

For Helen

FEMINIST FILM THEORY

A READER

Edited by
Sue Thornham



NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS
Washington Square, New York

CONTENTS

First published in the U.S.A. in 1999 by
New York University Press
Washington Square
New York, NY 10003

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Feminist film theory : a reader / edited by Sue Thornham.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-8147-8243-4 (cloth). — ISBN 0-8147-8244-2 (pbk.)

1. Feminism and motion pictures. 2. Women in motion pictures.

3. Feminist film criticism. I. Thornham, Sue.

PN1995.9 W6F465 1999

791.43'082—dc21

98-32118

CIP

Printed in Great Britain

Introduction	1
Part I: Taking up the Struggle	7
Introduction	9
1. Sharon Smith: 'The Image of Women in Film: Some Suggestions for Future Research'	14
2. Molly Haskell: 'The Woman's Film'	20
3. Claire Johnston: 'Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema'	31
4. B. Ruby Rich: 'The Crisis of Naming in Feminist Film Criticism'	41
Further Reading	48
Part II: The Language of Theory	51
Introduction	53
5. Laura Mulvey: 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'	58
6. Mary Ann Doane: 'Caught and <i>Rebecca</i> : The Inscription of Femininity as Absence'	70
7. Teresa de Lauretis: 'Oedipus Interruptus'	83
8. Kaja Silverman: 'Lost Objects and Mistaken Subjects'	97
Further Reading	106
Part III: The Female Spectator	109
Introduction	111
9. Michelle Citron, Julia Lesage, Judith Mayne, B. Ruby Rich, Anna Marie Taylor, and the editors of <i>New German Critique</i> : 'Women and Film: A Discussion of Feminist Aesthetics'	115
10. Laura Mulvey: 'Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" inspired by King Vidor's <i>Duel in the Sun</i> (1946)'	122
11. Mary Ann Doane: 'Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator'	131
12. Annette Kuhn: 'Women's Genres: Melodrama, Soap Opera and Theory'	146
Further Reading	157

'HER BODY, HIMSELF: GENDER IN THE SLASHER FILM'

Carol J. Clover

[...] On the face of it, the relation between the sexes in slasher films could hardly be clearer. The killer is with few exceptions recognizably human and distinctly male; his fury is unmistakably sexual in both roots and expression; his victims are mostly women, often sexually freed and always young and beautiful. Just how essential this victim is to horror is suggested by her historical durability. If the killer has over time been variously figured as shark, fog, gorilla, birds, and slime, the victim is eternally and prototypically the damsel. Cinema hardly invented the pattern. It has simply given visual expression to the abiding proposition that, in Poe's famous formulation, the death of a beautiful woman is the 'most poetical topic in the world'.¹ As slasher director Dario Argento puts it, 'I like women, especially beautiful ones. If they have a good face and figure, I would much prefer to watch them being murdered than an ugly girl or a man.'² Brian De Palma elaborates: 'Women in peril work better in the suspense genre. It all goes back to the *Perils of Pauline* ... If you have a haunted house and you have a woman walking around with a candleburn, you fear more for her than you would for a husky man.'³ Or Hitchcock, during the filming of *The Birds*: 'I always believe in following the advice of the playwright Sardou. He said "Torture the women!" The trouble today is that we don't torture women enough.'⁴ What the directors do not say, but show, is that 'Pauline' is at her very most effective in a state of undress, borne down upon by a blatantly phallic murderer, even gurgling orgasmically as she dies. The case could be made that

the slasher films available at a given neighborhood video rental outlet recommend themselves to censorship under the Dworkin-Mackinnon guidelines at least as readily as the hard-core films the next section over, at which that legislation is aimed; for if some victims are men, the argument goes, most are women, and the women are brutalised in ways that come too close to real life for comfort. But what this line of reasoning does not take into account is the figure of the Final Girl. Because slashers lie for all practical purposes beyond the purview of legitimate criticism, and to the extent that they have been reviewed at all have been reviewed on an individual basis, the phenomenon of the female victim-hero has scarcely been acknowledged.

It is, of course, 'on the face of it' that most of the public discussion of film takes place—from the Dworkin-Mackinnon legislation to Siskel's and Ebert's reviews to our own talks with friends on leaving the movie house. Underlying that discussion is the assumption that the sexes are what they seem; that screen males represent the Male and screen females the Female; that this identification along gender lines authorises impulses towards sexual violence in males and encourages impulses towards victimisation in females. In part because of the massive authority cinema by nature accords the image, even academic film criticism has been slow—slower than literary criticism—to get beyond appearances. Film may not appropriate the mind's eye, but it certainly encroaches on it; the gender characteristics of a screen figure are a visible and audible given for the duration of the film. To the extent that the possibility of cross-gender identification has been entertained, it has been in the direction female-with-male. Thus some critics have wondered whether the female viewer, faced with the screen image of a masochistic/harassistic female, might not rather elect to 'betray her sex and identify with the masculine point of view'.⁵ The reverse question—whether men might not also, on occasion, elect to betray their sex and identify with screen females—has scarcely been asked, presumably on the assumption that men's interests are well served by the traditional patterns of cinematic representation. Then too there is the matter of the 'male gaze'. As E. Ann Kaplan sums it up: 'Within the film text itself, men gaze at women, who become objects of the gaze; the spectator, in turn, is made to identify with this male gaze, and to objectify the women on the screen; and the camera's original "gaze" comes into play in the very act of filming.'⁶ But if it is so that all of us, male and female alike, are by these processes 'made to' identify with men and 'against' women, how are we then to explain the appeal to a largely male audience of a film genre that features a female victim-hero? The slasher film brings us squarely up against a fundamental question of film analysis: where does the literal end and the figurative begin; how do the two levels interact and what is the significance of the particular interaction; and to which, in arriving at a political judgment (as we are inclined to do in the case of low horror and pornography), do we assign priority?

