

Leatherface in Love
Sexuality and Gender in Horror Films

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Introduction: Why Look at Horror Films?

Why horror? It's a question that I've been asked more than a few times recently when talking about my desire to write a paper examining the gendered and sexual elements that lie within its genre conventions. Horror films as a genre have often been pushed aside in both public and scholastic conversations about film. With a few exceptions – *Psycho*, *Silence of the Lambs*, and *The Exorcist* to name a few – most horror gets shoved into the critical ghetto to wallow with fart joke comedies and children's films not made by Disney or Pixar. This is especially true about the prevailing subgenre of horror – the slasher/splatter film. These films are often pointed out by scholars as being “at the bottom of the horror heap” (Clover 11). It's easy to see why. Often they are low-to-no-budget affairs, filled with stilted action and more blood than many can take. The audience for these films also skews younger – leaving more middle-age critics shaking their heads at the young adults pouring into the theatre to see actors and actresses get gutted. Horror films, and slashers especially, are strongly stigmatized by their casual approach to the cultural taboos of sexuality and violence. Unlike an action film or a noir picture, slashers show the people dying on screen as relatively good individuals hunted down by a maniac with little compassion or consciousness. Even the predominant critically-acclaimed examples give us an image of a world without feeling, where the innocent become fearful demons and ordinary people are attacked by a cruel power beyond their control or understanding. With the genre of horror pushed into the low-art realm, what is the worth to dig through its slime to try and piece together a sociological examination?

I believe that there is worth in examining this maligned genre. Horror has for too long been relegated to the status of an unmentionable genre – a niche area to study and gawk at. Instead of treating these films as exploitative, scholars should seek to understand the rich history

of social critique that lie within the blood. Beginning at the earliest form of Gothic horror – from which the early horror films of Hollywood drew from – we can see the beginnings of the connection between the monstrous and the sexual. Probably the most well-known horrific figure of Gothic literature is Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*. His character is designed to partly be dark warnings about the evils of alternate sexualities. In her radical analysis of Gothic literature and film Judith Halberstam analyzes each of *Dracula* and other Gothic figures and their sexual undertones. In her view, Halberstam states, “[the Gothic novel and film] transform metaphors of otherness into technologies of sex...in other words, they produce perverse identities” (89).

Dracula embodies the threat of the perverse. He stalks virgin women and men and pierces their body to take their life energy. After the sexual transaction the individual become enslaved to the body – reborn as undead creatures obsessed and craving the life that has escaped them. *Dracula* lives in the unearthly world between definite natures. He’s neither man nor animal (he’s described with beast-like qualities in the novel), neither live nor dead, neither adult nor child (he’s described by Van Helsing as having a child brain) and neither man nor woman.

(Halberstam 90) It is the male vampire who gives birth to the next generation through the act of intercourse – a twist on what was deemed to be the natural order of sexuality (Halberstam 90).

From its earliest appearances *Dracula* and other Gothic figures have transformed. They’ve been interpreted and twisted into many different appearances from the romantic glossy vampires seen in the *Twilight* novels and films (which romanticizes the first bite and changes the animal-like figure into a more attractive model-like form) to the inbred Sawyer clan of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (who consume the entire body instead of just the blood). The Gothic origins of these films, slasher or not, imbibe the films with the theme of sexualized otherness. The violent/grotesque and the sexual get inherently connected. It is important, then, to see what these

films are telling us about whom and what is deemed as “other” – which should be feared and avoided.

While the background of horror in the Gothic tradition is important, the nature of the films themselves is another reason why they are important to examine. First, these films are relatively inexpensive to produce. *Halloween* cost in total \$320,000 to make in 1978 (Clover 32). Today it's even cheaper to make a film in the genre. *Paranormal Activity* only cost an estimated \$15,000 to make in 2010 and more tiny-budgeted, direct-to-DVD horror films are made every year (Boxofficemojo.com). These films also can be very profitable and popular. *Paranormal Activity* ended up grossing over one hundred million dollars, without even counting DVD sales (BoxOfficeMojo). Because of how inexpensive and possibly lucrative the genre is, there's a good amount of editorial freedom given to the creators of horror content. Directors like Tobe Hooper (*The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Poltergeist*), Wes Craven (*Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Scream*) and John Carpenter (*Halloween*, *The Fog*) all were given the ability to write and direct their own films. This auteur nature of horror films allow for the original intent of the filmmaker to be fully shown on screen without studio intervention. We receive the full brunt of what tale the director wants to tell us, which is such a rarity in this day and age that is important to observe what these men are trying to collectively say. What subconscious/conscious parts of American culture are they bringing out amidst the blood and gore?

Finally, it is important to look at the horror genre because of its viewer demographics. Horror has for the last few decades been extremely popular with young adults. We now grow up knowing the names of horror icons such as Freddy, Jason, Michael Myers, Chucky and Leatherface. Given the popularity of these films with the younger generations, especially young men, examination of what these films are subtly saying about their audiences is necessary. If, as

many critics have argued, horror films are predominantly anti-woman with their repetitive slayings of countless young women for an audience's enjoyment, how can we continue to allow these films to go unquestioned outside of demonstrating they are beneath scholarly comment? How may we also interpret the rising number of female viewers of horror – seen especially in the demographics of those watching *Nightmare on Elm Street* series (Trencansky 64)? We must try to decipher what messages these films are projecting. Horror films aren't merely titillating violence and sex medleys; they hide conflicting messages of sexual and gender roles that cry to be unearthed.

In order to go in depth into the central ideas throughout modern horror films I will be primarily looking at the origins of the genres. These are the films that have spawned sequels and imitators too numerous to mention. I will be analyzing films made by directors in the United States. While there are some fascinating ideas put forward by European and Asian directors, I am concentrating my research to remove the added cultural influence. While the United States is not a space designed on a single identity, the messages inside the Hollywood and outsider films remain at least partly constant. This paper is divided into four sections. I will begin by examining the slasher figure known as the "Final Girl." I will then observe the role of men in the possession subgenre of horror. The next section will focus on the nature of the rural space and its connection to violence and sexual assault. Finally the paper will look at the so-called "alternative sexualities," which includes gay, lesbian and transgender portrayals in horror. I will also do a more in-depth focus on two films – *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* and *Psycho* – that embody certain horror archetypes. Horror films have deep contradictory messages about what it means to be male, female, gay, transgender, sexually-active, virginal, and more. They are not all slicing

and dicing or Satan spewing gallons of pus, there's substantial information. It's my goal to try to identify what information is being transmitted.

Slasher Films: The Final Girl and Male Identification

Something's wrong and Laurie Stroud knows it. She thinks that she's been seeing a mysterious figure following her and her friends all day, but whenever she tries to take a second look, he's gone. Her friends are slowly vanishing when they go off to check on the Wallace kids they are supposed to be babysitting. It's not until she enters the Wallace's house that she finally discovers the horrible scene. Her friends are all dead, positioned in a way that resembles some evil rite. Soon after this discovery she's attacked by Michael Myers – a masked monster intent on killing her. Unlike her friends, however, Laurie fights back and flees. For the rest of the night she is pursued by the killer with no end seemingly in sight. In the end she barely survives, and only because she decided to meet violence with violence.

Laurie is what is now known as a Final Girl, a character type found in most American horror films from the seventies onward. Her experience in the film *Halloween* is not unusual for her type of character. The majority of films in the slasher genre follow the storyline of the single girl who survives when her friends have all died. The character type was given a name in Carol Clover's 1992 examination of horror, *Men, Women and Chain Saws*. Clover defined the Final Girl as

the [distressed female] who did not die: the survivor...She is the one who encounters the mutilated bodies of her friends and perceives the preceding horror of her own peril; who is chased, cornered, wounded; who we see scream, stagger, fall, rise, and scream again. She is abject terror personified (Clover 35).

To fully understand the Final Girl and her role in the films she must be compared to the other characters in her films. Final Girls are usually boyish. She is usually named something gender-

neutral like Marti, Stretch, Sidney, Nick or Stevie. She often enjoys hobbies that are more stereotypically male in nature such as auto repair, sports or home improvement. In a film genre where most of the characters are promiscuous, she remains sexless and often romantically apart.¹ In essence, it is a role that could have been played by either gender, yet it is almost always a woman who takes the role (Clover 39).² She survives through her keen observation skills - she's usually the only person to notice that something odd is going on - and her seemingly unique ability to fight back. While the other teens are murdered either quickly or after a short, meaningless struggle, the Final Girl is strong enough to push back, to run, to shove the door closed, or to grab and use a weapon. She is able to escape, bloody but victorious, and lives on.

