Gays, Women, and Chainsaws: Queer Approaches to Characterisation and Identification in Contemporary Slasher Film and Television, 1996-2019

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Abstract

Critics and theorists of the slasher film argue that gay male spectatorship is structured around cross-gender identification with the Final Girl (Greven 2011; Elliott-Smith 2015). This works on the assumption that the gay male spectator appropriates a feminine aesthetic, yet critics and theorists fail to interrogate *why* the gay male spectator might appropriate a feminine aesthetic, ignoring the stakes at play for women. Accordingly, *Gays, Women, and Chainsaws* examines how women and gay men are invited to watch the slasher film in similar ways, identifying with characters and narratives in accordance to their lived, cultural experiences. This suggests that spectatorship is not necessarily determined by identity politics, that which separates female and gay male spectatorships on the corporeal politics of gender and sexuality, as film and media studies often assumes. Rather, spectatorship is influenced by the heteropatriarchal discourse that dictates the lived, cultural experiences of women and gay men.

By subsequently considering how the politics and ideology of female representation informs both female and gay male spectatorships, this thesis interrogates how current understandings of postfeminist media culture are restrained by a normative gender binary. In doing so, the neoliberal logic of postfeminist media culture is further held to account, using a discursive approach to female and gay male subjectivity. Postfeminism is defined here in Angela McRobbie's terms where feminism is assimilated into hegemonic ideology (McRobbie 2009). Here, postfeminism describes the illusion that the demands of feminism have been achieved because women can be empowered in their everyday lives, eliminating the need for collectivist action. As women (and gay men) are invited to identify with empowered female characters in postfeminist media culture, as well as assimilating a

feminist politics, this thesis examines how gay male identification with these characters signifies ways in which a queer politics is being assimilated more broadly.

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Contents

Introduction

"Where My People At, Where My People At?"

Rethinking Gay Male Subjectivity in the Slasher Film

There is a scene in *Scre4m* (2011) where, chairing Woodsboro High School's Cinema Club, Charlie Walker (Rory Kulkin) identifies the very essence of the modern horror remake. "Modern audiences get savvy to the rules of the originals so the reverse has become the new standard. In fact, the only sure-fire way to survive a modern horror movie, you pretty much have to be gay." Quiet bursts of laughter echo throughout the room, simultaneous with a seemingly irrelevant cutaway to Kirby Reed (Hayden Panettiere) with a raised eyebrow. Something is funny, the film seems to suggest, yet not everyone is laughing.

While the cutaway to Kirby might seem irrelevant, lasting no longer than two seconds, Kirby's look is a disruptive one that bookends Charlie's speech. At first glance, *Scre4m* seems to accept Charlie's voice of authority, his mastery of the narrative, without question. This sporadic cutaway to Kirby, however, indicates something else entirely. Here, Kirby's look invites audiences to return an oppositional gaze that is sutured into *Scre4m* itself, addressing those who too are not laughing. Indeed, Kirby's look is reflexive of the gay's gaze, all too knowing of *Scre4m*'s heteronormative paradigms. Just as the film itself is conscious of these paradigms, Kirby becomes a screen surrogate for gay audiences, in which her look reflects that of embodied knowledge. Thus, her raised brow and bewildered expression mimic those returning her look, conscious of the film's gag: no one survives modern horror, *Scre4m* jokes, with gay erasure being the punchline.

Figure 1-3 What's funny? Kirby's look shuts down Charlie in *Scre4m*

The significance of this joke in *Scre4m* makes itself apparent later in the film, referenced in a violent confrontation between Ghostface and Cinema Club co-chair, Robbie Mercer (Erik Knudsen). Where the laughter was once reserved for those in the diegetic world, however, the joke intrinsically sutures itself into the spectator's seat, referenced in this instance for comedic effect. Here, Ghostface brutalises Robbie, forcing his body to the ground. "Wait, no, you ca— You can't, there's rules," Robbie desperately pleads. Ghostface raises his knife the air, ready to deliver the final blow, only for Robbie to suddenly remember those rules. "I'm gay," he blurts in sheer panic, desperately inauthentic. Reflexive of Kirby's earlier look, a swift cutaway shows Ghostface jerk his head to the side, as physical gesturing manipulates the look of disbelief onto Ghostface's expressionless mask. Ghostface knows, like Kirby, that gays only exist as the punchline of a discursive joke in *Scre4m*. His gesturing manipulates a look, then, that is indicative of an oppositional gaze, presenting a screen surrogate for those disaffected by the heteronormative paradigms of modern horror.

With Ghostface's prolonged posturing of disbelief, Robbie stares like a deer in headlights, further undermined by a diegetic silence that invites audiences to laugh. Here, the quiet bursts of laughter that once echoed throughout Cinema Club are displaced, sutured into the spectator's seat, creating a conscious division between those who find the joke funny and those who are not laughing. *Scre4m* makes it clear to audiences that Robbie is straight, regardless of their subject position, which is precisely why the joke both works and divides. While Robbie appropriates gayness as a means of survival, which is enough

to humour some, others know that the survival of gay characters is incidental, symptomatic of their erasure. Ghostface, as above, gestures the embodied knowledge of those disaffected by the joke, jerking his head in the posturing of disbelief. If, here, Ghostface returns an oppositional gaze, he soon asserts the gaze through decisive action, murdering Robbie for his ignorance and lies.

Figure 4-6 Robbie cries wolf to a knowing Ghostface in *Scre4m*

Scre4m, written/produced by openly gay screenwriter Kevin Williamson and directed by Wes Craven, was sold on the tagline "New Decade, New Rules," implying some kind of paradigm shift that would redefine the slasher subgenre beyond its post-9/11 remake cycle, typified by an oversaturation of films: *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2003), *Toolbox Murders* (2004), *House of Wax* (2005), *The Hills Have Eyes* (2006), *Black Christmas* (2006), *Halloween* (2007), *April Fool's Day* (2008), *Prom Night* (2008), *My Bloody Valentine 3D* (2009), *Friday the 13th* (2009), *Sorority Row* (2009), *Halloween 2* (2009), *The Stepfather* (2009), and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (2010). Yet, despite demonstrating a new consciousness in its representational politics, underlining the politics of gay erasure by paradoxically naming the very possibility of gay characters, *Scre4m* fundamentally changed nothing in its immediate wake. Even the film's theatrical trailers, in which all variations centralise Charlie's monologue on the rules of modern horror, conveniently edit out his reference to the possibility of gay characters and their very survival.

Nine years later, entering another new decade, Blumhouse released *Freaky* in 2020, co-written by openly gay screenwriter Michael Kennedy and openly gay director

Christopher Landon. Where *Scre4m* strategically edited out gay references in its marketing campaign, however, such references were critical to that of *Freaky*'s. Specifically, in the film's theatrical trailers, each depicts a scene of Josh Detmer (Misha Osherovich) as he and Nyla Chones (Celeste O'Connor) are chased down by the psychokiller. "You're Black, I'm gay, we're so dead," Josh proclaims. *Freaky* quite clearly sells itself, in part, on the inclusion of this joke. Yet, in comparison to *Scre4m* only nine years earlier, this joke exists in binary opposition to the one that is sutured into *Scre4m*, indicative of a very different representational politics. Such contradictory jokes evidence that gay representation in the slasher film is not immutable across the history of the subgenre.

If gay erasure is the joke of *Scre4m*, gay representation has certainly been overdetermined by critics and theorists of the slasher film, many of whom focus on the characterisation of the queer coded psychokiller (Clover 1987; Clover 1992; Benshoff 1997; Reiser 2001; Greven 2011; Bingham 2012; Grant 2012; Ognjanović 2012; Greven 2013; Petridis 2014; Bingham-Scales 2014; Greven 2016; Marra 2018; Petridis 2019; Willoughby 2020). Moreover, that Josh identifies himself as a potential victim in *Freaky*—pertaining to the joke of *Scre4m*, ironically, he survives—indicates that the slasher film itself does not necessarily subjugate gay representation to a single stereotype, offering multifaceted representations of gayness. Given that gay male spectatorship has been a constant across the history of the slasher film, accordingly, it becomes redundant to develop a surface level criticism that positions gay male spectatorship in sole relation to queer representation, thus providing the theoretical impetus of this thesis.

Gays, Women, and Chainsaws examines how women and gay men are invited to watch the slasher film in similar ways, identifying with characters and narratives in accordance to their lived, cultural experiences. This suggests that spectatorship is not necessarily determined by identity politics, that which separates female and gay male

spectatorships on the corporeal politics of gender and sexuality, as film and media studies often assumes. Rather, spectatorship is influenced by the heteropatriarchal discourse(s) that impact the lived, cultural experiences of women and gay men.

This thesis situates its theoretical foundations in cine-psychoanalysis and the development of feminist film theory in the late twentieth century, that which is said to be an outdated form of scholarship where the seminal criticism of Carol J. Clover originates. By reinstating the fluidity or so-called "queerness" of the psychoanalytic paradigms that defined Clover's school of feminist film theory, in turn, *Gays, Women, and Chainsaws* develops a revisionist approach to the slasher film and its gender politics. According to Clover, the slasher film invites the (straight) male spectator to oscillate between sadistic and masochistic subject positions, achieved through cross-gender or "bisexual" identification with both male and female characters, allowing Clover to dismantle the inherent misogyny that has historically defined psychoanalytic paradigms as fixed: male/female, masculine/feminine, active/passive, sadism/masochism, and so forth. Where Clover makes a valuable contribution to feminist film theory, a contribution that needs to be acknowledged in its own right for demystifying heterosexual masculinity as innately cruel and sadistic, this thesis revises Clover's notion of "feminine masochism" for its own purposes to suggest that the male spectator's identification with the female body is, in fact, indicative of a gay male subjectivity. This further disrupts an archaic notion of "sexual difference" and, in doing so, aligns women and gay men in political terms.

By revising Clover's psychoanalytic framework in mind of a gay male subjectivity, drawing on cine-psychoanalysis and feminist film theory to articulate an understated intersection between female and gay male subjectivity, *Gays, Women, and Chainsaws* reappropriates the language of cine-psychoanalysis to evidence how psychoanalytic approaches to gender and sexuality are not antithetical but complementary to so-called

"sociological" or "cultural" approaches. That cine-psychoanalysis is considered a methodological contradiction is precisely a limit of its archaic and often misunderstood vocabulary. By recognising the language of cine-psychoanalysis as part of an "imaginary discourse" that reflects the heteropatriarchal conditions in which we live (Altman 1977), this thesis extends later feminist criticism on female audiences and their identifications. This feminist criticism is extended by analysing its relevance to queer criticism on gay male audiences and their identifications. Subsequently, *Gays, Women, and Chainsaws* develops a conceptual framework that shifts critical discourse on the slasher film by reinstating cine-psychoanalysis and feminist film theory of the late twentieth century, evidencing the limits of surface level criticism by demonstrating how gay male audiences are invited to identify with female characters. This provides an innovative perspective on characterisation and identification in the slasher film by conceptualising how gay male audiences might identify with screen images in seemingly heterocentric narratives, particularly when the visual representation of gay maleness is rendered invisible.

Research Questions, Aims and Objectives

Gays, Women, and Chainsaws seeks to make a vital contribution to the emergent field of "queer feminism" by situating its relevance in film and media studies (Marinucci 2010/2016). Queer feminism encapsulates an intersectional approach to women's and LGBTQ+ politics but it currently disavows early emphases on the intersections of misogyny and homophobia that defined feminist and gay male criticism in the late 1980s (see, for example, Bersani 1987; Owens 1987; Watney 1987/1997; Boone and Cadden 1990; Modleski 1991; Roof 1992; Silverman 1992; Connell 1995). Although identity politics allows women and gay men to recognise the political specificities of their

identities, this thesis situates them within the discursive context of heteropatriarchal oppression, of which misogyny and homophobia are symptomatic. By subsequently using this discursive approach to female and gay male subjectivity, *Gays, Women, and Chain Saws* aims to answer four main research questions:

1. How are gay male audiences invited to identify with screen narratives and characters that appear to be heteronormative?
2. How does the slasher film consequently invite gay male audiences to identify with female characters?
3. How do the politics and ideology of female representation in the slasher film influence both female and gay male audiences?
4. How does the intersectional relationship between female and gay male audiences provide a nuanced understanding of postfeminist media culture?

By following these research questions, this thesis interrogates how current understandings of postfeminist media culture are restrained by a normative gender binary, reproducing an archaic notion of "sexual difference" that film and media studies in the twenty-first century claims to denounce. In doing so, the neoliberal logic of postfeminist media culture is further held to account, using a discursive approach to female and gay male subjectivity. Postfeminism is defined here in Angela McRobbie's terms where feminism is assimilated into hegemonic ideology (McRobbie 2009). Here, postfeminism describes the illusion that the demands of feminism have been achieved because women can be "empowered" in their everyday lives, eliminating the need for collectivist action. As women (and gay men) are invited to identify with "empowered" female characters in postfeminist media culture, as well as assimilating a feminist politics, this thesis examines how gay male identification

with these characters signifies ways in which a queer politics is being assimilated more broadly.

Slasher films are the object of study here since critics and theorists identify a "progressive" postfeminist development at the turn of the millennium, despite their persistent and pervasive narratives of violence against women (Craig and Fradley 2010; Rowe Karlyn 2011; Fradley 2013). Moreover, following the release of *Scream* (1996), openly gay screenwriters have been a constant in the production and popularisation of the North American slasher film. This is essential to acknowledge in pursuit of the four main research questions that this thesis aims to answer. Indeed, recognition of the openly gay screenwriter warrants an investigation into the discursive nature of female and gay male spectatorships in postfeminist media culture, scripted into the slasher film itself with a postfeminist sensibility.

Slasher Cinema and the Discursive Limits of Horror Studies

In a recent roundtable discussion with Wickham Clayton, Joan Hawkins, Steve Jones, and Daniel Sheppard, Murray Leeder asked how critics and theorists of the slasher film can move beyond the stranglehold of Clover's influence (Leeder in Clayton et al. 2021). According to Clover, young men are the target demographic of the slasher film, telling "the immensely generative story of a psychokiller who slashes to death a string of mostly female victims, one by one, until he is subdued or killed, usually by the one girl who has survived" (Clover 1992: 21). Within this narrative, young men are not offered a sustainable point of male identification, invited to identify instead with the Final Girl: she who defies the killer and "is boyish, in a word . . . not, in any case, feminine in the ways of her friends". Unlike the female friends that Clover speaks of, the Final Girl is both smart and

practical and her sexual reluctance sets her apart, aligning her "with the very boys she fears or rejects, not to speak of the killer himself" (ibid.: 40).

Katarzyna Paszkiewicz and Stacy Rusnak bespeak the popular belief that Clover's is a foundational contribution to "horror studies" or, more specifically, "feminist horror studies" (Paszkiewicz and Rusnak 2020: 8). Within this popular belief, it is thought that "Clover was using the teen slasher film to advance a *revolutionary* cross-gender identification model," allowing her work to be "received as a significant contribution to film studies, ensuring that most scholars cited Clover as the leading authority on teen slasher" (Nowell 2011a: 3, emphasis added). The problem with this account, explored at length in the Literature Review, is the fact that Clover's is not a conscious contribution to horror studies; her work explicitly contributes to developments in feminist film theory. Clover's theory is not *revolutionary*, in this light, but situates and merges pre-existing discourses on the cinematic apparatus, gendered subjectivity, and spectatorship into one theoretical framework that uses the slasher film as an object of study.

Clover's generic overview, described above, is inspired by her own historical account of the slasher film. Here, Clover identifies *Psycho* (1960) as the "appointed ancestor of the slasher film" in which *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) "revised the *Psycho* template to such a degree and in such a way as to mark a new phase" (Clover 1992: 23-4). Together with *Halloween* (1978), then, Clover argues that *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* "engendered a new spate of variations and imitations" (ibid.: 24). Among these variations and imitations are *Hell Night* (1981) and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre Part 2* (1986) which share strikingly similar codes and conventions to the aforementioned films, namely their respective use of Marti (Linda Blair) and Stretch (Caroline Williams) as "boyish" Final Girls who overcome perverse killers, allowing Clover to devise a generic formulation of the slasher film around a limited sample.

Much has been written on the limits of Clover's sample size (Hutchings 2004; Nowell 2011a; Kendrick 2014; Conrich 2015; Staiger 2015) which is said to overgeneralise and distort slasher's generic narrative in an act of (un)conscious bias. This scholarship, whether implicitly or explicitly, further points to the Americentrism of Clover's thesis which actively excludes any consideration of such Canadian productions as *Black Christmas* (1974), *Prom Night* (1980), *Terror Train* (1980), *My Bloody Valentine* (1981), and *Happy Birthday to Me* (1981). Richard Nowell's 2011 study of the first teen slasher film cycle most meticulously demonstrates the significance of these films (see also Koven 2006; Butler 2017) and, accordingly, demonstrates how underwritten Canadian productions—among other underwritten slasher films—are commonly understood to contradict Clover's generic observations. As Janet Staiger writes, before critics define the formulaic essence of slasher, "we must have a fairly accurate description of those texts" (Staiger 2015: 213). That is, individual slasher films must be closely analysed and theorised in their own right, allowing these films to then be collated as part of a formulaic approach that is anti-assimilationist and, thus, anti-essentialist. This allows Staiger herself, who takes a quantitative approach to 33 films—28 of which are referenced by Clover—to provide the following generic overview:

> Women are usually the victims and the heroines, but they are not always "Final Girls" in the strong sense that Clover implies. They may be quite feminine. Boyfriends, fathers or father figures, even other women and children, often support and aid them. They learn from those people so that they do take control of their battle with the killer. And they are rewarded not just with survival but also with romance. (ibid.: 222)

Just as Clover's observations on generic narrative and form have become the object of scrutiny in criticism, exemplified by Staiger's work, so too have her observations on the audiences of modern horror. Drawing on what appears to be limited anecdotal evidence,

as well as early film criticism which has since become synonymous with cult cinema and/or horror studies (Austin 1981; Ebert 1981; Austin 1983; Twitchell 1985), Clover characterises modern horror cinemagoers as follows: "young men, frequently in groups but also solo; male-female couples of various ages (though mostly young); solo 'rogue males' (older men of ominous appearance and/or reactions); and adolescent girls in groups" (Clover 1992: 6). Clover appropriately notes that proportional representation shifts between different subgenres and different films, bespeaking cultural distinctions in taste, yet still the prevalence of young male audiences remains a constant. "In the absence of statistics," Clover writes in empirical support of her claim, "I have polled some sixty employees of rental outlets (half in San Francisco, half elsewhere in the country) about the clientele for certain films . . . and they confirm to a person the young male bias," referencing an eclectic mix of six video titles: *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978), *Ms .45* (1981), *The Evil Dead* (1981), *Videodrome* (1983), and *Witchboard* (1986) (ibid.: 6).

Where many critics respectfully agree with Clover's emphasis on male spectatorship and have since critically refined her work (Creed 1993; Hutchings 1993; Rieser 2001; Keisner 2008; Staiger 2015), such criticism is often cautious in its approach. As Peter Hutchings writes of his own theory, widely applicable, he deploys "a rather abstract notion of male spectatorship, one which does not take into account the ways in which variable factors such as sexual orientation, class and race might influence and modify a particular audience's pleasures in horror" (Hutchings 1993: 93). Other critics have sought to situate the politics of female spectatorship in Clover's account, assuming that the category of "female" radically disrupts an otherwise heterosexist emphasis on male spectatorship (Halberstam 1995; Pinedo 1997; Cherry 1999; Trencansky 2001; Wee 2006; Short 2007; Craig and Fradley 2010; Rowe Karlyn 2011; Nowell 2011a; Nowell

2011b; Nowell 2012; Fradley 2013; Miller 2014; West 2018; Paszkiewicz 2020; Paszkiewicz and Rusnak 2020), yet still this work is often essentialist in its gendered approach to identity with little to no consideration of the intersections concerning race and ethnicity, age and class, disability and neurodiversity, and so forth. Harry M. Benshoff, in particular, emphasises sexuality at the intersection of identity and, in dialogue with Clover's observations, notes that "while the gender of an audience is relatively easy to calculate, the various sexualities of a group are much harder to qualify," creating space for critics to interrogate Clover's thesis by drawing on queer spectatorship (Benshoff 1997: 12; see also Halberstam 2005; King 2010; Greven 2011; Benshoff 2012; Bingham 2012; Halberstam 2012; Ognjanović 2012; Bingham-Scales 2014; Bingham-Scales 2015; Elliott-Smith 2015; Elliott-Smith 2016; Greven 2016; Marra 2018; Clúa 2020; Marra 2020; Willoughby 2020).

To avoid, in part, what is perceived to be the essentialist problematic of gender and identity, an alternative strand of theory seeks to broadly theorise slasher's youth audiences with catch-all terms such as "trauma," "resistance," "empowerment," and "survival" (Dika 1987; Dika 1990; Heba 1995; Williams 1996/2015; Dixon 2000; Gill 2002; Shary 2002/2014; Hutchings 2004; Shary 2005; Brickman 2011; DeGraffenreid 2011; Kvaran 2016). Still, the overall discourse surrounding Clover's audience is, by and large, to miss the point of her thesis. As Clover herself thoughtfully acknowledges in the introduction to *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*:

> My interest in the male viewer's stake in horror spectatorship is such that I have consigned to virtual invisibility all other members of the audience, despite the fact that their loyalty and engagement can be just as ardent and their stake in the genre just as deserving of attention . . . This book, however, is not about horror audiences per se any more than it is about horror per se. It is a book that explores the relationship of the "majority viewer" (the younger male) to the female victim-

> heroes who have become such a conspicuous screen presence in certain sectors of horror. (Clover 1992: 7)

Where Clover's observations on generic narrative and form, modern horror and its audiences, have become the object of scrutiny in criticism, her observations are incidental to the central focus of her thesis. Clover's observations, in other words, merely concern her object of study as a conduit through which to explore what her thesis is actually about, namely the politics of female characterisation and male identification. Clover's thesis is not fiercely heterosexist, in this light, so much as it is simply about male spectatorship (see also Clover 2015). Mary Ann Doane articulates it best in no uncertain terms, writing that the division and subdivision of subjectivity to avoid essentialist theories of gendered spectatorship is "potentially infinitely complex," applicable to those critics who problematise Clover's work for not considering the various intersections of identity. Such criticism faces an outcome which, "ultimately based on the premises of empiricism, is pure particularity, pure idiolect. This approach, which generates a great deal of discourse today, risks an aphasia of theory in which nothing can be said" (Doane 2004: 1231). What is needed, then, is a less abrasive, thoughtful reappraisal of Clover's thesis which develops a nuanced vocabulary to disrupt reductive assumptions that have led to an oversaturation of scholarship.

Clover's thesis is typically considered an example of "Grand Theory" where "discussions of cinema are framed within schemes which seek to describe or explain very broad features of society, history, language, and psyche" (Bordwell 1996: 3). Such theory is thought to be at odds with so-called "middle-level" research that Doane criticises; research that is empirical by nature and aims to deconstruct essentialist theories of gendered spectatorship by focusing on different subjectivities and the various intersections of identity. By reappropriating and rearticulating the language of cine-psychoanalysis that

Clover uses in her original thesis, this thesis fundamentally demonstrates how gendered binaries (male/female, masculine/feminine, and so forth) are more discursive categories than fixed markers of identity, allowing the seemingly essentialist nature of psychoanalytic feminist film theory to be recognised not as antithetical to "middle-level" theories of gender (accounting for female subjectivity) and sexuality (accounting for LGBTQ+ subjectivity) but complementary. Moreover, by situating Clover's thesis in the development of feminist film theory as opposed to the development of horror studies, her thesis can be outlined in its original context which allows false popular beliefs and generalisations to be reified, demonstrating how Clover's interest in the slasher film is not specific to male sadism and the characterisation of the Final Girl, allowing critics and theorists to move beyond certain theoretical occupations derived from Clover's thesis.

Since the formulaic nature of the slasher film has been debated relentlessly, with critics going out of their way to provide the definitive account of what the slasher film is, this thesis draws on Nowell's notion of the North American teen slasher film and Hollywood production cycles, providing a set of samples that are mutually agreed upon. Each individual chapter sets out which teen slasher film cycle it speaks to but, fundamentally, the teen slasher film is broadly described as "the story of young people being menaced by a shadowy blade-wielding killer" (Nowell 2011a: 77). This is the formula advocated by Clover's contemporaries who wrote on the teen slasher subgenre (Neale 1981; Wood 1983; Dika 1990) and does not allow slippage between more adult-centric psychosexual thrillers or gritty exploitation fare that are often described as "slasher" alongside lighter teen films such as *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th* (1980).

Chapter Breakdown

Chapter 1, "Clover's Other Girls: Bodies that Matter in the First Teen Slasher Film Cycle," begins by outlining the nuances of Clover's identificatory framework. Clover is typically interpreted as theorising a linear identificatory binary between the psychokiller and the Final Girl, encouraging critics and theorists to focus near exclusively on these archetypal characters. By charting how Clover conceptualises a fluid sadomasochistic framework that accounts for all characters in the mise-en-scène, then, Chapter 1 examines how Clover theorises both the female victim and the Final Girl as a collective identificatory body. The aim of this chapter is to then liberate the female victim of the early teen slasher film who, for too long, has been a victim to critical discourse. Isabel Cristina Pinedo (1997) and Catriona Miller (2014) consider issues of characterisation, identification, and female subjectivity in the slasher film and are essential to the female victim's liberation. Correlating with their work is the parascholarship of Vince A. Liaguno (2008) who considers issues of characterisation, identification, and gay male subjectivity. This chapter analyses the discursive relationship between accounts of female subjectivity and gay male subjectivity, both of which constitute "feminine" subjectivity in psychoanalytic discourse, and argues that the (post-)feminist politics of the early teen slasher film addresses both female and gay male spectatorships. Where accounts of female subjectivity and gay male subjectivity fundamentally centralise the Final Girl as a mode of resistance, however, this chapter applies the fluidity of Clover's identificatory framework to these accounts, locating the other girls in the early teen slasher film. Accordingly, it is theorised how the Final Girl's characterisation in the first teen slasher film cycle exists only in relation to the girls characterised before her. How women and gay men identify with the female collective, it is argued, is why women and gay men identify with the Final Girl as a mode of resistance.

Chapter 2, "The Importance of Being Kevin: Postfeminist Camp in the Third Teen Slasher Film Cycle," revaluates the well documented "postmodern" aesthetics of Kevin Williamson's *Scream* to argue that they are not postmodern at all. Here, it is argued that Williamson's use of camp aesthetics is misrecognised as "postmodern" aesthetics, and in doing so critics and theorists use postmodernism to unconsciously generate a heteronormative discourse that erases and replaces an inherently gay discourse. This is then further developed in relation to the film's gender politics. Although Williamson is often celebrated for supposedly making the teen film slasher relevant to young women, attributed to the postfeminist media landscape of the late 1990s, this chapter demonstrates how Williamson uses postfeminist camp to specifically address both female and gay male audiences. While *Scream*'s target demographic of young women is limited by the heteropatriarchal confines of the Hollywood mainstream, defined along the lines of a normative gender binary, Williamson's use of postfeminist camp indicates a discursive overlap between female and gay male spectatorships, assimilating gay male audiences as part of *Scream*'s target female demographic. As it is evidenced, too, Williamson's use of postfeminist camp in *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997) adopts the same strategy, disrupting the common criticism that *I Know What You Did Last Summer* is a mere cash-in.

Chapter 3, "'On the Bright Side, You'll Be Back': Repeat Viewing and the Politics and Ideology of Reidentification in *The Final Girls* (2015), *Happy Death Day* (2017), and *Happy Death Day 2U* (2019)," considers the implications of repeat viewing in the teen slasher film. Where text-based theories of characterisation, identification, and spectatorship are built around narrative structure, this chapter theorises the political and ideological implications of "reidentification" when audiences rewatch the teen slasher film to "reidentify" with certain characters. Here, it is argued that the identificatory process of "reidentification" seeks to empower female and gay male audiences in postfeminist terms,

allowing them to "reidentify" with the female victim. This, it is argued, feigns a sense of mastery and control that puts female and gay male audiences above the text in order to deny the ideological impetus of the female victim's death. It is subsequently demonstrated how the politics and ideology of "reidentification" have been narrativised in more recent teen slasher films, specifically in films that are written and/or directed by openly gay men. M.A. Fortin and Joshua John Miller's *The Final Girls*, for example, depicts a group of teenagers who are engulfed into the diegetic world of a slasher film, forced to repeatedly live through the events of the film in temporal loop. Meanwhile, Christopher Landon's *Happy Death Day* and *Happy Death Day 2U* characterises the female victim's transformation into the Final Girl, stuck in a temporal loop where she is repeatedly killed on her birthday each day, forced to subdue the killer in order to end the cycle.