A figurative or functional analysis of the slasher begins with the processes of point of view and identification. The male viewer seeking a male character, even

* From Donald, J. (ed.), *Fantasy and the Cinema* London: BFI, 1989, pp. 91–133.

a vicious one, with whom to identify in a sustained way has little to hang on to in the standard example. On the good side, the only viable candidates are the schoolmates or friends of the girls. They are for the most part marginal, undeveloped characters; more to the point, they tend to die early in the film. If the traditional horror film gave the male spectator a last-minute hero with whom to identify, thereby indulging his vanity as protector of the helpless female,⁷ the slasher eliminates or attenuates that role beyond any such function; indeed, would-be rescuers are not infrequently blown away for their efforts, leaving the girl to fight her own fight. Policemen, fathers, and sheriffs appear only long enough to demonstrate visible incompetence and incompetence. On the bad side, there is the killer. The killer is often unseen, or barely glimpsed, during the first part of the film, and what we do see, when we finally get a good look, hardly invites immediate or conscious empathy. He is commonly masked, fat, deformed, or dressed as a woman. Or 'he' is a woman: woe to the viewer of *Friday the Thirteenth I* who identifies with the male killer only to discover, in the film's final sequences, that he was not a man at all but a middle-aged woman. In either case, the killer is himself eventually killed or otherwise evacuated from the narrative. No male character of any stature lives to tell the tale.

The one character of stature who does live to tell the tale is of course female. The Final Girl is introduced at the beginning and is the only character to be developed in any psychological detail. We understand immediately from the attention paid to her here is the main story line. She is intelligent, watchful, level-headed; the first character to sense something amiss and the only one to deduce from the accumulating evidence the patterns and extent of the threat; the only one, in other words, whose perspective approaches our own privileged understanding of the situation. We register her horror as she stumbles on the corpses of her friends; her paralysis in the face of death duplicates those moments of the universal nightmare experience on which horror frankly trades. When she downs the killer, we are triumphant. She is by any measure the slasher film's hero. This is not to say that our attachment to her is exclusive and unremittent, only that it adds up, and that in the closing sequence it is very close to absolute.

An analysis of the camerawork bears this out. Much is made of the use of the I-camera to represent the killer's point of view. In these passages — they are usually few and brief, but powerful — we see through his eyes and (on the sound track) hear his breathing and heartbeat. His and our vision is partly obscured by bushes or windowblinds in the foreground. By such means we are forced, the argument goes, to identify with the killer. In fact, however, the relation between camera point of view and the processes of viewer identification are poorly understood; the fact that Steven Spielberg can stage an attack in *Jaws* from the shark's point of view (underwater, rushing upward towards the swimmer's flailing legs) or Hitchcock an attack in *The Birds* from the birds-eye perspective (from the sky, as they gather to swoop down on the streets of Bodega Bay) would seem to suggest either that the viewer's identificatory powers are unbelievably elastic or that point-of-view shots can sometimes be pro forma.⁸ But let us for the

moment accept the equation point of view = identification. We are linked, in this way, with the killer in the early part of the film, usually before we have seen him directly and before we have come to know the Final Girl in any detail. Our closeness to him wanes as our closeness to the Final Girl waxes — a shift underwritten by story line as well as camera position. By the end, point of view is hers: we are in the closet with her, watching with her eyes the knife blade stab through the door; in the room with her as the killer stabs through the window and grabs at her; in the car with her as the killer stabs through the convertible top, and so on. With her, we become if not the killer of the killer then the agent of his expulsion from the narrative vision. If, during the film's course, we shifted our sympathies back and forth, and dealt them out to other characters along the way, we belong in the end to the Final Girl; there is no alternative. When Stretch ensericates Chop Top at the end of *Texas Chainsaw II*, she is literally the only character left alive, on either side.

Audience response ratifies this design. Observers unanimously stress the readiness of the 'live' audience to switch sympathies in midstream, siding now with the killer and now, and finally, with the Final Girl. As Schoell, whose book on shocker films wrestles with its own monster, 'the feminists', puts it:

Social critics make much of the fact that male audience members cheer on the misogynous musifs in these movies as they rape, plunder, and murder their screaming, writhing female victims. Since these same critics walk out of the moviehouse in disgust long before the movie is over, they don't realize that these same men cheer on (with renewed enthusiasm, in fact) the heroines, who are often as strong, sexy, and independent as the [earlier] victims, as they blow away the killer with a shotgun or get him between the eyes with a machete. All of these men are said to be identifying with the maniac, but they enjoy *this* death throes the most of all, and applaud the heroine with admiration.⁹

What film-makers seem to know better than film critics is that gender is less a wall than a permeable membrane.¹⁰

No one who has read 'Red Riding Hood' to a small boy or participated in a viewing of, say, *Deliverance* (an all-male story that women find as gripping as men) or, more recently, *Alien* and *Aliens*, with whose space-age female Rambo, herself a Final Girl, male viewers seem to engage with ease, can doubt the phenomenon of cross-gender identification.¹¹ This fluidity of engaged perspective is in keeping with the universal claims of the psychoanalytic model: the threat function and the victim function coexist in the same unconscious, regardless of anatomical sex. But why, if viewers can identify across gender lines and if the root experience of horror is sex blind, are the screen sexes not interchangeable? Why not more and better female killers, and why (in light of the maleness of the majority audience) not Pauls as well as Paulines? The fact that horror film so stubbornly genders the killer male and the principal victim female would seem to suggest that representation itself is at issue — that the

sensation of bodily fright derives not exclusively from repressed content, as Freud insisted, but also from the bodily manifestations of that content.

Nor is the gender of the principals as straightforward as it first seems. The killer's phallic purpose, as he thrusts his drill or knife into the trembling bodies of young women, is unmistakable. At the same time, however, his masculinity is severely qualified: he ranges from the virginal or sexually inert to the transvestite or transsexual, is spiritually divided ('the mother half of his mind') or even equipped with vulva and vagina. Although the killer of *God Told Me To* is represented and taken as a male in the film text, he is revealed, by the doctor who delivered him, to have been sexually ambiguous from birth: 'I truly could not tell whether that child was male or female; it was as if the sexual gender had not been determined . . . as if it were being developed.'¹² In this respect, slasher killers have much in common with the monsters of classic horror – monsters who, in Linda Williams's formulation, represent not just 'an eruption of the normally repressed animal sexual energy of the civilised male' but also the 'power and potency of a non-phallic sexuality'.¹³ To the extent that the monster is constructed as feminine, the horror film thus expresses female desire only to show how monstrous it is.¹⁴ The intention is manifest in *Aliens*, in which the final girl, Ripley, is pitted in the climactic scene against the most terrifying 'alien' of all: an egg-laying Mother.

