standards of society, particularly hegemonic attitudes towards gender (Creed 1996, Williams 1996). This analysis roots the concept of gender in biological terms by stating that in order to be normal, one must behave like a member of their own gender. Gender and its subsequent behaviors and

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attitudes, in this case, are determined by the presence of a penis or a vagina. In this sense, the killer in the slasher film, who is seen as not fully male since he does not have heteronormative relationships with women, is seen as different from the phallic norm (Williams 1996, 23).

Clover takes this analysis further, claiming that the gender borders crossed in the slasher genre place these films outside of the typical Hollywood approach of gender as biologically determined. Instead, we are given a "loosening…of the equation sex = gender" (1996, 106). She goes on to state that "the slasher film, not despite but because of its crudity and compulsive repetitiveness, gives us a clearer picture of current sexual attitudes, at least among the segment of the population that forms its erstwhile audience, than do the legitimate products of the better studios" (1992, 22-3). The catch, as she notes, is that this audience is largely comprised of young males, a fact that while not empirically proven in the literature is commonly accepted by critics.

The transcendence of gender borders, according to Clover, takes place between the killer and the Final Girl as they interact. The killer, almost always a man, is not considered fully masculine due to some past sexual problem. He is either a sexual deviant or mentally immature[1]. The killer's sexual ambiguity is matched only by that of the Final Girl: a young woman, often depicted as tomboyish (i.e. dresses like a boy, is practical and perhaps mechanically inclined, does not primp) and virginal (or at the very

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[1] Freddy Krueger, from the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series, was a child molester in life and now kills teens as a ghost. Both Jason Voorhees (from the *Friday the 13th* series) and Michael Myers (from the *Halloween* series) are stuck in their childhood mentalities despite becoming full-grown adults.

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least abstinent). "Just as the killer is not fully masculine, she is not fully feminine – not, in any case, feminine in the ways of her friends" (Clover 1992, 40). Both characters channel their sexual frustrations through violence. The act of stabbing someone giving them a shared masculinity and the act of being penetrated by the other's weapon giving them a shared femininity (1992, 48-9). Rieser (2001) deviates from this idea, stating that the Final Girl's masculinity is overstated in that her use of phallic weaponry is reluctant and forced on her by the killer's use of them against her. Therefore, while the Final Girl is attempting to solidify her place in a heterosexual struggle with the killer, the killer is left alone to cross the gender border and thus represents non-normative sexual relations (2001, 377-8). The killer is deviant from hegemonic masculinity and this non-masculine nature is what is seen as horrific (2001, 380).

Problematic to this, as well as all psychoanalytic feminist analyses, is that fact that a person's sex category is too closely connected to their gender. While Clover and Rieser loosen this connection more so than Creed and Williams, they cannot escape it in their analyses. Their views on the subject of gender fall under what is called a "base/superstructure" model of gender, in which gender is seen as emerging from the sex of a body (Francis 2008). Furthermore, by stating that the actions and behaviors performed by characters in these films are either masculine or feminine, these authors are ignoring the social processes that place actions and behaviors in gender categories.

Various contexts can breed a variety of interpretations of behaviors (Francis 2008, 217)[2].

To avoid these problems, a decidedly more sociological approach is necessary. Such an approach can be found in the discussion of "doing gender" (West and Zimmerman 1987). This approach states that gender derives from social interaction rather than biological essentialism (1987, 128-9). In the context of slasher films, gender is formed from interactions between the characters within the film as well as interactions between the audience and the film itself. The scope of this paper allows for analysis only of the former.

West and Zimmerman (1987) use Goffman's dramaturgical approach to state that masculinity and femininity are "prototypes of essential expression" which can be conveyed in any social interaction (Goffman 1976, 75). These displays are conventional and indicate our nature to others. Goffman notes that gender was culturally established using either biological or learned bases and therefore gender displays are "conventional portrayals of these correlates" (1976, 69). However, while Goffman believed that that gender displays were optional, only performed in certain times and places aside from more serious interactions, West and Zimmerman believe that while gender displays may be optional, they are not asides. Rather, they are part of the serious interactions of which

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[2] For example, while women are often considered less aggressive than men, a woman aggressively protecting her children is not considered to be performing a masculine action.

Goffman writes (West and Zimmerman 1987, 130). In this way, they move beyond the idea of gender as mere display and consider it an ongoing interaction in everyday life.

In considering gender as an ongoing part of everyday social interaction, West and Zimmerman propose that sex, sex categories, and gender be considered as analytically unique from each other. In this sense, sex is the category of either male or female in which we are placed (1987, 132). While there are other possibilities besides male and female, our culture views these as the most salient categories (1987, 133). There are no essential criteria for determining a person's sex, rather it is done by gauging their actions and physical attributes. West and Zimmerman refer to this as sex categorization (1987, 133). We use a face-value analysis to place a person into a sex category. This means that we choose a person's sex category by assessing what we notice about their physical appearance and how they comport themselves.

Beyond the face-value approach is where we find gender. In order to remain a part of a certain category, one cannot simply look like a member of that category, one must act like they belong in that category (1987, 134). How we determine which behaviors are appropriate is by observing popular culture (e.g. movies, television shows, books, magazines, etc.). However, artifacts of popular culture do not present a perfect account of proper gender behaviors. Each artifact presents behaviors that are appropriate to the situation it represents. Likewise, we adjust our performances according to each situation in which we find ourselves. We create each performance with the intention of trying to either be gender-appropriate or not (1987, 135-6). Thus, gender performances may be optional. However, as the authors point out, one cannot

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say the same about being categorized by sex (1987, 130). It is therefore conceivable to state that since sex categories are "omnirelevant," any performance can be viewed as a gender performance and used to legitimate other performances by the same actor (1987, 136). In other words, because we cannot avoid being categorized as male or female, we cannot necessarily avoid being held accountable to that category with which we are associated. This is because gender performances are done by individuals but are fundamentally interactional frameworks for social situations (West and Zimmerman 1987; Messerschmidt 2009).