Chapter 4, "Beyond the Devil Daddy: Gender and Sexuality in the Gay Slasher Film after *Hellbent* (2004)," turns its focus to LGBTQ+ media to examine how the gay slasher film assimilates gay male subjectivity at face value. Where the "straight" teen slasher film of postfeminist media culture allows the gay male spectator to actively embrace (post)femininity, the gay slasher film actively disenfranchises this particular spectator, often assimilating its representation of gay masculinity by drawing on the conventions of straight masculinity. Accordingly, where the gay slasher film is often ideologically grounded in effeminophobia to assimilate gay men in heteropatriarchal structures, this chapter highlights the importance of reclaiming the ideological project of the "straight" teen slasher film. Although gay erasure on the surface is prominent, the teen slasher film in postfeminist media culture provides a "feminine" mode of address that is constant and fluid. This not only enables gay male audiences to actively oppose misogyny and align with female audiences in the face of heteropatriarchal oppression; they are permitted to authentically embrace a gay identity in an effeminate manner that suits them.

Literature Review

This literature review draws together two fields of study that, in light of recent criticism, are typically considered at odds: psychoanalytic feminist film theory and postfeminist media studies. Christine Gledhill uses the term "cine-psychoanalysis" to describe film studies' appropriation of psychoanalysis in the late twentieth century, the heteropatriarchal discourse of which was weaponised as metaphor by early feminist film theorists (Gledhill 1988; see also Lesage 1974a; Altman 1977; Pajaczkowska 1981; Gledhill 1988; Kaplan 1990a; Farmer 2000). This allowed theorists to use the language of psychoanalysis and its pre-established vocabulary to interrogate the politics and ideology of the cinematic apparatus, gendered subjectivity, and spectatorship. Critics throughout the twenty-first century have argued with increasing resolve against the use of cine-psychoanalysis, arguing that its discourse is outdated; that cine-psychoanalysis perpetuates a false sense of scientific rigour that contradicts cultural/sociological approaches to gendered subjectivity and spectatorship. Accordingly, the first two sections of this literature review narrate the development of cine-psychoanalysis and feminist film theory in the late twentieth century, calling for its continued relevance.

Following the influential criticism of Laura Mulvey, feminist film theorists explored the relationship between the cinematic apparatus, gendered subjectivity, and spectatorship, highlighting how narrative structure symbolically mirrors the Oedipal stage and emphasising narrative closure as the resolution of conflicts. This Oedipal approach assumes that by a film's conclusion, the "male spectator" and "female spectator" conform to their expected roles in heteropatriarchal gender relations, with the "male spectator" adopting a "masculine" subject position and the "female spectator" a "feminine" one,

both confined to the heteropatriarchal law of "compulsory heterosexuality" (Rich 1980). However, it is crucial to note that the "male spectator" and "female spectator" are abstract constructs; allegorical entities employed to describe the inner workings of the cinematic apparatus. Here, the cinematic apparatus is regarded as an apparatus of the state, serving to uphold the prevailing ideology by shaping compliant subjects ("spectators") aligned with the interests of the state. In other words, feminist film theorists conceptualise the "male spectator" and "female spectator" as idealised "male" and "female" subjects in heteropatriarchal society, enabling them to comprehend the ideological functions of the cinematic apparatus. Crucially, the Oedipal narrative is employed metaphorically to elucidate how cinema perpetuates and reinforces heteropatriarchal structures.

Mulvey has long reminded critics that her seminal work "was written at a time when films were watched in cinemas, in the specific conditions of the darkened theatre and the illuminated screen," asserting how new media and technologies have "radically changed conditions of spectatorship" (Mulvey 2019: 250; see also Mulvey 1996/2013; Mulvey 2004; Mulvey 2006; Mulvey 2015; Mulvey 2020). Francesco Casetti neatly summarises the implications, considered at length in Chapter Three, writing that "the cinematic dispositive no longer appears to be a predetermined, closed, and binding structure, but rather an open and flexible set of elements; it is no longer an *apparatus*, but rather an *assemblage*" (Casetti 2015: 69, emphasis in original). Mulvey's revision seems to suggest, therefore, that earlier theorises of gendered subjectivity and spectatorship need to be reappropriated; that the dismantlement of the cinematic apparatus is weighted in emancipatory power and provides exciting new ways of theorising gender and sexuality. Lest we miss the point, Mulvey writes that LGBTQ+ spectators have long found ways of "queering the gaze," denying their erasure in the configuration of the cinematic apparatus, and the gradual dismantlement of the cinematic apparatus has been met with real-time

advances in feminist and LGBTQ+ politics which have redefined gender and sexuality. These advances, Mulvey proceeds to note, have "changed the meanings of male and female, masculinity and femininity, that were inscribed into the [language of feminist film theory]," allowing the intersectional politics of female and gay male spectatorships to be written into discourse, defined by their anti-Oedipal relations (Mulvey 2019: 246).

For our purposes, the reappropriation of feminist film theory means reclaiming the language of cine-psychoanalysis. This unbinds theories of gendered subjectivity and spectatorship from the cinematic apparatus' ideological doctrine of compulsory heterosexuality and "sexual difference," demonstrating how seemingly essentialist binaries (male/female, masculine/feminine, active/passive, sadist/masochist, oppressor/oppressed) do not hinge on an archaic notion of biological determinism. Indeed, it is evidenced how the gendered dichotomies that cine-psychoanalysis and feminist film theory bespeak are organised around the heteropatriarchal discourse in which we find ourselves, articulating the conditions under which certain marginalised identities are subordinated, typified by women's oppression but extending most notably to the subject of male effeminacy. Although controversial, not to undermine the political specificity of naming women's subjectivity in certain contexts, it becomes apparent that the discursive categories of woman/female/feminine in cine-psychoanalysis and feminist film theory are more often than not figurative, theorised in Oedipal opposition to the discursive categories of man/male/masculine which are indicative of heteropatriarchal mastery, power, and control. In challenging the discursive nature of the cinematic apparatus, gendered subjectivity, and spectatorship, it is underscored how theories of "male spectatorship" and "female spectatorship" are constrained by the archaic vocabulary of cine-psychoanalysis, a breakdown of which demonstrates how theories of gendered subjectivity and spectatorship are much more fluid than opponents suggest.

Although cine-psychoanalysis did not define the whole of feminist film studies in the late twentieth century, the school of thought that defined feminist film theory came under particular scrutiny at the turn of the millennium. Here, the very notion of feminist *film* theory faced intense scrutiny and was absorbed or reconfigured into broader, more globally conscious theories of gender, media, and culture. This is exemplified by the turn to postfeminism in feminist media studies, the theoretical trajectory of which is explored in the final section of this literature review, considering how popular culture has dealt with the "problem" of feminism by assimilating its politics in neoliberal terms. Where feminist film theory once appropriated the language of psychoanalysis to theorise the politics of "male spectatorship" and "female spectatorship," this section demonstrates how feminist media studies has appropriated the language of cine-psychoanalysis to theorise the "female spectator" of postfeminist popular culture, despite claims that psychoanalysis is no longer relevant. That is, (post)feminist media studies builds itself on the very notion of "sexual difference" that it claims to denounce in feminist film theory's earlier use of cine-psychoanalysis, assuming that women identify with representations of women and men identify with representations of men, liberalised insofar as it acknowledges the intersections of identity.

By reinstating the fluidity of cross-gender identification in cine-psychoanalysis and feminist film theory throughout the late twentieth century, this section demonstrates how the "female spectator" of postfeminist media studies is often figurative, representative of a discursive category rather than an actual female subjectivity. Where feminist film theory once posited that the "female spectator" exists in discursive opposition to heteropatriarchal dominance, the "female spectator" of postfeminist media studies is structured around neoliberal ideology. This reflects the "feminine" subject position of some straight women and some gay men. Subsequently, just as postfeminist popular

culture assimilates a feminist politics to convey the notion that women have achieved equality, this section illustrates how gay male identification with postfeminist popular culture and its female characters assimilates a gay politics, aligning certain female and gay male subjectivities under the discursive category of the "female spectator." Here, as postfeminist popular culture assimilates the "New Woman" in heteropatriarchal culture, it is argued that gay male identification with postfeminist popular culture and the mise-en-scene of heteronormativity facilitates the assimilation of the "Post-Gay" in heteropatriarchal culture. Neoliberalism determines the illusionary "emancipatory" possibilities of domesticity and consumerism, seducing both the "New Woman" and the "Post-Gay" into heteropatriarchal culture.

On the Origins of Feminist Film Criticism: or, the "Images of Women" Debate

In the early 1970s, several popular studies were published by feminist critics in the United States, offering what are thought to be the first book-length treatments of women in film. Marjorie Rosen's *Popcorn Venus* (1973), Molly Haskell's *From Reverence to Rape* (1974), and Joan Mellen's *Women and their Sexuality in the New Film* (1974) share a focus on "images of women" and are typically considered foundational texts in the early development of feminist film studies. Although these popular studies are indebted to earlier feminist critics who wrote for such journals as *Film Quarterly*, *The Velvet Light Trap*, and the short-lived *Women and Film* (Beh 1971; Schwartz 1971; Beh 1972a; Beh 1972b; Citron 1972; Ford 1972; Houston and Kinder 1972; Mohanna 1972; Smith 1972; Sullivan 1972; Walker 1972; Webb 1972; Atlas 1973; Giddis 1973; Houston and Kinder 1973), their collective project sought to develop a sociological approach to women's representation in film; that which British feminist film theorist Claire Johnston refers to as "reflection theory"

(Johnston 1975a: 116-20). As Johnston observes in an early book review of *Popcorn Venus*, *From Reverence to Rape*, and *Women and their Sexuality in the New Film*, critics such as Rosen, Haskell, and Mellen "see the world created in films as a mirror of the real world, albeit a distorting one," in which the cinematic representation of women is thought to reflect real women in the real world (ibid.: 16). The feminist stakes at play here are considered by Johnston, of course, though they are put most meticulously in an early essay by Michelle Citron:

> Because films are produced by a male-dominated industry in a male-dominated society, they reflect the sexism of that society. Films are made by men, for men, and for what men think women are and want. Thus the roles women play in film reflect the roles they are supposed to play in society . . . The film audience, forgetting this female image is a biased one, is likely to accept it as a true depiction of women's potential. Film, therefore, reinforces and justifies the continual treatment of women as second-class citizens. (Citron 1972: 43)

This explains why early sociological approaches to women's representation, in the tradition of the film critic whose review is based on opinion, "derive from the dominant traditions of practical criticism based on personal response and subjectivity" (Johnston 1975a: 115; see also Lesage 1974b). Indeed, sociological approaches create zero distance between the feminist film critic and how she sees herself represented in a heteropatriarchal medium, motivated by a political consciousness. Here, the feminist film critic identifies "images of women" as the site of punitive struggle, resulting in ideological analyses of women's cinematic representation. Although such criticism often lends itself to a simplistic rendering of ideology, developing essentialist either/or conclusions that read women's representation as either progressive or reactionary, this essentialist rendering of ideology is purposely polemic as a catalyst of sorts. As Citron neatly summarises, a (lesbian) feminist filmmaker herself, what these sociological approaches to feminist film

criticism provide are the "much needed impetus for social change" in which audiences and filmmakers alike are made aware of the issues at stake in women's representation. Given an ideological breakdown of what constitutes "good" and "bad" representation, such criticism aims to influence the very essence of film content, inspiring filmmakers and industry figures with ways to "provide a variety of new female images" (Citron 1972: 43). Equipped with more "positive" images of women in the mainstream, feminist film criticism assumes positive social change for women, emancipated from their second-class status with authentic representation that reflects their lived experience, no longer reflecting the roles they are supposed to play in heteropatriarchal society.

Historiographies of feminist film studies are often simplistic in their accounts of *Popcorn Venus*, *From Reverence to Rape*, and *Women and their Sexuality in the New Film* as foundational texts that popularised a sociological approach to "images of women" (Thornham 1997; Smelik 1998; McCabe 2004; Chaudhuri 2006; Hollinger 2012). In fact, Johnston's early review goes as far to suggest that these popular studies "should not be inscribed into curricula dealing with women's studies," evidencing "no sense of film theory" (Johnston 1975a: 121-2; see also Kaplan 1974). Although Johnston's words might seem like a particularly scathing criticism, American theorist Julia Lesage made similar comments about the journal *Women and Film* and its sociological trajectory a year earlier, suggesting a disparity in feminist film criticism and the need to pluralise criticisms. Although this might now be recognised as the distinction between feminist film criticism and feminist film theory (Citron et al. 1978; Gledhill 1978; Rich 1978; Kuhn 1982/1994; Doane et al. 1984; Bergstrom and Doane 1989; Erens 1990)—both of which, nevertheless, constitute feminist film studies—the need to decipher between critical/theoretical discourses is essential in coming to understand why psychoanalytic methods were so ingrained in the development of feminist film theory. Again, feminist film criticism is said

to provide the impetus for social change, empowering women through "positive" images which reflect back in their everyday lives. In turn, theoreticians take issue with the fact that social change is not the same as systemic change, knowing that the representational politics of feminist film criticism is at the cost of new stereotypes signifying old myths. Where social change loosens the grip but maintains the hold of a totalitarian state, allowing women to feel empowered while maintaining their position in heteropatriarchal relations, systemic change removes that hold completely, allowing women not to simply *feel* liberated in their current situation but *be* liberated from that situation entirely, emancipated from heteropatriarchal oppression.

This is not to suggest a naivety on the part of early feminist film critics but, rather, a limit to their approach. Indeed, early feminist film criticism was grounded as much in Marxist ideology as it was feminism, enabling critics to fully comprehend the system within which social change happens. In the first issue of *Women and Film*, for example, editors Siew-Hwa Beh and Saunie Salyer call on the necessity of a "feminist-marxist-anarchist [*sic*] direction" in feminist film criticism, encouraging "as many women as possible" to contribute to the grassroots journal, as well as "men who are on our side." Here, people's liberation—including, but not limited to, "the liberation of workers, blacks, third people and children"—cannot be achieved without women's liberation, "for under every oppressed male/coloured/worker [*sic*] there usually lies a woman." Such early feminist film criticism therefore takes "images of women" as the site of political struggle and, in its mission to achieve positive social transformation for women, strategises to further develop "a People's Cinema where human beings are portrayed as human beings and not servile caricatures" (Beh and Salyer 1972: 6).

Writing two years after *Women and Film*'s inaugural issue, Lesage reflects upon the journal's mission as set out by Beh and Salyer, aligning herself with the emancipatory project of feminist film criticism. Here, she states:

> When I myself say that I am a socialist feminist, that means that I see the major forms of oppression in our society—sexual, class, and racial oppression, in particular—as interrelated and that women's oppression must be fought by collective action against those institutions which are built on class, racial, and sexual oppression: namely, the institutions of capitalism. (Lesage 1974b: 12)

Where *sexual* oppression otherwise refers to *sexist* oppression (misogyny), illustrative of a vernacular where heteropatriarchal gender relations are based on sexual difference (male/female), Lesage identifies cinema as a capitalist institution that does not merely reflect structures of classism, racism, and misogyny, but upholds those very structures. Bespeaking then recent developments in film theory, Lesage recognises cinema not as film per se but as a capitalist institution that is comprised of various sub-systems that all structurally interrelate, bringing into question the socially transformative potential of a feminist film criticism that provides ideological analyses of "images of women" on a strictly superficial level (ibid.: 13-5). As she writes, "the feminist critic must work out for herself a theoretical framework to encompass the whole range of issues related to film," calling for a theory-based criticism that "includes an explanation of the mechanisms operating *within* the film (form, content, etc.) and the mechanisms that go beyond the product that is the film (such as the film industry, distribution, audience expectation, etc.)" (ibid.: 13, emphasis in original). Johnston's review of *Popcorn Venus*, *From Reverence to Rape*, and *Women and their Sexuality in the New Film* subsequently situates Lesage's remarks in relation to these popular studies, addressing their need to "assess the role women have played in film history" through an institutional lens, and argues that "only through

analysis of text construction, of representation and of how meaning is produced in the film text, can the possible foundation of a genuinely revolutionary feminist cinema be laid" (Johnston 1975a: 122; see also Johnston 1973/1976; Cook and Johnston 1974/1988; Johnston 1975b; Mulvey 1975).

Demystifying the Gaze: Feminist Film Theory and the Heteropatriarchal Discourse of Cine-Psychoanalysis

French film theorists Jean-Louis Baudry and Christian Metz were among the first to theorise cinema as a capitalist institution (Baudry 1974-75; Metz 1975; Baudry 1976), inspired by *Cahiers du Cinéma* and the politics of French film criticism in the late 1960s (Comolli and Narboni 1971). In dialogue with Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, applying semiotics and psychoanalysis, Baudry and Metz sought to theorise the "cinematic apparatus" as an "ideological state apparatus" (Althusser 1971); that which upholds the dominant ideology by creating subjects (or, in this particular case, spectators) who are compliant with the state. Laura Mulvey's 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" subsequently emerged as a vital contribution to apparatus theory. While the essay is typically simplified as "the founding document of psychoanalytic feminist film theory" (Modleski 1988: 1), Mulvey was primarily interested in the gendered implications of the cinematic apparatus, problematising how Baudry and Metz had naturalised the "male" subject position of the spectator. Accordingly, where Baudry and Metz had already established a psychoanalytic approach to the cinematic apparatus, Mulvey sought to appropriate psychoanalytic theory as a "political weapon" precisely because of its oppressive, heteropatriarchal discourse. The language of psychoanalysis, for Mulvey's purposes, provides a conduit through which to explore "our understanding of the status quo, of the patriarchal order in which we are caught" (Mulvey 1975: 6-7; see

also Lesage 1974a; Altman 1977; Pajaczkowska 1981; Gledhill 1988; Kaplan 1990a; Farmer 2000).

According to Mulvey, classical Hollywood cinema is organised around the so-called "male gaze," which describes the male spectator's delusion of mastery and control under the specific viewing conditions of the cinematic apparatus. Here, the darkness of the auditorium situates each individual spectator in a perceived state of isolation; the screen, the projector, the form of the film, and the conventions of classical Hollywood narrative work to create the illusion that the spectator is "looking in on a private world" (ibid.: 9). Within this world that the male spectator perceives to be grounded in realism, the main male protagonist "articulates the look and creates the action," providing "a main controlling figure with whom the spectator can identify." Although the main male protagonist is, in reality, an imaginary character, the male spectator perceives him to be a mirror image of himself; an "ideal ego" that looks "more perfect, more complete, more powerful," but is imaginary and therefore unattainable. Accordingly, the cinematic apparatus creates "a stage of spatial illusion" where the male spectator can flail in denial. "As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look on to that of his like, his screen surrogate," creating the illusion that the male spectator's look is one of mastery and control, claiming the main male protagonist's power over the narrative as his own (ibid.: 12-3).

Given that classical Hollywood cinema functions as fantasy for the male ego, Mulvey argues that the representation of "woman" does not represent women at all. Rather, "woman" is the site of misrecognition; a symbolic figure for men to displace their anxieties. "Woman's desire," Mulvey writes, "is subjected to her image as bearer of the bleeding wound, she can exist only in relation to castration and cannot transcend it" (ibid.: 7). Here, Mulvey refers back to Freudian psychoanalysis in which the young boy is said

to believe that his mother has a penis, constituting the phallocentric notion in boyhood that everyone has a penis. On the occasion that the young boy stumbles upon his mother naked, catching a glimpse of her genitals, he is said to be horrified and assumes that she must have been castrated by his father. This, according to Freud, constitutes the traumatic moment that the young boy is made aware of "sexual difference" in which he can respond by adopting a fetish object. This fetish object can range from anything in sight—pubic hair, feet, tights, shoes, underwear—and displaces the missing female phallus onto the object, protecting the young boy from the knowledge of "sexual difference" and the traumatic possibility of castration. Psychosexually, repressed in the unconscious mind, the mother becomes symbolic of male "lack" in which female/feminine subject positions become synonymous with masochism and passivity, whereas the father situates male/masculine subject positions in relation to active sadism.

Because the representation of "woman" in the classical Hollywood cinema elicits castration anxiety in the male spectator, female characters are to be "simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*," in which their "visual presence tends to work against the development of the storyline, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation" (ibid.: 11, emphasis in original). That is, through processes of objectification, "woman" is reduced to a fetishistic image that phallicises her. Where Mulvey proceeds to contentiously argue that, in stark contrast to the female figure, "the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification," this is only because she appropriates the heteropatriarchal discourse that underlies psychoanalytic theory ("sexual difference") to interrogate the gendered implications of the cinematic apparatus and classical Hollywood cinema. In other words, Mulvey can only interrogate the "active/passive heterosexual division of labour" that ideologically defines "male" and

"female" subject positions by being controversial, identifying a split between "woman as spectacle" and an Oedipal narrative that "supports the man's role as the active one of forwarding the story, making things happen" (ibid.: 12).

Whereas Mulvey draws on fetishistic scopophilia to describe the visual pleasure of "woman as spectacle," she subsequently draws on voyeurism to describe the visual pleasure of the classical Hollywood narrative. Here, she notes that voyeurism is associated with sadism, and active sadistic voyeurism is crucial to the Oedipal trajectory of narrative. "Sadism demands a story, depends on making something happen, forcing a change in another person," Mulvey writes, in which active sadistic voyeurism is required for the male spectator to take up his "masculine" subject position in heteropatriarchal gender relations. With the female figure successfully fetishised, no longer causing threat as "bearer of the bleeding wound," the main male protagonist—and, in his identification, the male spectator—must ascertain guilt and assert control, "subjecting the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness" (ibid.: 14). With punishment usually in death and forgiveness in marriage, the Oedipal trajectory of narrative's end holds the male spectator in a stable identification with the main male protagonist, reducing "woman" to an undesirable position of passivity.

As Mulvey has long since reminded us, her theory of the "male gaze" was polemic and controversial by design, "uncompromising and un-nuanced," written out of need and necessity in the context of Britain in the early 1970s (Mulvey 2019: 242; see also Mulvey 1989/2009; Mulvey 1996/2013; Mulvey 2004; Mulvey 2006; Mulvey 2015; Mulvey 2020). Mandy Merck goes as far to call it "Mulvey's Manifesto" in which she neatly contextualises "Visual Pleasure" as a pioneering contribution to film studies in the UK:

> In Britain, the feminist movement of the early 1970s was mostly composed of educated middle-class women, but relatively few were employed as academics in a

> male-dominated profession . . . The film studies of the early 1970s were not undertaken in the country's universities, but in the British Film Institute, the film societies, journals ranging from Movie to New Left Review, exhibition sites such as the National Film Theatre and the Film-Makers' Co-Op, events like the EFF, and—importantly—secondary schools. (Merck 2007: 3; see also Fabian 2018)

As previously noted, although it is well beyond the confines of this present study to elaborate on the history of film education in the UK, it is important to note that "Visual Pleasure" is not simply reducible to a subsection of film studies (read feminist film theory). As Linda Williams elaborates, "feminist approaches have been so frequently folded into the basic questioning of the field of film and media studies that it would be counterproductive to isolate them" (Williams 2004: 1265). Viewed through this lens, "Visual Pleasure" constitutes a radical act of feminist activism that is grounded in consciousness-raising, not only making readers aware of the "male gaze" that permeates classical Hollywood cinema, but making readers aware of the (unconscious) heteropatriarchal discourse that had already developed the "male gaze" in film studies and apparatus theory vis-à-vis Baudry and Metz, the breadth of readership a further testament.

In reading "Visual Pleasure" as a consciousness-raising exercise, Mulvey further notes that she "hoped by conjuring up the male universal, homogenising subject 'he' (that we all knew), especially in the context of an overtly feminist argument, there might be a further element of shock" (Mulvey 2019: 242). With this, it is curious how Mulvey exclusively refers to "male" and "female" subject positions throughout her essay, not once referring to them interchangeably as "masculine" and "feminine" subject positions. Although it might be argued that Mulvey's essentialist definition of the "male" and "female" subject might be down to an archaic notion of "sexual difference," even analysts Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis in their influential engagement with Freud acknowledge that the "masculine" and the "feminine" have both sociological *and*

biological significance (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973: 243-4). Accordingly, critical emphasis needs to be drawn to the fact that the so-called "male gaze" is not inherently male; it is structured around the dominant ideology that upholds heteropatriarchal culture. In this light, the "male" spectator can never achieve the perfection, the wholeness, the power that he sees in his "ideal ego," translated into cultural studies as "hegemonic masculinity" (Connell 1995/2005).

According to Raewyn Connell, hegemonic masculinity describes an idealised image of masculinity in heteropatriarchal culture, and "guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (ibid.: 77). Typified by the privileged "straight white man" of the popular imaginary, only a small number of men meet the near impossible standards of hegemonic masculinity, yet most are complicit "since they benefit from the patriarchal dividend, the advantage men in general gain from the overall subordination of women" (ibid.: 79). Given that Connell also emphasises that there are "specific gender relations of dominance and subordination between groups of men" (ibid.: 78), it is important to note that the so-called "male gaze" bespeaks a dominant subject position in heteropatriarchal gender relations and is not specific to a "male" or "female" subject position. It is because of this that E. Ann Kaplan refers to the "male gaze" more accurately as a "masculine gaze" (Kaplan 1983: 23-35). On the specificity of Mulvey writing about the heterosexist "male" spectator in her essay, recalling that "we all knew one" in the 1970s, Mulvey's feminist wit seems to have been lost in canonical translation; her sweeping generalisation was never made as a "sensible" decision (Mulvey 2019: 242).

Following publication of "Visual Pleasure" in 1975, feminist film theory quickly turned to a consideration of female spectatorship, developing two critical approaches that were summarised by Silvia Bovenschen as early as 1977:

> The woman could either betray her sex and identify with the masculine point of view, or, in a state of accepted passivity, she could be masochistic/narcissistic and identify with the object of the masculine representation. (Bovenschen 1977: 127; see also Doane 1980; Doane 1981-82; Kaplan 1983)

While Mulvey's 1981 follow-up essay "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' inspired by King Vidor's *Duel by the Sun* (1946)" might subsequently seem repetitive in its theory of female spectatorship, its terms of use are nuanced. Here, Mulvey focuses on classical Westerns where "a woman central protagonist is shown to be unable to achieve a stable sexual identification, torn between the deep blue sea of passive femininity and the devil of regressive masculinity" (Mulvey 1981: 12). According to Mulvey, the female spectator's identificatory process mimics her gendered instability, drawing on Freudian theory of the libido (again, as metaphor) to suggest that it performs "both the masculine and the feminine functions," an active/passive oscillation (ibid.: 13). This allows the female spectator to freely oscillate between "masculine" and "feminine" subject positions, shifting between "trans-sex" identification with male characters and passive identification with female characters. By film's end, however, as in "Visual Pleasure," the woman central protagonist is punished in death; the female spectator's fantasy for masculinisation is left "at cross purposes with itself, restless in its transvestite clothes" (ibid.: 15).

Given that the female spectator in Mulvey's account is left in an inherently masochistic position, anxiously assuming a "masculine" subject position with the knowledge that such "non-feminine" transgression killed her screen surrogate, feminist film theory quickly developed a discourse surrounding "the impossibility of female spectatorship" (Doane 1987: 175). Here, extending the "images of women" debate that originally defined feminist film studies, critics questioned feminist film theory's focus on

the cinematic apparatus and its organising "gaze," arguing that it leaves little to no room to consider the female spectator in any meaningful way beyond heteropatriarchal definition (Rose 1980; Copjec 1982; Penley 1985). Other theorists, however, found promise in Mulvey's emphasis on cross-gender identification and its oscillation between masculinity/femininity. As Teresa de Lauretis subsequently observes, "figures of masquerade, transvestism, and crossdressing have been recurrent tropes of feminist discourse in the eighties, and in the theorisation of female spectatorship in particular" (de Lauretis 1994: 103; see also Doane 1982; Kuhn 1985; Doane 1988-89; Gaines 1989).