Nor can we help noticing the 'intrauterine' quality of the Terrible Place, dark and often damp, in which the killer lives or lurks and whence he stages his most terrifying attacks. 'It often happens,' Freud wrote,

that neurotic men declare that they feel there is something uncanny about the female genital organs. This *unheimlich* place, however, is an entrance to the former *Heim* [home] of all human beings, to the place where each one of us lived once upon a time and in the beginning . . . In this case too then, the *unheimlich* is what once was *heimisch*, familiar; the prefix 'un' [un-] is the token of repression.¹⁴

It is the exceptional film that does not mark as significant the moment that the killer leaps out of the dark recesses of a corridor or cavern at the trespassing victim, usually the Final Girl. Long after the other particulars have faded, the viewer will remember the images of Amy assaulted from the dark halls of a morgue (*He Knows Your're Alone*), Sally or Stretch facing dismemberment in the ghoulish dining room or underground labyrinth of the slaughterhouse family (*Texas Chainsaw I-II*), or Melanie trapped in the attic as the savage birds close in (*The Birds*). In such scenes of convergence the Other is at its bisexual mightiest, the victim at her tiniest, and the component of sadomasochism at its most blatant.

The gender of the Final Girl is likewise compromised from the outset by her masculine interests, her inevitable sexual reluctance (penetration, it seems, constructs the female), her apartness from other girls, sometimes her name. At the level of the cinematic apparatus, her unfemininity is signalled clearly by her exercise of the 'active investigating gaze' normally reserved for males and

hideously punished in females when they assume it themselves; tentatively at first and then aggressively, the Final Girl looks for the killer, even tracking him to his forest hut or his underground labyrinth, and then at him, therewith bringing him, often for the first time, into our vision as well.¹⁵ When, in the final scene, she stops screaming, looks at the killer, and reaches for the knife (sledge hammer, scalpel, gun, machete, hanger, knitting needle, chainsaw), she addresses the killer on his own terms. To the critics' objection that *Halloween* in effect punished female sexuality, director John Carpenter responded:

They [the critics] completely missed the boat there, I think. Because if you turn it around, the one girl who is the most sexually upright just keeps stabbing this guy with a long knife. She's the most sexually frustrated. She's the one that killed him. Not because she's a virgin, but because all that repressed energy starts coming out. She uses all those phallic symbols on the guy . . . She and the killer have a certain link: sexual repression.¹⁶

For all its perversity, Carpenter's remark does underscore the sense of affinity, even recognition, that attends the final encounter. But the 'certain link' that puts killer and Final Girl on terms, at least briefly, is more than 'sexual repression'. It is also a shared masculinity, materialised in 'all those phallic symbols' – and it is also a shared femininity, materialised in what comes next (and what Carpenter, perhaps significantly, fails to mention): the castration, literal or symbolic, of the killer at her hands. His eyes may be put out, his hand severed, his body impaled or shot, his belly gashed, or his genitals sliced away or bitten off. The Final Girl has not just manned herself; she specifically unmans an oppressor whose masculinity was in question to begin with. By the time the drama has played itself out, darkness yields to light (often as day breaks) and the close quarters of the barn (closet, elevator, attic, basement) give way to the open expanse of the yard (field, road, lakescape, cliff). With the Final Girl's appropriation of 'all those phallic symbols' comes the quelling, the dispelling, of the 'uterine' threat as well. Consider again the paradigmatic ending of *Texas Chainsaw II*. From the underground labyrinth, murky and bloody, in which she faced saw, knife, and hammer, Stretch escapes through a culvert into the open air. She clambers up the jutting rock and with a chainsaw takes her strand. When her last assailant comes at her, she slashes open his lower abdomen – the sexual symbolism is all too clear – and flings him off the cliff. Again, the final scene shows her in extremely long shot, standing on the pinnacle, drenched in sunlight, buzzing chainsaw held overhead.

The tale would indeed seem to be one of sex and parents. The patently erotic threat is easily seen as the materialised projection of the dreamer's (viewer's) own incestuous fears and desires. It is this disabling cathexis to one's parents that must be killed and re-killed in the service of sexual autonomy. When the Final Girl stands at last in the light of day with the knife in her hand, she has delivered herself into the adult world. Carpenter's equation of the Final Girl with the killer has more than a grain of truth. The killers of *Psycho*, *The Eyes of Laura Mars*, *Friday the Thirteenth II-VI*, and *Cruising*, among others, are explicitly figured

as sons in the psychosexual grip of their mothers (or fathers, in the case of *Crising*). The difference is between past and present and between failure and success. The Final Girl enacts in the present, and successfully, the parenticidal struggle that the killer himself enacted unsuccessfully in his own past – a past that constitutes the film's backstory. She is what the killer once was; he is what she could become should she fail in her battle for sexual selfhood. 'You got a choice, boy,' says the tyrannical father of Leatherface in *Texas Chainsaw II*, 'sex or the saw; you never know about sex, but the saw – the saw is the family.'

But the tale is no less one of maleness. If the early experience of the Oedipal drama can be – is perhaps ideally – enacted in female form, the achievement of full adulthood requires the assumption and, apparently, brutal employment of the phallus. The helpless child is gendered feminine; the autonomous adult or subject is gendered masculine; the passage from childhood to adulthood entails a shift from feminine to masculine. It is the male killer's tragedy that his incipient femininity is not reversed but completed (castration) and the Final Girl's victory that her incipient masculinity is not thwarted but realised (phallicisation). When De Palma says that female frailty is a predicate of the suspense genre, he proposes, in effect, that the lack of the phallus, for Lacan the privileged signifier of the symbolic order of culture, is itself simply horrifying, at least in the mind of the male observer. Where pornography (the argument goes) resolves that lack through a process of fetishisation that allows a breast or leg or whole body to stand in for the missing member, the slasher film resolves it either through eliminating the woman (earlier victims) or reconstituting her as masculine (Final Girl). The moment at which the Final Girl is effectively phallicised is the moment that the plot halts and horror ceases. Day breaks, and the community returns to its normal order.