As mentioned above, this applies to slasher films in how characters within the movie do gender with each other. For example, in *Halloween* (1978), the Final Girl, Laurie, is shy and quiet, dresses in clothes that hide her feminine figure, and does not actively date boys (a characteristic that elicits much teasing from her friends). Meanwhile, her friend Annie wears tighter clothes, has a boyfriend, and is outspoken. James Messerschmidt states that the use of the physical body must be taken into account when doing gender (2009, 86-7). Thus, Laurie's style of dressing in *Halloween* is not attempting to make her more masculine than feminine, it is simply attempting to negate her femininity.

As the two characters ride in a car together, the topic of a school dance comes up and Laurie expresses an interest in going to the dance with a boy she likes. Annie responds by saying, "I didn't know you thought about things like that, Laurie." In this example, Laurie is attempting a heterosexual female gender performance. Annie's response shows that while she knows Laurie is a female, she is surprised that Laurie

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would perform within that particular gender. Laurie, while viewed as a female, is not viewed as feminine by her friend. This dialogue supports Messerschmidt's claim about the body's use in doing gender. It also demonstrates that Laurie is not trying to be masculine. Rather, she has been hiding her femininity up until that conversation.

Regarding how contemporary contexts of gender and sexuality within our culture are reflected in our popular media, Silver (2002) makes reference to Second Wave feminism in her discussion of the horror film, *The Stepford Wives* (1975). She claims that the film's popularity was indicative of popular acceptance of radical feminist ideas, as documented in works like the "Florida Paper" and *The Feminist Mystique* (2002, 60). Specifically, Silver discusses how the film turns hegemonic notions of the family, domestic labor, and a woman's body into the horrific. Rieser makes a similar argument about slasher films, stating that the Final Girl represents "the real-world success of women," though this success is marred by the redefining of her proactive behaviors as masculine (Rieser 2001, 383).

Both Silver and Reiser recognize the ability of films to absorb elements of reality without directly reflecting those elements back to the audience. They allude to the idea that what movies offer the audience is a distorted view of reality, something detached and beyond everyday life but still accessible to everyone (Cavender, Bond-Maupin, and Jurik 1999; hooks 1996; Jacobs 2005). The issue of accessibility is important in that while films may have a target audience, filmmakers and production companies are always trying to reach the largest audience possible. To achieve this, production companies take into account the current attitudes of consumers

(Czarniawaska 2008). This idea echoes research by Howard Becker (1974) that claims that works of art are products of artists as well as their audience, the people financing their work, and the people who contribute to the creation of the tools used by the artist. Each contribution helps shape the work in some way, be it creatively, financially, or some other way (Becker 1974). According to this approach, a work of art is not simply the product of a single artist's mind but is influenced by myriad factors from sources within society.

These connections between the audience and the film establish that any changes observed in these films regarding the treatment of gender and sexuality can be regarded as reflections of the general attitudes of society in this matter. The connection between the intentions of those involved in the production and consumption of art and the work of art itself is best described by the reflection approach to the sociology of art. Simply stated, this theory claims that art reflects or is determined by society (Alexander 2003, 22). The problem with this theory lies in its broad nature. It is difficult to determine which facets of society are being reflected by art or to which groups they belong (Alexander 2003, 31). My research question resolves the former part of this problem by specifically examining the treatment of gender in slasher films.

As West and Zimmerman stated, the cultural artifact, in this case the slasher film, will not depict a perfect account of gendered behaviors. Instead, these films will depict behaviors appropriate to the specific situation (West and Zimmerman 1987). The conventions of the genre ensure that the situation, a young woman escaping a serial

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killer, will remain fairly constant from film to film, though different franchises[3] may approach the situation differently. Since sex categorization is considered a face-value analysis, determining if there are changes in the treatment of sexuality and gender in slasher films is best done through a content analysis which is an image-based approach. Since the Final Girl character is an integral and ever-changing character in the slasher genre, this analysis will use her as the focus of research. I hypothesize that as the films become more recent, the Final Girl in each film will begin to depict gender in a less exclusively and stereotypically feminine manner. By this, I mean that the stereotypical Final Girl who, like Laurie in *Halloween* (1978), is trying to neutralize her gender or whose role as a victim is more prominent than that of a survivor[4], will increasingly be replaced by a woman who is comfortable being feminine but is also not afraid to have masculine traits as well. She will be just as likely to scream as she will to pick up the killer's knife and stab him with it, though the latter will be her penultimate action.

METHODOLOGY

The question I am asking in this paper is whether or not there are changes in the treatment of gender and sexuality in slasher films over time and how these changes reflect changes in the treatment of gender and sexuality in society. Because the real-life struggle over gender equality has changed across multiple decades, I will trace changes

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[3] For the purposes of this paper, the term "franchise" will be used to refer to any set of films with plots that all revolve around the same character or set of characters (i.e. *Friday the 13th* and *Freddy Vs. Jason* are both considered part of the *Friday the 13th* franchise because they both involve the character of Jason Voorhees).

[4] "…[Femininity] is fundamentally constructed as relationally lacking in power." (Francis 2008, 212)

in the treatment of the Final Girl through specific plot arcs and over a period of time spanning three decades. I will begin in 1978, the year of the first official slasher film (*Halloween*) and end in 2007, the release year for the remake of *Halloween*. Although slasher movies tend to follow the same formula, they do so in different ways and within different contexts. Using a larger set of data also allows for more accurate testing of falsifiable hypotheses about thematic patterns that might be relevant to groups focused on by the research (King 2008).