What makes the Final Girl survive and why does this archetype pop up again and again in horror? Different scholars have proposed different answers. For Clover the Final Girl's strength lies in her similarities to the monsters she fights. Most monsters and killers in horror films are coded as queer sexually. They reside in a world where their sexuality is pushed aside and replaced by violence. The act of penetration is now penetration into the flesh to draw blood for these creatures. They are often portrayed as sexually violent (Michael Myers kills because of his violent attraction to his sister; Freddy is a queer pedophile). While the characters are obviously meant to be masculine – only Ms. Voorhees of the first *Friday the 13th* film is female of all the horror films I watched – they show little to no heterosexual attractions. When one of the girls in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* tries to seduce her killer by moaning “I’ll do anything if you don’t kill me,” she is met with scorn and derisive laughter. For these killers women and men are

¹ Though, as critics of Clover point out a heterosexual relationship cannot and should not be all the evidence to “prove” femininity for a female film character just like the fact that male characters are not entirely defined by their dating habits (Trencansky 65).

² Of course there are exceptions to the rule. Ginny, the heroine of *Friday the 13th Part 2*, has a relationship with Paul and survives. There is also the interesting case of the single “Final Boy” I’ve seen, Jesse from *Nightmare on Elm Street 2*, but Jesse is a special case that will be discussed later in the paper.

for the pleasure of murder – breaking them down into unrecognizable bits of gore – rather than sexual fulfillment.

This between-gender idea is solidified by the fetishization of certain parts of the killer. In her seminal article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” Laura Mulvey argues that women in film are fetishized and viewed primarily through “male gaze” of the camera lens (Mulvey 839). Women, Mulvey argued, are turned into pieces rather than whole persons (Mulvey 840). The camera will linger on the hair, the ankle bracelet or the legs to create a “spectacle” rather than a character.³ For the main characters in horror films, however, Mulvey’s descriptions are switched:

If anyone in the films is truly the object of the viewer's gaze, it is the monsters. Their arresting figures are consistently ‘looked at and displayed’ (Mulvey 162) throughout the narratives, as bodies of fascination in their deformities and wounds... Jason appears masked until his monstrous face is revealed with fanfare at the climax of the film, the virtual equivalent of a mainstream film’s nude scene ...the films give great prominence to Freddy's burnt skin and gloved hand, Pinhead and the other Cenobites' pierced flesh, and Jason's increasingly deformed face, "improved" in each film of the series...the faces of the monsters as an enticement to watch, to gaze on them like circus attractions. Their bodies are the perpetual subjects of scrutiny (Trencansky 65).

The killers then are both the ones being watched and fetishized and the voyeurs/fetishizers. They are both the male and female of the film.

The problem with this mixture of genderqueer/masculinity horror films offer is, in Clover’s opinion, in how audiences view and identify with characters. For an audience that is mostly male in nature it is easier to associate with the predominant male figure on the screen – the killer. This association is helped by the traditional camera style for horror films. The camera

³ Men, on the other hand, are entirely viewed through actions to remove the “dangers” of breaking a man down into sexual pieces (Mulvey 841). Ironically this view is seen more in the Final Girl than the killer. She is viewed through her running, her screaming and her fighting back. Very little focus is put on her body (unlike the other female characters in the films).

will act as the killer's eyes. We as the audience see what he sees. We become the one stalking our victim as he enters the farmhouse for directions. We're the one that grabs the enormous knife from the table with which to kill our sister (Clover 45). The audience's identification leads to an internal struggle. We go to horror films to see violence. We go to horror films to gleefully cringe as innocent (or not-so-innocent) people get slaughtered without mercy, but we don't want to be seen as heartless. If nobody survives and the killer is victorious that means that cruelty has won (Trencansky 65). How, then, can we change our identification from the heartless murder to the innocent Final Girl without an obvious and painful transition? In Clover's perspective this is where the Final Girl's nature comes in. Her androgynous nature allows for a point in the film where the film can change its focus. This scene is usually found after a section where the character is tortured both emotionally (discovering the bodies of her friends, hearing her fate) and physically. After this pivotal scene she decides to fight back. During a scuffle she will eventually overpower the killer and either take/use his weapon or knock his weapon to the ground. This symbolic castration leads to the change in the viewer's association. The two characters trade genders and roles as the Final Girl "specifically unmans an oppressor whose masculinity was called into question to begin with" (Clover 49). The Final Girl now is the killer and the killer the victim. For instance, in *Halloween* Laurie uses a coat hanger to blind Michael Myers, thereby ruining his view that the audience has been part of the entire film. She then grabs his knife and then turns it on him in a way reminiscent of how he killed her friends. Similarly *Scream* has a scene where Final Girl Sidney tortures the two killers by playing their own games with them. She even puts on the Ghostface costume for the final confrontation. This transferal of masculinity eases the audience away from their identification with the killer and explains the reason for the Final Girl's characteristics. She is an acceptable level of gender taboo when

compared to the horrors of the murder. She crosses the line enough to be able to be connected with the killer, but not enough that we can't view her as sufficiently normal in society's gendered view (Clover 52).

Fully using Clover's argument, however, ignores a few facts about the Final Girl character that are important to mention. First the character's transformation into the monster is not strong enough to fully beat the killer. With the exception of Mrs. Voorhees (one of the only female killers) each killer keeps coming back for revenge again and again. The girls are only able to stop them temporarily; once they turn their back, the killer vanishes and isn't seen again until the next sequel. Often the sequels go so far as to kill the last Final Girl at the beginning of the film. The main Final Girls of *Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Final Destination*, *Halloween*, and *Friday the 13th* all suffer this fate. Secondly, Clover ignores the fact that most Final Girls do not end up landing the "final" blow to the killer. There's often a Dr. Loomis (*Halloween*), random policeman (*Friday the 13th*) or truck driver (*The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*) who comes along to save her in the end. Even with her transformation, the Final Girl usually cannot defeat the killer on her own. Instead she must rely on arbitrary male authority figures to do it for her.

There is still another problem with Clover's analysis, this one brought up by Judith Halberstam in her work *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Horror*. While the book is mostly about the origins and nature of traditional gothic literary monsters – Dracula, Mr. Hyde and Dorian Gray to name a few examples – she does look at modern horror cinema in one chapter titled "Bodies That Splatter." To Halberstam, Clover remains stuck in the gender binary of male versus female. In Halberstam's perspective horror films "reconfigure gender not simply through inversion but by literally creating new categories" (Halberstam 139). The Final Girl is not a girl at all but an individual who appears at the "limits of gender as the 'inhuman' or 'less

than human” (Halberstam 141). Her gender, as well as the killers, is monstrous rather than male or female. It’s a category that “splatters, rips at the seams and then is sutured together again” (Halberstam 143). Through the transformation of conservative ideas of femininity or girlishness gender perceptions are reconstructed into a new form. This argument can be supported by looking at horror films of the late 1980s. Often the Final Girls of the sequels to the most famous horror films were not just simple androgynous girls of the past. They often had powers that rivaled those of the killer. *Nightmare on Elm Street 3: Dream Warrior*’s Kristin has the power to draw people into her dream to awaken their mental powers. The same thing is true for *Nightmare on Elm Street 4: The Dream Master*’s Alice who also has the power to learn skills from people in her dreams. Tina from *Friday the 13th VII: The New Blood* can use telekinesis. These characters are not just human anymore; they are something else – imbued with the same monstrous unknown energy that powers the killers they fight against (Trencansky 69).

