Women Trespassing: The Feminist Evolution of the Slasher Film

By

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DEDICATION

To my mom and grandpa, who nurtured my love of horror.

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ABSTRACT

"Women Trespassing: The Feminist Evolution of the Slasher Film" challenges the prevailing critical narrative that the slasher subgenre is monolithically misogynistic by tracing the overlooked contributions of women filmmakers and feminist perspectives across its controversial history. Drawing on a feminist and socio-historical framework, this dissertation constructs a genealogy connecting women's Gothic and crime fiction, early Hollywood labor, and modern and contemporary slasher filmmaking. Through close analyses of *The Slumber Party Massacre* (Amy Holden Jones, 1982), *Office Killer* (Cindy Sherman, 1997), and the *Fear Street* trilogy (Leigh Janiak, 2021), the dissertation argues that each film performs a feminist intervention into the subgenre, which largely corresponds to the various waves of feminism taking place in American culture during the time these films were respectively released. By recovering the marginalized contributions of figures such as Alma Reville-Hitchcock, Salley Richardson, and Debra Hill, and by reframing the slasher film as a dynamic site of negotiation among gender, spectatorship, and cultural anxiety, this project demonstrates that feminist engagement with this horror subgenre was never absent — only underrecognized.

Introduction

At the bottom of the horror heap lies the slasher […] film.

- Carol Clover*, Men, Women, and Chain Saws*

Of all the many subgenres within horror cinema, the slasher film remains one of the most critically detested and maligned. Frequently condemned as the clearest embodiment of sexism and misogyny within the horror genre, it has long been treated as a space neither made for women nor "good" for them. Yet its commercial popularity, cultural influence, and the undeniable presence of women — both behind the camera and in the audience — complicate such reductive claims. From its inception, women contributed in meaningful ways to the conventions and development of the slasher film, as evidenced by Alma Reville-Hitchcock, Salley Richardson, Debra Hill, and Amy Holden Jones. By illuminating the legacy of women's creative labor and influence in shaping the slasher subgenre, my dissertation continues the reclamation of women-directed horror films that have been disregarded or reductively labeled misogynistic. I focus on *The Slumber Party Massacre* (Amy Holden Jones, 1982)*, Office Killer* (Cindy Sherman, 1997)*,* and the *Fear Street Trilogy* (Leigh Janiak, 2021), examining them through a feminist and socio-historical framework. By deconstructing the long-standing perception of the slasher film as being harmful to women, I argue that these narratives perform feminist interventions into the subgenre, underscoring that feminism was never entirely absent from its evolution. My goal is not simply to offer a critique but to construct a genealogy that traces how women and feminist perspectives have informed, shaped, and defined the slasher subgenre from its classical cycle to the present. By challenging the entrenched negative assumptions surrounding slasher films – including those created by women – I illuminate a trajectory of feminist intervention and evolution.

Over the past five to seven years, scholars such as Aislinn Clarke, Alexandra Heller-Nicholas, Victoria McCollum, and Alison Peirse have expanded critical attention to women in horror filmmaking, yet the contributions of women to the development of the slasher subgenre have largely been overlooked. Closing this gap corrects a historical oversight and promotes inclusivity and diversity within horror scholarship. Highlighting the work of women directors both celebrates their artistic achievements and reframes the slasher film as more complex, contested, and politically rich than typically acknowledged. Moreover, attending to the alternative perspectives and storytelling strategies of these women enriches the cinematic landscape while underscoring how their interventions destabilize the assumption that slashers are monolithically misogynistic. My dissertation reframes the slasher subgenre as a dynamic site of negotiation, where gender, spectatorship, and cultural anxieties intersect, while also participating in the broader feminist effort to rewrite — or, rather, reclaim — women's roles in horror film history.

From Gothic Heroines to the Final Girl

The slasher film's negative reputation arises from a critical narrative that magnifies its misogynistic elements while erasing the pivotal role of women in shaping the subgenre as well as the antecedent tropes that laid the groundwork for its creation. One such overlooked figure is Alma Reville-Hitchcock, who has long been described as an "indispensable presence" on Alfred Hitchcock's films. She worked in multiple roles for him throughout his career, including editor, assistant director, writer, and consultant. Although she preferred to remain out of the limelight and little if any traditional historical documents related to her labor exist, her sustained influence across Hitchcock's oeuvre makes it difficult to imagine *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) — a

key protoslasher — emerging without her input (Osteen xxiii; Lane and Botting 208).[1] The exact extent of her contributions cannot be determined, but her ongoing presence in production suggests that she likely played some part in the film's development and, consequently, in the formation of the slasher subgenre.

Reville-Hitchcock's early involvement laid important groundwork for figures such as Salley Richardson and Debra Hill, whose contributions further shaped the slasher film in its infancy. Richardson's role as assistant director and co-editor on *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974) demonstrates how women's behind-the-scenes labor was instrumental in establishing the subgenre's foundations. Alongside *Black Christmas* (Bob Clark, 1974), Hooper's film is identified by scholars such as Sotiris Petridis as marking the true beginning of the slasher film and its classical cycle ("A Historical" 76). Equally significant is Debra Hill, who co-wrote and produced *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978), the film often regarded as the seminal entry in the subgenre.[2] Of these trailblazing women, Richardson remains the most overlooked. Outside of the end credits, the only acknowledgment of her role as assistant director and co-editor can be found in film catalogs listing the film's cast and crew. Occasionally, even these records fail to credit her as the assistant director. Unlike Reville-Hitchcock and Richardson, Hill has received a fair degree of recognition for her work on *Halloween* and other horror films. In his study of *Halloween*, film scholar Murray Leeder describes her contribution as "incalculable," though discussion of her is ultimately confined to a single paragraph in his chapter on the film's

[1] For more on Alfred Hitchcock and Alma Reville-Hitchcock's collaboration, see Pat Hitchcock O'Connell and Laurent Bouzereau's *Alma Hitchcock: The Woman Behind the Man* (New York: Berkley Books, 2003).
[2] Although *Halloween* is often credited as the "first" slasher film or the film that popularized the subgenre, Richard Nowell complicates this narrative by noting that filmmakers "were reluctant to model films on *Halloween* because they placed greater confidence in other horror and youth-oriented film-types" (*Blood Money* 9). Indeed, he argues that the film "did not impact production patterns or film content significantly in the eighteen months that followed its release" (108). Likewise, Sotiris Petridis identifies *Black Christmas* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* as important examples of slasher films that predate *Halloween* ("A Historical" 76).

creation (28). By comparison, film journalist and scholar Brian McFadden published a book-length examination of her career: *The Real Woman Behind "Halloween," "The Fog," "Escape from New York" and More: Pioneering Filmmaker Debra Hill* in 2019. Hill's recognition was atypical compared to her peers. While she has been recognized more than Reville-Hitchcock or Richardson, most of this attention arrived after the fact and often casts her as the lone woman who succeeded in a male-dominated industry.[3] This retrospective and tokenized visibility underscores the irony that even the "most recognized" woman of the slasher subgenre's early years was celebrated belatedly and in isolation. Taken together, these filmmakers demonstrate that women were integral to the development of the slasher film long before its conventions were codified, even if their labor has often been overlooked, delayed, or erased in critical and historical accounts.

Although the work of Reville-Hitchcock, Richardson, and Hill demonstrates how women's labor was integral to shaping the subgenre's foundations, many of the slasher film's familiar tropes were drawn from earlier film and literary traditions, where women writers played a particularly significant role. In *Studying Horror Cinema*, Bryan Turnock emphasizes the slasher film's debt to Italian *giallo* thrillers, identifying Mario Bava's *Bay of Blood* (1971) as a proto-slasher emerging from that tradition. The film begins with what appears to be a familiar *giallo* setup; however, the rapid succession of two killings quickly distinguishes the film from conventional *giallo* patterns, marking a shift toward what would later become the slasher

[3] Contemporary reviews of *Halloween* largely foregrounded John Carpenter's direction and the film's suspense, while giving little to no attention to Debra Hill's contributions. Roger Ebert, for instance, praised Carpenter's skill but omitted Hill entirely from his review, acknowledging her only in the credit listing ("*Halloween*"). This pattern recurred across the trade press: Ron Pennington of *The Hollywood Reporter* identified Hill as the producer in his review but overlooked her role as co-screenwriter, instead directing his praise toward Carpenter and the cast (3). Likewise, Marjorie Bilbow of *Screen International* focused on Carpenter and Jamie Lee Curtis, noting the effectiveness of the female characters' interactions — interactions, crucially, shaped by Hill's writing — without recognizing Hill herself (17).

formula. Turnock sees in *Bay of Blood* the subgenre's formula taking shape — establishing traits that would become central while moving away from those associated with earlier *gialli* (187-188).[4] This process of transformation did not begin with cinema alone. As Turnock notes, *giallo* itself was indebted to earlier detective fiction, particularly the work of Agatha Christie and her contemporaries such as Ngaio Marsh, Patricia Wentworth, and Margery Allingham, whose carefully staged mysteries relied on hidden identities, isolated settings, and the gradual unmasking of a killer (184).[5] In this sense, the slasher film inherits cinematic influences and a broader literary genealogy. Christie, Marsh, Wentworth, and Allingham supplied narrative blueprints that *giallo* reworked and were later crystallized in the slasher film's emerging formula.

Yet Christie herself was not writing in isolation. As feminist literary scholar Maureen Reddy argues, Christie and other women crime novelists "belong on a continuum that begins with the writers of female gothic" (9). Recognizing this continuum highlights how women across centuries have carried forward and reshaped narrative strategies of suspense, danger, and endurance. Gothic novels by women first articulated tropes of endangered women, threatening domestic spaces, and hidden male violence: Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) confines Emily within a castle dominated by patriarchal authority, while Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) reveals domestic menace through Bertha Mason's secret imprisonment in the attic. Both works illustrate how Gothic fiction used confinement and secrecy to expose gendered

[4] Richard Nowell also traces connections between the slasher and *giallo* subgenres, observing shared formal strategies such as killers who remain outside the frame or are shown through subjective shots. Both forms likewise feature murderers who weaponize everyday objects, echoing the gory whodunits of Italian *giallo* (*Blood Money* 69).
[5] Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None* (1939), later adapted as *Ten Little Indians*, illustrates how women crime writers anticipated slasher conventions: the closed setting of a mansion on a remote island isolates ten strangers from outside help; the murderer eliminates the group sequentially, echoing the "body count" structure later central to the slasher; suspicion shifts continually as each new death occurs; and only in the final revelation is the killer—Judge Wargrave, who has staged his own death to deflect suspicion—unmasked.

oppression.[6] Decades later, women crime novelists adapted these Gothic patterns into puzzles and serial murders. In *The Nine Tailors* (1934), Dorothy L. Sayers places her mystery in an isolated fenland village where the looming church mirrors Gothic entrapment, and the cryptic logic of the bells encodes secrecy and gradual revelation. These motifs then migrated into Italian *giallo* cinema, where mystery structures combined with stylized violence, hidden killers, and subjective camerawork. American slasher filmmakers then reshaped these traditions for their own cultural context, translating Gothic castles into suburban homes, placing teenagers at the center of danger, and intensifying suspense through a countdown of victims. In *Halloween*, Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis) becomes the perceptive heroine whose warnings go unheeded, while Michael Myers (Nick Castle) embodies both the Gothic's concealed male menace and the crime story's hidden murderer. This "hidden history" of the slasher film reveals that the subgenre did not emerge in a vacuum but crystallized out of a larger history of women's storytelling. From Radcliffe and Brontë's imperiled heroines, to Christie and Sayers' puzzles of secrecy and revelation, to the stylized menace of *giallo*, the slasher subgenre inherits and reworks traditions that women helped to establish.

Why the Record Erased Women from the Slasher Subgenre

The slasher film's long lineage underscores not only women's formative presence but also the recurring suppression of that presence. Reville-Hitchcock, Richardson, and Hill are far from the only women to be overlooked. As feminist scholars Catherine Riley and Lynne Pearce note in their study of crime fiction, when research began on "the history of women's crime writing, the literary tradition had succeeded in suppressing women's contribution to the genre – as indeed so much women's writing had been historically suppressed" (130). Correspondingly,

[6] For more on the Female Gothic and its connection to patriarchal critique, see Sue Chaplin's "Female Gothic and the Law" in *Women and the Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion* (edited by Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik).

the neglect of women slasher filmmakers is less an anomaly than part of a broader, longstanding trend in academic and critical discourse surrounding horror — and, more generally, a pattern of minimizing women's creative labor that extends across literature and film as a whole. Most critical studies have paid scant attention to the careers of women horror filmmakers. Instead, many well-circulated books by horror critics and scholars highlight only the men working within the industry. Simon A. Wilkinson's *Hollywood Horror: From the Director's Chair* (2007) and Chris and Kathleen Fernandez-Vander Kaay's *The Anatomy of Fear: Conversations with Cult Horror and Science Fiction Film Creators* (2014) only feature interviews with male directors. Likewise, Dennis Fischer's *Horror Film Directors, 1931-1990* (2011), an 867-page "exhaustive study" highlighting fifty-two "major" and forty-eight "promising, obscure, or hack" horror directors, includes only a single woman (Peirse 3). More recent interventions, such as Alison Peirse's edited collection *Women Make Horror: Filmmaking, Feminism, Genre* (2020), Alexandra Heller-Nicholas' *1000 Women in Horror, 1895-2018* (2020), and Victoria McCollum and Aislinn Clarke's edited collection *Bloody Women: Women Directors of Horror* (2022), represent crucial attempts to correct this imbalance. Yet, despite these significant contributions, scholarship on women horror filmmakers remains scarce and sporadic.

The lack of sustained scholarly attention to women horror filmmakers makes clear that the real issue is not whether women were present in horror filmmaking — they unquestionably were and continue to be — but why their work has so often been missing from the genre's historiography.[7] Film historian Karen Ward Mahar argues that early American cinema was built

[7] Women's presence in horror *is* undeniable: Alice Guy-Blaché directed and produced an adaptation of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Pit and the Pendulum* (1913), Edla Hansen edited *Häxen* (Benjamin Christensen, 1922), Edna Ruth Paul edited *Night of the Living Dead* (George A. Romero, 1968), Daria Nicolodi cowrote *Suspiria* (Dario Argento, 1977), Janice Fisher cocreated and cowrote *The Lost Boys* (Joel Schumacher, 1987), Mary Lambert directed *Pet Sematary* (1989), Karen Walton wrote *Ginger Snaps* (John Fawcett, 2000), Mary Harron directed *American Psycho* (2000), and Oh Jeong-wan produced and Lee Hyeon-mi edited *A Tale of Two Sisters* (Kim Jee-woon, 2003). Furthermore,

inside a masculinized nexus of science, mechanics, and commerce, which structurally limited women's entry into creative roles. Early cinema's origin in applied science and marketplace "ensured that the film industry was gendered at the start" and the "industry enforced the two most important factors that kept women's wages low and limited their opportunities: the sexual division of labor and occupational sex-typing" (9; 24). From the outset, the industry set a structural precedent for marginalizing women's voices. Women did gain limited — and gradually expanding — opportunities, but they were largely confined to tasks coded as "women's work": indoor, low-risk, requiring "dexterity but not skill," and, in practice, restricted to white women (24).[8] Furthermore, even as women popularized the art of amateur photography, they were rarely credited in either film or photography. As a result of this marginalization, tracing women's labor in pre- and proto-horror is difficult (Tortolani 22). In other words, the problem is not retrospective erasure alone; too often, women were never entered in the ledger at all.

The absence of a record makes it difficult to chronicle the work of women in pre- and proto-horror. Erica Tortolani proposes widening what counts as pre- and proto-cinema to bring to the surface how women literary writers, performers, and visual artists engaged with horror early on, work that may have shaped figures such as Alice Guy-Blaché and Lotte Reiniger (23). Crucially, her expansion exposes how definitions themselves have marginalized women: this history is not obscured only because archives are incomplete or credits were withheld, but because the forms through which women engaged horror were coded as "feminine" and consequently not recognized as part of horror's cinematic lineage. Though Tortolani never

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Ardel Wray, Irene Kuhn, Ruth Rose, Lillie Hayward, Dodie Smith, and Leigh Brackett were part of the cohort of women who wrote for American studio horror in the 1930s and 1940s (Peirse 14).

[8] As Mahar observes, surviving images of early film factories do not depict women of color, and contemporary reports omit racial or ethnic identification altogether (24).

directly says that these feminized practices were explicitly excluded from definitions, her framing and examples make the implication unmistakable. She begins with women-authored Gothic literature, whose nonlinear narratives and supernatural elements, which "incite fear and fascination in the audience," exerted a "precinematic influence on horror filmmaking in general" (22). In contemporary critical discourse, however, the genre's association with women became grounds for criticism and devaluation. The genre itself was "gendered as feminine and consequently vilified as vulgar," given its female-dominated circuits of production and consumption (Davison 133). Early reviewers imagined the genre's audience as vulnerable girls and young women, which shifted scrutiny to the perceived decency of authors and the circulating libraries that distributed their work, fueling a fixation on "correctness, temperance, morality, and purity." The reception of Ann Radcliffe's later novels sets up a double bind of condemnation for both moral "excess" and alleged conventionality. Reviewers decry "excesses" of language, description, length, and suspense even as they fault the works for sameness, ensuring Gothic texts written by women are always either too much or too little and thus always at fault (Gamer 70–71). The fate of Gothic literature shows the issue is classification, not medium: wherever women concentrated cultural labor, it was consigned to the private or domestic sphere, marked as low-status or trivial, branded "vulgar," or reduced to polite amusement unworthy of serious consideration.

In the same vein, women's parlor amusements and "living pictures" offered a near-direct pathway to modern film but, as feminized practices, were filed outside the story of "cinema." As scholar Melanie Dawson observes, such home entertainments were treated as anomalous; their "presumed privateness" and "supposed adherence to codes of feminized, domestic gentility" consigned them to the margins and ensured they received "little extended attention" (11). Even if one adopts a narrow, film-centered definition of cinema, the connection between domestic

amusements and screen culture is unmistakable. Dawson traces a late-nineteenth-century shift (c. 1880-1900) in which home entertainments turned toward showcase forms — tableaux and "living pictures" — that braided industrial advances in textiles, the spread of photography, and the rise of literary realism. And in the few decades following, performances increasingly moved from parlors into semi-public settings such as charity or benefit societies; as commercial entertainments such as theater, nickelodeon, and cinema expanded, domestic amusements receded (6; 131; 137). Women's Gothic authorship and home entertainments alike demonstrate that so-called "non-cinematic" practices were formative rather than ancillary. They cultivated presentational forms, audiences, and habits of looking that cinema later absorbed. However, their work was rendered invisible by a gendered boundary that defined feminized cultural production out of "cinema." Re-centering these feminized sites reframes the archival "gaps" as effects of definition and classification, not evidence of nonparticipation, and restores women's contributions to the prehistory of horror.

Because Tortolani shows how categorization made women's contributions invisible, the women who do appear in early horror read less like exceptions to the rule and more like survivors of a classificatory filter and institutional logics that devalued women's labor. Alice Guy-Blaché offers a case in point: even before 'horror' was codified as a genre, filmmakers — Guy-Blaché among them — wove horrific motifs into silent cinema. Frequently cited as one of the first women to direct films, she is a visible figure shaped by the constraints that made other women's work invisible (Tortolani 25–26). Moreover, she started directing at a time when being a director had not yet accrued the prestige it later would, a fact that, as scholar Heidi Honeycutt argues, may have helped make it possible for her to "direct a film at a time when most women were not allowed to vote" (23-24). The role had not yet been cordoned off as a prestigious, male domain, leaving its boundaries more permeable to women. And although Guy-Blaché endures in

the archive as one of the system's survivors, her reception typifies a historiography that sidelines women, evidence that mere inclusion in the record was one of many obstacles. She merits only a single sentence in David A. Cook's *A History of Narrative Film* (1981), even as early male filmmakers receive extended discussion. Furthermore, many of her films, particularly those hinting at horror or suspense, have been lost (Honeycutt 24; 29). The disparity between the treatment of Guy-Blaché and her male peers demonstrates that beyond entering the record, women faced barriers of evaluative framing, curricular uptake, and scholarly circulation. Far from alone, Guy-Blaché stood among numerous peers whose horror and horror-adjacent work in early cinema has likewise been minimized or forgotten if they were even credited to begin with — including Musidora (Jeanne Roques), Rosa Porten, Louise Kolm-Fleck, Elvira Notari, Marion Wong, Eloyce Gist, Lois Weber, Ida May Park, Mimi Derba, Harriet Mildred Jeffries, Grace Cunard, Julia Crawford Ivers, Germaine Dulac, Cleo de Verberena, Dorothy Davenport, Marie Louise Droop, and Claire Parker.[9]

As the decade turned and sound took hold, women virtually vanished from directing; outside Dorothy Arzner's studio work and scattered European independent and animated films, examples are rare. Not until the rise of television did women begin to regain a foothold behind the camera (65). Yet, as already established, presence behind the camera alone did not translate into recognition, sustained credit, or canonical standing. Ida Lupino's contributions significantly shaped the thriller and, later, television's horror boom; however her film *The Hitch-Hiker* (1953) met the same contradictory charges long leveled at women-authored Gothic fiction — "too violent, not violent enough, too slow, too sensational, or too cheap for RKO (who released it theatrically) and audiences to take seriously" (73-78). Hailed as a "beacon of equality in a time

[9] For more on these women see "Mother of All Evil" in Heidi Honeycutt's *I Spit on Your Celluloid: The History of Women Directing Horror Movies*.

when women in the United States were genuinely confined to highly rigid gender roles," her career was nonetheless policed. In a contemporary interview, she tried to forestall backlash against women directors by affirming her femininity and promising not to "stray into men's territory" (77-78). Thus, the rhetoric of equality masked ongoing gatekeeping, making Lupino's visibility contingent and her authorship precarious.

Despite the re-entry of women into the film industry, a historical pattern of exclusion persisted well into the mid-twentieth century. However, underrepresentation began to shift in the late 1970s, as the number of women working behind the camera increased, with even greater growth during the 1980s (Quart 1). A combination of factors — including increased studio willingness to take creative risks, the growing influence of directors over film production, and the momentum of broader social movements such as civil rights, women's liberation, and equal employment advocacy — helped create new opportunities for women to enter the film industry. They gained increased access to education, union representation, executive roles, and independent filmmaking networks. As a result, more women began directing in television and independent cinema, and a handful even directed studio films (Sheehan 483–484). However, even as more women pursued careers behind the camera, they continued to face systemic obstacles that restricted their opportunities in the industry.

A few women succeeded in directing during the 1970s, but many were denied such opportunities due to a widespread belief that women were incapable of managing film budgets, overseeing the complex aspects of production, or creating films on topics beyond their own personal experiences. A lack of confidence and respect for women filmmakers was rooted in outdated beliefs about biological inferiority, which portrayed women as incapable of multitasking, engaging in serious thought, commanding authority, or managing their emotions

(Sheehan 488). While few women were given opportunities to direct films, those who did break through were often constrained by the belief that women could only create stories rooted in their own supposedly "limited" personal experiences — primarily focusing on emotions and relationships. In contrast, men were presumed to possess greater imaginative and artistic range. As a result, women were often steered toward low-budget relationship films, which generated less profit and reinforced the stereotype that they were incapable of producing commercially viable or diverse cinematic work (489). In addition to being denied opportunities, women who did manage to direct were often placed under a microscope, similar to Lupino. They faced skepticism from their crews, executives, and journalists alike, all of whom questioned their authority and creative decisions. If a film underperformed, these women were disproportionately blamed, with their perceived failure held up as proof of women's unsuitability for directing roles — further reinforcing harmful stereotypes and justifying the continued marginalization of women in the director's chair (484). Together, these systemic and cultural barriers limited women's opportunities in the industry while at the same time shaping the types of stories women were allowed to tell and the genres they could work within, barriers that were particularly pronounced in male-dominated genres such as horror.

Against this backdrop, second-wave exploitation cinema emerged as a site that offered comparatively meaningful opportunities to women. Leading this charge was Roger Corman, who prioritized efficiency and reliability over gender, hiring directors who could deliver films on time and within budget. In the fall of 1964, he brought on Stephanie Rothman as the first woman to direct under his guidance. Rothman expressed gratitude for the opportunity but also noted the limitations of Corman's progressive reputation. Despite being known for hiring women when few others would, Corman did not employ many women overall (Rothman). In fact, of the films

he executive-produced, only eight percent were directed by women (Sloan and Decloux). Still, because he was hiring women at all — however few — Corman was seen by many as a maverick in the industry, especially in the 1970s and 1980s. Rothman, however, was unable to transition from second-wave exploitation to mainstream Hollywood in the same way as her male peers, highlighting the persistent barriers women faced despite Corman's progressive hiring. Compounding this marginalization, histories frequently sanitize the record, favoring icons such as Agnès Varda while treating women in violent or sexually explicit horror as an exploitation underbelly, with any acknowledgment routed through their non-horror accomplishments (Honeycutt 108). Exploitation cinema expanded opportunities for women, but it could only carry them so far.

Momentum picked up again with the VHS era. From the early 1980s until DVDs displaced video cassettes in the late 1990s, home video functioned as a durable distribution pipeline. Echoing television in the 1960s and the independent theater boom of the 1970s, this market opened up directing slots for women. As a result, "by the 1990s new women directors of horror didn't feel so out of place" (Honeycutt 230). Nevertheless, women were routinely sidelined and overlooked. As Chapter One will explore, Amy Holden Jones' 1982 slasher film *The Slumber Party Massacre* was among the subgenre's first woman-directed features. However, she faced significant backlash and, similar to Rothman, struggled to translate her exploitation-market success into mainstream Hollywood opportunities. Mary Lambert offers a parallel case. After helming the Stephen King adaptation *Pet Sematary* (1989) and *Pet Sematary Two* (1992), and despite *Pet Sematary*'s mainstream success, she reported that big-budget studio opportunities did not follow. In a personal interview with Honeycutt, Lambert observed, "I don't think it was so much that women didn't direct horror […] it's that women didn't and still don't,

get directing jobs from the big studios. After I had a very successful film, I didn't get other offers" (318-319). Women's high-profile success followed by a lack of opportunities extended to institutional recognition: in 1993, the Academy Awards trumpeted "The Year of the Woman," yet no women were nominated for Best Director, Best Screenwriter, or as producers of a Best Picture (305). The slogan marketed progress, but the nominations recorded their absence — or, at the very least, how much growth remained.

By decade's end, the industry shifted once again, opening up more directing opportunities for women while simultaneously erecting subtler, more insidious cultural barriers that kept many from working in the industry (Honeycutt 342). Producer Gale Anne Hurd underscored the double standard: "If a woman's film succeeds, it will be slightly easier for her, but if a woman's film bombs, making the next feature will be twice as hard as it is for a man" (qtd. in Snead 13). In this climate, women's success was discounted as an outlier, while failure was used as proof. Consider *American Psycho*: according to Mary Harron, the film "wasn't a huge success, but it wasn't a failure" and "it had some rave reviews." The film carried enough prestige to keep her working, yet she notes that securing her next project was no easier than with *American Psycho*. Furthermore, the offers that followed skewed toward "really bad serial-killer movies that never got made" (Harron). If Harron's "exception" status offered no leverage, the consequences for "failure" were markedly steeper, as Karyn Kusama's comedic horror film *Jennifer's Body* (2009) illustrates. Later canonized as a cult classic, Kusama's film performed poorly on initial release and, by industry logic, landed her in "director's jail," making subsequent studio work difficult (Honeycutt 350; Kusama). Far from anomalies, Kusama and Harron illustrate that the 2000s' broader access in horror carried distinct consequences for women.

Despite real progress, the industry's support for women who make horror is still uneven today. Filmmaker Izzy Lee has been trying to break into commercial filmmaking for years without success — even as men tell her it is a great time to be a woman filmmaker, with women treated as a "hot commodity" and men unable to get meetings.[10] Though she has landed a few meetings, Lee feels studios and production companies are "being shamed into hiring a woman." As she puts it, "I don't know if I've ever actually been taken seriously, and I'm tired as hell of this. Whether they realize it or not, men have been erasing our voices and our names from history. It's time that it's stopped" (Lee 191). Similarly, Aislínn Clarke was told she lacked the "right personality to be a director […] commanding, domineering, single-minded, loud, stubborn, obsessive: masculine" (Clarke 192).[11] From Harron's "exception" without leverage to Kusama's punishment for presumed "failure," and from Lee's stalled entry into commercial filmmaking to Clarke's "wrong personality" verdict, the pattern is consistent: women are present, but recognition and backing remain contingent. This present-tense gatekeeping mirrors the longer historiographical trend traced earlier — one that sidelined women's creative labor across crime and horror, concentrated attention on male directors in canonical surveys, and only recently has begun to be challenged by corrective collections. The result is continuity, not rupture: today's uneven support grows from the same classificatory habits that once kept women off the ledger. Accordingly, women in the slasher subgenre remain marginal, receiving intermittent notice rather than the sustained attention afforded to their male counterparts.

The Slasher Problem

Because any claims about representation presuppose a definitional frame, what follows turns to the problem of what counts as "slasher." As genre theorists Steve Neale and Rick

[10] Lee is the director of *House of Ashes* (2024).
[11] Clarke directed *Fréwaka* (2024).

Altman note, genres resist fixed boundaries; they emerge through ongoing industrial, critical, and audience negotiations.[12] As with other film categories, the slasher film is not a stable set of traits but a historically contingent construct, defined as much by later critical codification as by contemporaneous production practices. Before examining women's presence, labor, and authorship, it is necessary to first establish the criteria and cyclical boundaries that have guided much of the scholarship on slasher films. The following delineation is not intended to reify rigid genre categories or to endorse the often-androcentric critical frameworks that historically defined the slasher; rather, it provides the groundwork for demonstrating how these approaches have informed the subgenre's critical reception and helped cement its misogynistic legacy. By foregrounding genre instability, historicizing terminology, challenging essentialist definitions, and adopting a cyclical heuristic, I aim to establish the foundation for a feminist intervention that reassesses and corrects distortions introduced by early slasher criticism and scholarship.

As with all film genres, the slasher subgenre "is a system of communication comprising two components, the label and the corpus," though the relationship between the components is unstable (*Blood Money*, Nowell 15). Genres — and by extension, subgenres — are not rigid categories. What we call a "slasher film" (the label) and which films we count as slashers (the corpus) have shifted over time and remain open to debate. Even within the industry, the term has sparked confusion: when screenwriter Adam Rockoff told John Dunning, producer of *My Bloody Valentine* (George Mihalka, 1981) and *Happy Birthday to Me* (J. Lee Thompson, 1981), that he was writing a book on the subject, Dunning replied, "What's a slasher film?"[13] Attempting to clarify the term, Rockoff acknowledges that the typical description — "a maniac with a knife

[12] For more on genre theory see Neale's *Genre and Hollywood* and "Questions of Genre" and Altman's *Film/Genre* and "A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre."
[13] Rockoff is credited as a writer on the 2008 slasher *Wicked Lane* (Zach Passero) and the 2010 remake of *I Spit on Your Grave* (Steven R. Monroe).

slaughtering a group of young, good-looking teenagers in a myriad of gruesome ways" — is too simplistic. As he notes, "[b]oth *The Thing* ([John Carpenter,] 1982) and *The Evil Dead* ([Sam Raimi,] 1982) are exceptionally gruesome, bloody and violent, yet they're not slasher films. Both *Cobra* ([Geoge P. Cosmatos,] 1986) and *Kalifornia* ([Dominic Sena,] 1993) involve a knife-wielding maniac, yet they're not slashers either" (16). Rockoff's examples underscore how even seemingly clear criteria, such as the presence of a knife-wielding killer, fail to consistently define what constitutes a slasher film.

In a similar vein, scholar Richard Nowell has pointed out that the term "slasher" has not always been used with precision. He notes that it was broadly applied "for so-called splatter films (filmic showcases for gore), in reference to films which feature blade-wielding killers irrespective of their targets' age, and to youth-centered horror films irrespective of the monster presented therein" (*Blood Money* 17). The expansive application of the label highlights the ongoing difficulty of pinning down a clear and consistent definition of the slasher subgenre. Furthermore, the generic labels given to these films were highly inconsistent during the period of their production. None of these designators endured, and even those that later gained traction — "teenie kill-pics," "stalker films," "slasher movies," and "teen slasher films" — were not in use while the first slasher films themselves were being made (16). The retroactive labeling of early slasher films reveals that the subgenre was not clearly defined at the time of its emergence, and much of what we now recognize as the slasher canon was constructed in hindsight by critics, scholars, and fans.[14]

[14] The term "film noir" was similarly problematic and, similar to slasher films, was labeled retroactively by critics. As Homer B. Pettey demonstrates in his introduction to *Film Noir*, the genre label "film noir" was never a conscious artistic project but rather a critical construction imposed after the fact — a retroactive codification of patters that filmmakers such as Edward Dmytryk were not aware they were creating (1-2, 10-14).

Rockoff's and Nowell's observations together emphasize that the slasher category has always been fluid — its coherence shaped by evolving cultural and critical discourse. While the subgenre's instability complicates efforts to define it precisely, it does not erase the presence of a recognizable formula; rather, it underscores how that formula has taken shape over time through critical conversations, industry practices, and cultural expectations. Recognizing the constructed nature of the formula allows feminist critique to engage with the slasher subgenre's conventions and examine how those conventions have been challenged, reimagined, or subverted by women filmmakers over time. Seeing the formula as a product of cultural and industrial discourse opens up a broader methodological shift: rather than seeking one fixed definition of the slasher, it becomes more productive to view the subgenre through the lens of cycles. Acknowledging the variability in the conventions and formula of slasher films over time, Sotiris Petridis argues that the history of the slasher film is best understood not as a single, continuous tradition but as three periods or cycles: "the classical period (1974 until the end of the 1980s); the postmodern period (1990s); and the neoslashers (2000 until now)" ("A Historical" 83).[15] Applying this cyclical lens to the subgenre reveals how it transforms over time, expanding, contracting, and reconfiguring in response to shifting conditions.

Despite its fluidity and historical variability, the slasher film remains recognizable through a constellation of recurring elements that appear throughout its cycles. According to Petridis, the slasher subgenre is built on a set of core components — the killer, the survivors, the victims, and the moral code that determines who lives and who dies (*Anatomy of* 27). These basic components remain consistent across different slasher films and cycles, forming the recognizable foundation of the genre. What changes over time, however, is how these elements

[15] Petridis initially dates the neoslasher cycle from 2000 onward, but in *Anatomy of the Slasher Film: A Theoretical Analysis* he later narrows its span, arguing that the period effectively ended in 2013 (137).

are used within the story: how the killer's motive is explained, how the survivor is connected to the killer, and how the film defines what counts as acceptable behavior. While the building blocks stay the same, the way they interact and the roles they play evolve across decades, reflecting shifts in cultural values, audience expectations, and social commentary (40-41).[16] These changing patterns generate new cycles within the subgenre while maintaining its overall identity. Accordingly, I adopt a cyclical lens that tracks how the recurrent components persist while their relations are reconfigured across historical moments. In the following sections, I trace the rise, fall, and rebirth of slashers to demonstrate that the formula is historically contingent on industrial and cultural forces; this warrants a cyclical approach and, crucially, enables a feminist revaluation that recovers women's authorship and challenges the misogyny naturalized through criticism and canon formation by exposing the subgenre's conventions and reputation as historically produced rather than intrinsic.

However, it must be acknowledged that the historical overview presented in the following sections remains largely distant from women. The purpose of this dissertation is to recover and examine women's contributions to the slasher subgenre, yet the established history of that subgenre has all but excluded them. The scholarship that charts its rise and evolution tends to acknowledge female authorship only in passing — noting, for instance, that a given film was directed by a woman, without interrogating how that authorship actually appears or what it contributes to the subgenre.[17] Nevertheless, this history is necessary. Understanding the slashers

[16] In *Anatomy of the Slasher Film: A Theoretical Analysis,* Sotiris Petridis argues that the slasher subgenre is built on a stable set of core categories — such as the killer, the victims, the survivor, and Normality — which he calls the "semantic elements." While these remain consistent across films, he explains that the narrative structure, or "syntax," shifts over time as the relationships between these elements are expressed and arranged differently in each cycle (11).

[17] Rockoff addresses Amy Holden Jones and *The Slumber Party Massacre* but limits his study to the period between 1978 and 1986. Petridis similarly acknowledges only Rachel Talalay's *Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare* (1991), though his analysis is itself constrained to slasher films from 1974 to 2016 that ranked within the top 100 of the U.S. annual box office (10–11). Nowell does not discuss any female-directed slashers, and his study extends little beyond

subgenre's industrial conditions, formal conventions, and critical reception is a prerequisite for understanding what is at stake in recovering the women who worked within it. Only by establishing the dominant history can the significance of the women it has overlooked be appreciated. The sections that follow thus lay the groundwork for the feminist reevaluation that is this dissertation's central project.

The Rise of the Slasher Film

The classical slasher cycle's development in the late 1970s and early 1980s was deeply intertwined with the industrial shifts and market conditions that emerged both before and throughout that period. The youth demographic that became central to Hollywood's commercial strategy in the late 1960s and early 1970s prompted a wave of youth-focused, often low-budget films. At the same time, independently produced films had a better chance of being picked up by MPAA members than ever before, as the major studios were producing fewer films while theaters still needed content to meet demand. Between 1972 and 1974, the number of independent films increased by forty-six percent, while major studio output declined by forty percent (*Blood Money*, Nowell 64-65).[18] As the industry opened up to independent productions, filmmakers were able to create films that the major studios could easily distribute and market to young audiences. Yet, these projects still had to prioritize commercial viability, encouraging a balance between creative ambition and market appeal. To achieve MPAA member distribution and financial success, independent filmmakers often emulated the narrative and stylistic patterns

1981. Books focused on women and horror do engage with female-directed horror more broadly, but because they are not specifically about the slasher subgenre, the few slasher films they address are treated in isolation rather than examined in relation to their position within the subgenre's history and conventions.

[18] In the late 1960s, major Hollywood studios were losing significant amounts of money on costly, large-scale productions such as *Hello, Dolly!* (Gene Kelly, 1969) and *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (Richard Fleischer, Kinji Fukasaku, and Toshio Masuda, 1970), which failed at the box office. These financial setbacks led studios to reduce the number of films they produced and to scale back on budgets, becoming more cautious in their investment strategies (*Blood Money*, Nowell 65).

of recent box office hits that appealed to similar youth demographics (25). In short, the economic landscape of the 1970s encouraged the production of adolescent-targeted, cheap films that balanced innovation with profitability — conditions that shaped the rise and structure of the classical slasher cycle.

The Canadian slasher film *Black Christmas* capitalized on the shifts in the American film industry by presenting a female-centered, politically conscious whodunit that blended conventions from multiple blockbuster categories. Drawing on horror, ensemble youth-oriented narratives, romantic drama, and gritty police procedurals, the film tapped into several commercially viable modes of storytelling (Nowell, *Blood Money* 68, 105).[19] The film performed well in Canada, prompting Warner Bros. to acquire the U.S. distribution rights. The American release was a box-office disappointment, but the film ultimately succeeded in introducing a new horror model centered on "young people being menaced by a shadowy blade-wielding killer" (75–77). Recognizing the commercial promise *Black Christmas* had not achieved on the U.S. film market, director John Carpenter and producers Irwin Yablans and Moustapha Akkad teamed up to create *Halloween* in 1977. Aiming to capitalize on the missed opportunity for box-office success that had surrounded the Canadian film, these filmmakers retained its basic story structure while integrating stylistic and thematic elements from more recent blockbusters and youth-focused hits. In particular, they eliminated the whodunit element, replaced the college-aged characters with high school students, modeled the youth group after those seen in popular youth-centered films, and designed the killer to reflect traits found in major blockbuster villains (83-

[19] The popularity of these storytelling modes is reflected in the commercial success of the studio blockbusters *Rosemary's Baby* (Roman Polanski, 1968), *MASH* (Robert Altman, 1970), *Love Story* (Arthur Hiller, 1970), and *Dirty Harry* (Don Siegel, 1971) as well as the strong openings of *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973), *American Graffiti* (George Lucas, 1973), *The Way We Were* (Sydney Pollack, 1973), and *Magnum Force* (Ted Post, 1973) (*Blood Money*, Nowell 68).

92).[20] Unlike *Black Christmas*, *Halloween* did not secure a major studio distribution deal, and its initial box-office performance was modest. However, the film gradually gained traction through word-of-mouth, building success over time rather than achieving immediate commercial impact (99–100). While its growing popularity demonstrated that low-budget, independently distributed horror could find mainstream success, *Halloween* was not solely responsible for shaping the slasher subgenre.

According to Nowell, and contrary to popular belief, *Halloween* did not spark a major wave of American-made imitators. Independent filmmakers in the U.S. were hesitant to pursue a film style that lacked MPAA member distribution and had no additional box office successes to validate its commercial viability (*Blood Money*, Nowell 145-146).[21] The only American slasher film to immediately follow *Halloween* was *Friday the 13th* (Sean S. Cunningham, 1980). Despite critiques of *Friday the 13th* as a copycat of *Halloween*, it was not a risk-free cash-in but a calculated gamble, enabled by the producers' readiness to self-distribute if an MPAA member deal did not materialize. The filmmakers strategically blended *Halloween*'s narrative structure with commercially proven elements from prestige horror and youth comedies to attract the major distributors.[22] Paramount ultimately picked it up, turning it into a summer hit through savvy marketing and wide release (146-147). At the same time, Canadian filmmakers played a key role in the slasher subgenre's emergence. Government policies, including tax incentives and

[20] The commercial success of *The Pom Pom Girls* (Joseph Ruben, 1976) and *Carrie* (Brian De Palma, 1976) helped steer *Halloween* toward a narrative focused on teenage girls (*Blood Money*, Nowell 84). Likewise, the financial triumphs of *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975) and *The Omen* (Richard Donner, 1976) shaped the portrayal of Michael Myers — especially his role as a "relentless and seemingly unstoppable" monster who "prowls a familiar location during a date of cultural significance" (92).

[21] Additionally, filmmakers at the time had several safer and more reliable options to pursue: gang movies, animal comedies, roller-disco movies, female-centered coming of age dramas, and established horror subgenres (*Blood Money*, Nowell 116).

[22] Specifically, *Friday the 13th* drew from *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979), *Eyes of Laura Mars* (Irvin Kershner, 1978), *The Omen*, *Meatballs*, and *National Lampoon's Animal House* (John Landis, 1978) (*Blood Money*, Nowell 146).

subsidies, made Canadian productions more financially competitive for U.S. distributors. Following the popularity of *Meatballs* (Ivan Reitman, 1979), Canadian producers began developing youth-oriented, U.S.-set films aimed at attracting American audiences. The same approach was applied to *Halloween*'s formula with the creation of *Prom Night* (Paul Lynch, 1980), which demonstrated the slasher subgenre's viability in the market. By the summer of 1980, the gradual success of *Halloween* was further strengthened by the strong performance of both *Prom Night* and *Friday the 13th* (185). Although *Black Christmas* marked the true beginnings of the subgenre and *Halloween* represented an important development, it was the box-office success of *Friday the 13th* and *Prom Night* that ultimately established the slasher film as a commercially viable and sustainable presence in the industry during the early 1980s.

From these early films emerged what is now recognized as the classical slasher cycle.[23] Defined both by its stylistic conventions and subsequent critical theorization, Petridis characterizes this cycle by its middle-class, conservative milieu, its focus on adolescent characters who engage in divergent behaviors, and its punitive killer figure, who enacts violence as a means of enforcing dominant norms yet is ultimately punished for his own deviation from those norms. Within this structure, the only character permitted to survive is the Final Girl, whose survival stems from her adherence to the film's moral and social codes. The killer's origin is often rooted in sexual transgression or broader social deviance, tenuously connected to the film's current plot, which reinforces a conservative association between sexual activity and violent punishment (Petridis, *Anatomy of* 44). In *Halloween* (1978), Michael Myers murders his sister after witnessing her sexual activity, then, fifteen years later, escapes from an asylum and

[23] I want to note at the outset that the tropes and conventions of the slasher subgenre have often been discussed in essentialist terms. Yet the subgenre contains numerous deviations from these patterns, which I will address later in this chapter.

returns to his hometown. He stalks Laurie and her friends, disproportionately targeting those who engage in sex or other "deviant" behaviors. Laurie — coded throughout as "pure" and morally upright — emerges as the sole adolescent survivor. Similarly, in *Friday the 13th*, Pamela Voorhees (Betsy Palmer) holds camp counselors responsible for her son's drowning and, years later, murders the new staff attempting to reopen the camp, many of whom are marked by sexual activity or other "deviant" behavior. Alice Hardy (Adrienne King) is the sole survivor, but unlike Laurie's stricter "purity" coding, Alice is not framed as unequivocally virginal; the film even hints at a tentative romance with the lead camp counselor, Steve Christy (Peter Brouwer).

Although classical slasher films emerged in the mid-1970s, they peaked in the early 1980s. Therefore, their conservatism is often seen as a reflection of the 1980s sociopolitical conditions. Ronald Reagan's presidency ushered in a renewed conservative sociopolitical climate, while the emergence of the AIDS crisis intensified cultural anxieties surrounding sexuality. Together, these developments are often identified as central to the classical slasher film's tendency to punish sexual and transgressive behavior (*Anatomy of* 44-45). While not all classical slashers are equally conservative, the prevailing pattern links sexuality to punishment. This association loosens as the subgenre evolves, but, as later discussion will show, its centrality to the classical period may itself be a product of critical overemphasis, much like other tropes attributed to that era.

The Evolution of the Subgenre

After a short window of financial success in 1980 and early 1981, slasher momentum declined. As Richard Nowell notes, "MPAA members eventually stopped offering pickup deals to the independent producers of teen slasher films after market saturation generated weak ticket sales in 1981" ("'There's More'" 139). In the absence of clear profitability, MPAA members

were disinclined to finance or release slasher films, especially standalone entries. Nonetheless, the cycle did not disappear: through the early to mid-1980s, it persisted with notable titles such as *Sleepaway Camp* (Robert Hiltzik, 1983), *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven, 1984), and *April Fool's Day* (Fred Walton, 1986). Yet, the predictability of its conventions bred audience fatigue, and by the early 1990s, output had narrowed to sequels from the best-known franchises (Petridis, "A Historical" 80). The subgenre's decline, however, was not final; it mutated into a reflexive, self-referential form — the postmodern slasher.

The Postmodern Cycle

Ushered in by *New Nightmare* (Wes Craven, 1994), the slasher subgenre reanimated itself in a postmodern mode, ironizing and reworking conventions that had grown stale. In part, the self-reflexivity of *New Nightmare* can be attributed to Craven's own critique of the series' decline into formula and repetition. Critics such as Claire Perkins and Steve Jones note that the film bridges Craven's frustration with "unconsidered sequels" and his growing interest in meta-horror. At the same time, the film's inclusion of "videographic ruins" from earlier installments underscores his exhaustion with Hollywood's commercial system (Bledstein 209). Viewed within this light, the film seems more akin to an intervention in his franchise rather than just another sequel. Craven's inward, industry-facing meta softens the teen-thrill formula the series had trained audiences to expect and replaces Freddy Krueger's (Robert Englund) crowd-pleasing antics with commentary about franchise fatigue and censorship. Although the film is textually obsessed with youth media habits and explicitly links *Elm Street* to home viewership and the "video nasties" era, it does not center teens as protagonists in a high-school milieu (209). The adult-oriented meta and self-audit posture made by *New Nightmare* made it less immediately

accessible to the teen audience usually targeted with slasher films, which likely contributed to its struggles at the box office.