The franchises selected for my analysis are the top-grossing slasher franchises from 1/1/1978 (the year in which *Halloween* was released) until 12/31/2008. This information was distilled from a broader database of top-grossing franchises in American cinema. The database used was located on the website "Box Office Mojo" which offers an historical and financial breakdown of virtually every movie made in America and many from Western Europe (www.boxofficemojo.com/franchises/?view=Franchise&p=.htm). The franchises were ranked by adding up the gross domestic box office earnings of each film within each franchise. Those franchises that totaled the most box office earnings were at the top of the list. Box office earnings were based on actual earnings and not adjusted to modern ticket prices for comparative purposes.

I selected from this list of top grossing franchises any that were from the horror genre. To avoid including any films from other genres that might cross over into horror, I only included franchises that would be included in the horror section of a video rental, retailer, or distribution center. For example, while the Hannibal Lecter franchise is

sometimes discussed in literature as a horror series due to its graphic murder scenes and suspenseful plot lines, these films are generally categorized as dramatic thrillers and thus placed in the drama genre (*Silence of the Lambs* won the Academy Award for Best Drama in 1991).

This selection process left me with fifteen possible franchises to use in my analysis (here identified by the title of the first film in the franchise): *Alien, The Amityville Horror, Child's Play, The Exorcist, Final Destination, Friday the 13th, Halloween, Hellraiser, A Nightmare on Elm Street, The Omen, Poltergeist, Psycho, Saw, Scream,* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. In order to ensure that my analysis of gender in slasher films encompassed as much of the history of the genre itself as possible, I reduced this list to the highest grossing slasher franchises with films in three or more decades, defining decades as: 1970-1979 (the 70s), 1980-1989 (the 80s), 1990-1999 (the 90s), and 2000-2008 (the present). This reduced my list to ten franchises, of which I selected the top three for analysis. The franchises selected are: *Friday the 13th, Halloween, and A Nightmare on Elm Street*. The only film omitted from this analysis is *Halloween III: Season of the Witch* since it was a conceptual divergence for the series' producers and its content does not meet the definitional criteria of a slasher film. See Appendix A for a chart of slasher film franchises ranked by highest box office gross.

My content analysis was conducted using a rubric of categories of observable characteristics and behaviors/actions of the Final Girl that fit general definitions of either masculine or feminine displays of gender (see Appendix B for rubric). These categories were derived from the review of the literature on gender in horror films,

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specifically as it pertains to the Final Girl, as well as a preliminary viewing of the first

two film in this analysis, *Halloween* (1978) and *Halloween 2* (1981). The validity of my

rubric was verified by having a research assistant view *Halloween 2* on her own,

constructing her own categories in the process and filling out her rubric accordingly. In

comparison, the data collected by me and my assistant were 83% comparable. Any

differentiation was based on a matter of defining what constituted a certain action.

These matters were resolved in our follow-up discussion. After correcting the rubric

based on these preliminary viewings, both films were reviewed by me for the purposes

of collecting data for use in this analysis.

I observed the social construction of gender in each film by observing the

following categories: her presence in the film, sociability, nurturing, sexuality,

independence and helplessness, and aggression. The first category I observed was the

Final Girl's physical presence within the film as measured by the number of minutes

spent on-screen during the film (measured with a stopwatch). This was done as a

measure of how integral each Final Girl was to each movie. Having less screen time

could indicate that she was considered a minor character to that film as opposed to her

typical role as the main character.

The next category observed was sociability. This was measured by counting the

number of close relationships that the Final Girl maintained throughout the film. These

relationships were broken down into three possible categories, family, friends, and

coworkers, and then split by sex. This was done to determine if she was surrounding

herself with more men or women which could have a bearing on her level of

independence (see discussion of that category below). Sociability was also measured by determining if she was an introvert or an extrovert. This, too, would have a bearing on her level of independence as introverts would generally have fewer associations on whom they can rely.

The third category of observation was nurturing. This was measured by determining if she had any children in her care. Also measured in this category was whether or not she displays emotional concern for other characters (outside of an attack by the killer) by counting the total number of times that she expresses concern for others. It also included the number of characters who she protected from danger (from the killer or other threat).

The fourth category of observation was sexuality. This was measured by observing whether or not the Final Girl is actively dating, whether or not she is sexually active within the context of the film, whether or not she wear provocative clothing (i.e. prominently reveals parts of her anatomy that would specifically place her in the female sex category), and finally, whether or not she displays on-screen nudity either within or out of the context of intercourse.

The fifth category of observation was independence. This was broken down by the number of times she calls for help during an attack by the killer, the number of times she screams at a single provocation (as opposed to multiple screams evoked from a single stimulus which would be a type of scream used by the actress for dramatic effect), and the number of times she is rescued from the killer by another character. These observations were connected to those regarding her helplessness. This was

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measured by the number of times she is physically harmed by the killer and whether or not she displays rational thought and action during the final conflict with the killer (i.e. seeks direct routes of escape versus cowering, uses objects in immediate environment as weapons).

The final category of observation was aggression. This was measured by observing the number of times she physically harms or thwarts the killer and determining whether or not she kills the killer at the end of the film. This latter observation was broken down into several distinctions: whether the killer died as a direct result of the Final Girl's actions, an indirect result of her actions, or if the killer did not die at all at the end of the film.

I viewed each film privately. To ensure that aspects of the film were not missed during the recording of data or notes, films were paused when large amounts of information needed to be recorded. Segments of the films were reviewed when necessary to ensure the accuracy of data recorded. A drawback to this method of data collection is that my interpretations may have altered from one viewing to the next as all films were not viewed at once (i.e. what counted as provocative clothes in one film may not have met the same criteria in another). Reviewing films for verification of criteria based on previously recorded data helped to minimize this problem.