It is no surprise then that these Final Girls are often challenged not only by the killer but also by the society in which they live. Many Final Girls find themselves trapped in mental institutions and deemed a threat to themselves and others. They are derided by psychiatrists and orderlies for claiming that the killer exists and is coming for them. Some are even driven further away from normality by the mental health establishment. Alice is brought out to Camp Crystal Lake by her psychiatrist Dr. Crews against her will (her father drowned in the lake because of her abilities) so that Crews can test/exploit her powers. Other girls are given shock treatments or solitary confinement. Outside of the mental institutions is no better, as Sarah Trencansky writes in her survey of 1980s and 1990s horror films:

The family becomes overwhelmingly threatening to the female body in these films, oppressing the teenagers who are constantly presented as abused or ignored, even on Elm Street, the very vision of safe, suburban America (Trencansky 68)

Tracy of *Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare* and Kristin of *Hellraiser* are both sexually assaulted by their father and uncle respectively. Greta of *Nightmare on Elm Street 5: The Dream Child* is pressured into an eating disorder by her mother. Other family members are just negligent – alcoholics or pill poppers who don't bother even attempting to help their children try to not die (Trencansky 69). It is not enough that the teenagers of the eighties horror films have to deal with raving lunatics who will stop at nothing to kill them, they also face a world where their usual support group – the family – is intent to directly do harm to them through societal pressures to be normal.

As a character the Final Girl lies in a world of contradictions. She is both good, yet must be transformed into evil temporarily to survive. She sits in either the center or the unknown realms of gender distinctions. She is both an insider and an outsider to the social framework that helps to create the monster. Her balance on the thin lines between these extremes allows her to survive and helps the audience easily transfer their associations from the horror monster we love to see kill, to the strong woman we love to see live.

Case Study: Examining Gender and Monstrosity in *Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2*

Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2 would seem like an odd film to examine for this paper. Of all the horror franchises *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* series is often the most overlooked and ignored. Though it started the trend of slashers in the seventies, it was quickly taken over by such popular series such as *Halloween*, *Friday the 13th* and *Nightmare on Elm Street*. The second film in the *Chainsaw* series takes a detour from the usual “group of kids go to isolated spot to be slaughtered” storyline. There are only three major characters (outside of the killer Sawyer family

at least) and only one of the three is a woman. With all that said, this film is a perfect consolidation of the shifting gender messages in horror films.

The film focuses on the local Texas radio DJ named Stretch who is chased by the Sawyer clan after discovering their secret cannibal enterprises. The Sawyers now own an award-winning chili business and will do anything they can to keep their secret ingredient out of the press.⁴ After Stretch receives and plays a tape of a couple of joyriders getting killed by Leatherface, she is visited by him and his insane brother Chop Top. She is soon dragged into a nightmarish world of flesh and bone that makes up the Sawyer chili factory.

The relationship between victim and killer in *Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* isn't similar to any other horror film I watched, yet its gender messages give a strong backing to the ideas proposed by Clover and Halberstam earlier. Stretch and the mutilated Leatherface encounter each other often throughout the film and share a twisted kind of courtship. Their first meeting occurs in Stretch's DJ booth. While Chop Top brutally beats Stretch's friend and producer LG, Stretch hides from Leatherface in a large closet. When Leatherface bursts into the room things get interesting. Instead of killing her outright like he would typically do to his victims Leatherface instead flirts with her. As Stretch tries to seduce the killer, Leatherface reverts to his natural instincts. For him, sex equals violence. His chainsaw is not merely a phallic object but instead is his actual phallus. As Drayton Sawyer says to Leatherface later in the film: "You have one choice, boy: sex or the saw. Sex is, well, nobody knows. But the saw, the saw is family" (*Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2*). The act of choosing between the genitals and the weapon are not lost on Leatherface or the audience, so it is understood why instead of sexually following

⁴ It should be noted that the Sawyers would have no business/no reason to kill so many people if their customers didn't like their chili so much. Society is supporting and essentially creating the monster they are pretending not to know exists.

Stretch's frightened come-ons, Leatherface instead becomes more violent. He pushes his chain saw directly at Stretch's crotch then thrusts it into the ice bucket she is sitting on. This continues until he reaches a point of violent almost-orgasm where he destroys most everything around Stretch. Stretch must then play to this attraction to save herself a number of times.

This scene begins the film's tracking of the erotic/violent relationship between the killer and the victim and slowly starts the transition of Stretch from being a usual Final Girl to a character that embodies the "otherness" of the character. The next instance we see of this transformation comes at the point in time Halberstam describes as the "face off" (Halberstam 151). In this scene Stretch has hid herself in one of the storage areas in the Sawyers' factory. As she watches in horror she sees Leatherface flay the skin off her friend LG's face. She gags, making a noise that draws Leatherface's attention. Rather than attacking her, however, Leatherface does something that's surprising to an audience expecting violent death every two seconds. He come over and discovers Stretch and, lifting the newly cut facemask, places it over her head. He offers her a place to hide but also much more. In reskinning Stretch, he turns her into someone that looks like him. His character is defined by his horrific look (he's even named after it) and now she is just like him. The fact that he makes her do an awkward "courting ritual" dance afterward only cements the fact that he's looking for another similar to himself (Halberstam 151). In essence, Halberstam argues:

In LG's face her gender becomes ambiguous – she is not male here, this is not simply a homoerotic display of desire, rather she becomes literally a 'stretch' between genders. LG's face is stretched across her own, her gender is stretched between her mask, her location, her body and her relation to her monstrous dance partner (Halberstam 1995: 151).⁵

⁵ This gender fluidity and "stretchiness" can be seen through Leatherface's character in both films. In the first the audience is shown that Leatherface plays the mother to the male-dominated Sawyer household. He even has an outfit and skinmask that is distinctively feminine.

This transformation into Leatherface – similar yet distinct when compared to Clover’s identification of the Final Girl’s change into the killer – is not temporary in Stretch’s case. Though she loses LG’s skin mask in the next scene, Stretch continues to follow Leatherface’s example. By the end of the film we see a full transformation. Stretch has been chased into a cave by Chop Top. Inside this cave Stretch is able to find a chainsaw, which she skillfully takes and uses against her assailant. Her new phallus penetrates Chop Top Flesh and leaves a red gash in his abdomen. The final shot is a striking reference to Stretch’s transformation into the monster. She stands outside the cave screaming and waving her chainsaw in the air in a way that is definitely reminiscent of Leatherface’s fit of rage at the end of the original *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. As Halberstam points out: “Leatherface is replaced by Stretch, who has been leatherfaced, and Stretch has subtly altered the flow, the direction and the location of gender markings by her chain sawing” (Halberstam 159). For Stretch and Leatherface the chainsaw both cuts the body and transforms it into a new form. It breaks the shape apart and stitches it back into a new form - a form apart from the gender binary of boy and girl.

The Role of Men and Women in the Satanic/Occult Film

In the 1973 film *Don’t Look Now* Laura and John Baxter have gone to Venice to try to recover after the accidental death of one of their children. No matter where they go, however, their thoughts are drawn back toward their daughter. John continues to see a figure in a red jacket in the nooks and crannies of the city. Laura uneasily makes friends with two older women – one who claims to be psychic and knows her daughter. Eventually Laura accepts the two women and joins them in a séance while John rejects the whole situation as “ridiculous mumbo jumbo” (*Don’t Look Now*). Though he shows signs of the same psychic abilities John refuses to believe anything he senses until it is too late. He ignores the old women’s warnings to avoid the figure in

red and follows her to the church. There it is revealed that the figure is no ghost of his daughter, but instead a horrible-looking old woman who kills him with a large knife.

The relationship of the couple to the unknown in *Don't Look Now* follows a main trend of stories in the possession/occult subgenre of horror films. This subgenre is a large and mostly messy one which includes films like *Carrie*, *The Exorcist*, *Poltergeist*, and *The Omen*. It includes possession by Satan, lesser demons (Pazuzu in *The Exorcist* for example), or ghosts. It all can include the awakening of mental powers. It's difficult to reduce all these films to a simplified general example but there are some prevalent tendencies that appear throughout most of the films. To use a phrase from the film *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, these films often put a conflict between "White Science and Black Magic" (*The Serpent and the Rainbow*). I would go further and describe the conflict as being between White/Male Science and Black/Female Magic. White Science refers to traditional Western medical traditional. Its representatives are mostly white doctors/psychologists who use surgery, drugs and therapy to diagnose and cure their patients. Black Magic focuses on spiritualism, occultism and mysticism. Its representatives don't hold accredited degrees, but instead rely on folk methods and personal gifts to fight evil. They're usually scholars, psychics, writers, artists and priests. The traditional storyline of these films depicts the failure of White Science in trying to understand the mystical nature of the specific case. Only a supernatural solution can solve this supernatural problem, but first the main characters have to accept that the problem is unearthly and inhuman in nature. Therein lies the main central plot of these films – how do you convince White Science to accept that which it cannot explain (Clover 67)? The drama is drawn by the act of conversion. Often it is based on gender-defined qualities. The male figure fulfills the role of a skeptic and a believer in the

scientific method while the female figure is innately able to sense things aren't scientifically provable from close to the start.