Although *New Nightmare* was not a commercial hit, it did establish a template for a new phase of the subgenre that appealed to a media-literate 1990s teen audience — one formed by cable, VHS, and cross-media marketing — and renewed the form by revising, rather than replaying, its rules. As John Carpenter noted at the time, any new slasher film had to account for a "cynical, young, new [1990s teenage] audience who believe very sincerely that they're smarter than the movies they see" (qtd. in Wee 45). Carpenter's remark anticipated that era's self-aware tone and explained why simple formula repetition no longer sufficed. Craven's follow-up slasher, *Scream* (1996), turned that creative adjustment into a marketable formula, reaching the contemporary adolescent audience and consolidating the subgenre's rebirth.[24] The film earned $10 million in its opening weekend and proved successful enough to merit a lucrative re-release (White-Stanley and Flinn 173). *Scream*'s strong performance demonstrated a market demand for slasher films that foregrounded savvy spectatorship and intertextual play. And although *New Nightmare* is the true beginning of the postmodern cycle, it was *Scream*'s popularity and profitability that triggered an "inevitable avalanche of new-wave slasher-thrillers" (West, "Horror, Happy" 10). In this respect, *Scream* functioned the same as *Halloween*, *Friday the 13th, Black Christmas*, and *Prom Night* in the classical cycle: its success catalyzed a cluster of imitators, translating aesthetic innovation into a repeatable production strategy.

Imitation flourished precisely because the market embraced the cycle's postmodern tactics — self-referentiality and intertextuality. Self-referentiality, often mobilized through parody and pastiche, offered a solution to the classical cycle's predictability problem by

[24] Worldwide, *Scream* took in $173 million, whereas *New Nightmare* managed only $19.7 million (Petridis, "A Historical" 81).

foregrounding the film's own making. As the work points to its own production choices, invokes an authorial presence, names the codes that organize slasher storytelling, cites earlier texts, and anticipates audience response, viewers register what the "expected" move would be; the film can then swerve, delay, or overplay that move, creating surprise instead of repetition. By acknowledging their own construction, these films do more than expose the subgenre's rules. They also enter into a dialogue with earlier entries that makes new moves possible. Self-referential slasher films revisit rather than replicate the classical template, subjecting it to critique and revision to yield films that are recognizably in the subgenre yet newly self-aware (*Anatomy of* 46). In short, visibility becomes variability, and variability renews the form without abandoning it.

Beyond self-referentiality and intertextuality, the postmodern slasher film tilted toward whodunit plotting, amplified the killer's backstory and psychology, and traded the earlier cycle's moral conservatism for hyperconscious knowingness. Rather than front-loading the killer's identity and origin — as in *Halloween*, *The Slumber Party Massacre*, and *Silent Night, Deadly Night* (Charles E. Sellier Jr., 1984) — postmodern slashers such as *Scream*, *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (Jim Gillespie, 1997), and *Urban Legend* (Jamie Blanks, 1998) withhold both until the climax (77).[25] Additionally, postmodern slashers make the killer's backstory explicitly causal, tightening the link between origin and motive (83-84). For instance, in *Urban Legend*, Brenda's (Rebecca Gayheart) killings avenge her fiancé's (Vince Corazza) death in a crash caused by Natalie (Alicia Witt) and Michelle (Natasha Gregson Wagner). At the same time, the

[25] Not all slashers adhere to this tendency. Some classical entries withhold the killer's identity until the finale — *Friday the 13th* famously reveals Pamela Voorhees at the end — while parts of the 1990s revival keep a known-killer model, as in *Halloween H20: 20 Years Later* (Steve Miner, 1998), where Michael Myers' identity is never in doubt. These exceptions underscore that the shift is a strong trend rather than a strict rule in the same way as all slasher tropes.

cycle shifts away from punitive conservatism toward a hyperconscious mode that includes self-referentiality and intertextuality and also populates that narrative with genre-savvy characters who think and speak like informed viewers (*Anatomy of* 77-81; "A Historical" 80). Characters behave like real people in a media-saturated world while also naming the conventions that structure their stories, a double posture that blurs fiction and reality. This blur is not merely stylistic; it reflects the sociopolitical moment in which these films were made and consumed. As Petridis notes, U.S. public life was itself growing more spectacular, narrowing the distance between the "real" and the performed as an actor became president and the Gulf War unfolded as twenty-four-hour television. Postmodern slashers register the same condition, populating their narratives with media-literate characters who comment on the genre even as they inhabit it (*Anatomy of* 82–83). Postmodern slashers thus operated in dialogue with their cultural moment, reworking subgenre formulas for an audience fluent in media language and attuned to the collapse of boundaries between reality and performance.

Having redefined the slasher subgenre's narrative and ideological grammar, the postmodern cycle dominated late-1990s horror. By the early 2000s, however, the form shifted again. Postmodern devices were still present, but the subgenre had to adapt to remain commercially and culturally viable. Given the cycle's brevity, Petridis argues that the "postmodern period could be considered a transitional period from classical slashers to neoslashers" (81). Even as a transitional phase, it matters: postmodern slasher films marked a turn away from sexual punishment and strict adherence to classical conventions, opening space for new configurations of motive, character, and tone (81). What emerged next, the neoslasher, refined rather than reset the template built by the postmodern slasher.

The Neoslasher Cycle

In keeping with broader trends across the early-2000s film industry, the neoslasher cycle was deeply influenced by contemporary cultural forces, especially the George W. Bush administration and the post-9/11 national mood. Bush's presidency echoed Reagan's in its ideological agenda and social conservatism, with an emphasis on "family values." As Petridis notes, the post-9/11 War on Terror was a catalyst for the era's conservative turn. And as the 1980s were defined by anxieties around the AIDS crisis, the 2000s were dominated by fears of terrorism ("A Historical" 82). Despite claims that 9/11 dampened audience appetite for onscreen violence, popular post-9/11 trends — including home-invasion narratives and the "torture porn" subgenre — were conspicuously violent, albeit with thematic emphases on xenophobia, vulnerability, and revenge. Hollywood initially assumed post-9/11 audiences would want patriotic, reassuring entertainment, even positioning filmmaking as a civic duty to provide comfort and restore morale. However, by the mid-2000s, the opposite trend emerged: horror surged in popularity (Wetmore 13).[26] It was within this climate that the slasher subgenre began to flourish again and the neoslasher took shape.

Departing from prior cycles, the neoslasher era bifurcates into two primary strands: remakes and original entries.[27] Beginning with *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Marcus Nispel, 2003) and followed by *Black Christmas* (Glen Morgan, 2006), *Halloween* (Rob Zombie, 2007), *Friday the 13th* (Marcus Nispel, 2009), and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Samuel Bayer, 2010), the early 2000s witnessed a boom in slasher remakes. *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* was

[26] According to Wetmore, by 2005, about one-fifth of Lions Gate's releases were horror, and between September 2005 and April 2006 seven horror titles debuted at number one; the period also saw the launch of Afterdark Horrorfest and Showtime's *Masters of Horror* (Mick Garris, 2005-2007), a surge in American remakes of J-horror, and the emergence of so-called "torture porn" (13-14).

[27] The original neoslasher texts can further be categorized into subcategories "such as post-postmodern neoslashers, films that are part of a classical slasher franchise, or even mockumentary neoslashers" ("A Historical" 82).

marketed on brand recognition to a fresh cohort of viewers who knew Hooper's 1974 original by reputation. Its modest budget and strong grosses demonstrated that remaking horror could be a dependable business model (Mee 5-6). Yet while cinema functions as a commodity and remakes leverage built-in audiences to mitigate risk, the neoslasher remake cannot be reduced to economics alone. As Kevin J. Wetmore suggests, "[p]ost-9/11 horror is nostalgic for pre-9/11 horror, particularly that of the eighties" (193). Rather than understanding these films simply as Hollywood exploiting existing intellectual property, he argues that their popularity is tied to the trauma and uncertainty of the post-9/11 era. In this context, the remade slasher film becomes a form of cultural looking-back: a return to Reagan-era horror and its aesthetics of American dominance, resilience, and clear-cut threats, although with new social anxieties in mind, such as terrorism and nihilism.

Although the nostalgic pull of neoslasher remakes helped reignite the subgenre in the 2000s, the success of *Freddy vs. Jason* (Ronny Yu, 2003) is what ultimately demonstrated "a public appetite for slasher films" (Kvaran 965). *Freddy vs. Jason* was still rooted in established intellectual property, but it was not a remake — suggesting that the subgenre's revival did not hinge solely on reimagining earlier texts. Indeed, many neoslashers of the period were not remakes of classical slasher films at all, underscoring that the cycle extended beyond nostalgic recycling (Mee 81). Rather than operating merely as a nostalgic reboot, the neoslasher articulated its own conventions and revitalized the subgenre for the new millennium. Chief among these is a sustained focus on the killer and the formation, explanation, and justification of evil. Extending the postmodern turn toward causality, neoslashers push further by furnishing antagonists with plausible motives and three-dimensional psychological profiles ("A Historical" 83). For example, *Behind the Mask: The Rise of Leslie Vernon* (Scott Glosserman, 2006) follows its

would-be killer in mock-documentary style as he trains, reflects on slasher "tradition," and articulates his motivations, foregrounding the construction and psychology of evil rather than taking it as a given. On the other hand, in *Final Destination* (James Wong, 2000), "Death" functions as an unseen antagonist whose kills follow a decipherable pattern; the film shifts the slasher subgenre's causal emphasis from personal pathology to an impersonal, almost bureaucratic mechanism, reinforcing the era's preoccupation with inevitability, threat systems, and the rationalization of fear.

Beyond its deeper scrutiny of evil and the killer, the neoslasher selects victims through personal ties to the antagonist or sheer bad luck; similar to the postmodern cycle, it no longer treats sexual behavior as the arbiter of survival. In *You're Next* (Adam Wingard, 2011), the massacre is orchestrated as a family, insurance-driven murder-for-hire. The targets are relatives and partners, not "promiscuous" teens. Chance and misfortune drive other entries such as *The Strangers* (Bryan Bertino, 2008), where the motive for killing is reduced to "Because you were home." The prevalence of arbitrary, unjustified deaths resembling those seen in *The Strangers*, *Wolf Creek* (Greg McLean, 2005), and *Vacancy* (Nimród Antal, 2007) reflect post-9/11 anxieties about randomness and vulnerability. These shifts also alter survivor conventions: the virginal Final Girl is no longer guaranteed, multiple survivors may emerge, and in some cases, the apparent Final Girl becomes the killer (83). Erin (Sharni Vinson) is an unexpectedly capable survivor whose skills, not sexual restraint or purity, determine her endurance in *You're Next*, while *The Collection* (Marcus Dunstan, 2012) pivots to a rescue-mission frame that yields more than one survivor. Finally, neoslashers such as *Scream 4* (Wes Craven, 2011) and *All the Boys Love Mandy Lane* (Jonathan Levine, 2006) initially position Jill Roberts (Emma Roberts) and Mandy Lane (Amber Heard) as Final Girls before ultimately disclosing that they are the killers

or the cause of the killings. As a result, neoslashers abandon the rules about victimhood and survival, developing new patterns responsive to contemporary social and political anxieties rather than reproducing the overstated formulas of the classical era.[28]

Petridis identifies 2013 as the endpoint of the neoslasher cycle, noting that after this year, no slasher release managed to place within the U.S. box-office top-100. He attributes the third cycle's closure to industrial reconfiguration rather than audience fatigue: indie horror increasingly bypassed theaters for video-on-demand, and slasher storytelling migrated into television and online formats. The subgenre remains culturally relevant, but toward the end of the 2010s, it flowed through TV and internet platforms rather than theatrical release (*Anatomy of* 137-138). Although the present phase lacks a settled cycle label, slasher production has neither ceased nor waned; if anything, it has intensified across theatrical and streaming contexts.

The Slasher Today

Paralleling the neoslasher cycle, the current moment blends legacy intellectual property with fresh idioms: *Halloween* and *Scream* reboots and requels coexist with streaming-era experiments including the *Fear Street* trilogy (Leigh Janiak, 2021) and television series *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (Sara Goodman, 2021), alongside stylistically distinct one-offs — the *X* trilogy (Ti West, 2022–24), *Freaky* (Christopher Landon, 2020), and *Totally Killer* (Nahnatchka Khan, 2023).[29] And, while scholars such as Ilias Ben Mna, Marina Soler Jorge, and Ana Karolina Aparecida Alves da Silva have been analyzing individual contemporary slashers and franchises, the work of identifying and theorizing the current cycle has, so far, been taken up

[28] Once again, I want to note that not every film within a cycle conforms neatly to that era's tropes and conventions. For instance, *Valentine* (Jamie Blanks, 2001) reasserts a moral-retribution logic. The Final girl, Kate (Marley Shelton) is comparatively unmarked by transgression and survives while more conspicuously "at-fault" victims are punished. Similar moral and gendered survival patterns recur in *My Bloody Valentine 3D* (Patrick Lussier, 2009) and *Sorority Row* (Steward Hendler, 2009).

[29] As Ilias Ben Mna explains, a "requel" merges features of both remakes and sequels, producing a hybrid continuation-and-revival model (145).

primarily by popular film critics writing for digital publications. Sophia McCann, a student writer for *The Eagle*, characterizes the moment as a slasher revival that experiments with form and setting, keeps women central without purity constraints, and develops more multidimensional protagonists ("Slasher Films"). Likewise, award-winning film and TV writer Jason Hellerman argues that social media has affected the slasher subgenre by weaving platforms and digital culture into the killers' motives, victim behavior, and narrative design; he also notes an escalation in brutality and a turn toward more diverse, inclusive stories that move beyond the familiar "white high school" template ("The Evolution"). Beyond a simple cluster of releases, what emerges is a coherent reconfiguration of the slasher, in which legacy intellectual property, streaming architectures, social-media logics, and inclusive casting converge to shape a distinctly post-neoslasher moment.

These updates to the slasher subgenre may indicate a deeper industrial and aesthetic realignment. The resurgence of slashers films is taking place alongside the rise of "prestige" or — as scholar David Church calls it — post-horror. Church defines post-horror as a stylistic tendency that "contain[s] and move[s] beyond the ethos" of prior horror forms, favoring minimalism, restraint, and post-irony over visceral spectacle or meta-humor, and often approaching the tone and structure of character-driven drama (27-28, 38). Essentially, he argues that post-horror is not a totally new kind or genre of horror, but a style that builds on older horror movies while trying to move past them. Instead of big scares, gore, or winking jokes about the genre, these films focus on slow pacing, subtle tension, and serious, character-driven stories, more reminiscent of dramas that just happen to be horrifying. Because many post-horror films adopt arthouse aesthetics, critics have often labeled them "smart" or "prestige" horror to denote their cultural refinement and differentiate them from more mainstream commercial horror (34).

Although labels such as “smart” or “prestigious” risk implying that other forms of horror are somehow inferior, the critical discourse surrounding post-horror — and the cultural prestige it afforded the genre — may have contributed to the slasher film’s resurgence and the emergence of its current cycle.

Church does not identify any slasher films as post-horror, yet the subgenre has clearly evolved in conversation with it, at times drawing on post-horror tendencies such as intimate character focus, attention to trauma, and slower, more dramatic pacing. For instance, the requel *Scream* (2022) and its sequel *Scream VI* (Matt Bettinelli-Olpin and Tyler Gillett, 2023) retain the franchise’s self-reflexive slasher grammar, but they adopt post-horror’s trauma discourse and legacy-sequel gravitas. Mirroring post-horror’s emphasis on intergenerational wounds and psychological fallout, both films foreground Sidney Prescott’s (Neve Campbell) and Sam Carpenter’s (Melissa Barrera) inherited trauma, lineage, and therapy language as narrative stakes. Their tonal seriousness and interest in emotional continuity introduce a post-horror inflection into a traditionally ironic and referential franchise. On the other hand, *Bodies Bodies Bodies* (Halina Reijn, 2022) adopts post-horror’s slow-burn tension and character-driven psychological play while also employing slasher or whodunit logic to the narrative. Its focus on interpersonal dynamics, generational malaise, social media toxicity, and claustrophobic group paranoia aligns it with post-horror’s discursive concerns. Yet the core structure, confined setting, escalating suspicion, mourning body count, and gratuitous killings remain grounded in slasher tradition. Although these films are only two examples of contemporary slasher films, they illustrate how the current cycle has partially absorbed post-horror’s emphasis on trauma, psychological depth, and stylistic experimentation while still mobilizing the core mechanics of

the subgenre, resulting in hybrid works that circulate within both popular and art-horror economies.

Slasher Film Reception to Theory

The cyclical account of the slasher subgenre reveals it as an evolving, historically contingent form shaped by market pressures, aesthetic shifts, and cultural anxieties. Yet despite this mutability, reception discourses solidified a narrative of intrinsic misogyny that has proven remarkably durable. Therefore, it is necessary to return to criticism and academic theorization to trace how this reputation was constructed, stabilized, and mobilized — and to underscore the stakes of a feminist revaluation. Critical understandings of the slasher subgenre have often begun with the assumption that it was designed to cater to male fantasies of violence against women. As Nowell explains, "it has been claimed that [slasher films] were made to feed the fantasies—misogynistic, masochistic, or sadistic—of young men" ("'There's More Than'" 115). Although scholars such as Carol Clover, Vera Dika, Edward Donnerstein, Daniel Linz, and Steven Penrod have reinforced this view through their analyses of how women are represented and victimized within the films, Nowell instead locates the perception of the slasher subgenre as misogynistic and "for men" within the cultural discourse of the early 1980s, rather than attributing it to any inherent agenda against women. Specifically, he points to the influential critiques of film critics Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert as a central catalyst. Their widely circulated opinions exemplify how public debate — particularly the debates about "cinematic femicide" that emerged following *Dressed to Kill* (Brian De Palma, 1980) — established the slasher subgenre's poor reputation (115).

On their PBS show *Sneak Previews*, Siskel and Ebert praised *Halloween* but condemned *Friday the 13th*, *Prom Night*, *Terror Train* (Roger Spottiswoode, 1980), and many other slasher

films from the classic period as sleazy "women in danger films." They argued that these types of films exploited women through their visceral representations of extreme violence and gratuitous nudity. Outside of notable exceptions such as *Halloween* and *Psycho*, they insisted that most slasher films were devoid of artistry and good taste and, instead, could be boiled down to one thing: women screaming in terror. Ebert ultimately concluded, "These films hate women, and unfortunately the audiences that go to them don't seem to like women too much either" ("Women in Danger"). Their condemnatory attitude toward the subgenre was "popularly adopted as the received wisdom on the subject" and "[i]n the era of the second wave of feminism, these films were seen as depicting a masculine revenge upon women — particularly those who dared to be sexual" (Miller 111). In spite of differences in representation and the well-documented attempts by producers to appeal to women audiences, the overarching association between slashers and the objectification and victimization of women persisted, shaping the academic discourse surrounding the subgenre.[30]

Siskel and Ebert were hardly alone in influencing pubic, and later academic, discourse around the slasher subgenre. Other prominent critics condemned the films and subgenre outright. In *The Washington Post*'s "Critics Roundtable," Joseph McLellan argued that "[t]he horror film reached a new low this year [1980] in what we might call the 'Kill-the-Teen-agers' cycle," adding that *Fridy the 13th*, "probably the most technically accomplished and thematically impoverished of these films, gave me the worst two hours I have ever spent in a theater seat" (F1). In *The Hollywood Reporter*, Ron Pennington likewise dismissed *Friday the 13th*, claiming

[30] See Richard Nowell's *Blood Money: A History of the First Teen Slasher Film Cycle* for a detailed account of the history of slasher film marketing, particularly the extent to which women were a central consideration in their production. For further discussion of the variability within the slasher subgenre, see Janet Staiger's "The Slasher, the Final Girl and the Anti-Denouement" in *Style and Form in the Hollywood Slasher Film* (edited by Wickham Clayton).

that "gruesome violence, in which throats are slashed, and heads are split open in realistic detail, is the sum content" of the film; he further labeled it "a sick and sickening low budget feature," a "blatant exploitation of the lowest order" (3). A year later, *Los Angeles Times* critic Linda Gross diminished the subgenre in her piece on *Final Exam* (Jimmy Huston, 1981), calling it "just another maniac-on-the-loose suspenser" that "doesn't bring anything new to the young-folk-getting-killed genre" (7). Although she stops short of outright vilification, her "just another" framing and stacked genre labels convey clear distaste for the film and its peers. Jimmy Summers is even blunter in *Boxoffice*, branding *The Burning* (Tony Maylam, 1981) "one of the sickest of the recent string of gore fests." He concedes it is "slickest and best performed of the genre," but argues that this polish only makes it more "stomach-churning." He also faults its "pandering attention" to nudity, noting that "it has all the tastefulness of soft-core porn," and ends with the sardonic line, "what a way to pay your bills" (50). Contemporary reviews such as these did more than pan individual titles: they helped fix the subgenre's early reputation as formulaic, morally vacuous, and crudely sensational, a framing that many mid- to late-1980s scholarly accounts then took up as evidence of the slasher film's adolescent male-market pandering and misogynistic tendencies.

As the discourse moved beyond reviews, some of the first sustained studies of slashers came from Vera Dika and Carol J. Clover, whose analyses helped consolidate the subgenre as an object of academic inquiry. Preceding them, Robin Wood had already articulated a case for taking the cycle seriously, even as his readings introduced some overemphasized and occasionally misleading assumptions about its tropes and conventions. Clover had not yet coined the term "Final Girl," but Wood lays groundwork for the idea by asserting "the survivor in the teenie-kill movies [slashers]—endurer of the ultimate ordeals, terrors, and agonies—is invariably

female" (221). His use of the word "invariably" is an overreach: even in the early classical cycle, we see multiple-survivor endings and cases where survival is not neatly tethered to sexual conduct. Treating a dominant tendency as an absolute obscures these variations and flattens the subgenre's range of narrative solutions, industrial contingencies, and feminist potential. Nevertheless, Wood's intervention marks the moment when slashers shift from critical derision to scholarly debate, establishing questions — about survival, spectatorship, and gendered violence — that Clover, Dika, and later theorists would formalize. The following sections trace how these foundational frameworks emerged, beginning with the Final Girl, moving through the male gaze, and culminating in early arguments about violence against women, in order to map the conceptual architecture that shaped the slasher subgenre's initial academic life, its misogynistic legacy, and the limitations my project seeks to nuance.

The Final Girl

Among the early studies, none proved more influential than Clover's; her formulation of the Final Girl quickly became the field's touchstone and one of the most widely recognized tropes of the subgenre. Introduced in her 1987 article, "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film," the Final Girl refers to the lone female survivor in slasher films.[31] According to Clover, the Final Girl is typically portrayed as either surviving long enough to be rescued by a male character or managing to kill the slasher herself (35). Classic examples include Sally Hardesty (Marilyn Burns) from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, Laurie Strode from *Halloween*, and Alice Hardy from *Friday the 13th* — all young women who endure the trauma of the slasher film's violence and survive to its conclusion.

[31] Clover's article was later republished in her 1992 book *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film.*

In contrast to other female characters, the Final Girl is depicted as abstinent, hyper-vigilant (sometimes bordering on paranoia), intelligent, and resourceful. Laurie, for example, is framed as the "good girl" in *Halloween*, choosing to babysit rather than go out with boys. She is more cautious and observant than her friends, sensing something is off when she repeatedly spots Michael Myers watching her, even as her peers remain unaware or dismiss her concerns. Similarly, Alice shows a quiet awareness of tension at Camp Crystal Lake and ultimately defends herself by beheading Pamela Voorhees with a machete. Sally, though less assertive at the outset of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, survives a night of relentless terror through sheer will, managing to escape Leatherface's grasp by leaping into a passing pickup truck in the film's final moments. While these examples align with Clover's argument that the Final Girl adopts an "'active investigating gaze' normally reserved for males and punished in females," they also illustrate the broader gender ambiguity that defines the trope (48).

Clover ultimately theorized that the Final Girl possesses a "boyish" quality or is "not fully feminine" (39-40). Her gender, she argues, is "compromised from the outset by her masculine interests, her inevitable sexual reluctance, her apartness from other girls, [and] sometimes her name" (48). Around the same time, Dika also identifies an ambiguity in the heroine, a concept that aligns with but does not explicitly employ the term "Final Girl." She notes that the survivor occupies a liminal space, embodying both traditionally feminine and masculine traits, distinguishing her from the other characters (90). For instance, Laurie displays traditionally feminine traits as a nurturing, emotionally attuned babysitter; she is soft-spoken, dresses modestly, and carries herself with a gentle demeanor. At the same time, she is set apart from the other young women by masculine-coded qualities: she is academically serious, rational, observant, and vigilant, recognizing — or, at least, feeling — danger before others. She also

repurposes household objects as weapons, protects others, and moves through town on her own, defined more by independence than by romance. Sally and Alice likewise blend feminine and masculine traits. Both are compassionate and attentive to those around them, and Alice, in particular, is soft-spoken and artistically inclined. Yet each demonstrates notable resilience and agency, enduring prolonged pursuit, injury, and trauma. More than Sally, Alice exhibits stronger masculine coding: she has implied carpentry knowledge, takes initiative in investigating noises and danger, and physically confronts Pamela Voorhees. She is also styled more androgynously, with short hair and a simple, neutral wardrobe. The Final Girl, as theorized by Clover and Dika, is best understood as a hybridized gender figure whose blend of traits enables her survival.

At the same time, their accounts position her as outside — and at times actively resistant to — the social norms of sexualized femininity. By avoiding nudity and eschewing romantic relationships, the Final Girl is visually and narratively separated from the other female characters, who might embody or explore sexuality more openly. Although Clover does not explicitly state this in her description of the Final Girl, she implies that the character embodies more than mere abstinence; the Final Girl often appears wary of dating, may face teasing for her lack of romantic involvement, or is portrayed as unattached, isolated, and indifferent to male attention (39). Moreover, while it is not entirely forbidden for the Final Girl to be shown in partial undress, “she is less likely to disrobe to the point of nudity” (Dika 91). Across early slashers, the Final Girl stands slightly apart from heterosexual teen culture: Laurie is teased for her lack of romantic experience, Sally is narratively detached from any courtship dynamic, and Alice — whether currently or formerly involved — hesitates when Steve makes subtle advances towards her. Rather than just abstinence defining them, these Final Girls are marked by a degree

of social and romantic distance that reinforces their liminality within the gendered teen environment of the slasher.

Clover and Dika's accounts align with scholar Jody Keisner's later interpretation of the Final Girl's chaste image, which she argues conveys a clear moral stance: "premarital sex is *bad*; watching pornography/violence on the Internet is *bad*" (419). The trope extends beyond sexual abstinence to a broader, socially constructed ideal of feminine "purity" and moral superiority that aligned with the conservative sociopolitical climate of the 1980s. This logic also echoes Hollywood's Hays Code legacy. Although the Motion Picture Production Code was abolished in 1968, its central moral logic — that transgression demands punishment — lingered in Hollywood. Under the Code, wrongdoing had to be met with consequences to deter youthful imitation, uphold Christian moral standards, and avert boycotts that threatened profitability (Lewis 89-88; 100; 108). Thus, Keisner reframes the Final Girl's innocence as a moral message to the audience: a woman's survival is contingent upon her rejection of behaviors deemed "bad" or risky, such as premarital sex or the consumption of explicit media. This implicit "purity" coding positions the Final Girl as a socially acceptable role model, whose worthiness is, in part, tied to her moral choices. Consequently, the Final Girl trope becomes a vehicle for reinforcing cultural values around female behavior, subtly rewarding abstinence, modesty, and isolation with survival. In this way, the Final Girl does not simply survive the killer, she upholds a moral paradigm that contrasts her from other characters who deviate from this ideal.

Consequently, the Final Girl has emerged as a focal point of scholarly debate regarding her capacity to subvert, reinforce, or reconfigure gender norms within the slasher subgenre. Some see the Final Girl's survival and strength as an empowering display of female resilience, while others argue that her character reinforces problematic gender norms, positioning her within

a framework primarily shaped by male perspectives. Academics Klaus Rieser and Keisner both attack the Final Girl trope, challenging its potential to disrupt the patriarchal structures that define gender roles in horror cinema. Rieser argues that the Final Girl's capacity to challenge patriarchal norms is often overstated. Typically, she merely survives, gaining little meaningful experience or social approval, and her supposed independence is undermined by her association with victimhood, similar to other female characters. More significantly, despite her role as protagonist, the Final Girl primarily serves as an object of desire within the narrative (Rieser 377). Similarly, Keisner claims that "the Final Girl does little for female empowerment," suggesting that she fails to encourage female identification (425). Keisner's critique suggests that, despite surviving the horrors around her, the Final Girl's role may not genuinely challenge gender norms or empower viewers. This limits the trope's potential to inspire female audiences or foster a sense of solidarity. While Rieser and Keisner are not entirely mistaken in the observations that led them to these conclusions, it is important to note that both base their claims on a relatively narrow selection of films and then extrapolate sweeping generalizations about the Final Girl trope in the subgenre as a whole.[32]

Kyle Christensen builds on the critiques of Rieser and Keisner by highlighting two significant misconceptions surrounding the Final Girl trope: the assumption that the Final Girl is inherently a feminist figure and the belief that Laurie serves as an ideal model of feminist representation. Though Christensen does not deny that Final Girls can embody feminist qualities, he argues that Clover's concept, as seen in Laurie, does not achieve this. In *Halloween*, Laurie survives largely by chance and necessity, using household objects defensively, reacting to attacks

[32] Rieser's analysis draws on the *Halloween*, *Friday the 13th*, and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* franchises, along with *Psycho* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. Keisner, meanwhile, centers her discussion on *feardotcom* (William Malone, 2002) but also references the same franchises as Rieser, in addition to *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Part 2* (Tobe Hooper, 1986), *Scream*, and *I Know What You Did Last Summer*.

as they occur, and ultimately relying on Dr. Loomis (Donald Pleasence) for rescue. For Christensen, these traits reflect a heroine who is resourceful under pressure but not one who actively shapes her own survival in a way that aligns with feminist agency ("The Final Girl" 29). He points to Nancy Thompson (Heather Langenkamp) in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* as a contrasting example of a feminist Final Girl who develops what he calls a "womanly, non-masculinized identity" (42). While Clover outlines how Final Girls often adopt traditionally masculine traits to confront the killer — implying that survival requires a departure from stereotypically feminine qualities — Christensen argues that Nancy's strength derives from different qualities. She actively researches Freddy Krueger's origins, devises a detailed plan to pull him into the real world, sets traps throughout her home, and ultimately confronts him on her own terms. Crucially, she does all of this without abandoning her femininity: She remains emotionally expressive, maintains her close relationships, and uses intellect, preparation, and determination to defeat the threat. Nancy's identity as a woman remains intact and does not conform to the subgenre's pressure for Final Girls to act like "one of the boys" to survive (41). Consequently, Nancy represents a feminist reinterpretation of the Final Girl, showing that a woman's inherent qualities can be powerful enough to overcome the threat without sacrificing her femininity. In making this argument, Christensen departs from Rieser and Keisner's broader approaches and instead conducts a focused case study, keeping his conclusions specific to the films at hand rather than extending them to *all* Final Girls.

Taken together, these debates reveal that scholars tend to see the Final Girl as a paradoxical figure: on the one hand, she appears to challenge traditional gender roles by surviving and fighting back; on the other, she is read as remaining bound to patriarchal expectations, which complicates her status as a feminist icon. This tension between her

subversive potential and the patriarchal frameworks that constrain her is reflected in the foundational theories by Clover and Dika, who, while instrumental in identifying the Final Girl as a disruptive figure, ultimately frame her within restrictive binaries that oversimplify both her presence and function within the narrative. As Rockoff notes,

> This [Clover's] theory, which has merit, cannot apply to every slasher. For if the travails of the Final Girl are a face-saving way for the predominantly male audience to vicariously enjoy the victim role, what can account for those slashers in which there are two survivors, both a man and a woman? Or the few slashers in which a man is the lone survivor? Some writers have even pointed out that the names of the Final Girls themselves are purposely ambiguous. This is, however, a gross over analysis. For every androgynous name like Marti, Stevie or Bobbi, there are two gender specific ones such as Alice, Ginny, Laurie or Nancy. (24)

Rockoff's observations underscore the limitations of applying Clover's theory universally, emphasizing how variations from the masculinized, lone female survivor model disrupt a stable framework for interpreting gendered spectatorship and feminist potential within the slasher subgenre. Film theorist Janet Staiger supports Rockoff's critique by highlighting a key inconsistency in Clover's argument. Although Clover presents *Halloween* as the prototypical slasher film used to construct her theoretical framework, Staiger notes that the film itself does not fully adhere to the formula Clover proposes — let alone the broader range of slasher films it was meant to represent. Staiger complicates Clover's formulation by observing that the Final Girl is typically a woman, but not necessarily one who conforms to the expected traits of masculine femininity, virginity, or sexual disinterest (214; 222).[33] Rockoff and Staiger's critiques expose the limitations of early slasher theorization surrounding the Final Girl; however, despite

[33] Staiger's survey of thirty-three slasher films for table 14.3 reveals that twenty-three featured more than one surviving victim. Of those, twenty-one included both a female and a male survivor, challenging the notion that the Final Girl functions in isolation. Notably, *The Slumber Party Massacre* stands out as the only film with multiple female survivors and no male counterpart, further complicating the gendered assumptions embedded in Clover's model (220-221).

these theoretical shortcomings, the trope remains central to discussions of the slasher subgenre — particularly in relation to its gender politics and enduring patterns of misogyny.

The Male Gaze

To fully grasp the slasher subgenre's entrenched misogynistic legacy, it is necessary to shift from questions of characterization and narrative to questions of looking, spectatorship, and visual control, and to consider how these frameworks have been applied to the subgenre itself. Laura Mulvey's theorization of the male gaze, while not developed with the slasher subgenre specifically in mind, has nonetheless become central to its analysis, particularly in discussions of how cinema objectifies women. According to Mulvey, women in film are positioned "as erotic object[s] for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object[s] for the spectator within the auditorium" (63). This objectification caters to voyeuristic pleasure and functions as a psychological defense mechanism to manage the symbolic threat women pose within patriarchal culture – a threat rooted in the psychoanalytic concept of castration anxiety (64-65). The fragmentation or idealization of the female body through the gaze works to displace this anxiety, rendering women "safe" as objects of visual pleasure.

Dika's analysis of slasher films builds on Mulvey's psychoanalytic theory of the male gaze, directly connecting it to the slasher subgenre. In particular, Dika interprets the temporal structure of slasher films as a reflection of a psychoanalytic response to castration anxiety. Through this lens, Dika suggests that slasher narratives reenact a young boy's first encounter with female genitalia, where the perceived absence of a penis is interpreted as castration. The "bleeding wound" evokes fear, revulsion, and a compulsion to look, which slasher films dramatize through a series of murders, symbolizing the fantasized act of castration. This dynamic is often established in the opening sequence, which frequently depicts a woman's death or

mutilated body tied to a "primal scene" (Dika 94). In films such as *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th*, the killer — and by extension, the audience — watches a couple engage in sexual activity, setting the stage for the interplay between voyeurism, violence, and sexuality that defines the subgenre. Clover also connects the slasher film's recurrent violence to castration anxiety, noting that the genre's fixation on penetrative weapons, punished sexuality, and compulsive looking reproduces patriarchal fears of the female body, even if she does not frame this dynamic as explicitly as Dika's "primal scene" (49-51). Taken together, Mulvey, Dika, and Clover position the slasher film's visual and temporal structures as symptoms of a broader misogynistic logic in which the female body is simultaneously desired, feared, and violently controlled.

Dika also emphasizes that women, aside from the Final Girl, are depicted primarily as sexual objects. These characters are often shown engaging in activities that serve to heighten the audience's voyeuristic pleasure but do not advance the storyline or contribute to the narrative in any significant way, such as "bath[ing], frolic[ing], mak[ing] love, or participat[ing] in sports" (89). By focusing on these activities, slashers prioritize the visual consumption of women's bodies over their agency or development as characters, reinforcing critiques of the subgenre's alignment with the male gaze and its underlying misogyny. This objectification, combined with the subsequent violence enacted upon these women, can be read as the narrative "punishment" for their perceived sexual autonomy — another manifestation of the male gaze's response to the castration threat. Empirical work by Gloria Cowan and Margaret O'Brien supports Dika's claim. In their study of fifty-six slasher films, they catalogued the frequency of nudity, sexual activity, and sexually suggestive clothing or behavior, demonstrating how routinely the subgenre creates opportunities for objectification. They found that while forty-six percent of non-surviving women and twenty-three percent of surviving women wear revealing clothing, only nineteen

percent and seven percent, respectively, are actually shown nude (191). Angela D. Weaver et al. reported similar patterns in their analysis of the ten highest-grossing slasher films from the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s: only 2.9 percent of Final Girls are shown partially or fully nude, compared to 27.8 percent of other female characters (39). While these studies confirm that nudity appears in slasher films, they also suggest it is less pervasive than popular discourse often implies. At the same time, they do not fully contextualize these patterns within the industrial and cultural conditions under which the films were produced, nor do they address whether slashers feature more nudity than other popular genres. As will be discussed in Chapter One, industrial constraints and expectations shape both the kind and degree of nudity that appears on screen, complicating any simple assumptions about the subgenre's misogyny in this regard.

Violence Against Women

Debates about the slasher subgenre's gender politics and misogyny have also centered on the brutality it directs toward women, prompting critics and scholars alike to scrutinize who suffers on screen, how often, and for how long. Using both qualitative and quantitative approaches, they have examined both how this violence is represented visually and its frequency and duration, particularly when women are the primary targets. The widespread assumption that women are overwhelmingly the victims of slasher violence helped fuel a significant backlash against the subgenre. And, as already explored earlier, no one helped this narrative gain traction more than Siskel and Ebert.

However, a closer examination of the research complicates sweeping claims about violence against women and how often women are actually targeted within the subgenre. Clover, for instance, concedes that slasher films depict violence against both genders, yet she maintains that the victims are "most often and most conspicuously" female (33). This perspective aligns

with Edward Donnerstein, Daniel Linz, and Steven Penrod's claims in their 1987 book, *The Question of Pornography: Research Findings and Policy Implications*, which suggests women are disproportionately portrayed as victims of violence in slasher films. However, more contemporary scholars such as Dika contend that slasher films display "a pronounced tendency […] to be evenhanded" in their depiction of violence (90). Supporting this view, Cowan and O'Brien concluded that "women were not more likely to be victims […] nor were they less likely to survive when victimized" (194). These conflicting interpretations highlight the complexity of gender representation in slasher films. While Clover and others emphasize the disproportionate victimization of women, studies such as Cowan and O'Brien's challenge this assumption by suggesting that victimization and survival rates may be more balanced than initially believed. This debate underscores the importance of examining who experiences violence as well as how these portrayals are depicted on the screen.

Although male and female deaths in slasher films are roughly equal in number, the portrayal of these deaths differs significantly. Male deaths are often "swift and seen from a distance" or happen off-screen, while "the killings of women are filmed at a closer range, in more graphic detail, and at greater length" (Petridis, "A Historical" 77-78). The difference in length and brutality has been noted by many critics and scholars, including Dika; Ashley Wellman, Michele Bisaccia Meitl, and Patrick Kinkade; and Barry S. Sapolsky, Fred Molitor, and Sarah Luque. According to Dika, the slasher film highlights its violence against women by sensationalizing or featuring the violence more predominantly (90). Clover also examines this disparity in violence, observing that boys in slasher films are typically killed for reasons such as sexual transgression, making mistakes, interfering with the killer, or attempting to stop him. Girls, however, may face the same fate for these reasons but are also sometimes targeted simply

for being female (34). The differences in the length, brutality, and narrative justification of male versus female deaths suggest that slasher films sensationalize the killing of women, reinforcing their objectification and exploitation through voyeuristic, eroticized staging. Although these studies examine a decent number of titles, their samples remain relatively narrow: Sapolsky, Molitor, and Luque analyze only thirty films drawn from three years (1980, 1985, and 1989), while Wellman, Meitl, and Kinkade consider forty-eight films spanning the 1960s through the 2010s — an average of just eight films per decade.

What emerges across these strands of criticism, theory, and empirical study is a portrait of a subgenre whose misogynistic reputation was never simply inherent but rather historically constructed, amplified, and solidified through early reception discourse and academic codification. Whether focusing on the Final Girl, the male gaze, or patterns of on-screen violence, critics have had a tendency to read slasher films through frameworks that privileged certain examples, foregrounded particular anxieties, and often overlooked industrial, cultural, and authorship contexts. These models proved durable, shaping decades of scholarship and popular belief even as later studies revealed inconsistencies or alternative possibilities. My aim is not to claim that slasher films are free from misogyny or that earlier critics and theories were simply wrong; rather, I seek to interrogate the assumptions that have framed the subgenre as uniformly hostile to women and to open space for feminist slasher films to be recognized within its history.

The Road Ahead

To situate my analysis within the critical periodization of the slasher, this project draws on scholars such as Carol J. Clover, Vera Dika, Sotiris Petridis, Richard Nowell, and Adam Rockoff, whose work helps define the contours of the classical, postmodern, and neoslasher

cycles. Petridis' framework, in particular, provides the primary cyclical model I adopt, since his work offers one of the most detailed accounts of each period's formal and thematic patterns. As I move through the classical, postmodern, neoslasher, and contemporary cycles in the chapters that follow, I put Petridis into conversation with critics who likewise think cyclically about the subgenre: Nowell's industrial history of the classical cycle; commentators on the 1990s postmodern revival such as Claire Perkins, Steve Jones, and writers like Steven West and Debra White-Stanley and Caryl Flinn; analysts of the neoslasher era including Kevin J. Wetmore, Ivar Kvaran, and Adam Mee; and scholars and critics mapping the current moment, including Ilias Ben Mna, Marina Soler Jorge, Ana Karolina Aparecida Alves da Silva, Sophia McCann, Jason Hellerman, and David Church. Adopting a cyclical framework allows my project to situate each of the films I examine — *The Slumber Party Massacre*, *Office Killer*, and the *Fear Street* trilogy — within their respective industrial, cultural, and feminist contexts, while also making visible the structural gaps in slasher historiography that have consistently marginalized women's creative labor. By placing these woman-directed films in direct dialogue with the dominant formulae of their cycles, the project demonstrates how each one reconfigures, resists, or rewrites the conventions codified by scholarship and industry practices.

Chapter One examines *The Slumber Party Massacre* as a product of the classical slasher cycle and argues that the film both engages with and complicates the early tropes that came to define the subgenre. Grounded in its industrial context as a Roger Corman exploitation production and shaped by second-wave feminist politics, the chapter demonstrates how director Amy Holden Jones and screenwriter Rita Mae Brown negotiate the contradictions of empowerment and objectification that marked the early 1980s. While the film adopts recognizable classical slasher conventions — female nudity, voyeuristic framing, the phallic

weapon, and the Final Girl structure — it simultaneously reorients those conventions to challenge assumptions about misogyny, spectatorship, and gendered authorship within the subgenre. Instead of accepting the conservative, punishment-driven formula associated with the classical cycle, *The Slumber Party Massacre* reframes slasher tropes through a second-wave feminist lens, emphasizing collective female experience, exposing the gendered biases embedded in early theoretical frameworks, and shifting the representational focus from male anxieties to female fears.

Chapter Two examines *Office Killer* as a deliberate feminist intervention into the slasher subgenre, arguing that director Cindy Sherman uses slasher grammar, specifically the collapse of the Final Girl and killer into a single figure, to mount a critique of the patriarchal systems that structure women's labor, visibility, and vulnerability. Where the postmodern cycle expanded the subgenre's feminist potential by giving the Final Girl personal stakes and narrative agency, Sherman goes further, refusing the organizing logic that separates victim and killer into distinct bodies. Through Dorine Douglas (Carol Kane), the chapter traces how the film establishes its protagonist as a Final Girl — marked by marginality, chronic exposure to threat, and a world that refuses to name what is being done to her — before collapsing that position into the killer's, making both simultaneously active in the same body without resolution. Drawing on third-wave feminist frameworks, the chapter argues that this collapse is not generic incoherence but the film's central feminist argument: that patriarchal damage does not arrive from outside in the form of a monster that can be defeated but deforms from within, producing a figure whose agency and victimization are inseparable because they emerge from the same source. The chapter situates this argument within the industrial conditions that shaped the film's production and reception, reading the industry's failure to distribute and recognize *Office Killer* not as a

commercial miscalculation but as a structural inability to accommodate a film that placed a middle-aged female killer at the center of slasher grammar and collapsed the very distinctions on which the subgenre depends.

Chapter Three examines the *Fear Street* trilogy as the most formally and politically ambitious text of the contemporary slasher cycle, arguing that it represents the point at which the feminist interventions documented in earlier chapters become fully explicit — not subtext, not disruption from within, but a sustained and formally articulated argument made from within the subgenre's own conventions. Emerging in a fourth-wave feminist context shaped by intersectionality, queer visibility, and systemic critique, and enabled by the industrial conditions of its streaming-era, unified-authorship production model, the trilogy reconfigures slasher grammar at the level of representation, form, and ideology. At the center of that reconfiguration is an epistemological claim: that the kind of knowledge survival requires is inseparable from the race, sexuality, and class position of the person doing the surviving. Through Deena Johnson (Kiana Madeira), the chapter traces how the trilogy revises the Final Girl not by changing who she is or what role she occupies, but by changing what she has to know in order to survive — and how that knowledge is produced by the intersecting marginalities of Blackness, queerness, and class that the subgenre has historically rendered invisible. The chapter also examines the trilogy's dual killer function, arguing that its resurrected killers satisfy the genre's appetite for visible physical threat while its structural killer — the Goode family — exposes the patriarchal system that has always been producing Shadyside's disposability. Reading both functions together through Barbara Creed's Feminist New Wave Cinema and fourth-wave feminism's intersectional commitments, the chapter argues that *Fear Street* turns the slasher subgenre's grammar against the patriarchal logic it has historically served.

Through this structure, my dissertation demonstrates how each film reworks the conventions of its cycle from within, responding directly to the slasher film's long-standing misogynistic legacy. By situating these woman-directed films within their distinct industrial and feminist contexts, I show that their interventions arise not by abandoning the formula but by strategically negotiating and reshaping it. Together, these chapters reveal how women filmmakers have used the genre's constraints — and its history of gendered violence — as opportunities to revise its assumptions, challenge its inherited biases, and redefine the slasher film's possibilities.

Chapter 1: Feminist Disruption in the Classical Slasher

The Slumber Party Massacre (Amy Holden Jones, 1982) is the inaugural film in a groundbreaking slasher franchise, notable for being one of the only franchises in the subgenre to be entirely written and directed by women. Amy Holden Jones made her directorial debut with the film, opting to direct this independent production for B-movie mogul Roger Corman instead of editing the studio blockbuster *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) for director Steven Spielberg (Kart 293). While *The Slumber Party Massacre* grossed over $3 million and today is considered a "1982 video-nasty classic," it garnered mostly negative or mixed reviews upon its theatrical release (Cervantes; Felperin). Critics widely condemned the film for its perceived lack of originality, technical shortcomings, and overtly heavy-handed approach. Many also expressed disappointment that a film made by a female writer and director adhered so closely to the conventions of the exploitation genre, reflecting broader gender biases and heightened expectations placed on women filmmakers.

Responding to the critical backlash and disappointment surrounding the film's exploitation elements, this chapter examines how *The Slumber Party Massacre* engages with the

recognizable slasher tropes of its cycle while simultaneously reorienting and complicating them. As will be shown, the film challenges early theoretical frameworks of the subgenre and the reductive assumption that all slasher films are inherently misogynistic. Situated within the classical slasher cycle and shaped by second-wave feminism, the film reflects its industrial and ideological moment: one defined by contradictions between empowerment and objectification, and between female authorship and institutional constraint. Rather than merely reproducing slasher tropes, *The Slumber Party Massacre* reframes them through a second-wave feminist lens, emphasizing collective female experience and shifting the focus from male anxieties to the articulation of female fears. The film's portrayal of women is complex, offering multiple avenues for feminist reinterpretation. In challenging the gender binaries and audience identifications assumed by Carol Clover's Final Girl, the film opens space for a different kind of feminist reading — one that critiques the male gaze while also proposing an alternative gaze: one that centers female spectatorship, solidarity, and survival without subsuming femininity into masculinity. At the same time, the film's adherence to certain slasher conventions speaks to the creative compromises female directors had to navigate in the male-dominated film industry of the 1980s — pressures that continue to influence the positions available to women in horror today. By analyzing *The Slumber Party Massacre* within the context of its industrial cycle and second-wave feminist politics, this chapter demonstrates how women directors engaged with and reshaped the slasher formula, not in spite of its constraints but through a historically situated negotiation with them.