All recorded data were entered into an Excel spreadsheet. Totals and averages were calculated for each set of data. The categories of "% Time Final Girl is On Screen", "Total # of Characters She Rescues From a Threat", and "Total Times She is Rescued by Another Character" were entered into the statistical analysis program, SPSS

16.0, and line graphs were generated to provide a visual account of this data for all of

the films viewed as well as broken down by franchise. This latter analysis was

performed in recognition of the fact that each franchise was created by different people

and may reflect different ideas about what constituted a marketable slasher film.

A sample of 27 films from 3 franchises was used in this analysis. The films

viewed were:

Halloween Franchise:
Halloween (1978)
Halloween II (1981)
Halloween 4: The Return of Michael Myers (1988)
Halloween 5: The Revenge of Michael Myers (1989)
Halloween: The Curse of Michael Myers (1995)
Halloween: H20 (20 Years Later) (1998)
Halloween: Resurrection (2002)
Rob Zombie's *Halloween* (2007)

Friday the 13th Franchise:
Friday the 13th (1980)
Friday the 13th, part 2 (1981)
Friday the 13th, part 3 (or *part 3-D*) (1982)
Friday the 13th: The Final Chapter (1983)
Friday the 13th, part V: A New Beginning (1985)
Friday the 13th, part VI: Jason Lives (1986)
Friday the 13th, part VII: The New Blood (1988)
Friday the 13th, part VIII: Jason Takes Manhattan (1989)
Jason Goes To Hell: The Final Friday (1993)
Jason X (2002)
Freddy Vs. Jason (2003)

Nightmare on Elm Street Franchise:
A Nightmare on Elm Street (1984)
A Nightmare on Elm Street, part 2: Freddy's Revenge (1985)
A Nightmare on Elm Street, part 3: Dream Warriors (1987)
A Nightmare on Elm Street, part 4: The Dream Master (1988)
A Nightmare on Elm Street, part 5: The Dream Child (1989)
Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare (1991)
Wes Craven's New Nightmare (1994)

Freddy Vs. Jason (2003)[5]

A total of 28 Final Girls were observed for this analysis. All of them were white women, most were teen-aged, and could be described as middle to upper-middle class. There is one more Final Girl character than the number of movies viewed because *Halloween 4* depicted two characters that fit the definition of the character. Both characters shared approximately equal time on screen and are commonly understood by fans of the franchise as both being Final Girls[6].

RESULTS

The average amount of time spent on-screen by a Final Girl character was 27.57 minutes with the average running time of a film being 90 minutes. This means that the Final Girl spent approximately 30.6% of the film on screen. While this may seem a small amount for a main character, it must be noted that slasher films are notorious for their dense supporting casts (more people to kill). A plethora of kill-scenes makes it difficult for a Final Girl to dominate the screen. Therefore, we can conclude that despite a small amount of screen time, the nature of her character places the Final Girl in a position of importance. She, along with the killer, is the focus of the plot.

Only nine films depicted a Final Girl for an amount longer than 28 minutes. From these nine films, only six Final Girls are represented. This is because three of the Final Girls, Laurie (from *Halloween* and *H20*), Nancy (from *Nightmare on Elm Street* and *New Nightmare*[7]), and Alice (from *Nightmare*s *4 & 5*), appear in more than one film. The repetition of characters within

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[5] *Freddy Vs. Jason*, being a blend of the *Friday* and *Nightmare* franchises, counts for both for the purposes of this analysis.

[6] This is discussed in the franchise documentary, *Halloween: 25 Years of Terror* (2006).

[7] Heather Langenkamp, who plays Nancy in these films, acts as herself for the majority of *New Nightmare*, switching to Nancy for the final fight. This is part of the plot of the film in which Freddy Krueger is a real monster and attempting to escape his "prison" as a character in the previous *Elm Street* films.

a franchise is often due to the popularity of that character with fans. This is certainly the case with Laurie and Nancy, given that both characters were absent from their respective franchises for a long time only to return in a later installment. As mentioned earlier, the amount of screen time that a Final Girl has can directly show how integral she is to the plot. It is noteworthy that the three films with the lowest amount of screen time for a Final Girl (less than 20% of the film) depicted Final Girls as secondary characters to a male main character[8]. This shows that Final Girls cannot be taken for granted as main characters in these films. In these cases, the Final Girl was only a peripheral character. Given that all three of these Final Girls displayed nudity within the film, it is possible that their role was more for appeasing male audience members than for furthering the plot of the film. The majority of these scenarios (3 out of 5) were released between 1985 and 1986, implying that the filmmakers were attempting a new approach to these films that did not stick.

Regarding close relationships within these films, the average Final Girl had an extroverted personality. By this, I mean that she was outgoing, personable with others, and displayed strong levels of agency throughout each film[9]. She had more friends than family members and more family members than coworkers or other relations. This shows that, regardless of personality type, each Final Girl was a part of a close circle of relations. At the beginning of films, these circles could involve as few as three and as many as nine people. This number would dwindle, sometimes to zero, by the end of the film as each character was killed. In many cases, however, the Final Girl was not left alone during her battle with the killer. Instead,

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[8] These were *Friday the 13th, parts 5* and *6,* and *Jason Goes To Hell*.

[9] For example, Megan in *Friday 6* believes Tommy's reports that Jason Voorhees is alive and killing again when her father, the town sheriff, does not. She defies her father by breaking Tommy out of jail to help him kill Jason.

there would be someone helping her or needing help from her. This shows that the Final Girl was

most likely not to be an autonomous character.

Close relations with men outnumbered the close relations with women by sometimes

more than double. While this depicts an imbalance of male over female characters within the

films, it must be noted that each Final Girl was just as likely to rescue or be rescued by a male as

she was a female. The Final Girl, however, was more likely to need rescuing herself (average =

1.93 times per film) than to rescue others (average = 1.29 times per film). This strengthens the

conclusion above that she was not an autonomous character. When incidences of her needing

rescue were observed over the time span of these films, no discernable pattern arose (Graph 1).