Casting psychoanalytic verities in female form has a venerable cinematic history. Ingmar Bergman has made a career of it, and Woody Allen shows signs of following his lead. One immediate and practical advantage, by now presumably unconscious on the part of the makers as well as viewers, has to do with a preestablished cinematic 'language' for capturing the moves and moods of the female body and face. The cinematic gaze, we are told, is male, and just as that gaze 'knows' how to fetishise the female form in pornography (in a way that it does not 'know' how to fetishise the male form),¹⁷ so it 'knows', in horror, how to track a woman ascending a staircase in a scary house and how to study her face from an angle above as she first hears the killer's footfall. A set of conventions we now take for granted simply 'sees' males and females differently.

To this cinematic habit may be added the broader range of emotional expression traditionally allowed women. Angry displays of force may belong to the male, but crying, covering, screaming, fainting, trembling, begging for mercy belong to the female. Abject terror, in short, is gendered feminine, and the more concerned a given film with that condition – and it is the essence of modern horror – the more likely the femaleness of the victim. It is no accident that male victims in slasher films are killed swiftly or offscreen, and that prolonged

struggles, in which the victim has time to contemplate her imminent destruction, inevitably figure female. Only when one encounters the rare expression of abject terror on the part of a male (as in *I Spit on Your Grave*) does one apprehend the full extent of the cinematic double standard in such matters.¹⁸

It is also the case that gender displacement can provide a kind of identificatory buffer, an emotional remove, that permits the majority audience to explore taboo subjects in the relative safety of vicariousness. Just as Bergman came to realise that he could explore castration anxiety more freely via depictions of hurt female bodies (witness the genital mutilation of Karin in *Cries and Whispers*), so the makers of slasher films seem to know that sadomasochistic incest fantasies sit more easily with the male viewer when the visible player is female. It is one thing for that viewer to hear the psychiatrist intone at the end of *Psycho* that Norman as a boy (in the backstory) was abnormally attached to his mother; it would be quite another to see that attachment dramatised in the present, to experience in nightmare form the elaboration of Norman's (the viewer's own) fears and desires. If the former is playable in male form, the latter, it seems, is not.

The Final Girl is, on reflection, a congenial double for the adolescent male. She is feminine enough to act out in a gratifying way, a way unapproved for adult males, the terrors and masochistic pleasures of the underlying fantasy, but not so feminine as to disturb the structures of male competence and sexuality. Her sexual inactivity, in this reading, becomes all but inevitable; the male viewer may be willing to enter into the vicarious experience of defending himself from the possibility of symbolic penetration on the part of the killer, but real vaginal penetration on the diegetic level is evidently more femaleness than he can bear. The question then arises whether the Final Girls of slasher films – Stretch, Stewie, Marti, Will, Terry, Laurie, and Ripley – are not boyish for the same reason that the female 'victims' in Victorian flagellation literature – 'Georgy', 'Willy' – are boyish: because they are transformed males. The transformation, Steven Marcus writes, 'is itself both a defense against and a disavowal of the fantasy it is simultaneously expressing – namely, that a boy is being beaten – that is, loved – by another man'.¹⁹ What is represented as male-or-female violence, in short, is figuratively speaking male-or-male sex. For Marcus, the literary picture of flagellation, in which girls are beaten, is utterly belied by the descriptions (in *My Secret Life*) of real-life episodes in which the persons being beaten are not girls at all but 'gentlemen' dressed in women's clothes ('He had a woman's dress on tucked up to his waist, showing his naked rump and thighs.... On his head was a woman's cap tied carefully round his face to hide whiskers') and whipped by prostitutes. Reality, Marcus writes, 'puts the literature of flagellation out of the running... by showing how that literature is a completely distorted and idealised version of what actually happens'.²⁰ Applied to the slasher film, this logic reads the femaleness of the Final Girl (at least up to the point of her transformation) and indeed of the women victims in general as only apparent, the artifact of heterosexual deflection. It may be through the female body that the body of the audience is sensationalised, but the sensation is an entirely male affair.

At least one director, Hitchcock, explicitly located thrill in the equation victim = audience. So we judge from his marginal jottings in the shooting instructions for the shower scene in *Psycho*: 'The slashing. An impression of a knife slashing, as if tearing at the very screen, ripping the film.'²¹ Not just the body of Marion is to be ruptured, but also the body on the other side of the film and screen: our witnessing body. As Marion is to Norman, the audience of *Psycho* is to Hitchcock; as the audiences of horror film in general are to the directors of those films, female is to male. Hitchcock's 'torture the women' then means, simply, torture the audience. De Palma's remarks about female frailty likewise contemplate a male-on-'female' relationship between director and viewer. Cinematic horror, in short, succeeds in the production of sensation to more or less the degree that it succeeds in incorporating its spectators as 'feminine' and then violating that body – which recoils, shudders, cries out collectively – in ways otherwise imaginable, for males, only in nightmare. The equation is nowhere more plainly put than in David Cronenberg's *Videodrome*. Here the threat is a mind-destroying video signal and the victims television viewers. Despite the (male) hero's efforts to defend his mental (and physical) integrity, a deep, vagina-like gash appears on his lower abdomen. Says the media conspirator as he thrusts a videocassette into the victim's gaping wound, 'You must open yourself completely to this.'