Furthering the possibilities of masquerade, transvestism, and crossdressing, feminist film theory also started to draw on "fantasy theory" to develop a more flexible and fluid approach to the cinematic apparatus and spectatorship. Elizabeth Cowie's 1984 essay "Fantasia" is arguably the first to draw on Laplanche and Pontalis' 1968 essay "Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality," using it to problematise how film theorists to date had focused too hard on "uncovering the trajectory of desire constituted by the film text, a trajectory which is shown to position and fix the spectator as subject for its enunciation, an enunciation concerning a masculine Oedipal problem." Here, Cowie not only acknowledges fantasy as "a series of wishes presented through imaginary happenings" but "also a structure: fantasy as the *mise-en-scène* of desire, the putting into a scene, a staging, of desire" (Cowie 1984: 71). That is, spectators do not have to actively choose who they identify with in either/or terms of masculine/sadistic or feminine/masochistic Oedipal desire; the cinematic apparatus creates a sadomasochistic fantasy where characters and their Oedipal functions exist not in themselves but as part of the *mise-en-scène*, allowing the spectator to identify with multiple and contradictory subject positions simultaneously. Where this sadomasochistic fluidity indicates that subject positions are variable, however,

Cowie maintains that the Oedipal dictates of the cinematic apparatus means that "the terms of sexual difference are fixed" by narrative's end (ibid: 102).

Teresa de Lauretis' *Alice Doesn't* (1984) also draws on Laplanche and Pontalis to come to similar conclusions as Cowie on the identificatory politics of female spectatorship. Yet de Lauretis' discussion of "plot-space" and the female position in narrative makes her work particularly valuable. Literary theorist Jurij M. Lotman argues that myth is characterised by two aspects at opposite ends of the Oedipal trajectory; a heroic figure (Oedipus) who must overcome an obstacle typified by "darkness, warmth, dampness" ("a cave," "a house," "woman," etc.), representative of the archaic mother (Lotman 1979: 168). de Lauretis subsequently argues that the female protagonist is symbolic of this "plot-space," developing a theory of sadomasochistic spectatorship in which the female spectator can simultaneously identify with both "masculine" and "feminine" subject positions:

> . . . the female spectator identifies with both the subject and the space of the narrative movement, with the figure of the movement and the figure of its closure, the narrative image. Both are figural identifications, and both are possible at once; more, they are concurrently borne and mutually implicated by the process of narrativity. (de Lauretis 1984: 143)

Just as the cinematic apparatus creates a sadomasochistic fantasy where multiple characters and their contradictory Oedipal functions are organised into a single *mise-en-scène* of desire, the female spectator's so-called "bisexual" identification with both "male" and "female" subject positions situates her across both positionalities of desire, active and passive; "desire for the other, and desire to be desired by the other". Although, again, this "double identification" might seem optimistic in its attempt to write the female spectator into the cinematic apparatus, its Oedipal limits result in de Lauretis holding no less hope

than Mulvey and Cowie. Here, the female spectator's "masculine" identification with the main male protagonist allows her to project her own desire and self-worth onto the female protagonist. However, by assuming that her projection of desire and self-worth constitute the real feelings of a main male protagonist who is only imaginary, "narrative and cinema solicit the spectators' consent and seduce women into femininity" by film's end (ibid.: 143).

Simultaneous with its focus on "images of women" and female spectatorship, feminist film theory also found interest in "images of men" and male spectatorship, bringing into question Mulvey's view that the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objection and that the male spectator's identification is inherently grounded in sadism. Pam Cook's 1982 essay "Masculinity in Crisis?" reflects on her own "cinéphiliac obsession" with Martin Scorsese's *Raging Bull* (1980) to consider the implications that are presented in her work as a feminist film theorist (Cook 1982: 39; see also Gledhill 1995). According to Cook, numerous feminists celebrated *Raging Bull* upon its release; those "who have seen in its explicit representation of violence as a masculine social disease a radical critique of masculinity" (ibid.: 39). Where Cook proceeds to make a compelling counterargument, arguing that the film's attitude towards violence is ambiguous at best and "masculinity is put into crisis so that we can mourn its loss" (ibid: 40), her conclusion crucially notes that feminist fascination with *Raging Bull* "does raise crucial questions of desire, of the desires of feminist politics in relation to male desires and masculine politics, of the mobilisation of aggression and desire in the interests of politics" (ibid.: 46). That is, in centralising "images of women" as its organising feature, feminist film theory had rarely considered "images of men" and the nuances of male subjectivity. Some theorists saw potential in using feminist approaches to the politics of masculinity, sexuality, and violence.

Although Richard Dyer's 1982 essay "Don't Look Now" does not centralise film and considers the male pin-up across media culture, his was published at the same time as Cook's and is particularly influential. Dyer, like Mulvey, identifies a heterosexist double standard in looking relations between men and women. This act of cultural violence permits men to freely gaze upon "woman as spectacle" yet women are not permitted to look at men in the same way. Even though men in the media make themselves freely available for women to look, women are frequently manipulated into thinking otherwise since "images of men are often images of men doing something," implying that women are non-consensual voyeurs who only ever catch men in the act of doing things. Where "woman as spectacle" is feminised, furthermore, "images of men must disavow this element of passivity if they are to be kept in line with dominant ideas of masculinity-as-activity," and "even in an apparently relaxed, supine pose, the model tightens and tautens his body so that the muscles are emphasised, hence drawing attention to the body's potential for action" (Dyer 1982: 66-7). This might lead to the conclusion that men in the media assume an inherently sadistic subject position yet, again, their sadism as "non-spectacle" is grounded in an act of denial. Such denial indicates a deeply embedded masochism in images of men:

> Hence the excessive, even hysterical quality of so much male imagery. The clenched fists, the bulging muscles, the hardened jaws, the proliferation of phallic symbols—they are all straining after what can hardly ever be achieved, the embodiment of the phallic mystique [read hegemonic masculinity]. (ibid.: 71)

Where Dyer most notably re-reads Mulvey's notion that the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification, Steve Neale's 1983 essay "Masculinity as Spectacle" focuses on film in particular and the three psychosexual processes that Mulvey draws on, situating them in relation to images of men: identification, voyeuristic looking, and

fetishistic looking. Speaking in regard to male spectatorship and the cinematic apparatus, Neale demonstrates how "the erotic elements involved in the relations between the spectator and the male image have constantly to be repressed and disavowed," allowing the homoerotic implication(s) of male-on-male looks to be denied (Neale 1983: 15; see also Willemen 1981; Hanson 1991; Tasker 1993). This is precisely why "masculine" genres and films aimed at straight men "constantly involve sado-masochistic themes, scenes and phantasies," in which the sadistic spectacle of action allows the male spectator to deflect his look away from the masochistic (read homoerotic) spectacle of male suffering (ibid.: 8). "Were this not the case," Neale crucially concludes, and the homoerotic implications of male-on-male looks were embraced,

> . . . mainstream cinema would have openly to come to terms with the male homosexuality it so assiduously seeks either to denigrate or deny. As it is, male homosexuality is constantly present as an undercurrent, as a potentially troubling aspect of many films and genres, but one that is dealt with obliquely, symptomatically, and that has to be repressed. (ibid.: 15)

Neale's closing remarks therefore indicate that, just as feminist film theorists enunciated the impossibility of female spectatorship, the Oedipal confines of the cinematic apparatus also result in the impossibility of gay male spectatorship. Lest we miss the point, the "images of women" debate that originally defined feminist film studies was paralleled by a "gays in film" debate, and while some gay film theorists found promise in psychoanalysis (Tropiano 1989; Hanson 1991; Drukman 1995), it was largely written out of consideration (Dyer 1977a; Kleinhans 1977a; Wood 1978a; Watney 1982; Medhurst 1984). With film theory's newfound interest in masochism and fantasy theory, however, feminist film theorists quickly developed a discourse surrounding marginalised male subjectivity. Although such theory assumes itself to further the impossibility of gay male spectatorship,

as demonstrated below, the very notion of male spectatorship written into discourse is indicative of a gay male subjectivity that is denied only through the cinematic apparatus. That is, with the cinematic apparatus dismantled in the age of new media and technologies, the impossibility of gay male spectatorship in psychoanalytic film theory is inverted to speak precisely *for* the possibility of gay male spectatorship.

Gaylyn Studlar's 1984 essay "Masochism and the Perverse Pleasures of Cinema," revised and expanded as part of her book *In the Realm of Pleasure* (1988), is instrumental to the development of feminist film theory in which she theorises the "masochistic aesthetic" to challenge cine-psychoanalysis' dependency on Freud and Lacan to theorise spectatorship. Reflecting then recent trends in feminist film theory which sought to shift the signification of "woman" beyond phallic meaning (Lurie 1980; Silverman 1980; Lurie 1981-82; Pajaczkowska 1981; Fischer and Landy 1982; Williams 1984), Studlar draws on the work of Gilles Deleuze "to challenge basic Freudian tenets regarding the sado-masochistic duality and the etiology of masochism as a response to the father and castration fear" (Studlar 1984: 267; see also Deleuze 1971):

> Within masochism, the mother is not defined as lack nor as "phallic" in respect to a single transference of the male's symbol of power. She is powerful in her own right because she possesses what the male lacks—the breast and the womb. Active nurturer, first source of love and object of desire, first environment and agent of control, the oral mother of masochism assumes all symbolic functions. Parallel to her idealisation is a degrading disavowal of the father. (ibid.: 271)

Here, masochism describes the child's painful longing to be at one with the pre-Oedipal mother, characterised by the "masochistic aesthetic" of the cinematic apparatus which regresses the spectator back to the origins of masochism; that "infantile stage of helpless dependence" in which "pleasure does not involve mastery of the female but submission to her" (ibid.: 272). Within this equation, the cinematic apparatus espouses masochism in

one of two ways. Firstly, the spectator's passive look can never achieve the mastery of the gaze. Just as the adult masochist of psychoanalytic theory "cannot control the active partner," the spectator's look is a helpless one in which they "must comprehend the images, but the images cannot be controlled" (ibid.: 275; see also Silverman 1989; Clover 1992). Secondly, referring back to Baudry and Metz's analogy of the cinematic apparatus as a pre-Oedipal unity between mother and infant (Metz 1975; Baudry 1976), Studlar writes how the cinematic apparatus situates the spectator in a position of "lack" that relishes in the loss of pre-Oedipal connection:

> Just as the fantasised breast cannot offer real nourishment or interaction with the mother, the cinematic apparatus cannot provide intimacy or fusion with real objects. The spectator must disavow an absence: the dream screen offers only partial gratification of the symbiotic wish. (ibid.: 277).

By distinguishing masochism in its own maternal realm away from sadism, Studlar's discussion of the "masochistic aesthetic" might seem at odds with theories of sadomasochism, "trans-sex," and "bisexual" identification. Such theories, to reiterate, rely heavily on the Oedipal trajectory of the cinematic apparatus and the Law of the Father. Studlar is keen to assert, however, that this is not the case. Here, the "masochistic aesthetic" encourages identification with both "male" and "female" subject positions, explained by Studlar in the following terms:

> While the male's pre-Oedipal identification with the mother is repressed in adult life, for both male and female, same-sex identification does not totally exclude opposite-sex identification. The wish to be both sexes—to *overcome* sexual difference—remains" (ibid.: 277, emphasis in original).

For Studlar's purposes, the wish to overcome "sexual difference" is grounded in "the wish and counterwish for fusion and separation from the mother, the wish to change gender

identity." This allows the subject not to be committed to the sadism of Father's Law, allowing the subject to identify with both parents at once. Although this might seem inherently sadomasochistic, Studlar clarifies, the subject's inability to ever achieve this sadomasochistic desire situates it in the mother's realm of masochism. "Through the mobility of multiple, fluid identifications, the cinema provides an enunciative apparatus that functions as a protective guise like fantasy or dream," leading Studlar to conclude in dialogue with Laplanche and Pontalis that "fantasy is one means of achieving the goal of reintegrating opposite-sex identification" (ibid.: 178).

By this point in the development of feminist film theory, (sado-)masochism and its relation to sex/gender and identification seemed abstract in the texts that theory analysed: the thrillers of Alfred Hitchcock, Josef von Sternberg's star vehicle films for Marlene Dietrich, the classical Hollywood Western, the woman's film of the 1940s, film noir, etc. Although these films might be (sado-)masochistic in a psychoanalytic sense, the aesthetics of (sado-)masochism had to be clearly spelled out by theorists in relation to film content, creating a gap for feminist film theorists to draw on non-pornographic narrative films and genres that explicitly aestheticise their (sado-)masochistic politics. Enabled by feminist film theory's turn to fantasy, then, feminist film theorists quickly found productive ground in deploying horror as a fantasy genre; that which Mark Nash first coined the "cinefantastic" (Nash 1976; see also Donald 1989).

Barbara Creed's 1986 essay "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine," revised and expanded as part of her book *The Monstrous-Feminine* (1993), gained most traction among feminist film theorists by first introducing Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection to feminist film theory (Mulvey 2020). Kristeva reminds us that the child's first experience with authority is an experience with "maternal authority," typified by the mother's active role in sphincteric training (Kristeva 1982: 71). This notion of "maternal authority" is pre-

Oedipal and, demonstrating the child's unequivocal need for the mother in early development, abdicates the father of all being and power. Differing from the Deleuzian mother that Studlar describes, however, central to the abject mother is the fact that "the child learns, through interaction with the mother, about its body: the shape of the body, the clean and the unclean, the proper and improper areas of the body" (Creed 1993: 12). For Kristeva, toilet training constitutes "a primal mapping of the body" that is symptomatic of the "semiotic" as opposed to the "symbolic," creating a distinction between "maternal authority" and "paternal laws" (Kristeva 1982: 72). It is precisely because of this that bodily waste (faeces, urine, vomit, etc.) is so vile, so disgusting, so abject in the Western imaginary; bodily waste is "semiotic" of maternal authority and, if it was not culturally programmed to repulse, it might otherwise serve as a reminder of the pre-Oedipal mother who was self-sufficient and powerful enough to exist without the father. Kristeva therefore refers to abjection as that which "disturbs identity, system, order," that which "does not respect borders, positions, rules," because the abject disrupts heteropatriarchal discourse by referring back to the "semiotic" realm of the pre-Oedipal mother (Kristeva 1982: 4).

As Creed proceeds to demonstrate, modern horror films represent the "monstrous-feminine" in relation to the maternal figure and abjection in numerous ways: woman as archaic mother, monstrous womb, vampire, possessed monster, *femme castratrice* (castrating woman), witch, castrating mother. Far from the "mother of plenitude" that Studlar examines (Studlar 1984: 273), the monstrous-feminine is powerful in the fear that she elicits; through her transgressions that threaten heteropatriarchal identity, system, order, "the horror film sets out to explore the perverse, masochistic aspects of the gaze" (Creed 1993: 154). Although, for Creed's purposes, fantasy allows the male spectator to oscillate between an identification with the victim and an identification with the monster,

Creed emphasises the male spectator's identification with the former. "Through the figure of the monstrous-feminine, the horror film plays on his possible fears of menstrual blood, incorporation, domination, castration and death," situating the male spectator "in a powerless situation" (ibid.: 155).

Where Creed argues that the abject mother is a source of fear in modern horror, Carol J. Clover takes a radically different approach to suggest that the slasher film is thematised around the "mother of plenitude" that Studlar discusses, arguing that the slasher film is organised around her notion of the masochistic aesthetic. Here, Clover argues that the male killer of the slasher film is effeminate in some way, bound in a pre-Oedipal attachment with the mother. By contrast, "the Final Girl is a male surrogate in things oedipal," masculinised at film's end when she defeats the killer. Fundamentally, Clover appropriates de Lauretis' theory of female spectatorship to theorise male spectatorship in the slasher film, recognising a gendered reversal of the masculine "heroic figure" as female and the feminine "plot-space" to be overcome as male. Indicatively, Clover argues that the slasher film's narrative is centralised around the Terrible Place, most often a womb-like house or a uterine tunnel that the killer occupies, from which the Final Girl is reborn at the film's end with the pre-Oedipal killer dead. Until that moment, however, just as the cinematic apparatus creates a sadomasochistic fantasy where multiple characters and their contradictory functions are put into a single *mise-en-scène* of desire, the male spectator's so-called "bisexual" identification with both "masculine" and "feminine" subject positions situates him across both active/passive positionalities of desire. Although this "double identification" is ultimately repudiated by film's end, the Final Girl's Oedipal trajectory safely situating the male spectator in relation to his "masculine" subject position in heteropatriarchal gender relations, the violent abjection of the pre-Oedipal male (often queer coded) raises important questions about the cinematic apparatus and the

impossibility of a gay male spectatorship. That is to say, although theorists have assimilated gay male subjectivity into Clover's theory of male spectatorship and the Oedipal sadism of the Final Girl (Greven 2011; Elliott-Smith 2015; Elliott-Smith 2016; Greven 2016), the necessary separation of gendered subjectivity and spectatorship from the cinematic apparatus allows a gay male spectatorship to be theorised via Clover in much more radical, anti-Oedipal terms.

Oedipal sadism has dominated the critical discourse surrounding Clover's work. Where critics have chosen to emphasise the Final Girl's masculinisation at film's end, critics have chosen to neglect how she spends most of the film: "being chased and almost caught, hiding, running, falling, rising in pain and fleeing again, seeing her friends mangled and killed by weapon-wielding killers, and so on" (Clover 2015: x). Where critics have chosen to emphasise the killer's sadistic point of view that hides his feminine subject position, critics have chosen to neglect how "the fascination of the sadistic point of view is merely that it provides the best vantage point from which to watch the masochistic story unfold" (Silverman 1980: 5). Indeed, critics have read the antithesis of Clover's argument:

> If one focuses (as critics tend to) on the endings of horror films, one sees sadism. But if one takes it as a point of fact . . . that endings (as well as beginnings) are generally overdetermined and that it is in narrative middles that crucial matters are contested, and if one accordingly focuses on those parts of horror films—their middles, especially their "late" middles—in which the tension is greatest and the audience body most engaged, one sees masochism, and in remarkably blatant forms. (Clover 1992: 222)

For Clover, endings are an ideological precondition of the cinematic apparatus, allowing theorists to understand how cinema as an institution upholds heteropatriarchal structures. Middles, on the other hand, allow theorists to understand what could be—what *is*, repressed in the unconscious of heteropatriarchal society—and therefore hold radical

potential in imagining new futures that redefine notions of gender and sexuality. Although the systemic (Oedipal) precondition of the slasher film is defined by the cinematic apparatus, Clover herself pre-empts the future importance of new media and technologies in spectatorship, discussing the popularity of modern horror in both movie theatres and on home video. Accordingly, the narrative trajectory of the slasher film is not necessarily fixed in a predetermined, closed, binding structure; the Oedipal dictates become questionable and, indeed, the male spectatorship that Clover discusses becomes indicative of a gay male subjectivity that is not sadistic but fiercely anti-Oedipal.

Although Clover ultimately argues that the slasher film is grounded in sadomasochism, she emphasises how most of the narrative (the middle) is organised around "feminine masochism," suggesting that the male spectator identifies not with the killer's sadistic violence but with the female victim in peril. Where psychoanalytic theory broadly defines masochism as a "sexual perversion in which satisfaction is tied to the suffering or humiliation undergone by the subject" (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973: 244), feminine masochism "refers not to masochism in women, but to the essence of masochistic perversion in *men*" (Clover 1992: 215, emphasis in original). Here, feminine masochism is grounded in cross-gender identification as the male subject imagines his own masochistic fantasies and sexual desires through an identification with the female body. Accordingly, as the male killer penetrates the female victim in the slasher film, the (heterosexual) male spectator displaces his masochistic pleasure through identification with the female body to avoid a scenario that makes his homoerotic desire consciously known. As Clover proceeds to appropriately note on her theoretical approach to the slasher film:

> I did not know, when I began this project, that it would take me in some directions that it has: so deeply into the etiology of sadomasochism, for example, and into issues of male homosexuality. I feel especially tentative on the latter point, for I am

> fully aware that gay studies has emerged as a field related to but also distinct from feminism in the past few years, and that its discourse has been almost as frustratingly expansive as horror itself. (ibid.: 19-20)

Central here is publication of Leo Bersani's 1987 essay "Is the Rectum a Grave?" in which Bersani explicitly relates masochism to a gay male subjectivity that disrupts Oedipal power. Although controversial in approach, Bersani identifies a discursive overlap between misogyny and homophobia and argues that straight women and gay men "must of course fight the violence directed against them" (Bersani 1987: 221). His words here come from a critical engagement with Simon Watney who suggests that the verbal and physical violence of homophobia "may be symptomatic of displaced misogyny, with a hatred of what is projected as 'passive' and therefore female, sanctioned by the subject's dominant heterosexual drives" (Watney 1987/1996, 50). Bersani's argument assumes that, in dialogue with anti-pornography feminists such as Catherine A. MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, anal sex between gay men inevitably reproduces the same power dynamic as vaginal sex between straight people, "polarised into relations of mastery and subordination" (Bersani 1987: 216). "*To be penetrated is to abdicate power*," he most famously writes (ibid.: 212, emphasis in original), naturalising the "masculine" mastery of the penis and the "feminine" passivity of the bottom's anus and the woman's vagina. Drawing on the realities of syphilis in the nineteenth century and AIDS in the late twentieth century, Bersani respectively calls for the vagina and the rectum to be celebrated in their "very potential for death," celebrated for their reminder of the "semiotic," the mother's pre-Oedipal realm, with the power to destroy the symbolic order and heteropatriarchal society at large. As Bersani writes tongue-in-cheek, if men are to kid themselves that their penises symbolise the power of the phallus, "the rectum is the grave in which the masculine ideal . . . of proud subjectivity is buried" (ibid.: 222). Controversial, then, is Bersani's call for

women and gay men to "spread their legs with an unquenchable appetite for destruction" (ibid: 211).

Where Bersani makes a valuable contribution to "gay studies" here with its feminist intersection, his essay constitutes part of a wider development in cultural theory surrounding male feminism, emerging in the late 1980s and quickly disbanding into both gender studies and queer theory (Jardine and Smith 1987a; Boone and Cadden 1990; Modleski 1991; Roof 1992). Where Stephen Heath wrote during this period that men's relation to feminism is "impossible" with many theorists agreeing (Heath 1987: 1), gay men and their particular interest in feminist discourse was brought into question. "I don't always understand why that is," Alice Jardine observes, guessing that women are more likely to tolerate gay men in feminism because "we don't then have to worry about being penetrated; we worry less about being invaded, fooled, penetrated" (in Jardine and Smith 1987b: 244). As is the problem with psychoanalytic theories of (sado-)masochism, then, heteropatriarchal oppression is reduced to heteropatriarchal violence and heteropatriarchal violence is reduced to gendered violence. Here, gendered violence is reduced to an archaic notion of "sexual difference" in which violence against women is reduced to male violence. Subsequently, male violence cannot *not* be sexual violence since the male's recognition of "sexual difference" constitutes the origins of sexuality, grounded in infantile psychosexual development that makes men, "men" and women, "women."

Most interestingly, in the context of male feminism, Clover's (sadistic) notion of the Final Girl takes inspiration from the work of profound feminist theorist Elaine Showalter. Showalter is a radical opponent of male contributions to feminist discourse, regardless of their sexuality, and Clover's notion of the Final Girl as a male "transvestite" by film's end is derived from Showalter's fierce criticism of *Tootsie* (1982) as a feminist film in which Dustin Hoffman's character cross-dresses as Dorothy Michaels:

> *Tootsie*'s cross-dressing is a way of promoting the notion of masculine power while masking it. In psychoanalytic theory, the male transvestite is not a powerless man; according to psychiatrist Robert Stoller, in *Sex and Gender*, he is a "phallic woman" who can tell himself that "he is, or with practice will become, a better woman than a biological female if he chooses to do so". When it is safe or necessary, the transvestite "gets pleasure in revealing that he is a male-woman . . . The pleasure in tricking the unsuspecting into thinking he is a woman, and then revealing his maleness (e.g., by suddenly dropping his voice) is not so much erotic as it is proof that there is such a thing as a woman with a penis. Dorothy's effectiveness is the literal equivalent of speaking softly and carrying a big stick. (Showalter 1983/1987: 123)

This, however, is still to emphasise the Final Girl's closing "masculine" subject position which, a perquisite of the cinematic apparatus, is less important than her meaning throughout the film, especially the middle. In emphasising the Final Girl's "masculine" subject position, the *sado*masochistic nature of the slasher film is brought to forefront of discussion as opposed to its masochistic aesthetic; feminine masochism, by its very nature, disrupts the myth of male sadism as a biological condition in feminist discourse, making it particularly important to theories of straight male spectatorship (Silverman 1988: 57). Yet, why reappropriating Clover's theory of male spectatorship as indicative of a gay male subjectivity is so important, the "feminine" gay man's stakes in feminine masochism are radically different to that of the straight man, precisely because the psychosexual redundancy of (sado-)masochism can be reversed to be understood in cultural terms. That is, instead of defining masochism as a sexual perversion that is grounded in sexual desire and sexual pleasure, a gay male spectator's investment in feminine masochism is grounded in an identification with the victim of gendered violence; an identification with the victim of heteropatriarchal violence, heteropatriarchal aggression, misogyny under which lies the discursive reality behind the gay man's own oppressed state. Should it need spelling out, the effeminate male killer (often queer coded) is violently removed from the narrative only

when the Final Girl takes on his earlier sadistic function; the slasher film's sadomasochistic oscillation between the killer and the Final Girl spells out how misogyny and homophobia are one and the same, even though images of misogyny are much more frequent and gratuitous.

Rethinking "Images of Women" in the Twenty-First Century: Postfeminism, Feminine Subjectivity, and Contemporary Media Studies

In 2004, feminist critics Kathleen McHugh and Vivian Sobchack considered the relevance of cine-psychoanalysis and feminist film theory at the turn of the millennium, questioning the "current state of the discipline" in dialogue with the pioneers of feminist film theory. Here, McHugh and Sobchack ask:

> Does feminist film theory still exist as such—or has it been absorbed or diffused by broader and more global theories of media, culture, and gender? . . . Does psychoanalytic theory still have something to offer feminist inquiry into the affect and effects of media? How might feminist film theory avoid parochialism and address an ever-expanding media culture? (McHugh and Sobchack 2004: 1205-6)

Such questions reflect the fact that, by the 1990s, feminist film theory had entered a new juncture in its development. Here, feminist film theory responded to calls for the category of "woman" to be diversified in anti-essentialist terms, allowing theorists to consider differences among women and the intersectional politics of race and ethnicity, class, etc. This was furthered by the problematisation of "Grand Theory" in film studies, typified by the prevalence of cine-psychoanalysis in the late twentieth century where "discussions of cinema are framed within schemes which seek to describe or explain very broad features of society, history, language, and psyche" (Bordwell 1996: 3). As such, feminist film theory shifted away from cine-psychoanalysis to focus on new areas of study: firstly, theorists

sought to write the erasure of racial "difference" into discourse (Gaines 1988; Modleski 1991; hooks 1992; Young 1996), influencing an interrogation of postcolonialism and what E. Ann Kaplan refers to as the "imperial gaze" (Kaplan 1997; see also Bhabha 1983); secondly, theorists sought to problematise the new heroines of genre cinema as pseudo men, drawing on body and performance theory to argue for their feminist politics (Tasker 1993; Straayer 1996; Tasker 1998; Hills 1999; Inness 2004); and thirdly, theorists sought to dismantle earlier theories of the cinematic apparatus by considering gendered subjectivity and new media (Butler 2000; Mayne 2000; Mulvey 2006).