Despite the film's potential to disrupt genre expectations, early critical reception often dismissed it outright. In her review for *The New York Times*, Janet Maslin scathingly described the film as "just the usual cavalcade of corpses" and noted that it was simply "another, familiar,

gruesome spectacle." Although the film was written and directed by women, Maslin condemned the film for being vulgar and disappointing (C8). David Hinckley of the *Daily News* was similarly displeased with *The Slumber Party Massacre* and awarded it half a star. In response to writer Rita Mae Brown's characterization of the film as a slasher satire, he sarcastically remarked, "Good thing she told us, because we normally associate satire with at least a hint of subtlety, and 'Slumber Party Massacre' is about as subtle as a kick in the groin" (136). While Hinckley disparaged the film for its lack of understatement, he called to attention its overt approach to its women-centric themes, which challenged traditional expectations of satire's nuanced delivery. In addition to his thematic criticism, he also picked apart the film's acting and special effects, concluding, "It's a shame Brown couldn't translate her feelings toward men […] into a better movie" (136). Hinckley seemed to recognize Brown's feminist intent but, nonetheless, did not believe she and Jones were successful in the execution.

The backlash against the film extended beyond its heavy-handed approach and technical shortcomings; critics such as Robert S. Birchard were particularly troubled by the fact that *a woman* had directed an exploitation film and "suggested she had betrayed her sex by turning her talents to the 'girls in peril' genre" (Birchard 42). Birchard insinuated that, by working within this disreputable milieu, Jones was perpetuating harmful gender stereotypes and undermining the potential for female filmmakers to champion more empowering stories, a reaction that highlighted the tension between creative freedom and societal expectations of women's roles in shaping media narratives. Similarly, Maslin also made her negative view of the film's female creative team clear when she boldly asserted that "Not much, and nothing good" came out of a "cheap, bloody horror movie" being "turned over to a woman screenwriter and a woman director." In fact, she went so far as to suggest that the vulgarity of the film made Jones and

Brown's attempts to make a satirical movie "all the more disappointing" (C8). In essence, Maslin implicitly argued that the presence of a female director negatively impacted the film, because, in her estimation, women should be held to a higher artistic standard.

Maslin's reaction to *The Slumber Party Massacre* highlights the double standards and gender biases that were, and often still remain, prevalent in the film industry, where female directors frequently find themselves subjected to harsher criticism and different expectations. In an interview with Morgan Roberts, a feminist film writer for *In Their Own League*, Emmy-nominated director Amy Adrion reflected on what she learned from speaking with female filmmakers during the creation of her 2018 documentary *Half the Picture*.[34] Adrion confirmed that women directors consistently face barriers rooted in their gender, ranging from sexual harassment and casual or overt sexism to difficulty securing funding for projects dismissed as "small" or "niche." Even after proving themselves in independent film, many women struggle to "level up" to larger projects, often encountering belittling remarks or hostility on set. As Adrion noted, "If we wait for permission/acceptance/that dream job, we're going to be waiting forever. And life's too short" ("Exclusive Interview"). The patterns Adrion uncovered echo a long-standing dynamic in which women in male-dominated genres face professional roadblocks and gendered scrutiny that frames their creative choices as deviations from expected norms.

While it faced significant backlash and was subjected to criticism shaped by gendered expectations, *The Slumber Party Massacre* nevertheless received some positive attention. Duane Byrge's review in *The Hollywood Reporter* criticized the film in much the same way as Maslin and Hinckley, but unlike his fellow reviewers, he offered slight praise, commenting on how some of the interactions between the young women were "amusing and insightful" (3). Byrge's

[34] *In Their Own League* is a website and podcast that publishes reviews, interviews, articles, and personal essays on women and other underrepresented filmmakers.

appreciation of the film was echoed by the pseudonymous Lor. of *Variety*, who described the film as an "entertaining terror thrill" with "convincing lingo, good ensemble performances, and funny exaggeration of the genre's cliches." Dale Schneck of *The Morning Call* said, "Although not nearly as slick in its attack on terror as the Carpenter film [*Halloween*], 'Slumber Party Massacre' is one of the better entries in an already over-crowded field [… and] despite its faults and ethical shortcoming, [it] is a rousing thriller that will keep its audience awake" (23; 63). Together, these critics demonstrate a more nuanced perspective on the film. It might have flaws, but it also has some redeeming qualities such as its witty exaggeration of genre tropes, strong ensemble cast, and occasional sharp observations about female friendship.

While the film garnered praise from critics such as Byrge, Lor., and Schneck, Jones herself had complicated feelings about *The Slumber Party Massacre*. In fact, she did not even want to direct the film, but it was the one Corman offered her, and it was an offer she could not refuse (Kart 293).[35] In a 1984 interview with Larry Kart, Jones said, "If somebody came up to me and said, 'You're a monster for making that picture,' I'm not sure what I'd say" (293). However, during an interview with Birchard the same year, Jones announced that she liked the film and thought "the critics were wrong" (42). Although she has nothing but praise for the film today, her mixed feelings about it in the 1980s come as no surprise. According to Jones, "Critics, of course, excoriated me because I was a woman and I made a slasher film […] It took nearly forty years for critics to see that *Slumber Party Massacre* is a fundamentally feminist film, written by women, directed by a woman, with jokes, metaphors, and scares that reflect a woman's sensibility and fears" ("Q&A…(Part 2)"). Jones' own journey from initial reluctance to eventual pride in the film mirrors the broader critical reevaluation of the film. Initially dismissed

[35] According to Chris Nashawaty, "positions of power were virtually nonexistent in Hollywood" for women during the 1980s (390).

and criticized, it has since been recognized for its feminist underpinnings and contribution to the slasher subgenre.

In the decades since its release, Pat Gill, Isabel Cristina Pinedo, Carol Clover, Wickham Clayton, Graham Thompson, Richard Nowell, and Bryan Turnock have given *The Slumber Party Massacre* limited attention in their scholarly studies of the slasher subgenre. Clover and Clayton devoted more attention to the film these other scholars, but, nonetheless, their discussions are limited to only a few lines. Reynold Humphries, Wheeler Winston Dixon, and Laurence A. Rickels offer more substantial commentary on *The Slumber Party Massacre*, yet their analyses still amount to just a paragraph or two. Both Humphries and Dixon focus on the film's potential to challenge the "masculine-based order of the gaze" (Humphries 152); however, Humphries criticized the film for not being progressive enough, given its failure to challenge entrenched gender norms. He argued that while the film exposes conformity to culturally constructed images of femininity and male desire, it does not go far enough in challenging these norms. Rickels also identified feminist potential in the film, particularly in how it subverts traditional slasher conventions by emphasizing female camaraderie over individual heroism.

Even though Humphries, Dixon, and Rickels have examined feminist aspects of *The Slumber Party Massacre*, the film warrants a more comprehensive analysis that fully accounts for its industrial and sociopolitical context. Placing the film within the broader historical and cultural landscape of the early 1980s reveals how these conditions shaped the film's production and reception as well as its feminist potential. These industrial and cultural pressures clarify why the film's feminist interventions take the form of reworked genre conventions rather than overt rejection. Viewed through the lens of the classical slasher cycle, 1980s film industry conditions, and second-wave feminism, these interventions reflect a negotiation between creative ambition

and systemic constraint — one that mirrors broader shifts in American cinema and feminist discourse during the period.

Roger Corman, New World Pictures, and The Slumber Party Massacre

Despite *The Slumber Party Massacre*'s position as a slasher film, its production under Roger Corman's New World Pictures situates it firmly within the industrial framework of exploitation cinema. To contextualize the film's development and creative limitations, it is important to understand the broader industrial and cultural forces that shaped the exploitation market Corman capitalized on during the second half of the twentieth century. One of the most significant of these forces was the postwar rise of teenage consumers and the parallel expansion of drive-in theaters, which together created an ideal exhibition circuit for the low-budget, sensational films that would come to define second wave exploitation cinema.[36]

Postwar economic growth, suburban expansion, and a growing consumer culture centered on goods such as cars and televisions led to the emergence of teenagers as a key demographic in both retail and entertainment markets during the 1950s (Kozma 47). Among the many spaces that capitalized on this shift were drive-in theaters. Although the first drive-in opened in 1933, their numbers and popularity surged in the 1950s due to increased car ownership, suburbanization, affordable land, and low construction costs. Changes in infrastructure and demographics reshaped American leisure habits, and by the 1960s, drive-ins had become closely tied to teenage audiences, who embraced them as spaces for socializing and dating (Fox 25-26).[37] As drive-ins became increasingly tied to youth culture, the content of the films shown shifted to

[36] According to Alicia Kozma, "exploitation films can be roughly divided into three phases: classical exploitation (1919-1959), second wave exploitation (1960-1980), and neo-exploitation (1980-present)" (14).

[37] Many teens now drove themselves and used drive-in theaters as places to connect and explore romantic opportunities, marking a demographic shift away from the families that had once dominated the space. The secluded back rows — popularly known as "passion pits" for their association with teenage intimacy — came to symbolize the drive-in's role as a haven for adolescent independence and cultural rebellion (Fox 25–26).

reflect the tastes and desires of their new primary audience (30). In response to these shifting preferences, drive-in theaters increasingly relied on provocative and unconventional films, including horror, softcore sex, and action-adventure titles, which foregrounded emotional disaffection and anti-establishment themes (Monaco 45). The pivot toward increasingly explicit content was not merely reflective of changing preferences; it was a strategic response to the economic pressure of retaining the adolescent demographic, illustrating how exhibition practices began shaping the content itself.

Both drive-ins and grindhouse theaters were economically driven toward exploitative content as a means of staying in business. As film scholar Alicia Kozma notes, second wave exploitation films, which targeted the emerging teenage consumer demographic, dominated the drive-in theater circuit throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, later shifting their focus to urban grindhouses by the late 1960s and into the 1970s (14). Grindhouse theaters, "formerly mainstream theaters, rapidly declining due to changes in the population and demographics of their locations," began showing exploitation films as a desperate attempt to remain financially afloat (54). Today, these theaters are remembered as independently owned venues that screened multiple exploitation films back-to-back throughout the day at low admission prices, a programming style that helped define their enduring reputation. Fans of exploitation often associate these spaces — and the films they showcased — with themes of explicit violence, taboo sexuality, and a gritty, low-budget aesthetic (73). As the Production Code weakened, grindhouse theaters leaned even more into their reputation by showcasing sexploitation cinema, a defining feature of grindhouse programming in the 1950s and 1960s. Their notoriety was further amplified by bold marketing strategies and a tendency to showcase films that deliberately tested social and moral limits. Although publicly condemned for their "immoral" offerings and

presumed low-class viewership, grindhouses remained profitable by capitalizing on the popularity of sexploitation films after the 1950s (Church 84-85). Similar to drive-ins, grindhouses show how exhibition spaces helped dictate what types of content were produced and distributed, further normalizing sensational material as a commercially reliable draw.

The overlapping changes in exhibition practices and audience demographics marked a turning point in film history, where the profitability of provocative content began to outweigh earlier moral and institutional constraints. According to Kozma, "As the spectacularization of controversial topics of exploitation films became increasingly normalized throughout the 1960s, and as the cultural tenor of the country changed, the code [Hays Code] became outdated" (59). Since 1934, the Production Code Administration (PCA) had been strictly censoring American films, particularly in regard to sex, violence, and language. However, by 1967, cultural changes had eroded the Hays Code's authority to such a point that it "felt as suffocating as a Victorian-era corset" (Doherty 10). A growing cultural and legal consensus emerged that adults should be free to view almost any kind of film without government-imposed restrictions. In response to the changing attitudes, the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) unanimously voted to eliminate the Code and adopt a new system of classification. The Motion Picture Code and Rating Administration was then created and tasked with categorizing films into four ratings: G, for general audiences; M, for mature audiences; R, for restricted, and X, for no persons under sixteen (14).[38] The new rating system allowed for studios to produce more mature content and exert greater control over participation in the exhibition market, a desire that was "simply a response to a market trend […] Adult-themed pictures made money and helped maintain studio

[38] The ratings today are: G, for general audiences; PG, for parental guidance suggested; PG-13, for parents strongly cautioned; R, for restricted; and NC-17, for adults only (no one under 17).

and industry recognition […]" (Lewis 104; 114). Mainstream studios embraced adult content less out of artistic boldness than because it had demonstrated clear commercial appeal.

As adult content proved to be a lucrative draw, filmmakers faced mounting pressure to produce material that would appeal directly to the youth market and meet its growing appetite for edgier, more provocative fare. Independent studios such as American International Pictures (AIP), established in 1954 by Jim Nicholson and Samuel Arkoff, capitalized on this by developing a lean, efficient production model built around delivering exactly what younger audiences craved: sex, violence, and subversion. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, AIP rose to prominence and success by capitalizing on the growing second wave exploitation film market (Kozma 49). Integral to their rise was producer Roger Corman. Although Corman left AIP in 1969 to create his own company, New World Pictures, his collaboration with AIP helped establish a profitable formula for targeting the youth market. To ensure financial success, second wave exploitation cinema had to be made with minimal investment. These films were produced quickly and on tight budgets. Corman achieved this by reinvesting profits from previous releases, using stripped-down sets, skipping rehearsals, assigning multiple roles to crew members, and enforcing strict limitations on both time and budget (49).

To further limit financial risk, exploitation producers frequently crafted provocative marketing campaigns, sometimes even before filming began. They then tailored the films to match the promised sensationalism, though these efforts did not always succeed. The primary goal was simply to get audiences into theaters, and because tickets had already been purchased, actually delivering on those promises was not always necessary (Kozma 51). Herschell Gordon Lewis, a pioneering figure in exploitation cinema, embodied the industry's reliance on commercial appeal over artistic value. For Lewis, box-office performance was paramount, and

his philosophy reflected that priority: "'If you cannot titillate [your audience] with production value, you [must] titillate them with some type of edge'" (qtd. in Dixon 124). The economic model developed by AIP and other exploitation producers illustrates how financial pressures shaped the production process and the content itself, reinforcing the growing belief within the industry that sex and violence were essential commercial ingredients, regardless of artistic intent.

The commercially driven approach only intensified in the early 1970s, as exploitation cinema evolved to prioritize the marketable packaging of race, sex, and violence — an evolution that fueled the rise of distinct types such as Blaxploitation, martial arts, and sexploitation films (Kozma 52-53). Earlier exploitation films certainly used controversial or taboo content to attract attention, but these elements became the main attraction in the 1970s. The way the material was crafted, stylized, and sold to audiences became more targeted, deliberate, and deeply tied to cultural identities and social tensions. The influence of diminished censorship and the commercial success of sensational content did not go unnoticed. Hollywood, benefiting from the new rating system and eager to capitalize on proven audience interests, began incorporating edgy material into mainstream films to maximize box office returns (55). Unlike classical exploitation, which operated largely outside the mainstream, second wave exploitation occupied a fluid, transitional space between independent and Hollywood filmmaking. The permeability of these sectors allowed for stylistic and industrial overlap, with many creatives — such as Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, and Peter Bogdanovich — moving between the two spheres. As a result, the inclusion of exploitative elements in both independent and mainstream cinema solidified the commercial expectation that filmmakers would deliver content with sex, nudity, and violence in order to remain financially viable.

The industry-wide expectation is perhaps most clearly embodied by Corman, whose prolific output during this period was directly shaped by the financial pressures that defined the exploitation model and came to define mainstream cinema as well. Corman understood that commercial success depended on delivering the elements audiences had come to expect, and he made these requirements explicit for the filmmakers he mentored. His films, and those produced under his banner, reflect the aesthetic hallmarks of exploitation and the economic demands that drove creative decisions during the 1960s, 1970s, and into the 1980s. According to Scorsese, Corman "taught you the realities of the marketplace: There was a chase scene here; there has to be a touch of nudity here. He didn't apologize for that […] You have to embrace that if you're going to make a movie for him" (Nashawaty 286). Knowing the expectations around violence, sex, and nudity when working with Corman, filmmaker Stephanie Rothman "developed a loose set of directorial principles she applied to her films as a way of rationalizing and transgressing" the requirements. For Rothman, nudity had to be "equitable across the sexes," "violence [could not] be eroticized" and had to "be shown with its inevitable consequences," and "rape [could not] be shown, only alluded to" (Kozma 81-82). Her efforts reveal how even within rigid commercial frameworks, some filmmakers sought to subvert exploitative expectations while still navigating the industry's unrelenting demand for marketable content.

Taken together, these industrial and exhibition trends shaped the context in which *The Slumber Party Massacre* was developed. As a film produced by Corman, it inherited both the economic constraints and content expectations of the exploitation tradition. From its tight production schedule and limited budget to its inclusion of sex, nudity, violence, and marketable horror elements, the film reflects the legacy of exploitation cinema's emphasis on profitability over prestige and the importance of targeting adolescents.

The Film Industry in the 1980s

While *The Slumber Party Massacre* was shaped by its roots in exploitation cinema, its release in the early 1980s also positioned it within a broader, evolving cultural and industrial landscape. According to Graham Thompson, the 1980s was a "watershed [moment] in the history of Hollywood that not only saw its corporate structures change, but also witnessed a fundamental shift in the very nature of Hollywood's purpose" (89). The purpose expanded to include a wide array of media ventures beyond traditional filmmaking. In particular, Hollywood diversified "into video, video games, cable television, publishing and various forms of product merchandising" — ventures that Thompson notes became "important streams of revenue for the industry" (89). Among these, the rise of home video initially sparked concern, as many feared it would diminish theatrical attendance and studio income. These anxieties, however, proved to be misguided; home video ultimately created an additional market that complemented theatrical exhibition and broadened overall consumer demand (92-93).[39] The rapidly evolving media environment of the 1980s ultimately transformed how films were financed, produced, and consumed, laying the groundwork for the kind of industrial conditions that allowed the slasher subgenre to flourish across both theatrical and home video markets.

The rise of home video in the 1980s was instrumental in amplifying existing opportunities for independent filmmaking by generating a need for content that outpaced studio supply. The explosive growth of the video market created an unprecedented appetite for new material that the studios alone could not satisfy, thereby making independent projects more commercially viable (96). Similar to Jim Jarmusch, Steven Soderbergh, and Spike Lee, slasher filmmakers capitalized on the growing demand for affordable, easily distributed content. Slasher

[39] Graham Thompson points out that during the 1980s, "Cinema ticket sales rose by 20 per cent…while the number of cinema screens increased from 17, 590 to 23, 132" (92-93).

films, with their low production costs, formulaic structures, and strong appeal to teen audiences, were perfect for the video market. Beyond the growing appetite for new films, independent producers were further motivated by the ability to bypass major studio gatekeeping and partner with emerging distributors such as Vestron and New Line (96). As theatrical support waned, slasher films found renewed life in the burgeoning home video market and through emerging independent distributors. The persistence of the subgenre during this period also opened space — however limited — for new voices to enter the field, including women such as Amy Holden Jones, Carol Frank, and Deborah Brock.[40]

While the continued output of slasher films offered a narrow opening for women to step into directorial roles, the broader landscape of the 1980s film industry remained marked by only modest gains in gender equity. The 10-year span saw "a 150 percent increase in the number of women directors from the previous decade" as well as an "increase in the number of female executives in positions of power to green light films" (Smukler 279). Several women who had directed under Roger Corman — such as Penelope Spheeris, Amy Holden Jones, Deborah Brock, and Katt Shea — were able to turn those early exploitation-era opportunities into creative roles at major studios (Nashawaty 390). Their breakthrough into Hollywood, however, was far from universal. Structural inequalities from earlier decades continued to shape women's directing opportunities. In a 1981 *New York Times* article, Sally Ogle Davis noted that "for the most part, women directors feel the film industry in the United States discriminates against them on an almost unprecedented scale" (36). To make matters worse, the limited advancements that were being made prompted some men in the industry to claim, "that opportunities for women to direct have never been better" (36). While they acknowledged that sexist attitudes persisted, they

[40] Carol Frank wrote and directed *Sorority House Massacre* (1986) and Deborah Brock wrote and directed *Slumber Party Massacre II* (1987).

simultaneously continued to blame women for their own underrepresentation behind the camera, asserting that "first-rate 'mainstream' women directors have not emerged who combine the creative and leadership qualities needed to handle multimillion dollar projects" and "many women […] want to make women's pictures" (36). In short, while the 1980s marked measurable progress for women working within the industry, that progress was uneven, contested, and shaped by lingering biases that refused to fully cede control.

It was within this fraught and contradictory industry landscape that Jones directed *The Slumber Party Massacre*. While she was among the few women to successfully transition from exploitation cinema to studio-backed projects, Jones still faced an environment that cast doubt on women's creative authority and imposed limits on the kinds of stories they were expected — or allowed — to tell.[41] On the advice of Scorsese, and understanding that the path to working on feature films often began with exploitation work at Corman's New World Pictures, Jones edited *Hollywood Boulevard* (Allan Arkush and Joe Dante, 1976) for Corman. Her collaboration with Corman opened several professional doors, including her appointment as the group one editor for *E.T.* at just twenty-seven. However, when *E.T.* kept getting pushed back because of production complications with *Poltergeist* (Tobe Hooper, 1982), Jones reconsidered her career trajectory and reached out to Corman for guidance on how to transition into directing. Corman told her she should prove she could handle the kind of material he produced. In response, Jones rewrote the first ten pages of the script *Don't Open the Door* (the working title of *The Slumber Party Massacre*), filmed a ten-minute reel, and delivered it to Corman, which secured her the rare opportunity to direct a feature film. Even though the project was an exploitative slasher film,

[41] Shut out from directing roles despite her film's success, Jones pivoted to screenwriting, finding it a more reliable way to work in Hollywood after *The Slumber Party Massacre* drew no offers beyond New World Pictures (Jones, "Q&A…(Part 2)").

Jone chose to direct *The Slumber Party Massacre* over editing *E.T.* because, in her own words, "I believed that if I cut *E.T.*, it would make me a top-tier editor in my twenties, and I'd be roped into working as an editor for a very long time. A change to direct might never come again. Women simply did not get to direct in those days" (Jones, "Q&A…(Part 1 of 2)"). Her decision to seize a rare directing opportunity — despite the film's exploitative trappings — reflects both the limitations placed on women filmmakers at the time and the calculated risks they had to take to break into an industry that offered them few chances to lead.

The conflict between creative autonomy and the commercial demands imposed by male-dominated production structures is especially evident in the compromises women were expected to make when directing. Jones, as those before her, was required by Roger Corman to include nudity in *The Slumber Party Massacre* (Irons). Although second wave exploitation cinema had been supplanted by New Hollywood at this point, exploitation films were still being made and their elements remained firmly in place, having been absorbed into the commercial fabric of mainstream and independent filmmaking (Kozma 61-62). The persistence of these exploitative elements into the 1980s illustrates both a shift in cinematic style and a broader industry-wide entrenchment of commercial priorities. For female filmmakers similar to Stephanie Rothman and Jones, navigating these demands meant constantly negotiating between creative vision and economic survival. Yet, while a handful of women succeeded in working within or even subverting these constraints, their experiences were far from typical. The broader reality for women in the film industry during the 1970s and 1980s was marked by systemic exclusion, limited access to directing opportunities, and a pervasive skepticism about their ability to handle commercial projects.

Feminist Frameworks: Second-Wave Politics and Cinefeminism

Understanding the context around the film industry and Jones' decision is crucial for appreciating the significance of *The Slumber Party Massacre*. While the film largely follows the formula of a conventional classical slasher film — featuring tropes such as the Final Girl, female nudity catering to the male gaze, and gendered violence — it strategically reconfigures the tropes to highlight and critique the subgenre's portrayal of women. Viewed in light of the gendered challenges Jones faced just to secure a directing role, these choices take on added weight. The film's adherence to and subversion of genre expectations speak directly to the limitations imposed on women in both the stories they were allowed to tell and the conditions under which they were permitted to tell them. Jones' creative negotiation reflects the core strategies of second-wave feminism, which sought to confront and dismantle the institutional and cultural forces limiting women's autonomy. By working within a male-dominated genre while subtly reworking its assumptions, *The Slumber Party Massacre* engages in a distinctly feminist act, drawing attention to the structural dynamics that restrict female agency, interrogate traditional gender roles, and objectify female sexuality. Its dual role as both a slasher film and a subversive text mirror the second-wave emphasis on using cultural forms to critique and expose patriarchal power.

To fully appreciate how the film engages with these themes, it is essential to explore the core principles of second-wave feminism, a movement that redefined women's roles in both public and private life. Although there had been no mass women's movement since the fight for suffrage, feminism was far from dead. Revived in the 1960s and gathering momentum in the 1970s, the movement primarily focused on issues such as workplace inequality, restrictive gender roles, domestic expectations, and reproductive rights (Ware 103-105). These efforts

unfolded alongside other social movements, creating a dynamic and, at times, contentious landscape. As historian Anne M. Valk notes, "The history of second-wave feminism should be understood within the context of the parallel, occasionally overlapping, and often contentious movements that arose at the same time" (4). Radical feminists, inspired by black liberation movements, sought to end male supremacy by transforming both personal lives and societal structures, advocating for a democratic system that dismantled capitalism. Meanwhile, liberal feminists focused on achieving sex equality through legal reforms, working within America's existing economic and political frameworks (4). Furthermore, the second-wave feminist movement has been criticized as being a predominantly white women's movement.

Radical feminists, in particular, "adopted the term *sisterhood* to stress the bonds they presumed women share" (Valk 6). The problem with this language of sisterhood and solidarity was its denial of significant intraracial and interracial differences. Although it aimed to unite women under a common cause, many women, including bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Angela Davis, felt marginalized by a movement that often prioritized the concerns of white, middle-class, heterosexual women. In her keynote address at the 1982 National Women's Studies Association Convention, Davis highlighted how "the contributions of women of color have been overlooked, misrepresented, and misunderstood," which, in her view, called for "a multiracial women's movement, [and] a multiracial approach to women's studies" (6). Davis' critique of the absence of diversity paralleled criticisms of feminist film theory, which was likewise faulted for neglecting the concerns of women who were not white, middle-class, or heterosexual.

Cinefeminism, a branch of feminist film theory that emerged alongside second-wave feminist thought in the 1970s and early 1980s, focused on "how films work ideologically to

construct women as signs in a complex textual system that supports and even naturalizes patriarchal ideology by defining women as other to men" (Hollinger 10). The cinefeminism theoretical framework became instrumental in analyzing films through the lens of gendered power dynamics, questioning the ways women were objectified and marginalized on screen. In 1973, Claire Johnston argued that traditional mainstream cinema often constructs women as representations of what they mean to men rather than fully realized characters. Johnston critiqued the patriarchal structure of film, noting that women are presented through the lens of male desire, functioning as symbols or objects within a system that naturalizes male dominance (32-34). Similarly, Laura Mulvey theorized that a "determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure […] women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*" (62-63). Mulvey's theory of the male gaze underscores how cinema positions women primarily as objects of visual pleasure for male spectators, reinforcing their subordinate role in a patriarchal system.

While both second-wave feminism and cinefeminism were shaped by predominantly white perspectives and often excluded the voices and experiences of women of color, their critique of patriarchal structures and the representation of women was instrumental in shaping films such as *The Slumber Party Massacre*, which engages with these feminist critiques to subvert many of the subgenre's established tropes. Despite their limitations, second-wave feminism and cinefeminism provided a foundation for the film's subversion of traditional gender roles and its critique of the male gaze. In the following section, I examine how *The Slumber Party Massacre* engages with the slasher formula not simply by reproducing its tropes but by reworking them through the lens of second-wave feminism. The film draws on recognizable

genre conventions — such as the Final Girl, gendered violence, and female nudity — but reorients them to foreground collective female experience, critique patriarchal power structures, and center female spectatorship. As will be demonstrated, the film both operates within and pushes against the boundaries of a subgenre shaped by male anxieties and industry constraints, offering a feminist intervention that is shaped by, rather than in spite of, those limitations.

Redefining Genre Expectations

Released in 1982, *The Slumber Party Massacre* belongs to the classical era of the slasher subgenre and follows many of the expected beats of a slasher. Nevertheless, it does so in a way that reflects the creative negotiations of its female director, working within a restrictive system. Rather than rejecting the subgenre outright, the film reframes its conventions to make visible the gendered tensions at the heart of slasher cinema. Jones and Brown's nuanced approach sets the film apart from its predecessors and offers a fresh perspective on the slasher formula, predating the postmodern narrative and stylistic tendencies that became more prevalent following the release of Wes Craven's films *New Nightmare* (1994) and *Scream* (1996). The introduction of women as the principal creators of a slasher film was unique, as prior to *The Slumber Party Massacre*, they had been largely confined to lower creative leadership roles. Even though Debra Hill was the producer and co-writer of *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978) and Sallye Richardson was the assistant director and co-editor of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974), the select few women working within the slasher subgenre were largely relegated to the makeup, costume, and wardrobe departments. Consequently, Jones' role as director and Brown's contribution as a writer were significant, influencing both the narrative and the film's visual execution. Without claiming that having women as directors and writers inherently makes films more progressive, it is evident that their perspectives can offer unique insights and challenge

traditional narratives, especially when this is their explicit goal. The shift in creative control marked by *The Slumber Party Massacre* represents a pivotal development in the slasher subgenre.

To understand how *The Slumber Party Massacre* operates as a feminist intervention, it is first necessary to establish what the film appears to be doing on the surface. The gap between its apparent conformity to slasher conventions and its underlying subversive logic is precisely where its feminist critique is located. At first glance the film may not appear particularly progressive. Opening with a familiar slasher premise, the film features an escaped killer wielding a phallic weapon who stalks and murders a group of teenagers, delivering the expected tropes of the genre — nudity, voyeurism, and a rising body count. The narrative centers on high schooler Trish (Michele Michaels), who decides to host a sleepover while her parents are away for the weekend. Russ Thorn (Michael Villella), a recently escaped patient from a mental facility, is revealed as the film's killer with the murder of a telephone repairwoman (Jean Vargas) outside the school. He then turns his attention to Trish and her unsuspecting friends, setting the stage for the film's escalating violence.

After basketball practice that afternoon, the girls head home to get ready for the sleepover. Linda (Brinke Stevens), however, returns alone to the locker room to retrieve something she forgot and becomes Thorn's next victim. As night falls, the story alternates between scenes of the slumber party and the quieter domestic space of Valerie (Robin Stille) and her younger sister Courtney (Jennifer Meyers), who live next door. The film builds suspense as Thorn continues his attacks, killing Trish's neighbor Mr. Contant (Rigg Kennedy) and then Diane's (Gina Smika Hunter) boyfriend, John (Jim Boyce), who waits in the garage hoping to sneak her away from the party. Diane is murdered soon after discovering his body. Oblivious to

the escalating threat, the girls inside remain at ease — until the pizza delivery boy (Aaron Lipstadt) collapses through the front door, his eyes gruesomely drilled out. In a panic, Jeff (David Millbern) and Neil (Joseph Alan Johnson) try to run for help but are quickly intercepted and killed. Believing the party is still going, Courtney sneaks out of the house and heads over to Trish's house. Valerie soon follows. Inside, the terrified girls hesitate to answer the door. When Jackie (Andree Honore) finally opens it, Thorn is waiting — he kills her instantly. Horrified, Trish and Kim (Debra De Liso) flee to a bedroom, hoping to find refuge. Meanwhile, Valerie searches the house and yard for Courtney and anyone from the slumber party. Thorn strikes again, fatally stabbing Kim and launching into a chase after Trish. Still unaware of the full extent of the danger, Courtney and Valerie stumble upon Kim's body hidden in the refrigerator, sending them into a panic. They quickly hide, only for Thorn to conceal himself beneath a blanket in an attempt to ambush them. Coach Jana (Pamela Roylance) arrives and tries to intervene but is ultimately killed. In the climax, Trish, Valerie, and Courtney band together to fight back, finally overpowering Thorn and putting an end to his rampage.

Given its familiar narrative structure, *The Slumber Party Massacre* inevitably invites comparisons to other popular slashers such as *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th* (Sean S. Cunningham, 1980) — a point recognized by contemporary reviewers. Linda Gross of the *Los Angeles Times* described the film as "yet another reprehensible and gory exploitation movie about a crazed killer," with a premise "suspiciously close to that of 'Halloween'" (G3). Gross' evaluation of the film ignored the fact that contemporary audiences enjoyed the formulaic nature of the subgenre and would not be upset that *The Slumber Party Massacre* featured familiar narrative elements, notably a male killer who escapes from a mental institution and targets teenagers in a suburban setting. In fact, this is what they would be expecting. However, Gross'

critique exemplifies the kind of backlash Jones risked by choosing to direct within a subgenre that was increasingly being criticized for its perceived misogyny and depiction of violence against women. By retaining familiar slasher motifs such as the Final Girl, voyeuristic framing, and depictions of violence against women, Jones engages directly with the genre's most contested elements — aspects that scholars such as Gill, Brandon R. Grafius, Humphries, and Rickels have critiqued for reinforcing misogynistic narratives and limiting female representation. Rather than accepting these conventions at face value, *The Slumber Party Massacre* subtly destabilizes them, inviting viewers to reconsider their function and impact. Reconfiguring these tropes enables the film to perform a feminist critique from within the genre's own structure, suggesting that even its most problematic tropes can be repurposed toward subversive ends.

The Final Girl

On the surface, the portrayal of the Final Girl in *The Slumber Party Massacre* may seem to align with Clover's original theorization. However, the Final Girl trope is not a universal or immutable feature of slasher films, and its application varies widely across the subgenre. Even in films with a lone female survivor, not all conform neatly to Clover's model of the masculinized, virtuous heroine. Nevertheless, the trope remains a dominant lens through which slasher films have historically been interpreted. For that reason, it remains a useful critical entry point — not because it fully explains a film like *The Slumber Party Massacre*, but because it highlights the ways in which the film both participates in and deviates from typical subgenre expectations during the classical cycle.

Scholars such as Humphries, Rickels, and Clover identify Valerie, an outsider within the group, as the film's Final Girl. Valerie embodies many of the classic characteristics associated with the trope. For example, as a new student, Valerie finds herself without friends. Although

she possesses impressive basketball skills, the only person who wants to include her is Trish, emphasizing her sense of being "apart" from the other young women. Valerie further reinforces this distance by turning down Trish's invitation to the sleepover, opting to instead stay home and babysit her younger sister, Courtney. Her character also disrupts traditional gender roles by exercising Clover's "active investigating gaze" (48). After Valerie follows Courtney to Trish's house and the two realize there is a killer inside, Valerie quickly takes initiative. While hiding in the basement, she searches for a weapon and emerges with a machete, determined to confront the threat. She embodies the resilience and strength typical of the Final Girl by taking on the role of the pursuer and confronting Russ with forceful action. Her willingness to face the killer head-on and use violence to defend herself mirrors the "masculinized qualities" often required for survival in slasher films.

However, *The Slumber Party Massacre* does not simply reinforce the problematic theorizations of the Final Girl trope — it actively subverts and critiques it. Rather than focusing on a single surviving female character, the film broadens the concept of the Final Girl to include multiple women surviving through solidarity and shared strength.[42] Ultimately, it takes the combined efforts of Valerie, Courtney, and Trish to put an end to Russ' reign of terror. Trish initiates the attack by stabbing him in the back, after which Valerie finds the machete and continues the fight. She disables him further — first slicing off the tip of his drill, then severing his hand, and finally slashing his stomach, sending him into the pool. Despite his severe injuries, Russ resurfaces and lunges at Valerie, attempting to strangle her. Courtney quickly jumps onto his back, throwing him off balance. Moments later, Trish rushes in with her knife. Though

[42] *The Slumber Party Massacre* is not the first or only slasher film to feature multiple survivors; however, it stands out among those analyzed by Janet Staiger as the only one in which all the surviving characters are women. In contrast, films such as *Terror Train* (Roger Spottiswoode, 1980), *April Fool's Day*, and *Halloween* also feature more than one survivor, but at least one of them is male (Table 14.3, 220).

neither Trish nor Courtney is able to harm him directly, their actions buy Valerie enough time to grab the machete. As Russ charges again, Valerie lifts the blade, and he impales himself. Their teamwork subverts and critiques the Final Girl trope by rejecting the idea of a lone female survivor who must embody traditionally masculine traits to conquer the killer.

By distributing survival across Valerie, Courtney, and Trish, the film anticipates and complicates the isolating, masculinized nature that would later come to define the classic Final Girl trope. It presents survival as a communal effort grounded in solidarity and mutual support. Importantly, the violence these young women enact is framed as reactive and defensive — they act only to protect themselves and one another from a threat, not to dominate. Jones' approach disrupts the trope's eventual emphasis on individualism and the expectation that one "exceptional" girl must rise above others through masculine-coded aggression. Instead, it proposes that survival can come from cooperative resilience rather than a single heroic figure, offering an early alternative model in which multiple women share in victory over the killer.

The Slumber Party Massacre also features female characters who depart from the typical depiction of the Final Girl as celibate or sexually ambivalent. While Trish, Valerie, and Courtney are not shown engaging in sexual activity, their portrayal lacks the overt innocence or isolation that commonly distinguishes Final Girls as theorized by Clover and Dika. Trish, Valerie, and Courtney each offer a unique perspective on these purity expectations. Rather than simply conforming to or rebelling against the standard of innocence, they navigate these expectations in ways that reveal their individuality and complexity. Trish, notably, is the only one of the three shown nude — a detail that complicates the later convention linking of Final Girl survivability to modesty and sexual restraint. Beyond nudity, the film also presents Trish as openly interested in sex and romance. When Jeff and Neil visit her house, she flirts with Jeff by encouraging him to

place cold hot dogs on a bruise forming on his face. She stands close to him, touches his arm, and later leans into him while talking to Diane. In a brief moment, they can be seen gently holding hands, with Jeff softly rubbing her fingers. These details hint at a budding romantic connection between Trish and Jeff, subtly suggesting mutual feelings that go beyond casual flirtation. They position Trish as a character who embraces her desires without being punished for them, anticipating a more nuanced approach to female sexuality than the rigid norms the trope would later solidify.

Similarly, Valerie and Courtney are shown engaging with pornographic material. Valerie keeps a *Playgirl* magazine hidden under her mattress, which Courtney discovers. Courtney casually flips through it, telling her sister she is just doing her "biology" homework. Their dialogue reveals that Valerie has had more magazines, which Courtney has looked at and even ripped out the centerfolds. While Valerie's views on dating are never directly addressed and she does not appear to be in a relationship, her *Playgirl* magazines suggest she is not entirely disinterested in men or sex. Even her decision to skip Trish's sleepover is not due to concerns about drugs, alcohol, or boys; instead, she overhears the other girls mocking her and consequently does not feel genuinely welcome. Valerie's decision to distance herself from the other girls positions her as an outsider within the main group, though her exclusion owes nothing to purity coding. Diane simply finds her odd for drinking too much milk.[43]

Just as Valerie's outsider status is not rooted in "purity," Courtney also challenges the trope's chaste ideal. Her interest in boys is evidenced as she is teased by Valerie for showing excitement when a boy calls her on the phone, further illustrating that neither sister fully embodies the innocence often expected of the Final Girl. While Trish, Valerie, and Courtney

[43] The other girls challenge Diane's reasoning for considering Valerie strange, suggesting it might stem from Valerie's basketball talent and striking appearance.

abstain from sex, they do not neatly align with the image of the morally pure Final Girl that would later define the subgenre. Trish's nudity, Valerie and Courtney's engagement with pornography, and their shared interest in boys and romantic connection all complicate the assumption that innocence is necessary for survival. Their portrayal suggests that emotional and sexual curiosity can coexist with resilience, offering an early example that pushes against the genre's eventual codification of moral purity as a survival requirement.

The Male Gaze

Although Trish's nudity challenges the reductive expectation of feminine "purity" for the Final Girl, it can also be interpreted as contributing to the objectification of women, reinforcing a common critique of slasher films and their underlying misogyny. Mirroring many other slasher films, *The Slumber Party Massacre* includes scenes that cater to the male gaze, largely as a result of the creative constraints placed on Jones. Despite these demands, Jones' approach to filming these scenes reveals a subtle critique of the male gaze. For instance, the film's opening sequence features Trish waking up in the morning and changing from a nightgown into a sundress. Although she is shown partially nude for a few seconds, the scene stands apart from typical opening sequences in other slasher films. Unlike Judith Myers (Sandy Johnson) in *Halloween*, who is stabbed postcoital, Trish does not engage in any explicit or implicit sexual activity, nor is her nudity followed by punishment. By presenting Trish's nudity in an everyday, non-sexualized context and without the threat of immediate harm, the scene disrupts the expected connection between female nudity and violence that defines much of the subgenre. The mundanity of the act — Trish simply getting dressed — also reframes her body as a natural part of her daily routine rather than an erotic spectacle designed solely for audience consumption. By normalizing Trish's nudity, the scene critiques the male gaze by rejecting the punitive logic that typically governs the

representation of women in slasher films. Furthermore, the fact that this opening sequence deviates from the temporal structure outlined by Dika, with its psychoanalytic implications and focus on the male killer, signals a shift away from the framework of castration anxiety that often underpins such narratives. Trish is observed solely by the audience, not by both the audience and the killer.

Less than eight minutes later, the film features another instance of nudity: Trish and several other female characters are shown showering after basketball practice. The shower scene, often considered the most objectifying in *The Slumber Party Massacre*, includes brief moments where the camera lingers on parts of their bodies as they wash, gossip, plan a slumber party, and complain about the game. However, it diverges from the typical stylistic elements of gratuitous shower scenes, opting for a more grounded and casual tone. Instead of presenting a steamy locker room with full-frontal nudity and women provocatively washing their bodies to the backdrop of a sensual song, Jones portrays the young women casually chatting about boys, joking around, and pragmatically cleaning up after basketball practice. The scene is notably devoid of a musical score or thick steam, and there is no full-frontal nudity.

Most importantly, none of the girls engage in sensual or performative acts of washing that sexualize the moment. As this scene is not romanticized or stylized in the manner found in the opening scenes of popular horror films of the period such as *Carrie* (1976) and *Dressed to Kill* (both Brian De Palma, 1980), the audiences' expectation of a gratuitous spectacle is left unfulfilled. Jones acknowledges these expectations by opening with a steamy, waist-level medium shot that frames one of the girls in the shower entryway, deliberately cropping her head and legs to center attention on her torso and butt as she drops her towel. By structuring the shot in this manner, Jones initially appears to cater to the anticipated visual language reminiscent of

the classic shower scene which often fetishizes the female form. However, this moment is not prolonged or sexualized further, instead transitioning quickly into a more mundane and practical depiction of the shower scene. Even when the camera slowly pans down to Trish's butt, lingers, and then pans back up — a shot somewhat reminiscent of how Carrie White (Sissy Spacek) is filmed in the opening sequence of *Carrie* — the camera work feels distinctly different because of the change in tone and intent. While Carrie's hands move over her body in a manner that feels sensual and almost approaching self-groping, Trish's movements are quick and practical, focused solely on cleaning without any overt sexual undertones.

Further subverting expectations, the dialogue and camera work frame the scene in a way that mirrors male-focused shower sequences in films, such as *The Pom Pom Girls* (Joseph Ruben, 1976) and *Full Moon High* (Larry Cohen, 1981), where football players are casually shown washing and joking after a game. These scenes, similar to the shower scene in *The Slumber Party Massacre*, are presented in a matter-of-fact way, avoiding the sexualization typically associated with depictions of female nudity. By stripping away overt sensuality, the film challenges conventional cinematic norms all while meeting the producers' expectations. However, the deliberate rejection of sexualized female nudity does not imply a complete absence of objectification within the scene. Jones flips the script by positioning the female characters as the ones engaging in objectification, subverting the traditional dynamics of the male gaze. The gaze reversal is exemplified in a casual conversation between Trish and Linda. When Trish asks, "You like watching basketball on TV?" Linda playfully responds, "Yeah, I love all those great big guys in their cute little shorts," shifting the lens of desire away from their own naked bodies and onto men. By framing the girls as active participants in observing and expressing desire, this moment challenges the presumption of a predominantly male and heterosexual audience. It

redefines women as more than passive objects of pleasure, allowing them to assert agency and reshape the dynamics of desire on their own terms. The juxtaposition of these elements — mundane, non-sexualized female nudity alongside playful female objectification of men — creates a nuanced critique of the cinematic norms surrounding the gaze.

The Slumber Party Massacre deepens its evaluation of the male gaze in a later scene where the young women change into their pajamas for the slumber party. As with other moments of nudity in the film, they are not being observed by the killer. Instead, they are watched by some of their male classmates, making this one of the few instances where the nudity takes on a more performative quality. Trish, Kim, and Jackie are shown changing in front of an open window in Trish's living room. While the camera briefly lingers on Jackie's (covered) butt and on Trish and Kim's breasts, the moment lacks any overtly sexualized framing, reminiscent of the earlier shower scene. Throughout the sequence, the girls engage in casual conversation, gossiping about another girl who was caught having sex by her parents. The scene is not slowed down or shrouded in steam, nor does it consist of close-up, isolated, voyeuristic shots of their bodies. Furthermore, the girls do not engage in sensual or self-touching behaviors as they change.

While the nudity itself inherently invites objectification, Jones resists amplifying it through the film's visual style or tone. As Humphries observes, the audience is aware that the boys are secretly watching the girls, but the girls remain oblivious to their gaze (153). The shots of the girls changing could be interpreted as being presented from the point of view of the teenage boys watching them through the window. By framing the scene from their perspective, the film attributes the act of objectification and the employment of the male gaze to the boys within the narrative, rather than directly to the filmmaker or the audience. Reframing attribution shifts the responsibility for the voyeuristic gaze onto the boys, emphasizing their intrusive

behavior as the source of the objectification. Rather than exploiting the female characters for the audience's pleasure, the film critiques the male gaze by embedding it within the actions of the boys. Locating the male gaze within characters allows the scene to interrogate the dynamics of the male gaze without endorsing or perpetuating it.

The interplay between voyeurism and critique becomes even more complex when examining Diane's character. As one of the most overtly sexualized figures in the film, Diane offers a nuanced case study in how *The Slumber Party Massacre* navigates the tension between fulfilling genre expectations and subverting the male gaze. Preceding her death as well as the death of her boyfriend, John, Diane's nipple is briefly exposed during their make out session in his car. While the shot lasts only a few seconds and is obscured by the darkness in the garage, it is framed in an extreme close-up, emphasizing John's hand as he gropes her. The scene appears more objectifying than other instances of nudity in *The Slumber Party Massacre*; however, its brevity and seemingly obligatory inclusion suggest it functions less as a genuine enactment of the male gaze and more as a nod to the genre's exploitative roots or a producer-mandated requirement. The moment lacks the extended framing, emphasis, or voyeuristic build-up typically associated with the male gaze, making it feel incidental and almost out of place within the film's broader critique of these types of cinematic norms. The contrast in framing further highlights the film's subversive treatment of nudity, as it seems to meet expectations without fully engaging in them.

Violence Against Women

The Slumber Party Massacre's nuanced engagement with the male gaze, as seen in its framing of female nudity and moments of playful subversion, extends into its portrayal of violence against women. While the film challenges traditional cinematic norms in its depiction of

nudity, it does not shy away from the subgenre's characteristic violence. The male gaze frames how women are visually presented in slasher films and reflects deeper cultural anxieties about control and power over women's bodies. The dynamic between visual representation and control frequently intersects with depictions of violence, as the subgenre often uses acts of brutality against women to further explore (or exploit) underlying cultural anxieties.