This outcome was not predicted by my hypothesis.

Graph 1 – Number of Times Final Girl Needs Rescuing by Year
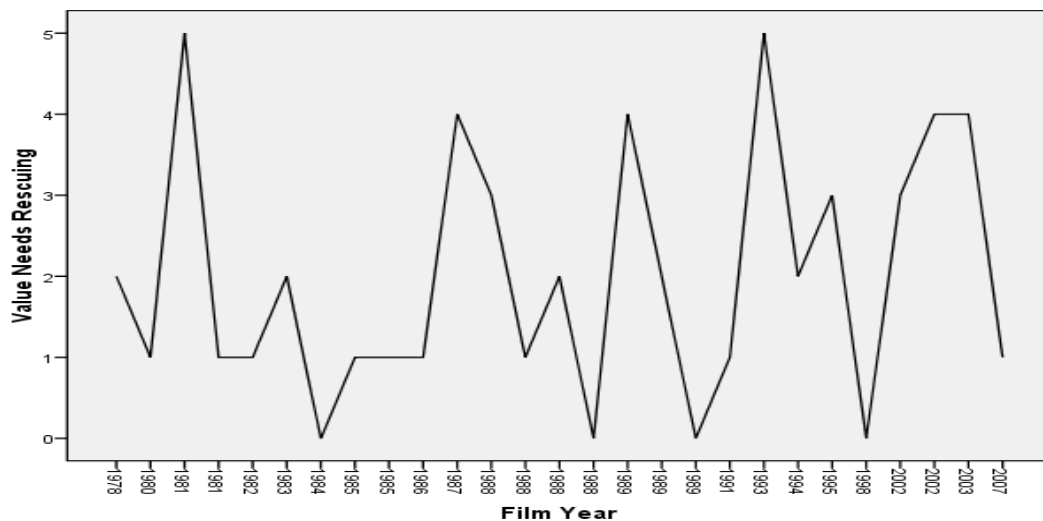
While the overwhelming number of relationships between the Final Girl and men versus

women would seem to suggest that the Final Girl requires more men in her life than women, the

usefulness of these characters calls this into question. Keeping in mind that slasher films are

notorious for their high body counts (i.e. the total number of dead characters by the end of the

film), the increased number of men in the movie also means that more men than women are being killed. This supports data reported by Cowan and O'Brien (1990) and Sapolsky, Molitor, and Luque (2003). It also counters Clover's characterization of slasher films as being composed of mostly female victims. Therefore, we can conclude from the data that the close relationships a Final Girl keeps do have an impact on her level of independence, though the gender of the relationships does not.

The average Final Girl was not in a romantic relationship with another character (17 out of 28). However, those who were in romantic partnerships were always in heterosexual relationships and the boyfriend/husband was almost always murdered by the killer. Any friends of the Final Girl who were in romantic relationships were also always in heterosexual partnerships. There were no gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender characters depicted in any of the films. The heterosexual relationships that pervade these films can be assumed to be an aspect of the films used to appeal to the widest audience possible, which is assumed to be heteronormative by nature. This assumption is not unique to the slasher genre. It is a common aspect of general audience-oriented films (Martin and Kazyak 2009).

Of the Final Girls in romantic relationships, only three were depicted as being sexually active in the context of the film. While several of the Final Girls showed some level of nudity on-screen (10 out of 28), usually a flash of skin or a barely covered leg or torso, never a fully nude body part. Only one of them showed nudity in the context of sexual intercourse (Alice, *Nightmare 5*). This sole example was due to the plot of the film, in which the killer attempts to corrupt her unborn child through its dreams. While only ten of the Final Girls in this analysis displayed on-screen nudity, many of the supporting female cast members were naked in one or more scenes. Rarely was a man depicted in the nude, and male genitalia were never shown.

While common occupations depicted in these films were those of babysitter and summer camp counselor, Final Girls were evenly split on the issue of childcare. Of the half that did have children in their care during the film, the average amount of children cared for was approximately two[10]. Though many of them did not have any children under their direct care, most were apt to show concern for the wellbeing of other characters outside of an attack by the killer. This, again, shows that the Final Girl in not entirely autonomous from other characters. Her level of concern for others as well as her penchant for taking children under her care reflects an almost motherly attribute of her character and certainly relegates her to a more feminine gender. However, the data reported no discernable patterns of showing concern across time (Graph 2).

Graph 2 – Number of Times Final Girl Shows Concern for Others by Year
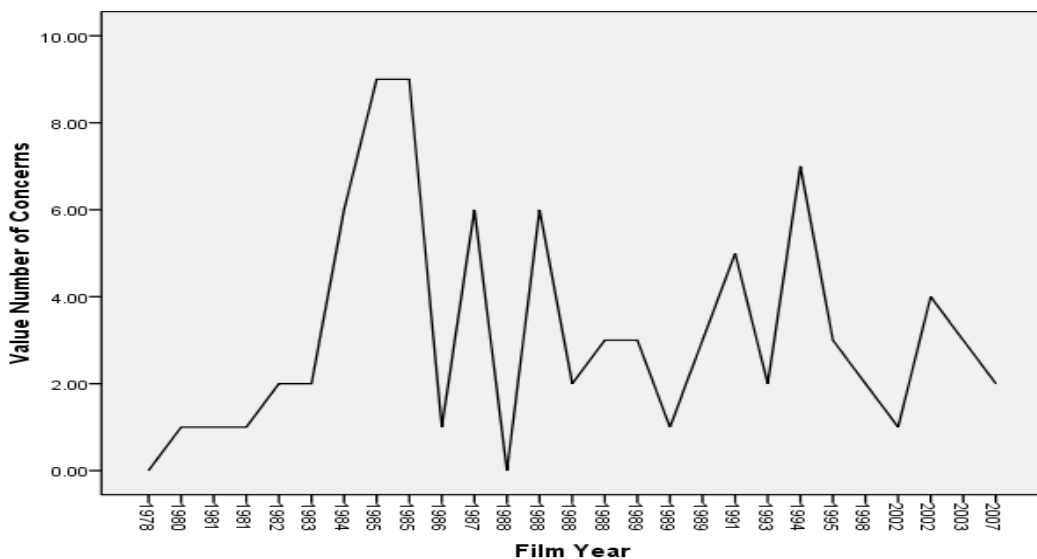