Where postfeminism is theoretically derived from media and cultural studies, its discourse would further encourage a new area of study in feminist film theory. However, within this area of feminist film theory, the specificity of film is often assimilated in discussions of television, media, and popular culture (Read 2000; Coulthard 2007; Barker 2008; Mendible 2008; Tasker 2012; Gwynne and Muller 2013; Hamad 2013; Henry 2014; Schreiber 2014; Lindop 2015; Hill 2020). As Shelley Cobb and Yvonne Tasker proceed to observe, although feminist film theory "may seem an outdated form of scholarship," "feminist critical analysis of the representation of gender and other intersectional identities of class, race and sexuality in film has remained a key component of the feminist critical studies approach to postfeminist media," suggesting that "feminist film criticism's legacy and continuing influence can be found anywhere that feminism and visual culture meet" (Cobb and Tasker 2016). Where postfeminism might be theoretically derived from media and cultural studies, then, postfeminist approaches to film and popular culture need to be recognised as a response to cine-psychoanalysis and feminist film theory in the late twentieth century. Accordingly, where cine-psychoanalysis once appropriated the language of psychoanalysis to theorise the heteropatriarchal dictates of "male spectatorship" and "female spectatorship," this section re-examines how (post)feminist

media studies has appropriated the language of cine-psychoanalysis to theorise the "female spectator" of postfeminist popular culture, despite claims that we are now "post-psychoanalysis" with its methods (supposedly) no longer relevant. Here, it is evidenced how (post)feminist media studies organises itself around the very notion of "sexual difference" that it claims to denounce in feminist film theory's earlier use of cine-psychoanalysis, even though the mechanics of cross-gender identification in cine-psychoanalysis and feminist film theory is much more fluid than recent critics suggest. Having reinstated the fluidity of cross-gender identification in the previous section, then, this section demonstrates how the "female spectator" of postfeminist popular culture is often figurative and describes a discursive category as opposed to an actual female subjectivity, encompassing both women and gay men in their postfeminist identifications.

This section begins by spelling out the discursive parallels between postfeminism and third wave feminism at the turn of the millennium. Both postfeminism and third wave feminism are typified by the rise of "Girl Power" in the 1990s. However, as this section demonstrates, Girl Power's mediation in film and television creates a popular feminism that assimilates feminism and its politics in the mainstream, allowing the representation of "women's independence," "women's freedom," "women's agency," and "women's empowerment" insofar as it fits with a neoliberal narrative of personal choice and decision. Subsequently, this section considers how the female protagonist of postfeminist popular culture is more often than not represented alongside the archetypal gay best friend, restricted to a critical discourse of liberalised "sexual difference" where straight women identify with images of straight women and gay men identify with images of gay men. Drawing on this on-screen friendship as metaphor, this section proceeds to consider how both characters are features of a single *mise-en-scène* and, as such, the gay male spectator of postfeminist popular culture is invited to identify with both straight women and gay men.

By focusing on gay male identification with the female subject of postfeminist popular culture in particular, it becomes apparent that the postfeminist subject is organised around neoliberal ideology, addressing the "feminine" subject position of certain female and gay male subjectivities. Just as postfeminist popular culture assimilates feminism to suggest that "equality" has been achieved, this section demonstrates how gay male identification with postfeminist popular culture and female characters assimilates a gay politics by the same mode of address, consolidating certain female and gay male subjectivities. Just as postfeminist popular culture assimilates the "New Woman" in heteropatriarchal culture, gay male identification with postfeminist popular culture and its *mise-en-scène* of heteronormativity organises the assimilation of gay men in heteropatriarchal culture.

Charlotte Brunsdon, writing at the end of the twentieth century, vaguely refers to postfeminism as a "baggy" concept in cultural theory (Brunsdon 1997: 389). Vicki Coppock, Denna Haydon, and Ingrid Richter elaborate here, stating that the term "postfeminism" had become "a product of assumption" by this point in which critics and theorists deployed postfeminism for their own purposes, providing no working definition and as such leaving the concept open to interpretation (Coppock et al. 1995: 4). Subsequently, Sarah Gamble observes that "exactly what it constitutes . . . is a matter for frequently impassioned debate" (Gamble 2001: 43), with some feminist theorists rejecting the term altogether, typified by Susan J. Douglas' notion that "it has gotten gummed down by too many conflicting meanings" (Douglas 2010: 24). Sarah Projansky describes this conflict, writing that "postfeminism is by definition contradictory, simultaneously feminist and antifeminist, liberating and repressive, productive and obstructive of progressive social change" (Projansky 2007: 68), with conflicting meanings grounded in the discursive nature of postfeminism itself. Here, postfeminism broadly refers to postfeminist discourse. As Projansky meticulously demonstrates elsewhere, however, there is no single postfeminist

discourse but a plurality of postfeminist discourses that are encapsulated under the term "postfeminism" as a discursive umbrella.

Projansky's genealogy of postfeminism, that which tracks its development throughout the late twentieth century, identifies five discursive categories that are each interrelated but distinct in their own right. Firstly, Projansky refers to "linear postfeminism" as a "linear historical trajectory" in popular perceptions of feminist politics; a chronological development that assumes we are living in post-feminist times where "equality" has been achieved, deeming feminism dead, exemplified by the media's pedestalling of Ally McBeal in the late nineties as "an imaginary (i.e., *nonliving*) television character who represents heterosexuality, obsession with body image, and aggressive get-ahead professionalism." Linear postfeminism focuses "almost exclusively on 'equality' for white, heterosexual, middle-class women" with media representations that emphasise financial independence (and thus the right to independence in singledom), entry into high-paying corporate jobs, and a new-found sexual independence in heterosexist terms (Projansky 2001: 70, emphasis in original); the "post" prefix, in this regard, "the signification of a kind of termination—a temporal designation of whatever it prefaces as ended, done with, obsolete" (Jones 1990/2000: 8). Where linear postfeminism declares the end (the death) of feminism, then, "backlash postfeminism" embraces a hostile backlash against feminism and the women's movement, marked by anti-feminist rhetoric in a media-driven campaign to turn people away from and reject the principles of feminism, harkening back to a pre-feminist period (Projansky 2001: 70-2; see also Faludi 1991; Jones 1992). "Overall," Projansky notes, "both linear and backlash postfeminism represent feminism in a particularly negative light," the former calling its death and the latter outright hostile (ibid.: 67).

In stark contrast, discussed at length below, "equality and choice postfeminism" assumes a linear historical trajectory that does not end in the death of feminism but, rather, it provides the illusion that the goals of feminism have been successfully achieved. By this account, we are living in post-feminist times where "equality" has been achieved, providing the illusion that feminism is no longer needed because its project was successful. Women, in this light, have a new-found freedom to "choice" which allows them to make their own decisions, especially in regard to relationships, family life, and work (ibid.: 72-9). With this new-found freedom to "choice" and the rhetoric of women's independence, Projansky further identifies "(hetero)sex-positive postfeminism" as discursively derivative, situating sexual freedom and agency as essential to female independence and emancipation (ibid.: 79-83). Where these discursive strands of postfeminism "offer a relatively positive version of feminism," then, Projansky lastly identifies how "*men can be feminists too*" which creates a postfeminist discourse where "men turn out to be *better* feminists than women," writing "woman" out of discourse (ibid.: 68, emphasis in original; see also Modleski 1991).

For the purposes of this study, postfeminism describes the assimilation of feminist politics in popular culture, emblematic of popular texts in the late 1990s and early 2000s; those popular texts that range as broadly as *The X-Files* (Fox, 1993-2002), *Clueless* (1995), *Scream* (1996), *Spice World* (1997), *Ally McBeal* (Fox, 1997-2002), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (The WB, 1997-2001; UPN, 2001-3), *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998-2004), *Charmed* (The WB, 1998-2006), *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), and *Legally Blonde* (2001). Many of these popular texts are considered the cultural product of third wave feminism. Yet, as Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra warn, feminist critics "are not in the business of simply celebrating icons of postfeminist culture," holding a responsibility as critics "to approach the popular with a sceptical eye" (Tasker and Negra 2007: 21). Joanne Hollows and

Rachel Moseley rightfully note that "most people become conscious of feminism through the way it is represented in popular culture" and "for many women of our generation, formative understandings of, and identifications with, feminist ideas have been almost exclusively within popular culture" (Hollows and Moseley 2006: 2). However, as Moseley and Jacinda Read had previously noted, "feminism is never available in some pure or unmediated form" (Moseley and Read 2002: 234), encouraging Hollows and Moseley to conclude that "popular feminism is feminism tamed and divested of its radical meaning" (Hollows and Moseley 2006: 10).

This feminist scepticism surrounding popular culture and the "popular feminism" that it espouses is deeply indebted to the "images of women" debate of the 1970s, particularly that strand of feminist film criticism that took the ideological impetus of women's representation at face value, typified by Rosen's *Popcorn Venus*, Haskell's *From Reverence to Rape*, and Mellen's *Women and their Sexuality in the New Film*. John Storey describes it best, writing that such feminist critics problematise popular culture as "a sort of ideological machine that more or less effortlessly reproduces dominant ideology," providing "little more than a degraded landscape of commercial and ideological manipulation" (Storey 1993/1997: 12; 129). Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment go even further to suggest that popular culture, in this particular context, serves "the complementary systems of capitalism and patriarchy, peddling 'false consciousness' to the duped masses" (Gamman and Marshment 1988: 1). This leads Imelda Whelehan to note that "the role of the feminist . . . is to prove herself equal to demythologising the powerful and ever-changing myths about the female self and nature perpetuated in the mass media and other state apparatuses" (Whelehan 1995: 299), yet popular culture's assimilation of feminist politics in the late 1990s and early 2000s makes the task of feminist criticism particularly difficult, in effect telling women and girls that their feelings of

"empowerment" in postfeminist popular culture are inherently bad. Here, feelings of "empowerment" are the negative consequence of heteropatriarchal manipulation, exploiting the intersections between postfeminist popular culture and third wave feminism.

Postfeminism is organised around buzzwords such as "empowerment," "choice," "independence," and "agency," all of which find representation in postfeminist popular culture. Such narratives are indebted to second wave feminism and, in their cultural moment, might even seem representative of third wave feminism. Yet, as Amanda D. Lotz states, "third wave feminism is differentiated by a shift in the strategic consciousness of feminist ideology and praxis" (Lotz 2007: 74). As such, postfeminist popular culture provides a representation of what Angela McRobbie refers to as "*faux*-feminism" (McRobbie 2009: 1, emphasis in original). With "empowerment," "choice," "independence," and "agency" given to characters in fiercely individualist terms, frequently grounded in the character's locale of corporate and/or consumer culture, the *faux*-feminism of postfeminist popular culture suggests that feminism has been "rescripted," allowing "its smooth incorporation into the world of commerce and corporate culture" (Banet-Wesier 2007: 209); that which Robert Goldman, Deborah Heath, and Sharon L. Smith refer to as "commodity feminism" (Goldman et al. 1991; see also Goldman 1992). Whelehan otherwise refers to this as "free market feminism" in which she describes how the mainstreaming and commodification of feminism works through capitalism, "based on competitive choices in spite of social conditions being stacked against women as a whole" (Whelehan 2005: 29). This situates postfeminism within the context of the 1990s "New Economy," typified by the "Third Way" politics of Bill Clinton in the United States and Tony Blair in Great Britain, allowing Tasker and Negra to argue that the politics of feminism experience the "displacement of democratic

imperatives by free market ones" (Tasker and Negra 2007: 6). Accordingly, notions of "liberation," "freedom," and "independence" are removed from their once radical roots in feminist activism, left to "now postulate many media forms because they sell" (Hollows 2000: 194). Banet-Weiser's recent discussion of "popular feminism" is illustrative and presupposes that, despite the increased visibility of a self-identifying feminist discourse in the media circa 2014, "empowerment is the central logic." Here, popular feminism is predicated on a feeling as opposed to a politics, recalibrating "the politics of feminism to focus on the individual empowered woman" (Banet-Weiser 2018: 17; see also Rottenberg 2018). Although the visibility of popular feminism is important, Banet-Weiser writes, "it often stops there, as if *seeing* or purchasing feminism is the same thing as changing patriarchal structures" (ibid.: 4, emphasis in original).

Lotz refers to "a period of intermezzo" in her attempt to theorise the intersections between third wave feminism and postfeminism, arguing that both signify "a new era in feminism" at the turn of the century: "one between the overwhelming structural impediments to gender justice that existed before the activist efforts of second wave feminism yet a world in which complete equity has not been achieved" (Lotz 2007: 72). That is, third wave feminism and postfeminism both emerge in recognition that second wave feminism and its efforts have fundamentally changed heteropatriarchal structures, making enormous gains in women's rights, yet sexism/misogyny is still an inherent issue. As such, the politics of third wave feminism and the apolitical nature of postfeminism both seek to make sense of a post-second wave society for women and girls, typified by the rise of "Girl Power" in the 1990s.

Most heavily associated with the Spice Girls, Girl Power was first popularised in the late 1990s and became a popular stance among young women and girls into the new millennium, reclaiming girlish femininity with a confident display of female sexuality.

Typically used as a slogan in interviews and printed on merchandise, Girl Power claims to promote female independence; it claims to promote female assertiveness and autonomy at the cost of young women and girls buying into a brand. Even in coining the "Girlie" and calling for her to embrace "pink-packaged-femininity" in the face of heterosexist culture, signifying Girl Power, Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards identify its limits in colloquial terms (Baumgardner and Richards 2000: 137). As they write, within Girlie culture, "there is danger that Spice Girls Pencil Set Syndrome will settle in: girls buy products created by male-owned companies that capture the slogan of feminism, without the power" (ibid.: 161). This is not to deny the particular strength that Girl Power has in the configuration of girlhood and young femininity, as alluded to by Hollows and Moseley in their view that most people first identify with feminism via its representation in popular culture. As Sinikka Aapola, Marnina Gonick, and Anita Harris observe, Girl Power bespeaks "a feminist ideal of a new, robust, young woman with agency and a strong sense of self" (Aapola et al. 2005: 39); it is predicated on a "take-charge dynamism" that allows femininity to be reappropriated away from its historical connotations with "passivity, voiceless, vulnerability and sweet naturedness" (ibid.: 19). What is problematic, then, is feminism's mediation in postfeminist popular culture. That is, popular feminism with its politics assimilated to be individualist, consumerist, and (often) seemingly apolitical, situating not women and girls as its primary beneficiary but free market capitalism.

Much has been written about the origins of "Girl Power" in the Riot Grrrl movement before it was appropriated by the Spice Girls following their first single in 1996, assimilated into the popular imaginary. Rebecca Munford convincingly argues that, in its transition from third wave feminist activism in the music industry to mainstream media, "girl power emerges as the site of that dangerous and deceptive slippage between third wave feminism and post-feminism" (Munford 2004/2007: 276). Where Riot Grrrl's

emphasis on girlish femininity "can be understood as part of a politics of *identification* that is vital to both individual and collective empowerment," Munford describes "Spice Girls-style girl power" as "a ready site for postfeminist colonisation," suggesting that it has become nothing more than a "fashion statement" (ibid.: 272-4, emphasis in original). In other words, where the Girl Power associated with Riot Grrrl describes a girlish femininity that signifies a conscious feminist belonging, the Girl Power associated with the Spice Girls strips it of authentic feminist signification, reducing Girl Power to an empty symbol of an individual's at oneness with the millennial cultural zeitgeist.

Stéphanie Genz takes issue with Munford's approach and, by way of contrast, argues that "it might be futile to erect a line of demarcation and differentiation between what constitutes postfeminist activity and third wave activism." Here, Genz draws on the work of Patricia Mann (1994) to suggest that the intersection between third wave feminism and postfeminism signifies "the different dimensions of agency that women participate it," suggesting how "micro-political forms of gendered agency" allow women and girls to make dramatic changes in basic social relationships that might otherwise be tainted with sexism (Genz 2006: 346); "within families, workplaces, schools, and other public spheres of interaction" (Mann 1994: 1; see also Budgeon 2001). Where Genz clearly aligns with Stacy Gillis and Munford's sentiment that "the 'power' and the 'girl' in girl power need to be interrogated rather than dismissed outright" (Gillis and Munford 2004: 173), she does not give sufficient weight to the specificity of Girl Power and popular feminism in its mediated form. That is, she does not take into account the ideological impetus of postfeminist popular culture itself, rather its effects.

Angela McRobbie's *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2009) provides the most astute account of postfeminism in popular culture, neatly explaining its characteristics that are particularly apparent across postfeminist film and television at the turn of the millennium.

McRobbie describes postfeminism as "a process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and 1980s are actively and relentlessly undermined," typified by popular culture's active "undoing of feminism" with its postfeminist narratives. Although this might seem like a vicious backlash against feminism, postfeminist popular culture ensures that feminism is "taken into account," "appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even well-intended response to feminism." However, with feminism "taken into account" and informing female representation, postfeminist popular culture perpetuates the myth that "equality" has been achieved and feminism is no longer needed. In McRobbie's own words, because feminism has been "taken into account," it is implied that feminism "is a spent force," permitting the real-time "dismantling of feminist politics and the discrediting of the occasionally voiced need for its renewal." This is achieved by female representation being actively tied in a "double entanglement" which "compromises the co-existence of neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life . . . with processes of liberalisation in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relations" (McRobbie 2009: 11-2).

Within the postfeminist narrative, feminism is replaced by what McRobbie refers to as "female individualisation." Here, the postfeminist narrative depicts individual women and their personal problems, displacing what should be a feminist narrative about women's collectivist struggle and the problems they share in the face of heteropatriarchal oppression. Here, it is the individual character's responsibility to "have it all"—the perfect relationship, the perfect job, the perfect home, the perfect body, the perfect family—and, if she fails, personal responsibility falls on her. Although feminism is "taken into account" to provide the female protagonist with a sense of "liberation," "freedom," and "independence," it is precisely her access to "choice" that forces personal responsibility on her to make the right decisions. Making the right decisions allows the female

protagonist to perpetuate a sense of "empowerment" yet, with the heteropatriarchal structures that are stacked against her invisible, the wrong decisions encourage the female protagonist to blame herself:

> Choice is surely, within lifestyle culture, a modality of constraint. The individual is compelled to be the kind of subject who can make the right choices. By these means new lines and demarcations are drawn between those subjects who are judged responsive to the regime of personal responsibility, and those who fail miserably. (ibid.: 18-9)

Where McRobbie's outlining of postfeminist popular culture is widely applicable to popular feminist texts since the 1990s (see also Tasker 1998), one element that is specific to the late 1990s and early 2000s, synonymous with Girl Power, is the representation of "ordinary women, indeed girls, who created their own, now seemingly autonomous pleasures and rituals of enjoyable femininity from the goods made available by consumer culture," typified by the success of HBO's *Sex and the City* (McRobbie 2009: 3). Prior to the 2007-8 financial crisis, Genz (2009) refers to a pre-recession "postfemininity" that, as well as refiguring hegemonic femininity/domesticity through buzzwords such as "agency," "self-determination," and "freedom" is most intimately tied to consumer culture, allowing women and girls to feel "empowered" in their "shopaholic" behaviour and shoe/handbag fetishism. "Shoe fetishism or 'shopaholic' behaviour is no longer evidence of women's victimisation by the tyranny of the fashion industry", Eva Chen elaborates, "seen as a source of building up confidence and individual identity, as well as having the competitive edge in a marketized arena of dating and working" (Chen 2013: 444). Yet following the global recession and subsequent shifts in our political, social, and cultural landscape, critics have questioned the ongoing relevant of postfeminism as a critical concept, often bringing into question its emphasis on consumer culture.

"Postfeminism has shown itself to be significantly related (if not reducible) to the 'bubble culture' of the twenty-first century's first decade," Negra and Tasker argue, bringing into question postfeminist popular culture's "female consumer" as "an icon of excess as much as adoration" (Negra and Tasker 2014: 4-6). Dean DeFino's comparative analysis of *Sex and the City* and HBO's *Girls* (2012-17), moreover, identifies "a deep generation divide" between the two shows, arguing that Carrie Bradshaw's generation are "self-assured because they already achieved career success. When they graduated from college in the yuppie heyday of the late 1980s, opportunities were everywhere," providing the capital to consume; a consumerism that is not equated to by Hannah Horvath in *Girls* (DeFino 2014: 190). This leads Meredith Nash and Ruby Grant to suggest that *Girls*, in stark contrast to *Sex and the City*, is characterised by "post? feminism" which is explained in the following terms:

> . . . the term "post? feminism" may be used to describe a revised post-feminist sensibility for a millennial generation. Rather than rejecting post-feminism, we include a question mark to create a platform for new debate and engagement with post-feminism, while acknowledging its coexistence with predecessor feminisms, and the continuing popular and academic usage of post-feminism. The question mark importantly provides a focal point for questioning and re-articulating the meaning, usage, and constituencies of post-feminism today. For instance, "post? feminism" is potentially useful in enabling a dialogue around the challenges faced by a . . . generation of young women who are trying to position themselves between second wave feminism and post-feminism and in changed social, economic, and political contexts. Here, the addition of the question mark symbolises that feminist engagement with post-feminism is multiple and shifting and that the breadth of issues involved in feminist identification is much broader and complex in the current moment. (Nash and Grant 2015: 988)

"Are we now *post-postfeminism*?," Rosalind Gill similarly asks (Gill 2016: 611, emphasis in original), inspired by a "new visibility of feminism" in recessionary popular culture (ibid.: 614). This all bespeaks an overall frustration among some feminist critics who realise the

impossibility of theorising a truly emancipatory feminism in postfeminist popular culture, exemplified by Whelehan's dismissal of postfeminism as that which is "boring and frustrating to analyse," described as "an empty signifier" that "has become overburdened with meanings," eliciting "sensations of boredom and ennui which trouble a feminist cultural critic attempting to make sense of the postfeminist distractions of popular culture" (Whelehan 2010: 159). McRobbie goes as far to describe a "post-feminist stranglehold" and argues that it is precisely because of this entrapment that "there has been a blossoming of new feminisms across so many different locations" (McRobbie 2015: 9). Yet Gill most crucially makes the case for "keeping, rather than jettisoning, the notion of postfeminism" because "regrettably, we are a long way from being post-postfeminism" (Gill 2016: 625-6). As she writes elsewhere, "sexism is . . . becoming more flexible, agile, and mobile, is itself innovating, making it harder to recognise, to critique, and to resist" (Gill 2014: 517), building on Sara Mills' earlier assertion in 2003 that "the nature of sexism has changed over the last 15 years because of feminist campaigns over equal opportunities, so that there now appears to be less overt sexism" (Mills 2003: 90). And where, for example, Mills argues that sexism and anti-sexism have become entangled in debates surrounding political correctness and "excess attention to the sensibilities of those who are seen as different from the norm" (Mills 2003: 89), Banet-Weiser more recently notices an insidious cultural shift beyond what Gill refers to as "*postfeminist sexism*" (Gill 2011: 64, emphasis in original), demonstrating how the increased visibility of popular feminism in postfeminist popular culture has increased the visibility of "popular misogyny" (Banet-Weiser 2018: 2).

Although the trope long dates back to films such as *Pillow Talk* (1959), *A Taste of Honey* (1961), *Lover Come Back* (1961), *Send Me No Flowers* (1964), *Darling* (1965), *Sunday Bloody Sunday* (1971), *Cabaret* (1972), and *Zee and Co.* (1972), whether implied or explicitly stated, representations of the straight woman and the gay best friend have permeated

postfeminist popular culture since the 1990s. Not only was the trope popularised by texts such as *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997), *Sex and the City*, and *Will & Grace* (NBC, 1998-2006; 2017-20) but it was a thematic staple of so many more: *Single White Female* (1992), *Clueless*, *Copycat* (1995), *Beautiful Thing* (1996), *Fear* (1996), *As Good as It Gets* (1997), *Get Real* (1998), *The Object of My Affection* (1998), *Cruel Intentions* (1999), *Gimme Gimme Gimme* (BBC, 1999-2001), *The Next Best Thing* (2000), *Bridget Jones's Diary*, *Mean Girls* (2004), *The Stepford Wives* (2004), *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), and *Ugly Betty* (ABC, 2006-2010) to name but a few pre-recessionary examples. This popular trope has, of course, carried into recessionary popular culture with texts such as *A Single Man* (2009), *Glee* (Fox, 2009-15), *Easy A* (2010), *Gayby* (2012), *Girls*, *G.B.F.* (2013), *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (Netflix, 2015-19), *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), *Isn't It Romantic* (2019), *It's a Sin* (Channel 4, 2021), *And Just Like That…* (Max, 2021-), *Newark, Newark* (Gold, 2022), and *Uncoupled* (Netflix, 2022). Here, the most fascinating development is the horror genre's recent use of the trope by way of apology for slasher's earlier representations of queer psychokillers and misogynistic violence: *American Horror Story* (FX, 2011-), *Scream Queens* (FX, 2015-6), *Killer Unicorn* (2018), *Midnight Kiss* (Hulu, 2019), *Scream: Resurrection* (VH1, 2019), *Slasher: Solstice* (Netflix, 2019), *Freaky* (2020), *Candyman* (2021), and *Chucky* (Syfy; USA Network, 2021-) being among some of the most notable examples. Where the straight woman and the gay best friend are clearly a staple of postfeminist popular culture, then, the way in which they have been theorised is incredibly restrictive. Women and gay men, in criticism that considers the politics and ideology of representation and spectatorship, are often approached using post-psychoanalytic theories of gender and sexuality that are derived from cultural studies. Here, critics aim to move beyond psychoanalytic notions of "sexual difference" that are thought to binarise male/female, masculine/feminine, in heterosexist terms. In doing so, however, post-psychoanalytic theories of gender and sexuality

reproduce the very notion of "sexual difference" that they claim to denounce, reducing women and gay men to a biological determinism that fixes their gendered subject position. This reductively assumes that the female spectator and the gay male spectator respectively identify with their so-called "screen surrogate," never the female spectator with the gay man or the gay male spectator with the woman onscreen.

Baz Dreisinger's underread essay "The Queen in Shining Armour" (2000) develops a theoretical approach to the straight woman and the gay best friend that all subsequent criticism seems to follow. As Dreisinger writes, offering meticulous analyses of *My Best Friend's Wedding* and *The Object of My Affection*:

> Gay friends seem to have become the trendy accessory for straight women in media today. Why? A consideration of the question will bring into light three interesting conclusions: First, in the figure of the gay friend, Hollywood has invented a new incarnation of homosexuality on screen; second, this new, idealised incarnation actually serves a very old purpose in filmic narrative; and third, embodied in this figure are deep-seated anxieties about heterosexuality in late twentieth-century culture as a whole. (Dreisinger 2000: 4)

In providing a strictly ideological analysis of the straight woman and the gay best friend, Dreisinger argues that these films aestheticise a "safe eroticism" for heterosexual audiences, showing platonic friendships between women and gay men that could easily be mistaken for romantic relationships. For example, *The Object of My Affection*, *The Next Best Thing*, *Will & Grace*, and *Gayby* are relentless in their portrayal of straight women and gay men attempting to have children together with varying degrees of success, presupposing the single woman and the single gay man as a copulating would-be couple if the gay best friend was straight. In a similar vein, typified by intimate hugs, kisses on the lips, and slow dances on occasion, many texts ideologically misconstrue platonic affection for heterosexual eroticism. Desire, these representations seem to suggest, is repressed

under the surface of homosexuality; to quote *When Harry Met Sally…* (1989) and the heterosexual script, "men and women can't be friends because the sex part always gets in the way."