The film both adheres to and critiques the conventional portrayal of violence against women in the slasher subgenre. While the film features twelve deaths (six male and six female), it avoids the typical emphasis on graphic depictions of female suffering and significantly departs from the use of point-of-view (POV) shots commonly associated with the killer. Most of the deaths, regardless of gender, occur off-screen or are obscured. For instance, the deaths of the telephone repairwoman and Linda initially seem to align with Clover's assertion that women die because they are women. However, these killings are not filmed in more graphic detail or lingered upon longer than the deaths of Jeff or Neil. Moreover, the absence of killer POV shots during these moments denies the audience the voyeuristic perspective that often characterizes slasher violence and, in turn, distances the viewers from the perpetrator's gaze. When Russ kills the telephone repairwoman in her van, the camera refrains from explicitly showing the act of violence, instead depicting blood splattering on the ceiling as evidence of her death. While the thirty-second scene does include moments of her visibly suffering and attempting to escape, it also briefly employs her POV. The use of the victim's POV, rather than the killer's, is a significant deviation from traditional slasher conventions. By framing the scene from the repairwoman's perspective, the film shifts the focus to her fear and struggle, effectively centering her as a person rather than an object of violence.

When Russ corners Linda in the locker room, the film maintains a detached perspective, emphasizing the tension of the moment without inviting the audience to share in Russ' perspective. Although Linda's death scene lasts approximately three minutes and incorporates elements of spectacle, the primary focus remains on her desperate attempts to escape and hide as Russ pursues her. Even during the moment of her initial injury, when Russ cuts her arm, the camera avoids lingering on her pain, slowing the action, or introducing any sexualized imagery. Instead, the shot emphasizes the injury briefly before pulling back the frame to show Linda falling in the background and Russ' drill ominously looming in the foreground. The scene's framing redirects the viewer's attention from her suffering to the broader menace embodied by Russ and his weapon, a symbol of violent masculinity. When Russ discovers Linda, her hiding place betrayed by blood seeping under the locked door, the film again avoids sensationalizing the death of women. The scene cuts away just as Russ' drill pierces the door, showing Linda screaming only briefly before transitioning to an empty gym. While the sequence's length and dramatic tension could position it as a spectacle, the film's decision to avoid the killer's POV and omit the explicit depiction of Linda's death carries far greater narrative and thematic weight. It subverts audience expectations and critiques the slasher subgenre's tendency to sensationalize brutality against women.

Both Linda's death and the one immediately preceding it — the death of the telephone repairwoman — reflect the archetype of opening kills in other slasher films, where early deaths serve to establish the killer's menace and set the tone for the rest of the narrative. According to Dika, "regardless of the specific narrative situation […] the opening sequence *always* presents a

woman's death and/or an image of her mutilated body" (94).[44] In *Halloween*, six-year-old Michael Myers (Will Sandin) murders his sister; in *Prom Night* (Paul Lynch, 1980), ten-year-old Alex Hammond (Michael Tough) witnesses his sister's death; and in *Friday the 13th*, Pamela Voorhees (Betsy Palmer) kills two camp counselors who sneak away to have sex. *The Slumber Party Massacre* diverges from the norm by rejecting voyeuristic tendencies and presenting the violence in a more detached and critical manner. The focus is on the victim's humanity and agency, prioritizing their attempts to resist and survive rather than the killer's dominance. Emphasizing the victim's perspective and resisting voyeuristic framing heightens suspense, fulfills audience expectations, and challenges the subgenre's reliance on female suffering as spectacle, offering a more thoughtful engagement with the slasher formula.

All of the female deaths share a detached quality, and Diane's death is no exception. Echoing the other girls, her death occurs offscreen, with the focus shifting to Russ' drill, which becomes even more overtly phallic. As with the depiction of Linda's death, the girls and their fear become secondary to Russ and his drill, shifting the focus from their suffering to the broader theme of violent masculinity. In Diane's case this is underscored by a striking visual choice: the camera frames her through Russ' legs, with the drill prominently positioned between them. The emphasis on Russ and his drill in Diane's death contrasts with the portrayal of the other female characters' deaths — Jackie, Kim, and Coach Jana. Unlike the offscreen deaths of Diane, Linda, and the telephone repairwoman, these deaths are shown on screen but are handled quickly, obscured by darkness, and devoid of lingering focus. Despite being depicted visually, the killings

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[44] It is worth noting that Dika's observation does not hold universally. While many slasher films do follow this type of set-up, there are notable exceptions, including the opening sequences of *Black Christmas* (Bob Clark, 1974), *When a Stranger Calls* (Fred Walton, 1979), *The Burning* (Tony Maylam, 1981), and *Alone in the Dark* (Jack Sholder, 1982).

and their aftermaths are not emphasized or sensationalized. Notably, the first bloody, mutilated body the audience sees is not a woman's but Trish's neighbor, Mr. Contant. Although his actual death occurs offscreen, his body is immediately shown as he falls with Russ' drill protruding from his throat, marking a stark contrast to the treatment of female deaths and bodies.

Jeff and the pizza delivery guy, similar to Mr. Contant, are killed entirely offscreen, though their bodies are later displayed in graphic detail. Jeff with his head severed, and the pizza guy with his eyes gouged out. By comparison, the telephone repairwoman's and Linda's bodies are never shown postmortem. Diane's body does appear later, falling onto Jeff, but it is not heavily mutilated — she has blood running down her face but no visible wounds. Likewise, Kim's body is revealed when Courtney opens the refrigerator, with a knife in her chest and blood trickling from her mouth, but again, the gore is minimal. The male bodies in the film are subjected to significantly more visible violence and graphic gore, an inversion that subverts typical slasher conventions by shifting the emphasis away from the objectification and mutilation of female characters and instead spotlighting male victims in ways that critique the subgenre's traditional dynamics. In *The Slumber Party Massacre,* it is not the women who are the victims of extreme violence; it is the men.

The subversion of violence against women is particularly evident in the graphic depictions of the male character's deaths, specifically Jeff and Neil. In contrast to the onscreen deaths of the female characters, the deaths of Jeff and Neil are framed and filmed to mirror the treatment typically reserved for female characters in other slasher films. While female deaths are often depicted in close-up, with graphic detail and extended focus, male deaths are typically swift, leaving little time for the victim to react or display fear before the camera quickly moves onward. These deaths are also more often shown from a distance or obscured by darkness or fog

(Clover 35). *The Slumber Party Massacre* subverts this slasher trope by portraying Jackie, Kim, and Coach Jana's deaths as brief and understated, while depicting Jeff and Neil's deaths as prolonged, graphic, and emotionally charged. Jackie's death exemplifies this shift perfectly. She is killed within seconds of opening the door to let Valerie inside, only to have her throat slashed by Russ. The camera does not linger on her; instead, her body falls out of the frame as the focus remains on Russ. The portrayal of Jackie's death contrasts sharply to the treatment of Jeff and Neil. Their deaths are given significantly more screen time, with the camera lingering on their suffering and fear, highlight every graphic detail.

Jeff, similar to Linda, is shown injured before his death is ultimately revealed. However, while Linda's injury is brief and the focus is on Russ and the drill, Jeff's is fully visible, with the audience clearly seeing both his face and upper body as Russ drives the drill through his shoulder. Once the drill breaks through, the camera moves into a close-up of Jeff's face, capturing his scream of terror. Rather than the focus of the scene being on Russ or the drill, it is on Jeff, emphasizing his pain and fear in a way that centers his suffering. Similarly, Neil's death focuses on his desperate and terrified attempt to get Valerie's attention, screaming, "Oh, God, please open up!" as Russ chases him down. Neil proves powerless against Russ, and the camera unflinchingly captures his entire torso as Russ repeatedly stabs him. The scene then lingers on Neil's lifeless body, drenched in blood, with his face frozen in an expression of pain and terror, prolonging the audience's focus on his vulnerability and suffering. Shortly after Neil's death, it is revealed that Jeff is still alive as the audience witnesses his agonizing attempt to pull himself toward the house. Upon reaching the door, he collapses against it, crying in pain. In one of the film's rare POV shots, the audience views Jeff through Russ' eyes as he stealthily approaches. When Jeff notices Russ, the camera lingers on his face, twisted with fear and anguish. Jeff pleads

with Russ, while the audience sees the shadow of the drill ominously rising before the fatal blow, which happens offscreen. Even in the absence of an explicit depiction, Jeff's death receives significantly more screen time and emotional weight than the deaths of the female characters, even those that are shown onscreen. Jeff's death further underscores the film's reversal of traditional slasher conventions regarding the portrayal of violence against women.

The death scenes of Neil and Jeff could be interpreted as a continuation of slasher misogyny by redirecting the emotional weight of the violence away from female characters and onto male characters. In a subgenre traditionally dominated by the victimization of women, this focus on male pain and fear risks sidelining the critique of gendered violence by instead prioritizing the experiences of male victims, potentially perpetuating a male-centric perspective even in moments of reversal. However, *The Slumber Party Massacre* uses the reversal to critique the objectification and voyeuristic focus on female suffering in slasher films, not to center men and their experiences as more significant. Instead, by framing the male deaths in the same prolonged and graphic way women's deaths are typically shown, the film highlights the absurdity and cruelty of these cinematic conventions. The focus on male suffering serves to expose the audience's desensitization to female suffering, forcing them to confront how normalized and gendered the depiction of violence has become in the subgenre. Far from being misogynistic, this reversal challenges the audience to rethink their expectations and recognize the inherent gender bias in traditional slasher tropes.

Jones' disruption of traditional slasher conventions aligns with *The Slumber Party Massacre*'s engagement with second-wave feminism and cinefeminism, as it critiques and subverts the subgenre's deeply ingrained gender biases. By subjecting male characters to the same lingering, graphic focus typically reserved for female victims, the film highlights the

inherent voyeurism and cruelty of these cinematic conventions. The shift in gendered visual conventions critiques the subgenre's normalization of female suffering and forces the audience to confront cultural biases around gendered violence. The film further challenges the male gaze by subverting its objectifying tendencies. While moments of nudity and violence remain, they are framed to critique, rather than reinforce, the gaze. Scenes that might traditionally sexualize or exploit female characters instead highlight their agency and humanity, while male suffering becomes the focal point of prolonged visual and emotional scrutiny. The inversion of gendered violence exposes the ways in which slasher films typically prioritize female victimization as both spectacle and narrative.

Additionally, *The Slumber Party Massacre* reimagines the Final Girl trope, rejecting the isolating, masculinized portrayal of a lone female survivor. Instead, it broadens the concept to include multiple women who exhibit resilience and strength through solidarity and mutual support. Characters such as Valerie, Trish, and Courtney complicate the trope's reliance on purity and moral superiority, challenging the expectation that survival hinges on adhering to traditional gender norms. By presenting survival as a collective effort rather than an individual triumph, the film critiques the patriarchal underpinnings of the Final Girl and redefines what it means to endure within the slasher subgenre. Through its engagement with these interconnected elements, the film critiques the foundational conventions of the slasher subgenre while offering a feminist reimagining of its key tropes, an approach that subverts audience expectations and reflects the broader aims of second-wave feminism and cinefeminism: to dismantle entrenched power dynamics and create space for more equitable representations in media.

Shifting the Slasher Film's Focus

Through its subtle disruptions of familiar slasher tropes, *The Slumber Party Massacre* gradually shifts the focus away from traditional, male-centered anxieties, bringing to light fears and experiences more closely tied to women's lives and perspectives. The film complicates patterns — such as the male gaze, sensationalized violence against women, and the isolating Final Girl trope — that would only later be theorized as defining conventions of the slasher subgenre. As a result, it offers a feminist exploration of gender dynamics that centers women. *The Slumber Party Massacre*'s feminist shift is particularly significant given the slasher subgenre's theoretical centering of men. Coupled with the prevalence of male killers and a presumed male audience, the sensationalized depiction of female death has led critics such as Clover to link the subgenre to male anxieties and desires (61). More specifically, Barbara Creed argues that "castration anxiety is a central concern of […] the slasher sub-genre," which visualizes the killer inflicting his greatest fear (castration) on the victim ("Horror and" 74). Grounding the slasher film in castration anxiety and the male fear of emasculation has significant implications for how women are depicted and perceived within the genre.

By positioning women as the primary victims of violence that represents male anxieties, women are reduced to mere objects upon which male fears are projected. Women become symbolic vessels for male insecurities, reinforcing their objectification and powerlessness in the narrative. As a result, female characters are often portrayed as passive, vulnerable, and defined by their sexuality, with their deaths depicted in a voyeuristic manner that both sensationalizes and diminishes their humanity. Furthermore, this interpretation reinforces traditional gender roles, where male characters wield power through violence, and female characters serve as the "other" to be dominated or destroyed. The female body, often presented in graphic detail during

death scenes, becomes a site of fear and spectacle, reinforcing harmful tropes of women as disposable and subject to male control. While *The Slumber Party Massacre* predates the codification of slasher tropes, it engages with many of the same narrative structures that would come to define the subgenre — and crucially, it resists and reframes them. Rather than requiring the abandonment of femininity, the film reimagines power and agency as qualities that can coexist with feminine-coded traits. By challenging the disproportionate punishment of sexually active women and the framing of female sexuality as a site of terror, the film disrupts the patriarchal framing of maturity and power as inherently masculine. Reinterpreting these conventions not only challenges the traditional binary representations of gender within the subgenre but also offers a more inclusive and empowering vision of the Final Girl, one that centers female experiences and reclaims agency from the constraints of patriarchal narratives.

The reductive portrayal of women as vessels for male anxieties aligns closely with psychoanalytic interpretations of the slasher subgenre, which center on male psychological development and reinforce traditional patriarchal perspectives. To explain the subgenre's popularity, Dika argued that slasher films symbolically depict the "growth from childhood into an awareness of the harsh realities of the adult world," a theme that resonated with adolescent audiences (96). She further suggested that the slasher film's two-part temporal structure — where a past event, often sexual in nature, resurfaces later — mirrors stages of psychosexual development. Within this framework, the sexualized past event represents a symbolic "reenactment of a young boy's first viewing of the female genitalia" (97). Interpreted psychoanalytically, the absence of a penis is perceived as castration, evoking fear, revulsion, and fascination in the boy. The boy's conflicted response is echoed in the present-day narrative, where the killer, now an adult, reenacts these feelings symbolically through acts of violence

against women, turning the fear of castration into a murderous compulsion. Dika's psychoanalytic interpretation hinges on the framework provided by the slasher film's two-part temporal structure, which links a past event to present-day violence. Viewing the slasher narrative through this lens centers the male experience and, specifically, male anxieties. By situating the core symbolic struggle around castration anxiety, the interpretation inherently prioritizes the perspective and developmental concerns of male characters, even when the central figure in the story is the female heroine.

Unlike slashers such as *Halloween*, *Friday the 13th*, and *Prom Night,* which rely on Dika's two-part temporal structure — with an inciting incident or backstory followed by present-day violence — *The Slumber Party Massacre* shifts the focus away from the killer's psychological development by dropping the first part of the two-part temporal structure. Instead, it opens in a seemingly mundane way, with a bright sunny morning casting light over an idyllic suburban environment where a newspaper boy (Francis Menendez) rides his bike past Trish's house, emphasizing the quiet normalcy of the neighborhood. While sequences similar to this are not uncommon in slasher narratives, they usually follow the past event where the killer's backstory and motivation for killing are revealed. For example, in *Halloween*, the film begins with the infamous POV shot of six-year-old Michael Myers killing his sister, establishing the inciting incident and providing a backstory for the killer. Only after subsequently revealing twenty-one-year-old Michael Myers' escape from the Smith's Grove Sanitarium fifteen years later does the film transition to the quiet suburban neighborhood where Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis) is introduced heading off to school.

The Slumber Party Massacre's omission of a past event or inciting incident is a deliberate choice that distinguishes it from traditional slashers and theorization. Instead of exploring the

killer's psychological backstory or showing an inciting incident involving violence against a woman, the film briefly introduces the killer, Russ, through a newspaper headline and a radio broadcast. These mediums provide only minimal details — Russ has escaped custody and was previously convicted of killing five people in 1969. Presented through impersonal and distanced sources rather than intimate POV sequences, he becomes an abstract and enigmatic figure, making it difficult for the audience to connect with or understand him psychologically. By excluding Russ' backstory and only presenting him through second-hand accounts, the film prevents his perspective from dominating the narrative. The intentional erasure of Russ' narrative past ensures that the audience's focus remains on the female characters and their experiences, reframing the story to prioritize female experience and agency from the outset.

The narrative erasure of Russ' backstory does more than recenter female experience — it also allows the film to engage with broader systems of patriarchal violence. Through the introduction of Russ, Jones clearly demonstrates her understanding of the slasher subgenre and its patriarchal underpinnings, particularly how psychoanalysis and Reagan-era politics shaped the messaging of these films. By juxtaposing the newspaper headline, "GOP Lifts Social Security Ax," with "Mass Murderer of 5 Russ Thorn Escapes," the film draws a direct parallel between the systemic violence of conservative policies and the literal violence of the killer. The specific use of the word *ax* ties both headlines together, equating the "ax" of budget cuts (which can harm vulnerable populations, including women) with the "ax" of a violent killer. The connection between the two headlines suggests that both governmental policy and murderous violence function as tools of patriarchal power. By echoing the language of economic policy in the context of physical violence, the film shifts attention away from individual pathology and toward broader societal structures that normalize and enable harm against women. In doing so,

The Slumber Party Massacre foregrounds female experience while actively working to decenter the male psyche as the organizing principle of the slasher narrative — a move that challenges dominant critical frameworks and paves the way for a feminist reimagining of the subgenre.

Although the film removes the killer's backstory to decenter male psychology and foreground female perspectives, scholars have proposed other ways to argue that slashers remain fundamentally structured around male experience — suggesting that even without a personal history, the killer and the narrative still reflect and reinforce male fears, fantasies, and desires. Clover, for instance, analyzes the slasher narrative through a psychoanalytic lens, arguing that the male viewer's forbidden fantasy of paternal intimacy is displaced onto acts of violence against female bodies. The symbolic displacement of an unconscious desire for the father onto women creates a dynamic where female victims and the surviving heroine embody male anxieties, allowing the viewer to confront these psychological tensions indirectly while masking their taboo nature (Clover 50-52). Within this framework, the killer's actions are seen as attempts to assert dominance and resolve his subconscious conflicts, further emphasizing the narrative's grounding in male psychological development. Moreover, Clover suggests that the Final Girl functions as a proxy for the teenage male viewer. Her femininity is sufficient to convey fear and vulnerability — emotions traditionally repressed in adult men — but not so exaggerated as to challenge conventional notions of male strength and sexuality (51). In other words, the Final Girl is constructed in a way that lets male viewers safely identify with her. Even though slasher films often feature a woman as the protagonist, her role is shaped to serve male audiences and psychology.

Traditional psychoanalytic readings of slasher films center on male anxieties and phallic dominance while also imposing a strict gender binary, framing the slasher narrative through

rigid, oppositional notions of masculinity and femininity. According to Clover, the slasher narrative "is no less one of maleness. If the experience of childhood can be — is perhaps ideally — enacted in female form, the breaking away requires the assumption of the phallus. The helpless child is gendered feminine; the autonomous adult or subject is gendered masculine" (50). Despite the centrality of the heroine, Clover argues that the narrative ultimately reinforces male-centric ideas about growth and power. The heroine's position within the film shifts from a feminized position of helplessness to a masculinized position of autonomy and agency.

While *The Slumber Party Massacre* features multiple female protagonists, Trish's character particularly disrupts the psychoanalytic focus on male experience emphasized by theorists like Clover. Trish's arc aligns with the film's broader effort to shift attention away from male psychological development and toward the complexities of female growth, autonomy, and emotional expression. Her development explicitly illustrates the transition from childhood to adulthood through her actions and costume design, reinforcing the film's critique of patriarchal structures and its shift away from male-driven psychoanalytic frameworks. Following the idyllic suburban establishing shot, Trish is depicted sleeping in bed, surrounded by her floral sheets, wearing a white, modest nightgown that visually symbolizes her lingering connection to childhood while foreshadowing her impending maturity. Her coming of age is conveyed not only through the depiction of her "mature" female body as she gets out of bed and changes into a sundress but also through her deliberate act of throwing some of her childhood toys into the garbage can, a symbolic gesture of leaving behind innocence and embracing adulthood. Trish further asserts her transition into adulthood by reminding her mother (Anna Patton) that she is eighteen years old. By eliminating the focus on the killer through a past event and centering the

opening scene on Trish and her development, *The Slumber Party Massacre* shifts the narrative focus from male to female experiences.

The film's redirection is especially significant when considered alongside the psychoanalytic tradition that defines slasher films through the lens of castration anxiety, where a fear of female sexuality serves as a foundational element of interpretation. The male killer's compulsion to destroy female bodies can be read as a symbolic attempt to control or eliminate the perceived threat of female sexual autonomy. Female sexuality, in this framework, becomes a site of terror for the male characters within the narrative as well as the presumed male audience. The subgenre's supposed focus on this fear of female sexuality stems from castration anxiety and the stark contrast in how women and men are killed within these narratives. In examining the extended screen time, heightened emotional weight, and explicit connection to sexual behavior associated with female deaths, Pinedo observes that "the slasher film regards female sexuality with a marked degree of fear and loathing" (75). Cowan and O'Brien similarly argue that "In slasher films, the message appears to be that sexual women get killed and only the pure women survive […] the good woman is asexual and the bad (and therefore dead) woman is sexual […] Slasher films reinforce the idea that female sexuality is costly […] at least for females" (195). The condemnation of female sexuality aligns with the cultural climate of the Reagan era and its resurgence of conservative values that emphasized traditional family roles and moral policing of sexuality ("A Historical," Petridis 79). The heightened emotional weight and dramatic focus on female deaths, particularly those of sexually active women, reflect and amplify societal anxieties about female sexual autonomy. For the characters within the narrative and the audience engaging with these films, female sexuality becomes a site of terror and a justification for violence, echoing the era's broader cultural fears and reinforcing patriarchal control.

Departing from the traditional slasher structure, which often grounds male killers in psychological or sexual motivations, *The Slumber Party Massacre* deliberately omits any clear rationale for Russ' violence. Instead of providing a backstory that explains Russ' motivations for stalking and killing the young women, the film opens with a focus on Trish, thereby shifting narrative attention away from the killer entirely. While this might initially appear to support Clover's argument that women in slashers "die [. . .] because they are female" (34), it simultaneously removes the oedipal psychosis or sexual anger that motivates killers such as Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) in *Psycho* and Michael Myers in *Halloween*. Additionally, none of the female characters are killed during or immediately after sexual intercourse, stripping the murders of the psychosexual nature often present in other slashers and their connection to castration anxiety or the fear of female sexuality. As discussed earlier in reference to the Final Girl and the male gaze, the film portrays the female characters as engaging with their sexuality in frank and normalized ways. They are shown talking openly about boys and sex, reading *Playgirl* magazines, and casually displaying nudity among themselves. The casual, nonjudgmental presentation of the girls' sexuality neither fetishizes their behavior nor universally punishes them for it, as not all the girls engaging with their sexuality are killed. While some of the characters do die (Diane, Jackie, and Kim), the lack of a consistent link between their deaths and their sexual behavior or attitudes weakens the moralistic messaging seen in other slashers, where sexually active or aware women are disproportionately punished. The departure from the subgenre conventions, coupled with the previously noted fact that the female kills in *The Slumber Party Massacre* do not follow the typical slasher archetype — where female deaths are slower, more graphic, and occupy more screen time — creates space for a reinterpretation of these deaths and their messaging. Rather than framing the violence as a punishment tied to female sexuality, the

film repositions the murders as a critique of patriarchal control and reclaims the narrative to center women's perspectives and fears, specifically the fear of rape or sexual violence.

The focus on the fear of rape and sexual violence signals a profound thematic shift in *The Slumber Party Massacre*, where the ultimate source of terror is male aggression and dominance instead of the female body or sexuality. By stripping away the killer's backstory and psychosexual motivations, the film presents Russ as an almost elemental force of male violence, a figure whose actions are not justified or contextualized. The lack of explanation allows the narrative to reflect the pervasive threat of male violence faced by women in everyday life, redirecting the audience's attention from individual psychological trauma to systemic patterns of control and fear. Humphries, in his exploration of slashers, serial killers, and the Final Girl, focuses on murder scenes where the female victim is overtly sexualized, suggesting that the POV shots of these killings represent "a masculine fantasy of rape, where the victim is represented as willing in order to hide the true nature of masculine aggressive tendencies" (151). Although he focuses on the killings of sexually open or available women and interprets these as a male rape fantasy, he also opens the door to understanding these scenes as a reminder of the pervasive fears that women face. By emphasizing the overt sexualization of the victims in these murder scenes, Humphries highlights how such portrayals reinforce the cultural association between sexual assault and the misinterpretation that women "want it." His perspective aligns with *The Slumber Party Massacre*'s broader critique of patriarchal control, as the film reframes violence against women to center their fears rather than male fantasies. Instead of perpetuating the voyeuristic tropes often found in slashers, the film challenges the audience to confront the systemic patterns of male violence and their cultural implications.

The very first kill in *The Slumber Party Massacre* directly engages with the notion that women "want" to be objectified and raped, highlighting both the pervasive fears women face and the dangerous consequences of men internalizing such misconceptions. Before the telephone repairwoman is pulled into her van and killed by Russ, the camera focuses on Neil and Jeff as they exit the school and head toward the gym. Jeff advises Neil, "You gotta be more aggressive," encouraging a more assertive approach to pursuing women. Shortly after, the boys encounter the telephone repairwoman working, and Jeff jokingly suggests to Neil that he might be in love. Following his own advice, Jeff tries to flirt with her but is unsuccessful. Moments after the boys leave, Russ pulls the woman into her van and kills her. The scene juxtaposes the boys' seemingly innocent interaction with the repairwoman against Russ' act of violence, illustrating the continuum between normalized entitlement and its potential to escalate into aggression. Humphries interprets this scene as "the killer [. . .] acting out the desire of the boys," presenting "an extreme version of the sexual fantasy of young males" (153). In the context of Humphries reading, the killer becomes a symbolic extension of the boys' normalized entitlement, enacting their desires in a violent and exaggerated form. His interpretation not only critiques the underlying attitudes expressed by Jeff's advice to "be more aggressive" but also positions the repairwoman's murder as a broader commentary on how male entitlement, if unchecked, can manifest in extreme violence. While it might initially appear that this scene serves as an enactment of male fantasy for a presumed male audience, the use of the telephone repairwoman's POV instead of the killer's challenges such an assumption. By centering her perspective, the film aligns the audience with her fear and vulnerability rather than with the killer's aggression. The decision to use her POV subverts traditional slasher tropes that often encourage voyeuristic identification with the killer and instead emphasizes the terror experienced

by women subjected to male violence. In doing so, the film critiques the normalization of male fantasies of dominance and redirects the narrative focus toward the pervasive fears and lived experiences of women.

The notion that women "want" to be preyed upon resurfaces at the end of the film when Russ finally speaks. As he prepares to attack Trish, he says, "I love you […] You know you want it." Russ' words underscore the dangerous male misconception that women desire such treatment, linking this distorted belief directly to acts of violence. By combining Russ' verbal expression of entitlement with his violent actions, the film critiques the pervasive cultural narratives that normalize male dominance and aggression while emphasizing the fear and trauma these misconceptions impose on women. The girls are not being stalked and murdered because they are impure or trigger Russ' castration anxiety; instead, they are being targeted by a male-dominated society that perceives them as disposable and lacking agency while holding them complicit in their own victimization. In reframing the violence and temporal structure, *The Slumber Party Massacre* shifts the focus from male fears and fantasies to female experiences and fears, exposing the cultural systems that perpetuate these threats and centering the narrative on women's resilience and survival.

While *The Slumber Party Massacre* challenges many of the subgenre's conventions and reorients the narrative toward women's experiences, one element the film retains — often cited as evidence of the subgenre's male-centeredness — is the Final Girl's use of a phallic weapon, such as a knife or chainsaw, during the climactic confrontation. Critics argue that these types of weapons reinforce the notion that a woman's power to survive and retaliate is contingent on adopting traditionally masculine symbols of dominance and aggression, rather than emerging from a space coded as feminine. As theorized by Clover, the killer and Final Girl, as

representations of the "feminine male" and "masculine female," serve to destabilize rigid gender categories, particularly the feminine one (40; 63). While Clover interprets the gender confusion in slasher films as a subversive element that challenges the rigidity of the gender binary, her analysis remains grounded in a heteronormative and patriarchal framework. She acknowledges the destabilization of rigid categories but does not view this as a means of empowering the Final Girl or transforming her into a genuinely empowering figure. Instead, Clover's reading treats the Final Girl's gendered ambiguity as a narrative device that facilitates male audience identification, framing her as a vessel for male anxieties.

Scholars such as Kyle Christensen build on this critique by highlighting how the Final Girl's use of phallic weapons privileges masculinity while condemning femininity, reinforcing binary and patriarchal ideas about power and survival ("The Final Girl" 26). Christensen critiques the masculinization of the Final Girl as a sign of antifeminist gender identification, arguing that this undermines the potential for feminine-coded strength or resilience to be valued on its own terms ("'Look What You'" 32). Similarly, Christopher Sharrett contends that the Final Girl functions as a "masculinized rejuvenator of the patriarchal order," reinforcing rather than subverting patriarchal power structures (289). Instead of challenging patriarchy, the Final Girl helps restore it by temporarily taking on masculine power to re-stabilize the male-dominated system. Given that Trish wields a kitchen knife and Valerie uses a machete, it might appear that *The Slumber Party Massacre* reinforces the idea that women must take up masculine-coded power in order to survive, thereby reinstating patriarchal norms. However, the weapons used by the women are not glorified or fetishized in the same way as Russ' drill, which is repeatedly framed between his legs to evoke overt phallic imagery. Additionally, labeling certain weapons as inherently masculine reinforces a rigid gender binary that limits how power and agency are

understood, denying the possibility that such tools — and the strength they represent — can be gender-neutral or rooted in feminine experience. Viewing weapons and traits through an inherently gendered lens marginalizes feminine-coded expressions of strength while also ignoring the possibility that tools and characteristics can be gender-neutral. As a result, women's empowerment is too often framed as masculine, rather than being recognized as a valid expression of strength on its own terms.

According to Isabel Cristina Pinedo, seeing the Final Girl's transition as one of masculinization "signifies the horror genre's inscription within a male-dominated discourse where power is coded as masculine, even when embodied in biological females" (82). Her analysis echoes the concern that power and agency are too often framed as incompatible with femininity, reinforcing a binary understanding of gender. The assumption that female characters must adopt masculine-coded traits to survive renders feminine agency contradictory and devalues strength expressed through feminine-coded behaviors. Framing feminine strength as inherently contradictory also contributes to the depiction of power in slasher films as a patriarchal construct — one that sidelines feminine experience in favor of male psychological investment. However, *The Slumber Party Massacre* complicates this framework by presenting female characters whose strength and survival are not predicated on a complete rejection of femininity. While Valerie and Trish do use weapons commonly associated with masculinity, their power is portrayed as an extension of their determination and care for others rather than a departure from their gender. By refusing to fetishize their violence or masculinize their agency, the film opens space for imagining a version of feminine power that is not in conflict with survival. In this way, it challenges the genre's underlying assertion that power must be

masculinized, offering a vision of female agency that resists the binary logic traditionally embedded in the slasher formula.

Conclusion

Despite its modest budget and mixed critical reception, *The Slumber Party Massacre* is a landmark within the slasher subgenre for its foundational challenge to the legacy of misogyny embedded within the subgenre. As one of the few slasher films of the classical cycle to be both written and directed by women, the film carved out space for feminist engagement at a time when women were rarely granted the opportunity to shape horror narratives from behind the camera. Its subversive potential lies not in abandoning the slasher formula, but in using its conventions — female nudity, voyeurism, phallic weaponry, and the Final Girl — to expose and destabilize the very assumptions those tropes typically uphold. Through this subversive reappropriation, Jones and Brown offered an early model for feminist filmmaking within a commercial genre that had otherwise sidelined female voices and was known as one of the most misogynistic subgenres of horror.

The Slumber Party Massacre was followed by *Slumber Party Massacre II* (Deborah Brock, 1987), *Slumber Party Massacre III* (Sally Mattison, 1990), and a requel, *Slumber Party Massacre* (Danishka Esterhazy, 2021).[45] Remarkably, every installment in the series was both written and directed by women, making it one of the rare horror franchises with consistent female creative leadership. Although the franchise stands out because of its leadership, the films have received little academic attention, either as individual entries or as a collective whole. Laurence A. Rickels and Timothy Shary are the only scholars I found who address the initial

[45] According to Deborah Brock, the European rights to *Slumber Party Massacre II* were sold by Roger Corman before a film or script existed. He sold it on the name alone (Nashawaty 454-455). On the other hand, *Slumber Party Massacre III* was not even originally filmed as part of the franchise. It was only considered the last film in the trilogy upon its name change at release (Dead Meat).

trilogy, yet neither offers more than a few paragraphs. Rickels devotes the most space to the trilogy, but his commentary on Parts II and III is largely descriptive. He does, however, end by raising critical questions about whether the survivor roles are truly empowering or simply recycled fantasies — male or female — disguised in a straight-friendly version of camp (168).[46] As Rickels suggests, the trilogy raises questions about whether its representations of female survival mark genuinely subvert slasher conventions or simply repackage familiar fantasies. These questions highlight how each film navigates the tension between feminist intent and industry constraint — a dynamic that does not negate the trilogy's transformative impact on the subgenre but underscores the limitations within which it was created.

The Slumber Party Massacre has had a lasting influence, helping to pave the way for future women filmmakers in horror despite the constraints under which it was made. Its legacy can be traced through the continued cult interest it generates and the gradual emergence of more women in horror directing throughout the 1990s and beyond. Filmmakers such as Mary Lambert, Katt Shea, and later Jennifer Kent and Karyn Kusama benefited from the slow, uneven gains forged by earlier pioneers like Jones. The film thus stands as both a product of its time and a catalyst for change — evidence that even within the confines of a rigid genre system, feminist authorship could carve out meaningful space.

As the next chapter turns to Cindy Sherman's *Office Killer* (1997), the conversation shifts from the classical slasher film's formulaic reconfigurations to a postmodern reimagining of horror through irony, fragmentation, and third-wave feminist politics. Where *The Slumber Party Massacre* works from within the slasher film's structure to critique gendered violence and

[46] Shary, by contrast, references the *Slumber Party Massacre* trilogy as an example of a "lesser" slasher franchise but offers no substantial analysis. He does briefly remark that the third installment is "the least intriguing of the bunch" (165, 183).

voyeurism, *Office Killer* embraces a more experimental, fractured approach to genre, one shaped by Sherman's background in visual art and her interrogation of identity, labor, and marginalization. Together, these films chart a trajectory of feminist horror that evolves in both form and politics, revealing how each wave of feminism brings new strategies to bear on the slasher formula.

Chapter 2: The Final Girl Who Became the Killer

When Cindy Sherman's *Office Killer* was released in 1997, it was neither the first slasher film directed by a woman since *The Slumber Party Massacre* (Amy Holden Jones, 1982) nor the last. In the fifteen years between these two films, a number of women-directed slashers entered commercial circulation, though most were produced within the low-budget exploitation market that defined the subgenre throughout the 1980s.[47] Each of these films merits further scholarly attention, but it is *Office Killer* that represents the most significant departure from the classical tradition. Mirroring Doris Wishman's *A Night to Dismember* (1983) and Katt Shea's *Stripped to Kill 2: Live Girls* (1989), *Office Killer* positions a woman as the killer rather than confining her to the role of victim. Unlike Wishman and Shea, however, Sherman approaches the figure of the woman as killer with a metatextual awareness of the subgenre's conventions, filtered through a surrealist and highly stylized aesthetic rooted in her visual arts background. Where Jones came to directing through various filmmaking capacities, Sherman arrived at *Office Killer* from her

[47] The following is a list of known women-directed slasher films released between 1982 and 1997: *A Night to Dismember* (Doris Wishman, 1983), *Rocktober Blood* (Beverly Sebastian, 1984), *Sorority House Massacre* (Carol Frank, 1986), *Stripped to Kill* (Katt Shea, 1987), *Blood Diner* (Jackie Kong, 1987), *Blood Sisters* (Roberta Findlay, 1987), *Slumber Party Massacre II* (Deborah Brock, 1987), *Stripped to Kill 2: Live Girls* (Katt Shea, 1989), *Slumber Party Massacre III* (Sally Mattison, 1990), *Beauty Queen Butcher* (Jill Rae Zurborg, 1991), *Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare* (Rachel Talalay, 1991), *Dolly Dearest* (Maria Lease, 1991), and *Ghost in the Machine* (Rachel Talalay, 1993).

career in photography — and where Jones continued working in film, Sherman never directed another feature film.[48]

That *Office Killer* exists at all is in many ways a product of circumstance. Sherman initially hesitated to make a feature film, unsure how the collaborative nature of filmmaking might reshape the creative independence she valued in her photographic practice. Producer Christine Vachon, however, persuaded her by promising a streamlined process in which Sherman would work almost exclusively with Vachon, who would ensure that the rest of the crew executed Sherman's vision. Vachon had already secured financing for a horror project, a genre Sherman had long envisioned as the natural home for her first film, drawn to its unpretentious low-budget nature as much as her genuine love of it (Sherman 74). What began as a practical arrangement, however, quickly became an intellectual one. After reading Clover's *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* and engaging with its theorization of the Final Girl trope, Sherman "was eager to transform the predictable narrative structure of the slasher, which so frequently pits male villains against female victims, into terms that would resonate with women viewers" (Meagher 142). The significance of Sherman's engagement with Clover cannot be overstated — it establishes *Office Killer* not as a horror film made by an artist who happened to love the genre, but as a deliberate and informed response to the critical conversation surrounding gender and the slasher.

And yet, for a work so consciously constructed, *Office Killer* has been met with a critical ambivalence that has left its feminist stakes and potential largely underexamined. Rather than a photographer's mistaken foray into filmmaking, the film is a conscious reworking of the slasher subgenre, shaped by and in dialogue with the scholarship surrounding classical slashers and

[48] Sherman directed the short film "Doll Clothes" in 1975 and, more recently, contributed a short film shot for *30/30 Vision: Three Decades of Strand Releasing* (2019), a project created to celebrate Strand Releasing's 30th anniversary.

gender, a quality evidenced from the film's very premise. At its center is Dorine Douglas (Carol Kane), a lonely magazine editor whose isolation deepens after she is demoted to a part-time, work-from-home position. After witnessing the accidental death of a co-worker, she begins murdering those around her, bringing their bodies to her basement and transforming her domestic space into a grotesque re-creation of the office, an uncanny parody of corporate order built from corpses and objects. Informed by her photographic explorations of gender, identity, and representation, the film uses slasher grammar to mount a critique of patriarchal systems — one that, as this chapter will argue, is deeply informed by third-wave feminist principles of agency, complexity, and resistance. The result is a slasher film more aligned with the art-horror cinema of the 2010s and 2020s than with the subgenre entries of its own era.

Office Killer's art-horror sensibility may help explain why the film found little purchase with contemporary audiences and critics; it was not well-received and reportedly grossed under $40,000 (Marzoni 39). However, before the film even reached audiences in December 1997, it had already encountered significant obstacles. According to Dahlia Schweitzer, the film's unpredictable narrative structure, multi-genre confusion, and non-conventional cast made it challenging to market and distribute (38). Miramax, the original distributor, thought it would appeal to the same young male audiences who went to see their indie-art house releases *Kids* (Larry Clark, 1995), *I Shot Andy Warhol* (Mary Harron, 1996), *Basquiat* (Julian Schnabel, 1996), and *subUrbia* (Richard Linklater, 1996) and attempted to promote the film to the same demographic. Audience feedback from early screenings demanded that Molly Ringwald receive more both screen time and sexual scenes. Ultimately, Miramax declined to release the film, leaving a smaller distribution company, Strand Releasing, to pick it up and release it only in a select few art houses before dumping it on VHS and DVD (Schweitzer 38). When initially

released, *Office Killer* was met with predominantly negative reviews and attracted minimal scholarly interest. Early reception was broadly dismissive, treating the film as a failed experiment on the part of a photographer trying her hand at directing. Later reappraisals highlight the film's stylization and genre hybridity, though it remains mostly marginal within mainstream academic criticism on the slasher subgenre.[49]

Contemporary reviews shaped much of *Office Killer*'s early reception, repeatedly faulting its lackluster or inept direction, acting, and writing. In August 1997, *Variety*'s Derek Elley and *Screen International*'s Allan Hunter both published harsh reviews of the film. Elley describes the film as having "klutzy direction, mostly sophomoric performances, and a script so flat it is not even laughably bad" (76). Hunter gave the film one star in three distinct categories and claimed it "squanders a talented ensemble cast on a clumsy black comedy" (38).[50] Subsequent reviews in November and December did little to change the film's reputation. In *The New York Times*, Roberta Smith called the film "stiff and clunky", a project Smith felt lacked "Sherman's usual finesse" (AR41). One of the newspaper's other film critics, Stephen Holden, was similarly underwhelmed and called it "a crude, laugh-free horror spoof" that "doesn't offer a single moment of visceral or emotional electricity" (E5). Around the same time, *Film Comment*'s Richard T. Jameson, the *New York Daily News'* Dave Kehr, and *Vogue's* John Powers gave *Office Killer* a rating of abysmal (4). By January 1998, the film's reception showed little, if any improvement. Dale Winoguar of *Boxoffice* echoed earlier sentiments, giving the film one star

[49] While scholars such as Dahlia Schweitzer and Michelle Meagher have offered substantial analyses of the film, *Office Killer* and Cindy Sherman are absent from Sotiris Petridis's extensive study of the subgenre, *Anatomy of the Slasher Film: A Theoretical Analysis*. Likewise, in Wickham Clayton's edited collection *Style and Form in the Hollywood Slasher Film*, none of the contributors discuss *Office Killer* or Sherman.
[50] The categories are critical, domestic (US), and foreign.

and declaring it “as funny as a hernia” (46). Despite the resounding negative reviews, not all critics were dismissive of the film.

Duane Byrge of *The Hollywood Reporter* offered a measured review of the film, acknowledging its stylistic merits while stopping short of high praise. He commended Sherman for how the film’s “stylization fits the peculiarities of the story line” and its “creepy glow” (70). Additionally, Byrge noted that the cast was “well-selected” and that the film benefited from “solid” technical contributions (70). Building on this perspective, the existing discourse has grown increasingly positive. In a 2015 *ARTNews* article, Andrew Marzoni praised its striking visuals, described its “gore as beautiful” and called it “skillfully shot” with a “consistently clever” script (39). More recently, in 2021, Justin McDevitt of the horror film magazine *Rue Morgue* boldly asserted that it “does not seek to waste any of your precious time.” Even though critics such as Byrge, Santas, Marzoni, and McDevitt have acknowledged *Office Killer* for its distinctive visual style and unconventional approach to horror, the film remains largely overlooked, with its reputation shaped by isolated reviews rather than sustained discussion.

Academic engagement with *Office Killer* has been similarly sparse. One of the earliest scholarly touchpoints appears in Constantine Santas’ piece for the film journal *Senses of Cinema*, which takes the form of a review rather than a sustained analysis. Santas characterized the film as “impress[ing] more than perhaps it should” and found it possessing a “basic amateurishness.” At the same time, he credited *Office Killer*’s “ingenious blend of high power dramatics, macabre humor, and a new twist or two on a time-worn formula.” Santas’ review is notable less for its interpretive depth than for the simple fact of its focus on the film at all. Other scholars — including Steven Jay Schneider and John A. Walker — reference *Office Killer* only in passing, stopping short of any extended engagement. However, more sustained discussion emerges in the

work of Steven Dillon, David E. Maynard and Theresa L. Geller, and Tom McDonough, which explores the film's place within art, the film industry, and Cindy Sherman's broader artistic oeuvre. In *The Solaris Effect*, Dillon situates *Office Killer* within a broader discussion of art and artifice in American cinema, arguing that certain films negate traditional forms of art by ignoring, simplifying, or redefining them within cinematic terms. Dillon asserts that cinema shows a persistent lack of respect for visual art — particularly painting — and often transforms it into something vulgar and unstable (142). He identifies *Office Killer* and *American Psycho* (Mary Harron, 2000) as examples of this aesthetic negation, suggesting that these films "empty out art; they reject art's traditional signification and comfort" (166). By stripping away art's capacity to provide meaning or reassurance, these films render their serial killer protagonists purposeless and their violence aesthetically hollow. Dillon argues that the true horror lies in this absence of meaning. *Office Killer*, in particular, inherits the serial-killer-as-artist motif but destabilizes it: Dorine's violence is random and amoral, her gallery of corpses grotesquely stripped of symbolism, and Sherman's unstable cinematography mirrors this aesthetic collapse (171–72).

Building on Dillon's claims, Maynard and Geller, along with McDonough, provide alternative frameworks for situating *Office Killer* within broader conversations about Sherman's artistic identity, feminist aesthetics, and the intersections between the art world and the film industry. While Dillon emphasizes aesthetic negation, Maynard and Geller focus on Christine Vachon, one of *Office Killer*'s producers, using the film as a case study to argue that Vachon should be recognized as a significant creative force in contemporary independent cinema. Although their primary interest is Vachon, they also offer an insightful reading of *Office Killer* through the lens of antisocial feminism and radical passivity, highlighting Dorine's rejection of

the traditional transference of femininity from mother to daughter and her destruction of maternal bonds and stand-ins throughout the film (105–106). Echoing Dillon, Maynard, and Geller, McDonough frames *Office Killer* within Sherman's broader practice; however, he foregrounds labor and neoliberal self-entrepreneurship. He casts the film as "a savage tale of self-improvement through murder […] a gothic allegorization of what neoliberalism has come to know as 'human capital'" (125). Seen through this lens, Dorine's basement archive and strategic eliminations become a Gothic translation of neoliberal self-investment, where personal improvement is achieved through managing and accumulating other people's lives as human capital. Read together, these scholars relocate the film's horror from individual pathology to the structures that shape art, labor, and spectatorship.

While Dillon, Maynard, Geller, and McDonough offer compelling analyses of the film, the most substantial examinations come from Michelle Meagher and Dahlia Schweitzer. Adopting a visual-cultural studies framework, Meagher draws connections between Sherman's photography and *Office Killer*. Similar to her photography, the film "reframes a familiar, commercial form so as to draw attention to feminine representational codes" (137). By reworking the slasher and workplace comedy subgenres, Sherman exposes the conventions that dictate "feminine" appearance and behavior, rendering them visible as constructed codes rather than natural truths. Meagher also situates the film within the broader slasher tradition, emphasizing its reconfiguration of the Final Girl and its feminist appropriations. Her analysis underscores how Sherman reimagines the slasher subgenre through a postmodern feminist lens, framing *Office Killer* as a text that foregrounds identity construction and reveals femininity as a performed and unstable category.

Complementing Meagher's feminist reading, Schweitzer's extended study frames *Office Killer* as a kind of cultural record — one that captures the gendered anxieties of 1990s workplace life — and as a crucial, if overlooked, text in Sherman's artistic trajectory. Schweitzer's book is meant to valorize the film as an important contribution to film theory, criticism, and production despite its commercial failure and critical neglect. She situates the film within its 1990s context, analyzing its engagement with contemporary anxieties surrounding AIDS, technology, shifting workplace dynamics and mass media culture. Through a detailed shot-by-shot breakdown of significant scenes, she illuminates the film's complex visual strategies, intertextual references, and thematic depth, positioning *Office Killer* as inseparable from the cultural moment in which it was produced (4-5). While she ultimately concludes that the film's depiction of unlikable female characters contributes to a misogynistic narrative, her study underscores its richness as a site for analyzing gender, spectatorship, and the porous boundaries between high and low culture (108). It is precisely this richness that the present chapter seeks to recover.

Schweitzer's conclusion that the film is ultimately misogynistic, however, underestimates the deliberateness of Sherman's feminist intervention — an intervention this chapter situates within the longer genealogy of women's contributions to the slasher subgenre established in Chapter One. Amy Holden Jones made *The Slumber Party Massacre* within the commercial demands of Roger Corman's exploitation model, subtly reorienting the classical slasher cycle's conventions before the subgenre had even been subjected to sustained critical or theoretical attention. Sherman faced no such constraints. With theorization about slasher films available to her, including Carol J. Clover's *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, Sherman destabilizes the subgenre's conventions with deliberate precision, using the subgenre to expose and reject the institutional and ideological structures that organize women's vulnerability. At the center of

Sherman's intervention is Dorine, whose position as both victim and killer collapses the distinctions the subgenre depends on to organize violence and survival into separate bodies. Through Dorine, *Office Killer* mobilizes slasher grammar as a mode of feminist critique. Where Jones demonstrated that the slasher subgenre's conventions were not inherently misogynistic but dependent on how they were used, Sherman goes further — reworking them entirely to mount a feminist critique of the patriarchal systems that structure women's labor, visibility, and vulnerability.