In connecting the Final Girl's measures of sociability and nurturing to her measures of independence, the number of rescues performed by the Final Girl did not match the number of

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[10] Megan in *Friday 6* was a counselor at a summer camp and thus had an immeasurable amount of children in her care.

times she showed concern for other characters. While the average number of expressions of concern was 2.39, the average number of characters she rescued from the killer or other threat was 1.29, just slightly more than half. As mentioned above, she was slightly more likely to be rescued by another character than to rescue someone herself. This fact is buttressed by the number of times in which she calls for help (average = 1.75 times per film) or screams in panic (average = 7.71 times per film). As Graph 3 shows, no discernable pattern of this action developed over time.

Graph 3 – Number of Characters Rescued by Final Girl by Year
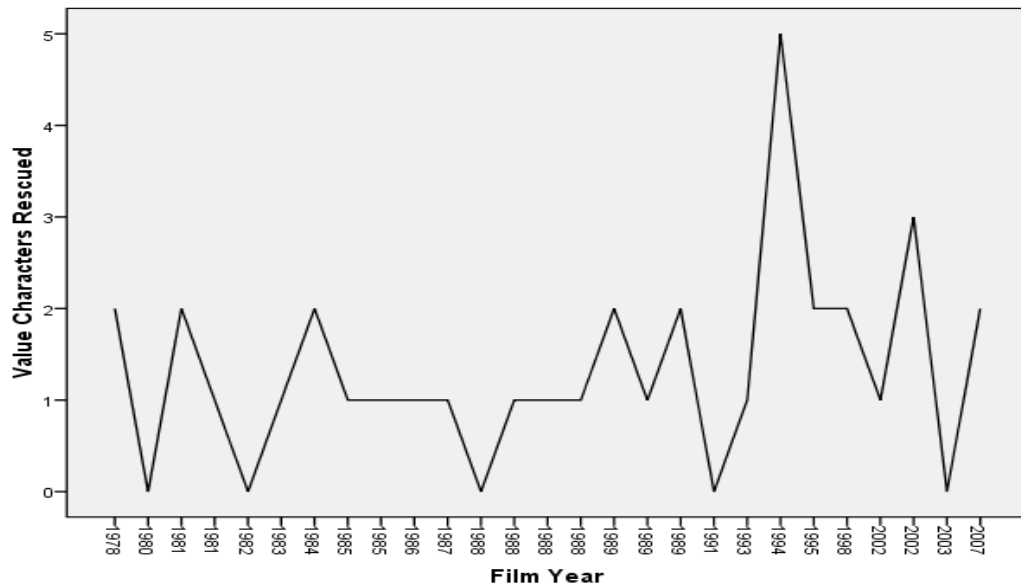
Screaming and calling for help are two actions addressed in previous literature as feminine actions, but I interpret them as measures of agency and autonomy as these actions are often performed by the Final Girl as alternatives to fighting the killer or rationalizing the situation. Noteworthy here is the fact that Final Girls with high numbers of screaming and calling for help (a combined total of 10 or more) also usually displayed rational action during the final conflict with the killer (10 out of 12 Final Girls). This suggests that the screaming/calling was

performed earlier in the film and desisted as the Final Girl approached the penultimate battle. This was predicted in my hypothesis, even though this was common to films throughout the timeline rather than more prominent in more recent films as I had expected.

In counterpoint to the passive actions of screaming or calling for help are data on whether the Final Girl harms the killer or is harmed herself. The averages show that the Final Girl was far more likely to attack the killer (3.29 times per film) than to be harmed herself (2.21 times per film). Also, 23 out of 28 Final Girls displayed rational actions in attempting to thwart the killer. However, the range of displays of rationality varied from character to character. Several only used rational action at the last possible moment to save themselves while others set up a complex system of traps to thwart the killer[11]. Overall, the majority of Final Girls displayed strong levels of agency throughout the final fight.

Finally, the average Final Girl did not kill the killer at the end of the film. 17 out of 28 Final Girls were not the cause of the killer's death. The other 11, however, were directly responsible for the killer's death, making the Final Girl's actions the most likely reason for the killer to die at the end of a film. 6 Final Girls were indirectly responsible for the killer's death either by assisting another in killing the killer or by accidently causing the killer to act in a way that caused his or her[12] own death. Graph 4, as with the previous graphs, shows no pattern emerging over time.

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[11] An example of the former is Laurie in Rob Zombie's *Halloween* (2007) who obtains a gun during her fight with Michael Myers but only shoots Michael by accident when she is startled by a sudden movement. An example of the latter is Nancy in *Nightmare on Elm Street* who plans ahead for Freddy's final assault by luring him into the real world and rigging several booby traps in her house to harm him.

[12] The only killer in these films who isn't a man is Jason's mother in *Friday the 13th* (1980), and she is killed directly by the Final Girl, Alice.