If the slasher film is 'on the face of it' a genre with at least a strong female presence, it is in these figurative readings a thoroughly strong male exercise, one that finally has very little to do with femaleness and very much to do with phalliccentrism. Figuratively seen, the Final Girl is a male surrogate in things oedipal, a homoerotic stand-in, the audience incorporate; to the extent she 'means' girl at all, it is only for purposes of signifying phallic lack, and even that meaning is nullified in the final scenes. Our initial question – how to square a female victim-hero with a largely male audience – is not so much answered as it is obviated in these readings. The Final Girl is (apparently) female not despite the maleness of the audience, but precisely because of it. The discourse is wholly masculine, and females figure in it only insofar as they 'read' some aspect of male experience. To applaud the Final Girl as a feminist development, as some reviews of *Aliens* have done with Ripley, is, in light of her figurative meaning, a particularly grotesque expression of wishful thinking.²² She is simply an agreed-upon fiction, and the male viewer's use of her as a vehicle for his own sadomasochistic fantasies an act of perhaps timeless dishonesty.

[...] If we define the Final Girl as nothing more than a figurative male, what do we then make of the context of the spectacular gender play in which she is emphatically situated? In his essay on the uncanny, Freud rejected out of hand Jentsch's theory that the experience of horror proceeds from intellectual uncertainty (curiosity?) – feelings of confusion, induced by an author or a coincidence, about who, what, and where one is.²³ One wonders, however, whether Freud would have been quite so dismissive if, instead of the mixed

materials he used as evidence, he were presented with a coherent story corpus – forty slashers, say – in which the themes of incest and separation were relentlessly played out by a female character, and further in which gender identity was repeatedly thematised as an issue in and of itself. For although the factors we have considered thus far – the conventions of the male gaze, the feminine constitution of abject terror, the value for the male viewer of emotional distance from the taboos in question, the special horror that may inhere, for the male audience, in phallic lack, the homoerotic deflection – go a long way in explaining why it is we have Pauline rather than Paul as our victim-hero, they do not finally account for our strong sense that gender is simply being played with, and that part of the thrill lies precisely in the resulting 'intellectual uncertainty' of sexual identity.

The 'play of pronoun function' that underlies and defines the cinematic is nowhere more richly manifested than in the slasher; if the genre has an aesthetic base, it is exactly that of a visual identity game. Consider, for example, the by now standard habit of letting us view the action in the first person long before revealing who or what the first person is. In the opening sequence of *Halloween I*, 'we' are belatedly revealed to ourselves, after committing a murder in the cinematic first person, as a six-year-old boy. The surprise is often within gender, but it is also, in a striking number of cases, across gender. Again, *Friday the Thirteenth I*, in which 'we' stalk and kill a number of teenagers over the course of an hour of screen time without even knowing who 'we' are; we are invited, by conventional expectation and by glimpses of 'our' own bodily parts – a heavily booted foot, a roughly gloved hand – to suppose that 'we' are male, but 'we' are revealed, at film's end, as a woman. If this is the most dramatic case of pulling out the gender rug, it is by no means the only one. In *Dressed to Kill*, we are led to believe, again by means of glimpses, that 'we' are female – only to discover, in the denouement, that 'we' are a male in drag. In *Psycho*, the dame we glimpse holding the knife with a 'visible virility quite obscene in an old lady' is later revealed, after additional gender teasing, to be Norman in his mother's clothes.²⁴ *Psycho II* plays much the same game. *Cruising* (in which, not accidentally, transvestites play a prominent role) adjusts the terms along heterosexual/homosexual lines. The tease here is whether the originally straight detective assigned to the string of murders in a gay community does or does not succumb to his assumed homosexual identity; the camerawork leaves us increasingly uncertain as to his (our) sexual inclinations, not to speak of his (our) complicity in the crimes. Even at film's end we are not sure who 'we' were during several of the first-person sequences.²⁵

The gender-identity game, in short, is too patterned and too pervasive in the slasher film to be dismissed as supervenient. It would seem instead to be an integral element of the particular brand of bodily sensation in which the genre trades. Nor is it exclusive to horror. It is directly thematised in comic terms in the recent 'gender benders' *Toolzie* (in which a man passes himself off as a woman) and *All of Me* (in which a woman is literally introjected into a man and affects his

speech, movement, and thought). It is also directly thematised, in the form of bisexual and androgynous figures and relations, in such cult films as *Pink Flamingos* and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* [...].

It may be just this theatricalisation of gender that makes possible the willingness of the male viewer to submit himself to a brand of spectator experience that Hitchcock designated as 'feminine' in 1960 and that has become only more so since then. In classic horror, the 'feminization' of the audience is intermittent and ceases early. Our relationship with Marion's body in *Psycho* halts abruptly at the moment of its greatest intensity (slashing, ripping, tearing). The considerable remainder of the film distributes our bruised sympathies among several lesser figures, male and female, in such a way and at such length as to ameliorate the Marion experience and leave us, in the end, more or less recuperated in our (presumed) masculinity. Like Marion, the Final Girl is the designated victim, the incorporation of the audience, the slashing, ripping, and tearing of whose body will cause us to flinch and scream out in our seat. But unlike Marion, she does not die. If *Psycho*, like other classic horror films, solves the femininity problem by obliterating the female and replacing her with representatives of the masculine order (mostly but not inevitably males), the modern slasher solves it by regendering the woman. We are, as an audience, in the end 'masculinized' by and through the very figure by and through whom we were earlier 'feminized'. The same body does for both, and that body is female.

The last point is the crucial one: the same *female* body does for both. The Final Girl 1) undergoes agonising trials, and 2) virtually or actually destroys the antagonist and saves herself. By the lights of folk tradition, she is not a heroine, for whom phase 1 consists in being saved by someone else, but a hero, who rises to the occasion and defeats the adversary with his own wit and hands. Part 1 of the story sits well on the female; it is the heart of heroine stories in general (Red Riding Hood, Pauline), and in some figurative sense, in ways we have elaborated in some detail, it is gendered feminine even when played by a male. Odysseus's position, trapped in the cave of the Cyclops, is after all not so different from Pauline's position tied to the tracks or Sally's trapped in the dining room of the slaughterhouse family. The decisive moment, as far as the fixing of gender is concerned, lies in what happens next: those who save themselves are male, and those who are saved by others are female. No matter how 'feminine' his experience in phase 1, the traditional hero, if he rises against his adversary and saves himself in phase 2, will be male.