The Undistributable Film

What may at first appear to be a radical foray into genre cinema is, instead, in keeping with Sherman's artistic body of work. Sherman's photographs operate as a catalog of performed identities, constructed through precise bodily arrangement. She conveys roles, personalities, and situations through the manipulation of the body's limbs, giving intention and meaning to each gesture and object. Through her photographs and how she arranges the subject, composition, and environment, Sherman "questions stereotype and learned behavior" while also "expos[ing] the ruptures under the surface by taking everyday life and shifting it off kilter, examining society's expectations for appearance and behavior" (Schweitzer 33). In other words, Sherman exposes how femininity operates as a socially scripted role — one that appears stable only because it is constantly rehearsed — revealing the subtle tensions and fractures that emerge when everyday visual norms are disrupted. Her most acclaimed series, *Untitled Film Stills*, composed of sixty-nine black-and-white photographs, "upsets the distinction between popular and precious visual culture by taking up the industrial practice of the commercial film still" (Meagher 136). Through the appropriation of classical Hollywood cinema's formal conventions, Sherman draws attention to the feminine stereotypes they produce and how easily and unconsciously women embody

them. Her shift from still photography to the moving image is therefore an expansion of her artistic concerns, one that brings her critical eye to the narrative frameworks of slasher films and extends into cinema the same impulses that drive her photography. The film's dismantling of gendered expectations thus mirrors her images' exposure of femininity as constructed, and of the subtle violences that sustain those constructions.

The conditions that made Sherman's feminist intervention possible were as much industrial as they were artistic. *Office Killer* did not emerge from the mainstream film industry — it could not have. The commercial logic of the major studios, with their dependence on global distribution, mass audiences, and proven genre formulas, had little room for a film as idiosyncratic, generically hybrid, and ideologically challenging as *Office Killer*. That the film exists at all is a product of the specific industrial landscape of the 1990s, in which an independent sector operating outside the constraints of the Big Six — Disney, Warner Bros., Sony, Twentieth Century Fox, Universal, and Paramount — could support projects that defied commercial expectation. Understanding this landscape is therefore essential for understanding the film's feminist ambitions, not simply as background context, but as the material conditions that determined what kind of intervention Sherman could make and how far she could push it.

The decade was marked by rapid technological change, shifting consumer habits, and the growing visibility of independent production companies. Although the 1990s were widely remembered as a time of relative peace and economic stability, Chris Holmlund points out that this sense of security coexisted with mounting cultural anxieties. New and resurgent diseases such as West Nile virus, AIDS, and tuberculosis circulated alongside a growing awareness of both domestic and international terrorism. At the same time, rapid advances in digital technology introduced their own uncertainties, from computer viruses and clogged inboxes to fears that a

Y2K systems failure could destabilize essential infrastructures. Together, these developments produced a cultural climate far less settled than the decade's optimistic surface suggested (1). The atmosphere of simultaneous optimism and unease shaped both the content and production of 1990s cinema. As Holmlund notes, films across the decade — from *Total Recall* (Paul Verhoeven, 1990) and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (James Cameron, 1991) to *You've Got Mail* (Nora Ephron, 1998) and *Being John Malkovich* (Spike Jonze, 1999) — directly engage anxieties about identity, bodily integrity, and technological change. *Office Killer* is no exception. The film's workplace setting, its fixation on computers and corporate downsizing, and its portrayal of bodily vulnerability all register the decade's cultural tensions, embedding them within the formal language of the slasher.

Yet the mainstream industry of the 1990s was itself shaped by technological and economic forces that had little room for a film like *Office Killer*. The Big Six "continued to dominate moviemaking, consolidating and extending their influence both horizontally and vertically throughout the decade" (Holmlund 2).[51] Their consolidation coincided with a sharp rise in production costs. Star salaries escalated throughout the decade, with leading actors commanding $15–$20 million per picture and often negotiating a share of the profits. Prominent directors secured comparable deals, and even select screenwriters earned record-breaking sums.[52] At the same time, advances in digital technology made special effects increasingly central and expensive, further driving up production budgets and limiting the kinds of projects the studios

[51] Over the decade, the Big Six expanded aggressively: Disney acquired Miramax and ABC/ESPN, TimeWarner bought Turner Broadcasting and New Line, Sony broadened its theatrical and global media operations, and Fox, Universal, and Paramount/Viacom grew their broadcast, cable, music, publishing, and merchandising arms (Holmlund 3-4).

[52] Stars such as Sylvester Stallone, Tom Cruise, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Mel Gibson, and Julia Roberts commanded these salaries, while directors such as James Cameron and Steven Spielberg negotiated similar profit-sharing arrangements. Screenwriters Joe Eszterhas and Shane Black were among the few who received multimillion-dollar fees (Holmlund 4).

were willing to finance. By the end of the decade, "the average cost of a movie had reached $60 million for the first negative and $80 million once marketing and publicity were included" (4-5). The major studios managed these costs through extensive global distribution networks, international co-productions, and expanding revenue streams through merchandising, theme park tie-ins, and adaptations of proven material — strategies that collectively reduced financial risk but also narrowed the range of projects they were willing to finance (5). For a film as generically hybrid and formally unconventional as *Office Killer*, this was not simply an industrial backdrop but a determining condition: the mainstream industry had neither the appetite nor the infrastructure for what Sherman was making.

The genuinely independent sector, then, was where a film like *Office Killer* could actually take shape. Independent production companies operating outside the commercial logic of the major studios could back formally experimental, politically charged projects that the studio system largely avoided — and it was within this environment that *Office Killer* was developed from the outset by Kardena, Good Machine, and Killer Films. Christine Vachon's Killer Films had already established itself as a major force in independent production, releasing formally experimental and politically charged titles including *Poison* (Todd Haynes, 1991), *Safe* (Todd Haynes, 1995), and *I Shot Andy Warhol* (Mary Harron, 1996) (Holmlund 7). Producing *Office Killer* was consistent with Killer Films' track record of championing unconventional projects, but finding a distributor willing to release the film proved far more complicated.

In May 1996, Miramax came on as the intended distributor — a company whose split identity helps explain why the arrangement ultimately fell apart (Steuer 8).[53] From its earliest years, Miramax drew on the playbook of pioneering exploitation companies, emphasizing the

[53] Miramax's first film was *The Burning* (Tony Maylam, 1981), also a slasher film.

most provocative elements of prestige material while simultaneously building a reputation for quality art-house cinema (Perren 23). To manage this tension, the company launched Dimension Films in 1992 as a dedicated outlet for genre and exploitation fare, allowing Miramax to pursue the commercial market without compromising its carefully cultivated image as a distributor of serious independent film (48-49). Dimension would go on to play a significant role in both the final years of the classical slasher cycle and the emergence of its postmodern successor, releasing *Halloween: The Curse of Michael Myers* (Joe Chappelle) in 1995 and *Scream* (Wes Craven) in 1996. Despite being generically recognizable as a slasher, *Office Killer* — with a middle-aged woman as its primary figure of identification — satisfied neither the appetite for self-aware, postmodern teen horror that *Scream* had cultivated for Dimension nor the taste for transgressive yet sophisticated indie cinema that Miramax championed under its main label. Why Dimension was never considered as a potential distributor remains unclear, but what is known is that Miramax withdrew from a theatrical release following poor test screening scores.[54] Vachon recalls that despite feeling positive after the screenings, a Miramax executive was dissatisfied with the below-average questionnaire results and threatened to release the film straight to video if the scores did not improve. The film was ultimately passed to Strand Releasing for a limited theatrical run, though Miramax retained the video rights (Vachon and Edelstein 376-77).

Situating *Office Killer* within this industrial landscape is essential because the industry's failure to distribute the film was not simply a commercial miscalculation. It reflected deeper assumptions about whose stories slasher films could tell and whose experiences it could enter. *Scream* had offered Dimension's audience young, sexually visible characters, self-aware genre thrills, and a clearly defined killer. *Office Killer* offered none of these. An industry organized

[54] As discussed in the critical reception section above, Miramax attempted to sell *Office Killer* to the same young male demographic that attended their indie art-house releases.

around a presumed young, male audience was structurally ill-equipped to recognize a film that placed a middle-aged female killer at the center of the slasher film's narrative grammar, collapsing the very distinctions between victim and killer on which the subgenre depends. Understanding this misrecognition is not merely historical context, it is central to the argument this chapter makes. If the industrial conditions of the 1990s determined that *Office Killer* could be produced but not properly distributed or received, then recovering the film's feminist stakes requires doing the work the industry refused: taking seriously its engagement with slasher grammar as the formal vehicle through which Sherman's critique of women's labor, bodies, and legibility operates.

A Dark Chick Flick Wearing a Slasher Mask

Tracing how *Office Killer* works within slasher convention is essential to this chapter's argument — it is only by understanding the film's formal engagement with slasher grammar that Dorine's unstable positioning as both victim and killer becomes readable as deliberate feminist intervention rather than generic confusion. The following synopsis establishes the narrative foundation necessary for that analysis. The film's murders and its generic reconfiguration unfold through Dorine, a middle-aged, meek copyeditor at *Constant Consumer* magazine. In the wake of corporate downsizing and technological advancement — compounded by the office manager Norah Reed's (Jeanne Tripplehorn) as-yet-undisclosed embezzlement — Dorine receives a letter from editor-in-chief Virginia Wingate (Barbara Sukowa) informing her that her full-time position will be scaled back to part-time, at-home work. During a late-night work session, Dorine enlists the help of a male co-worker, Gary Michaels (David Thornton), when her computer malfunctions. While attempting to fix it, Gary is accidentally electrocuted. Initially shocked and horrified, Dorine ultimately wheels Gray's body to her car and takes it home, positioning it on

the couch in her basement. During this sequence, Dorine experiences her first flashback to a childhood incident in which her father (Eric Bogosian) dies in a car accident and her mother (Alice Drummond) is left permanently disabled.

The following day at the office, Gary's unexplained absence prompts Virginia to reassign his work to Dorine and Kim Poole (Molly Ringwald). Pressed to complete the article quickly, Dorine, Kim, and Virginia work late. When Kim leaves to get food, Dorine is left alone with her supervisor and kills Virginia by replacing her inhaler with a canister of butane. As before, Dorine takes the body home. That evening, she sits in the basement with Gary and Virginia's corpses, watching a movie, eating popcorn, and speaking to them as though they are still alive. To deflect suspicion, Dorine sends emails from Gary's and Virginia's accounts suggesting they are merely out of the office. Dorine's efforts to control the narrative fail to eliminate suspicion entirely. Kim grows increasingly uneasy, even as Norah moves closer to Dorine, bringing her new clothes in an effort to "update" her wardrobe. The growing intimacy encourages personal disclosure, and as Dorine speaks to Norah about her family, the film shifts into another flashback, revealing her role in her father's death, an act strongly implied to have been a response to his sexual abuse.

Shortly thereafter, Dorine claims her next victim: Brian (Eddie Malavarca), the office mailroom attendant. After catching him looking at a pornographic magazine in a storage area, she murders him by stabbing him in the neck with a Cuisinart blade. Unlike Gary's accidental death and Virginia's hands-off killing, this act is direct and deliberate. Dorine again brings the body home, but this time escalates her ritual by severing Brian's hands. The basement reveals that Dorine's violence has also expanded beyond the *Constant Consumer* office. At some point prior to killing Brian, she killed two young girls who came to her door selling Girl Scout cookies earlier in the day. As Dorine's killing spree intensifies, the film introduces a parallel plot in

which Norah is revealed to be embezzling funds from *Constant Consumer* by inflating the cost of computers purchased for the work-from-home initiative and pocketing the difference. The embezzlement comes to light when Norah allows Dorine to fix her computer and, in the process, inadvertently shows her a spreadsheet documenting the theft. Against this backdrop of institutional corruption, Kim — newly fired — returns to the office seeking to reclaim her job, openly blaming Dorine for her dismissal. Frustrated by no one's willingness to believe her, Kim retreats to the stairwell to smoke, where Dorine attempts to strangle her with her own scarf. Although Kim escapes and never sees her attacker, the incident solidifies her suspicions. When she tells Norah about the attack, her concerns are dismissed, and she is recast as hysterical and unbalanced.

Norah's dismissal of Kim's concerns proves fatal, as Dorine soon turns her attention toward Norah herself, knocking her unconscious and taking her to the basement. After speaking with Kim and also becoming suspicious — particularly when Norah appears to be missing — Norah's boyfriend Daniel Birch (Michael Imperioli) goes to Dorine's house to investigate. While he is there, Norah regains consciousness and cries out after her hand slips through Gary's chest cavity, alerting Daniel and deepening his suspicion. Dorine dismisses the noise as coming from her cat before heading downstairs. In reality, she descends into the basement with a knife to confront Norah, who still does not suspect Dorine and initially believes she has come to rescue her. Instead, Dorine explains that the bodies in the basement are Norah's fault, instructing her to explain to them all why they are now "working from home," before attacking her. As the two struggle, Daniel breaks into the basement, only for Dorine to slash his stomach open and kill Norah. The film ends with Dorine driving away from her burning house with a bag containing

Norah's hands and head, alongside a newspaper with the headline "OFFICE MANAGER WANTED" circled.

The synopsis makes visible the narrative logic through which *Office Killer* operates, but understanding what that logic is doing requires situating the film within the generic framework from which it both draws on and departs. While this chapter argues that *Office Killer* is fundamentally indebted to the slasher subgenre, others have questioned that classification. Schweitzer, for instance, described *Office Killer* as "somewhere between genres; more of a dark 'chick flick' combined with elements of film noir, black comedy, and horror" (6). Though indeed a generically hybridic film, it remains rooted in slasher grammar, structured around the subgenre's characteristic organization of violence, escalation, and survivor positioning. Recognizing this adherence does not resolve the film's departures from convention; rather, it provides the foundation through which those departures — particularly the collapse of survivor and killer positions — become recognizable as deliberate formal feminist interventions rather than generic incoherence. What follows traces how *Office Killer* operates as a slasher, moving from its foundational generic conventions through its engagement with the postmodern slasher cycles that defined the subgenre in the 1990s.

Office Killer most clearly establishes its slasher credentials through its narrative organization around accumulating murders and a central protagonist who survives. Sotiris Petridis defines the subgenre's core premise, in the most simplified of terms, as being "about a serial killer who is spreading fear in a middle-class community by killing innocent people" ("A Historical" 76). Mirroring *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978) and *Friday the 13th* (Sean S. Cunningham, 1980), *Office Killer* builds its momentum through this body-count logic and strategically spaced moments of violence. Gary's death functions as the inciting act of violence,

after which the plot shifts away from restoration or resolution and toward repetition and escalation. Virginia's murder marks a decisive escalation from accidental death to intentional killing, confirming that the narrative will proceed through accumulation. From this point forward, the pace of violence accelerates: following Virginia's death, Dorine kills two Girl Scouts and Brian in quick succession, before the narrative culminates in the deaths of Daniel and Norah. Petridis also identifies survival as a structural requirement of the subgenre. Slasher films conventionally end with the killer defeated and at least one protagonist alive (76). *Office Killer* complicates this convention significantly but does not abandon it entirely: both positions remain filled. Dorine drives away from her burning house at the film's conclusion, the sole survivor of the violence she herself has produced. She simultaneously fulfills the role of killer and the role of survivor — satisfying, in the most destabilizing way possible, both structural requirements Petridis identifies as fundamental to the subgenre.

Office Killer further aligns itself with slasher convention through its reliance on improvised, intimate weapons. The subgenre has always privileged proximity and bodily engagement over distance or detachment — as Adam Rockoff notes, "killings in slasher films *are* personal," with victims typically dispatched by whatever sharp or convenient instrument is at hand, including knives, swords, razors, axes, machetes, arrow, power drills, spears, and saws (18-20). *Office Killer* subtly redirects this convention by favoring domestic and incidental objects over the iconic or fetishized weapons typically associated with slasher antagonists. Ordinary household items are repurposed as instruments of violence, reinforcing intimacy while stripping the violence of stylized excess. Dorine's replacement of Virginia's inhaler with a butane cartridge exemplifies this logic by transforming an object associated with care and vulnerability into a mechanism of death. Brian's murder offers an even clearer illustration:

Dorine kills him with a Cuisinart blade, a kitchen tool that explicitly links slasher violence to the domestic sphere, requiring close physical contact and reinforcing the subgenre's dependence on intimate violence. The emphasis on proximity and improvisation continues in the film's final confrontation, when Dorine uses a basic kitchen knife to kill Daniel and Norah. The knife is a more conventional slasher weapon, but it does not function as Dorine's signature tool; she picks it up out of necessity when she descends into the basement to confront Norah. In each case, the film's violence and Dorine's choice of weapon remains rooted in the intimate, proximate logic that defines the slasher subgenre.

Office Killer's adherence to slasher grammar extends beyond these foundational conventions — the film also engages with the critical impulse of the postmodern slasher cycle that defined the subgenre in the 1990s. Similar to Wes Craven's *Scream* (1996) and *New Nightmare* (1994), *Office Killer* places classical conventions under pressure, though the means through which it does so are distinct. Postmodern slashers are most often associated with self-referentiality and intertextuality, strategies that function primarily as a means of exposing and critiquing the moral conservatism of the classical cycle. As Petridis explains, postmodern slashers "parody the subgenre so that it is not a simple reproduction of the classical formula, but a review of it through criticism" (*Anatomy of* 46-47). *Office Killer* produces a comparable mode of critique, but rather than making slasher conventions the object of parody or satire, the film deploys them straight, using body-count logic, intimate weapons, and survivor positioning as functional narrative tools while situation them within a workplace setting and centering a middle-aged woman as the protagonist. By relocating slasher violence from youth culture to the workplace, the film disrupts the classical cycle's reliance on moralized adolescence as the engine of threat; violence no longer emerges from sex, drugs, or youthful rebellion. At the same time,

centering the narrative on a middle-aged woman exposes the subgenre's privileging of young, sexually coded female bodies and reveals how middle-aged women are culturally coded as invisible, harmless, or non-desiring. Together, these shifts unsettle the slasher film's moral and visual economy, demonstrating how its conventions become unstable when detached from youth, sexuality, and spectacle and imbued with feminized labor and social invisibility. This mode of critique aligns *Office Killer* with the postmodern cycle's interrogation of classical convention, even as it pursues that interrogation through different means.

Another way *Office Killer* engages with postmodern slasher grammar is through its narrative centrality of Dorine as the killer, reinforced through backstory and psychological motivation. As Petridis observes, postmodern slashers emphasize a direct connection between the killer and the victims, grounding acts of violence in personal relationships rather than anonymous threat (*Anatomy of* 83-84).[55] In *Scream*, for example, Ghostface's identity is concealed until the film's final act, but the revelation is accompanied by Billy's backstory, which retrospectively frames his murders as motivated by personal grievance and obsession with Sidney Prescott (Neve Campbell). *Office Killer* shares this investment in killer motivation and personal connection to victims but pushes the logic further than most postmodern slashers — bringing Dorine to the narrative foreground from the outset rather than withholding her perspective until a climactic reveal. From the opening sequences, the film structures scenes around her daily routines, interior spaces, and emotional responses, consistently privileging her perspective over those of the characters around her. Furthermore, her killings are not random. Each victim is connected to her working life and the erosion of boundaries between work and

[55] *Halloween II* (Rick Rosenthal, 1981) was a progenitor of establishing a personal connection between the killer and the victims, given the plot twist the Laurie Strode and Michael Myers are siblings. However, this trope is more pronounced in the postmodern cycle.

home, establishing an internal logic that grounds her violence in personal motivation rather than anonymous threat.

Office Killer's alignment with postmodern slasher grammar extends to its treatment of the survivor figure. Mirroring the killer, the survivor undergoes a transformation in the shift from the classical to the postmodern cycle. Where the classical slasher film typically culminated in a single surviving woman, postmodern films more frequently distributed survival across multiple characters (Petridis, *Anatomy of* 88). *Halloween: The Curse of Michael Myers* ends with a final couple, while *Scream* leaves three characters alive.[56] Postmodern slashers also reshaped the Final Girl herself when films did retain a singular survivor. As Petridis notes, Final Girls "are now adults and have nothing to do with the frightened teenage Final Girls of the classical cycle, nor with their virginal characteristics" (*Anatomy of* 88-89). In *New Nightmare*, for example, Heather (Heather Langenkamp) is an adult woman with an established career and a family — a far cry from the virginal, socially marginal teenagers who anchored the classical cycle. *Office Killer* participates in this evolution while pushing it further. Paralleling the postmodern Final Girl, Dorine is an adult woman, middle-aged and working in a professional setting, not a teenager. Yet, unlike Heather, she collapses the trope entirely, occupying both the survivor and the killer positions simultaneously.

The collapse of survivor and killer has a precedent, through Sherman transforms it beyond its original form. *Office Killer*'s engagement with slasher grammar is historically self-aware in ways that reach beyond the classical cycle, extending back to Alfred Hitchcock's

[56] Petridis' analysis of the survivor figure across both cycles reveals a clear shift: while 42 percent of classical slashers disrupted the Final Girl trope, that figure rises to 75 percent in postmodern slashers (Anatomy of 150-151). However, these figures should be treated with some caution — Petridis' sample includes only 38 classical and 12 postmodern films, and notable omissions such as *The Slumber Party Massacre* raise questions about the comprehensiveness of the dataset.

Psycho (1960). Scholars have been quick to note the connection. David E. Maynard and Theresa L. Geller describe *Office Killer* as "*Now Voyager* (Irving Rapper, 1942) meets *Psycho* […] by way of *Working Girl* (Mike Nichols, 1988)" (105). Steven Dillon goes further, reading the film as a deconstructive update of Hitchcock's original and arguing that Sherman systematically inverts the Bates model: Dorine's domestic arrangements mirror Norman Bates' (Anthony Perkins) in reverse, and where Norman projects menace and charm, Dorine is so socially withdrawn that the dead become her only companions (171-172). What *Office Killer* inherits from *Psycho*, however, goes beyond the structural inversions Dillon identifies. That inheritance centers on a specific model of the killer, one defined by repressed interiority, domestic pathology, and surface harmlessness rather than an external, mythological threat. Neither Norman nor Dorine registers as a credible threat; both are socially awkward and overlooked, the kind of people no one thinks to suspect as capable of violence. Domestic space becomes, for each character, a site of pathological preservation — Norman's fruit cellar housing his mummified mother, Dorine's basement repurposed as a workplace of corpses. The violence of each figure is inseparable from a damaged parental relationship. Norman's pathology is organized around his mother, while Dorine's is rooted in her father's abuse and her mother's failure to protect her. It is this model of the killer — psychologically wounded, domestically bound, and socially invisible — that distinguishes Dorine from the external, mythological threats of the classical and postmodern cycles. Where Jason Voorhees and Michael Myers are silent, masked, and unknowable, and where Ghostface's identity is concealed behind a costume and revealed only as a narrative device, Dorine's violence is rooted in a specific psychological history and a social invisibility that renders her beneath suspicion to those around. What makes

this possible is the audience's unobstructed access to her interior life, and it is that access which enables the identificatory collapse the rest of the chapter will trace.

Office Killer operates unmistakably within the slasher subgenre. Its grounding in foundational slasher conventions as well as its engagement with the generic transformations introduced by the postmodern cycle firmly locate the film within the subgenre regardless of its hybrid generic register. The generic location is essential to this chapter's argument. Without it, Dorine's simultaneous occupation of killer and survivor positions could be read as a narrative quirk rather than deliberate intervention. But because the film clearly operates within slasher grammar, it can be argued that those positions are being deliberately collapsed — and that the collapse is meaningful rather than accidental.

The Architecture Beneath

The previous section established *Office Killer* as a slasher film, grounding the analysis in the conventions Sherman employs. But identifying those conventions is only the starting point. Slasher films have always carried feminist potential — as Chapter One's reading of *The Slumber Party Massacre* demonstrated — but the postmodern cycle of the 1990s "differed from what came before: they were made after the rise of third wave feminism, particularly the Riot Grrl movement and the more mainstream Girl Power movement, young women were becoming the focus of popular culture in ways that hadn't been seen before" (West, " 'Not In'"). Sherman is part of this evolution; *Office Killer* contributes to women's growing prominence within the subgenre. However, she is also doing something the rest of the cycle is not. Where other postmodern slashers expanded the subgenre's feminist potential, Sherman uses its conventions to mount a feminist critique of the patriarchal systems that structure women's labor, visibility, and vulnerability. Understanding this distinction requires two frameworks: the Shermanesque

slasher, which positions *Office Killer* as a distinct feminist mode within the subgenre, and third-wave feminism, which explains why Dorine's contradictory positioning as both victim and killer is not incoherence but intervention. This section first traces how the postmodern slasher cycle changed the subgenre's relationship with issues of gender, then introduces the Shermanesque slasher film as a framework for understanding how Sherman exceeds that trajectory and finally turns to third-wave feminism to account for the specific form her intervention takes.

The postmodern cycle's relationship with gender shifted on multiple fronts, one such shift was in how it treated women's bodies and sexuality. While the extent of the classical cycle's misogyny has likely been overstated — as Chapter One demonstrated, the conventions were not inherently exploitative — nudity did feature more prominently in the classical period, and it did carry a significant connection to death. The postmodern cycle sharply reduced its presence, with nudity decreased from twenty-five percent of characters in the 1980s to just three percent in the 1990s (Ménard et al. 631). Sexual activity, meanwhile, became more prevalent without any corresponding increase in death. In fact, characters who engaged in sexual activity were no more likely to die than those who did not (632). *Scream* is perhaps the clearest example of this: Sidney has sex with Billy yet survives the film as its Final Girl. While not every postmodern slasher film broke from the classical model so explicitly, the cycle as a whole was becoming less punitive in its treatment of women's sexuality.

The cycle's changing gender politics went beyond its treatment of sexuality, however. It also reshaped the role women played in the narrative itself. Women had always been central to the slasher, but the postmodern cycle changed the nature of that centrality. Rather than "interlopers into the killer's world, their personal histories" became the site of horror, "something they either created or were born into" (West, "'Not In'"). In classical slashers like

Halloween, women — especially the Final Girls — are the focus of the narrative but largely incidental to the horror itself. Instead of targeting Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis) because of who she is or an event in her past, Michael Myers (Nick Castle) targets her simply because she is there. The postmodern slasher film reverses this. Sidney Prescott (Neve Campbell) is targeted because of her family history: her boyfriend Billy Loomis (Skeet Ulrich) seeks revenge for his mother's abandonment following his father's affair with Sidney's mother. By grounding the horror in the Final Girl's own life, Alexandra West argues, postmodern slasher films raised the personal stakes of survival. The Final Girl could no longer simply escape but had to actively confront the source of her horror ("'Not In'"). By making women's lives and histories essential to the narrative rather than incidental, the postmodern slasher film gave its characters a significance that the classical cycle often denied them. At the same time, by grounding the horror in the Final Girl's personal history rather than her behavior, the postmodern cycle broke from the classical slasher film's moralistic logic, in which women were punished for sexual activity or social transgression. Sideny is targeted because of events in her mother's past that preceded and exceeded her own choices rather than because she broke any rules. The survivors — including the Final Girl — were no longer sorted into survival or death based on whether or not they were "good." Together, these shifts signaled the subgenre's growing, if incomplete, feminist potential.

As the preceding evidence demonstrates, the postmodern cycle expanded the subgenre's feminist potential in real ways. Yet the expansion had limits. The reduction of nudity represented avoidance rather than a rethinking of how women's bodies could be depicted without exploitation. Similarly, the shift from behavioral to historical motivation carried its own complications. In *Scream*, the subgenre stops policing the behavior of its teenager victims and Final Girl by untangling the killer's motivation from transgressive behavior. The result is a Final

Girl who has gained personal stakes and agency, survival is no longer a reward for virtue. However, the killings are still rooted in male judgement of female sexual behavior. Billy decides a woman's sexuality justifies destruction, and the entire plot follows from that judgement being treated as a coherent motivation. *Scream* does present Billy's reasoning as monstrous instead of justified, but the plot still runs on Maureen Prescott's (Lynn McRee) affair as its engine. Sherman's *Office Killer* does something different. Dorine is not a young Final Girl given more backstory or deeper motivation — she is a middle-aged, invisible woman whose violence emerges from the institutional conditions of feminized labor and workplace erasure instead of psychosexual pathology. Sherman uses the slasher subgenre not to revise its own gender politics but to critique the patriarchal systems that exist beyond them.

To differentiate Sherman's approach to the subgenre, Meagher proposes the "Shermanesque slasher," a term that identifies how Sherman's broader artistic practice converges with the slasher film's formal operations. Drawing on Clover's observation that the slasher subgenre depends on a "fluidity of engaged perspective[s]," Meagher argues that the operations at the heart of Sherman's work — "play, masquerade, and dissimulation" — align with the subgenre's built-in capacity to shift the viewer's identification between characters (Clover 46; Meagher 142). In *Office Killer*, this convergence is realized through Dorine, whose positioning as both Final Girl and killer keeps identification unstable, mirroring the refusal of fixed identity that defines Sherman's photography (142-143). Meagher's framework is valuable for connecting Sherman's artistic practice to the subgenre's identificatory instability, but this chapter extends the Shermanesque slasher film beyond questions of identification and artistic method by arguing that the convergence of Sherman's practice and slasher grammar produces something more than unstable identification; it produces a distinct feminist mode within the subgenre. As used here,

the Shermanesque slasher film is defined by the collapse of the Final Girl and killer into a single figure, a collapse that does not simply destabilize identification but mobilizes it toward a critique of the patriarchal systems that structure Dorine's vulnerability, invisibility, and violence. This collapse is the primary mechanism through which Sherman's feminist intervention operates, and it demands a critical framework capable of holding victimhood and agency together rather than treating them as opposed. Third-wave feminism provides that framework.

Placing the film in conversation with the third wave of feminism reveals how Sherman engages and unsettles the decade's shifting discourse on gender. As Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake argue, postfeminist discourse framed feminist politics through a reductive binary: either acknowledge women's increased power and abandon critiques of patriarchy or continue to name structural oppression and deny progress altogether. Within this framework, anyone who spoke of oppression was placed in the "victim" camp, and empowerment was defined in opposition to critique (2-3). Third-wave feminism, by contrast, refused this false choice. For Heywood and Drake, third-wave feminism is a coalition-based praxis that holds victimization and agency together rather than treating them as mutually exclusive, recognizing that individuals may simultaneously experience structural harm and exercise power (3). Deborah L. Siegel articulates this position most forcefully, arguing that "the radical act of pronouncing oneself victim to systemic inequity does not necessarily amount to a defeatist confession of utter weakness"; rather, "to name oneself 'victim' is an articulation of strength, for to give a name to the injustices that continue to oppress is to adamantly refuse victim status" (76). Third-wave feminism, in other words, insists on inhabiting the tension between power and victimization rather than resolving it.

The insistence on inhabiting tension rather than resolving it had significant consequences for how film scholars understood gender on screen. The dominant frameworks of feminist film theory had been shaped by second-wave assumptions, particularly the psychoanalytic model of spectatorship theorized by Laura Mulvey, in which cinema reproduced a structure of masculine looking and passive feminine spectacle (62-63). Within this framework, agency was coded as inherently masculine, even when embodied in female characters. Clover's theorization of the Final Girl is the most influential example. Despite identifying a figure of considerable narrative power, Clover read the Final Girl not as a woman exercising agency but as a "male in drag," a surrogate through which adolescent male viewers could safely experience masochistic fantasies (53, 56). The woman who fights back could not, within this model, be understood as a woman at all. Isabel Cristina Pinedo mounts a direct challenge to this formulation in her 1997 book *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing*. For Pinedo, Clover's characterization of the Final Girl as masculine accepts the very binary it should disturb: if active desire and aggression are the prerogatives of masculinity, then "feminine agency is an oxymoron" (82). Pinedo argues instead that the horror genre, because it is committed to transgressing boundaries, opens a space in which binary notions of gender break down both narratively and stylistically. The surviving female is coded ambiguously — as feminine through her function as the object of aggression and as masculine through her exercise of violence — and this ambiguity is the source of the genre's subversive potential rather than a failure of representation (84). Her formulation that the surviving female "may be victimized, but she is hardly a victim" echoes the third-wave position Siegel articulates: to name one's victimization is not to capitulate to powerlessness but to refuse the terms on which powerlessness is assigned (87). Pinedo and Siegel arrive at this position from entirely different directions. One through

close analysis of a genre figure, the other through feminist theory. That they land in the same place suggests the Final Girl is doing more than reflecting subgenre convention. She is instinctively embodying a feminist argument about the coexistence of agency and victimhood that was being worked out in theory simultaneously.

The fact that the subgenre and the theory were thinking through the same problem, without explicitly naming it as such, is precisely what makes Kathleen Rowe Karlyn's analysis of the *Scream* trilogy particularly valuable. She makes that implicit conversation explicit. For Karlyn, the first three films address the issues that defined third-wave feminism's engagement with popular culture: sexuality and virginity, adult femininity and its relation to agency and power, and identity as it is shaped by the cultural narratives of a media-saturated generation. Rather than reading Sideny Prescott as Clover's boyish Final Girl, Karlyn reads her as a specifically female hero whose power emerges through her femininity and sexuality ("*Scream*, Popular Culture"). Sidney has sex on her own terms, and the loss of her virginity marks the beginning of her power as an adult woman rather than the end of her story. And, when she kills the killer, she claims authorship over her own narrative — "Not in my movie." Crucially, the films produce this model of female agency by working through the subgenre's violence. Sidney is traumatized, hunted, and battered across all three films, and her agency is never separable from the violence that occasions it. What makes the films recognizable as third-wave texts is their refusal to choose between acknowledging the danger that structures young women's lives and affirming their capacity to act within and against it. Karlyn situates this within the broader third-wave argument that popular culture is not an instrument of ideological reproduction but a site of identity formation, proving "an abundant storehouse of images and narratives valuable less as a means of representing reality than as motifs available for contesting, rewriting and recording"

("*Scream*, Popular Culture"). For Karlyn, this is what makes popular culture politically meaningful — its capacity to furnish the raw material through which identity can be contested and remade, not its ability to accurately represent reality. Therefore, *Scream* is not merely a horror film that happens to feature a capable heroine, it is a cultural space in which the terms of female identity are actively renegotiated. Yet this framework, compelling as it is, also clarifies the ceiling of what the postmodern cycle achieved. If popular culture's power lies in rewriting available narratives, it remains constrained by which narratives are made available in the first place. *Scream* rewrites the Final Girl, but as the treatment of Maureen reveals, it does not rewrite the logic that makes women's sexuality a source of danger and consequence. The subgenre expanded its feminist potential — Sidney survives, acts, and authors her own story — but the architecture beneath that story remained largely intact.

Karlyn's reading of *Scream* was part of a wider shift in feminist horror scholarship. As Katarzyna Paszkiewicz and Stacy Rusnak document, the Final Girls of the 1990s slasher cycle were increasingly understood as products of third-wave feminism and Girl Power culture, and the field moved toward centering female spectatorship and viewing pleasure rather than treating horror as exclusively male discourse ("Revisiting the Final Girl"). What united these interventions was the same refusal that animates third-wave feminism more broadly: the refusal to treat victimization and agency as mutually exclusive categories, and the insistence that the contradictions within popular culture texts — their simultaneous capacity to exploit and empower, to wound and to pleasure — are not obstacles to feminist analysis but its proper object. Yet the scholarship that emerged from this revisionist impulse has largely centered on the surviving female — the woman who fights back against a male killer and whose agency is forged

in opposition to his violence. *Office Killer* presses the questions further. Sherman does not split victim and killer across two bodies but collapses them into one.

Dorine is a socially marginal office worker whose accumulated victimization — professional, domestic, sexual — gradually tips into murder. She is simultaneously the most victimized figure in the film and its agent of violence. When approached through postfeminist binaries, Dorine appears incoherent: too victimized to be empowered, too violent to remain seen as a victim. Nevertheless, third-wave feminism makes her coherent by providing a logic in which victimhood and agency are not opposed but coexistent. Where Karlyn's reading of *Scream* demonstrates third-wave feminism's capacity to hold these positions together across the arc of a surviving female's story, *Office Killer* tests the framework further by collapsing both positions into a single body. Dorine is not fighting back against a male killer — she is becoming the killer through the very conditions that victimize her. This collapse is what makes the film a feminist intervention into the subgenre. The classical slasher film externalizes patriarchal violence onto a male figure whose defeat offers resolution. The postmodern cycle reforms that structure by giving the Final Girl agency and personal stakes. However, both models still organize patriarchal damage as something that comes from outside — a monster that can be fought and killed. *Office Killer* refuses that consolation. By making Dorine simultaneously victim and killer, the film reveals that patriarchal structures do not just threaten women from outside — they deform from within, producing damage that is neither clean nor heroic nor resolvable through triumph. Her violence is not cathartic, because it was never meant to be. It is a symptom of the system rather than a defeat of it, and the film's refusal to redeem it is precisely where its critique is located. Sherman actualizes this intervention through genre form itself. Through slasher grammar — specifically the collapse of Final Girl alignment and killer-centered narrative authority into a

single figure — the film sustains Dorine's contradictory positioning rather than resolving it, allowing survivor identification and killer authority to operate within the same body. Third-wave feminist logic operates through slasher grammar rather than in spite of it.

The Wound and the Weapon

In the close reading that follows, Dorine's position as both Final Girl and killer will be traced in three movements. The first establishes Dorine as a Final Girl as it aligns with Clover's theorization. The second tracks her transformation into the killer. The third movement holds both positions together, examining what it means that the film refuses to resolve them — that Dorine never stops being readable as a victim even as she kills, and never stops being readable as a killer even as she suffers. It is in that sustained contradiction that the film's critique of patriarchy is located. *Office Killer* does not locate its critique in the defeat of a monstrous figure who embodies male violence. Instead, it locates that critique in its refusal to separate the damage patriarchy does from the body to which it is done.

Cornered: Dorine as Final Girl

Office Killer establishes Dorine as a Final Girl from its opening sequences. She is marked by the traits Clover identifies as definitive: marginality, social isolation, and sexual inexperience — the qualities that separate the survivor from her peers and align the audience with her perspective before the violence begins. Yet where the classical Final Girl is defined by her relationship to a physically pursuing killer, *Office Killer* displaces the source of threat onto institutional and patriarchal structures. The film does not abandon the Final Girl's defining conditions such as her sustained exposure to threat, social separation, and vulnerability. Instead, it relocates them. Dorine is not hunted through corridors. She is erased by bureaucracy, invaded by male colleagues, and silenced by her own family. The threat is structural rather than bodily,

but the grammar organizing her experience is unmistakably that of the Final Girl: she is the figure through whom danger is felt, whose victimization the audience is asked to inhabit, and whose survival will ultimately require confronting the source of that danger directly. Establishing her in this position is the first movement of the film's feminist intervention, because it is only once Dorine is understandable as a Final Girl that the collapse of that role into the killer's becomes visible as a critique rather than a contradiction.

Clover's Final Girl is defined in part by being cornered, placed in a situation where escape or refusal is structurally unavailable to her (35). *Office Killer* established this condition for Dorine in its opening sequence through bureaucratic fait accompli rather than physical pursuit. The film begins with a close-up of a letter informing her that she will now be a part-time at-home worker. The impersonal language of the letter immediately situates her within a workplace structure that diminishes her stability and erases her presence. The decision to shrink her position has been made about her body and her livelihood, and she has had no part in making it. The camera's fixation on the text being typed rather than on Dorine as she speaks visually reinforces this erasure, emphasizing how institutional power is exercised through documents that circulate independently of human accountability. Nobody owns this decision. Virginia, who is the editor-in-chief, refuses to deliver the letters herself. When Norah attempts to push the task back onto her — telling her to "crawl out there and do the dirty work" — Virginia deflects responsibility entirely, ordering Norah instead to "get out there and drop the ax." Norah even attempts to pass the task off to another employee, only to be rebuffed, leaving her begrudgingly responsible for distributing the letters. Significantly, the letter itself frames the downsizing as a consequence of "low worker-productivity," allowing both women to distance themselves from the decision by casting it as an objective outcome of worker failure rather than a managerial

choice. Responsibility is deferred at every level until it disappears entirely and what remains is Dorine. She is cornered by a decision that no one will claim, with no authority to negotiate or refuse its impact. The threat has found her the way the killer finds the Final Girl.

Where the classical Final Girl's terror is concentrated in a single night of pursuit, Dorine's is chronic. She has been invisible for years. Clover argues that what distinguishes the Final Girl from her peers is that she "lives with the knowledge" of her peril for far longer than those around her (35). *Office Killer* translates this condition into institutional terms. Dorine has always known, at some level, that she does not register. Her presence is tolerated rather than recognized, and that her absence would go equally unnoticed. This is made unmistakably visible when Norah begins distributing the downsizing letters and cannot even identify her. Despite Dorine's long-term employment at the magazine, Norah does not recognize her name or face. As Schweitzer observes, "everyone else knows" where Dorine sits, but Norah, the person empowered to decide her professional fate, has no idea who she is (50). The moment clarifies that Dorine's disposability is both bureaucratic and social. This erasure is compounded when Norah later encounters Dorine at the copy machine and addresses her as "Ms. Davis" rather than "Ms. Douglas," reinforcing how little Dorine registers as an individual within the office hierarchy. That same chronic lack of recognition surfaces in her interactions with Gary, who avoids looking at her altogether during their exchange, keeping his attention fixed on his coffee cup and desk. The threat Dorine lives with is not the threat of a killer closing in, it is the threat of a workplace that has decided, long before the film begins, that she is not quite there. And it is precisely because she has lived with that knowledge for so long that her terror takes the form it does.

However, Dorine's invisibility does not exempt her from workplace expectations; it coexists with the demand that she remain pleasant, compliant, and emotionally steady. The classical Final Girl screams and flees and her terror is written on her body (Clover 35). Dorine's terror has no such outlet. Years of conditioning have sealed it inward, and what emerges instead is compliance so complete it has become indistinguishable from composure. As a copyeditor, she occupies a feminized support role essential to the magazine's daily operations yet structurally undervalued, requiring her to smooth over errors, absorb frustrations, and facilitate the work of others without recognition or authority. Her hesitancy, politeness, and desire to be helpful are repeatedly read as weakness, reinforcing a dynamic in which her emotional restraint becomes a form of unpaid labor. Schweitzer captures this precisely in her reading of the moment after Gary's accidental death. Dorine stands with "eyes closed, fists clenched on either side, repeating to herself 'It's not my fault. It's not my fault. I'm going to have to clean it up. I'm going to have to clean it up'" (61). A Final Girl in this moment would be running and screaming. Dorine's body is doing something terror-adjacent, but instead of releasing outward it turns inward, converting panic into a task. The fists and closed eyes are the terror; "I'm going to have to clean it up" is the conditioning that redirects it. Schweitzer continues by arguing that Dorine's response is indistinguishable from the magazine's own mantra: "get the job done" (61). The fact that Dorine's response to a dead body is functionally identical to her response to a copyediting error is darkly comic. It reveals how thoroughly the institutional demand for compliance has colonized her interior life. She cannot distinguish between ordinary workplace stress and genuine horror because years of absorbing both without outlet have made them feel the same.

The same dynamic plays out at the interpersonal level, where the expectation of composure becomes even harder to refuse because it is embedded in the casual rhythms of the

workday rather than in formal institutional decisions. Kim's persistent rudeness makes this visible. When Virginia assigns Gary's story to Dorine and Kim to complete together, Kim immediately asks, "What is she doing here?" — referring to Dorine — and visibly bristles at the prospect of collaboration. Later, as they work side by side, Kim throws a crumpled ball of paper at Dorine's head, a gesture treated as irritation or humor rather than as workplace hostility. There is no reprimand, no acknowledgment that anything has occurred. The film's refusal to frame Kim's behavior as an incident reinforces the expectation that Dorine absorb it as part of the ordinary texture of her day. And she does, maintaining politeness in situations where irritation or resistance would be justified, offering no protest, no flinch, nothing that would register as a response at all. This is what internalized terror looks like when it has been fully incorporated into daily life. The Final Girl's abject terror is understandable precisely because it externalizes; it screams, staggers, and flees. Dorine's terror is visible only in its absence: in the composure that should not be possible, the politeness that should have broken long ago, the silence where a reaction ought to be.

The preceding interactions establish how institutional structures corner and condition Dorine, the following scene — prior to Gary's death — reveals the human face of that structure and connects it explicitly to the film's broader pattern of male violation. As Maynard and Geller observe, *Office Killer* depicts "the two worlds offered women — work and domesticity — as dominated by men," with Gary functioning in the workplace as a direct echo of Dorine's father in the home (107). The parallel is not incidental, and it maps directly onto the logic Clover identifies in the slasher. The Final Girl is targeted because she is there, because the structure around her has made her available to the threat. Both Gary and Dorine's further intrude into her personal space under the cover of a socially sanctioned role, and both treat her discomfort as

irrelevant, because the roles they occupy grant them the right to do so. Under the pretense of helping Dorine "learn something," Gary positions her at her desk, presses his body against the back of her chair, and tries to force her down into the chair while commenting, "Ooh, a little tense." When she attempts to pull away, he responds with anger by shouting and thrusting his hands into her face, revealing how expectations of feminine agreeableness render her discomfort unreadable to him.

Gary's threat does not announce itself as a threat. It arrives dressed as normalcy, as mentorship, as a colleague staying late to help. However, the setting is telling. The office has emptied out, everyone else has gone home, and Dorine is alone with Gary in the way the Final Girl is alone with the killer — isolated, without recourse, in a space that has ceased to offer the protection of witnesses. This is what it means to be the Final Girl in *Office Killer*. She is not chased down a corridor. She is cornered at her desk, after hours, in an empty office. The camera reinforces Dorine's positioning as the Final Girl through its handling of point of view. Clover argues that by the climactic sequences of the classical slasher, the camera's perspective has migrated entirely to the Final Girl and "we are in the closet with her, watching with her eyes the knife blade pierce the door; in the room with her as the killer breaks through the window and grabs her" (45). The audience inhabits her experience of threat rather than observing it from outside. *Office Killer* deploys this logic in the Gary scene through a precise formal strategy. When Gary intrudes on Dorine, the film uses a combination of two-shots and close-ups that keep the viewer positioned as witness to her experience rather than participant in his. Crucially, every shot of Dorine alone is at eye-level. The camera neither looks down on her nor up at her, refusing both the condescension of a high angle and the aggression of a low one, instead meeting her where she is. The shots that include Gary, by contrast, are taken from over Dorine's shoulder at a

low angle, making him loom. The formal effect is to organize the scene around Dorine's perspective: we see Gary the way she sees him — from below, from behind, as a body that has imposed itself into her space. Her close-ups also register fear clearly. The camera stays on Dorine as she excuses herself, visibly shaken, and the shot holds long enough to register that something has been done to her.

Through a series of flashbacks, *Office Killer* establishes that the victimization organizing Dorine as a Final Girl was put in place long before she ever set foot in the offices of *Constant Consumer*. As Maynard and Geller observe, Dorine's father "was […] a founding editor of the magazine; thus, Dorine's low status there is an extension of how he 'kept girls under his thumb' in both settings" (107). Gary is not an aberration; he is a repetition. The flashbacks reveal the same structure operating in the domestic sphere: a male figure intruding into Dorine's personal space under the cover of a sanctioned role, her discomfort rendered incomprehensible by the authority that role confers. Before his accidental death, Dorine was subjected to inappropriate and sexually abusive behavior by her father over an extended period of time — conduct she was conditioned to endure rather than resist. When she finally attempts to disclose this behavior to her mother, she is met with disbelief and moral reprimand rather than protection. Her mother dismisses Dorine's account as vulgar fabrication, framing it as evidence of a "dirty mind." Her father counters by asserting affection and paternal authority, insisting "she loves me, don't you honey?" and reinforcing that claim by placing his hand on her knee. This exchange reveals how Dorine has been trained to normalize male intrusion and how her victimization is reinforced within the family itself. She is harmed by gendered expectations, workplace bureaucracy, and a patriarchal system that privileges male authority (particularly paternal authority) over women's credibility and bodily autonomy. In both contexts, professional and domestic, Dorine is

positioned as responsible for maintaining emotional and interpersonal stability, even when that stability is achieved through her own silence and bodily compliance. The repetition of this dynamic across the workplace and home underscores that Dorine's victimization is situational *and* systemic: she has been conditioned to accept intrusion as an obligation rather than recognize it as a violation. Her sustained exposure to threat and regulation, coupled with social isolation, establishes the conditions for Final Girl alignment long before violence becomes explicit.