Graph 4 – Did the Final Girl Kill the Killer by Year[13]
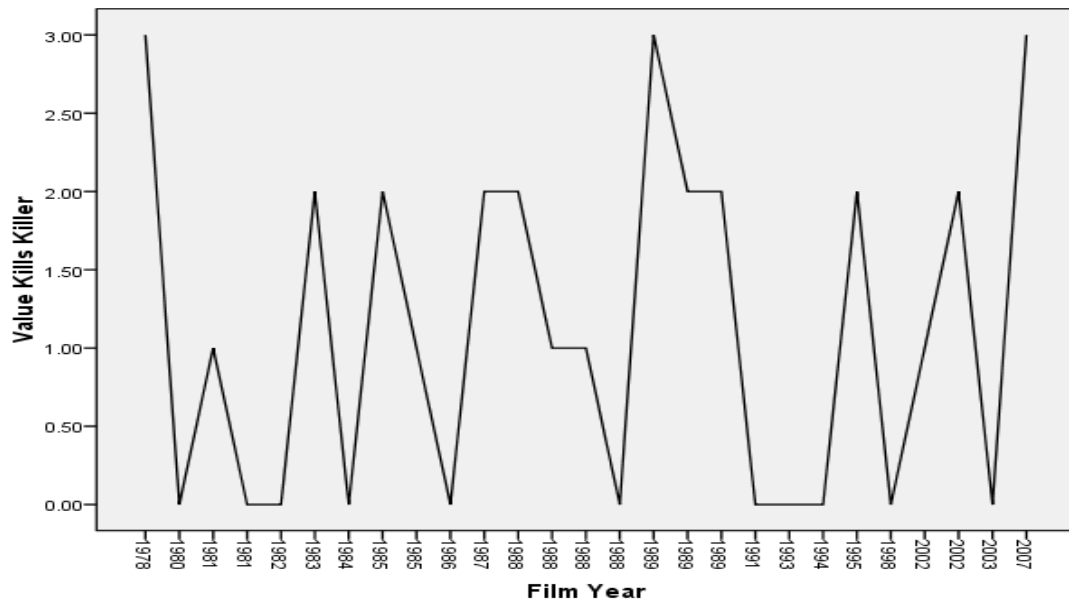
CONCLUSION

My hypothesis was that as slasher films became more recent, the Final Girl character in each film would begin to depict gender in a less exclusively and stereotypically feminine manner, that the stereotypical Final Girl-as-victim would increasingly be replaced by a woman who is comfortable being feminine and masculine. This, however, was not correct. Rather, the data indicate that this latter Final Girl, one who can be both feminine and masculine, has been prominent in slasher films throughout the genre's existence. While there have been aberrations from the formula (e.g. men as main characters), they are never long-lived. Also, the Final Girl's character vacillates from year to year, sometimes being more of a victim who exercises little to no agency while at other times using her agency to adopt whatever behaviors or characteristics were necessary to be a survivor.

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[13] 0 = her actions directly resulted in the killer's death; 1 = her actions indirectly resulted in the killer's death; 2 = she did not kill the killer; 3 = the killer did not die in this film

The Final Girl proved not to be an autonomous character, but rather part of a strong social community of friends, family, co-workers, etc. Social ties were closest with friends, men more so than women, though the Final Girl was not usually in a romantic relationship. All romantic relationships depicted in these films were of a heterosexual nature. The Final Girl's social nature was further emphasized by her constant concern for others and her tendency towards nurturing roles (e.g. babysitter, camp counselor).

The Final Girl's femininity was emphasized in many ways in these films. First is the use of nudity or heterosexual romances which made her femininity highly visible in a physical way. Next, in a behavioral sense, was how she was depicted in the role of nurturer. Finally, her femininity was depicted in how she was placed in the role of the victim. Being attacked by the killer, screaming, calling for help, and needing rescue from danger were the signs that she did not possess power. In opposition to these were her masculine traits such as rescuing others, rationally approaching a situation, and attacking or killing the killer. As we noticed with the case of screaming/calling versus the use of rationale in the final conflict with the killer, as the former diminished, the latter developed. In fact, the two seem to be inversely proportionate within these films. For example, in *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), Nancy pretends to be a helpless victim in order to lure Freddy into her series of traps. As each trap is sprung, Nancy resumes her role as victim in order to lead Freddy into the next trap. In this case, Nancy is vacillating between the feminine, powerless role and the more masculine, empowered role.

This leads to two major conclusions about the social construction of gender in slasher films. The first conclusion is that slasher films do not seem to allow for any genders besides heterosexual as bifurcated into masculine and feminine, male and female. Nowhere do we find homosexual, bisexual, or transgender scenarios, characters, or relationships. The

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masculine/feminine split that we do see depicted in these films is shown in behaviors and character traits that reflect the amount of agency and power that the character displays.

This leads to the second conclusion to be drawn from this data, that the masculine/feminine split is entirely dichotomous. There is no point in which they are blended. A character is either one or the other. The switch can take place gradually throughout a film, as in the case of most of the Final Girls, or from moment to moment as we saw in the scene from *A Nightmare on Elm Street* described above. Any character that is perhaps attempting to neutralize their gender, such as Laurie from *Halloween* (1978), is not given the opportunity for long. The very nature of the slasher film is to create victims and survivors, and these are respectively gendered as feminine and masculine. The Final Girl is thus forced to choose between screaming (femininity, powerlessness) and grabbing a weapon and fighting back (masculinity, empowered). By choosing one, she is rejecting the other, at least for that moment.

Does this attitude towards gender in slasher films truly reflect our attitudes toward gender in society? I believe that it does. Sociologists have been attempting to move beyond this heteronormative, dichotomous view of gender for decades. However, the average citizen has probably never read these works, nor do they have any idea that they exist. To the average citizen, you are either a man and thus masculine, or a woman and thus feminine. Sex and gender are directly connected in this sense, not treated as different categories as they are by sociologists. Since slasher films are attempting to appeal to a general audience and not an audience comprised of gender scholars and sociologists, it is not surprising that they depict gender in this manner. Therefore, it is not surprising that the social construction of gender in slasher films has not shown a definite change over the last 30 years. It would seem that I was overly optimistic in my

hypothesis, hoping that society has begun to see the changes academics have been pointing out for decades.