What is remarkable about the slasher film is that it comes close to reversing the priorities. Presumably for the various functional or figurative reasons we have considered in this essay, phase 1 wants a female: on that point all slashers from *Psycho* on are agreed. Abject fear is still gendered feminine, and the taboo anxieties in which slashers trade are still explored more easily via Pauline than Paul. The slippage comes in phase 2. As if in mute deference to a cultural imperative, slasher films from the 1970s bring in a last-minute male, even when he is rendered supernumerary by the Final Girl's sturdy defense. By 1980,

however, the male rescuer is either dismissably marginal or dispensed with altogether; not a few films have him rush to the rescue only to be hacked to bits, leaving the Final Girl to save herself after all. At the moment that the Final Girl becomes her own saviour, she becomes a hero, and the moment that she becomes a hero is the moment that the male viewer gives up the last pretense of male identification. Abject terror may still be gendered feminine, but the willingness of one immensely popular current genre to re-represent the hero as an anatomical female would seem to suggest that at least one of the traditional marks of heroism, triumphant self-rescue, is no longer strictly gendered masculine.

So too the cinematic apparatus. The classic split between 'spectacle and narrative', which 'supposes the man's role as the active one of forwarding the story, making things happen', is at least unsettled in the slasher film.²⁶ When the Final Girl (in films like *Hell Night*, *Texas Chainsaw II*, and even *Slasher Uninvited*) assumes the 'active investigating gaze', she exactly reverses the look, making a spectacle of the killer and a spectator of herself. Again, it is through the killer's eyes (I-camera) that we saw the Final Girl at the beginning of the film, and through the Final Girl's eyes that we see the killer, often for the first time with any clarity, towards the end. The gaze becomes, at least for a while, female. More to the point, the female exercise of scopoc control results not in her annihilation, in the manner of classic cinema, but in her triumph; indeed, her triumph *depends* on her assumption of the gaze. It is no surprise, in light of these developments, that the Final Girl should show signs of boyishness. Her symbolic phallicisation, in the last scenes, may or may not proceed at root from the horror of lack on the part of audience and maker. But it certainly proceeds from the need to bring her in line with the epic laws of Western narrative tradition – the very unanimity of which bears witness to the historical importance, in popular culture, of the literal representation of heroism in male form – and it proceeds no less from the need to render the reallocated gaze intelligible to an audience conditioned by the dominant cinematic apparatus.

It is worth noting that the higher genres of horror have for the most part resisted such developments. The idea of a female who outsmarts, much less outfights – or outgazes – her assailant is unthinkable in the films of De Palma and Hitchcock. Although the slasher film's victims may be sexual reases, they are not in addition simple-minded, scheming, physically incompetent, and morally deficient in the manner of these film-makers' female victims. And however revolting their special effects and sexualised their violence, few slasher murders approach the level of voluptuous sadism that attends the destruction of women in De Palma's films. For reasons on which we can only speculate, femininity is more conventionally elaborated and inexorably punished, and in an emphatically masculine environment, in the higher forms – the forms that *are* written up, and not by Joe Bob Briggs.

That the slasher film speaks deeply and obsessively to male anxieties and desires seems clear – if nothing else from the maleness of the majority audience. And yet

these are texts in which the categories masculine and feminine, traditionally embodied in male and female, are collapsed into one and the same character – a character who is anatomically female and one whose point of view the spectator is unambiguously invited, by the usual set of literary-structural and cinematic conventions, to share. The willingness and even eagerness (so we judge from these films' enormous popularity) of the male viewer to throw in his emotional lot, if only temporarily, with not only a woman but a woman in fear and pain, at least in the first instance, would seem to suggest that he has a vicarious stake in that fear and pain. If it is also the case that the act of horror spectatorship is itself registered as a 'feminine' experience – that the shock effects induce bodily sensations in the viewer answering the fear and pain of the screen victim – the charge of masochism is underlined. This is not to say that the male viewer does not also have a stake in the satiric side; narrative structure, cinematic procedures, and audience response all indicate that he shifts back and forth with ease. It is only to suggest that in the *Final Girl* sequence his empathy with what the films define as the female posture is fully engaged, and further, because this sequence is inevitably the central one in any given film, that the viewing experience hinges on the emotional assumption of the feminine posture. Kaja Silverman takes it a step further: 'I will hazard the generalisation that it is always the victim – the figure who occupies the passive position – who is really the focus of attention, and whose subjugation the subject (whether male or female) experiences as a pleasurable repetition from his/her own story', she writes. 'Indeed, I would go so far as to say that the fascination of the satiric point of view is merely that it provides the best vantage point from which to watch the masochistic story unfold.'²⁷

The slasher is hardly the first genre in the literary and visual arts to invite identification with the female; one cannot help wondering more generally whether the historical maintenance of images of women in fear and pain does not have more to do with male vicarism than is commonly acknowledged. What distinguishes the slasher, however, is the absence or untenability of alternative perspectives and hence the exposed quality of the invitation. As a survey of the tradition shows, this has not always been the case. The stages of the *Final Girl's* evolution – her piecemeal absorption of functions previously represented in males – can be located in the years following 1978. The fact that the typical patrons of these films are the sons of marriages contracted in the 1960s or even early seventies leads us to speculate that the dire claims of that era – that the women's movement, the entry of women into the workplace, and the rise of divorce and woman-headed families would yield massive gender confusion in the next generation – were not entirely wrong. We may prefer, in the eighties, to speak of the cult of androgyny, but the point is roughly the same. The fact that we have in the killer a feminine male and in the main character a masculine female – parent and Everyteen, respectively – would seem, especially in the latter case, to suggest a loosening of the categories, or at least of the equation sex = gender. It is not that these films show us gender and sex in free variation; it is that

they fix on the irregular combinations, of which the combination masculine female repeatedly prevails over the combination feminine male. The fact that masculine males (boyfriends, fathers, would-be rescuers) are regularly dismissed through ridicule or death or both would seem to suggest that it is not masculinity per se that is being privileged, but masculinity in conjunction with a female body – indeed, as the term victim-hero contemplates, masculinity in conjunction with femininity. For if 'masculine' describes the *Final Girl* some of the time, and in some of her more theatrical moments, it does not do justice to the sense of her character as a whole. She alternates between registers from the outset; before her final struggle she endures the deepest throes of 'femininity'; and even during that final struggle she is now weak and now strong, now flees the killer and now charges him, now stabs and is stabbed, now cries out in fear and now shouts in anger. She is a physical female and a characterological androgynous: like her name, not masculine but either/or, both, ambiguous.²⁸