Taken together, these scenes establish that Dorine's victimization is systemic, being produced and reproduced across every space she inhabits. The bureaucracy corners her, her colleagues condition her, Gary violates her, and her family silences her. What the film has assembled, across all of these registers, is the complete portrait of the Final Girl: a figure marked by marginality, sustained exposure to threat, and a world that consistently refuses to name what is being done to her. Clover argues that the Final Girl survives because she is the one who sees clearly, who recognizes the threat for what it is even when no one else will (35). *Office Killer* has spent its first act showing us what that clarity costs — the years of absorbed slights, the terror sealed inward, and the silence that has become indistinguishable from compliance. Dorine sees. She has always seen. What the film does next is refuse the consolation the classical slasher film offers her. She does not pick up a weapon and defeat the killer from outside. She becomes one. And it is in the collapse of the Final Girl and killer into the same body where *Office Killer* locates its feminist argument.

Becoming the Killer

The preceding section established Dorine's alignment with the Final Girl through the structural conditions of her experience — marginality, chronic exposure to threat, and a world that consistently refuses to name what is being done to her. Nevertheless, *Office Killer* refuses to

leave her there. Where the Final Girl's power emerges at the point of endurance through resistance, escape, or last-resort retaliation against a threat that comes from outside, Dorine gradually assumes the position Clover reserves for the killer himself. He is the figure whose only role is that of killer, the organizing force of violence rather than its endpoint (30). This is not a celebratory or emancipatory transformation. The film does not present Dorine's violence as liberation or triumph. What it does is transfer to her the proactive authority the slasher antagonist has traditionally held — control over the initiation, escalation, and direction of violence — making her agency, rather than an external threat, the primary engine of narrative progression. She does not defeat the killer. She becomes one.

Rather than emerging through intentional killing, Dorine's relationship with violence initially emerges through reaction and containment. Gary's death is accidental, and Dorine's early agency therefore takes a reactive rather than generative form. Rather than producing violence, she responds to it by asserting control over its aftermath and claiming authority over the body, the space, and the narrative that follows. She removes Gary's body and seemingly cleans the scene, erasing visible traces of the electrocution. Dorine's containment extends beyond the physical realm into narrative control when she sends an email to Kim from Gary's account. Writing as Gary, she explains that he "needed a little break" and urges Kim not to "worry." Although Kim remains distressed by Gary's disappearance, she does not question whether he is alive, allowing Dorine to successfully distance herself from suspicion through narrative manipulation. The email is more than a practical cover, though. It is also the first instance of Dorine assuming the killer's structural logic: controlling what others can see, ensuring that the violence remains invisible, keeping her victims unaware of what is accumulating around them.

Dorine's invisibility is not accidental; it is performed. The email follows immediately after Daniel visits her home to set up her laptop. During his visit, Dorine performs her usual meekness and social awkwardness, reinforcing Daniel's assumptions about her technological incompetence. He instructs her to "play around" with the computer, try the tutorials, and attend his upcoming workshop, implicitly positioning her as incapable of independent technical action. Although Dorine quietly notes that she knows "a little" about computers, the scene is structured to suggest that Daniel does not imagine her capable of sending an email from someone else's account. The juxtaposition of this interaction with Dorine's successful impersonation of Gary underscores how her agency operates through concealment rather than visibility, exploiting others' underestimation of her capacities.

After her preliminary assertion of narrative authority over violence, Dorine begins to exert increasing control. Unlike Gary's accidental death, the murders that follow are intentional, marking a shift from reaction to deliberate action. Dorine determines when violence occurs but also how it is carried out, moving from indirect methods, such as poisoning Virginia, to increasingly bloody and hands-on forms of killing. The progression in kills signals her growing command over the means of violence rather than a simple escalation in quantity. That command extends to the direction of violence as well. She selects her victims, and that selection follows a discernible internal logic rather than randomness — each killing is purposeful, organized around Dorine's own judgment about who has harmed her and how. In this way she assumes the position Clover reserves for the killer: the organizing force behind the film's violent events, operating in plain sight while remaining constitutionally invisible to those around her. Authority is asserted through control rather than spectacle or excess. She has control over method, over target, and over the circumstances under which violence is enacted.

Dorine's assumption of the killer's position extends beyond her acts of violence into the institutional structure of the workplace itself. Clover's killer is defined in part by his indestructibility. The structures around him consistently fail to contain him, and he rises from every attempt to stop him (30). *Office Killer* translates this quality into institutional terms. Prior to Gary's death, Dorine possesses only a narrow and informal authority tied to her copyediting role. Her coworkers occasionally defer to her expertise on grammar and usage, but this carries no broader credibility or protection within the organization, as Norah's inability to recall her name makes clear. This changes following Gary's disappearance. Assigned to complete his unfinished piece alongside Kim, Dorine ensures the work is submitted while also orchestrating the situation in a way that results in Kim's dismissal. When Kim raises concerns, the institution sides with Dorine, accepting her account and rendering Kim's complaint ineffective. The workplace does not expose her — it insulates her, validating her version of events and absorbing conflict on her behalf. As with the killer who rises after every blow, Dorine cannot be contained by the very structure that once organized her subordination. The institution that erased her now defends her, and it does so without ever understanding what it is protecting.

The same logic operates in the domestic sphere, where the conditions of Dorine's victimization become the conditions of her control. At home, Dorine's mother functions as a source of surveillance that mirrors the workplace's hierarchical oversight by reasserting authority through an intercom system, issuing corrections the moment Dorine enters the room, and implicitly assigning domestic labor through remarks that the house "could use some work." The domestic space is structured by inherited authority rather than Dorine's control, and her mother's limited mobility — the result of the car accident that killed Dorine's father — is the one constraint the surveillance system cannot overcome. Dorine turns it against her. By unplugging

the motorized chair her mother relies on to move between floors, she assumes control over who can access which spaces, determining the boundaries of her mother's movement through the house. It is the first exercise of the killer's spatial logic in the domestic sphere: controlling access, limiting visibility, deciding who can and cannot enter. The film makes this inversion visible. As Dorine sends her mother upstairs with her breakfast tray, the camera holds on to the image of her mother slowly ascending into darkness while Dorine moves confidently through the kitchen below — illuminated, purposeful, no longer directed by the space but directing it. The institution of the family, like the institution of the workplace, has begun to organize itself around Dorine's will rather than against it.

Dorine's growing authority over domestic space extends beyond rearrangement and access to encompass the management and containment of bodies. As Schweitzer observes, "Dorine gains more power by gaining locations, and gains locations as a byproduct of gaining power" and nowhere is this more visible than in the basement, which she transforms from a peripheral storage area into what Schweitzer describes as the "id" of the house or the space of primal control, organized entirely around Dorine's will (111). Rather than functioning as a chaotic or transgressive dumping ground, the basement operates as a fully organized extension of the office and her home. The bodies are positioned, arranged, and maintained with the same methodical precision Dorine brings to her copyediting. Sherman herself identified this as the film's central preoccupation: it "is more than anything else about 'what this woman does with the bodies after they're dead'" (Schweitzer 34). What she does is compose them. She is, as Schweitzer puts it, a "puppeteer" (34). Dorine is an arranger of bodies that do not talk back, determining their placement, proximity, and function within the space she now governs. She is no longer merely occupying the domestic space or reacting within it. She is authoring it and, in

the process, has assumed the killer's most complete expression of control over when and how violence occurs as well as what it leaves behind.

The consolidation of Dorine's domestic authority culminates in an act that exceeds spatial control entirely. Even with full command over access, movement, and the arrangement of bodies, Dorine's authority within the house remains incomplete. The space itself is inseparable from its history as the site of her father's abuse, her mother's complicity, and the lingering visual reminder of that violence in the painting of Dorine sitting on her father's lap. Occupation is not enough. Clover's killer cannot be contained by the structures around him. He rises from every blow, survives every attempt to stop him, and the narrative cannot hold him (30). Dorine's equivalent of that indestructibility is structural not physical. The house that once organized her vulnerability, that enforced her father's authority and her mother's surveillance, simply ceases to exist. The fire is an act she initiates and controls, ensuring that the space can never reassert its prior function. By destroying it, Dorine does what the classical killer does at the level of narrative: she removes herself from the structure entirely, already moving toward the next location. The institution cannot hold her. It never could. It just took her this long to burn it down. While Dorine's domestic authority culminates in destruction, her relationship to the workplace traces a parallel but distinct trajectory — one that begins not in control but in its total absence.

At the outset of the film, the workplace is a space Dorine must continually navigate under conditions of visibility and constraint. Its largely open floor plan renders her continuously observable, subject to evaluation, and vulnerable to repeated invasions of her physical space. Dorine's demeanor within the office mirrors these conditions: she moves hesitantly and deferentially, calibrating her posture and behavior in response to supervisors and coworkers, her presence shaped by an awareness of being seen and assessed. Her spatial subordination becomes

especially visible in her first interaction with Virginia, where Dorine is framed crouching out of view while Virginia looms above her with open contempt. Virginia turns to Mr. Landau and asks, “Is this the one?” After Dorine is identified as the correct employee, Virginia pulls her back into frame and drags her away by the arm. The sequence ends with Dorine run-walking behind Virginia, struggling to keep pace as she is ushered into Virginia’s office. This moment of overt spatial domination does not remain confined to interpersonal interaction; it extends outward, shaping how Dorine’s body moves through — and is acted upon by — the workplace itself. An ink cartridge explodes in her face and some disposable cups cascade uncontrollably from the water cooler, moments that underscore her position as a figure acted upon by her environment. The workplace thus appears as a system that materializes control through its very textures, reinforcing Dorine’s position as a figure subjected to space rather than one who organizes it.

Dorine’s spatial subordination does not hold. Following Gary’s death, Dorine begins to operate in the workplace the way the killer operates in the slasher, through the strategic withholding of the compliance others have always been able to count on. During her late-night work session with Kim and Virginia, Dorine is framed in the foreground while Kim remains in the background, a reversal of earlier spatial hierarchies. Rather than responding with apology or deference, Dorine initially ignores Kim’s attempt to get her attention before addressing her with a brief and pointed question: “Was there something that you needed?” Although the line is delivered in Carol Kane’s characteristically soft, high-pitched voice, Dorine does not hesitate or soften her posture as she has in earlier interactions. Her speech is clipped and direct, signaling control rather than submission. Dorine’s lack of eye contact in this exchange further underscores this shift. Earlier in the film, her averted gaze reads as nervous or fearful, paired with apology and retreat. Here, however, Dorine withholds eye contact deliberately, continuing her work

without shrinking, explaining, or seeking approval. The gesture functions as a refusal of engagement rather than a sign of insecurity, reinforcing her emerging authority within the space.

The Virginia scene is where Dorine's assumption of the killer's spatial logic becomes fully visible in the workplace. Dorine, like a slasher killer organizes space around violence, determining who enters, who exits, and who does not leave. After Kim heads out to get dinner, Dorine deliberately sets fire to Virginia's ashtray and conceals herself within the office, transforming the workspace from an environment she merely navigates into one she actively organizes. As Virginia struggles and attempts to speak to her, Dorine watches intently, her gaze steady and unflinching. Unlike her earlier encounters with Virginia — marked by physical displacement, intimidation, and forced movement — this moment reverses the spatial dynamic. Dorine no longer appears frightened, shy, or submissive; instead, she occupies the space with purpose, positioning herself as an observer who controls the conditions of the encounter rather than a body acted upon by the environment. She initiates and directs every stage of the scene: entering Virginia's office, igniting the fire, drawing Virginia into the room, sabotaging the inhaler, and maintaining visual control as Virginia dies. Dorine removes the body and cleans the space, completing the transformation of the workplace from a site of imposed authority into one temporarily organized around her actions.

Dorine's confrontation with Virginia marks a turning point. From here, Dorine's actions trace the killer's most unsettling quality: the ability to operate in plain sight, moving through increasingly visible and populated spaces while remaining unreadable as a threat to those around her. The killing of the mailroom attendant marks an early turning point in this transformation. Unlike earlier acts that depend on seclusion, this murder occurs during the workday while the office remains active and populated. Dorine's willingness to act in daylight signals a new

assurance in her ability to move, act, and respond within the workplace without hesitation, even under conditions of potential surveillance. Her attempted killing of Kim further develops this confidence by relocating violence into a transitional zone within the office. Neither private room nor open workspace, the stairwell is a regulated passage designed to control movement between floors. By introducing violence into this location, Dorine no longer confines her actions to marginal or hidden areas but inserts them into spaces of circulation and visibility, accepting an even greater risk of interruption.

The escalation culminates in Dorine's kidnapping of Norah, which represents the clearest expression of her transformed relationship to workplace space. Unlike earlier encounters in which Dorine approaches Norah and her coworkers from a position of hesitation, Dorine now initiates the interaction on her own terms. She approaches Norah while Norah is seated beside Mr. Landau (Mike Hodge), momentarily positioned as just another worker rather than as a supervisor. The physical arrangement reverses their usual dynamic: Dorine stands over Norah, who looks up at her, caught off guard by Dorine's sudden appearance and responding with visible surprise and unease. Dorine, by contrast, is calm and assured. She confidently invites Norah to lunch, smiling and projecting ease, while Norah reacts nervously, chuckling, and rubbing her fingers over her mouth before hesitantly asking if Dorine has sent her an email. The exchange marks a clear reversal of their workplace relationship, placing Norah in the position Dorine once occupied. This reversal carries into the following scene, as Norah follows Dorine to her car under the assumption of a routine lunch break. The parking garage is not empty: Kim drives away nearby, and other coworkers move toward the elevator. Despite this visibility, Dorine acts without hesitation, striking Norah and placing her in the car. Dorine is not hidden, but because it has never developed the capacity to read her as a threat the institution sees

nothing. This is the killer's invisibility fully realized. Rather than the invisibility of a monster lurking in the margins, Dorine enacts the invisibility of the woman the workplace decided was not quite there.

Dorine's increasing authority over violence, institutional legitimacy, and space confirms her assumption of the position Clover reserves for the killer: the organizing force of threat, the figure whose decisions rather than external dangers drive the narrative forward. She authors violence, composes space, and operates with an impunity the institution cannot revoke because it was never equipped to see her as a threat in the first place. Nevertheless, the film does not resolve the tension this creates. Dorine does not stop being a Final Girl when she becomes a killer, and it is the film's insistence on holding both positions simultaneously that the following section will examine.

The Killer Final Girl

Dorine survives *as* the Final Girl by becoming the killer, and she becomes the killer without relinquishing the structural vulnerability that marks her as a victim. The convergence of these two slasher film positions is most clearly articulated through Dorine's acts of violence. Although the position of the killer grants her active agency within the narrative, her killings prevent that agency from becoming detached from the conditions of her victimization. Two scenes make this collapse most visible: the flashback in which Dorine causes her father's death, and the basement confrontation with Norah — moments in which victimization and violence do not occur in sequence, but, instead, simultaneously, held together in the same body, in the same gesture, without resolution.

The collapse of Final Girl and killer is most compressed in Dorine's flashback, where she causes the car accident that kills her father. As Maynard and Geller describe, the scene makes the

sexual abuse explicit. Her "father's hand caresses Dorine's thigh while her mother dismisses Dorine's complaint against her father" and then "Dorine grabs her father's hand to stop his caress and, refusing to let go, causes the car to crash" (107). The gesture is simultaneously defensive and fatal, but what prevents it from resolving into simple self-defense is that it is not comprehensible as such to anyone in the scene. The classical Final Girl's violence is validated by the narrative. She picks up the weapon, defeats the killer, and the subgenre frames her resistance as justified triumph. Dorine's act has no such framing. Her mother is actively dismissing her account of the abuse in the same moment she grabs his hand. Schweitzer's close reading registers this irresolution in Dorine's face: the low-angle shot reveals a "melancholy look in her eyes […] with a grim determination in her jaw," a look that would "smite him if given the chance" (Schweitzer 73). The determination and the melancholy are present in the same face simultaneously — the face of someone still being harmed and already refusing it, with no language available to distinguish between the two. When she grabs his hand, she is the Final Girl cornered without recourse and the killer causing a death in the same gesture, at the same instant, with the film offering no frame that would allow us to call it one rather than the other. This is because it is both.

The climactic confrontation between Norah and Dorine in her basement extends the collapse across an entire sequence, and what makes it the most sustained expression of the convergence is that Dorine makes the connection between her killer position and her Final Girl position explicit out loud. She does not bring Norah to the basement simply to kill her. As Schweitzer observes, Dorine brings Norah home alive so that she can "explain to everyone about the money […] see the damage she has wrought" and "know *why* she is being punished" (38, 96). The killer's violence is inseparable from the Final Girl's victimization. Norah is the one who

sent everyone home, who engineered the downsizing that cornered Dorine, and whose embezzlement is responsible for the downsizing of Dorine's job. In this moment she is simultaneously the killer — knife in hand, Norah trapped in her basement — and the Final Girl, the one who has been harmed, whose livelihood was dismantled by the person she is now attacking. The violence cannot be separated from the victimization because they are directed at the same source. Dorine is not killing despite being a victim. She is killing because of it, and she needs Norah to understand that the two are the same. Norah then shoves her. As Schweitzer describes, Norah "lets loose a yell and shoves Dorine away," sending her stumbling back onto the stairs, slumped and bleeding while Norah races around the basement crying for help (97). Meagher notes that Norah "comes close to overcoming her," and in this moment the Final Girl's conditions reassert themselves with full force (144). Dorine is physically vulnerable, cornered in her own space, unable to immediately contain the threat she has herself initiated. The collapse does not resolve, though, it deepens. Dorine pulls herself up, reaches for her knife, and moves toward Norah with blood trickling down her face, the killer's determination visible in a body that is still marked by the Final Girl's vulnerability. Both positions remain active simultaneously, neither canceling the other, held together in a body that is bleeding and lethal at the same time.

The Critique in the Contradiction

The convergence of Final Girl and killer in Dorine's body is not merely a formal inversion of slasher convention. It is the film's central feminist argument. Each act of violence remains materially and symbolically connected to the systemic and patriarchal structures that have harmed her, rendering the killings as critiques of — and resistance to — the systems that produced her vulnerability rather than expressions of autonomous empowerment. The following section traces that logic through three killings that together map Dorine's confrontation with

patriarchal power across bodily, generational, and economic registers: Gary, whose death exposes how male entitlement to women's space is normalized under the guise of help; the Girl Scouts, whose killing confronts the reproduction of gendered compliance across generations; and Norah, whose death ties violence directly to the economic structures that rendered Dorine precarious in the first place.

Gary's death initiates Dorine's contemporary killing sequence and signals the translation of patriarchal intrusion from the domestic sphere into the workplace. Although accidental, his electrocution emerges from an interaction in which professional assistance collapses into bodily invasion, revealing how male authority and entitlement to women's space are normalized under the guise of help. Gary does not present himself as a threat. He presents himself as someone doing Dorine a favor, positioning his body against hers under the cover of technical assistance. The invasion is sanctioned by the institutional logic of the workplace, which has always organized Dorine's body as available to the demands of those above her. His death does not result from a deliberate act of resistance. It results from the same conditions that structured her vulnerability: she is alone, after hours, dependent on his help, and unable to refuse his proximity without consequence. The burning of his hands — the very instruments of invasion and abuse — materializes this logic in the film's most precise image of violence remaining tethered to victimization. Dorine does not celebrate his death. She attempts to seal his wound with packing tape and clean him with Windex, as though the damage might be undone. The killer's agency and the Final Girl's conditions are present simultaneously: she has caused a death, and she is still the person who had no recourse but to accept his help in the first place.

The killing of the Girl Scouts extends Dorine's violence beyond the office and into the feminized economies of domestic and affective labor, targeting a form of harm that is harder to

name precisely because it does not present itself as harm at all. As Schweitzer observes, the Girl Scouts are "spreaders of cookies and propaganda from door to door, representative of a childhood innocence denied to Dorine" (38). They are, in other words, what Dorine once was: girls performing cheerful, moralized feminine labor in service of a domestic order that will discipline and diminish them as surely as it disciplined and diminished her. Their visit to her porch is innocent – as was Dorine's compliance, once. But the film refuses to separate the innocence from what it reproduces. When one of the girls plugs the stair chair back in and subsequently restores her mother's mobility and with it her capacity for surveillance and domestic authority over Dorine, the act is not malicious. It is simply what a well-socialized girl does. She helps, she fixes, she restores order. And in doing so she reinstates the very structure Dorine has been dismantling. Dorine's killing of the Girl Scouts is the most uncomfortable act of violence in the film precisely because it refuses the clean distinction between innocent victim and agent of harm. The girls are both simultaneously and the film offers no frame that would allow us to resolve the contradiction. The violence remains tethered to victimization not because the Girl Scouts harmed Dorine directly, but because they embody the system that will keep producing that harm, generation after generation, in the form of girls who are too well-trained to refuse it.

Norah's death is the most direct confrontation between Dorine's violence and the economic structures that produced her precarity. Where Gary's death exposes patriarchal entitlement embedded in bodily interaction and the Girl Scouts expose its reproduction across generations, Norah embodies the institutional and economic logic that renders Dorine disposable in the first place. As Schweitzer notes, Norah's "embezzlement is responsible for the downsizing," and it is her corruption, operating behind the smooth surface of managerial

authority, that initiates the economic restructuring that corners Dorine (109). Dorine does not kill Norah immediately or impulsively. Dorine brings her home alive to explain the damage she has caused. The violence is inseparable from the demand for accountability. Dorine needs Norah to understand what she has done, to face the people her decisions have harmed, and to stand in the space her downsizing created and acknowledge it. The killer's agency and the Final Girl's conditions remain bound together here as tightly as anywhere in the film. And yet the confrontation is only necessary because Dorine is the one who was made precarious, the one whose labor was rendered disposable by neoliberal restructuring, the one whose vulnerability Norah's institutional authority produced. The structures that harmed her remain intact even as she acts against them. She does not regain her position, receive recognition, or secure economic stability. The violence is real and the victimization is real and the film refuses to let either one cancel the other out.

Dorine's violence does not function as autonomous empowerment or psychological aberration. Instead, each act remains tethered to specific configurations of patriarchal power — familial, institutional, economic, sexual, and spatial — ensuring that her growing agency never fully detaches from the conditions of her victimization. Crucially, the film refuses to translate Dorine's increasing control into institutional reward or social restoration: she does not regain her full-time position, receive recognition, or secure economic stability. The structures that produced her precarity remain intact even as she becomes increasingly capable of acting within and against them. Instead of framing Dorine's killings as a linear shift from victim to agent, *Office Killer* frames them as a sustained engagement with the systems that have disciplined her body, labor, and space. Through the convergence of Final Girl and killer positions, the film articulates a third-wave feminist logic in which agency and victimization coexist rather than cancel one another.

Conclusion

Although *Office Killer* was poorly received upon release and has remained largely marginalized within Sherman's legacy, it nevertheless constitutes a crucial feminist intervention into the slasher subgenre. The film critiques and resists patriarchal structures not by abandoning slasher conventions, but by strategically redeploying them within a third-wave feminist logic. Through its manipulation of slasher grammar — specifically the Final Girl and killer positions — the film makes its feminist intervention discernible at the level of form rather than message alone. Instead of staging these positions as sequential or mutually exclusive, *Office Killer* collapses them, holding victimization and agency in simultaneous play. As a result, the film rejects the postfeminist demand that women either acknowledge their increased power and abandon structural critique or continue to name oppression at the expense of progress, demonstrating how feminist intervention has long operated within the slasher subgenre rather than outside it. The film shows that feminist intervention can emerge through the strategic reworking of slasher conventions at the level of form.

Office Killer occupies a crucial position in the evolution of slasher cinema by expanding the formal and political possibilities of the subgenre without resolving its central contradictions. The film's impact lies not in commercial success, franchise production, or significant canonization, but in its willingness to collapse the Final Girl and killer positions in a sustained and uncompromising way. While it is not possible to establish a direct line of influence between *Office Killer* and later slasher films that similarly unsettle this binary, its interventions mark an important moment of formal disruption. In the years since its release, neoslasher films such as *Scream 4* (Wes Craven, 2011) and *All the Boys Love Mandy Lane* (Jonathan Levine, 2006) revisit and destabilize the separation between survivor and killer, complicating traditional

alignments of victimhood, agency, and moral legibility. These later texts approach the binary differently and with varying degrees of irony and genre awareness, yet their willingness to blur or fracture the Final Girl/killer distinction emerges in a cinematic landscape already altered by earlier experiments like *Office Killer*. Even without direct evidence of influence, Sherman's film demonstrates an extreme and early disruption of slasher grammar that helps make such later reconfigurations imaginable. Its significance, then, lies less in what it produced directly than in how it stretched the limits of slasher form, opening conceptual space for more overt, playful, or self-conscious collapses of the subgenre's most enduring binary in the years that followed.

The next chapter shifts from the formal constraints of classical slasher films and the fragmented, postmodern intervention of *Office Killer* to a slasher text produced under markedly different cultural and industrial conditions. Where *The Slumber Party Massacre* embeds feminist critique within the conventions of early slasher films and *Office Killer* exposes structural harm through contradiction, instability, and refusal, Chapter Three examines Leigh Janiak's *Fear Street* trilogy as a work that is able to articulate feminist politics openly rather than obliquely. Emerging within a fourth-wave feminist context and produced as a unified streaming-era trilogy, *Fear Street* realizes possibilities that remain constrained or unresolved in earlier women-directed slashers, foregrounding intersectionality, queer subjectivity, and system critique as organizing principles rather than subtext. In tracing this shift, Chapter Three positions *Fear Street* as a defining work of the contemporary slasher cycle, illustrating how changes in feminist politics and industrial conditions reshape what feminist intervention within the subgenre can look like.

Chapter 3: *Fear Street*, Intersectionality, and Feminist New Wave Cinema

In 2021, Netflix released the highly successful *Fear Street* trilogy, a distinctive slasher franchise directed and co-written by Leigh Janiak. As with the *Slumber Party Massacre* trilogy,

Fear Street comprises three films shaped by women filmmakers; however, unlike *Slumber Party Massacre*, all three entries in *Fear Street* were co-written and directed by Leigh Janiak. The continuity in creative control lends the trilogy a degree of formal and thematic cohesion rarely seen in slasher franchises and never seen in a slasher franchise directed by only women. Based on R. L. Stine's teen horror novels and conceived as a single, unified narrative, the trilogy traces the intertwined histories of Shadyside, Sunnyvale, and the witch Sarah Fier (Elizabeth Scopel).[57] Further distinguishing *Fear Street* from franchises such as *Halloween*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Friday the 13th*, and *The Slumber Party Massacre*, the films were written and produced concurrently and released on three consecutive Fridays via Netflix. Despite its unusual industrial model and liminal position between film and television, each installment found itself on Netflix's consumer-rated top ten list; part one was in the top ten in seventy-four countries, part two was in the top ten in seventy-one countries, and part three was in the top ten in eighty-one countries ("Global Top 10").

These industrial and formal conditions — consistent authorship across three films, simultaneous production, and rapid serialized release on a streaming platform — position *Fear Street* as an unusually unified intervention within the current slasher cycle. Rather than functioning as a loosely connected franchise shaped by shifting creative and commercial priorities, the trilogy operates as a sustained narrative project, allowing its engagement with slasher conventions to unfold deliberately across installments. This chapter argues that *Fear Street* represents one of the most formally and politically ambitious texts of the contemporary slasher cycle. Emerging in a fourth-wave feminist context shaped by intersectionality, queer visibility, and systemic critique, the trilogy reconfigures slasher grammar at the level of

[57] Shadyside and Sunnyvale are the neighboring fictional communities in which the narrative is set.

representation, form, and ideology. It uses its treatment of the Final Girl, the killer, and the relationship between them to relocate horror away from marginalized bodies and toward the patriarchal system that has always been producing their disposability. At the center of that reconfiguration is an epistemological claim: that the kind of knowledge survival requires is inseparable from the race, sexuality, and class position of the person who is surviving.

Unlike *The Slumber Party Massacre* (Amy Holden Jones, 1982) and *Office Killer* (Cindy Sherman, 1997), the *Fear Street* trilogy has not only garnered many positive reviews, but it has also been established as a successful horror trilogy, thanks to its high level of audience engagement.[58] According to Olly Dyche, a writer for the website *MovieWeb, Fear Street* "became a beloved trilogy by fans of the genre [… and] is the best horror trilogy of the past 30 years" ("Why *Fear Street*"). Similarly, Natalia Winkelman of *The New York Times* described the trilogy as "an engaging and scrappy mini-franchise, [that] plays like 'Scream' meets 'Stranger Things' built on a supernatural premise sturdy enough to sustain interest and suspense over nearly six hours" (C4). The popular criticism of the franchise, while generally praiseworthy, has not been universally positive. In a *Forbes* review, Erik Kain's argues that "*Fear Street* cannot hide its derivative script, awful pacing and dreary characters behind diverse casting and a queer romance" ("*Fear Street: 1994*"). Similarly, Judy Berman of *Time* criticizes the film's "formulaic approach," concluding that it is "nothing more, if also nothing less, than a competent streaming-algorithm impression of the forgettable flicks kids with fewer viewing options once rented on VHS" ("Netflix's *Fear Street*"). In other words, these critics suggest that the trilogy's most

[58] As with most horror films, *Fear Street* has not won any elite film awards, but each film has won and been nominated for genre specific awards at the BloodGuts UK Horror Awards, Fangoria Chainsaw Awards, Bram Stoker Awards, and ReFrame.

distinctive interventions — its queer romance and inclusive casting — do not fully compensate for what they see as a familiar, mechanically assembled slasher narrative.

Reviews like Kain's and Berman's have not prevented other film critics such as Marcus Shorter, Candice Frederick, and Anna Bogutskaya from applauding the films and evaluating their engagement with queerness and patriarchal politics. Writing for *Bloody Disgusting*, Shorter examines the ways in which *Fear Street* and the horror genre at large tend to focus on the "ills of living in a patriarchal society" ("*Fear Street Shines*"). The *Fear Street Trilogy* depicts a world in which women are blamed and silenced while men remain powerful and maintain social control. In *The New York Times*, Frederick approaches *Fear Street* from a queer perspective, focusing on how the trilogy addresses the treatment of women who exist outside of societal norms. With a lesbian romance at the center of the narrative, *Fear Street* challenges the lack of queer horror as well as the stereotypical and dispensable portrayal of queer characters that are featured in horror films (C1). Rather than treating the trilogy as disposable streaming horror, these critics frame it as a deliberate reworking of slasher conventions that makes its political commitments clear through the subgenre itself. Bogutskaya captures the balance between popular form and thematic density when she observes: "Janiak serves a successful blend of supernatural, teen and slasher horror: *Fear Street* might superficially resemble the goth, gory sister of *Stranger Things*, but it's heavy with ideas and questions about our place in the (super)natural order of things" (75). Bogutskaya's claim underscores what these reviewers collectively recognize. *Fear Street* uses the pleasures of teen and slasher horror to stage a sustained interrogation of patriarchal violence, queer disposability, and the social systems that determine whose bodies are allowed to survive.

Yet while articles like those written by Dyche, Winkelman, Kain, Shorter, Frederick, and Bogutskaya have brought attention to *Fear Street*, the films have received only limited academic

consideration. One scholar, Emeterio Diez-Puertas, argues, "the Netflix trilogy (digital screens) shows adolescents (target audience) a rite of passage and a myth (mythopoetics) related to their sexual identity (gender assimilation)" (my trans. 170). Traditionally, this myth or rite of passage – expressed through the slasher subgenre – encourages adolescents to ascribe to heteronormative sexuality. Yet, *Fear Street* "fights against this discourse, since its actantial subject is a liminal Queer subject" (my trans. 170). The trilogy essentially rewrites the mythology of slashers. Instead of a myth that promotes heteronormativity, this film franchise accepts and normalizes sexual diversity. Diez-Puertas' article questions the messaging behind slashers and claims that *Fear Street* is disrupting the traditional patriarchal and heteronormative notions of sexual orientation that have been a staple in the slasher subgenre.

With the exception of Diez-Puertas' sustained engagement, most scholarship on the trilogy approaches *Fear Street* through broader critical frameworks rather than extended close analysis. In their chapter, "From 'Born This Witch' to 'Bad Bitch Witch': A History of Witch Representation in Western Pop Culture," Jaime Hartless and Gabriella V. Smith conceptualize the "bad bitch witch" as a powerful but unstable feminist figure that enables transgressive agency without moral punishment while simultaneously revealing how race, sexuality, and power continue to constrain who is allowed to be "bad" without consequence (323-326). Situating *Fear Street* within this framework, they argue that the trilogy initially appears to rehearse an "evil witch" narrative but ultimately exposes the true source of violence as wealthy, white men. Sarah, they contend, "refuses to be victimized like earlier witch-hunt targets" instead weaponizing the curse against the family responsible for her persecution (325).

Although Hartless and Smith productively locate *Fear Street* within contemporary feminist witch discourse, their analysis leaves open how that intervention operates through

horror's generic structures. Questions of genre become central in scholarship that reads the trilogy through the collapse and recombination of familiar archetypal roles. In her conclusion to *Witchcraft and Adolescence in American Popular Culture*, Miranda Corcoran argues that *Fear Street* exemplifies this tendency by collapsing the teen witch and the Final Girl into a single hybrid figure, disrupting rigid archetypes of adolescent girlhood by allowing characters to exchange powers, vulnerabilities, and narrative roles across time and genre (201). Corcoran identifies the trilogy's disruption of normative models of adolescent femininity, while subsequent scholarship extends this disruption beyond form to questions of sexuality, race, and power. In her chapter on queer resistance, Abigail Waldron contends that the *Fear Street* trilogy intentionally reclaims a historically white, straight teen-horror franchise by centering queer and BIPOC characters, foregrounding lesbian love as the narrative's emotional anchor, and shifting the locus of horror from queer bodies toward the systems of power that produce harm (169).

Chapter Three examines how the *Fear Street* trilogy mobilizes its serialized structure and formal cohesion to enact a fourth-wave feminist intervention within the slasher subgenre. Building on the work of Diez-Puertas, Hartless and Smith, Corcoran, and Waldron, the chapter argues that where *The Slumber Party Massacre* embeds feminist critique as subtext within the classical cycle's constraints, and *Office Killer* works through generic disruption, *Fear Street* confront the subgenre's patriarchal logic directly — guiding the it into what Barbara Creed terms the "dark night of abjection," the space in which revolt against patriarchal power becomes not only possible but necessary (*Return of* 2). The chapter develops this argument in three movements: first, by situating the trilogy within the industrial conditions and feminist cultural moment that made its formal ambitions possible; second, by tracing how the trilogy reconfigures the Final Girl and killer functions to relocate horror away from marginalized bodies and toward

the system determining their disposability; and third, by reading that reconfiguration through Creed's Feminist New Wave Cinema and fourth-wave feminism's intersectional commitments — while accounting for the limitations the trilogy's own logic makes visible.

The Streaming-Era Slasher Film and Feminist Production

The trilogy's ability to enact sustained feminist intervention is inseparable from the industrial conditions under which it was produced. *Fear Street*'s unified authorship, concurrent production, and streaming-era release model created the material framework that enabled its prolonged engagement with patriarchal power and genre convention. Yet this structure was only possible because of the broader transformations brought about by streaming. Originally developed at Twentieth Century-Fox, *Fear Street* was positioned for a more traditional theatrical rollout, with the three films intended to be released over the course of three months. When production began in March 2019, however, the Disney-Fox merger became official, leaving "the fate of the R-rated homage to slasher films uncertain" (Surrey). In the aftermath of the merger, Peter Chernin — whose company, Chernin Entertainment, was producing the trilogy — left Fox and signed a non-exclusive first-look deal with Netflix. This partnership ultimately enabled Netflix to acquire *Fear Street*, and the films' planned theatrical strategy was abandoned in favor of the more experimental streaming release model (Verhoeven).

The shift from theatrical release to streaming occurred amid a wider industrial struggle over the future of Hollywood distribution. With the rise of Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon, debates over the fate of studios and movie theatres have intensified. Hadida et al. argue that Hollywood is experiencing an "identity crisis" not simply because new technology has emerged, as with television in the 1950s, but because streaming services directly challenge the decision-making structures through which studios determine what films to make and how to release them (214).

The COVID-19 pandemic would later accelerate this disruption by closing U.S. theaters and pushing both studios and streaming platforms toward online-first strategies. In 2019, both theatrical exhibition and streaming subscriptions reached record highs, and studios continued to operate through a tightly interconnected distribution pipeline: films typically received an exclusive theatrical window of roughly ninety days before moving to PVOD, physical media, and finally SVOD licensing to third-party platforms such as Netflix or Hulu. The pandemic — and the following rapid expansion of studio-owned streaming services — destabilized this established chain (DeFelice et al. 29-30).

As a result, the contemporary industry is increasingly shaped by two competing institutional logics. Traditional studios continue to operate through what Hadida et al. describe as a commitment institutional logic, which "emerged in the early years of the twentieth century, from a close alignment between the feature film — the industry's main product — and the movie theatre as the venue in which the feature film is experienced and consumed" (217). Under this logic, production and distribution decisions are oriented toward theatrical release, with scripts, casting, budgets, personnel, and marketing designed to generate opening-weekend box office momentum that translates into media attention, word-of-mouth, sustained attendance, and downstream demand in later release windows (217). Even though most films now barely break even and box-office revenue is increasingly concentrated in a small number of blockbuster hits, the extreme inequality in returns has ultimately reinforced studios' commitment to pursuing theatrical blockbusters (234-35). Streaming services, by contrast, operate through a convenience instructional logic, in which films are designed and distributed to maximize at-home accessibility, catalogue breadth, and subscriber retention rather than box-office performance. Initially, streaming platforms relied mostly on studio films and were treated by Hollywood as

merely another release window, but as studios attempted to subordinate streaming through strict windowing and limited revenue sharing, companies such as Netflix and Amazon expanded into production and commissioning, effectively taking on roles historically associated with studios (220-21).

Fear Street emerges precisely at the point where these two institutional logics collide. Initially conceived with the studios' commitment logic of theatrical windowing and box-office momentum, the trilogy ultimately becomes reorganized by the convenience logic of streaming, where value is generated through sustained view attention, serialized consumption, and catalogue strategy. Although *Fear Street's* original production and release plan was unusual for a studio project — shot consecutively and designed for rapid, back-to-back release — it was not entirely without precedent. As Miles Surrey notes, "It's not often that a production company goes all in on shooting three movies at once because of the inherent risk involved" though *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy was similarly filmed back-to-back, even if it was ultimately released across three consecutive Decembers ("*Fear Street* and the Revolution"). Already "described by one insider as 'bingeing movies'," *Fear Street*'s move to Netflix intensified the trilogy's alignment with binge-viewing, especially for first-time audiences.

Fear Street's feminist intervention is not only the result of its narrative content or representational politics, but also the product of a specific set of industrial conditions that made its formal structure possible in the first place. Put differently, the trilogy's politics are inseparable from its mode of production and distribution. A feminist intervention that unfolds across nearly six hours — one that can return repeatedly to patriarchal power, reframe slasher convention over time, and build cumulative critique — requires an industrial framework that supports continuity, cohesion, and duration. Janiak explicitly frames the trilogy's structure as an industrial

experiment from the outset, explaining that the "core idea" was Chernin's proposal to release "a trilogy all in one year," and that the project ultimately became "a hybrid between movies and traditional television content," in which each film functions as "its own thing" while still driving the "bigger narrative" forward. Importantly, Janiak also emphasizes that the trilogy's final streaming release model — one film per week — was "pretty late in the process," and that Netflix "had been raising their hand since before we even had the green light," stepping in decisively once "there was an opening" following the Disney-Fox merger (Janiak). Her account clarifies that *Fear Street*'s unusual form was deliberately engineered as a strategy of sustained audience engagement, one that became fully realized once the trilogy moved from Fox's theatrical logic to Netflix's streaming logic.

If *Fear Street*'s streaming release model provided the conditions for its sustained feminist intervention, its very existence as a woman-directed slasher trilogy also depends on the industrial climate of its production moment. In other words, the same transformations that destabilized theatrical distribution and empowered streaming platforms also reshaped hiring patterns, risk calculations, and genre prestige in ways that opened new (though still constrained) opportunities for women directing horror. To understand the stakes of Janiak's authorship, it is necessary to place *Fear Street* within the larger industrial context of women's horror filmmaking in the twenty-first century. As Heidi Honeycutt argues, women directors were already visible within genre cinema during the early 2000s, with a number of horror and thriller projects receiving wide theatrical distribution and being actively promoted to established genre audiences. She highlights directors such as Jennifer Lynch, Catherine Hardwicke, Karyn Kusama, Laura Lau, Kimberly Peirce, Kathryn Bigelow, Lexi Alexander, Agnieszka Wójtowicz-Vosloo, and Katja von Garnier as examples of women whose films circulated prominently within the genre marketplace.

Honeycutt also emphasizes that this visibility extended beyond studio releases: independent, genre-adjacent work by women drew notable critical attention as well, especially around Sundance, where 2000 became known as “The Year of the Sundance Women” after women directed forty-seven percent of the films selected that year (342). Echoing earlier moments of apparent progress, this surge in recognition did not erase the structural barriers women continued to face in genre production, but it did signal a growing industrial and cultural openness to women’s horror authorship — an openness that would expand, unevenly but significantly, across the rest of the twenty-first century.

The increase in women’s visibility continued to expand across the twenty-first century. As Honeycutt observes, “the number of horror films made in the twenty-first century is staggering, and women directors make a staggering number of them” (478). She argues that women have “become an integral part of the modern horror film as creators,” alongside the genre’s broader evolution into a form capable of telling stories from many different perspectives, often with an even greater emotional and visceral impact (478). Women’s increased prominence in horror reflects a convergence of industrial and cultural developments rather than any single causal shift — among them #MeToo; the growth of female-focused horror festivals and conventions; the rise of “elevated horror” and its emphasis on power, victimhood, and identity; and the increasing legitimization of horror through film festivals and mainstream awards culture, including the Oscars (McCollum and Clarke 3; Honeycutt 482). Within this landscape of expanded presence, women’s horror authorship has become increasingly visible as a genre intervention in its own right. As Victoria McCollum and Aislínn Clarke argue, “Today, women are mobilizing ostensibly masculine genres more than ever before, while at the same time

challenging audience expectations and telling stories that transcend gender, despite the discomfort of their detractors" (7).

Janiak's career offers a clear example of this contemporary dynamic. She emerged as a horror director in the 2010s with her directorial debut *Honeymoon* (2014). Prior to making *Honeymoon*, Janiak worked as a producer's assistant for Leonardo DiCaprio's production company, Appian Way. During that period, she was offered the chance to direct an episode of a network television series, but she declined because the opportunity came with a condition: she would need to shadow a veteran director first. Janiak worried that this kind of "training" would undermine her credibility, later explaining, "'Why would anyone give me $40 million to get a movie off the ground if just last week I was doing this little training program?'" (qtd. in Dowd). This gamble paid off. She went on to direct *Honeymoon*, which she notes was fortunately "'embraced by the festival community and the horror community'" (qtd. in Price). The fact that Janiak highlights this reception points to how women's growing presence in horror has been supported and encouraged by overlapping networks of recognition. The film also drew the attention of Doug Wick and Lucy Fisher, the husband-and-wife producing team behind Red Wagon Entertainment, who approached Janiak about co-writing and directing a remake of *The Craft* (Dowd). Although the remake ultimately did not move forward with Janiak attached, she was offered additional directing opportunities in television, including *Outcast* and *Scream: The TV Series*. As her television work expanded, so did her visibility within horror and teen genre spaces, and in 2017 Janiak and her writing partner, Phil Graziadei, came on board to develop the *Fear Street* trilogy.

Since the trilogy's release, Janiak has continued working in serialized television, directing episodes of HBO's *The Staircase*. Most recently, she has also been reported as set to

direct and executive produce *Harness*, which is described as "a thriller set in a gruesome sect of the sports betting world in the '80s" (Donnelly). Janiak's trajectory is impressive, but it also reveals that constraints that continue to shape women's careers in horror and genre filmmaking. Despite working across film and television, her feature filmography remains relatively small; over the course of nearly twelve years, *Fear Street* stands out less as one project among many than as a rare opportunity to direct at scale within a major horror property.

Janiak's career points to a broader industrial tension: women's increased visibility has not translated into consistent access to financing and production support. Even Karyn Kusama — whom Honeycutt identifies as "one of the first women directors to become widely recognized in the twenty-first century for her continuous genre work" — has a history of struggling to secure financing (350). Kusama's *The Invitation* (2015), for instance, had difficulty attracting backers, "with executives telling her that the film needed a big star to happen." Ultimately, the film was only made through the intervention of Gamechanger Films, a "female-owned and female story-driven" equity fund (356). Kusama's experience demonstrates how women's genre authorship can be critically recognized while remaining economically precarious, dependent on alternative funding structures and gatekeepers' willingness to treat women's horror as commercially viable. This tension is reflected at the institutional level as well. Despite the genre's recent successes, the industry still has considerable room for progress, and Blumhouse — often treated as the defining horror studio of the moment — "has been repeatedly criticized for the scant number of female film-makers on the wall of directors in their LA office" (McCollum and Clarke 3). At the same time, women's increased prominence in horror has produced another tension: visibility frequently requires women directors to be marked and discussed as women first, rather than simply as filmmakers. McCollum and Clarke describe this dynamic directly:

> For the moment, certainly, it is impossible to be a woman who makes horror films without being a 'female horror filmmaker' — the current of industry, academic, and consumer conversation brings it up again and again; that is the process of becoming visible. The female filmmaker is identified as such, whether or not the filmmaker wishes to be so identified or whether they consider such a label a useful signpost to understanding their work or useful to them in how they navigate creating work in the industry. (10-11)

In other words, visibility operates as a double bind. While increased attention to women's horror filmmaking can create opportunities for recognition and community, it also produces a form of discursive containment: women's work is continually framed through gender as its primary interpretative category. While this dissertation necessarily reads women's slasher authorship through feminist frameworks, McCollum and Clarke's point clarifies that gender operates as an analytical lens as well as an industrial category that structures how women's work is made visible and understood. Taken together, these industrial dynamics clarify that women's increased prominence in contemporary horror is neither a simple story of progress nor a straightforward expansion of opportunity. Rather, it is structured by uneven access, persistent gatekeeping, and a discourse of visibility that simultaneously recognizes women's authorship and marks it as exceptional. *Fear Street* emerges from within these contradictions. It is enabled by streaming-era production and distribution shifts that made space for a woman-directed slasher trilogy at scale, yet it remains shaped by the same industrial conditions that continue to limit women's sustained access to genre filmmaking. At the same time, *Fear Street*'s significance cannot be fully understood through gender alone.

Racialized and Queer Visibility in Slasher Cinema

Fear Street centers racialized and queer experience, positioning both as integral to its critique of patriarchal power, disposability, and social control. The following section therefore turns from the industrial conditions that made *Fear Street* possible to the cultural and

representational context through which its intersectional politics take shape. In particular, it is crucial to recognize that horror has historically been shaped by the racialized production of monstrosity, a process through which marginalized bodies are rendered threatening, inhuman, and therefore killable. As Natalie Wilson argues, "monsterizing the Other was — and continues to be — one of the primary ways to maintain power and shore up existing hierarchies" (6-7). Wilson's claim is especially visible in the history of Black representation in horror cinema, where Blackness has long been invoked as a site of fear even as Black people themselves have been erased, stereotyped, or contained within the genre's representational boundaries.