Although Christopher Pullen does not directly engage with the work of Dreisinger, his equally underread book *Straight Girls and Queer Guys* (2016) proceeds to acknowledge how the so-called "gay best friend" is also represented as bisexual or sexually ambiguous ("queer"). In dialogue with Mulvey, Pullen expands the ideological gaze of the cinematic apparatus to refer more broadly to a "hetero media gaze" that also accounts for television, suggesting that representations of straight girls and queer guys are fundamentally organised by the gaze:

> As part of this, the straight girl and queer guy need to be represented as framing, and resonating with, the commodity potential of "normative" male-female heterosexual coupling, as media corporations, producers and distributors are economies that rely on the dominance of heteronormative markets, as they are funded to address and to reflect their audiences. This "heterocentric" unit potential is apparent in the manner that . . . audiences may recognise themselves within the representational body. Consequently, the straight girl and the queer guy are part of this heterocentric value system. (Pullen 2016: 7-8)

Yet where Pullen argues that the straight girl and the queer guy are framed by a "safe eroticism" so that heterosexual audiences (primarily straight men) can identify with another of their ilk onscreen, in denial that the queer guy is not a devout heterosexual, more productively than Dreisinger he emphasises that "the relationship between the straight girl and the queer guy provides a deep range of political and cultural interactions, intersections and alliances," allowing the "hetero media gaze" not to dominate discourse (ibid.: 4). As Pullen writes in dialogue with Stephen Maddison, "both the queer guy and the straight girl are abject others, respectively female and queer, implying a shared political vision and the connectivity between feminism and queer identity politics" (ibid.: 5; see

also Maddison 2000). This is not without its problems, of course, as alluded to above in reference to the issue of gay men in feminism. "Despite the implicit connection they share," Mimi Marinucci neatly summarises, "there is a history of tension between feminist studies and sexuality studies, both in general and in the more specific case of queer theory" (Mariunucci 2010/2016: 140-1). Chris Weedon begins to spell out the problem at hand, alluding to the fact that queer theory (and its origins in sexuality studies) aims to deconstruct and trivialise the very notion of "sexual difference" that some feminists naturalise as the direct (male) source of women's oppression:

> The queer movement challenges the very ideas of normality which underpin social institutions and practices. From a queer perspective nothing is natural, nothing is normal. Everything is a social and cultural construct and gender identities are acquired, at least in part, through performance . . . In theoretical terms, queer theory is in many ways postmodern, since it renounces any fixed notions of difference . . . Binary oppositions are replaced by a proliferation of differences which queer theory and politics refuse to hierarchise. (Weedon 1999: 73)

This leads Pullen to suggest that the "co-presence of a heterosexual female with a queer male problematises the normative gender binary dynamic that might be evident in feminist approaches, offering more of a connection to queer theory approaches," encouraging him to approach the relationship between the straight girl and the queer guy through a queer lens. Only in passing does Pullen most critically draw attention to the fact that the heteronormification of the straight girl and the queer guy, representing women and gay men in such a way that conforms to the dominant (read heteronormative) ideology, lends itself to postfeminist discourse:

> In this way, rather than connecting with the political dynamics of feminism, which might involve challenging the power structures held by masculine order, the union

> between the straight girl and the queer guy might be seen as a queer post-feminist construct. (Pullen 2016: 5)

Yet Pullen's adamance on a queer lens through which to approach the straight girl and the queer guy, acknowledging postfeminism yet dismissing it as an ideological strategy of the "hetero media gaze," leads him to suggest that the female and the gay male spectator have some kind of radical power in their identifications with the onscreen relationship:

> I argue that the imagined union between the straight girl and the queer guy suggests a form of alliance, which might stimulate some kind of revolution or drive to equality. At the same time, as both the queer guy and the straight girl are respectively and independently male, and heterosexual; they are indexical to the dominant powerbases. Hence their union is a complex identification source, which relies not on stability and fixity but rather on shared difference, and also shared access to power. (ibid.)

If homophobia is displaced misogyny, as it has been suggested above, women and gay men certainly maintain a "shared difference" insofar as *some* gay men embrace a culturally conceived notion of "feminine" subjectivity that sees homophobia more frequently directed towards them than gay men who are "straight-acting" ("masculine"), allowing them to more easily "pass" as straight in the public domain. Moreover, the prevalence of vaginaphobia in gay male culture, typified by the "gold star gay" who has never had sex with a woman and the "platinum star gay" who was also born via C-section, heavily indicates a power imbalance where women (including lesbians and queer women) are often excluded. This is not to mention the prevalence of femmephobia in gay male culture where "masc" men discriminate against effeminate men, misrecognising their own internalised homophobia—their fear of emasculation, their hatred of the feminine, their misogyny—by projecting it onto others. Those marginalised effeminate gay men are just as capable of misogyny, of course, yet in postfeminist popular culture they are more likely

to be female-identified with the straight woman than male-identified with the gay best friend who is so often characterised as masc.

Judith Butler, in a post-structural approach to identity, writes:

> As much as it is necessary to assert political demands through recourse to identity categories, and to lay claim to the power to name oneself and determine the conditions under which that name is used, it is also impossible to sustain that kind of mastery over the trajectory of those categories within discourse. (Butler 1993: 19)

Butler's words articulate the need for identity politics but, in recognising the importance of an individualist approach to identity, they also draw attention to the wider political implications that identity politics has for marginalised groups. As defined by Butler, identity politics allows marginalised groups to assert political demands based on the specificity of their marginalised identities. Here, identity politics allows straight women and gay men, who are respectively marginalised on the praxes of gender and sexuality, to (a) recognise and name their marginalised subject position—"I am marginalised because I am a woman," "I am marginalised because I am a gay man"—and (b) determine the political specificity of their marginalised identity, under which the "queer" umbrella is too ambivalent to address. For example, the fight for a straight woman's right to emergency contraception and birth control is different to the fight for a gay man's right not to be criminalised. This understanding of identity politics is what ultimately separates the politics of women's liberation from the politics of gay liberation. Yet this justified political specificity does not situate these identities in the broader discursive context of heteropatriarchal oppression. Alone, the fight for women's liberation and the fight for gay liberation can only alleviate the symptom of oppression, respectively liberating women

and gay men. Only together, then, can feminism and gay liberation address the oppressive totalitarian grip of heteropatriarchal capitalist structures.

To situate theory in practice, Lisa Duggan favours a historical approach to identity politics. Here, she conceptualises the "progressive-left social movements" of the 1960s and early 1970s—especially the civil rights and the Black Power movements but also including feminism, gay and lesbian liberation, and countercultural mobilisations—as "*cultures of downward redistribution*." Where each individual movement focused on the political demands of a specific marginalised group, surfacing from their rapid proliferation was prosperous ground for discursive overlap. In sharing "languages and concepts, practices and policies," these individual movements could align at the intersections, generating "the pressure to level hierarchies and redistribute *down*—redistribute money, political power, cultural capital, pleasure, and freedom." With the rise of neoliberalism from the early 1970s, however, these progressive-left social movements were met by "a pro-business counter movement intent on building a *culture of upward (re)distribution*" (Duggan 2003: xvii, emphasis in original). As Duggan proceeds to note, identity politics, "in the contemporary sense of the rights-claiming focus of balkanized groups organised to pressure the legal and electoral systems for inclusion and redress, appeared out of the field of disintegrating social movements." Accordingly, the progressive-left social movements of the 1960s and early 1970s were upended by the "civil rights lobby." Here, the turn to identity politics saw marginalised groups campaign for "equal rights" so that they have more systemic freedoms. These freedoms are only freedoms, however, insofar as marginalised groups assimilate to meet the consumerist needs of heteropatriarchal capitalism. As Duggan sums it up, for marginalised people, "engage the language and institutional games of established liberal contests and achieve equality" (ibid.: xviii).

Just as postfeminism is derived from the "civil rights lobby" and its achievements in gaining certain rights for women, so too is what Duggan refers to as "homonormativity," described in the following terms:

> . . . it is a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilised gay constituency and a privatised, depoliticised gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption. (ibid.: 50)

Here, homonormativity describes gay men and the assimilation of their politics in heteronormative terms, typified by the lobby for marriage equality that allows gay couples the same freedoms as straight couples. As gay men are coupled off to enjoy the quiet life, their visibility on the gay liberation front is diminished, demobilised, and once radical displays of homosexuality in public are moved behind closed doors, reserved for the privacy of the home for which they pay rent or a mortgage. Most notable for its representation of homonormativity, US sitcom *Will & Grace* depicts Will Truman as a successful gay lawyer and his best friend Jack McFarland as a struggling gay actor, "positioned within a narrative space that relies on familiar comedic conventions for addressing homosexuality—equating gayness with a lack of masculinity" (Battles and Hilton-Morrow 2002: 89). Jack (played by the openly gay Sean Hayes) is an inherently camp, stereotypically effeminate representation of gay maleness whereas Will (played by straight actor Eric McCormack) is more conventionally masculine, so much so that Kathleen Battles and Wendy Hilton-Morrow argue that this "version of gay masculinity is in no way different from the same image [of masculinity] being sold to heterosexual men" (ibid.: 90). Helene A. Shugart subsequently suggests that Will's characterisation evidences that "gay men are capable of 'doing' heterosexuality"—that is, gay men are capable of "passing" as straight—deeming them "capable of being wholly grafted onto

established heterosexual communities and contexts" (Shugart 2003: 76; 69). Building on Larry Gross' assertion that "when previously ignored groups or perspectives do gain visibility, the manner of their representation will reflect the biases and interests of those powerful people who define the public agenda" (Gross 2001: 4), Shugart concludes that *Will & Grace*'s "apparently emancipatory messages and representations may, in fact, function to reify dominant discourses" (Shugart 2003: 67).

Such accounts of *Will & Grace* in their ideological analyses seem to assume that the gay male spectator is invited to identify with Will and only Will, presupposing that gay men hold a homonormative subject position in their identification with a homonormative protagonist. By further implication, then, Jack is written off as an undesirable point of "feminine" identification—despite his character delivering the kind of camp discourse that subtly addresses gay male subjectivity (see Cohan 2007)—and, perhaps most importantly, gay male identification with postfeminist icons Grace Adler (Debra Messing) and Karen Walker (Megan Mullally) is completely disregarded along the lines of "sexual difference." Consider, by way of comparison, the critical discourse that surrounds *Sex and the City*, premiering the same year as *Will & Grace* in 1998. Critics have alluded to the prevalence of gay men in the show, albeit in the background as secondary characters (Gerhard 2005; Pullen 2016), yet its centralising of NYC socialites Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker), Samantha Jones (Kim Cattrall), Miranda Hobbs (Cynthia Nixon), and Charlotte York (Kirsten Davis) creates a critical discourse that focuses near exclusively on postfeminism and the politics of female spectatorship. Jane Gerhard, for example, observes how the show is structured around female friendship and the explicit representation of sex, both in its portrayal and the way in which "the girls" recount their multitude of encounters together. For Gerhard, such talk among friends "works in the same way that consciousness-raising sessions did for second wave feminists," allowing

them to make sense of the dissatisfaction with the very thing that is supposed to "empower" them. Such talk "provides an account of the 'dissonance' the characters experience between ideas about heterosexual romance and their experience of straight sex." Equally important, however, is the fact that such sex talk "also insists on the pleasures of heterosexual sex for women," in which Gerhard states:

> These women are shown enjoying intercourse in an array of positions with numerous partners. The characters love penises and the men who bear them. They love feeling desirable. The pleasure they take in sex, in which they narrate to each other in conversation, both bind them to each other and erotically to heterosexual pleasures. This must be seen as an important contribution the show makes—these women are the subjects of heterosexual sex, not its objects. (Gerhard 2005: 45)

Where *Sex and the City* suggests a newfound female independence and sexual freedom, Ariel Levy nevertheless reminds us that sexual hedonism is met in equal part with hedonistic acts of consumption, focusing as much on "Manolo Blahniks and Birkin bags" as women's sexual agency (Levy 2005: 172). This allows Nash and Grant to safely assert that *Sex and the City* represents female sexuality "as part of a consumer lifestyle—sexual relationships, fashion, and entertainment as the primary drivers" (Nash and Grant 2005: 982), furthered by Chen who suggests that *Sex and the City* creates a postfeminist ideal: "the image of the empowered, assertive, pleasure-seeking, 'have-it-all' woman of sexual and financial agency" (Chen 2013: 441). Gill subsequently argues that one of the pleasures offered by the show is its "feminine and address and potential for feminine identification," typified by its intrinsic postfeminist sensibility. She continues, "*Sex and the City* is about being 'one of the girls'; it opens up a world of female bonding" (Gill 2007: 243-4).

For Gill's purposes, the feminine address of *Sex and the City* and its potential for feminine identification refers specifically to straight women, using it to demonstrate the show's intrinsic problem with lesbophobia and biphobia that is ideologically intertwined.

As such, although *Sex and the City* regularly flirts with displays of lesbianism and bisexuality, the show's representation of sex "is resolutely heterosexual and phallic." The girls might be their own sexual subjects but, to refer back to Gerhard, these are sexual subjects who fundamentally loves penises and the men who bear them (ibid.: 244). Straight women, in their identification(s) with the girls, are invited to reembrace traditional femininity insofar as they "are invited to become a particular kind of self, and endowed with agency on condition that it is used to construct oneself as a subject closely resembling the heterosexual male fantasy" (ibid.: 258). Here, *Sex and the City* and postfeminist popular culture at large is "constructed around a strongly male-identified notion of femininity and works to promote male interests" (ibid.: 244). Where Gill argues that postfeminism serves the fantasies of heterosexual men, and straight women succumb to these fantasies in their "feminine" identifications in postfeminist popular culture, it is important to note that *Sex and the City* was created by Darren Star with Michael Patrick King having significant input as executive producer, both of whom are openly gay men.

The significance of Star and King as the creators of *Sex and the City* is clearly spelled out in their recent work. King's 2021 reboot of *Sex and the City*, *And Just Like That…*, centralises a recently widowed Carrie Bradshaw navigate single life in her fifties with Miranda and Charlotte. Star's *Uncoupled* subsequently premiered on Netflix in 2022, following Michael (Neal Patrick Harris), a recently single, forty-something gay man living in New York City, as he navigates single life with the aid of gay friends Stanley (Brooks Ashmanskas) and Billy (Emerson Brooks). Should the implications of this need to be made clearer, the final episode of *Uncoupled* sees Stanley supported by his friends following an unexpected breast cancer diagnosis, repeating and displacing a notable narrative arc from the final season of *Sex and the City* where Samantha undergoes treatment for breast cancer.

By Star's design in *Sex and the City*, the postfeminist sensibility and its potential for feminine identification is not just for women but gay men, allowing a gay male subjectivity to otherwise make sense of itself in postfeminist popular culture. As such, *Sex and the City* really is about being "one of the girls," opening up a world of female bonding to gay men. Gay men, too, enter a world of "liberation," "freedom," and "independence" in postfeminist popular culture. Indeed, their identification with postfeminist figures allows them to feel a sense of "empowerment," mandated by the "agency" and "choice" that these women must navigate in order to achieve success. This might seem like a near sadistic development in gender politics since postfeminist popular culture, which is so often produced by openly gay men, ideologically perpetuates fantasies and myths about women's equality under heteropatriarchal relations for the momentary "feel-good" thrill of gay men. But this is to assume that straight men do not still dominate the sector of postfeminist popular culture, be them creators or executives, with women and gay men having to work within the confines of a not-so level playing field. Gay men so often produce postfeminist popular culture but so too do straight women, their collective presence most profound in "chick flicks" and teen horror. Does this mean that women and gay men who produce postfeminist popular culture, especially gay men, take feminism into account to ultimately belittle it with cruel intent?

Much has been written about women's creative roles and the ideological process of postfeminist popular culture but the question remains for the creative role of gay men. Where this current study later considers the stakes that gay male creatives have in the ideological process of postfeminist popular culture, for now it is important to consider why the gay male spectator might identify with postfeminist images in the first place and what the ideological implications are. Firstly, given how gays have a long history of erasure in popular culture, it is reductive to assume that the gay male spectator only identifies with

other gay men in popular culture, be it through masculine or effeminate stereotypes. And even when the gay male spectator does identify with gay men, gay men are unlikely to permeate every scene, most often reduced to a "gay best friend" who serves the needs of the straight woman.

When the gay male spectator is actively engaged in a postfeminist narrative, he is affectively engaged in a process of cross-gender identification with images of women. Historically, feminist film theorists and their appropriation of cine-psychoanalysis have acknowledged women's representation and gay men's representation "decisively on the side of the spectacle," arguing as such that "the homosexual subject finds himself situated in an apparently feminine position." Subsequently, it is said that gay male spectators can "renegotiate their gender identity precisely at the level of spectacle" (Silverman 1992: 354; see also Farmer 2000), encouraging the gay male spectator to identify with female characters as per Mulvey's notion of "woman as spectacle" (Mulvey 1975: 12). This requires a further level of complexification in postfeminist popular culture, however, since postfeminist figures no longer serve the essentialist function of spectacle. Indeed, women have gained a subjectivity that was once reserved for the main male protagonist.

Genz has called for the need to "expand our understanding of the intimate connections between culture and subjectivity," shifting from a consideration of "*what* postfeminist subjectivity entails to an interrogation of *how* postfeminism engages subjects in the perplexing double binds of discipline and choice" (Genz 2015: 545-6, emphasis in original). This is essential in coming to understand the gay male spectator's stake in postfeminist popular culture, furthered by the turn to affect in postfeminist theory or, as Tisha Dejmanee refers to it, the "turn to interiority" (Dejmanee 2016). Here, postfeminism's fierce notion of "female individualisation" is organised around the individual's psyche which constitutes their subjectivity; that which Catherine Rottenberg

refers to as "interiorised affective spaces" (Rottenberg 2014: 424). As the gay male spectator identifies with the postfeminist subject of popular culture, he might feel "empowered" in those "feel-good" moments where the postfeminist subject makes the right decisions and does something right. However, the gay male spectator's identification with the female subject position is not organised around the need to be "empowered," for the gay male spectator's sense of "empowerment" is a consequence of his identification with the female subject position. That is, the gay male spectator is "empowered" because he is actively invested and feeling his way through a postfeminist narrative trajectory where feelings constantly change according to the demands of narrative. When the postfeminist subject fails and does something wrong in her personal/professional life, the gay male spectator feels with her, experiencing the full extent of the trails and tribulations of a postfeminist subjectivity. Indeed, not all is positive and empowering. Just as marriage equality is said to make gay men "equal," access to hard-fought rights are said to make straight women "equal," yet both are left dissatisfied in postfeminist popular culture, "disempowered" as well as "empowered" in their identifications with the postfeminist subject. If equality has been achieved for both straight women and gay men, why does postfeminist popular culture allow for moments that feel so inherently pessimistic, presenting images of self-blame that resonate with both female and gay male subjectivities?

As feminist film theory tells us, appropriating psychoanalysis and its heteropatriarchal discourse/language to make sense of currently accepted gender relations, the act of spectatorship is an innately complicated process with our identifications multiple, contradictory, and ever shifting. Many feminist film theorists of the late twentieth century feared that feminist film theory and cine-psychoanalysis might fall into the trap of ahistoricism, drawing on universal psychoanalytic frameworks that might seem inconsequential to political, cultural, and social change (Johnston 1975a;

Cook 1982; Kaplan 1983; Silverman 1990; Kaplan 1990b; Walker 1990; Bergstrom 1990; Clover 1992). These earlier theories of spectatorship and their emphasis on cross-gender identification are essential in coming to understand the intricacies of characterisation and identification in neoliberal times, typified by postfeminist popular culture at the turn of the millennium. While it is easy to assume that gay male identification with postfeminist popular culture appropriates the political specificity of female identification, then, it remains that female characters are part of a wider *mise-en-scène* that reflects the making of neoliberal subjectivity; the ideological dictates of neoliberalism, again, determine both postfeminism *and* homonormativity.

Where postfeminist popular culture asks women and girls to meet the near impossible standards of "having-it-all" in their identification with characters who reflect their gendered subject position, the gay male spectator also finds himself in a near impossible situation, not "one of the girls" yet presented with a neoliberal subjectivity that addresses him in "feminine" terms. Given that gay culture has been privatised and depoliticised in its anchoring of domesticity (typified by both marriage equality and the rights-based advances in same-sex parenting) and consumption, gay male identification with the female subject of postfeminist popular culture implies that gay men can "have-it-all" too now; the failure to do so is presented as a failure on the gay man's part as opposed to the (neoliberal) heteropatriarchal capitalist system that has historically oppressed him. Where visual representations of gay masculinity since the late 1990s are said to organise gay male spectatorships in accordance to homonormative ideology, just as visual representations of straight femininity are said to organise straight female spectatorships in accordance to postfeminist ideology, homonormativity and postfemininity are derivative of neoliberalism, albeit in a slightly different (and not always equitable) gendered aesthetic along the lines of "sexual difference." Accordingly, gay male identification with

postfeminist subjectivity, given the impossible task of becoming "one of the girls" when the girls themselves are imaginary characters in a fantasy world, demonstrates the impossible limits of homonormativity itself. Indeed, the postfeminist fantasy of "having-it-all" and being "equal" is unachievable, as is the homonormative fantasy. Nevertheless, the fantasy of postfeminist "liberation" remains an alluring one with "feel-good" moments of "empowerment." Thus, postfeminist popular culture provides a "feminine" fantasy for the gay male spectator. In trying to achieve their "feminine" identification with this fantasy in the real world, the ideological doctrine of postfeminist popular culture seduces gay men into a homonormative lifestyle, achieved through their performed yet near impossible "feminine" identification with postfeminist icons.

Conclusion

By revisiting the "images of women" debate that defined the early development of feminist film studies, this literature review has highlighted the constraints within which postfeminist media studies currently operates, analysing "images of women" in popular culture. Here, women's representation is analysed at face value, fostering a rigid ideological framework for understanding gendered subjectivity and spectatorship. Having demystified the vocabulary of cine-psychoanalysis and feminist film theory in the late twentieth century, emphasising the continued importance of cross-gender identification, this literature review has demonstrated how the "female spectator" of postfeminist media studies is often symbolic, bespeaking both female and gay male subjectivities. Neoliberalism is the organising feature of postfeminism and, in turn, postfeminist media culture often seduces gay men into a "feminine" subject position. Systemically, this assimilates gay men through identificatory processes that are akin to those experienced by

straight women, meeting the needs of heteropatriarchal culture under free market capitalism.

Methodology

This thesis uses textual analysis as its primary research method. In order to interrogate the discursive overlap between female spectatorship and gay male spectatorship in postfeminist media culture, the film texts to be analysed are written by either women (Chapter 1) or openly gay men (Chapter 2-4). By analysing these film texts in particular, it is assumed that both the women and the openly gay men who are the writers of postfeminist media culture are simultaneously the consumers of postfeminist media culture. As textual analysis allows the postfeminist discourse(s) at work to be interrogated in these films texts, then, the postfeminist discourse(s) reflect those accessed by the female and gay male consumers of postfeminist media culture. By subsequently using textual analysis to examine the postfeminist politics and ideology of the film texts under review, the postfeminist subject position of the female and gay male spectator can be theorised, proposing how the postfeminist discourse(s) at work in the film texts are used to influence and assimilate female and gay male subjectivity in a neoliberal representational system. To situate this research methodology in theory, this chapter begins by considering the "object problem" that researchers face when analysing the work of screenwriters. This justifies why film texts themselves are analysed as the object of study and not the screenplays from which they are developed. Subsequently, the strengths and weaknesses of textual analysis are considered as a primary research method, confined strictly to the analysis of discourse.

Screenwriting and the "Object Problem"

Auteur theory, otherwise known as *film d'auteur* or *cinéma d'auteur*, has traditionally been used by film critics and theorists to describe film directors as the all-seeing artistic visionaries of their work. Indeed, the *auteur*, translated from French, refers to the *author*. Auteurism appropriates the creative and technical skill of many into a single artistic role (the director) and, in doing so, essential figures in a film's cast and crew are forgotten: screenwriters, producers, composers, cinematographers, editors, casting directors, production designers, art directors, set decorators, costume designers, not to mention the staff in the departments that support them. By focusing on the openly gay screenwriter as well as the woman screenwriter, this thesis provides a nuanced approach to film authorship, suggesting the screenwriter's artistic, ideological, and political input which might otherwise be attributed to the film director who is often a straight man. However, this approach has problematic potential insofar as it risks reproducing the existing systemic structures and power imbalances of auteur theory, merely replacing the director with the screenwriter as the all-seeing artistic visionary and ignoring other roles, requiring further consideration in the emergent field of screenwriting studies.

Ian W. Macdonald refers to the screenplay as a document that describes intention. Here, the screenplay allows the screenwriter to present their "screen idea" but how this is read and interpreted from person-to-person is entirely subjective, grounded in imagination (Macdonald 2013: 4). As cast and crew read the screenplay and/or its drafts, Macdonald refers to their part in the "Screen Idea Work Group" in which they actively contribute to "an ongoing processes of development." Here, the cast and crew who engage with the screenplay actively become "writers" since the document itself is an everchanging proposal "based on previous *and future* discussions" (ibid.: 176, emphasis in original).

Accordingly, the screenplay becomes a collaborative effort that negotiates the screenwriter's vision of the screen idea, allowing the screen idea to be made and become a fully realised screenwork. Steven Maras similarly refers to the screenplay as a "blueprint" in which cast and crew actively engage in "scripting" or "writing" beyond the materiality of the screenplay itself: actors actively script and write with their bodies, for example, and set decorators actively script with props, not to mention the possibility of writing with the camera or the lights. Even verbal notes given by the director might constitute scripting when put into practice (Maras 2009: 118-29).

Screenwriting studies and its emphasis on collaborative work creates what Maras refers to as the "object problem" when approaching the screenwriter and the screenplay. Here, Maras draws attention to the questions raised:

> Is the "object" of screenwriting on the page or the screen? Does the script or its realisation exist independently from film? Is the "script" the final production of the screenwriting process, or just one aspect of the filmmaking process? Are we dealing with two objects (the script as read and film as distributed) or one? And what should be made of discrepancies between the script and film and then published script? If the screenplay is the object, how did it emerge and develop? (ibid.: 11)

This process is doubly complicated when focusing on the screenwriter, their gender or sexuality. As Maras writes, "screenwriting is a practice of writing, but it is also a discourse that constructs or imagines the process of writing in particular ways" (ibid.: 12). By disrupting the image of the lone screenwriter writing their screenplay, then, theorists such as Maras and Macdonald further disrupt a politics of screenwriting that is centred on being able to read the screenwriter's subjectivity in the text itself. Indeed, they disrupt "generalisations about [screenwriting] practice[s] that inflame sensibilities" (ibid.: 4). Although this is an important and necessary development that allows other cast and crew to be written into consideration, it risks writing the screenwriter's gender or sexuality out

of discourse. As to consider the significance of the screenwriter and their gender/sexuality without ignoring the collaborative function of the cast and crew, Richard Dyer's critical engagement with Jack Babuscio's work on camp and the gay sensibility is indicative.

Discussed at length in Chapter 2, Babuscio observes how camp aesthetics are often used by gay creatives in cinema, inspired by an innate gay sensibility:

> I define the gay sensibility as a creative energy reflecting a consciousness that is different from the mainstream; a heightened awareness of certain human complications of feeling that spring from the fact of social oppression; in short, a perception of the world which is coloured, shaped, directed, and defined by the fact of one's gayness. (Babuscio 1978/1999: 118)

Dyer subsequently problematises this notion of the gay sensibility by arguing how openly gay creatives have "access to discourse . . . on account of who they are" and, consequently, camp aesthetics are not inspired by a naturalised gay sensibility (Dyer 1991: 188). That is, gay creatives use camp aesthetics not because they are gay but because they know precisely what camp aesthetics are, made possible through their engagement with and access to LGBTQ+ subcultures, LGBTQ+ communities, and LGBTQ+ media. Applied to the women and gay men who write the film texts that are analysed as part of this thesis, then, female and gay male screenwriters have access to postfeminist discourse(s) on account of who they are; the consumers and complacent subjects of postfeminist media culture. And, by analysing the film text as the object of study, textual analysis allows the postfeminist discourse(s) at work within these film texts to be teased out and speculated on. This allows a film's cast and crew to be rightfully recognised, assuming that the screenwork is a collaborative effort, while simultaneously recognising the postfeminist discourse(s) that might signify the screenwriter's discursive influence. Such postfeminist discourse(s) might

be carried through from the female or gay male screenwriter's original screenplay which, to reiterate, exists as a document of intention.

Textual Analysis as Discourse Analysis

According to Peter Larsen, textual analysis is a method of interpretation that allows researchers to tease out a whole range of possible meanings in media texts. Here, Larsen observes that the text "should not be regarded as a closed, segmented object with determinate, composite meanings but, rather as an indeterminate field of meaning in which intentions and possible effects intersect" (Larsen 1991: 121). Alan McKee furthers this to suggest that, by approaching texts as an indeterminate field of meaning, researchers can use textual analysis to theorise and speculate how different cultures and subcultures of people understand and relate to texts differently. In McKee's own words, textual analysis allows researchers to analyse texts and "make an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations" in which researchers can then speculate how different groups, demographics, and "human beings make sense of the world" (McKee 2003: 1).