These gender distinctions are highlighted in films involving possession. In almost every film involving possession/psychic powers it is a woman who is the one under control by/given this unearthly power. A few examples include *The Exorcist*, *The Last Exorcism*, *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*, *The Haunting*, *Witchboard*, *Carrie*, *The Fury*, and *Firestarter*. The female character acts as a portal for either the demonic force or her own mystical abilities. Why is the figure most always a woman or young girl? Marcia Kinder and Beverly Houston propose it is because this "introduces the dimension of women as the weaker vessel" into the plot (Kinder and Houston, 52). The woman is then more weaker to being possessed because of the fact that she's female and, as Kinder and Houston put it, "open" both sexually (the vulva is related to the word valve) and spiritually (Kinder and Houston, 52). In horror films wherever Satan is, there will probably be female genitalia. We see this in the séance in *Don't Look Now*. As it begins to fall apart the medium turns to Laura and asks her "Are your legs crossed?" (*Don't Look Now*) This turns out to be the case and after Laura opens herself the séance works perfectly. Women are often raped and impregnated by Satan as they sleep (seen in *Rosemary's Baby* and 1979's *The Visitor*) (Clover 76). It is not a coincidence that the main character's possession is confused for pregnancy in *Witchboard*. Similarly the young girls in *Carrie*, *The Fury* and *Audrey Rose* first exhibit their supernatural powers after menstruating for the first time. Clover argues: "menstrual blood would seem to have little to do with castration or loss and much to do with powerful things going on behind closed doors" (Clover 78). When the girls surround Carrie in the shower and yell "Plug it up! Plug it up!" they are not just teasing her, they are, like Carrie's mother does later, associating the natural function as a woman's dangerous curse (*Carrie*). The same concept

appears in *The Fury* where female researchers are told to avoid the psychic subject Gillian while they are having their periods. For women in possession/occult films the body is a dangerous trap. Natural changes like pregnancy, menstruation and even just being “open” can lead to dark, unwelcome new challenges. Their supposedly-weaker, more susceptible bodies are there for the forces of the beyond to possess.

This susceptibility has its benefits too. The women in these films are more likely to be in touch with the spiritual world and more willing to accept the strange things that inhabit it. In *Don't Look Now* Laura and the blind seer realize that something is wrong in Venice long before John's murder. Laura keeps attempting to leave and to return to her son in England but John refuses to go – ignoring the obvious mystical signs that there is danger for him in the city. Likewise *Poltergeist*'s Dianne starts to climb the stairs to look for her missing youngest daughter when she suddenly stops. Her hair and clothes move as if a gust of wind hit her from out of nowhere. “She just moved through me,” she cries “My God! I felt her. I can smell her...she went through my soul!” (*Poltergeist*). Dianne, along with the psychic Tangina are the two figures that understand the house's power and Dianne is the one sent into the void to rescue her daughter. Her husband can do nothing but watch and be prepared to pull the rope when ordered. The willingness of the female form allows for entrance into the spiritual womb yet also allows access of other denizens of that realm to take the trip backwards.

Films like *Carrie* and *The Fury* take this positive nature of womanly openness a step further. The powers themselves are a blessing to the people who control it; instead it is the people in the community who are the curse (Short 122). Carrie's mom is a radical fundamentalist who refuses to acknowledge the biological and spiritual nature of the feminine body. Instead she calls her daughter's powers “a gift from Satan” and plans to kill her for going to the prom

(*Carrie*). Similarly the two teenagers in *The Fury* are held hostage by the mysterious Paragon Clinic – its director a demonic businessman/government operative who wants to exploit the kids for their powers. The young psychic teens embrace their powers as part of their identities. After being confronted by her mother about her abilities Carrie shouts back, “It’s not Satan’s power. It’s me!” (*Carrie*). For these women and the women of possession films being “open” is a natural state of being. Good or bad, they are forced to take the consequences. To restrain and close themselves off is unnatural and they will be punished just like Carrie’s classmates or mother.

While women play an important role in possession/occult films, the main focus of these films is the men. For the most part the female body is just that in these films – a body to act as spectacle or serve as vessel. On the other hand, the male characters of this subgenre are the focus of the films “psychological interest” (Clover 85). There is a reason the film is called *The Exorcist* rather than “*The Exorcism*.” These films surround the male character – examining his struggle to cling to rational, scientific thought while trying to solve the mysteries of the irrational other world. There is little care given to Regan and her plight. As Kinder and Houston point out:

Little to nothing is left to one’s imagination [in *The Exorcist*] except the pity and compassion that surely have informed the directorial point of view. Even the doctor’s diagnostics are distorted into invasions of Regan’s pitiful body with alien instrumentation that parallel the Demon’s vicious invasion of her mind (Kinder and Houston, 47).

The men of these films are often figures of authority – priests, doctors, psychiatrists and politicians – who refuse to believe in the satanic and the strange. Each film begins with the male refusing that there is anything wrong. John laughs at Laura’s entreaties to leave Venice in *Don’t Look Now* and scorns her relationship with the two sisters. In *The Omen*, Robert Thorne refuses to believe any evidence that his son is not human, even as his wife states her fears to him and his photographer friend tries to pass on evidence. *Witchboard* gives its audience not just a story

about a man coming to terms with the spiritual, but also a redemption plot. Jim, the boyfriend of the character who is possessed by the demon Malfeitor, begins the film as an alcoholic dropout who is “not capable of giving a shit about anybody but [himself]” (*Witchboard*). He can’t tell his girlfriend Linda he loves her and can’t get back together with his best friend Brandon. Through the film Jim’s emotional side slowly rises to the surface and by the end he is able to embrace/save his girlfriend, get married and become friends with Brandon. Linda is merely a device in the film to get Jim to accept his “girly” (his own words) nature.

The most famous example of this transformation can be seen in Father Karras in *The Exorcist*. He is a man trapped between the worlds of faith (his priestly garb) and the worlds of scientific fact (his psychology degree). In essence Karras’ character is White Male Science versus Black Female Magic personified. He entered the seminary feeling as if he could easily make the two extremes work together. That is why the diocese sent him to “Harvard, Bellevue, John Hopkins, places like that” (*The Exorcist*). He cannot do it, however, and the passing of his mother in a place in which she did not wish to die has left him questioning what of the church’s teachings are real. When Chris comes to visit him to plead for him to check up on her daughter his mind automatically brings him to the effects of mental illness or stress rather than otherworldly forces. Even after observing Regan for a short time he has no idea whether she is faking her illness or not. It is not until he hears the girl speaking in unknown tongues that he gets the church to do what must be done. For him Regan is nothing more than a symbol of spiritual truth. She is not a girl, but a devil that proves that God exists. The novel the film is based on acknowledges that fact. During the exorcism a possessed Regan chastises Karras: “You care nothing at *all* for the *pig*. You care *nothing!* You have *made her a contest between us!*” (Blatty 230). This is brought up again by Father Merrin to Karras during a break: “I think the demon’s

target is not the possessed; it's us" (Blatty 278). Regan may be one who is being controlled by the demon but she is just a McGuffin for Karras and Merrin's struggles.

What's interesting to note is that this transformation into a new man can also be seen as an escape from the films' implied role of masculinity. For the main male characters of these films their survival depends on them rejecting the White Male Science and becoming more of a part of the Black Female Magic. They become less obviously men and more queer. The fight then becomes a challenge between rigid masculinity and mystical femininity. The femininity always wins. The male character either changes her perspective and embraces the other extreme or is killed in the attempt. They are either *Witchboard*'s Jim or *Don't Look Now*'s John. As Clover points out: "the male story of horror is an echo version of the female story: it tells of being open up by and to something, letting something in. It is only by referring to her body that his story can be told" (Clover 101). As the male reaches his breaking point and his acceptance of his feminine nature, the female character's possession increases in a parallel manner (Scahill 8). This allows him to seem acceptable by comparison to the mostly-male audience. As Carol Clover states:

For a space to be created in which men can weep without being labeled feminine, women must be relocated to a space where they will be made to wail uncontrollably; for men to be able to relinquish emotional rigidity, control, women must be relocated to a space in which they will undergo a flamboyant psychotic break; and so on (Clover 105).