As a slasher trilogy, *Fear Street* must be read in relation to the subgenre's own representational history, one that has frequently erased Blackness from its suburban spaces, relegated Black characters to marginal roles, or positioned them as expendable in service of white survival. In the slasher film boom of the 1980s, Black characters were included primarily through what Robin R. Means Coleman and Mark H. Harris call "marginalized inclusion," meaning Black actors were typically relegated to supporting roles where death was almost guaranteed, rendering them narratively expendable. This expendability is framed as racially deterministic: the "Black guy" becomes the figure whose fate is dictated less by character choices than by skin color, a grim reminder that race structures survival even within genre fantasy. As a result, although slasher films often featured fewer Black characters overall than white ones, the mortality rate for Black characters was disproportionately high because they were rarely positioned as Final Girls (or Guys) (30-32). The "Black Guy Dies First" trope became so entrenched during the 1980s that it was ripe for parody in the 1990s through films like *Scary Movie* (Keenen Ivory Wayans, 2000), even as horror continued to kill off Black characters well beyond the slasher subgenre's initial decline. Twenty-first-century slasher films show some

improvement due to increased cultural awareness of systemic racism, but as long as Black characters remain largely confined to supporting roles, their deaths will continue to function as a structural feature of the genre. At the same time, Means Coleman and Harris complicate this critique by noting that, in contemporary horror's economy of spectacular gore, death can paradoxically operate as a form of inclusion — since being granted a memorable kill scene signals visibility — whereas the most damaging form of exclusion is not being present at all (39-40). If the slasher subgenre's racial politics have often been most visible in the expendability of Black supporting characters, they become even more revealing in the comparatively rare moments when Black women are positioned as survivors.

Because the Final Girl functions as the slasher subgenre's privileged site of identification and endurance, the historical scarcity of Black Final Girls reveals how deeply whiteness has been embedded in the subgenre's narrative logic. Means Coleman and Harris make this point explicitly, arguing that Clover's foundational model of the Final Girl leaves unspoken what is nonetheless obvious in the films themselves: that the classic Final Girl of the 1970s and 1980s was "almost exclusively White" (265). As such, Clover treats gender as the primary (and most important) form of difference, assuming it can stand in for other categories such as race. As a result, her theory effectively silences how race shapes horror spectatorship and narrative structure (Dent 184). Clover's critical blind spot is not only theoretical; it is reflected in the slasher film's representational history, where Black women have been persistently denied the trope's most protected position. Although some Black women did break through in the 1970s, they were frequently positioned as co-Final Girls alongside white women, revealing the persistent difficulty Black Final Girls have faced in rising above the level of "Co-Final Girls" or "Sidekicks Who Survive" (S.W.S.). The 1980s slasher boom offered little improvement, as

"Black actresses suffered along with all Black aspirations for lead roles" (265-266). In the 1990s, however, the Black film movement helped normalized Black female leads and expanded opportunities, even as the Black female S.W.S. remained a common figure, reflecting what Means Coleman and Harris describe as the "cinematic caddy" status of many Black roles (267-268).

Black horror actresses in the twenty-first century have increasingly moved into Final Girl and lead positions, with opportunities expanding rapidly in the 2010s — particularly in the cultural landscape shaped by *Get Out* (Jordan Peele, 2017). Means Coleman and Harris even point to *Fear Street* as a rare contemporary case in which a Black Final Girl survives across multiple installments, a narrative possibility enabled in part by the trilogy's unusual, serialized Netflix release in 2021 (269, 271-273). At the same time, however, many films treat Black Final Girls through a race-neutral framework in which race is not explicitly foregrounded as a plot concern. Nevertheless, Blackness still shapes how the role is read, and racial meaning can emerge even when it is not intentionally emphasized (274). Due to the fact that Black women's bodies are culturally overdetermined by racial stereotypes, race fundamentally alters how strength, masculinity, and survival are read in horror. Traits that make the white Final Girl admirable — resourcefulness, toughness, "boyish" resilience — are often interpreted negatively when embodied by Black Women, whose strength is more likely to be read as threatening or pathological (Dent 185). The Final Girl, then, is not only gendered but racialized. Even when Black women survive, the genre often struggles to grant them the same narrative innocence, identification, and cultural protection that whiteness has historically secured.

Even so, Means Coleman and Harris stress that the representational horizon has widened: Black women are no longer just confined to sacrifice, sidekick survivorship, or symbolic

function in the same way the genre historically demanded. Therefore, while Black Final girls have not yet been granted consistent representational space or narrative complexity, the breadth of roles available has improved substantially compared to earlier peaks such as 1970s Blaxploitation and the Black film breakthroughs of the 1990s (277). In this context, contemporary figures such as *Fear Street's* Deena Johnson (Kiana Madeira) and *Slumber Party Massacre*'s (2021) Dana (Hannah Gonera) and the subgenre's growing number of Black women positioned as survivors rather than sacrifices reflect precisely the representational opening Means Coleman and Harris describe — even as the slasher subgenre continues to negotiate what it means for Black women to occupy the role historically most protected by whiteness.

The representational history of Black Final Girls and Black characters in slasher films clarifies the stakes of *Fear Street*'s intervention. In a subgenre that has historically treated Blackness as either absent from its suburban spaces or present primarily through expendable supporting roles, the trilogy's decision to center a queer Black Final Girl is a structural revision of slasher grammar rather than incidental casting. Deena's narrative endurance — and the trilogy's commitment to sustaining her across a multi-installment story — reorients the slasher film's traditional distribution of vulnerability and survival, refusing the subgenre's longstanding tendency to reserve narrative authority for whiteness. Yet *Fear Street*'s representational politics do not operate through race alone. The trilogy also positions queerness as a central organizing force of its narrative world, making lesbian love the emotional engine of the story and relocating horror away from queer bodies and toward the patriarchal systems that endanger them.

Fear Street's approach stands in sharp contrast to a much longer horror tradition in which queerness is figured less as a sustaining emotional center than as a symbolic marker of social anxiety and cultural unease. As Darren Elliott-Smith notes, horror has long represented the

"Other" through metaphors of threat and disorder, with "non-normative sexuality (bisexuality and homosexuality)" often "chief among these concerns" (1). Harry Benshoff similarly argues that for much of the twentieth century, homosexuality rarely appeared directly in popular culture, and when it did, it was frequently filtered through the iconography of horror — linked to darkness, panic, and monstrous emergence (1-2). Even as horror's nonrealistic forms invite queer readings by destabilizing the heterosexual status quo, Benshoff cautions that the genre's patriarchal foundations have historically narrowed queerness into a masculinist framework, most often coding male homosexuality as monstrous through its association with femininity (6). Elliott-Smith and Benshoff show that queerness has been central to horror's meaning-making for decades, but most often as a displaced sign of deviance, danger, or contamination rather than as an explicit site of identification and love.

Building on horror's history of queer coding, Peter Marra turns to the slasher subgenre specifically as a place where queerness is projected onto monsters and killers but also emerges at the level of spectatorship, affect, and political fantasy. He argues that the slasher film can be read as preforming an unlikely queer political function: it dramatizes a critique of white, heteronormative, bourgeois suburbia and transgresses the moral systems that cast queerness as immoral and perverse. In this view, identifying with figures such as Leatherface or Michael Myers (Nick Castle) is a political act, an alignment with rebellion against moralistic ideology rather than a reductive embrace of violence. At the same time, Marra acknowledges that the slasher film's transgressive power is deeply compromised by what he calls the subgenre's own ugly baggage — especially misogynistic voyeurism and violence against women. Nevertheless, he contends that slashers depict immoral acts while also antagonizing the very idea of morality, making the genre a mainstream site where moral order itself is destabilized (12-13).

Although slashers have a long history of depicting queer-coded figures as dangerous killers, this tradition can still be politically and effectively meaningful for queer spectators. Rather than treating queerness as a "safe" or sanitized politics, Marra suggests that there is power in the slasher film's fantasies of vengeance, since the institutions and archetypes targeted by slasher violence often resemble the very structures gay liberation opposed — capitalism, the nuclear family, organized religion, psychiatry, and the policing of gender and sexuality (51). Drawing on the shift from the assimilationist homophile movement (e.g., Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis) to the revolutionary demands of gay liberation after Stonewall, Marra argues that slashers can be read as offering a pleasurable, materially harmless metaphor for tearing down normative society. Using Audre Lorde's distinction between hatred and anger, he frames slasher violence not as an endorsement of harm but as a representational form through which transformative anger and antinormative rebellion can be exposed (51-52). Ultimately, Marra concludes that slashers are shaped by a contradiction. They have historically relied on homophobic and transphobic stereotypes, yet they also function as a resonantly queer critique of heteronormative suburban culture, producing a complex dual experience for queer audiences of both recognition and revulsion (59).

Race further complicates queer representation, particularly given horror's long history of marginalizing Black characters altogether. Means Coleman and Harris argue that Black queer representation in horror has been inconsistent, ranging from "good, bad, and ugly," and often reflecting both mainstream assumptions about Black attitudes toward queerness and the real complexity of Black communities themselves.[59] Nonetheless, similar to many areas of Black

[59] While Means Coleman and Harris address horror broadly rather than the slasher subgenre specifically, their framework helps clarify the industrial and representational constraints that shape what kinds of Black queer visibility become possible within mainstream horror.

horror representation, visibility and opportunity have been improving in recent years (279). In the Golden Age of Hollywood, especially under the Motion Picture Production Code, Black characters were already largely absent from horror films. As a result, Black queer representation became more obscured, forming a "hidden minority within a hidden minority" (279-280). The end of the Motion Picture Production Code and the shift to the MPAA rating system — arriving shortly before the rise of Blaxploitation — created space for horror films to depict homosexuality more openly, including Black queer characters who were at least visible in ways that had been nearly impossible in earlier decades. However, visibility alone is not necessarily progress, since these representations often raise the question of whether they reproduce harmful stereotypes rather than offering meaningful inclusion (280-281). Even with these industrial shifts, Black queer representation remained difficult to find throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Furthermore, horror's marketing to young heterosexual men shaped queer female representation: lesbianism was frequently deployed as titillation to increase the "sex quotient," and the sexploitation/lesbian vampire niche was dominated by white actresses. When Black and Brown women did appear, it was often through exoticized colonial tropes — set in "tropical" spaces and tied to voodoo imagery — where women of color were positioned as dangerous seductresses luring white tourists into sex and death (282-283).

Twenty-first century horror has seen a significant increase in both Black lesbian representation and lesbian representation overall, which has broadened the range of portrayals available. As a result, more affirming depictions now exist alongside — and help counterbalance — earlier or more problematic representations (Means Coleman and Harris 286). However, many horror films featuring gay Black characters tend to place them in interracial relationships, regardless of gender. Means Coleman and Harris suggest that this reflects an industry and

audience comfort level in which Blackness and queerness are each acceptable on their own, but the visibility of two Black queer people together is treated as exceeding what mainstream horror is willing to represent. In other words, films such as *Fear Street* and *Bodies, Bodies, Bodies* manage "difference" by diluting it through interracial coupling, implying that the combined "otherness" of black queer intimacy is still considered too challenging for audiences (297-298). In this sense, contemporary horror's representational progress remains uneven: it offers increased visibility, but that visibility is still shaped by an underlying logic of containment. Blackness and queerness may now be permitted, but the genre often hesitates to fully affirm Black queer intimacy without softening it through interracial pairing. This tension provides an important context for reading *Fear Street*, which both participates in and complicates these representational patterns. At the same time, the trilogy's ability to make queer love and racialized experience structurally central is inseparable from the cultural moment in which it was produced. Emerging in the late 2010s and early 2020s, *Fear Street* takes shape within a fourth-wave feminist landscape defined by intersectionality, queer visibility, and a heightened attention to systemic power — conditions that help explain both the trilogy's representational commitments and the political clarity of its critique.

From #MeToo to the New Monstrous-Feminine

What scholars and popular culture have labelled a "fourth wave" of feminism began circulating as early as the mid-2000s but gained wider cultural visibility around 2012. It is frequently linked to the rise of the internet and social media, and it is especially defined by its sustained focus on gendered violence. The #MeToo movement in 2017 brought workplace sexual harassment and assault — especially in Hollywood — into mainstream public discourse, producing an unprecedented cultural reckoning (Evans 605-606). More broadly, the past decade

has seen feminism gain renewed momentum through transnational activism, sustained opposition to misogyny and sexual violence, and new developments in feminist theory. As a result, journalists and scholars such as Kira Cochrane, Prudence Chamberlain, and Nicola Rivers have characterized the proliferation of grassroots activism and the resurgence of women's-rights discourse across media, academia, and public politics as evidence of a fourth wave formation. While the idea of a new wave has long been predicated and repeatedly contested, the 2010s in particular have been shaped by the emergence of shared collective emotions and by the internet's ability to connect women globally, circulate personal experience, and mobilize protest (Strauss 16). Because this feminist formation is still unfolding, the fourth wave remains an evolving framework that scholars continue to refine and debate (Wehler and Rayborn 2). One of the most consistent points of scholarly agreement, however, is that the fourth wave is best understood relationally.

Feminist "waves" tend to develop in response to the one that comes directly before them, drawing on and revising earlier priorities while also pushing back against their limitations — a pattern shared by many cultural movements (Gheorghiu and Praisler 90). In the case of the fourth wave, one of its central aims is to correct the narrowness of earlier feminist discourse, especially the tendency of mainstream feminism to center white, middle-class women while marginalizing women of color and LGBTQ communities. As a result, fourth-wave feminism is frequently defined by its emphasis on diversity and intersectionality, which allows it to build solidarity among women but also across different gender identities and sexual orientations. Rather than treating difference as a barrier, the movement uses it as a basis for recognizing shared experiences of discrimination, harassment, and gendered violence. As a result, it highlights that sexism remains a systemic and ongoing problem — one that persists despite earlier feminist

gains and that crosses national boundaries as well as divisions of class, ethnicity, sexuality, and age (Strauss 17). Building on Black feminist interventions from the second and third waves — particularly those articulated by bell hooks and Audre Lorde — fourth-wave feminism must account for the overlapping structures of racism, classism, homophobia, and transphobia that shape women's lives differently (18). Consequently, fourth-wave feminism is not a single-issue movement, but, instead, a broad, intersectional, and media-saturated formation that has spread across multiple disciplines and public spheres.

Within horror, these broad feminist shifts are accompanied by parallel transformations in feminist film theory — changes the Barbara Creed theorizes through the emergence of what she calls Feminist New Wave Cinema. Creed argues that, alongside internationally celebrated directors such as Claire Denis, Jane Campion, Agnieszka Holland, Lucrecia Martel, and Kathryn Bigelow, a newer generation of feminist filmmakers has risen to prominence, including figures such as Jennifer Kent, Ana Lily Amirpour, and Julia Ducournau (*Return of* 1). While these directors work across varied genres and styles, Creed contends that their films share a common political and aesthetic commitment: they break with dominant cinematic traditions, experiment formally, and foreground the experiences of women and other marginalized subjects. For Creed, Feminist New Wave Cinema is not merely a trend but a distinct historical movement, defined by its recurring narrative focus on female protagonists who revolt against male violence and the corrosive values of patriarchy — including misogyny, racism, homophobia, and even anthropocentrism (1–2). These protagonists reject patriarchal definitions of "proper" femininity and instead pursue their own desires and selfhood, often through a descent into what Creed terms the "dark night of abjection, where they engage with the underlying horrors of the patriarchal order" (2). Drawing on Julia Kristeva's theorization of abjection and revolt, Creed frames this

journey as both a political act of resistance and a site of personal transformation, with the story told insistently from the heroine's perspective and in her voice (2).

Although Feminist New Wave Cinema is not limited to horror, Creed argues that it frequently mobilizes horror as an aesthetic mode to express the surreal and often brutal realities of human struggle. Feminist New Wave films treat the horrific as multifaceted — physical, psychological, and psychic — and locate it in violence, families, relationships, institutions, race relations, and environmental destruction. Whether bloody or not, they are shaped by feminist aims of social justice and empowerment, and they invite viewers into the "underworld" of the human psyche as part of their exploration of revolt (*Return of* 3-4). A key unifying figure across Feminist New Wave Cinema is the monstrous-feminine, which Creed reframes as a liberating and transformative force. While her earlier work described the monstrous-feminine as an abject, misogynistic construction shaped by patriarchal ideology and male directors, she emphasizes that feminist filmmakers in the new millennium have transformed her into a figure of active revolt rather than mere subversion. Ultimately, the monstrous-feminine functions to undermine patriarchal myths that cast women as weak, passive, or ineffective (4-5).

Feminist New Wave films trace the monstrous-feminine protagonist's journey into spaces defined by patriarchal violence and "male abjection," focusing on how revolt leads to transformation rather than destruction. As these heroines confront their "other" and enter the "dark night of abjection," they come close to being marked as abject themselves, but they are not ultimately consumed by it (*Return of* 13-14). Because they already exist at the margins of the symbolic order, they are able to recognize the corruption and instability on which it is built. Through this journey, the protagonist realizes that revolt is not optional but necessary. When she resists patriarchal power, its representatives often label her dangerous, deviant, or even terroristic

— yet, drawing on Kristeva, Creed frames this revolt as potentially powerful and even "grand." The films depict women revolting against many forms of patriarchal violation, including sexual violence, enforced social control, racial terror, the suppression of queer identity, cruelty toward animals, environmental destruction, capitalist dehumanization, and systems that steal women's labor, creativity, or autonomy. Feminist New Wave Cinema centers a heroine who refuses her assigned role and insists on speaking — and acting — on her own terms (14).

Creed's theorization of Feminist New Wave Cinema and the broader political horizon of fourth-wave feminism provide an essential framework for reading *Fear Street* as more than a contemporary slasher film revival that leans heavily into nostalgia. The trilogy's sustained focus on patriarchal violence, institutional complicity, and queer disposability aligns it with the New Wave's investment in revolt as both narrative structure and political gesture. At the same time, *Fear Street* emerges from a cultural moment shaped by fourth-wave feminism's intersectional attention to gendered violence, systemic oppression, and media activism. This context clarifies why the trilogy does not merely "update" the slasher conventions through representational inclusion but mobilizes them to expose that mechanism through which patriarchal power reproduces itself across time. As a result, *Fear Street* positions revolt — rather than survival alone — as the organizing logic of its feminist intervention.

Queering Slasher Tropes

The theoretical and representational contexts established in the preceding sections — fourth-wave feminism's intersectional commitments, the history of Black and queer representation in the slasher, and Creed's theorization of the monstrous-feminine as a figure of revolt — converge in the *Fear Street* trilogy in ways that make it one of the most formally and politically ambitious slasher productions of the contemporary cycle. The following analysis will

argue that *Fear Street* does not update slasher conventions through representational inclusion by placing a queer Black woman in the Final Girl role and calling the work done, rather it reconfigures the subgenre's grammar at the level of form and structure, using its treatment of the Final Girl and the killer to relocate horror away from marginalized bodies and toward the patriarchal systems that produce their disposability. The analysis proceeds in two parts: the first examines what the trilogy demands of its Final Girl, and the second examines what it does with the killer function — arguing that both interventions are facets of the same systemic argument. Before turning to that analysis, a brief account of the trilogy's narrative arc is necessary to ground the formal and structural claims that follow.

Part One: 1994 introduces the protagonist, Deena Johnson (Kiana Madeira), a lesbian teenager navigating a painful breakup with her former girlfriend Sam Fraser (Olivia Scott Welch). It also establishes the central tension between Shadyside, an economically depressed town plagued by mass murders every few decades, and Sunnyvale, its wealthy, privileged neighbor. After a car accident in which Sam disturbs Sarah's bones lands her in the hospital, Deena, her brother Josh (Benjamin Flores Jr.), and her friends Kate (Julia Rehwald) and Simon (Fred Hechinger), discover that Sam is being hunted by reanimated Shadyside killers, seemingly raised by the centuries-old curse of Sarah. The killers prove impossible to destroy, surviving even after the group detonates them. Desperate, the teenagers try to contact C. Berman (Gillian Jacobs), a woman who survived the curse years earlier. Though she does not answer their call, they deduce from a newspaper article that she survived by dying and being revived. They stop Sam's heart and bring her back but not before Kate and Simon are killed. Deena, Sam, and Josh believe the nightmare is over — until *Part One* ends with Sam stabbing Deena, revealing that she has become the newest possessed Shadyside killer.

Part Two: 1978 picks up where *Part One* left off, with Deena and Josh bringing a restrained Sam to C. Berman's house in another attempt to save her. The majority of the film is C. Berman's account of herself as a teenager — Ziggy Berman (Sadie Sink) — and her sister Cindy Berman (Emily Rudd) at Camp Nightwing in 1978 where Cindy's boyfriend Tommy Slater (McCabe Slye) becomes the latest Shadyside killer. C. Berman's story deepens the unfolding mystery connecting Shadyside, Sunnyvale, and Sarah. Cindy and her friend Alice (Ryan Simpkins) manage to stop Tommy, but when Alice touches a pulsing heart-like mass in some underground tunnels below the camp, she sees a vision of Sarah and the reanimated killers pursuing her and Cindy. Using Nurse Lane's (Jordana Spiro) journal, the girls come to believe the solution is to reunite Sarah's severed hand with her body. Before they can accomplish this goal, Alice is killed, and when Cindy brings the hand to the tree where Sarah was rumored to have been hanged and buried, the body is missing. Both Cindy and Ziggy are killed at the tree by the Shadyside killers. Ziggy alone is revived, and the narrative returns to 1994 where Deena and Josh locate Sarah's hand and reunite it with her remains.

Part Three: 1666 opens with the aftermath of reuniting Sarah's hand and body: Deena is transported into the memories and experience of Sarah in 1666. Through this living vision, Deena discovers the true history of Shadyside, Sunnyvale, and the curse — a history built on a false narrative perpetrated by generations of the Goode family. In 1666, Solomon Goode (Ashley Zukerman) initiates a pact with the devil that guarantees prosperity for his family and what will become Sunnyvale at the expense of Shadyside's residents. Sarah and Hannah Miller (Olivia Scott Welch) are lesbian lovers, and after their relationship is discovered and the local pastor — possessed through Solomon's pact — murders the town's children by gouging out their eyes, the two women are accused of witchcraft. Solomon, spurned by Sarah's rejection of him, allows her

to be captured. Both women are sentenced to hang, but Sarah falsely confesses to witchcraft and claims she bewitched Hannah, sacrificing herself to save her lover. After the hanging, Sarah's friends secretly bury her body where it will not be found. Once Deena has lived and witnessed the truth, she returns to 1994 and works with C. Berman, Josh, and Martin (Darrell Britt-Gibson), a Shadyside mall janitor, to kill Sheriff Nick Goode (also Ashley Zukerman), the current Goode patriarch. They prevail, and the curse ends.

The synopsis above presents the trilogy's plot in neutral terms, but the narrative it describes is anything but neutral in its formal and political operations. What the three films trace, underneath their period settings and slasher iconography, are two questions: why has Shadyside been marked for death, and who benefits from that marking remaining invisible? These questions are not answered by any of the trilogy's genre mechanics — not by stopping the killers, not by finding the hand, not by surviving the night. They are answered only when the Final Girl learns to read the system she has been living inside her entire life. It is to that Final Girl, and to what the trilogy demands she know, that the analysis now turns.

Seeing the System

As the preceding chapters have argued, the Final Girl trope — Carol J. Clover's foundational theorization of the slasher subgenre's surviving female protagonist — has never described the subgenre's actual operations as neatly as its widespread adoption would suggest. Chapter One demonstrated that the survivors of the classical cycle, including those in films similar to *The Slumber Party Massacre*, complicates Clover's characterization of the Final Girl in two significant ways. First, the film distributes survival across three characters rather than isolating it in a single masculinized heroine. Second, none of the survivors conform to the purity expectations that Clover and Vera Dika associate with the Final Girl. These disruptions

demonstrate that the classical cycle was already producing Final Girls who exceeded Clover's framework. Chapter Two showed that *Office Killer* does not simply revise who the Final Girl is but collapses the position entirely, folding it into the killer's. Rather than producing a Final Girl who exceeds Clover's framework by distributing survival or rejecting purity, Sherman refuses the framework's organizing logic and makes that refusal the site of the film's feminist critique. Dorine is simultaneously the figure whose victimization the audience is asked to inhabit and the figure whose violence drives the narrative forward, and the film insists on holding both positions without resolution. What this collapse reveals is that patriarchal damage does not arrive from outside in the form of a monster that can be defeated. It deforms from within, producing a figure whose agency and victimization are inseparable, because they emerge from the same source. What this section will argue is that the *Fear Street* trilogy pushes past these earlier complications to the trope. Rather than reworking who the Final Girl is or what role she occupies, the trilogy changes what she has to *know* in order to survive — and, crucially, it suggests that the kind of knowledge survival requires is inseparable from the race, sexuality, and class position of the person who survives.

Here it is worth bringing attention to something that has largely been left unspoken in Clover's Final Girl tradition. She is, without exception, white, straight, and at least middle class. These are not incidental features of the figure; they are its unmarked defaults. Clover never discusses the Final Girl's race because it is assumed to be white. Whiteness functions as the invisible ground on which the figure's gender trouble plays out. Although a few Black Final Girls such as Jeryline (Jada Pinkett-Smith) in Earnest Dickerson's *Tales from the Crypt: Demon Knight* (1995) popped up in the postmodern cycle, until recently they have been overwhelmingly either left out of the films or placed as side characters. The debates about the Final Girl's

feminist potential have been conducted almost entirely within the boundaries of white, heterosexual, middle-class femininity. This is not simply an oversight in the scholarship. It reflects the subgenre itself which has centered white protagonists, and the Final Girl has been theorized accordingly.

Deena breaks with every one of these defaults, and *Part One* establishes this from its opening sequences. She is Black, she is a lesbian, and she is lower-class — a resident of Shadyside, the trilogy's more diverse, economically depressed town. Beyond the actress who plays Deena being mixed-race, her Blackness does not seem to play a significant role within the film. As Means Coleman and Harris argue, most slasher films with a Black Final Girl take a "race-neutral approach" where "race is rarely an explicit plot point" (274). However, this does not mean that having a Black Final Girl is not significant. Her Blackness "inextricably colors her role, and even if unintentional, the implications of her race can come through" (274). Consider the police station scene. Both Deena and Sam try to report the killer; both are dismissed as pranksters. As they leave, though, Denna lunges at the deputy and secretly grabs his gun. His response — "Young lady, do not test me!" — is directed at her alone. On one level, this makes sense: she is the one who attacked him. However, Deena's aggression toward the officer registers within a script he already has for reading a Black girl's behavior. He is unsurprised enough to restrain her and implicitly threaten violence rather than react with shock and investigate the situation further. She knows that a Black girl acting aggressively toward a white officer will be read as a confirmable threat rather than an inexplicable surprise. Deena knows how race works within the *Fear Street*'s diegesis, and she uses that knowledge to arm herself.

Beyond small moments resembling the one in the police station, Deena's race is inseparable from her class position in ways the trilogy benefits from even when it declines to

name them. The film establishes her economic status through accumulating details rather than exposition. Her clothing and musical choices — flannel shirt, combat boots, and Radiohead — code her as grunge, a subcultural aesthetic rooted in working-class disaffection. At home, she tells her brother Josh that AOL is expensive; he replies that he is stealing it. The exchange is played for humor, but it quietly establishes a household where internet access is not a given. The film further signals the economic conditions of Shadyside through its institutional spaces. Students at Deena's school are required to pass through metal detectors and have their bags searched, an image that carries connotations of both poverty and racialized policing of public schools. The clearest articulation of the class divide, however, comes through the mise-en-scène of the bus sequence in *Part One*. As Deena, Kate, and Simon ride from Shadyside into Sunnyvale, a series of tracking shots mimicking the view from the bus windows presents the two towns in stark visual opposition. Shadyside is composed of small, single-story houses in visible disrepair, shuttered businesses, and a flimsy roadside sign reading "Now Leaving Shadyside" that has been spray-pained to read "Shittyside." The moment the bus crosses into Sunnyvale, the visual register transforms entirely. The houses are white, pristine, and two-storied, with columns and white picket fences. A solid, clean sign reads "Welcome to Town of Sunnyvale." The landscaping is manicured, the buildings are historic and well-maintained, and the overall impression is one of wealth that has been sustained across generations. Even on the football field, the divide is present: the Sunnyvale Devils boast a championship banner displaying six consecutive state titles with a record of 15-0-0 and a professionally made mascot costume, while Simon has cobbled together the Shadyside Witch mascot from green face paint, a black robe, and a flimsy hat. The film drives the comparison home when Deena rides the bus back to Shadyside while Sam rides in her new boyfriend's car — one his father bought for him.

Part One scripts all of this as class, but the visual texture of these scenes carries racial meaning that the dialogue leaves unspoken. Shadyside's student body is racially mixed, while Sunnyvale reads as predominantly white. Sunnyvale's sheriff, police officers, and mayor are all white, with only a handful of Black football players and one Black cheerleader visible among the students on the Sunnyvale side. The trilogy never comments on this disparity, but the camera registers it. The disposability of Shadyside — a community that is economically abandoned, stigmatized, blamed for the violence inflicted upon it, and exploited so that a wealthier whiter community can prosper — echoes a specifically racialized history of disinvestment and systemic abandonment in the United States. The metal detectors, the shuttered businesses, the spray-painted sign: these are all images that resonate with the material conditions of communities that have been shaped by redlining, defunding, and neglect along racial as well as economic lines. *Fear Street* does not need to name this history for Deena's Blackness to activate it. Her presence within these spaces asks the audience to see Shadyside's disposability through a lens that includes race even when the screenplay does not. In this sense, the trilogy's race-neutral approach to the Final Girl does not erase Deena's race so much as rely on it to do work the narrative itself refuses to do explicitly, allowing the class allegory to carry racial meaning through casting and visual association rather than through dialogue.

The relationship between what the audience sees and what the script is willing to say reaches its most charged expression in *Part Three: 1666*. Roughly the first half of the film centers on how the settlers of Union scapegoated Sarah. The violence plaguing the community actually originates with Solomon's secret pact with the Devil, but it is Sarah the settlers blame. Her gender, independence, and queerness make her a plausible target in ways that a man such as Solomon could never be. Yet the film renders this foundational act of scapegoating through

Deena's body, and the formal choices through which it accomplishes this are worth examining closely. At the end of *Part Two*, Deena begins having visions after bleeding on Sarah's bones, as others have before her. Unlike the others though, Deena does not simply see the past. She becomes it. The transition begins with what is, by this point in the trilogy, a standard vision montage sequence: fragmented images of Sarah and witchcraft iconography rendered in the red color grading the films have established as their visual code for visions. However, the film quickly destabilizes this expectation. The montage culminates in a low-angle, shallow focus close-up of Sarah still bathed in red. Subsequently, the color grading shifts from red to a more realistic but muted saturation, and the film begins a series of match cuts between Deena and Sarah. Across these cuts the composition, costuming, and gesture stay the same. Only the color grading shifts, bouncing between the red of the vision and a more realistic saturation. When the sequence settles, the person the audience sees is Sarah in 1666, but the body she inhabits is Deena's. The film confirms this split through a striking overhead shot: as the character looks down into water, the reflection shows Sarah's face while the body above belongs to Deena. Although Deena appears momentarily confused, the opening of *Part Three* makes clear that Sarah does not know she is Deena. Deena is not acting within the past but seeing through Sarah's eyes as a trapped spectator — present in the body but unable to alter the events unfolding around her.

The formal significance of this sequence is twofold. First, the match-cutting and the reflection shot establish that Deena and Sarah are not interchangeable but layered — two women occupying the same position within the same system of violence, separated by centuries but formally fused by the film's editing. Second, and more importantly for the racial argument I have been developing, the audience watches these events through Kiana Madeira's face. The 1666

characters are white settlers. The scapegoating of Sarah unfolds within a white community's internal power struggle, yet because the film has placed Deena's Black body inside that history, the audience cannot see the sequence without also seeing a Black woman experiencing the foundational act of communal violence that will define Shadyside for centuries. The script does not name what this doubling means in racial terms. But the formal choice to filter this history through Deena's embodied perspective means the scapegoating of a woman blamed for a community's suffering — punished so that those in power can remain invisible — resonates with the history of racial violence in the United States regardless of the period costumes the actors are wearing.

As with every intervention in this genealogy, the trilogy's formal achievement is inseparable from its limitation. The doubling opens a possibility no previous slasher film has offered: a Final Girl whose body connects the subgenre's violence to a history of racial scapegoating. But by refusing to name that connection in the script, the trilogy stops short of the critique its own formal logic makes available. It does not, however, maintain the same silence about all forms of marginalization. Sarah's persecution in 1666 is driven in part by her relationship with Hannah, and Deena's queerness is not something the trilogy leaves to casting and visual association alone. It is written into the narrative as a central, acknowledged force. If Deena's Blackness colors her role as Final Girl, her queerness defines it. Queerness has long been an implicit presence in horror, and when queer characters have appeared explicitly, they have typically been treated as more expendable than their straight counterparts (Gibson 142). For lesbians in particular, these trends have shifted over time, but not always in straightforward ways. Lesbian characters moved from embodying what has been termed "Dead Lesbian Syndrome" to having their identities treated as incidental to the narrative, and only more recently

has lesbian identity become central to a film's plot (Rachel). Black lesbians have faced additional layers of stereotyping: they have often been figured as the Black Seductress, present in narratives primarily for titillation rather than as full characters (Means Coleman and Harris 283-84). And while representation has improved, Black lesbians on screen are still frequently depicted as the pursuer in their relationships and are disproportionately placed in interracial pairings (286, 297).

Fear Street inherits this history of representation, and the choices it makes with Deena and Sam's relationship reveal both how far the subgenre has come and where its conventions still exert pressure. *Part One* is highly self-conscious about the subversion it is enacting, particularly in the scenes that introduce Deena after the opening sequence and title card, where it deliberately plays with audience expectations before revealing her sexuality. Other than her grunge aesthetic, the film initially keeps Deena's sexuality heterosexually coded. When she is first on screen in her bedroom, she is writing a note to Sam. Nothing about the note or about Deena indicate what gender Sam might be, and the choice of the androgynous name allows the audience to assume Sam is male. As Deena walks down the hallway at school the film reinforces this assumption by building the romance plot through a series of motivated cuts between Deena's face and various heterosexual couples being romantic around her: one pair cuddling, another holding hands, another kissing against her lockers. Deena glares at the last couple and knocks on the lockers beside them to reclaim her own, but the looks she gives before that moment read as longing. The editing constructs what appears to be a familiar narrative — a girl nursing a breakup with a boy, surrounded by reminders of what she has lost. Even when Sam first appears, the film continues to lead the audience toward a heterosexual reading. It is not until Deena leaves the memorial and Sam approaches her that the film reveals Deena's queerness.

The reveal reframes everything the audience has just watched. The longing looks in the hallway, the note in the bedroom, the androgynous name: all were constructed to make the audience assume heterosexuality so that its disruption would land with force. Nevertheless, the film does not treat the reveal as a twist for shock value. It immediately grounds Deena's queerness in the material conditions of her life. The reasons for the breakup, the audience learns, is that Sam's parents divorced and Sam moved from Shadyside to Sunnyvale. Sam suggests the move was not a reason to end things, but Deena pushes back, accusing Sam of being excited to start a new life in Sunnyvale and of being too afraid to tell anyone about their relationship. In a single exchange, the film binds Deena's queerness to the trilogy's class divide. The breakup is not simply about two teenagers growing apart. It is about the impossibility of maintaining a queer relationship across a class boundary that demands closeting as the price of upward mobility. Deena accuses Sam of wanting to leave their relationship behind along with Shadyside, suggesting that Sam's move to Sunnyvale required not just a change of address but a change of identity. Sam's choice of new partner reinforces this reading. She is now dating Peter, a white boy from Sunnyvale, a relationship that offers her the safety of heterosexual legibility in a community where that legibility carries material rewards. Sam has traded a queer, interracial relationship with a poor Black girl from Shadyside for a straight, normative relationship with a white boy from Sunnyvale. The film never frames this as a conscious betrayal on Sam's part, but the substitution maps the personal onto the structural: moving to Sunnyvale means not just gaining economic stability but conforming to the social norms that sustain it. The fact that Deena and Sam's relationship is interracial places it within another of the patterns Means Coleman and Harris identify, though the film does not treat their racial difference as exotic or as a source of titillation, instead treating it as one more axis along which the Shadyside-Sunnyvale divide

operates. In these opening scenes, Deena's queerness is established as inseparable from the trilogy's class and racial politics.

Nevertheless, the trilogy does not confine queerness to the opening of *Part One*. It makes it the engine of the entire trilogy. Across the subgenre's history, the Final Girl has been defined by her will to survive. Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis) fights against Michael Myers with whatever she can find because her life depends on it in *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978). Sidney Prescott (Neve Campbell) outlasts Ghostface in *Scream* (Wes Craven, 1996) because the alternative is death. Erin (Sharni Vinson) in *You're Next* (Adam Wingard, 2011) turns a home invasion into a one-woman counterattack, dispatching the killers methodically. Even in the contemporary cycle, *In a Violent Nature* (Chris Nash, 2024) reimagines the slasher film from the killer's perspective only to end the same way: a lone survivor whose only motivation is to escape alive. Whatever else changes across these cycles, the Final Girl's engine has almost entirely remained self-preservation. She acts because her own life is at stake. Deena is driven by something the subgenre has seldom if ever centered: the desire to save the woman she loves. In one sense, Deena fits the pattern Means Coleman and Harris identify: the Black lesbian as pursuer. She is the one fighting to get Sam back, the one who refuses to let go. However, the trilogy reframes what pursuit means. Deena's pursuit is not the aggression or desperation that has typically characterized the Black lesbian peruser on screen, and it is not framed around a sexual pursuit. When Sam is marked by the curse, it is Sam, not Deena, who becomes the target of Shadyside's cycle of violence. Deena has no obligation to confront the curse other than her refusal to lose Sam. While this becomes most explicit once the group deduces that the killers are pursuing Sam specifically, Deena's protective instinct is visible in her actions well before that revelation. During the hospital attack, Deena grabs an IV pole and strikes the killer, then seizes

Sam's arm and pulls her into a run. As they flee through the corridors, Deena stays behind Sam, keeping herself between Sam and the pursuing killer. When they hear the killer nearby, it is Deena who peers around the corner to locate him. And when the killer separates them, grabbing Sam, Deena throws herself onto his back. In each of these moments, rather than running from the killer Deena is running toward the danger, and she is doing so not to preserve her own life but to protect Sam's. The classical Final Girl survives because she fights back when cornered. Deena fights before she is cornered, and she does so for someone else. Rachel observes a similar dynamic in *What Keeps You Alive* (Colin Minihan, 2018), where Jules (Brittany Allen) escapes to safety in her car but then pulls over and turns around, unable to separate her survival from her relationship to the woman trying to kill her. As Rachel notes, the moment only works because "understanding the wordless transition Jules moves through requires truly seeing how much the marriage and the wife she thought she had meant to her" ("Final Girl-on-Girl"). But Jules' attachment surfaces in a single moment of hesitation within an otherwise conventional survival narrative. Deena's queer attachment is not a complication of the Final Girl's will to survive. It replaces that will entirely, structuring her across all three films.

The subgenre's conventions are tested further when Sam herself becomes possessed at the end of *Part One* (and for the rest of the film) and turns on Deena and the others. Now the person Deena loves is the killer. In a typical slasher, this would resolve simply: the Final Girl's job is to stop the killer, and the audience expects a confrontation that ends in the killer's death. Deena refuses this logic. Even as Sam attacks her, Deena does not treat her as the monster the subgenre expects her to be, and the film's formal choices reinforce this. In a typical slasher confrontation, the Final Girl is framed in close-up to emphasize her fear and interiority while the killer occupies wider shots that emphasize physical threat and bodily menace. When Sam attacks

Deena, the film refuses this asymmetry. Both women are framed in close-up, with match cuts alternating between their faces at eye level, placing the audience in something close to the point of view of each. The camera cuts to an overhead shot revealing that Sam has stabbed Deena, then to a cowboy shot, then back to the close-up match cuts of both faces, and then overhead again as Deena falls to the ground. The effect is one of equivalence rather than opposition. Instead of framing a Final Girl against a killer, the film centers two people caught in the same violent system, both of them victims of the curse even as one is wielding a weapon. The filming tells the audience something the characters have not caught up to: this is not a conventional monster to be destroyed. The struggle itself is shot quickly, with very little of the actual fight visible on screen. What the film gives us instead is the aftermath, rendered through an interrupted tracking shot that begins by looking at the floor and then gradually angles upward to reveal Sam tied up in the corner of the kitchen with the phone cord. The image is startling not because it resembles a defeated killer but because it does not. A slasher film's dead or subdued killer is typically shot from above, reduced to an object, stripped of menace. Sam, bound and restrained, resembles less a conquered monster than someone who has been contained against her will. The framing invites discomfort rather than relief, suggesting that what has happened to Sam is something done to her rather than something she chose. Deena's refusal to treat Sam as a monster is already present in the way the film looks at both of them. Across all three films, it is this refusal that pushes the narrative forward, compelling Deena to seek out the 1978 survivor, reunite Sarah's severed hand with her body, and ultimately to excavate the 1666 origins of the curse. Every act of historical investigation the trilogy demands of its Final Girl is motivated by queer attachment rather than the instinct to survive.

The fact that the trilogy allows this attachment to be fully realized on screen — physically, emotionally, sexually — without punishment is itself a break from the subgenre's conventions. Against the representational history I outlined earlier, the trilogy's treatment of Deena's sexuality is significant. The subgenre has historically killed its lesbian characters and reduced Black lesbians to the figure of the seductress. Deena suffers neither fate. She is openly queer, she is physically intimate with Sam, and the film neither punishes her for it nor frames her body as a spectacle for the audience's consumption. During the most intimate scene between Deena and Sam, the formal difference between how the subgenre filmed sexual intimacy during the classical cycle and *Fear Street* is stark. In *Halloween*, the sex scene between Lynda (P.J. Soles) and Bob (John Michael Graham) begins at a distance, with the camera observing the couple already in bed from across the room. The camera pushes in slowly but never moves past a medium shot, maintaining an outsider's perspective, never fully entering the scene. There are no close-ups of faces, no attention to what the characters are feeling. The camera's steady, distant push-in echoes the way Michael Myers's point of view is framed throughout the rest of the film, formally linking the act of watching sex to the act of watching before killing.

Deena and Sam's scene could not be more different. It begins not with sex but with care. Deena is helping Sam clean and bandage a wound. Before they kiss, they have an emotional conversation in which Sam blames herself for what is happening and expresses regret about moving to Sunnyvale. She admits that she left because Deena was a reminder of her own sexuality, and that she was scared — scared of Deena's sexuality, scared of their relationship, scared of herself. The scene opens in a full shot but quickly cuts to closer framing, moving into shot-reverse-shot close-ups of both their faces. The lighting is extremely low, with only one side of each face illuminated, creating an atmosphere of privacy rather than exposure. When Sam

pulls Deena toward her by her belt loops, the camera captures this in a close-up on Deena's stomach, then cuts to a close-up of Deena's face, smiling with tears in her eyes. Once they begin kissing, every shot is a close-up or extreme close-up: their faces, their hands, their bodies entangled and touching. The farthest the camera pulls back in the entire sequence is a single medium shot from across the room, and it occurs only once. Where *Halloween* maintains distance, *Fear Street* draws closer. Where John Carpenter's camera watches from outside, Janiak's camera is present with the characters, attending to their faces and their emotions rather than displaying their bodies. The audience is positioned as a witness to something intimate and earned rather than being positioned as a voyeur. The trilogy's formal treatment of this scene reflects what Rachel identifies as a broader shift in queer horror. Horror, Rachel argues, is fundamentally an "affective project, asking us to be afraid of the same things the protagonists are" ("Final Girl-on-Girl"). Centering lesbian experience means trusting that the audience will take queer love and queer fear seriously on their own terms, without requiring translation into heteronormative frameworks. Janiak's camera makes the same demand. By filming Deena and Sam's intimacy with close framing and emotional weight rather than voyeuristic distance, the *Fear Street* trilogy asks its audience to be present with a queer relationship rather than to observe it from outside. And having invited the audience in, the film does not betray that trust. The scene's formal language communicates that this is not a prelude to punishment. It is the emotional center of the film.

Part Two: 1978 confirms this distinction by returning to a more conventional treatment of straight sexuality, making visible by contrast just how deliberately the trilogy protects its queer couple. *Part Two* features two sex scenes between straight couples, and both are handled in ways that contrast sharply with the intimacy between Deena and Sam. Alice and Arnie's (Sam

Brooks) scene begins *in media res* with a close-up of Alice's face, but quickly cuts to a medium shot that pans down Arnie's nude body before pulling back to a medium full shot of both characters from the side. When Cindy charges in, the more distance framing appears to align with her point of view, linking the audience's gaze to that of an intruder. The scene is physically explicit but emotionally thin. Kurt (Michael Provost) and Joan's (Jacqueline Vené) scene is more formally complex but no less conventional in its outcomes. The camera shows Joan's face in close-up during sex — briefly approaching the kind of intimacy the trilogy affords Deena and Sam — but the film repeatedly cuts to exterior shots, filming the couple through the window, a framing choice that aligns the audience with the perspective of someone watching from outside. After sex, Kurt tells Joan not to tell anyone about them, because he is Sunnyvale and she is Shadyside and then leaves her alone. The camera lingers on Joan as she dresses, though it moves quickly enough to avoid letting the audience's gaze settle on her body. The exterior shots continue, and the scene builds directly to Joan's death. Kurt's demand for secrecy echoes Sam's closeting of her relationship with Deena, but where *Part One* treats the confession of that shame as a path toward reconnection and tenderness, *Part Two* follows secrecy with abandonment and violence.

The contrast with Deena and Sam is formal as much as narrative. Their intimacy is filmed entirely from within the space they share: close-ups, extreme close-ups, low light, faces and hands. The camera never goes outside. The audience is never positioned as a voyeur or aligned with a threatening gaze. And the subgenre's oldest convention — sex as prelude to death — is applied to the straight couples and never to the queer one. The camera treats Deena's sexuality as an extension of her emotional life rather than as a performance. She is not seducing anyone. She is reconnecting with the person she loves. This stands in direct contrast to the figure of the Black

Seductress that has historically defined Black lesbian characters on screen. Deena's sexuality is never staged for the audience's consumption, and the camera's formal choices refuse to reduce her to spectacle. The subgenre has long operated on the implicit rule that the surviving girl is the one who does not have sex, and when that rule has been relaxed, it has rarely extended to queer women and almost never to Black queer women. Deena is permitted to be sexual and to survive, to pursue her own desire and to be the hero of her own story, without those two things being placed in conflict. The trilogy refuses to make her choose between her queerness and her role as Final Girl.