With his emphasis on different cultures and subcultures, McKee's account of textual analysis suggests that it can be used as a method to identify different discourse(s) at work within a text. By therefore analysing a sample of film texts that are written by women and gay men, those who are consumers as well as writers of postfeminist media culture, an analysis of the postfeminist discourse(s) at work within these texts is warranted in an attempt to locate the screenwriter's own postfeminist subject position. This allows the discursive overlap between female and gay male spectatorship to be theorised, using the fact of the screenwriter's identity to theorise a postfeminist subject position within the

texts themselves, and thus constructing an idealised but strictly hypothetical "spectator" to understand the discursive overlap.

Using this primary research method to interrogate the politics and ideology of postfeminist media culture, however, serves only to develop an ideological criticism of postfeminist media culture. Indeed, by registering "women" and "gay men" as a figurative discursive categories, this method does not take into account the heterogeneity of real-life audiences. Not all women and gay men watch postfeminist texts in the same way and, certainly, many would denounce the feminine subject position that these texts create. However, for those real-life audiences who are willing to embrace the feminine subject position that postfeminist media culture creates, women and gay men have the power to resist and hold postfeminism to account in their viewing. That is, female and gay male audiences are invited to resist preferred (ideological) readings of the texts in question, reading feminism into the very characters and narratives that try to assimilate it.

Chapter One

Clover's Other Girls

Bodies that Matter in the First Teen Slasher Film Cycle

In the literature review, it was demonstrated how Carol J. Clover draws on the work of Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis to theorise fantasy as the organising feature of cinematic spectatorship. Here, the cinematic apparatus is organised around the phantasy of wish fulfilment; the mise-en-scène of desire. This allows the multiple, simultaneous, shifting, contradictory subject positions presented by the cinematic text to be theorised. Indeed, the spectator and their identification with one film character is not individualist; the spectator identifies with the film image in which all characters contribute to the cumulative mise-en-scène. Accordingly, this chapter begins by outlining Clover's identificatory framework in the slasher film. Where critics typically regard a linear identificatory binary between the psychokiller and the Final Girl, which has encouraged critics and theorists to focus near exclusively on these characters, this chapter charts how Clover conceptualises a fluid sadomasochistic framework that accounts for all characters in the film. Specifically, for the purposes of this thesis, it will be examined how Clover theorises both the female victim and the Final Girl as a collective identificatory body.

By conceptualising Clover's identificatory framework in mind of the female collective, the aim of this chapter is to then liberate the female victims of early teen slasher; those who are otherwise referred to as victims to critical discourse. Essential to their liberation are the theorisations of Isabel Cristina Pinedo (1997) and Catriona Miller (2014) who consider issues of characterisation, identification, and female subjectivity. Applied to their work is the parascholarship of Vince A. Liaguno (2008) who focuses on

characterisation, identification, and gay male subjectivity. This chapter identifies a discursive overlap between accounts of female and gay male subjectivity, that which otherwise constitutes "feminine" subjectivity in psychoanalytic terms, and argues that the (post-)feminist politics of the slasher film seduces both female and gay male spectatorships. However, where accounts of female and gay male subjectivity fundamentally centralise the Final Girl as an identificatory model of female resistance, this chapter applies Clover's fluid identificatory framework to these accounts, situating the other girls in this narrative. In doing so, it is conceptualised how the Final Girl's characterisation in early teen slasher cannot be without the girls characterised before her. How women and gay men identify with the female collective, this chapter argues, is why women and gay men identify with the Final Girl as a mode of resistance.

Visual Pleasure and Slasher Cinema: Carol J. Clover and the Horrors of Heteronormativity

"Slasher films are uniquely violent against women," or so critics warned at their popularisation in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Linz and Donnerstein 1994: 246). "Get back in your place," Gene Siskel claimed, was the ideologically intertwined message in these films; "a primordial response" to the women's movement of the 1970s (*Screen Previews*: Extreme Violence Directed at Women, 1980). Even in theorising backlash postfeminism—that discursive hostility towards the women's movement, gaining prominence in the 1980s—Susan Faludi identifies another critic who "proposes that feminists produced the rise in slasher movies" (Faludi 1991: 3). Here, early teen slasher films are mischaracterised as the cultural artifice of a "new traditionalism" where feminist ideology is violently denounced, reminiscent of a past where "traditional values were (supposedly) popular" (Projansky 2001: 72).

Interrogating such claims of violent antifeminism, Carol J. Clover published "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film" in 1987, a shortened and revised version of which later appeared in 1992's *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. Here, where criticism had previously ostracised the female figure as lone victim, Clover sought to problematise such a reductive conclusion, using her voice to accredit the silenced. Specifically, in accrediting the role of the surviving female protagonist, Clover opened a space to consider multifarious issues of characterisation and identification, using her work to scrutinise the assumption that slasher films adopt a sustainably sadistic male gaze, inviting "audience identification not with the victim but with the killer" (Ebert 1981: 55).

According to Clover, young straight men "are the slasher film's implied audience, the object of its address" (Clover 1992: 23). Here, the slasher film "tells the immensely generative story of a psychokiller who slashes to death a string of mostly female victims, one by one, until he is subdued or killed, usually by the one girl who has survived (ibid.: 21). Within this narrative, teenage boys are not offered a sustainable point of male identification. Boyfriends and schoolmates are "marginal, undeveloped characters" who "tend to die early," authoritarian figures such as fathers, policemen, and sheriffs "demonstrate risible incomprehension and incompetence," and the killer—who, for the most, remains "unseen or barely glimpsed"—fails to elicit "immediate or conscious empathy" when audiences finally bear witness (ibid.: 44). His most sustainable point of identification, then, in accordance with the narrative's trajectory, comes in the Final Girl: she who defies the killer and "is boyish, in a word . . . not, in any case, feminine in the ways of her friends." Unlike the female friends that Clover speaks of, the Final Girl is both smart and practical and her sexual reluctance sets her apart, aligning her "with the very boys she fears or rejects, not to speak of the killer himself" (ibid.: 40).

On the premise that the Final Girl comes out triumphant, critics often interpret Clover's theorisation as "supposedly progressive" (Williams 1996/2015: 198). Klaus Rieser exemplifies this, stating that contrary to Clover's claims, "the slasher film nonetheless remains deeply implicated in patriarchal ideology" (Rieser 2001: 275). Yet Clover says it herself: "To applaud the Final Girl as a feminist development . . . is, in light of her figurative meaning, a particularly grotesque expression of wishful thinking" (Clover 1992: 53). In accordance with the narrative trajectory, Clover merely theorises that the Final Girl is the audiences' *final* point of identification. As she attempts to demonstrate, identification in the slasher film is not sustainable—"neither fixed nor entirely passive" (Williams 1991: 8)—suggesting that those critics who have engaged with the Final Girl have not acknowledged the intricate identificatory trajectory that Clover sets out. Critics, in short, have not acknowledged her theorisation as a whole.

According to Clover, for the majority of the slasher film, the killer offers an identificatory model for male audiences, albeit an unsustainable one. It is precisely because of this that the killer remains unseen or barely glimpsed. Indeed, identification is implicated once the killer's physicality is finally detailed, as male audiences are unable to elicit immediate or conscious empathy. The killer's presence is instead signified in a series of point of view shots, placing male audiences in the eye of the beholder. Should this paralleling of characteristic and identificatory maleness not be clearer, Clover equates phallic weaponry to the penis, constituting "personal extensions of the body" (Clover 1992: 32). As in the classical Hollywood cinema that Laura Mulvey interrogates, the killer "articulates the look and creates the action," providing "a main controlling figure with whom the spectator can identify" (Mulvey 1975: 12-3).

As Clover's heterosexual audiences share an identificatory gaze with the killer, it is clear as to why he penetrates his male victims in a fashion that "is nearly always swift,"

from a distance, dimly lit, or offscreen without a glimpse (Clover 1992: 35). If, in the slasher film, "violence and sex are not concomitants but alternatives" (ibid.: 29)—"excessive in their displacement of sex onto violence" (Williams 1991: 2)—audiences are not offered the gratuitous spectacle of male penetration because "the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification" (Mulvey 1975: 12). Read in allegorical terms, as a man penetrates another with his weapon, male audiences are spared the homoerotic spectacle of penetrative gay sex. Yet when the spectacle of male penetration is shown, which is more often than Clover is prepared to acknowledge, critics often subvert this logic of homoeroticism to one that is heteronormative. Here, the spectacle of male penetration is read as a feminisation of the body—a symbolic castration—resembling woman's "bleeding wound" (Dika 1990: 61; Creed 1993: 126).

If the spectacle of male death is informed by the logic of misogyny, this logic is made overt when audiences witness the spectacle of female death, said to literalise woman's symbolic meaning. Long before she is slain, however, Mulvey identifies that woman "subjected to her image as bearer of the bleeding wound," arousing castration anxiety in male audiences (Mulvey 1975: 7). First, then, male audiences must objectify woman as a fetish to disarm the threat of castration. This is why, in part, Clover recognises the female victim as "first and foremost a sexual transgressor" (Clover 1992: 33). Indeed, her primary function in coital scenes is to pose nude and "titillate the audience" (Rockoff 2002: 14), allowing male audiences to deny her sexual transgression through objectification. Once objectified, male audiences can safely look upon her with a sadistic voyeurism, "asserting control and subjecting the guilty person through punishment" (Mulvey 1975: 14). Far from being a merciful subgenre, the female victim is slashed to death by the killer—and, by extension, the identifying male spectator—who imposes the

image of the bleeding wound upon her, mapping onto her body the very symbolism she tries to transgress (see also Landy and Fischer 1982; Williams 1984).

Here, Clover is keen to assert that the female victim is punished through a misogynistic lens, filmed—in stark contrast to her male counterpart—"at closer range, in more graphic detail, and at greater length" (Clover 1992: 35). However, Clover simultaneously acknowledges the empathetic possibilities of this misogynistic lens, positing that death needs to be seen in order to be felt. Alas, her insistence on a heteronormative viewpoint implicates any positive reading of this, writing: "It may be through the female body that the body of the male audience is sensationalised, but the sensation is an entirely male affair," making the violation of the body "imaginable, for males, only in nightmare" (ibid.: 52-3). Using the female body to experience the "nightmare" of penetration, male audiences are invited to "experience forbidden desires and disavow them on the grounds that the visible actor is, after all, a girl" (ibid.: 18). The female victim serves as a "heterosexual deflection," averting a homoerotic scenario through gender displacement as male audiences are made penetrable only in their sensationalised mimicking of the female body (ibid.: 52). The sadism that underlines identification with the killer, then, is theorised to unsustainably coincide with a masochistic identificatory process with his female victims, conceptualising a fluid sadomasochistic framework. As Steve Neale observes in his analysis of *Halloween* (1978), on which Clover bases her thesis:

> What is significant about the spectator's position within the sado-masochistic aspects of the structure is that it is constantly split between the twin poles of sadism and masochism. And this split is inscribed in the text in terms of a shifting series of polarised identifications. (Neale 1981: 28)

In conceptualising such a sadomasochistic framework, Clover could easily be mistaken to suggest that the female victim serves as nothing but a sexual two-dimensional archetype. Rieser's engagement certainly reflects this, suggesting that "these women serve almost exclusively for voyeuristic display as victims" (Rieser 2001: 376). However, Clover is aware that, in order for audiences to be sensationalised via the female body, it is not enough for these victims to be looked at with a sadistic voyeurism, eliciting immediate identification on the grounds of masochism thereafter. Indeed, empathetic identification cannot be felt without an emotional investment. As Clover therefore tends: "Although the slasher film's victims may be sexual teases, they are not in addition simpleminded, scheming, physically incompetent, and morally deficient," suggesting a certain likeability that encourages audiences to identify with them (Clover 1992: 61). By the end of any given film's duration, this is exactly why "we shifted our sympathies back and forth and dealt them out to other characters along the way," discounting the killer and the Final Girl (ibid.: 45-6). As the emotional politics of victimhood have been written out of memory, the female victim has become a victim to critical discourse, ostracised in the margins. Accordingly, it is counterproductive to interpret the fluidity of Clover's sadomasochistic framework in favour of a linear identificatory binary between the killer and the Final Girl. As Rieser, again, demonstrates:

> Most important to Clover's and our purposes is that the slasher invites a *shifting* identification: the audience (predominantly male according to Clover) usually identifies at first with the killer . . . Later, however, when the monster turns against the female protagonist, the audience shifts . . . its identification to the Final Girl. (Rieser 2001: 374, emphasis in original)

Midst an array of female victims, Clover recognises the Final Girl as exceptional, "the distressed female most likely to linger in memory." To demonstrate her claim, Clover

introduces the Final Girl in the most visceral of terms, articulating the severity of her trauma:

> She is the one who encounters the mutilated bodies of her friends and perceives the full extent of the preceding horror and of her own peril; who is chased, cornered, wounded; whom we see scream, stagger, fall, rise, and scream again. She is abject terror personified. (Clover 1992: 35)

Once again, the spectatorial body is sensationalised through the female victim, only here without her subsequent death, as scenes of agonizing torture register the Final Girl as a masochistic identificatory model. Here, empathy allows male audiences to feel emasculating expressions of emotion. However, because this is "registered as a 'feminine' experience," the Final Girl's gender invites male audiences to deny the phenomenon as emasculating (ibid.: 61). Spectating male bodies are invited to consider themselves emotionally depleted only in their sensationalised mimicking of the female body, for "crying, screaming, fainting, trembling, begging for mercy belong to the female" (ibid.: 51). With this, Clover recognises the Final Girl and the female victim as a collective—their "femaleness" equally serves as "the artefact of heterosexual deflection"—suggesting a critical double standard when, respectively, once is glorified and the other tainted (ibid.: 52).

Indirectly, Clover herself has questioned this double standard, aiming to rectify by addressing it. Writing in retrospect, she observes how "in wider discourse, the sketch version more or less hijacked not only the character of the Final Girl but the chapter in which she figures" (Clover 2015: x). Paraphrased above, Clover's so-called "sketch version" of the Final Girl merely constitutes four sentences, frequently recited by critics:

> The Final Girl is boyish, in a word. Just as the killer is not fully masculine, she is not fully feminine—not, in any case, feminine in the ways of her friends. Her smartness, gravity, competence in mechanical and other practical matters, and sexual reluctance set her apart from the other girls and ally her, ironically, with the very boys she fears or rejects, not to speak of the killer himself. Lest we miss the point, it is spelled out in her name: Stevie, Marti, Terry, Laurie, Stretch, Will, Joey, Max. (Clover 1992: 40)

With an emphasis on her smartness, gravity, and competence in practical matters—let alone her sexual reluctance which is read as a symptom of these qualities—critics regard Clover's sketch of the Final Girl with a feminist sensibility, dismissing the male audiences' supposed identification with the killer, not to speak of the victims before her. In this light, the Final Girl presents female, offering an emancipatory point of identification for female audiences, but is also masculinsied, offering a non-emasculating point of identification for male audiences. What is not taken into account, then, is how Clover's sentiments are setting up her main argument about the Final Girl, hence defining her in relation to what the other girls are not.

Just as the Final Girl is exempt from death, she is the one to look at the killer, bringing him into the audiences' vision. Where male audiences once saw from his perspective, here they adopt the Final Girl's point of view—"putting us in the mind and body of the prey rather than the predator" (Clover 2015: xi)—bearing witness to the killer's grotesque look. With this look, the killer is dismissed as an identificatory model, unable to elicit immediate or conscious empathy. It is here, then, that male audiences are said to switch their identificatory core, transcending the killer in favour of the Final Girl. Where audiences once identified with her "feminine" impulses, it is here that "she stops screaming, faces the killer, and reaches for the knife." Aided by the phallic weaponry once held by the killer—that which parallels characteristic and identificatory maleness—"*she* addresses the monster on *his* own terms" (Clover 1992: 28, emphasis added). At the

moment of her phallicisation, that is, the Final Girl becomes the final core identificatory model for male audiences. If before, the "feminisation" of male audiences died along with the victim—resuming the killer's sadistic look, shifting back and forth—here the "feminisation" of male audiences dies at the moment of the Final Girl's "masculinisation," reforming their position as gendered subjects in heteropatriarchal relations. Like Mulvey's main male protagonist, he who offers a "screen surrogate" for male audiences (Mulvey 1975: 12), Clover's Final Girl ultimately serves as a "male surrogate" who is "female not despite the maleness of the audience, but precisely because of it. The discourse is wholly masculine," inviting the male spectator to employ her as "a vehicle for his own sadomasochistic fantasies" (Clover 1992: 53).

Because the psychoanalytic component of Clover's so-called "Final Girl theory" is now generally dismissed, it might be suggested that the term "Final Girl" is useful insofar as it gives name to the surviving female protagonist. Yet Clover is still keen to stress that although the Final Girl "does look something like a female hero," surpassing the killer's rampage, "consider how she spent the good hour of the film up to then: being chased and almost caught, hiding, running, falling, rising in pain and fleeing again, seeing her friends mangled and killed by weapon-wielding killers, and so on." If audiences should therefore discount their readings of the Final Girl as a "female avenger" or "triumphant feminist hero," recognising her instead as a "[t]ortured survivor" or "victim-hero" (Clover 2015: x), audiences should also review their perception of the female victim as a hopelessly underdeveloped archetype; "tits and screams" (Clover 1992: 35).

Just as she has "hijacked" her own meaning, Clover recognises the Final Girl as having "hijacked" her theorisation on slasher too. This is somewhat of a modest notion, given that the Final Girl has essentially seized the development of critical discourse, needlessly marginalising the archetype of victimhood when she herself characteristically

fits. Decades later, the Final Girl is a product of Clover's psychoanalytic interest in the paradoxes of heteropatriarchal gender norms, in which the following sections proceed to consider a proposition. "The psychoanalytic validity of these claims I leave to others," Clover concludes. "I do not mean to propose that horror movies have nothing to offer but an s/m bang" (Clover 1992: 223-5). However, unlike previous attempts, here her proposition will be met in the interests of female and gay male audiences, indifferent to the exceptionality of the Final Girl in the victim paradigm. Just as female and gay male audiences, for too long, have been marginalised in critical discourse, now they are acknowledged along with the victims lost to memory.

Her Body, Themselves: On the Discursive Limits of "Female" and "Gay Male" Spectatorship

At the turn of the millennium, critical discourse on the slasher film made an attempt to shift away from psychoanalytic methods, theorising violence and youth in sociological terms. According to John Kenneth Muir, the violence that foregrounds the slasher film reflects "the ugliness of the world" (Muir 2007: 18). Here, youth audiences are offered the opportunity "to watch their fears displayed viscerally onscreen" (Kvaran 2016: 964). "A fantasy of anxiety prevents actual anxiety and its consequence," Janet Staiger elaborates (Staiger 2015: 213). "These films reassure that we can walk unharmed through the nightmares of violence," allowing youth audiences to enjoy the cathartic expression of death—delaying the rites of passage into adulthood—guaranteed survival in their closing identifications with the Final Girl (ibid.: 226).

Although these arguments remain mostly convincing, they become problematic in their essentialist treatment of youth as a homogenous culture. Staiger, at the very least, observes how "this is an aesthetic for young men" which may incidentally "help explain

its pleasures for young women as well" (ibid.: 226). What requires further consideration, then, is Sarah Trencansky's notion that the slasher film aims to address "the unprivileged 'other' groups of society" (Trencansky 2001: 64). As writer/director Wes Craven observes:

> It's an audience with a certain disposition. They're willing to look at things that are a lot more physically challenging. They're a little bit more comfortable with horror films—because they're dealing with more primal issues, in confrontation with parents and authority figures, being placed in personal danger. (Craven in Williams 1996/2015: 201-3)

If such theorisations are to be made about the slasher film, it seems important not to suggest a homogenous youth culture with a core anxiety. Rather, theorists need to deconstruct the structures of youth, allowing them to speculate how the intersections of identity might align individual bodies and their anxieties. Isabel Cristina Pinedo, for example, maintains that the slasher film depicts "violence as a constituent of everyday life" (Pinedo 1997: 65). As she proceeds to situate this everyday violence in the politics of female spectatorship, Pinedo characterises the slasher film as "an imaginary staging of women who fight back with lethal force against male figures who stalk and try to kill them" (ibid.: 87). According to Pinedo, this narrative captures a female subjectivity and, as a result, she theorises the slasher film as "a cathartic outlet" for female audiences (ibid.: 85). Catriona Miller develops this further to demonstrate how film audiences "draw on personal and cultural experience as a response to cinematic elements" and, for young women and girls in particular, "the outward reality is likely to be patriarchal in tone." Here, the slasher film provides "a particularly stark representation of what it feels like to be female within a patriarchal society," allowing female audiences to identify with the Final Girl as "a mode of resistance" (Miller 2014: 113-6).

As Vince A. Liaguno proceeds to interrogate the politics of gay male spectatorship, his words elicit that of Pinedo and Miller:

> Slasher films also serve as an outlet for the societal fears gays face in their everyday lives. For gays who've chosen to embrace their sexual orientation, navigating in a world fraught with prejudice, discrimination, and the threat of physical harm from gay bashings, the characters in slasher films provide a conduit through which those fears can be examined on a subconscious level. (Liaguno 2008)

As the Final Girl emerges as a mode of female resistance, she simultaneously emerges "as a figure that resonates with gay sensibilities" (Bingham-Scales 2017). Liaguno likens her narrative trajectory to the coming out process: "weak, timid, uncertain of how to navigate through the situation she finds herself in," to then transform and resist—come out—as "she toughens and becomes confident in her abilities to overcome the malevolence stalking her" (Liaguno 2008). This is further suggested by Heather Langenkamp, the talent behind Nancy Thompson in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) and *A Nightmare on Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors* (1987), who reflects on her fanbase in the docuseries *History of Horror* (AMC, 2018-21):

> I guess I'd say my very first fans were young gay men, and they told me that they [identified with] Nancy as they faced their folks—or, their parents, or their families—in revealing their true selves. And they expressed to me ["revealing their true selves"] was their Freddy . . . that scary thing that they have to face and they have to fight. (Langenkamp in *History of Horror*: Slashers – Part 2, 2018)

With their shared themes of violence and resistance, although there is nuance, accounts of female subjectivity and gay male subjectivity clearly articulate the intersections of identity. In doing so, women and gay men are aligned in their anxieties and subsequent viewing (identificatory) practices. However, as feminist scholars address female audiences, and as

gay scholars address gay audiences, the heteropatriarchal structures that underpin their anxieties cannot be fully understood and interrogated. That is, scholars are restrained by the discursive limits of identity politics. By appropriating Clover's notion of "feminine masochism" and rendering it in cultural terms, disavowing its psychosexual connotations, the relationship between female and gay male spectatorships can be theorised around the similar affective responses that female and gay male audiences might experience, determined by the conditions of a heteropatriarchal culture. Accordingly, through processes detailed at length in the literature review, this allows the (post)feminist politics and ideology of early teen slasher to be applied to both female and gay male audiences.

The Personal is Political: Vernacular (Post-)Feminism and the First Teen Slasher Film Cycle

Originally coined the "teenie-kill pic" by Robin Wood (1983), revised as the "stalker" film by Vera Dika (1987), teen slasher is widely recognised as a subtype of the slasher subgenre. Following its popularisation in the late 1970s and early 1980s, teen slasher was often assimilated in the backlash against so-called "women-in-danger" films (Ebert 1981), unique in its (seemingly) formulaic narrative structure. Where the "women-in-danger" film centralises violence against women, the teen slasher film broadly focuses on "the story of young people being menaced by a shadowy blade-wielding killer" (Nowell 2011a: 77), primarily marketed at a niche demographic of mixed-sex teenagers and young adults.

According to Richard Nowell, the first teen slasher film cycle was influenced by *Black Christmas* (1974). Although this "Pioneer Production" was a box-office failure, it nevertheless provided "a new textual model" for filmmakers to follow (ibid.: 77). *Halloween* speculated the commercial viability of teen slasher again in 1978 and, "across several re-releases, beginning in late 1979 and continuing through out the early 1980s,"

Halloween became a "Trailblazer Hit" that indicated market interest (ibid.: 100). *Friday the 13th*, *Prom Night*, and *Terror Train* soon followed as "Prospector Cash-ins" in 1980, ensuring that *Halloween*'s success was not a one-off. While *Terror Train* performed poorly, *Friday the 13th* and *Prom Night* emerged as "Reinforcing Hits," signaling the "commercial robustness" of teen slasher (ibid.: 184). However, this soon encouraged a surplus of "Carpetbagger Cash-ins" to oversaturate the market, exploiting the commercial viability of the film type and bringing the first teen slasher film cycle to an end: *My Bloody Valentine* (1981), *Friday the 13th Part II* (1981), *Graduation Day* (1981), *The Burning* (1981), *Happy Birthday to Me* (1981), *Final Exam* (1981), *Hell Night* (1981), *The Prowler* (1981), *Just Before Dawn* (1981), *Madman* (1981), and *The Dorm That Dripped Blood* (1982).

While Nowell is primarily interested in the first teen slasher film cycle's industrial context, earlier theorists were interested in developing a sociohistorical approach. As Dika succinctly observes:

> The stalker formula achieved its greatest success at a transitional period in American history. After the humiliation, loss, and guilt of Vietnam, America found itself in an enfeebled world position, faced with a faltering economy. Moreover, the Carter administration, much assailed because of its incompetence in maintaining a position of strength for the United States, received its most crushing blow with the Iranian hostage crisis. In 1979, at a time paralleling the rise of the stalker film, American government personnel were held captive in Tehran for over a year. While the United States acted with restraint, the national mood was one of outrage and impotence. The desire for action found expression on buttons, bumper stickers, or graffiti that read "Fuck Iran" or "Nuke Iran." The American hostages were finally released in 1980, on the day of Ronald Reagan's inauguration. With the Reagan presidency came the finalization of an already ongoing process that tended to reverse the ideals, aspirations, and attitudes of the 1960s. America returned to traditional values—to family, home, and religion. "Do your own thing" was replaced by conservative personal conduct and a reassessment of career goals. The economy made it necessary for young people to think of making money and not to indulge in a variety of less-than-practical creative pursuits. Moreover, the radical style of the hippies was replaced by a new kind of radicalism. Punk fashion replaced the 1960s attitude of peace and love with a harsh, aggressive artificiality.

> Violence and sadism were featured prominently in punk music and performance style. (Dika 1987: 97-8; see also Dika 2023)

According to Dika, "the stalker film shares this dominant shift in attitude" (ibid.: 98), primarily achieved through the audiences' closing identification(s) with the Final Girl. "To the stalker film's young audiences, on the brink of adulthood and ready to formulate ideas on careers, politics, and family, these films demonstrate the inefficiency of sexual freedom, of casual, nongoal-orientated activity, and of a nonviolent attitude," characterised by those who are permitted to live and those who are permitted to die (ibid.: 98-9). Allegorically, "the cheers at the end of these films are for an enfeebled but still strong America, one symbolised by a once weak female character who has now been fortified with a new set of ideals for survival" (ibid.: 99). Although Dika's approach does not account for the nuances of gendered spectatorship, and her use of structuralism works to dichotomise victim/survivor, she nevertheless demonstrates how the first teen slasher film cycle is grounded in the rise of neoliberalism. Applied to Patricia Erens' critically neglected argument, then, that the early slasher film "simultaneously reinforces patriarchal values while at the same time subverting them" (Erens 1987: 53), the first teen slasher film cycle can be theorised in relation to the politics and ideology of postfeminism. Although, as Yvonne Tasker notes, "the origin point of postfeminism is located somewhere in the late 1980s and early 1990s" (Tasker 2020: 672), the language of postfeminist discourse is nevertheless apparent throughout film history; Tasker's notion of "vernacular feminism" can therefore be used as a tool of analysis for historical postfeminist discourse.

As Nowell writes in his history of the first teen slasher film cycle, representations of female friendship were essential to how female audiences engaged and identified with early teen slasher films, focusing not on the Final Girl but the female collective. Where Pinedo and Miller's theorisations remain mostly convincing, then—centralizing the Final

Girl as a mode of resistance—their ideas need to be situated in Clover's fluid identificatory framework as to locate the other girls in this narrative. Nowell observes how the team behind *Halloween* cast a female ensemble and consciously "built their film around three small-town high school girlfriends," allowing distributors to target a primary demographic of young women and teenage girls (Nowell 2011a: 83). This trend had previously been seen in *Black Christmas* and would later influence *Prom Night* and, to a lesser extent, films such as *Friday the 13th* and *Terror Train*. Although this strategy allowed the first teen slasher film cycle to capture a female subjectivity, it is important to note how some additions to the cycle, including *The Burning* and *My Bloody Valentine*, appropriate female friendship for the advancement of male character development. Where such films might still capture a female subjectivity, offering a reflection of heterosexual femininity with strict "girl talk" about men, sex, and relationships, other films are bound in exploring the multifaceted lives of young women and girls, depicted through their more intricate representations of female friendship.