Robin Wood speaks of the sense that horror, for him the by-product of cultural crisis and disintegration, is 'currently the most important of all American [film] genres and perhaps the most progressive, even in its overt nihilism.'²⁹ Likewise Vale and Juno say of the 'incredibly strange films', mostly low-budget horror, that their volume surveys: 'They often present unpopular – even radical – views addressing the social, political, racial, or sexual inequities, hypocrisy in religion or government.'³⁰ And Tania Modleski rests her case against the standard critique of mass culture (stemming from the Frankfurt School) squarely on the evidence of the slasher, which does *not* propose a spurious harmony; does *not* promote the 'specious good' (but indeed often exposes and attacks it); does *not* ply the mechanisms of identification, narrative continuity, and closure to provide the sort of narrative pleasure constitutive of the dominant ideology.³¹ One is deeply reluctant to make progressive claims for a body of cinema as spectacularly nasty towards women as the slasher film is, but the fact is that the slasher does, in its own perverse way and for better or worse, constitute a visible adjustment in the terms of gender representation. That it is an adjustment largely on the male side, appearing at the furthest possible remove from the quarters of theory and showing signs of trickling upwards, is of no small interest.

NOTES

I owe a special debt of gratitude to James Cunniff and Lynn Hunt for criticism and encouragement. Particular thanks to James (not Lynn) for sitting with me through not a few of these movies.

1. 'The Philosophy of Composition', in *Great Short Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. G. R. Thompson (New York, 1970), p. 55.
2. As quoted in William Schoell, *Sissy Out of the Shower* (New York, 1985), p. 56.
3. As quoted in Schoell, p. 41.
4. Donald Spoto, *Dark Side of Genius: The Life of Alfred Hitchcock* (New York, 1983), p. 483.
5. Silvia Bovenschen, 'Is There a Feminine Aesthetic?' *New German Critique* 10, 1977,

- p. 114. See also Mary Ann Doane, 'Miscognition and Identity', *Cine-Tracts* 11, 1980, pp. 25-32.
6. Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (London and New York: Methuen, 1983), p. 15. The discussion of the gendered 'gaze' is lively and extensive. See also all Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen* vol. 16 no. 3, Autumn 1975, pp. 6-18; also Christine Gledhill, 'Recent Developments in Feminist Criticism', *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* (1978); reprinted in Mast and Cohen, *Film Theory and Criticism*, pp. 817-45.
7. Robin Wood, 'Beauty Bites the Beast', *American Film* 8, 1983, p. 64.
8. The locus classicus in this connection is the view-from-the-coffin shot in Carl Dreyer's *Vampyr*, in which the I-camera sees through the eyes of a dead man. See Mark Nash, 'Vampyr and the Fantastic', *Screen*, vol. 17 no. 3, Autumn 1976, esp. pp. 32-3. The 1987 remake of *The Little Shop of Horrors* (itself originally a low-budget horror film, made the same year as *Psycho* in two days) lets us see the dentist from the proximate point of view of the patient's tonsils.
9. Two points in this paragraph deserve emending. One is the suggestion that rape is common in these films; it is in fact virtually absent, by definition. The other is the characterization of the Final Girl as 'sexy'. She may be attractive (through typically less so than her friends), but she is with few exceptions sexually inactive. For a detailed analysis of point-of-view manipulation, together with a psychoanalytic interpretation of the dynamic, see Steve Neale, 'Halloween: Suspense, Aggression, and the Look', *Filmwork* 14 (1981).
10. Wood is struck by the willingness of the teenaged audience to identify 'against' itself, with the forces of the enemy of youth. 'Watching it [Texas Chainsaw Massacre II] recently with a large, half-stoned youth audience, who cheered and applauded every one of Leatherface's outrages against their representatives on the screen, was a terrifying experience.' 'Return of the Repressed', *Film Comment* 14, 1978, p. 32.
11. 'I really appreciate the way audiences respond', Gail Anne Hurd, producer of *Aliens*, is reported to have said. 'They buy it. We don't get people, even rednecks, leaving the theater saying, "That was stupid. No woman would do that." You don't have to be a liberal ERA supporter to root for Ripley', as reported in the *San Francisco Examiner Datebook*, 10 August 1986, p. 19. *Time*, 28 July 1986, p. 56, suggests that Ripley's maternal impulses (she squares off against the worst aliens of all in her quest to save a little girl) give the audience a much stronger rooting interest in Ripley, and that gives the picture resonances unusual in a popcorn epic.
12. Further, 'When she [the mother] referred to the infant as a male, I just went along with it. Wonder how that child turned out - male, female, or something else entirely?' The birth is understood to be parthenogenetic, and the bisexual child, literally equipped with both sets of genitals, is figured as the reborn Christ.
13. Linda Williams, 'When the Woman Looks', in *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, eds Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams, American Film Institute Monograph Series (Los Angeles: The American Film Institute/Fredrick, Maryland, University Publishers of America, 1984), p. 90. Williams's emphasis on the phallic leads her to dismiss slasher killers as a 'non-specific male killing force' and hence a degeneration in the tradition. 'In these films the recognition and affinity between women and monster of classic horror film gives way to pure identity; she is the monster, her mutilated body is the only visible horror' (p. 96). This analysis does not do justice to the obvious bisexuality of slasher killers, nor does it take into account the new strength of the female victim. The slasher film may not, in balance, be more subversive than traditional horror, but it is certainly not less so.
14. S. Freud, 'The "Uncanny"', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* ed. and transl. James Strachey, 24 Vols (London: Hogarth