Essentially in most of these films a woman becomes temporarily possessed by a man (most all examples of possession are by male demons or spirits) in order that man can become more feminine.

Poltergeist II: The Other Side, *Witchboard* and *The Exorcist* all are examples of this transformation. In *Poltergeist II*, Steve is stuck positioned between the satanic preacher Henry

Kane (whom all the women in his family fear) and the Native American spiritualist Taylor (whom the women adore). Near the end of the film Kane confronts Steve about his family's reliance on the feminine-coded shaman:

Who do your wife and family turn to with their problems? They turn to *him* now don't they? They don't trust you anymore, and what you fear is that you're not man enough to hold this family together! Now let me in. Let me in! Let me in! (*Poltergeist II: The Other Side*)

Kane directly challenges Steve's manhood – arguing that to follow the spiritual path would mean that he was feminine. Shaken, Steve turns to Taylor for advice. Taylor takes Steve into his teepee to participate in what seems like a ritual cleanse. At the start of the ritual Steve refuses to take part in Taylor's musings on the nature of good, evil and the spiritual realms – he calls it “a lot of crap” (*Poltergeist II: The Other Side*). Slowly, however, he begins to follow what Taylor is saying. While magical smoke surrounds the pair Steve rises and is struck down by an invisible force. He then is forced to sit with an obvious phallic feather on his crotch. To finish the ritual Taylor turns to Steve and exhales the smoke (he describes it as “the entity”) into Steve's face. Steve breathes deep and is entered by the spirit. Here Steve takes the role of the woman in the usual possession film. He is opened and entered by a spirit – this time benevolent. It is only through his willingness to open himself in this homosocial environment that he is able to stop Kane's threat to his family.

This nature of the homosocial/homosexual space leading to victory is also seen in *Witchboard*. For a large part of the film the two male figures Jim and Brandon refuse to talk to each other, supposedly because Linda stopped being in a relationship with Brandon to date Jim. In reality Brandon slips when he confronts Jim: “When you get tired of Linda, you're going to walk away from her too, just like you did with school...just like you did with m-” (*Witchboard*).

The two characters are often seen talking on beds with words like “asshole,” “open” and “portal” peppered in their speech. When Brandon is later killed by Malfeitor, Jim shows more emotion than he ever did about Linda and her horrific transformation. While eventually Jim is reunited with a normal Linda it feels like a cop-out ending that had to be included. It is merely an ending designed to push the idea that all three characters are straight, when all the evidence is to the contrary.

The Exorcist looks at the underlying homosexual tensions in a more obvious way. The book especially highlights this fact, as one priest says:

I'd like to put my arm around another guy's shoulder, but right away I'm scared he's going to think I'm queer. I mean, you hear all the stories about so many latents attracted to the priesthood. So I just don't do it. I won't go into somebody's room just to listen to records; or talk; or smoke. It's not that I'm afraid of *him*; I'm just worried about *him* getting worried about *me* (Blatty 229).

This fear of being labeled a homosexual is seen throughout the novel. What Regan finally does to get Karras to break down during the exorcism is shout that he is gay. While the film doesn't focus on this part of the story, it does subtly highlight Karras' homosexual tendencies, and Regan does attack him with the phrase. Whether Karras is gay or not is not the important fact, however, it is more important that he becomes susceptible and open in a position that requires him to remain closed and cloistered. As the other priest worries, we can see that even *seeming* can be dangerous. To actually be open is too much of a threat. When Karras finally releases all restraint and taunts the demon to enter him rather than Regan he is taken over with the same force. He takes the female role, and, unable to survive in this position, throws himself out of the window to his death. In Karras we see the dangers of complete transformation. While Jim and Steve are able

to hold on to part of their masculinity during their transformation Karras does not and is punished for his womanly openness.

The Rural World and Sexual Assault

It was a film that quickly ignited controversy. *I Spit on Your Grave* (also called *Day of the Woman*) was condemned by critics as inhumane. It led to multiple newspapers columns about violence and women in America. Britain took their response even further, holding hearings on this and other “video nasties” (Christopher 2). In the film, a New York writer name Jennifer takes a trip to a small town in the country to finish writing her novel. From her outset she is vaguely threatened by a gang of youths at the gas station she stops at to fill up her tank. The men then begin to watch the house at night. Their assault on her escalates as they surprise Jennifer and capture her in order for one of the members of their group, Matthew – who is mentally retarded – to lose his virginity. After he fails the other three men proceed to rape her brutally. She tries to escape but is quickly captured and raped again by one of the men. As she slips into unconsciousness the men destroy her novel and drive off, leaving Matthew to kill her to hide their crimes. Matthew is unwilling to do that, however, and she survives to plan her revenge. One by one she kills the men in gruesome revenge. Matthew is strangled in a noose while having sex with Jennifer. Johnny’s genitals are cut off in a bathtub and he’s left to bleed to death. Andy is murdered with an ax, and Stanley is cut to pieces by a boat motor. The film then ends with little fanfare. Having accomplished her mission there is nothing else for Jennifer to do.

I Spit on Your Grave horrified critics when it was released. Roger Ebert led the charge against the film – giving it zero stars and writing “It is a movie so sick, reprehensible and contemptible that I can hardly believe it’s playing in respectable theaters” (Ebert). To watch the film is a sickening experience. There is little reason for the rapes to take place and there is no

discussion about legal issues – other than the poster which states “This woman has just cut, chopped, broken, and buried five men beyond recognition...but no jury in America would ever convict her!”⁶ The movie looks badly made, the sound is horribly done, and the story is noxious at best. In most ways there is little to no reason to ever see the film.⁷

There is one thing that *I Spit on Your Grave* does well. Through its characters it emblemizes the urban/rural dichotomy seen in many horror films. Jennifer from the beginning is seen to be a city woman. The opening shots of the film show her in New York – driving through the busy urban streets, smiling at her doorman, and holding herself with a strong confidence. The film quickly shifts towards her cabin in the middle of nowhere. Compared to her well-maintained and fashionable clothes, the men who work at the gas station she stops at look like yokels in their sneakers and torn blue jeans. The film goes out of the way to state that, though she may be not rich, Jennifer definitely has more money than the locals. She is able to sustain herself as a member of the creative class while they perform menial tasks or are unemployed. When she gives Matthew a tip he replies with “I never got a tip like that before!” (*I Spit on Your Grave*). This discrepancy in earnings and lifestyle is what seems to bring the men to enact their violent assault on Jennifer. The audience sees one scene before the rapes when the men are discussing her as they fish. When Matthew mentions her large tip Johnny replies: “The New York broads are all loaded, Matthew” at which Stanley chimes in “Yeah, and they fuck around a lot” (*I Spit on Your Grave*). The only reason we can gather for the assault is that Jennifer hails from an area more prosperous and urban. Even when under the sight on Jennifer’s gun, Stanley continues this message: “The thing with you is a thing any man would have done...First thing you come into

⁶ Strangely enough the tagline is wrong in two major plot aspects. Jennifer kills four men, not five, and she doesn’t burn any of them.

⁷ The film was remade in 2010. While the story remains the same in the new version the deaths are more horrifically brutal (she leaves one man to get his eyes pecked out by birds). Jennifer also rapes one of her rapists anally with a shotgun. It did not make back its small two million dollar budget (BoxOfficeMojo).

this gas station from other places. You exposed your damn sexy legs to me...” (*I Spit on Your Grave*). The fact that Jennifer as a woman comes from this “other” place and has money (therefore power) drives these men mad.

The urban/rural division pops up in a number of horror films. This is partly due to the simple fact that setting a film out in the middle of nowhere is the easiest way to remove problems involving communication with the outside world and the intrusion of law enforcement in some meaningful way. Outside of the simple mechanical function, however, there is a divisive factor. As Clover points out the rural world “is a place where rules of civilization do not obtain. People from the city are people like us. People from the country are people not like us” (Clover 124). Rural spaces are usually male-dominated. The men are either unattached from any family (such as the men in *I Spit on Your Grave* or *Deliverance*) or controlled by a powerful patriarch who rules over them with an iron fist (the Sawyers in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *The Hills Have Eyes*). They are often deformed mentally or physically as to suggest extreme inbreeding. They do not follow the rules of social custom and appearance, preferring to have unkempt clothing and bad hygiene. They snort, spit and drool. Their teeth are badly cleaned and possibly missing. Often the character’s aren’t even given names – just called things like Leatherface, Chop Top, Hitcher, Papa Jupiter, Redbeard and Birdie (*Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *The Hills Have Eyes* and *Hunter’s Blood* respectively). In essence they are society failing and an uncivil, animalistic sexual and violent nature taking its place.