Part Three: 1666 goes further by tying Deena's queerness directly to the origin of the curse and, by extension, to her role as the Final Girl who can break it. When the ending of *Part Two* places Deena inside Sarah's body, she enters a world where queerness is a public accusation. Sarah's relationship with Hannah is explicit in the narrative, and it is this relationship that makes Sarah a plausible scapegoat in the eyes of her community. The settlers seize on Sarah's queerness as proof of her deviance, and it is this accusation that allows Solomon's pact to remain hidden for centuries. Their response to Sarah enacts what Rachel identifies as a distinctly queer horror: not just the fear that something terrible will happen to you, but "the fear that comes from self-loathing, the fear not only that we might be capable of something monstrous, but that we are inherently monsters by dint of who and what we are" ("Final Girl-on-Girl"). The community does not merely punish Sarah for what she has done. It brands her a witch, and her queerness is the proof. Her relationship with Hannah is taken as evidence that she is unnatural, that her very nature is monstrous. The trilogy literalizes this fear by making the accusation of witchcraft — an accusation rooted in Sarah's sexuality — the mechanism through which the real monster, Solomon, escapes detection. The trilogy is not simply providing

backstory. It is explaining why Deena, specifically, is the Final Girl who can end the curse. She shares something with Sarah that no previous Shadyside survivor has: the experience of queer love and having her sexuality treated as a threat. The doubling of actors across time periods makes this connection visible on screen. As Gibson argues, the repeat casting across time periods is not meant to suggest literal reincarnation but to demonstrate that the characters "are trapped in a cycle of atrocities which is doomed to repeat unless they can find a way out" (143). The same actress who plays Sam in 1994 plays Hannah in 1666, which means the audience watches Deena fall in love with the same face twice — once in her own body and once in Sarah's. The scene between Sarah and Hannah begins differently from Deena and Sam's, however, in ways that are formally significant. The camera starts at a distance, framing the two women from far away in the dark woods, creating the impression that they might be being watched. However, once they begin kissing, the filming shifts into the same register the trilogy used for Deena and Sam: close framing, low light, attention to faces and touch. Yet the 1666 scene also carries a tension the 1994 scene does not. Sarah tells Hannah that what they are doing is wrong. Hannah responds that it does not feel wrong but offers to stop at Sarah's request. The exchange mirrors Sam's own conflicted relationship to her sexuality — her closeting, her fear, her retreat into a straight relationship in Sunnyvale — but places it in a world where the consequences are immediate and communal rather than private. Both couples are startled into stopping, but the parallel ends there. In 1994, Deena and Sam are interrupted by a noise in the school, and there are no repercussions. No one has seen them and even if someone did, it would not matter. In 1666, the noise in the woods carries a different weight. Someone has seen Sarah and Hannah, and there will be consequences. The darkness that in the earlier scene signaled privacy and intimacy becomes, in

the 1666 scene, the darkness of exposure and surveillance. The same formal language — close framing, low light, two faces together — produces safety in one century and danger in another.

The effect is not simply that two queer couples exist in the trilogy's narrative. It is that the film asks the audience to see them as the same relationship separated by centuries and subjected to different degrees of the same threat. Sarah and Hannah face exposure, accusation, and death. Deena and Sam face a mother who cannot accept her daughter's sexuality, a class divide that rewards closeting, a girlfriend who was too scared to tell anyone, and the quiet understanding that loving openly in either Shadyside or Sunnyvale carries a cost. When the settlers turn on Sarah because of her relationship with Hannah, the audience is watching Sam's face be condemned for the same love that Deena fought to protect, and the formal repetition makes the persecution feel like a threat that is still present — because within the trilogy's logic, it is. The curse was made possible by the scapegoating of a queer woman. It is broken by a queer woman who refuses to let that history repeat. Deena's queerness is not incidental to her survival. It is the thread that connects her to the origin of the violence and gives her the knowledge she needs to end it. Recent slashers such as *Bodies Bodies Bodies* (Halina Reijn, 2022) and the 2021 *Slumber Party Massacre* remake have also placed queer, Black, or Black queer women in the Final Girl role, but *Fear Street* does something these films do not. It transforms Deena's identity from a fact about who she is into the reason she can do what the narrative requires of her.

Throughout this section, I have argued that Deena's Blackness, her queerness, and her class position are not simply demographic updates that modernize the Final Girl for a more inclusive era, as though the figure's basic operations remain the same and only the casting has changed. They are what make it possible for Deena to do what no previous Final Girl has done: recognize the violence she faces as systemic. The classical Final Girl survives by being more

resourceful than her peers. The postmodern Final Girl survives by being more genre-literate. The neoslasher Final Girl survives by becoming more proactive. Deena survives by understanding that rather than being autonomous agents, the killers terrorizing Shadyside are products of a centuries-long system designed to protect the wealth and power of Sunnyvale's ruling Goode family. The conventional slasher protagonist fights for individual survival. Deena rejects this logic. Her survival is not individual but collective, aimed at liberating Shadyside from the system that has marked it for violence.

The question the trilogy poses is not whether Deena is tough enough or smart enough to survive but whether she can uncover why her community has been targeted in the first place. She does not need the curse to teach her that Shadyside is disposable. As Rebecca Gibson observes, Denna is "firmly mired in doom-and-gloom cynicism, confident of her own disposability" (145). What the trilogy demands is that she traces that violence to its source. As Emeterio Diez-Puertas observes, the trilogy situates Deena's agency "in a cognitive dimension closely linked to knowing what happened in the past" (174; my trans.). Unlike the classical Final Girl, whose competence is physical and reactive, Deena's competence is epistemological. She must learn the history of her own oppression in order to end it. Her Blackness gives her a framework for recognizing systemic dispossession that the subgenre's white Final Girls were never positioned to see. Her queerness connects her to Sarah and gives her the emotional drive to excavate the curse's origins rather than simply flee from its effects. Her poverty means she has lived the Shadyside-Sunnyvale divide long before the curse reveals itself as its cause. None of these identities alone explain her survival. Together, they produce a Final Girl whose knowledge is intersectional in the fullest sense — she sees the system because she has been shaped by every axis along which it operates. The trilogy's intervention into the Final Girl trope is not that Deena

looks different from her predecessors. It is that what she knows, and how she came to know it, is inseparable from who she is. The trilogy "acknowledges the tragedy of that historic impossibility without allowing it to warp the present" ("Unbury Your Gays"). By breaking the curse, Deena does not simply survive the way Final Girls before her have survived — traumatized, alone, defined by what they endured. She rewrites the terms on which survival is possible, for herself and for the community the subgenre has spent centuries marking for death.

Hidden in Plain Sight

The preceding analysis has argued that Deena's survival depends on a form of knowledge the subgenre has not previously demanded of its Final Girl: the ability to recognize that violence she faces as systemic rather than individual. However, that argument implies a corresponding claim about the killers she is recognizing. If what Deena understands, and what previous Final Girls could not, is that the slashers terrorizing Shadyside are not autonomous agents but instruments of a larger structure, then the trilogy must do formal and narrative work to make that structure visible — to show the audience not just a killer but a killing system. This section examines how *Fear Street* manages that task. It argues that the trilogy operates with two distinct killer functions that exist in tension throughout all three films: the proximate killers, who satisfy the subgenre's appetite for masked, relentless, physically imposing threat, and the structural killer, the Goode family, whose generational pact with the Devil generates and directs that threat from a position of apparent respectability. The proximate killers give the trilogy its slasher iconography — the chase sequences, the weapon, the unstoppable body — while the Goode family gives that iconography a political meaning the subgenre has rarely been willing to supply. Reading the two killer functions together reveals what is most formally and ideologically distinctive about the trilogy's intervention: it uses the conventions of the slasher killer not to

deliver individual menace but to make a systemic argument about who produces violence, who it is directed at, and who benefits from it remaining unrecognized.

The trilogy's resurrected killers — "Skull Mask Killer" Ryan Torres (Noah Bain Garret; David Thompson), Ruby Lane (Jordyn DiNatale), "The Nightwing Killer" Tommy Slater (Lloyd Pitts; McCabe Slye), "The Milkman" Harry Rooker (Kevin Waterman), Billy Barker (Emily Brobst), and "Shame Killer" Isaac Milton (Keil Oakley Zepernick) — are formally constructed to satisfy subgenre expectations. At its most basic, the slasher film's killer exists to disrupt the community (Petridis, *Anatomy of* 30). In the classical cycle, this figure became a standardized generic element: male, almost always white, asexual or averse to sexuality, and driven by some past trauma to hunt and kill teenagers in the present (32). The postmodern cycle complicated this template in two significant ways: killers could now be multiple or female, and their violence was no longer triggered by deviant behavior but organized according to a design that directly linked killer to victims (33-34). The neoslasher cycle pushed further, increasing the prevalence of paranormal, metaphysical, and mutant killers and continuing the trend toward multiplicity (34). *Fear Street*'s resurrected killers draw on all three cycles simultaneously. They are multiple and include at least one female killer in Ruby Lane, satisfying the postmodern expansion of the template. As possessed or dead killers supernaturally animated, they are paranormal and metaphysical which places them firmly within neoslasher film tendencies. And in the relentless, largely silent pursuit of specific targets, they reproduce the classical killer's most durable formal qualities: the unstoppable body, the signature weapon, and the absence of negotiation or motive that might be addressed or challenged.

Ryan Torres illustrates how fluently the trilogy handles this inherited iconography. In *Part One*'s opening, he is supernaturally possessed and transformed into a killer, donning a skull

mask and black robe and attacking with a knife in a sequence that explicitly references *Scream*. The parallels are formal as much as iconographic. Ryan's pursuit and killing of Heather (Maya Hawke), a mall bookstore employee, is staged as a direct echo of Ghostface's opening killing of Casey (Drew Barrymore): both women pause mid-flight when they encounter another body — Casey her boyfriend, Heather a fellow mall employee — before continuing to run. Both are then filmed in long shot as they flee, stabbed while still in motion, after which the camera encroaches. A ground-level medium close-up frames each woman in her final moments of attempted escape, and both make the same last gesture: reaching up to pull the mask from the killer's face. The formal repetition is precise enough to function as quotation. By opening with a sequence this deliberately indebted to one of the postmodern cycle's most iconic kills, the trilogy signals its genre fluency immediately. It knows exactly what a slasher killer looks like, how a slasher killing is filmed, and what the audience expects from both. This fluency matters because the trilogy's intervention into the killer function depends on it. It cannot be revealed that the killer is an instrument of a larger system without first making the audience believe, however briefly, that they are watching a killer in the conventional sense.

However, the trilogy does not take long to establish that its killers will not behave as the subgenre has trained the audience to expect. In *Scream*, when Casey pulls the mask from Ghostface, the gesture reveals nothing — the killer's identity remains concealed, the mystery intact. When Heather pulls the mask from Ryan, the trilogy refuses this withholding. The audience sees his face, and then watches as Sheriff Goode shoots him in the head. The unmasking, that in *Scream* preserves the killer's opacity, here dissolves it entirely. What the trilogy offers in place of mystery is a vacancy, the suggestion that there was never anything autonomous behind the mask to begin with. The trilogy prepares this revelation carefully through

its presentation of Ryan before and after possession. In his opening moments, he is lively and relaxed, joking with Heather, visibly present in the way that people are when they are simply themselves. The only disruption is subtle: as he moves to leave, he pauses, hearing something, and asks Heather what she said. She replies, “I didn’t say anything, weirdo.” When the camera returns to Ryan, he looks briefly confused, and a fly buzzes around his neck — a small, almost throwaway detail that the trilogy will later retroactively charge with meaning. By the time Heather removes the mask, the contrast is stark. Ryan’s skin is blotchy, the flesh around his eyes reddened, his face emptied of expression. He does not emulate a killer in the grip of rage or psychosis. He resembles someone who is no longer there. The classical slasher killer is frightening because of what the audience senses behind the mask, some animating pathology, some terrible interiority. Ryan is frightening because the mask comes off and there is nothing. He has not become a monster. He has been vacated.

Ryan is the trilogy’s most elaborated instance of this principle, but not its only one. Tommy Slater follows a similar trajectory in *Part Two* — introduced as a living character before being possessed and turned killer, then killed, and later reanimated — meaning the audience has two opportunities to register his vacancy: once when possession empties him out and again when death fails to stop him. The other killers who the audience does not get to see prior to their reanimated possession, Ruby Lane, Harry Rooker, Billy Barker, Isaac Milton, make the same argument through absence rather than contrast. Where Ryan’s vacancy is established by stripping away a person the audience has just met, these figures arrive already emptied, their histories reduced to a name and a kill method. The trilogy never grants them interiority, because interiority is not the point. They are not agents. They are a delivery mechanism for violence that originates elsewhere. That the resurrected killers cannot be permanently destroyed reinforces this

notion. In the classical cycle, the killer's indestructibility carries a quasi-metaphysical charge — evil that cannot be extinguished. In *Fear Street*, it carries a systemic one. The killers cannot be stopped because stopping them is beside the point. They are symptoms, and you cannot kill a symptom. The trilogy's characters discover this progressively and painfully: every attempt to destroy the killers directly fails, and survival requires redirecting them rather than defeating them. The only solution is to address the source.

Where the resurrected killers satisfy the genre's appetite for visible, physical threat, the trilogy's true killer function is located elsewhere — in the Goode family, whose generational pact with the Devil generates and directs that threat from a position of institutional respectability. The trilogy introduces Nick Goode in the immediate aftermath of Ryan's death, and the formal choices of his introduction are worth examining closely because they embed the argument the trilogy will not make explicit for another two films. The sequence begins with a full shot of Goode in the mall, establishing him at a distance as an authority figure arriving to manage the situation. The camera then cuts to a medium close-up, bathing him in blue light — a significant choice given the trilogy's established color grammar, in which as Diez-Puertas notes "Shadyside represents witches, liminals and the color blue" while "Sunnyvale represents devils, structure, and red" (182; my trans.). In this first moment of close access to Goode's face, the trilogy is already placing him on the wrong side of the divide he is supposed to represent. His expression resists easy reading: the actor's wide eyes render him simultaneously shocked and exhausted, and the film does not resolve this ambiguity. Rather than granting the audience the legibility that close framing conventionally promises, the trilogy withholds it. The camera then cuts to a shot that silhouettes Goode entirely, his face now inaccessible, as he walks toward the bodies. Centered in the background of this shot is a tree — the tree from which Sarah was hanged in

1666. The audience does not know this yet, but the composition indicates it. In a single sequence of three shots, the trilogy has placed its trustworthy white sheriff in Shadyside's color, made his face unreadable at the moment of closest access, and framed him against the site of the trilogy's foundational act of scapegoating. The formal argument is already present. The narrative will spend two more films catching up to it.

Throughout *Part One*, Nick is coded as the helpful, sympathetic authority figure — calm, authoritative, and apparently aligned with the protagonists. The trilogy constructs this coding carefully and consistently, but it threads formal ambiguity into almost every scene. After the accident that lands Sam in the hospital, he questions the group and tells Deena directly, "I'm on your side." This line reads as genuine, but the scene bathes him in the mixed blue and red light of the police car, placing both color codes on his body simultaneously and quietly unsettling the clarity of his allegiance. When Deena and Sam come to him after the hospital attack, he does not believe them, smirking slightly as he pretends to take their report in red pen, but he neither dismisses them harshly nor raises his voice. He redirects them calmly by mentioning prior pranks and citing the demands of the ongoing situation before leaving. At the hospital, confronted with the carnage, he is brooding and composed in ways that register as professional restraint without immediately signaling foreknowledge. When he spots blood on the street outside and goes to investigate, the camera frames him in a low-angle shot looking down, his brows furrowing, a posture of discovery that the audience is positioned to read as concern. The next time he appears he is pulling up to an unknown house and leaving a note that reads "It's happening again," the trilogy's first explicit indication that he knows more than he has shown. The film does not linger on this revelation. It moves on, leaving the note's implications suspended.

His final appearance in *Part One* is the most formally and narratively complex. With Kate and Simon dead and the killers no longer in pursuit, Nick interrogates Deena, Josh, and Sam. The scene is constructed to maximize his apparent sympathy. He tells Sam she has a ghost-like appearance, then acknowledges — with visible discomfort when Deena speaks of how the town will reduce Kate and Simon to trash — that while it feels too easy to blame everything on them and call them junkies, the department will go with that story anyway. He apologizes to Deena for not listening when she came to him earlier and tells her he is listening now. Every beat of the scene is calibrated to position him as the one authority figure who sees the protagonists clearly and cares about what happens to them. The note he leaves at the unknown house earlier in the film reinforces this reading. Written in red pen — Sunnyvale's color — and reading "It's happening again," it is most naturally interpreted as a warning: someone with knowledge of the curse alerting someone else who shares that knowledge. The gesture rhymes with a familiar contemporary horror convention. In the post-*Scream* franchise landscape, legacy characters frequently return in new instalments to guide younger protagonists through crises they have survived before — Laurie in the *Halloween* sequels as well as Sidney across the *Scream* films. Nick's note positions him within that tradition: the experienced survivor, still watchful, still trying to protect the vulnerable from what he knows is coming. The trilogy gives the audience every reason to trust him and buries the reasons not to in formal details — the mixed light of the police car, the unresolvable expression in his introduction, the unnamed recipient of the note, the use of red pen — that will only become clear once the reveal makes them retroactively visible.

Part Two deepens this misdirection by giving the audience something *Part One* withholds: an emotional reason to want Nick to be trustworthy. He is introduced at Camp Nightwing not as an authority figure but as a teenager, and his first significant act is to advocate

for Ziggy when she is about to be expelled from camp, arguing on her behalf by noting that sending her home will invite questions about the burn another camper gave her. The gesture is protective without being condescending, and it establishes the dynamic that will organize their arc: a Sunnyvaler who sees a Shadysider clearly and chooses, at least initially, to act on what he sees. Ziggy's response — "Thank you, King of Sunnyvale […] for rescuing poor helpless Shadysider me" — names the power dynamic with uncomfortable precision even as she accepts his help. She knows what his protection costs and what it means, and the line anticipates his eventual betrayal with a clarity neither of them recognizes yet. Their romantic arc is filmed with the same formal language the trilogy used for Deena and Sam: close framing, soft low lighting that keeps both faces fully visible, the camera slowly closing in as they sit together on a bench and speak vulnerably about their families and their positions on opposite sides of the Shadyside-Sunnyvale divide. Nick talks about the pressure of following in his father's footsteps, about not wanting to be part of the family legacy, about wanting to be with the weird girl from Shadyside. As he speaks, the camera shows a close-up of his finger tracing her arm — the arm that bears the burn, the injury that opened the film and established her vulnerability within the camp's social hierarchy. The gesture is tender and loaded simultaneously: he is touching the mark of what Sunnyvale does to Shadyside while telling her he wants something different. However, the scene closes on a qualification. There is nothing he can do, he says, to have the life he is describing. The camera pulls back. They separate. Then she follows him, the camera closes in again, and they kiss until a scream pulls them apart. The formal language of the scene — the slow zoom, the close framing, the soft light — asks the audience to invest in this relationship in the same register they invested in Deena and Sam. The trilogy is building an emotional attachment it will use against the audience in the film's closing minutes.

The closing sequence of Ziggy's story begins with the same formal register as the intimacy scene. After reviving Ziggy, Nick is beside her in close-up, low light, his hand resting on her head. The camera places the audience back inside the language of their earlier connection. Ziggy then tells him it was the witch. Nick's face goes serious and expressionless, and he says nothing. The silence is the decision. The film then cuts to a full shot: the ambulance pulling away, Nick centered alone in the frame, the vehicle and Ziggy disappearing from the screen while he remains. The centering is compositional confirmation of what has just happened — he has chosen to stay where he is, in the middle of the frame, in the middle of Sunnyvale's power structure, while she is taken away. A medium close-up follows as one of the officers asks what happened. Without looking away from the direction the ambulance has gone, Nick tells him it was Tommy. The delivery is flat and slightly forced, and something that reads as sadness crosses his face. It then begins to rain — the first rain in the trilogy — and the film cuts to an overhead shot of Nick looking directly up into the camera as the rain falls on him. The overhead shot is the formal equivalent of the silhouette in *Part One*: a composition that gives the audience maximum access to a face, while simultaneously making that face unreadable. However, where the silhouette withheld by obscuring, the overhead shot withholds by exposing — Nick is fully visible, looked down upon, flattened by the camera's angle, and the expression the rain falls on could be guilt, resignation, or the blankness of someone who has just closed a door. The first rain in the trilogy is not incidental. Rain in visual grammar carries the weight of consequence, of something that has been building finally arriving. What has arrived here is not a storm but a choice — the moment a person who might have been different becomes, irrevocably, what his family made him. The trilogy will not confirm this reading until *Part Three*. Nonetheless, the

overhead shot, similar to the silhouette before it, is the camera making an argument that outpaces the narrative.

The reveal that Nick has been the source of the violence all along arrives not through confrontation or confession but through vision. Deena emerges from her experience of 1666 with three pieces of evidence that the trilogy has been distributing across all three films without providing the key to read them correctly. The first is the name: the man who made the pact with the Devil was Solomon Goode, and the name connects the historical perpetrator to the present one through an inference Deena makes and the audience can follow. The second is the actor: the trilogy casts the same actor to play both Solomon and Nick, making the continuity of the Goode family visible at the level of the body. The Goode family is not a lineage of individuals who each independently chose power over conscience but a single continuous institution, the same face across centuries, the same choice made so many times it has become indistinguishable from identity. The third and most formally sophisticated piece of evidence is the cave. The vision shows Deena Solomon's cave, and the audience recognizes it — they have seen it twice already. In *Part One*, they watched Sam's name being added to its walls without understanding what the etching meant or who was doing it. In *Part Two*. the cave was presented as the witch's lair, its walls and their inscriptions absorbed into the mythology of Sarah's curse. The trilogy gave the audience the killing system's administrative record and handed them the wrong key. Every name etched into those walls is a Shadysider who was possessed and used and discarded. The cave is the archive of the pact's operation across centuries, and it has been visible the whole time. The vision does not reveal something hidden. It allows Deena — and the audience — to finally read the pieces of the puzzle correctly.

The film's formal choices in the moments immediately following confirm this. As Deena comes out of the vision knowing it is Nick, the film cuts to a close-up of the back of his police car and pans to show him getting out — the camera moving from the institutional symbol of his authority to the man himself in a single fluid motion that refuses to separate the two. He is his office. He is the car. He is the badge. The trilogy has spent two films coding him as the trustworthy authority figure and here, in the moment of revelation, it makes that coding retroactively sinister by refusing to disrupt it. He looks exactly the same. The film then gives the audience something it has never given them before: Nick's point of view. The POV framing shows Josh centered in a full shot, isolated, caught in the beam of Nick's flashlight. It is the gaze of someone assessing a target, and the trilogy places the audience inside it before they have fully processed what that means. The flashlight here is an instrument of exposure and threat. A close-up of Josh's face follows with the light in his eyes, signaling that he is vulnerable and unaware. The formal language of the helpful authority figure and the formal language of the predator turn out to be identical.

Deena grabs Josh and they run. Ground level shots track their flight through the woods, close-ups of their faces registering fear and urgency as Deena tells her brother what she now knows. As they steal his car the camera zooms into a close-up of Nick's face, and for the first time in the trilogy his expression is fully readable. He is angry. After two films of carefully maintained unreadability — the ambiguous exhaustion of *Part One*, the forced flatness of his lie in *Part Two*, the rain falling on a face that could mean anything — the composure finally slips. But what is underneath is not the monstrous interiority the classical slasher killer promises. It is simply anger at being seen. Nick is suspicious throughout the trilogy, because his face cannot be read. He is frightening in this moment because it finally can. The revelation does not transform

him into something other than what he has been. The contrast with Ryan is instructive. Ryan's horror is one of absence — the mask comes off and the person is gone. The Goode family's horror is one of continuity. Each generation has worn the same face: the helpful authority figure, the protector, the man in charge who seems, genuinely, to care. This face is not a disguise. It is the instrument through which the system operates. Sunnyvale's wealth, its clean streets, its institutional power — these are not a respectable surface hiding something corrupt underneath. They are the corruption. Sunnyvale is the safest and most prosperous community in the trilogy precisely because it extracts that safety and prosperity from Shadyside's suffering (Diez-Puertas 182; my trans.). The Goode family does not merely benefit from the system. They are the system. The trilogy has been showing the audience the killing system all along, dressed in the visual grammar of safety and authority. The cave was always there. The names were always being added. Nick Goode was always exactly what he appeared to be. The audience just did not know what that was.

The asymmetry between the two killer functions is the trilogy's central formal and political argument. The proximate killers are maximally visible — they are the horror the audience can see, flee from, and fight. They fill the frame, they pursue relentlessly, they embody the slasher film's most durable iconography. Nick is almost entirely absent from the violence he produces. In *Part One* and *Part Two*, he does not need to be present, because the system runs without him. While the resurrected killers tear through Shadyside, Nick is elsewhere: writing reports in red pen, apologizing to Deena, saving Ziggy, being the helpful sheriff. The violence and its source never occupy the same space until the audience already knows they are connected. The trilogy has been making a formal argument about visibility from the beginning. The horror that is understandable as horror — the masked killer, the unstoppable body, the chase through

darkened corridors — is not the horror that is actually producing the terror. The slasher subgenre has always foregrounded the proximate killer and left the structural conditions of violence offscreen. *Fear Street* makes that offscreen space the real subject of the trilogy.

Part Three's climax is where the two killer functions finally converge, and the way the trilogy stages that convergence is formally precise. Deena uses her own blood to draw the resurrected killers toward Nick, forcing the structural killer into proximity with the instruments of his own system for the first and only time. However, the trilogy immediately separates them again. Nick escapes, Deena follows, and the final confrontation is between the two of them alone, while the others hold off the resurrected killers elsewhere. The structural and proximate killer functions are kept spatially distinct even in the moment of their greatest proximity. What replaces the resurrected killers in the film's climactic space is not their violence but Nick's — and his violence is immediately distinguishable from theirs. Where every proximate killer in the trilogy is silent, pursuing and attacking without speech, Nick taunts. He holds the knife to Deena's throat and tells her she is going to be famous: "Shadyside's newest piece of shit […] local dyke slays girlfriend, friends, brother." The taunting is not cruelty for its own sake. It is the system operating through language rather than through reanimated bodies. Nick is already writing the headline that will make Shadyside responsible for its own deaths, constructing the story that will render the structural violence invisible once again. He has always been more dangerous with words than with weapons. The knife at her throat is almost incidental. The real instrument is the narrative he is producing.

The fact that Deena defeats him not entirely through physical force but also through epistemological means is the trilogy's most formally coherent moment. She survives the knife, survives Sam's possession reactivating at the worst possible moment — the system making one

final attempt to use the person she loves against her — and then places Nick's hand on the beating heart mass in the cave, forcing him into a vision of every death the pact has produced since 1666. The archive the trilogy has been building across three films — the names on the cave walls, the resurrected killers, the centuries of Shadyside's disposability — is made visible to the man who has been maintaining it. His defeat is physical but also perceptual. He is made to see what he has spent his life refusing to look at, and the seeing undoes him. As he experiences the vision, Sarah's real curse — one meant for the Goode family and no one else — finally activates: he hears her voice and sees the dead. While he is trapped in that confrontation with the system's full history, Deena stabs him in the eye. The classical Final Girl defeats the killer by outlasting or overpowering him. Deena defeats the structural killer by forcing him to read the archive she has spent three films learning to read herself. The weapon is knowledge. It has always been knowledge.

The Final Girl and the killer are, in the end, facets of the same argument. The subgenre has traditionally placed them in simple opposition: the survivor and the threat, the one who lives and the one who kills, individual resourcefulness against individual menace. Fear Street dismantles this opposition by revealing that both functions are defined by their relationship to the same system. Deena survives not by overpowering the killers but by learning to read the structure that produces them. The resurrected killers cannot be defeated because they are not the source of the violence. Nick Goode cannot hide because the archive of his family's operation has been visible all along, waiting for someone positioned to read it correctly. The trilogy's central formal intervention is to relocate horror away from the body doing the violence and toward the system ordering it — and to insist that recognizing that system requires exactly the kind of knowledge that Deena, specifically, possesses. Her Blackness, her queerness, and her class

position are not incidental to her role as Final Girl. They are what make her the only person in the trilogy capable of seeing clearly enough to end what the Goode family started. The classical slasher film stages a confrontation between a survivor and a killer. *Fear Street* stages a confrontation between a person shaped by systemic dispossession and the system that produced her dispossession. Deena does not just survive. She reads the archive, forces the archivist to confront it, and burns the whole system down.

The Dark Night of the Archive

The close reading developed across the preceding section has demonstrated that *Fear Street*'s intervention into slasher grammar operates simultaneously at the level of representation, form, and ideology. The trilogy does not simply diversify the subgenre's cast of characters or update its iconography for a contemporary audience. It reconfigures the fundamental logic through which the slasher film has historically distributed vulnerability, survival, and horror — relocating terror away from the bodies of marginalized characters and toward the patriarchal system that has always been producing their disposability. What remains to be examined is why this reconfiguration takes the specific shape it does: why the trilogy's feminist revision is organized around intersectional knowledge, why it centers the falsification of history as a mechanism of patriarchal power, and why its formal choices consistently position the audience inside the experience of its marginalized protagonist rather than observing her from outside. These are not accidental features of the trilogy's politics. They are the signature of a specific feminist cultural moment — one shaped by fourth-wave feminism's intersectional commitments and by what Creed identifies as the defining formal and ideological investments of Feminist New Wave Cinema. Reading *Fear Street* through these frameworks does not reduce it to an illustration of theory. It reveals the full scope of what the trilogy is doing and why it matters.

For Creed, the Feminist New Wave heroine refuses patriarchal definitions of proper femininity and instead embarks on a journey into the "dark night of abjection" — told always from her own perspective and in her own voice — where confronting the violence of the symbolic order becomes the condition of her transformation (*Return of* 2). Deena's trajectory maps precisely onto this structure. Her descent is literal as well as figurative, and it happens in two stages that together trace the full arc of Creed's structure. The first is the 1666 vision which is involuntary, embodied, and historical. Deena does not choose to enter this descent. It overtakes her when she reunites Sarah's hand with her remains, pulling her inside a foundational act of patriarchal violence she has no power to alter or interrupt. She must endure the full weight of what the system did to Sarah: the accusation, the community's turn against a woman whose queerness made her a plausible scapegoat, the hanging. She watches another queer woman destroyed by the same logic that has marked Shadyside for centuries. Nevertheless, she emerges from that vision transformed rather than destroyed, in precisely the sense Creed describes. The descent has not broken her. It has given her what she could not have acquired any other way. She now has the knowledge of where the violence originates, who has been maintaining it, and what it will take to end it.

This knowledge is what makes the second descent possible. Armed with what the vision has revealed, Deena follows Nick into the tunnels and the cave — the physical space where the pact's administrative record has been accumulating across centuries. Where the 1666 vision confronted her with the origin of the system's violence, the cave confronts her with its full historical scope: every name etched into its walls, every Shadysider possessed and discarded, the archive of what the Goode family has done laid out around her in the dark. This is the symbolic order's underground made literal. Nick's taunting in the cave confirms what the vision already

revealed. The system's most dangerous instrument has always been narrative, the story told about who is responsible for Shadyside's suffering. He is already writing the headline that will make Deena the perpetrator of her own community's destruction. However, Deena does not meet this with physical force alone. She forces Nick's hand onto the beating heart mass in the cave and makes him experience the vision she has already survived — the full archive of the pact's centuries of violence, made inescapable. What destroyed him is precisely what transformed her. She could withstand that confrontation because the first descent had already equipped her for it. Nick cannot withstand it because he has spent his life refusing to look at what she has spent three films learning to read. She emerges from the cave not traumatized in the way the classical Final Girl emerges from her ordeal — shaken, barely surviving, defined by what she has endured — but transformed in the way Creed's monstrous-feminine is always transformed: reborn into a world the system no longer governs, because she has burned it down.

The trilogy's reconfiguration of the Final Girl function is not only recognizable through Creed's framework. It is also a precise expression of fourth-wave feminism's central theoretical commitment: the insistence that feminist analysis must account for the overlapping and mutually reinforcing structures of racism, classism, homophobia, and transphobia rather than treating gender as the primary and sufficient axis of oppression. Fourth-wave feminism builds on the Black feminist interventions of the second and third waves — particularly those articulated by bell hooks and Audre Lorde — to argue that the experience of oppression is never single-axis, and that the forms of knowledge produced by intersecting marginalizations are qualitatively distinct rather than merely additive. *Fear Street* embeds this logic directly into its narrative structure. Deena does not survive despite her Blackness, her queerness, and her class position. She survives because of them. Each axis of her marginalization has given her a form of

knowledge that the system's beneficiaries cannot possess, because they have never needed to develop it. Her Blackness gives her a framework for recognizing systemic dispossession that does not need to be named to be operative: she already knows, in the way that people shaped by racialized disinvestment know, that the arrangement of Shadyside and Sunnyvale is not accidental. Her queerness connects her to Sarah across centuries and gives her the emotional drive to excavate the curse's origins rather than simply flee its effects. Her poverty means she has lived the divide the Goode family's pact produces long before the trilogy reveals that divide as the pact's intended outcome. These are not three separate forms of knowledge that happen to coexist in the same character. They are intersectional in the precise sense that fourth-wave feminism demands: each one shapes and sharpens the others, producing a critical vision no single axis could generate alone. This is also, as Creed's framework makes clear, the condition of the Feminist New Wave heroine more broadly. Her marginality — her position at the edges of the symbolic order — is not a disadvantage to be overcome but the very thing that allows her to see the corruption on which that order is built. Those the system protects cannot see it clearly because they have no reason to look. Deena has always had every reason.

To read *Fear Street* as a work of Feminist New Wave Cinema and fourth-wave feminist politics is not to read it uncritically. The trilogy's formal and ideological achievements are real, but they exist alongside limitations that its own logic makes visible. The first concerns race. As the earlier analysis established, the trilogy's approach to Deena's Blackness is largely race-neutral: it relies on racial meaning it declines to articulate, carrying its racial critique through casting and visual association while maintaining plausible deniability about whether it is making a racial argument at all. The result is a trilogy that benefits from the political weight of centering a Black Final Girl without fully committing to the critique that centering makes available.

Deena's Blackness does real work in the text — it shapes how the audience reads Shadyside's disposability, it activates a history of racialized disinvestment that the screenplay never names — but the trilogy stops short of the argument its own formal choices make possible, leaving that work to be done by the audience rather than by the film itself. The second limitation concerns the management of Black queer intimacy. As Means Coleman and Harris observe, *Fear Street* places Deena in an interracial relationship with Sam, a pattern they identify across contemporary horror as a containment strategy: Blackness and queerness are each permitted, but the combined otherness of Black queer intimacy is diluted through racial difference rather than fully affirmed on its own terms. The trilogy's representational progress is real but uneven, offering increased visibility while simultaneously managing the discomfort that visibility produces.

The third and perhaps most structurally significant limitation is the trilogy's resolution. Deena defeats Nick, the curse ends, and the 2021 epilogue gestures toward a Shadyside and Sunnyvale no longer divided. But the systems that made the Goode family's pact possible — institutional authority, the sheriff's office, the economic structures that sustained the divide across centuries — are not dismantled alongside the pact itself. The trilogy imagines liberation more completely than it imagines the structural transformation that would make liberation durable. In this sense, *Fear Street* participates in a tension Creed identifies across Feminist New Wave Cinema more broadly: the heroine's revolt is personal, immediate, and transformative, but the patriarchal symbolic order she revolts against is larger than any single confrontation can dismantle. Deena burns the system down as far as the narrative allows. What remains — the institutions, the hierarchies, the economic conditions — is the terrain the trilogy gestures toward without fully entering.

Conclusion

The *Fear Street* trilogy arrived at a specific intersection of industrial possibility and feminist cultural urgency, and what it achieved there was neither accidental nor easily replicable. This chapter has argued that the trilogy's feminist intervention operates simultaneously at the level of representation, form, and ideology — reconfiguring the slasher subgenre's fundamental grammar through its treatment of the Final Girl, the killer, and the relationship between them, and insisting that the kind of knowledge survival requires is inseparable from the race, sexuality, and class position of the person doing the surviving. Deena Johnson is not a Final Girl who happens to be Black and queer and poor. She is a Final Girl whose Blackness, queerness, and poverty are what make her capable of doing what the trilogy demands: reading the system, tracing the violence to its source, and burning the archive down. That argument is not incidental to the trilogy's politics. It is its politics, embedded at the level of form — in the color grammar that places Nick Goode on the wrong side of the divide from his first appearance, in the framing of Deena and Sam's intimacy that refuses the voyeurism the subgenre has historically required, in the overhead shot of a young man making the choice that will define his family for generations, in the 1666 vision that places a Black woman's body inside a foundational act of communal scapegoating and asks the audience to see what that doubling means.

Situated within the genealogy this dissertation has been tracing, *Fear Street* represents the point at which the feminist interventions documented across earlier chapters become fully explicit — not subtext, not disruption from the margins, but a sustained and formally articulated argument made from within the subgenre's own conventions. Where *The Slumber Party Massacre* embedded its critique in the gap between what the camera shows and what the screenplay is willing to say, and where *Office Killer* collapsed the Final Girl and killer into a

single figure to reveal that patriarchal damage deforms from within rather than arriving from outside, *Fear Street* names its targets directly and builds its argument across three films with the confidence of a cultural moment that has caught up to what those earlier texts were reaching toward. The dissertation has argued that feminist intervention in the slasher subgenre has never been simply a matter of representation — of who survives, who dies, and who wields the knife — but of form: of how the camera positions the audience, how genre conventions are deployed and disrupted, how the subgenre's own grammar can be used to say something the subgenre has historically worked to suppress. *Fear Street* is where that formal argument becomes impossible to miss. It is the genealogy's culmination not because it resolves the tensions the earlier films identified, but because it makes those tensions the explicit subject of its own narrative. It stages, across six hours of carefully unified filmmaking, a confrontation between the slasher subgenre's conventions and the patriarchal logic those conventions have always served.

That this argument required three films, a unified director, and a serialized structure to make fully is not a minor detail. It is the condition of possibility for everything the trilogy does. Janiak's authorial control across all three films — the shared formal language, the accumulated color grammar, the misdirection built across two films to make the reveal of a third land with full political force — is what separates *Fear Street* from the slashers with which it is in conversation. The subgenre's conventions are not disrupted in a single film. They are dismantled across a sustained argument, film by film, using the audience's own genre fluency against them. The industrial conditions that made this possible, the streaming release model, the concurrent production, the unusual decision to shoot all three films as a unified whole, were, as this chapter has shown, neither guaranteed nor stable. They emerged from a specific moment of disruption in

Hollywood's distribution landscape, and they produced something the theatrical system's logic of individual blockbusters could not have sustained.

The fragility of those conditions is confirmed by what followed. *Fear Street: Prom Queen* (Matt Palmer), released on Netflix in 2025 without the trilogy's unified authorial vision, demonstrates precisely what the trilogy was working against. A standalone film set in 1988 Shadyside with a new male director and an unconnected narrative, *Prom Queen* retreats into the conventional slasher grammar the trilogy spent three films dismantling — a masked killer, disposable teenagers, a whodunit structure organized around individual threat rather than systemic violence. The intersectional politics, the formal argument about who gets to survive and why, the sustained engagement with the subgenre's own patriarchal logic: none of it carries over. *Prom Queen* is not a failure of execution alone. It is a demonstration that the *Fear Street* trilogy's achievement was inseparable from its form. A feminist intervention of this scope and coherence requires exactly the kind of unified authorship, serialized duration, and formal consistency that Janiak's trilogy possessed and its sequel does not.

What the trilogy makes possible, then, is not a template but a proof of concept. It demonstrates that the slasher subgenre — a form whose conventions have historically distributed vulnerability along the lines of gender, race, sexuality, and class in ways that reinforced rather than interrogated those structures — is capable of being turned against itself. That the subgenre's own iconography, its own formal grammar, its own audience expectations can be used to make a systemic argument about patriarchal power that the subgenre has spent decades concealing. And that making that argument requires the right politics and industrial conditions: the space to build a formal vocabulary across multiple films, the authorial continuity to sustain it, and the cultural moment to give it urgency. *Fear Street* possessed all three. What it leaves behind is the

knowledge that when those conditions align, the slasher film can do more than it has historically been willing to do. The subgenre's conventions are not a prison but a vocabulary, and that vocabulary can be used to say something the subgenre has never said before.

Conclusion: The Genealogy and Its Future

This dissertation set out to construct a genealogy of feminist interventions into the slasher subgenre. Beginning with the literary antecedents — the Gothic heroines of Ann Radcliffe and Emily Brontë, the puzzle-makers of Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers, the stylized menace of Italian giallo — and moving through the suppressed labor of Alma Reville-Hitchcock, Sallye Richardson, and Debra Hill, the project has traced how women's creative presence shaped a subgenre whose critical narrative has consistently erased them. The three chapters that follow from that genealogy argue that *The Slumber Party Massacre* (Amy Holden Jones, 1982), *Office Killer* (Cindy Sherman, 1997), and *the Fear Street trilogy* (Leigh Janiak, 2021) each perform a feminist intervention into the slasher subgenre's conventions, using the subgenre's own grammar to say something the subgenre has historically worked to suppress. Examined together, these films do not represent isolated exceptions to a misogynistic rule. They represent a trajectory, one that has been present across the subgenre's history, responsive to the feminist cultural moments that produced it, and systematically overlooked by the scholarship that claimed to account for it.

What is at stake in recovering this trajectory is not simply a corrective to slasher historiography, though the correction is necessary and overdue. The broader stakes are those of any feminist reclamation project: when women's creative labor is rendered invisible within a cultural form, the form's history becomes a history of what men have made, and the ideological assumptions built into the form are naturalized rather than contested. The slasher film's reputation as inherently misogynistic has functioned exactly this way. By treating the subgenre

as uniformly hostile to women, critics and scholars reproduced — at the level of theory — the same erasure that the industry had already performed at the level of production and reception. This dissertation's intervention is to insist that those two erasures are connected. The women who directed feminist slasher films were working against the same institutional pressures that shaped how those films were received, how they were theorized, and how they were (or were not) remembered. To recover one is to put pressure on the other. A genealogy of feminist interventions into the slasher subgenre is also, necessarily, a genealogy of the critical practices that could not see them.

The three films at the center of this project also demonstrate something that slasher scholarship has rarely acknowledged: that the subgenre's relationship to feminism has never been static. Each film is understandable only in relation to the feminist cultural moment that produced it. *The Slumber Party Massacre* is shaped by second-wave feminism's insistence on collective female experience and its suspicion of the male gaze — a politics that Amy Holden Jones and Rita Mae Brown embedded not by abandoning the exploitation format but by reorienting what that format makes visible and who it imagines watching. Where the second wave demanded that women's experience be centered, Sherman's *Office Killer* responded to third-wave feminism's more unsettling question: what happens when the woman at the center is both victim and perpetrator? By collapsing the Final Girl and the killer into a single body, Sherman produced a figure whose agency and victimization are inseparable because they emerge from the same patriarchal source. Janiak's *Fear Street* trilogy went further still, embedding fourth-wave feminism's intersectional commitments as narrative logic: Deena's Blackness, queerness, and class position are not incidental features of her character but the conditions of her capacity to see, and therefore to survive. Each film advances what the previous one made

possible, and each does so by negotiating the specific industrial constraints of its cycle rather than transcending them. The genealogy this dissertation has traced is not a story of progressive liberation but of historically situated negotiation — of what feminist filmmakers could make, within the slasher subgenre's conventions, at a given cultural moment.

Making Sense of the Present

The contemporary slasher cycle has not resolved the tensions this genealogy traces. In some respects, the current moment is the most formally and politically varied the subgenre has ever been and women directors are more visible within this cycle than at any previous point in the subgenre's history. Since the *Fear Street* trilogy, Halina Reijn has released *Bodies Bodies Bodies* (2022), Carlota Pereda has released *Piggy* (2022), Hannah Barlow and Kane Senes have released *Sissy* (2022), Nahnatchka Khan has released *Totally Killer* (2023), and Ama Lea released *Slashercise* (2024). Additionally, the representational diversification the *Fear Street* trilogy modeled — Black protagonists, queer couples, intersectional survival logics — has begun to leave traces elsewhere: the 2021 *Slumber Party Massacre* remake (Danishka Esterhazy), *Bodies Bodies Bodies*, *Piggy*, and *Sissy* each redistribute the subgenre's survival logic in ways the classical cycle could not have accommodated by centering queer and non-white women as survivors, a fat protagonist whose body the slasher subgenre would historically have marked for punishment, and a Black woman whose revenge on her bullies occupies the killer's position without forfeiting the audience's identification.

Yet the contemporary moment is also one of significant institutional instability. The streaming disruption that made the *Fear Street* trilogy's production model possible has not stabilized into a new norm. Netflix's relationship to theatrical distribution remains contested, and the conditions that allowed Janiak to shoot three films simultaneously under unified authorial

control have not been replicated. The theatrical slasher film continues to operate under the logic of individual blockbusters and franchise extensibility, as confirmed by the 2026 releases of *Scream 7* and *The Strangers: Chapter 3*, with more franchise properties already in development. The result is a cycle defined less by a coherent formal or ideological tendency than by the coexistence of deeply divergent industrial models, each generating different constraints and different possibilities for feminist filmmaking. Where the classical, postmodern, and neoslasher cycles were shaped by identifiable industrial conditions the contemporary cycle is shaped by fragmentation, by the simultaneous operation of streaming platforms, theatrical exhibition, and legacy franchise management in ways that resist synthesis.

The trajectory of the *Fear Street* franchise after the trilogy is instructive in this regard. *Fear Street: Prom Queen* (Matt Palmer, 2025), released on Netflix as a standalone film set in 1988 Shadyside with a new male director and an unconnected narrative, retreats into the conventional slasher grammar the trilogy spent three films dismantling. The intersectional politics, the formal argument about epistemological survival, the sustained engagement with the subgenre's own patriarchal logic: none of it carries over. What *Prom Queen* makes visible is the degree to which the trilogy's achievement was inseparable from its specific industrial conditions — the concurrent production, the unified authorial vision, the serialized release model that gave the formal argument across three films time to accumulate. When those conditions change, the political work they enabled does not automatically continue. *Prom Queen* is not a failure of execution alone. It is a demonstration that a feminist intervention of the trilogy's scope and coherence requires exactly the kind of industrial support that the trilogy possessed and that the franchise's next instalment did not. It also, frankly, demonstrates something the genealogy this project has traced already knew: that feminist interventions into the slasher subgenre are never

guaranteed, never self-sustaining, and never simply a matter of progressive momentum. They require specific conditions — industrial, cultural, and authorial — and when those conditions are absent, the subgenre reverts to its conventions with remarkable ease.

Looking Ahead

The genealogy this dissertation has constructed points toward two directions for future scholarship. The first is the question of what the contemporary cycle is — whether it constitutes a coherent cycle at all in Sotiris Petridis' sense, or whether the fragmentation of the current industrial landscape has made the cyclical model itself inadequate to describe how the subgenre currently operates. The scholarly work of defining and periodizing the present moment has, as this project noted in its introduction, been taken up primarily by popular film critics rather than academic scholars, and the gap matters. The theoretical frameworks developed within slasher scholarship — the Final Girl, the male gaze, the cyclical model — were developed in relation to specific industrial and formal patterns that the contemporary moment may be straining beyond recognition. Whether those frameworks require refinement, extension, or replacement is a question that the current cycle's formal and ideological diversity makes more pressing, not less.

The second direction concerns the women filmmakers this project has not been able to examine. The genealogy traced here is necessarily partial: three films, three cycles, three feminist cultural moments. What remains outside this project is substantial. The women-directed slashers of the classical and postmodern cycles — among them *A Night to Dismember* (Doris Wishman, 1983), *Rocktober Blood* (Beverly Sebastian, 1984), *Blood Diner* (Jackie Kong, 1987), and *Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare* (Rachel Talalay, 1991) — each merit the kind of historically situated feminist analysis this project has modeled. The contemporary cycle's women directors including Esterhazy, Reijn, Khan, and others likely to follow require analysis that

attends to both the representational advances they have made and the industrial constraints that continue to shape what is possible within them. The genealogy this dissertation has constructed is not a complete history. It is a framework and an invitation.

What the genealogy does establish — definitively — is that the slasher subgenre has never been the monolithically misogynistic form its critical reputation has claimed. Women have been present in its history from the beginning: writing it, editing it, producing it, and directing it. The feminist interventions this project has documented were not accidents or anomalies. They were responses to a form that, for all its surface hostility to women, contains within its conventions enough room for feminist filmmakers to turn it against itself. The subgenre's vocabulary of confinement, pursuit, survival, and revelation has been available to feminist reinterpretation from the moment women began working within it. What has changed across the trajectory this project traces is not the availability of that vocabulary but the degree to which feminist filmmakers have been able to use it explicitly, to make its arguments explicit rather than encoded, to bring the subtext to the surface without the industrial pressures that historically forced it underground. *Fear Street* is where that argument becomes impossible to miss. However, it was always present — in the gap between what Jones' camera showed and what the screenplay said, in the collapsed body of Dorine Douglas, in the work of women whose names appear in credits that few critics thought to read. The genealogy of feminist slasher filmmaking did not begin in 2021. It was now simply impossible to deny.

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