- Press, 1953-66), vol 17, p. 245. See also Neale, 'Halloween', esp. pp. 28-9.
15. 'The woman's exercise of an active investigating gaze can only be simultaneous with her own victimization. The place of her specializing gaze is transformed into the locus of a process of seeing designed to unveil an aggression against itself.' Mary Ann Doane, 'The "Woman's Film"', in *Re-Vision*, p. 72.
16. John Carpenter interviewed by Todd McCarthy, 'Trick and Treat', *Film Comment* 16, 1980, pp. 23-4.
17. This is not so in traditional film, nor in heterosexual pornography, in any case. Gay male pornography, however, films some male bodies in much the same way that heterosexual pornography films female bodies.
18. Compare the visual treatment of the (male) rape in *Deliverance* with the (female) rapes in *Hitchcock's Prey*, or Wes Craven's *Last House on the Left* or Ingmar Bergman's *The Virgin Spring*. The latter films study the victims' faces at length and in closeup during the act: the first looks at the act intermittently and in long shot, focusing less on the actual victim than on the victim's friend who must look on.
19. Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (New York: 1964), pp. 260-61. Marcus distinguishes two phases in the development of flagellation literature: one in which the figure being beaten is a boy, and the second, in which the figure is a girl. The very shift indicates, at some level, the irrelevance of apparent sex. 'The sexual identity of the figure being beaten is remarkably labile. Sometimes he is represented as a boy, sometimes as a girl, sometimes as a combination of the two - a boy dressed as a girl, or the reverse.' The girls often have sexually ambiguous names, as well. The beater is a female, but in Marcus's reading a phallic one - muscular, possessed of body hair - representing the father.
20. Marcus, pp. 125-7.
21. Further: 'Suspense is like a woman. The more left to the imagination, the more the excitement... The perfect "woman of mystery" is one who is blonde, subtle, and Nordic.... Movie titles, like women, should be easy to remember without being familiar, intriguing but never obvious, warm yet refreshing, suggest action, not impassiveness, and finally give a clue without revealing the plot. Although I do not profess to be an authority on women, I fear that the perfect title, like the perfect woman, is difficult to find; as quoted by Spoto, *Dark Side of Genius*, p. 431.
22. This would seem to be the point of the final sequence of Brian De Palma's *Blow-Out*, in which we see the boyfriend of the victim-hero stab the killer to death but later hear the television announce that the woman herself vanquished the killer. The frame plot of the film has to do with the making of a slasher film ('Co-Ed Prey?'), and it seems clear that De Palma means his ending to stand as a comment on the Final Girl formula of the genre. De Palma's (and indirectly Hitchcock's) insistence that only men can kill men, or protect women from men, deserves a separate essay.
23. Freud, 'The "Uncanny"', esp. pp. 219-21 and pp. 226-7.
24. Raymond Duggan, *Films and Feelings* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), p. 216.
25. Not a few critics have argued that the ambiguity is the unintentional result of bad film-making.
26. Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', p. 12.
27. Kaia Silverman, 'Masochism and Subjectivity', *Filmwork* 12, 1979, 5. Needless to say, this is not the explanation for the girl-hero offered by the industry. *Time* magazine on *Aliens*: 'As Director Cameron says, the endless "renouncing" of the masculine hero by the "male-dominated industry" is, if nothing else, commercially shortsighted. "They choose to ignore that 50% of the audience is female. And I've been told that it has been proved demographically that 80% of the time it's women who decide which film to see"; 28 July 1986. It is of course not Cameron who established the female hero of the series but Ridley Scott (in *Alien*), and it is fair to assume, from his careful manipulation of the formula, that Scott got her from the slasher film, where she has flourished for some time with audiences that are heavily

- male. Cameron's analysis is thus both self-serving and beside the point.
28. If this analysis is correct, we may expect horror films of the future to feature Final Boys as well as Final Girls. Two recent figures may be incipient examples: Jesse, the pretty boy in *A Nightmare on Elm Street II*, and Ashley, the character who dies last in *The Evil Dead* (1983). Neither quite plays the role, but their names, and in the case of Jesse the characterization, seem to play on the tradition.
29. For the opposite view (based on classic horror in both literary and cinematic manifestations), see Franco Moretti, 'The Dialectic of Fear,' *New Left Review* 136, 1982, pp. 67-85.
30. *Incredibly Strange Films*, eds V. Vale and Andrea Juno, *Re/Search* 10, San Francisco, 1986, p. 5.
31. Tania Modleski, 'The Terror of Pleasure: The Contemporary Horror Film and Post-modern Theory,' in *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*, ed. Tania Modleski (Bloomington, Ind., 1986), pp. 155-66. (Like Modleski, I stress that my comments are based on many slashers, not all of them.) This important essay (and volume) appeared too late for me to take it into full account in the text.

'HORROR AND THE MONSTROUS-FEMININE: AN IMAGINARY ABJECTION'

Barbara Creed

I

Mother's not herself today. — Norman Bates, *Psycho*

All human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject. 'Probably no male human being is spared the terrifying shock of threatened castration at the sight of the female genitals,' Freud wrote in his paper, 'Fetishism' in 1927.¹ Joseph Campbell, in his book, *Primitive Mythology*, noted that:

...there is a motif occurring in certain primitive mythologies, as well as in modern surrealist painting and neurotic dream, which is known to folklore as 'the toothed vagina' — the vagina that castrates. And a counterpart, the other way, is the so-called 'phallic mother,' a motif perfectly illustrated in the long fingers and nose of the witch.²

Classical mythology also was populated with gendered monsters, many of which were female. The Medusa, with her 'evil eye', head of writhing serpents and lolling tongue, was queen of the pantheon of female monsters; men unfortunate enough to look at her were turned immediately to stone.

It is not by accident that Freud linked the sight of the Medusa to the equally horrifying sight of the mother's genitals, for the concept of the monstrous-feminine, as constructed within/by a patriarchal and phallogocentric ideology, is

* From *Screen* 27:1, 1986, pp. 44-70.