The rural residents can’t be the only ones to blame in the situation, however, since many of the films go out of their way to show this as a fight between not just the civil against the inhuman but also the oppressor against the oppressed. While Stanley’s argument to Jennifer about the nature of her rape is laughable he does speak of a resentment that can be found in a

number of horror films. In *Deliverance*, the foursome of urban men from Atlanta have traveled into the country to go canoeing in one of the last free-running rivers that can be found in the South. They had to hurry to get to the river because it will soon be dammed by a power company which wishes to use its current to power houses in the city. The city the men come to at the beginning later is seen being forced to move to higher ground to avoid being swept away by the changing landscape. One of the characters in the film even says “we’re gonna rape this whole god-damned landscape. We’re gonna rape it!” (*Deliverance*). Similarly the hunting forest of *Hunter’s Blood* are being “ripped up for toothpicks and firewood” (*Hunter’s Blood*). The mountains in *The Hills Have Eyes* have been both exploited by silver mining and then radiated by nuclear testing. Economically these areas have been exploited and humiliated. For example, the Sawyer clan turn to cannibalism after their meat packing plant closes down due to the economy. Often the films show rich urbanites trying to pay their way through situations – flaunting their riches in the rural poor citizens’ faces. Jennifer in *I Spit on Your Grave*’s tip to Matthew is mentioned over and over as a sort of slap on the men’s faces. The rural citizens then react to the exploitation the only way they can, though violence and sexual assault. Just as the city people rape their rural landscape, they will rape the city people.

The rural horror film then shifts into a Darwinian challenge of haves against have-nots. The support system (air conditioner, dentistry, money) that keeps the city-dwellers comfortable is stripped away from them. The audience then watches to see what will happen to the trapped urbanites. Will they follow the leads of the locals who are stripped of their humanity to survive or will they fight to preserve their dignity and humanism in the face of horror? For the most part, the men sink to the animalistic levels of the rural folk. Jennifer violently slaughters her past assailants. The men of *Deliverance* have killed the rapist with a bow and arrows and have

released his body in the water to shroud the evidence. The family of *The Hills Have Eyes* resort to using their mother's corpse as bait to spring a violent trap on their attackers. While the men and women of the city do become violent like their aggressors, they never become sexual assaulters with the exception of the remake of *I Spit on Your Grave*.

The gendered issues must also be observed in the rural rape/revenge film. Though a few films feature heterosexual rapes (*The Hills Have Eyes* and *I Spit on Your Grave*), many of the rural films deal with rape of the homosexual variety. In these cases, the rapists go out of their way to define their victims as feminine. The men of *Deliverance* call Bobby a "sow" and "soft" (*Deliverance*). The attackers in *Hunter's Blood* decide to assault the "pretty one" (emphasis on pretty rather than handsome). Most of the city men are more effeminate than their country brethren. They are "appearance concerned, trinket-laden, physically weak and incompetent, queasy about the hard facts of life" (Clover 160). Urban nature manifests itself in femininity in these films, so even as the men try to go outdoors for "manly bonding" as one of the men's girlfriends calls it in *Hunter's Blood* they are unable to disassociate themselves from that part of their nature. This fact leaves them open to assault. They are attacked not just because they are from the city, but because the city makes them womanly and therefore rape-susceptible.

The rural rape/revenge horror film sends a strong message of eye for an eye for retribution. The city dwellers essentially rape the country dweller's land economically and environmentally. Through the cities men's air conditioners and power stations, the men of the country are exploited, corrupted and forced to turn monstrous. With a lack of other means, they use the only ability they have, the use of force, to enact an act of revenge against the urban visitors who are either female or less-masculine men. The audience is meant to cheer for the rape victim as they take their revenge – seeing as we as a primarily urban audience identify ourselves

with the victim – but in the end there is no winner. The rural men have their lives and bodies destroyed and the urban visitors are left shaken and broken down – forced to confront the violent nature they’ve held inside under the civilizing force of the city.

Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Identity in Horror

The 1983 film *Sleepaway Camp* seems on the surface to be just another stereotypical slasher. A group of young teenagers travel to the isolated Camp Arawak and begin to get murdered one by one by an unknown killer. At the end of the film, however, something unusual happens. As the two remaining survivors wander the shore of the lake they find Angela, the quiet girl who everyone liked, softly singing to herself while holding the decapitated head of her crush Paul. The camera begins to pull back and the audience discovers – to their surprise – that Angela is male. She was forced at a young age by her aunt to dress up in girl’s clothes and her confusion over her gender has turned her into a person horribly twisted and evil.

As mentioned earlier many horror characters exist in a place outside the definitions of the gender binary. Their queer otherness has allowed them to be seen as something radical and harmful to social norms. While the number of gay, lesbian and transgendered characters in horror films are remarkably low, the few instances that appear are powerfully coded to send messages of why their characters are horrifying. These figures dare to try to subvert the societal rules of the heteronormative gender binary and are thus seen as monstrous. In a film genre where most relationships are taboo save for the possible boyfriend saving his girlfriend from the beast, it can be easy to see why “sociopolitical and psychosexualized Others are displaced (as in a nightmare) onto monstrous signifiers, in which form they return to wreak havoc in the cinema” (Benshoff 8-9). For some scholars of queer identity horror films are powerful mediums for “preparing the teenager for the anxieties of reproduction” – encoding normalized sexualities that adhere to the

dominant ideology of the culture (Twitchell 7). Horror monsters then are used to show the dangers of alternative sexualities be them too desirous (the vampire and werewolf both being figures driven by lust of one form or another), or desiring something that the dominant culture deems “inappropriate” (Benshoff 10). These queer – both sexually and physiologically – creatures still populate the horror gallery today.

In his book *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film* Harry Benshoff charts the evolution of queer images in the horror genre. The first visibly gay character in his eyes comes from the 1935 film *Bride of Frankenstein*. The earlier film in the series had been advertised with queer overtones – declaring that the doctor had “no woman’s kiss [touch] his lips” and that he must choose either “The Lady or the Monster!” (Benshoff 46). In *Bride of Frankenstein* the character of Dr. Septimus Pretorius is obviously coded to be queer. He “oozes a gay camp aura over the entire film” (Benshoff 50). His character drags Frankenstein away from his wife to create a “friend” for the Monster. The majority of his dialogue is double entendre. He asks Frankenstein to “*probe* the mysteries of life,” his first creation is a queen, he and Frankenstein shared “secret experiments” (*Bride of Frankenstein*). Most importantly however is the very nature of Pretorius and Frankenstein’s experiments. They, two men, are coming together to create new life – a field usually left to man and woman. They are punished for their crime, however, though Frankenstein and his new bride (who he’s been ignoring for most of the movie) go free, Pretorius stays to die with the monster, who tells him “We belong dead” (*Bride of Frankenstein*). While the heterosexual couple survives, the alternate sexualities and bodies cannot survive in this world.

As mentioned earlier, the other predominant major gay character would be the figure of Jesse in *Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy’s Revenge*. The film seems to outright connect the

horror of the nightmarish Freddy and homosexuality. Jesse is the new kid in town and the film begins like every other *Nightmare on Elm Street* film – he starts having nightmares about Freddy that seem so lifelike. Jesse’s different from the other teens in the series, however, in his dreams he isn’t being killed by Freddy, he is Freddy. In the real world he is threatened by the explicitly gay character in the film – a gym coach that is described as “hanging around queer S and M joints downtown...he likes pretty boys like [Jesse]” (*Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy’s Revenge*). Jesse also begins to have a “homosocial/homosexual” relationship with a jock called Grady who introduces himself by pulling Jesse’s shorts down. Jesse does have a romantic interest in rich girl Lisa, but he seems to have little to no desire for her at all.