It must be noted that my research was limited by several factors. The first of these factors is the drawback of using a content analysis. By using this image-based form of analysis, I am unable corroborate any conclusions I have made through the use of other resources (e.g. the writers, directors, and audiences of these films). I propose two methods of corroboration of my conclusions. The first would be to conduct similar content analyses on different film genres. The horror genre is most often compared to the comedy genre for their shared abilities to build suspense towards a "pay-off", their abilities to obtain an audible reaction from audiences, and their shared plot element of a perpetrator doing something to a victim (Wells 2000, 53). Therefore, comedies would be a good place to begin. Also, analyzing genres that are empirically proven to appeal to mostly men (i.e. action films) or mostly women (i.e. romantic comedies) would allow for analysis across gender. My second proposal for future research regarding the flaw of the content analysis would be to strengthen the research on slasher films by researching the audiences of these films. This should be done to prove empirically who comprises the audiences of these films.

The second drawback to this research paper is that by restricting my sample of films to franchises, I have limited the genre to these few films, all of which are generally the same. While this approach was suited for the limits imposed by this type of research, a broader approach would be necessary if this topic were to be approached in an unrestricted setting. As a fan of the

genre, several films spring to mind that could offer possible exceptions to the rules[14]. Future research in this area should include non-franchise films in order to broaden the research sample.

Finally, my own familiarity and fondness of these films and previous literature has proven to be both an asset as well as a detriment. My knowledge of the genre allowed me to determine a strong sample with which to start, a good idea of what characteristics and behaviors to watch for during research, as well as an ability to recall details of these films over time without constant review. However, my familiarity has also made moving beyond the original literature challenging. A research partner, someone not as familiar with the genre, would have been ideal if this were an unrestricted research project with no time limit.

To conclude, the social construction of gender in the slasher film genre does not resemble the "doing gender" theory. Rather it is more akin to an older, heteronormative approach that places gender and sex in the same categories: male/masculine or female/feminine. However, the character of the Final Girl does manage to move outside of her stereotypical role as female/feminine/victim by incorporating masculinity in order to place herself in the role of survivor and aggressor. This, as reflection theory states, is indicative of how gender is socially constructed by the average member of society. The social construction of gender in slasher films has remained constant over the 30 year history of the genre. This should come as no surprise, given how the views of the average citizen on gender have not changed much in this time either. However, the advent of the legalization of civil unions between homosexual domestic partners in the United States shows promise that these attitudes will change. We should look to our culture's art for confirmation.

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[14] For example, *Haute Tension* (2003) depicts a character that is killer, victim, and spurned homosexual all at once.

Chart of Horror Franchises Ranked by Highest Box Office Gross

Franchise Name	Total Franchise Gross (unadjusted)	No. of Movies in Franchise	Top Grossing Movie within Franchise	# of Movies 1970-1979	# of Movies 1980-1989	# of Movies 1990-1999	# of Movies 2000-present	RANK By Gross
Alien	389.5 million	6	Alien	1	1	1	3	1
Amityville	170.5 million	4	Amityville Horror 1979	1	2	0	1	8
Child's Play	126.2 million	5	Child's Play	0	1	3	1	
Exorcist	291.9 million	5	The Exorcist 1974	2	0	1	2	6
Final Destination	154.4 million	3	Final Destination 3	0	0	0	3	
Friday the 13th	315.6 million	11	Freddy Vs Jason	0	8	1	2	3
Halloween	275.1 million	9	Halloween 2007	1	4	2	2	7
Hellraiser	48.5 million	4	Hellraiser	0	2	2	0	
Nightmare on Elm Street	307.4 million	8	Freddy Vs Jason	0	5	2	1	4
The Omen	162.5 million	4	The Omen 1976	2	1	0	1	10
Poltergeist	131.7 million	3	Poltergeist	0	3	0	0	
Psycho	102.7 million	4	Psycho 2	1 in the 60s	2	1	0	
Saw	316.3 million+	5	Saw 2	0	0	0	5	2
Scream	293.6 million	3	Scream	0	0	2	1	5
Texas Chainsaw Massacre	164.8 million	6	Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2003	1	1	2	2	9
info obtained from www.boxofficemojo.com/franchises/?view=Franchise&p=.htm rankings are by total, unadjusted box office gross totals, doesn't include dvd/video sales or rentals hilighted sections represent franchises that are highest grossing that have movies spanning at least 3 decades								

APPENDIX B

Rubric for Operationalizing Agency and Autonomy of the Final Girl

Title of film:
Year of film:
Name of Final Girl:
Physical Presence:
    1. Total number of minutes of screen time:
    2. Total duration of the film:
    3. Percent time spent on screen during film:
Sociability
    4. Total number of close male associations-
        a. Family:
        b. Friends:
        c. Coworkers:
    5. Total number of close female associations-
        a. Family:
        b. Friends:
        c. Coworkers:
    6. Is she an extrovert or introvert? Extrovert / Introvert
Nurturing
    7. Does she have children of her own or in her care (i.e. babysitter)? Yes / No
        a. If yes, total number of children:
    8. Total number of times she expresses concern for others (outside of an attack by the killer):
    9. Total number of characters she rescues or protects from the killer or other threat:
Sexuality
    10. Is she actively dating? Yes / No
    11. Is she sexually active? Yes / No
    12. Does she display on-screen nudity? Yes / No
        a. During intercourse? Yes / No
    13. Is she wearing provocative clothes? Yes/No
Independence/Dependence
    14. Total number of times she calls for help:
    15. Total number of screams:
    16. Total number of times she is rescued by another character:
Helplessness
    17. Total number of times she is physically harmed by the killer:
    18. Does she display rational action/thought during the final conflict with the killer? Yes / No
Aggression
    19. Total number of times she physically attacks the killer:
    20. Does she kill the killer in this film? Yes / No
        a. Is the killer's death a direct or indirect result of her actions? Direct / Indirect

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