By thoughtfully screening female friendship, early teen slasher films were often successful in their delicate portrayal of "the emotional, social, and psychological pressures of burgeoning heterosexuality," reflecting the lived, cultural experience(s) of a young female demographic (ibid.: 210). *Halloween*'s success was predicated on the dynamics of girlhood in particular; a notion that Nowell attributes to John Carpenter who knew the importance of such content on the film's commercial prospects. Here, Nowell suggests that co-writer/producer Debra Hill "wrote the girls' dialogue *because* writer/director Carpenter felt that he, as an adult male, could not depict female youth convincingly" (ibid.: 83-4, emphasis added). Nowell's emphasis on Carpenter as "writer/director" mischaracterises Hill's role from co-writer/producer to some sort of inconsequential script editor, problematised by Murray Leeder in his comprehensive study of the film. Leeder

describes Hill's contribution to *Halloween* as "incalculable" and, derived from an interview with Carpenter, notes how she herself completed the first draft of the screenplay (Leeder 2014: 28). Where critics might fetishise the auteurism behind John Carpenter's *Halloween*, on the contrary, Debra Hill is largely responsible for popularising the early teen slasher film. Indeed, Hill perfects the nuances of a feminine subjectivity that captures female youth, working in collaboration with the onscreen talent of Jamie Lee Curtis, Nancy Loomis, and P.J. Soles.

While Hill continues to struggle for the posthumous recognition that she deserves, countless other women remain overlooked in their vital contributions to the first teen slasher film cycle. Indeed, *The Silent Scream* (1979) was co-produced by Joan Harris and Leslie Zurla, *Terror Train* was co-written by Judith Rascoe in an uncredited role, *Friday the 13th Part II* was co-produced by Lisa Barsamian, *Graduation Day* was co-written by Anne Marisse, *Final Exam* was co-produced by Carol Bahoric, and *The Dorm That Dripped Blood* was co-written and produced by Stacey Giachino. *Night School* (1981) was also written by Ruth Avergon but, although Dika originally wrote of the film as part of the stalker cycle in 1987, its adult themes are exemplary of North American *giallo*. As Hill paved the way for these women to fulfil roles as writers and producers, their function might be considered the same; developing female characters, offering suggestions, and scripting films that capture of subjectivity of female youth. However, just as it is impossible to capture the whole of female youth as one homogenous culture, relying on broad assumptions about what "female" subjectivity constitutes, these techniques also incidentally work to resonate with a gay male subjectivity, offering a "feminine" subject position that speaks to their lived, cultural experience(s).

Laurie (Jamie Lee Curtis) is the Final Girl in *Halloween*, more reserved that her friends, Annie (Nancy Loomis) and Lynda (P.J. Soles). Hill's characterisations are

sophisticated and, depite their differences, the friendship makes a charming spectacle. Here, where critics exploit the liberated sexuality of Annie and Lynda, the film largely situates their sexuality among the other trials and tribulations of female adolescence. As Nowell neatly summarises:

> Much of *Halloween* depicted the trio bonding, discussing homo-social and heterosexual interaction, and musing over the minor personal problems that arouse from their comfortable middle-class existences: having or not having a prom-date; balancing schoolwork, babysitting, and boyfriends; not being caught smoking pot. (Nowell 2011a: 83)

Annie and Lynda are characterisations of the New Woman, prototypically "empowered" by the gains of second wave feminism. Considering the intricacy with which these characters are portrayed, these representations of the New Woman give visibility to a postfeminist discourse that is not violently antifeminist, "appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even well-intended response to feminism" (McRobbie 2004: 255). Indeed, these postfeminist representations of the New Woman assimilate feminist politics into popular culture, appearing so that the demands of feminism have been "taken into account" and invoked. As a typical example, Annie and Lynda have a freedom to choose, enabling them to make "empowering" decisions in about and their everyday lives. In dialogue with Laurie, however, they struggle to balance their adolescence with the burgeoning pressures of schoolwork, babysitting, and boyfriends. Annie and Lynda are held hostage to their personal problems, relying on the nuances of female friendship to navigate through them. As characterisations of the New Woman, Annie and Lynda are both likeable and confident, encouraging both female and gay male audiences to identify with them, but their imperfections are what make them realistic and relatable, capturing

the subject position of female youth (and, to a lesser extent, gay men) in a neoliberal, postfeminist culture.

As Annie and Lynda form a collective in their friendship with Laurie, talking through and making light of their personal problems, they withdraw from the very mantra that defined second wave feminism ("the personal is political"). These collectivist conversations could open a space for feminist thought and intervention, constituting an exercising in consciousness-raising; that which Imelda Whelehan describes as "intended to awaken women to the injustices of their secondary social positions," encouraging them to "reassess their personal and emotional lives, their relation to their families, their lovers, and their work" (Whelehan 1995: 13). These conversations, however, are wholly depolicitised. Their personal problems are perceived as an ingrained part of life, manageable only in the pursuit of an individual, in which the conflicts faced by Annie and Lynda signify their marginalised subject position, despite their status as New Women in postfeminist culture. It is precisely in her marginalised subject position that the New Woman lends herself to gay male as well as female identification, presenting the image of a "feminine" subjectivity.

To further capture the postfeminist subject position of female youth and gay men, early teen slasher films share a diegetic world of recognisable locations that are heteropatriarchal in character, shifting between schools and universities, summer camps and suburban streets. At first, these surrounds seem safe, reflecting the ordinariness of everyday life, yet depoliticised scenes of misogyny and (hetero-)sexism are often overlooked. In *Halloween*, Annie confronts Michael Myers (Nick Castle) as he slowly drives by and stares at the three girls, suggesting that catcalling and street harassment are a daily occurrence. "Hey jerk, speed kills!" In *Prom Night*, Kim (Jamie Lee Curtis) and her friends are harassed by school bully Lou (David Mucci) in the corridor. "Now I know why

Kim won't go out with me, she likes girls." What appears to be a snide (hetero-)sexist joke later becomes assault when, in the canteen, Lou forces himself on Kim and kisses her. In *Terror Train*, Alana (Jamie Lee Curtis) discovers that boyfriend Mo (Timothy Webber) and his best friend Doc (Hart Bochner) have spiked the drinks of two young women at a party, both of whom they attempt to date rape. Even in *Friday the 13th*, the apparent safety of a mixed-sex friendship group is undermined by casual sexism. As the camp counsellors prepare dinner, Marcie (Jeannie Taylor) refuses to "play chef" when the cook does not show. "The squaws are revolting," Ned (Mark Nelson) remarks. He further excludes Marcie and Brenda (Laurie Bartram) when the other men start discussing how to use the emergency power generator. "Don't you like that macho talk?" Although these scenes depoliticise their representations of misogyny and (hetero-)sexism, from the outset, before violent disruption even ensures, they fundamentally provide audiences with a "feminine" subject position that allows them to identify against a "masculine" subject position.

As a violent disruption ensues, to see through the killer's point of view becomes a politically radical tool. "The danger is within," these shots seem to suggest, making "every suburban commonplace menacing" (Gill 2002: 16). Through the eye of the beholder, female audiences are invited to see themselves, realising the threat posed to their screen surrogate. Simultaneously, gay male audiences are invited to reflect on their own vulnerability, realising the threat posed to their female counterpart. In realising the threat, actively identifying with the "empowered" individual gazed upon, audiences are invited to *feel* the threat staring at her. Yet a certain hopelessness looms. Marked as a victim, the girl being gazed upon is unable to act for she does not have the knowledge that female and gay male audiences do. Unaware, her biggest problems remain to be trivial in comparison. Balancing the trials and tribulations of female adolescence, she fails to see the real horrors of heteropatriarchy that stare upon her. In a position of helplessness, audiences are

consciously affected by the heteropatriarchal threat that stares, seeing the configuration of a marginalised identity through the eye of oppression.

Although *Halloween*'s Michael Myers is occasionally presented as a vulnerable figure, scenes of violence and threat clearly signify him as the marker of heterosexual masculinity. In the early teen slasher films that followed, although the killer's gender identity and sexual orientation become more uncertain, their assumed "maleness" reflects how the masculinisation of violence is normalised. Before the killer's identity is revealed, then, violence in early teen slasher might best be situated in relation to Raewyn Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity. According to Connell, hegemonic masculinity determines how gender is defined in heteropatriarchal relations; it is the idealised practice of masculinity that illegitimately promises "the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Connell 1995/2005: 77). Although men generally hold no authentic claim to this idealised notion of hegemonic masculinity, many are complicit "since they gain from the patriarchal dividend," situating themselves hierarchically superior in heteropatriarchal gender relations. Here, it is precisely in their inability to claim authenticity that some complicit masculinities choose to appropriate dominance through violence and threat, "authorised by an ideology of supremacy" (ibid.: 83). Reflecting the "maleness" of the killer in early teen slasher, then, any masculinity that appropriates dominance through violence and threat is a toxic masculinity.

As the killer proceeds to victimise the female body, since theorists such as Clover displace the politics of sex onto violence, Leo Bersani's psychoanalytic account of penetrative sex can be applied and adapted in cultural terms, used to theorise the politics of violence in such a way that aligns female and gay male subjectivity in "feminine" positions. Bersani's words can be adapted to describe her death, writing that "the body is to be read as a language" (Bersani 1987: 220). Here, the killer appropriates his dominance

through a violent act, performing a totalising subjugation of the female body. In this performance of domination, the act of killing is an attempt to create meaning whereby the body of the killer and the body of the victim are "polarised into relations of mastery and subordination" (ibid.: 216). However, consider Connell's words: "Violence is part of a system of domination, but is at the same time a measure of its imperfection. A thoroughly legitimate hierarchy would have less need to intimidate" (Connell 1995/2005: 84). Given the constructedness of the killer's dominance, then, critical discourse on early teen slasher becomes particularly problematic. Indeed, the fact that developed female characters are referred to as "victims" only validates the actions of the killer's illegitimate performance (see also Williams 1984).

Despite the killer's performance, no female victims are compliant in their deaths. Although these girls often struggle, in their struggle, they attempt to resist the killer's actions. In *Halloween*, for example, as Michael strangles Annie from the backseat of her car, she beeps the horn in a desperate bid for attention. Likewise, as Michael strangles Lynda with a telephone cord, she gasps for air knowing that Laurie is listening on the other end of the line. Although they are unsuccessful, in the early teen slasher film, representations of the female victim resist the reinforcement of a heteropatriarchal narrative. Neither she wants to die nor do we, as an audience, want her to die. To politicise this affective response, early teen slasher films emerge as a kind of consciousness-raising exercise in postfeminist culture. If the personal is political, as Adam Rockoff writes, "the killings in slasher films *are* personal" (Rockoff 2002: 9, emphasis in original).

"Symbolic castration appears to be part of the ideological project of the slasher film," Barbara Creed writes in psychoanalytic terms (Creed 1993: 125). To therefore theorise early teen slasher as a consciousness-raising exercise in postfeminist culture, the act of symbolic castration itself appears to be part of the ideological project of the teen

slasher film. Indeed, female and gay male audiences are reminded that to hold a "feminine" subject position is to be oppressed in heteropatriarchal gender relations, whether or not feminism has been "taken into account" and invoked in postfeminist popular culture. Here, as audiences identify with female bodies and experience their plight, their deaths are not the morbid reinforcement of violent antifeminism but, rather, a reinforcement of the circumstances under which feminism is needed.

More often than not, the Final Girl is a New Woman herself, with *Halloween*'s Laurie emerging as somewhat of an anomaly. Examples, here, include Jess (Olivia Hussey) in *Black Christmas*, Alice (Adrienne King) in *Friday the 13th*, Kim in *Prom Night*, Alana in *Terror Train*, and Ginny (Amy Steel) in *Friday the 13th Part II*. Here, it is precisely in her survival that the Final Girl appears as abject terror personified. Just as audiences identified with and experienced the plight of her friends, the Final Girl is the one to discover their mutilated bodies, perceiving the full extent of the preceding horror and of her own peril. She finds their dead bodies at the utmost of oppression and, forced to reflect on her own personal anguish, the Final Girl is confronted with an abject realisation of self. Indeed, the Final Girl is what the victims were; the Final Girl is what the victims are. If the Final Girl mimics audiences, realising the violent oppression that young women face, it is at this moment of realisation that the Final Girl "is pushed to the limit and driven to fight *by any means necessary*" (Pinedo 1997: 76, emphasis in original). However, if the Final Girl inflicts violence only because she must, it seems ambitious to suggest that early teen slasher films "celebrate" violent female retaliation, as Pinedo does (ibid.: 80). Certainly, if female audiences in particular partially avoid slasher films for "fear of being violently aggressive," the Final Girl's resistance needs to be read in more than just celebratory terms (ibid.: 85).

Before further considering the politics and ideology of the Final Girl's retaliation, the killer's identity requires interrogation, particularly its stakes for gay male audiences. As the early teen slasher film enters its climatic stages, as the Final Girl enters a definitive fight with the killer, it would seem that a linear identificatory binary explains the viewing practices of gay male audiences. Assuming that gay male audiences, at first, identify with the Final Girl, identification with the killer is implied (at face value) when they are revealed as "the embodiment of otherness," often appearing in Sotiris Petridis' words as "a male with homosexual or even transsexual [*sic*] characteristics" (Petridis 2014: 79-80). Through a psychoanalytic lens, Robin Wood set the foundation for this mode of viewing. Wood identifies the return of the repressed as an inexorable feature of the contemporary North American horror film, arguing that the monstrous represents the repressed Other within heteropatriarchal bourgeois capitalism: female sexuality, the proletariat, other cultures, ethnic groups, alternative ideologies, homosexuality and bisexuality, and children (Wood 1986/2003: 68-9). "Central to the effect and fascination of horror films is their fulfilment of our nightmare wish to smash the norms that oppress us and which our moral conditioning teaches us to revere," achieved through our identifications with the Other (ibid.: 72).

Theorising the queer monster, Harry M. Benshoff adapts Wood's work to move beyond a psychoanalytic framework, conceptualising LGBTQ+ audiences in light of their lived, cultural experience. He argues that, situated outside the hegemonic order, "the cinematic monster's subjective position is more readily acceded to by a queer viewer," inclining them to "experience the monster's plight in more personal, individualized terms" (Benshoff 1997: 12-3). Although queer monsters have the potential to reinforce hegemonic narratives of homophobia, transphobia, and transmisogyny, Benshoff stresses that identification with them "can mean many different things to many different people, and is

not necessarily always a negative thing for the individual spectators in question" (ibid.: 13).

To theorise a linear identificatory binary between the Final Girl and the killer, however, would be to deny gay male audiences and their closing identifications with the Final Girl. It is ineffective, then, to simply theorise an ontological reversal between characters. It is ineffective to theorise, from a heteropatriarchal viewpoint, that the Final Girl is "actively engaged in projecting the violent impact of hegemonic masculinity onto the (nonnormative) monster to then insidiously exorcise it" (Rieser 2001: 390; see also Greven 2011). This would problematically suggest that gay male audiences are only emancipated in death, deriving some kind of masochistic thrill, having identified with a killer who is presented as a "border-crossing pervert" (ibid.: 386). Certainly, if gay men are "associated with insatiable desire, with unstoppable sex," they need more than slasher for a cathartic masochistic release (Bersani 1987: 210).

Because the teen slasher film is considered formulaic, the theory that surrounds it reflects wider discourse, abound in assumptions and essentialist theorisations. The fact of the matter is, for a seemingly generative film type, the identity of the killer is an independent variable between films. Yet, a fact frequently disavowed by critics, this does not have to create theoretical contradictions. Indeed, if the teen slasher film encourages a fluid identificatory framework between characters, the killer's body and their ontological meaning has the potential to become unequivocally inherent, negotiable by the affective needs of audiences.

The violence in the teen slasher film is, first and foremost, discursive. Before the killer's identity is revealed, then, their assumed "maleness" reflects the masculinisation of violence in heteropatriarchal culture. "It is, overwhelmingly, the dominant gender who hold and use the means of violence," Connell observes (Connell 1995/2005: 83). On the

occasion that the maleness of the killer is literalised, the male killer emerges as the toxic embodiment of complicit masculinity in hegemonic gender relations: the fatherless son in *The Silent Scream*, the Final Girl's love interest in *My Bloody Valentine*, the Final Girl's friend in *The Dorm That Dripped Blood*, the bereft boyfriend in *Graduation Day*, the unknown assailant in *Final Exam*, the town sheriff in *The Prowler*, and so forth. Perceiving their violence as entirely justified, the killer shows no remorse for his actions. Failing to subsequently elicit even the faintest grimace of empathy, their appropriation of dominance through violence and threat is framed as wholly ideological. Offered a core identificatory model in the Final Girl, female and gay male audiences are confronted face-to-face with the discursive symptom of their anxieties; a male killer who is at one with hegemony, violently enforcing the subordination of the surviving female victim.

And yet, *Prom Night* alludes to the effeminacy of its killer, revealed to be the Final Girl's loving twin brother who seeks vengeance for the death of their younger sister. *Terror Train* presents its killer as a young crossdresser who similarly seeks vengeance for his trauma at the hands of bullies. Numerous teen slasher films present their killers as women: *Friday the 13th*, *Happy Birthday to Me*, and the slasher-adjacent *Night School*. Meanwhile, the maleness of many killers erases any consideration of their disabilities and disfigurements: *Halloween*, *Friday the 13th Part II*, *The Burning*, *Hell Night*, and so forth. These killers are marginalised by definition, navigating within the confines of heteropatriarchal law. This allows female and gay male audiences, among others, to momentarily disidentify with them.

Disidentification, according to José Esteban Muñoz, "is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology . . . not to willfully evacuate the politically dubious or shameful components within an identificatory locus. Rather, it is the reworking of those energies," reconfiguring the reactionary component of any given identity (Muñoz 1999:

11-2). "To disidentify is to read oneself and one's own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to 'connect' with the disidentifying subject" (ibid.: 12). As female and gay male audiences are invited to identify with the marginalisation of certain killers, then, they are invited to disidentify with the brutality of their actions. Disclosing their motives of pain and suffering—bereft, cheated, bullied, oppressed—female and gay male audiences are momentarily invited to empathise, revealing the killer to be a victim of the hegemonic world in which they live. It is precisely in their marginalisation that the killer is vilified, their mental state pushed beyond limits, yet the reason for this is depoliticised. Here, just as the Final Girl is a victim-hero, the killer is not a killer but a victim-killer.

In psychoanalytic terms, Dika suggests that the killer and the Final Girl "objectify the opposing tensions of a single self" (Dika 1990: 130). Yet, understood in terms of *oppression* as opposed to *repression*, the killer and the Final Girl are not necessarily a single self but paralleled in their marginalisation. Seeing the killer in a fragile state, the Final Girl enters into a paradoxical sense of solidarity, mimicked by female and gay male audiences. Here, the fluidity of identification allows female and gay male audiences to simultaneously identify with both bodies, shaped by the marginalisation of character. Yet it is this dual identificatory process that allows female and gay male audiences to subsequently disconnect with the killer, posing the Final Girl as their concluding identificatory model. Breaking emotional unity, the killer strikes against the Final Girl once more, in which hegemonic violence is again perpetuated in an act of displacement. It is here, again, that the Final Girl is pushed to the limit and must fight back by any means necessary.

Clover identifies two potential endings for the Final Girl: she "finds the strength either to stay the killer long enough to be rescued (ending A) or to kill him herself (ending B)" (Clover 1992: 35). Regardless of any given film's ending, critical engagement with the

Final Girl's agency tries too hard to forge itself into a postfeminist narrative about female empowerment. This is perhaps why Pinedo recognises the slasher film as celebratory of violent female retaliation, "empowering" the Final Girl when the killer is defeated. Yet for the Final Girl to be violently threatened is not empowering. As demonstrated above, the discursive source of violent masculinity is not designed to empower but oppress marginalised people. Framed in a life-threatening situation, the Final Girl fights as a matter of survival, "to survive what has come to seem unsurvivable" (ibid.: 39). To focus on the Final Girl's violent agency is to suggest her emancipation in life or death. That she barely survives is not empowering but this does not make her story any less feminist.

As an accidental survivor, the Final Girl is safe. At least, "for the moment, until the next film" (Rieser 2001: 390). Open endings are a constituent of early teen slasher, trading in "fears that refuse to go away" (Humphries 2002: 151). Although the heteropatriarchal threat is overcome, the Final Girl's narrative ends precisely where it began. Reinstated as spectacle, the Final Girl is marginalised and forced to assimilate into a heteropatriarchal world she thought she knew. However, the violence the Final Girl experienced leaves "a lingering sense of discomfort" (Kendrick 2014: 319). It feels that a symptom of heteropatriarchal oppression is gone but the cause is ever-present. Indeed, the killer's appropriation of dominance through violence and threat is still felt, suggesting that with hegemony reformed, heteropatriarchal violence could strike again at any given moment. The diegetic world once again depicts recognisable locations that are heteropatriarchal in character, presenting audiences with a world which looks like their own. Mimicking the Final Girl, however, hegemony is now witnessed through a paranoid lens. That is assuming, of course, that the Final Girl is not the Final Victim. *The Dorm That Dripped Blood*, a film co-written and produced by Stacey Giachino, is particularly nihilistic, leaving the Final Girl for dead and incinerated.

Conclusion

Although slasher films are violent against women, they are not uniquely so. In repeating the rhetoric, critics "exercise a binding power" in which their claim "acts *as* discourse" (Butler 1993: 17, emphasis in original). By reiterating that slasher *is* a misogynistic subgenre, critics ensure that slasher *becomes* a misogynistic subgenre. The male critics behind slasher's condemnation might be read as the real perpetrators of antifeminist discourse, then. Less worried about misogyny, as they so exhaustedly claim, these critics are preoccupied with defending and protecting the very masculinity that caused it. As Roger Ebert exemplifies, vilifying not the male killer but the female victim: "Now the 'victim' is the poor, put-upon male in the audience. And the demons are the women on the screen" (Ebert 1981: 56).

Nearly 15 years after the first teen slasher film cycle, which Nowell historicises between 1978 and 1981, *Scream* (1996) popularised teen slasher into the new millennium, essentially following an identical blueprint to *Halloween*'s box office success. As Valerie Wee writes, *Scream* made contemporary teen slasher "relevant to the adolescent female moviegoer" (Wee 2006: 59). Just as early teen slasher intricately captured the emotional, social, and psychological pressures of burgeoning heterosexuality, the films popularised by *Scream* developed an empathetic approach to the "physical, emotional, and psychological suffering" of their female protagonists (Craig and Fradley 2010: 87). Again, the angst of physical, emotional, and psychological suffering in *Scream* is a symptom of heteropatriarchal gender relations, capturing the personal and cultural subjectivities of female youth. Just as John Carpenter knew the commercial importance of such subjective content in *Halloween*, it is apparent that Wes Craven equally knew its importance in relation to *Scream*. Hence, Kevin Williamson "intentionally orientated *Scream*'s narrative

toward concerns particularly relevant to teenage girls" (Wee 2006: 60). Once again, where fans fetishise the auteurism of Wes Craven's *Scream*, the creative body responsible for popularising contemporary teen slasher is the openly gay Kevin Williamson, perfecting the nuances of a marginalised subjectivity that speaks to young women and gay men.

By paralleling *Halloween* and *Scream*, the similarities between early and contemporary teen slasher are made evident. Yet contrary to their similarities, critical discourse has chosen to emphasise their differences, suggesting a "progressive" postfeminist paradigm shift in recent renditions of the subgenre. Here, teen slasher is said to have developed a "refreshingly alert (post-)feminist sensibility which both refers back to and updates the protofeminism of the slasher film's Final Girl from the late 1970s and early 1980s" (Craig and Fradley 2010: 87). However, as this chapter has demonstrated, the teen slasher film has always had a (post)feminist sensibility, liberating the female victim of critical discourse to suggest that her very character was enabled by second wave feminism. By conceptualising the female victim and the Final Girl as a collective identificatory body, then, it becomes apparent that early teen slasher films are not ideologically reinforcing their violent antifeminism, so critics once claimed. Rather, early teen slasher films reproduce the horrors of a reality under which feminism is needed.

Chapter Two

The Importance of Being Kevin

Postfeminist Camp in the Third Teen Slasher Film Cycle

Ezra Brain and Olivia Wood (2023) have recently argued that Wes Craven's slasher films can be read through a queer lens. As is common in the critical discourse that surrounds queer horror, however, Brain and Wood assume that their queer readings of Craven's slasher films are oppositional readings. That is, Brain and Wood assume that their queer readings involve reading against the grain of the Hollywood mainstream, assuming that the politics and ideology of Craven's slasher films are otherwise heteronormative. Craven is perhaps best known for directing *Scream*, the film that popularised teen slasher at the turn of the millennium, yet the contributions of openly gay screenwriter Kevin Williamson are frequently written out of discourse. Instead of arguing that *Scream* encourages oppositional readings that allow the film to be interpreted as a queer text, then, this chapter demonstrates how the politics and ideology of the film are queer by design, and what are frequently regarded as "oppositional readings" might actually be preferred readings.

This chapter begins with a critical revaluation of queer horror and the discourse(s) that define the supposed subgenre. In doing so, this chapter theorises the openly gay screenwriter, and argues that their mediation of a heteronormative narrative does not necessarily reinforce a heteronormative politics and ideology. Although the use of heteronormative aesthetics allows the gay screenwriter to assimilate within the Hollywood mainstream, their mediation of a heteronormative world is not real; it is a fabrication that allows heteropatriarchal narratives to be critiqued through the politics and ideology of camp. While the gay screenwriter might not write LGBTQ+ characters into their films,

then, they nevertheless create a space for the marginalised in Hollywood's representational system.

By subsequently situating this critical revaluation of queer horror in relation to *Scream*, this chapter proceeds to evidence how the well documented "postmodern" aesthetics of *Scream* are not postmodern at all. Here, it is argued that the "postmodern" aesthetics of *Scream* are the misrecognition of Kevin Williamson's camp aesthetics, and postmodernism is used by critics and theorists to unknowingly generate a heteronormative discourse that erases and replaces a gay discourse. This is then further developed in relation to the gender politics of *Scream*. While Williamson is often celebrated for making the teen slasher film relevant to young women and teenage girls, contributing to the postfeminist media culture of the late 1990s, it becomes apparent that Williamson specifically uses postfeminist camp to address both female and gay male audiences. Although the target demographic of *Scream* is limited by the heteropatriarchal dictates of the Hollywood mainstream, defined along the lines of a heteronormative gender binary, Williamson's use of postfeminist camp indicates a discursive overlap between women and gay men, assimilating gay male audiences as part of *Scream*'s target female demographic.