The film constantly gives hints about Jesse’s true sexuality and connects that part of his identity to the monster of Freddy. After Jesse and Lisa find the diary of Nanci, the Final Girl of the first *Nightmare*, they begin to read:

Lisa: His body is so slim and smooth, and I know I should watch him, but that part of me that wants him forces me to.

Jesse: He comes to me at night – horrible, ugly, dirty- under the sheets with me, tearing at my nightgown with his steel claws
(*Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy’s Revenge*).

The audience can see the connection director Wes Craven’s trying to make in this scene. For Lisa the romantic relationship is just that – romantic and filled with heterosexual teenage lust. Jesse’s reading is much darker. For him sexuality is connected with violence. His section sounds like something out of a sexual assault. As Benshoff also points out: “The fact that Jesse’s reading places him in the role of the girl further feminizes him and gives a clue to his disturbance: homoerotic feelings which are displaced onto Freddy’s murderous rampages” (Benshoff 248). We see an even more explicit example during a dream Jesse has about his gym teacher. Jesse “wakes up” and wanders through the rain to the S&M club that the teacher is known to inhabit.

There the teacher – dressed in tight pants and leather – takes Jesse back to the gym to run laps and “hit the showers.” While Jesse is naked under the water Freddy appears and attacks the teacher in what can only be called an S&M nightmare. Jump ropes swing out and splay the teacher on the floor. All kinds of balls and other sporting equipment then erupt from their stands and pelt the coach. Finally the teacher is dragged into the shower to Jesse and whipped by towels until his back bleeds. Jesse then transforms into Freddy to murder him. Freddy’s interaction into the dream sequence fulfills two goals. First it prevents any sexual contact to be made.⁸ It also links homosexuality with monstrous violence. Freddy allows for sexual titillation but replaces the orgasm with an explosion of blood. By the end of the film Freddy will have entirely taken over Jesse’s body. He will have killed Grady, who Jesse runs to spend the night with rather than his girlfriend, terrorized a party by only killing the male participants, and fled to a bizarre factor filled with incomplete mutations of animals (just as he himself is supposedly a mutation for being attracted to men). Eventually Linda is able to brave the strange compound and rescue Jesse through the power of her love for him, but we still see little reciprocity on his part. The film ends with Jesse trapped on a runaway bus driven by Freddy, nothing changed but the fact that others don’t acknowledge Freddy’s existence. Freddy both represents Jesse’s innermost feelings as well as acts as a censor for the film so it doesn’t have to outright say anything about Jesse. In a genre that so often associates sexuality with violence, Freddy’s transformation is just another way to symbolize sexual contact while again highlighting that this type of contact is taboo and dangerous to the wellbeing of its participants and the community.

Like the majority of the rest of popular culture, representations of lesbians and not bisexual/pansexual women in horror films are hard to find. There is one area of horror films

⁸ It is not just homosexual content that causes Freddy’s interruption. Later in the film when Linda is trying to kiss Jesse Freddy stretches his tongue to become a nightmarish tentacle.

where they are most likely to be seen – the vampire film. In fact in her book *Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in Film* Andrea Weiss says that “outside of male pornography, the lesbian vampire is the most persistent lesbian image in the history of cinema” (Weiss 84). There are many reasons for this surprising imagery. First, images of lesbians are constantly coming into conflict between being attractive and being dangerous in American culture. The act of two women erotically connected is appeals to the voyeuristic primal urge in many men, yet the very act of two women being physically intimate excludes men and challenges the patriarchal structure. Vampires then are a good fit – they both are erotically powerful being but also very dangerous to the living society. Vampirism also helps to justify the female alternative sexuality. As Bonnie Zimmerman argues in her examination of lesbian vampires:

Lesbianism — love between women — must be vampirism; elements of violence, compulsion, hypnosis, paralysis, and the supernatural must be present. One woman must be a vampire, draining the life of the other woman, yet holding her in a bond stronger than the grave (Zimmerman).

Men can then watch a lesbian vampire film and experience sexual thrill, but also have their own masculinity confirmed because the women who desire women are doing so not of their own free will. One is being controlled through some unnatural force – the only force supposedly that would stop a woman from being attracted to a man.

The earliest of films that looked at this side of queer horror was the 1936 film *Dracula's Daughter*. In this film the monster, Marya Zaleska, desires to get rid of her horrible curse. She longs “to live a normal life- think normal things” but she is compelled to act out her monstrous urges thanks to “horrible impulses” (Benshoff 78). Compared to the other women in the film she prefers masculine outfits – especially when she stalks her victims. While she attacks both gender to feed, she prefers to feast on women – a trait that worried the Breen Censorship offices at the

time because of the “perverse sexual desire” inherent in her feasting (Benshoff 80). The film ends with Zaleska dying, unable to rid herself of the horrible curse. Her transgressions of “healthy” erotic desire do her in and she will never be able to become normal (Saunders 17).

Other than *Dracula's Daughter* the other major area to find lesbian vampires is in the cult films of Hammer Films. Unlike the melancholy Zaleska or *Dracula's Daughter*, however, these women embraced their monstrous alternative sexuality and primarily feasted on women victims. While most of these films were not released in the states, one film gained a strong underground following and had enough traction in the America to be looked at – *Daughters of Darkness*. The film seems normal at the start – a typical horror film where a newly married couple goes to visit the groom's mother in a remote hotel and is plagued by nightmarish horrors. As the film continues, however, the audience realizes that things aren't as they seem. The new husband is a sadist and repressed homosexual. His mother is actually his aging queer lover in drag. The Countess staying in another room is also not as she seems. She is actually Countess Bathory, famous female vampire, who decides she desires the young bride's neck (Zimmerman 23). The bride, fearful of her husband's sexuality and violent streak, gleefully accepts the bite and the new life as a vampire. She and the Countess then drain her husband and flee off together, only to perish in a car accident. *Daughters of Darkness* is a conflicted film. On one hand it portrays lesbianism as a positive force. The bride happily accepts a life of being a vampire compared to the violent and subservient role her husband expects of her. Still the film does nothing to try to contradict the stereotype that lesbian women are anti-male and the fact that the villain is obviously homosexual seems to either make the film argue that there are okay points on the spectrum of sexuality and female homosexuality is preferred over male, or that male sexuality in general is a horrifying thing and must be avoided. This strangeness along with the fact that the

female couple must die in the end – a tradition in most films with queer characters – gives a contradictory message about the acceptance of a lesbian lifestyle. Monstrous may be better than being beaten by a gay in denial, but is it actually not horrifying for society? Still, as Zimmerman argues: “when the viewer herself is a lesbian or feminist... the film takes on a kaleidoscope of meaning. It shows lesbianism as attractive and heterosexuality as abnormal and ineffectual” (Zimmerman 24).

The lesbian vampire is both designed to be attractive and feared. The audience gets sexual pleasure from her conquests but worries about her unstable impact on heterosexual society. She is always punished for her identity, whether she desired her “curse” or not which reaffirms the status quo. Her unearthly gifts make her more powerful than men, but she will never be accepted outside of the outskirts of society due to her monstrous nature.

Transgendered characters – or characters who are at least coded to seem transgendered – are seen prevalently in the horror genre. Horror films show the nature of being transgendered as a societal nightmare – its characters “monstrous gender- and sexual-deviants...in ‘gender distress’” (Sullivan 38). The reason the killers act the way they are is from a perversity that stems from a psychological condition. Horror film’s characterization of transgender identity allows for no sympathy from the audience; these creatures are just twisted, horrific murderers bent on destruction of the normative social structure (Sullivan 39).

To discuss transgendered horror villains you must talk about the two famous film characters inspired by the serial killer Ed Gein – Norman Bates and Buffalo Bill. Ed Gein was a murderer who made national headlines after police had discovered he had been digging up graves to create an outfit made of skin. Bates from Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* and Bill from *Silence of the Lambs* reinterpret Gein’s story into a warning about alternative sexualities by

showing an extreme case while still hedging their bets on whether the characters are transgendered or not. Both films explicitly state that their villains are not transgender. *Psycho*'s psychiatrist at the end monologues:

Sam: Well, why was he...dressed like that?
 District Attorney: He's a transvestite!
 Dr. Richman: Ah, not exactly. A man who dresses in women's clothing in order to achieve a sexual change or satisfaction is a transvestite. But in Norman's case, he was simply doing everything possible to keep alive the illusion of his mother being alive. And when reality threatened that illusion – he dressed up!
 (*Psycho*)

A similar argument is put forth by Hannibal Lector about Buffalo Bill:

Lecter: Our Billy wants to change too.
 Starling: There's no correlation in the literature between transsexualism and violence. Transsexuals are very passive.
 Lecter: Clever girl! ... Billy is not a real transsexual, but he thinks he is, he tries to be. He's tried a lot of things, I expect (*Silence of the Lambs*)

While each film tries to distance itself away from using the term “transvestite” or “transsexual” as a definition of their killers, it is very obvious to the audience that these characters are coded as being at least queer. Both films do little to argue that their villains are not transgendered outside of the simple speech given and the actions of the characters (dressing in women's clothing, defining themselves as sexually feminine) state differently.

Both figures have uneasy reasoning that often falls into the stereotypes of queer characters. For Norman Bates, Buffalo Bill and *Sleepaway Camp*'s Angela, the answer to where their transgendered identity originates deep in their childhood upbringing, not on genetics or personal choice. For example, Buffalo Bill had, as described by Hannibal Lector, “a severe childhood associated with violence. Our Billy wasn't born a criminal, Clarice, he was made one through years of systematic abuse. Billy hates his own identity” (Phillips 103). In the novel Bill

constantly watches his mother's win at the Miss Sacramento beauty contest of 1948 (Tharp 109). Similarly, Norman Bates lived his childhood in isolation, away from everyone but his harsh, controlling, puritanical mother. When she replaced him with a lover, Norman was driven insane and began his murdering spree – with his mother now in his head. Angela's story is even more explicitly causal and matter-of-fact than the other two. After her parents died in a boating accident, Angela (then Peter) was sent to live with her mentally-unstable aunt. The aunt decided she didn't want two boys and forced Peter to wear dresses and be called Angela. Each film's connection of transgendered identities and mental illness gives a message that to feel closer to the opposite gender is something wrong – mentally incorrect in American society – and a choice no one makes of their own free will. Those that do decide to take up a queer label do so because of overpowering mothers or aunts and psychological damage that drives them to kill.

The connection between the character's gender identity and their homicidal impulses are strongly made in *Psycho*, and *Silence of the Lambs*. Norman associates sexual arousal with violence and death. He flips over to his mother character after peeking through a peephole of Marion getting undressed for the shower. His ambiguous sexual and gendered nature – masculine and powerful as his mother, feminine and shaky as his male persona – challenge the gendered concepts and threaten to shatter the social sphere of his little motel (Doty 159). To Norman/Mother all women are erotic temptresses who desire sexual favors and enjoy being watched and all men are driven by physical instinct to fulfill their animalistic appetites. He desires to destroy those that do not follow his queer system, and, as Mother, he does so.

For *Silence of the Lambs* the notion of gender change is central to Buffalo Bill's motivation and the film's narration. As K.E. Sullivan points out:

The identity of the active serial killer in *Silence* is not at issue (we know that Bill/Ted Levine is the killer as soon as he kidnaps his

last victim). The main narrative revelation, then, hinges on showing both Bill's motivation for killing (he wants to fashion a "woman suit") and the details of his transgendered body. The narrative suggests that he is monstrous not so much through his killing (after all, Lecter kills, too), but because he is a man who sews, wears makeup and desires a sex change operation. In this sense, then, the terms monster and transsexual collapse; the latter becomes a privileged signifier for the former (Sullivan 39).

This focus on the horror of transsexuality is emphasized even more directly during the final reveal. When Starling enters the Buffalo Bill's house with her partner Crawford, she's more shocked about Buffalo Bill's desire for a literally second skin than at his streak of murders. The horror isn't just from Bill's efforts to destroy the rules of the social system, but the so-called natural laws of gender as well – the latter being the most shocking. This is surprising compared to the figure of Hannibal Lecter, who some scholars have proposed represents a gay character (he is coded as being effeminate, artistic and with tastes that stay on the high class side). Julia Tharp describes him with "his mannerisms are 'natural' in the way that Harris describes the effeminate man as 'not so much imitative of women as he is non-imitative of men, for the state of effeminacy is characterized by complete inattention to gender'" (Tharp 112). Thus Hannibal, though still being a monstrous killer is acceptable when compared to Bill. While Hannibal is "inattentive" about gender, Bill revels in his queer identity – preparing himself for his transformation by sewing outfits and posing in the mirror with his poodle.

Ironically Norman and Bill are defeated partially by characters with queer characteristics themselves. While Norman/Mother makes short work of the feminine erotic symbol of Marian Crane he is not able to stop her sister Lila from discovering his dark secret. Lila is the opposite of Marian in many ways. Marian is first seen in bed with a man who's not her husband. She is flirted at by most of the men she meets and reciprocates. Lila, on the other hand, remains asexual at all times (Doty 173). She at first is seen talking to a store clerk about her sister and getting in

an argument with Marian's wanna-be fiancé. She takes charge and decides what she and Sam are going to do even as he bristles under her orders. She's the one who dares to enter the house alone while Sam stalls Norman. Agent Starling of *Silence of the Lambs* plays a similar role. In her scenes "Demme imposes on the viewer the spectacle of the petit Clarice operating within her masculine environment" (Tharp 109). While she is viewed by the other men as female she does not ever label herself as such. She attacks her work harder than the other agents and goes out on her own to discover anything she can about the disappearing girls. While the head of Lector's asylum believes that she got the job because she will "arouse" him, she ignores the comment and does not give his put-ons any mind. Both Clarice and Lila "act from 'masculine' initiative and logic as well as 'feminine' concern and empathy...which leads them to find the male killers who have not had as much success with their own gender dilemmas" (Tharp 109). Lila and Clarice are the safe, socially-acceptable version of Norman and Bill/Hannibal. They have come to work with their gendered halves in a way that is acceptable rather than have their halves as dangerous conflicts inside themselves. Though this does lead to another difficult question: is it merely because Lila and Clarice are women embracing aspects of masculinity that it's okay, what if the genders were reversed in their case?

Gay, lesbian and transgender identities in horror show an image of queer sexuality as horrific transforming force. For gay men their identities in horror are usually ones of messing with the natural order of the world. They are either forced against their will or twisted by an insane psyche to try to break normal society. Lesbians are usually shown as a woman with a horrible curse. No matter how obvious it is to her there isn't any way for her to stop her primal instincts and thirsts for womanly pleasures. Even in the one possible-positive portrayal merely has lesbianism as a better alternative to other queer personas. They are often portrayed as cruel,

man-haters and desiring any female flesh they can find. The transgendered villains have their identity defined not of their own making but from their childhood – a horrible upbringing with too much female influence and isolation. This supposedly twists their identity into a dark, nightmarish shape with the goal to destroy that which is not them. Anything that dares accept normal sexuality must be killed. It is only through individuals who walk the thin line of gender acceptability themselves that they are caught and brought to justice. In each of these three cases the end result is the same. The challenger of the “natural” way is brought down by society/natural forces and pays the ultimate price. They will be imprisoned/killed for their alternative sexuality.

Conclusion: Gender and the Horror Film

Horror films, though often brushed aside as mindless sex and gore, are important to examine and evaluate. They are seen by countless hoards of young adults every week and what they say about sexuality and gender is entering the audiences head. Horror often narrowly defines what is okay to be gender-wise. An individual can stretch and experiment, but too much will lead to them becoming viewed as outside of society and dangerous. The majority of horror villains exhibit some sort of gender/sexual malfeasance. They are either sexual to the point of assault or asexual and trapped in a new facet of sexuality that blends sexuality and violence. Horror films also implicitly send warnings about other facets of gender. They strongly enforce heteronormativity through their use of queer characters as the primary monsters and then showing the consequences of the gender distinction. The films also warn against people who choose to live isolated in rural areas – portraying them as sexual deviants and degenerates who desire payback from urbanites who have ruined their lifestyle. Finally, in somewhat of a contradiction to the prior arguments, horror shows through occult films the benefits of accepting things that are outside of the rigid gender boundaries. Horror is a teeming mass of conflicting identity issues all

rolled up into a bucket of blood. It's proactive and reactive, forward thinking and regressive.

Who knew that a genre which consisted of men in masks and screaming women could mean so much?

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