Making Things Perfectly Straight: Rethinking Queer Horror, Heteronormative Aesthetics, and the Gay Screenwriter

While the definition of queer horror shifts from critic to critic, it is mutually understood that Robin Wood set its theoretical foundation with an emancipatory perception of monstrosity. As spelled out in the previous chapter, Wood asserts that the North American horror film of the 1970s characterises the monster as Other, fulfilling our desire to disrupt heteropatriarchal bourgeois capitalist structures (Wood 1986/2003: 68-72). Harry M. Benshoff subsequently adapts Wood's thesis to conceptualise LGBTQ+ audiences,

"linking the queer corpus with the figure of the Other as it has been theorised by Wood" (Benshoff 1997: 5). Again, "the cinematic monster's subjective position is more readily to by a queer viewer," and so they are "more like likely than straight ones to experience the monster's plight in more personal, individualised terms" (ibid.: 12-3):

> Identification with the monster can mean many different things to many different people, and is not necessarily always a negative for the individual spectators in question, even as some depictions of queer monsters undoubtedly conflate and reinforce certain sexist or homophobic fears within the public sphere. (ibid.: 13)

As it has been observed elsewhere, however, Benshoff's overemphasis on spectatorship does not consider how "individual film and television texts characterise the queer monster differently, each informed by their own ideological project" (Sheppard 2020: 177). Indeed, Benshoff's essentialist focus on spectatorial identification is exemplary of the critical discourse that surrounds Wood's theory: that all contemporary horror texts with monstrous Others are susceptible to reappropriation. Yet, as Wood addresses elsewhere, this is not his argument:

> Its thesis applies to only one branch of the genre (though it still seems to me the most important), and it fails to discriminate sufficiently in terms of value, lumping together major works and the relatively trivial simply because they reveal the same generic tropes – a common failing of "theoretical" criticism. (Wood 2003: xxxviii)

In mind of Wood's critical reflexivity, then, when considering the queer monster in more recent years, it becomes necessary to theorise how individual film and television texts use the generic trope, not to theorise the generic trope itself. This brings into question the very definition of queer horror—that which is central to the figuration of the *monster queer*—in which Benshoff devises queer horror into four categories:

1. Film and television texts that feature coded LGBTQ+ characters. These characters are binarised as either victims or, more often than not, the queer monster themselves.
2. Film and television texts that are written, produced, and/or directed by LGBTQ+ personnel; film and television texts that star LGBTQ+ performers, or performers whose star personae are culturally rendered queer, are a subset of this approach.
3. Film and television texts that allude to queer sexuality by subtextual or connotative means. Such narratives frequently depict the queer monster cause a disruption to heterosexual hegemony, albeit ambiguously by said subtextual or connotative means.
4. Film and television texts, broadly defined, that are interpreted by LGBTQ+ audiences.

Since Benshoff published *Monsters in the Closet* in 1997, he could not have foreseen developments in both queer theory and horror studies at the turn of the millennium. Accordingly, above, particular terms used by Benshoff have been adjusted to make them discursively accurate in their use today: namely, *homo-horror* has been adjusted to *queer horror*, the gay and lesbian focus of which has been extended to consider the LGBTQ+ acronym. His focus on film, furthermore, now reflects horror studies' turn to television.

While Benshoff's category of four might seem like an essentialist way of theorising queer horror, he evidences throughout his study that they are "hardly mutually exclusive" (Benshoff 1997: 16). Here, Benshoff demonstrates the permeable boundaries of queer horror; his category of four coalesces as questions of auteurism and authorship, characterisation and identification become fundamental to the reception of any given queer horror text. This approach takes particular inspiration from Alexander Doty's

Making Things Perfectly Queer (1993) where Doty himself identifies the very necessity of Benshoff's work. While queer people have long been the producers and consumers of the horror genre, "surprisingly little has been done to formally express this cultural history," Doty asserts (Doty 1993: 14). Reading Benshoff's study as the expression of this cultural history, in turn, Doty's aura becomes manifestly clear. Consider, for example, Benshoff's second definition of queer horror, his archaic use of language addressed above:

> The second type of homo-horror film is one written, produced, and/or directed by a gay man or lesbian, even if it does not contain visibly homosexual characters. Reading these films as gay or lesbian is predicated upon (what some might call a debased) concept of the cinematic auteur, which would argue that gay or lesbian creators of film products infuse some sort of "gay sensibility" into their films either consciously or otherwise. Yet such questions of authorship, which are certainly important and hold bearing on this particular study . . . will herein be of lesser importance, since it is not necessary to be a self-identified homosexual or queer in order to produce a text which has something to say about homosexuality, heterosexuality, and the queerness that those two terms proscribe and enforce. (Benshoff 1997: 14)

While it has long been viewed as an objective truth that anyone can produce queer horror, this does not give sufficient weight to the "material social position in relation to discourse" that draws a critical distinction between queer and straight auteurs. Since queer auteurs exist within wider LGBTQ+ communities and structures, more often than not, it is essential to consider "the access to discourses they have on account of who they are" (Dyer 1991: 188). Where Richard Dyer specifically focuses on their access to LGBTQ+ discourses, however, Andy Medhurst elaborates to show how queer auteurs also have considerable access to heteronormative discourses. On the politics of gay screenwriting, Medhurst notes:

> . . . a homosexual writer might have a great many insights into the codes, mechanisms and ideologies of heterosexuality itself. That such insights are available to gay people (whether we are written or not) should come as no surprise—from birth we are relentlessly socialised into a heterosexual identity that we may later choose to reject but which remains an always familiar landscape—those on the margins of a culture know more about its centre than the centre can ever know about the margins. (Medhurst 1991: 203-4)

Applied to queer horror, then, queer auteurs use their privileged subject position to narrativise and therefore provide access to queer discourses, whether explicitly presented in LGBTQ+ terms or otherwise. While this mediates queer discourses and makes them accessible to all, for queer audiences in particular, the mediation of queer discourses constitutes belonging. Determined by various socioeconomic factors, not all LGBTQ+ people hold this sense of belonging in the real world, with queer discourses mostly accessible in cities and urban areas. Whether or not consciously acknowledged, therefore, in the spatial and temporal moment of spectatorship, queer audiences are immersed in the queer discourses that are not always available to them, momentarily bringing marginalised subjectivities to the centre. Just because *anyone* can produce a text with *something* to say about sexuality, *what* they have to say is always discursive, and queer auteurs have access to different discourses that straight auteurs do. Or, at the very least, their access to the same discourses are unequivocally different.

While this definition of queer horror might appear to be the most important to Benshoff, Doty's theoretical influence suggests Benshoff's surprising indifference to its approach. Indeed, as Benshoff writes, this definition of queer horror is what an auteurist approach would argue, thereby disassociating his own critical subject position. While an argument is to be made that theories of auteurism are not as redundant as they seem, as demonstrated, Benshoff's engagement is not to be dismissed as it tactfully problematises simplistic notions. Here, while "auteur" and "author" are typically regarded as

interchangeable nouns, Benshoff draws a critical distinction between notions of auteurism and authorship, vis-à-vis Doty (see also Barthes 1977; Foucault 1977). Accordingly, "auteurism" describes that to do with key personnel in the context of production—directors, screenwriters, actors, producers, and so forth—whereas "authorship" describes that to do with audiences, reception, and the interpretation of textual meaning. Benshoff's auteurist definition of queer horror, then, is queer insofar as audiences read queerness into a text. If audiences retain the extratextual knowledge of a key personnel's sexuality, as Doty asserts, they are invited to develop "queer forms of auteurist analyses around certain cultural figures and their creative output" (Doty 1993: 20). This would suggest that LGBTQ+ personnel are not the auteurist visionaries of *queer* horror but, rather, audiences are the visionaries of a queer subject. Indeed, they use their extratextual knowledge of a key personnel's sexual identity to validate a queer interpretation of the text; an act of reading that is authorised or, as Doty refers to it, "author-ising" (ibid.: 22).

Benshoff demonstrates the usefulness of this authorial strategy in his 2012 update to *Monsters in the Closet*, situating its practice in the online reception of David DeCoteau's *Leeches!* (2003) and Victor Salva's *Jeepers Creepers* (2001) and *Jeepers Creepers 2* (2003). Where *Monsters in the Closet* is enlightened by the notion of queer spectatorship, however, Benshoff's update largely subjugates queer audiences in order to consider the homophobic discourse(s) at work in the reception of these films. Here, as audiences share an extratextual knowledge of DeCoteau and Salva's sexualities, it seems that their narratives "make the homoerotic manifestly homosexual, opening up a space for a critique of the [horror] genre's usual hetero/sexist dynamics" (Benshoff 2012: 142). In an attempt to maintain the horror genre's heteropatriarchal tradition, then, straight men disparage these films on IMDb forums. "Once recognised by viewers, the spectre of homosexuality in any given DeCoteau film can then be spotted across the text," Benshoff cites as one particular

example, proceeding to observe how one reviewer on IMDb regarded *Leeches!* as being about "KILLER PENISES" and "AIDS" with its "hidden gay agenda" (ibid.: 135-6).

Benshoff's update fundamentally identifies a shift in queer horror at the turn of the millennium, asserting that "the most important factor to contribute to the increased visibility of queer horror has been the proliferation of LGBTQ media itself" (ibid.: 131). Darren Elliott-Smith's *Queer Horror Film and Television* (2016) subsequently theorises this shift by branding "Queer Horror" as a millennial subgenre, "crafted by male directors/producers who self-identify as gay, bi, queer or transgendered [*sic*] and whose work features homoerotic, or explicitly homosexual, narratives with 'out' gay characters" (Elliott-Smith 2016: 2). While it might seem that Elliott-Smith's focus simply gentrifies the word "queer" to indicate a masculinised homocentrism, he does so only because millennial queer horror characterises its protagonists as fluidly shifting in sexual identity, from gay to bisexual, curious to queer. Furthermore, an integral feature of Elliott-Smith's thesis is not "Queer Horror" per se but, rather, a subgenre he refers to as "gaysploitation horror" which *is*, in effect, millennial queer horror. As Elliott-Smith writes, gaysploitation horror is "made by gay male or queer identified directors which highlight either homoeroticism, or homosexuality, in increasingly erotic ways in order to attract audiences," usually by focusing on "the celebration, erotic display, torture and evisceration of the male body spectacular" (ibid.: 89). Much of Elliott-Smith's thesis is therefore dedicated to analyses of these independent horror, gaysploitation texts including the films of David DeCoteau, Paul Etheredge's *Hellbent* (2004), Jason Paul Collum's *October Moon* (2005), and Sean Albey's *Socket* (2007), as well as Gothic TV soap operas *Dante's Cove* (Here TV, 2004-7) and *The Lair* (Here TV, 2007-9).

As Elliott-Smith neatly summarises, millennial queer horror "projects contemporary anxieties *within* gay male subcultures onto its characters and into its

narratives" and, in doing so, "turns the focus of fear upon *itself*, its own communities and subcultures" (ibid.: 21, emphasis in original). Increasingly throughout the 2010s, then, the masculinist centrism of "Queer Horror" opened a critical space for other LGBTQ+ subjectivities to bring their narratives to the forefront, allowing Elliott-Smith and John Edgar Browning to extend a generic definition of "New Queer Horror" in more inclusive terms; "horror that is crafted by directors/producers who identify as lesbian, gay, bi, queer, transgender, non-binary, asexual, intersex; or work that features homoerotic, or explicitly homosexual, narratives with 'out' LGBTQ+ characters" (Elliott-Smith and Browning 2020: 5). These texts, expanding Elliot-Smith's earlier definition, "speak about the contemporary anxieties felt *within* LGBTQ+ subcultures as projected onto the characters and the narratives therein" (ibid.: 5-6, emphasis in original).

As exemplified by the work of Darren Elliott-Smith, the recent shift in queer horror's critical discourse highlights the implications of Harry M. Benshoff's original definition(s). While Benshoff presupposes an objective truth that anyone can produce queer horror, theorising that auteurism is irrelevant since audiences themselves are the authors of meaning, Elliott-Smith brings the significance of queer auteurism to the forefront, situating its function in the intricacies of "(New) Queer Horror." Indeed, as "(New) Queer Horror" projects anxieties *within* LGBTQ+ communities onto its characters and into its narratives, focusing fear upon *itself*, such generic definition cites both the discursive and ideological nature of queer auteurism to which Benshoff has otherwise expressed an indifference Here, queer auteurs evidence their material social position in relation to discourse, making their access to discourse(s) explicit by situating such discourse(s) at the site of queer horror's antagonism. As defined by Elliott-Smith, that is, "(New) Queer Horror" visualises the LGBTQ+ discourse(s) at work to create a shared language, to expand discursive accessibility, as part of its ideological project.

The ideological project of "(New) Queer Horror" radically disrupts the assumptive relationship between queer auteurism and authorial reading strategies, where audiences might otherwise be accused of *reading too deeply into things*, since the discourse(s) at work are literalised. This, however, brings the discursive potentiality of queer auteurism and queer spectatorship to a reductive conclusion in horror studies. While this critical discourse is undoubtedly essential, the study of queer voices is relegated, quite literally marginalised, to the safe confines of LGBTQ+ media, queer horror, and generic definition. Consequently, instead of assimilating queer scholars, assuming that they might otherwise *read too deeply* into heterocentric texts, it is worth drawing a critical distinction between "queer horror" and horror that is incidentally written by queers. This might very well suggest that queer people do not necessarily *read too deeply into things*, as an authorial reading strategy historically suggests. Rather, straight people are so deeply committed to their unconscious engagement with heteronormative discourse(s) that they cannot read otherwise, even when it is spelled out.

Queer cultural theorists, such as Jack Babuscio and Doty himself, have long acknowledged queer potentialities in the horror genre. Babuscio, for example, writes that horror "is susceptible to camp *interpretation*" (Babuscio 1978/1999: 121, emphasis added) which Doty then situates in its heteronormative narrativity, asserting that these film and television texts "*exploit* the spectacle of heterosexual romance, straight domesticity, and traditional gender roles gone awry" (Doty 1993: 15, emphasis added). These queer potentialities, however, gravitate towards the autonomy of audiences and their authorial reading strategies as opposed to recognising film and television texts as ideological artefacts of cultural production. Instead of suggesting that horror *exploits* heteronormative narrativity to encourage camp *interpretation*, it might be suggested that the horror genre

comments on its heteronormative ideology which, depending on the nature of the commentary, resonates with a marginalised subjectivity.

Babuscio and Doty mostly draw on classic horror cinema to exemplify their claims, referencing Universal's *The Black Cat* (1934) as well as James Whale's monster movies, RKO's *Cat People* (1942) and *The Seventh Victim* (1943), and Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), among other films. While tensions still exist between camp discourses, then, Babuscio and Doty's chosen samples fundamentally bridge the gap between "gay camp" and its apparent heteronormative appropriation in the 1960s. Camp's appropriation into the mainstream begins with Susan Sontag's 1964 essay, in which any queer engagement with her "Notes on Camp" should begin by citing Note 51 to problematise those suggested claims of homosexual erasure:

> The peculiar relationship between Camp taste and homosexuality has to be explained. While it's not true that Camp taste is homosexual taste, there is no doubt a peculiar affinity and overlap. Not all liberals are Jews, but Jews have shown a peculiar affinity for liberal and reformist causes. So, not all homosexuals have Camp taste. But homosexuals, by and large, constitute the vanguard—and the most articulate audience—of Camp. (The analogy is not frivolously chosen. Jews and homosexuals are the outstanding creative minorities in contemporary urban culture. Creative, that is, in the truest sense: they are creators of sensibilities. The two pioneering forces of modern sensibility are Jewish moral seriousness and homosexual aestheticism and irony). (Sontag 1964/1999: 64)

Arguably, claims of homosexual erasure emerge as a backlash against Sontag's ill-judged wording in Note 2: "It goes without saying that the Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticised—or at least apolitical" (ibid.: 54). Note 2 does not exist in a vacuum, however, and is often understood in relation to Note 53: "Yet one feels that if homosexuals hadn't more or less invented Camp, someone else would" (ibid.: 64). While Sontag does not technically engage in an act of homosexual erasure, her very particular definition of

Camp gets lost in the experimental structure of her essay. Accordingly, Sontag fails to acknowledge that camp itself is multifarious, in which her apolitical Camp that anyone could invent is understood as the erasure of gay camp discourse. In reality, writing in 1964, Sontag only appropriates the language of a gay camp discourse because it resonates with her own countercultural subjectivity, then without a vocabulary. That is, Sontag appropriates a gay camp discourse to create her own Camp discourse, appropriating the language of gay camp only to make sense of her own subject position.

Andrew Ross expands on Sontag's work, and the body of knowledge it soon inspired, to demonstrate how the postwar mainstreaming of Camp fundamentally challenges notions of taste and value. According to Ross, the "camp effect" describes the cultification of popular culture. When cultural artefacts, created by earlier modes of production, have lost their "power to produce and dominate cultural meaning, [they] become available, in the present, for redefinition according to contemporary codes of taste" (Ross, 1988/1999: 312). Consequently, our culture of mass consumption is a "throwaway culture, even a disposable culture," in which we are always conscious of the fact that current popular artefacts "*will soon be outdated*—spent, obsolescent, or out of fashion" (ibid.: 319, emphasis in original). Camp therefore functions as the "*re-creation of surplus value from forgotten forms of labour*," as the Camp cultural artefact "contains messages about the historical *production* of the material and cultural conditions of taste." Here, Ross adopts a dissonant heteronormative vocabulary, referring to the moment that the so-called "camp liberator" rediscovers "history's waste" (ibid.: 320, emphasis in original).

In mind of Sontag and Ross' works, then, it comes as no surprise that Babuscio suggests that classic horror films are susceptible to camp interpretation. Indeed, this might very well bridge the gap between two different camp discourses, since all audiences are invited to enjoy the Camp sensibility "of artifice and exaggeration" along the lines of taste

and value (Sontag 1964/1999: 53). What this does not take into account, however, is the fact that, while horror exploits heteronormative narrativity to encourage camp interpretation, the horror genre comments on its heteronormative ideology which, depending on the nature of the commentary, resonates with a marginalised subjectivity. Here, Babuscio himself is particularly insightful, as he expands the work of Esther Newton (1972/1999), theorising the relationship between camp and the gay sensibility. As Babuscio writes:

> I define the gay sensibility as a creative energy reflecting a consciousness that is different from the mainstream; a heightened awareness of certain human complications of feeling that spring from the fact of social oppression; in short, a perception of the world which is coloured, shaped, directed, and defined by the fact of one's gayness. (Babuscio 1978/1999: 118)

Babuscio proceeds to state that, in popular culture, the gay sensibility finds its expression in camp. Copying the words of Newton almost verbatim: "Camp is never a thing or person per se but, rather, a relationship between activities, individuals, situations and gayness" (ibid.: 118-9). Camp and the gay sensibility are thus interchangeable terms. As the Anglo-American gay liberation movement gained momentum throughout the 1970s, the politics of camp and the very notion of a gay sensibility became particularly contentious, in which Babuscio's utopian essentialism serves as the epitome of optimism within criticism. Critics such as Harold Beaver (1981/1999) and Jonathan Dollimore (1991/1999) represent one branch of criticism, adopting a poststructuralist method that dismantles camp and the gay sensibility as socially reinscribed, "meaningful only within a specific cultural system or structured discourse" (Beaver 1981/1999: 161). Such a critic as Andrew Britton represents another branch of criticism, then, whose criticism is much more inspired by the gay liberation movement, interrogating the extent to which camp and the gay sensibility are

oppressive structures. "Camp is simply one way in which gay men have recuperated their oppression, and it needs to be criticised as such," Britton argues: "The positive connotations—an insistence on one's otherness, a refusal to pass as straight—are so irredeemably compromised by complicity in the traditional, oppressive formulations of that otherness" (Britton 1978-79/1999: 142). Perhaps it is ironic that Britton is explicitly engaging with the work of Richard Dyer here, since Dyer's original essay presents an appropriate response to Britton. While Dyer is under no illusion that "the camp sensibility is very much a product of our oppression," Dyer also questions Britton's violent policing of gay maleness as an oppressive act in itself: "You have to let people be gay in the way that's best for them" (Dyer 1976/1999: 111-4).

"The failure to conceive of a theory of ideology is continuous with an untenable theory of choice," Britton further argues, suggesting that the inability to theorise the ideology of camp proves that the ideology of camp is oppressive (Britton 1978-79/1999: 139). "Identity and togetherness, fun and wit, self-protection and thorns in the flesh of straight society—these are the pluses of camp," Dyer fundamentally states (Dyer 1976/1999: 111). Not only are these the pluses of camp, however. Indeed, they constitute the very discourse of camp which might itself be theorised as an ideological discourse. As Newton writes: "The [person who is performing] camp is the central role figure in the subcultural ideology of camp" (Newton 1972/1999: 102). If, according to Beaver, "power and discourse are inseparable" (Beaver 1981/1999: 166), camp as an ideological discourse creates a collectivist power.

"The presence of the unseen beneath the surface is no less important than what one actually sees," so Babuscio writes on camp and the gay sensibility (Babuscio 1978/1999: 121). As this chapter turns its focus to the gay screenwriter, then, it becomes apparent that the screenplay is the very presence beneath that surface and, indeed, it is no less important

than the film or television text itself. If, as Jason Lee notes, screen narratives are "based on feeling rather than thinking" (Lee 2013: 33)—and if, therefore, the circumstances of production explain the presence (the feeling) of camp and the gay sensibility—these film and television texts are not susceptible to queer interpretation but, rather, queer audiences are affectively experiencing the ideological discourse(s) at work in their screenplays. The problem with this approach, however, is that in order for camp to "be read as a critique of ideology" (Meyer 1994: 18), these film and television texts must nevertheless work within the heteronormative ideology that they are critiquing.

As Sean Griffin writes, "heterosexuality is so intricately tied into the ideology of patriarchy," mediated representations of straightness are registered as totalising, "ritualised performances" which enforce a heteronormative standard (Griffin 2009: 3-6). Accordingly, Dyer suggests that the mediated heterocentrism of camp texts should be read as fabrications:

> . . . we are tempted by film and television to be drawn into the worlds they present as if they were real. Camp can make us see that what art and the media give us are not the Truth or Reality but fabrications, particular ways of talking about the world, particular understandings and feelings of the way life is. Art and the media don't give us life as it really is . . . but only life as artists and producers think it is. Camp, by drawing attention to the artifices employed by artists, can constantly remind us that what we are seeing is only a view of life. This doesn't stop us enjoying it, but it does stop us believing what we are shown too readily. (Dyer 1976/1999: 115)

As gay screenwriters situate ideological discourse(s) within these heteronormative structures, it becomes apparent that "the very essence of ideology" is to conceal itself (Lee 2013: 29). These film and television texts subsequently face an inevitable paradox in their ideological strategy; in order to critique heteronormative structures, they must assimilate into those very structures. Accordingly, because this ideological strategy finds its expression in our affective responses to camp and the gay sensibility, the strategy is

predicated on a politics "that proposes working with and through existing definitions and representations" (Ross 1989/2008: 64). Helene A. Shugart and Catherine Egley Waggoner elaborate here, writing that this politics "might appear to be progressive or even transgressive [but it] may well be positioned and delivered in such a way as to require the acceptance of quite conventional notions" (Shugart and Waggoner 2008: 7).

Where gay directors and producers are frequently acknowledged in theories of auteurism, screenwriters are rarely, if ever, referred to. Lest we miss the point, Darren Elliott-Smith uses "directors/producers" to stylise auteurism in his generic definition of queer horror, ostracising the screenwriter. Putting the rhetoric of this discourse into words, Steven Price writes that "the screenplay acquires meaning only in relation to something outside itself . . . For the picture to exist, then, the screenplay must be killed and the body made to disappear" (Price 2010: 51-2). Price's death anthology has further significance on the gay screenwriter in particular. Moe Meyer's critique of cultural studies' gentrification of camp proves particularly useful here, drawing on Sontag's notes. As Sontag is said to erase the gay history of camp, she might be said to have performed an act of appropriative violence, as Meyer alludes to. "Located in the past, the queer has been assigned to the site of the grave, of death, of nonexistence, of nonpresence, and no longer needs to be taken into account" (Meyer 1994: 14).

Succumbing to the very violence of their narratives, the gay screenwriter becomes a victim to the heteronormativity of media and cultural studies, written out of discourse and erased from existence. With this act of violent appropriation, Meyer finds bittersweet emancipation. Audiences, no matter how at one with heteropatriarchal structures, unknowingly "lip synch the discourse of the Other" (Meyer 1994: 17). Despite the fact that the ghost of gayness still haunts these films and television texts, however, audiences are nevertheless marginalised for *reading too deeply* when they do acknowledge camp, the

gay sensibility, and an ideological representation of heteronormativity that feels different. Indeed, with the screenwriter dead, the ideology of their screenplay is politicised to become the very thing it set to critique; film and television texts, once intended as ideological inquisition, simply became heteropatriarchal reinscription.

Hyperpostmodern or Just Plain Camp? Postfeminist Camp in Kevin Williamson's *Scream* (1996)

Kevin Williamson's *Scream* is the epitome of a film that, through the development of critical discourse, has become the very thing it set to critique. Rick Worland, for example, dismisses *Scream* as that which "is about almost nothing except the often-simplistic formula of the slasher cycle of the early 1980s" (Worland 2007: 19). Aviva Briefel and Sam J. Miller similarly disregard the film as "a parody, self-reflexively calling out the clichés of the subgenre to subvert and then reaffirm them," and argue like many of their contemporaries that "its popularity was largely due to just how stagnant and predictable the genre had become" (Briefel and Miller 2011: 2). Here, *Scream* is treated as the subject of a surface level criticism that interprets horror through a sociopolitical lens, reflective of the North American horror film in the 1990s and "the supposed failure of the genre to articulate the real-world horrors of the present" (Craig and Fradley 2010: 79). Indeed, since the Third Way politics of the Clinton administration made any national atrocities and military interventions "easy for Americans to overlook" (Briefel and Miller 2011: 2), *Scream* is theorised as a politically apathetic text that comments on the slasher film instead.

An alternative body of criticism finds fascination in the aesthetics of *Scream* and, explaining the pessimism that underlines the film's reception, argues that its style and form are symptomatic of the cultural nihilism that broadly defines the "postmodern" condition. If, however, postmodernism simply describes "heterosexuals catching up with camp"

(Medhurst 1991: 207), it becomes apparent that such "postmodern" criticism actively gentrifies the gay sensibility of Kevin Williamson's screenplay, calling "camp" by a different name. "The power of the concept of postmodernism serves as a machine for generating discourse," Dana Polan writes, "and this is the phenomenon most in need of analysis" (Polan 1988: 49). Applied to *Scream*, the "generative apparatus" of postmodernism generates a heteronormative discourse that erases and replaces a homosexual discourse, appropriating the strategies of camp and the gay sensibility. Fredric Jameson famously argues that postmodernism is defined by a "new depthlessness" that destabilises sign processes (semiosis) and meaning making (Jameson 1984: 58). Surrounding the critical discourse on *Scream*, then, the "new depthlessness" of postmodernism is the cross that marks the grave of Kevin Williamson's camp aesthetics.

Dick Hebdige observes that "postmodern" can be used to describe anything from "the décor of a room, the design of a building, the diegesis of a film, the construction of a record, or a 'scratch' video, a TV commercial, or an arts documentary, or . . . the layout of a page in a fashion magazine" (Hebdige 1986: 78) Much like camp discourse, the "definition of the concept shifts with the objects taken to exemplify it" (Frow 1997: 27). Because, as Mark Jancovich writes, "*Scream* presents itself as a clever, knowing, ironic reworking of the slasher movie, which is presented as moronic and unselfconscious" (Jancovich 2002: 8), critics and theorists often use this as reason alone to define the film as a postmodern work. Andrew Tudor is quick to problematise this approach, however, arguing that their use of the term "postmodern" often provides "little or no discussion of what that involves or implies," ignoring its complex set of debates and offering no thought on the theoretical and historical implications (Tudor 2002: 105; see also Williams 2000). Where Peter Hutchings subsequently proposes that the term "postmodern horror" should instead be understood "as a somewhat arbitrary descriptive label for a number of recent

horror films," exemplified by *Scream* and the films of the third teen slasher cycle (Hutchings 2004: 211), an alternative proposal is to drop the term "postmodern horror" altogether and recognise these films for what they truly are. If the postmodern slasher film is not "postmodern" but camp, it does not need to be theorised in relation to the "generative apparatus" of postmodernism; the homosexual discourse(s) at work do not need to be erased and replaced by heteronormative discourse(s). That is, by theorising camp and the gay sensibility against the appropriative strategies of postmodernism, *Scream* and the millennial teen slasher film can be generically identified as queer horror, assimilated into the Hollywood mainstream through the "generative apparatus" of postmodernism.

Despite the best efforts of Tudor and Hutchings, theorists have since proceeded to analyse *Scream* using postmodern frameworks, Valerie Wee being the most notable example. Jim Collins, who examines a number of popular (non-horror) genre films released in the late 1980s and early 1990s, writes that "what we have seen of postmodernism thus far is really a first phase, perhaps Early Postmodernism, the first tentative attempts at envisioning the impact of new technologies of mass communication and information processing on the structure of narrative" (Collins 1993: 262). Wee proceeds to argue that the *Scream* trilogy "marks a later phase of postmodernism than the early postmodernism highlighted by Collins," coining this supposedly more advanced stage of postmodernism "hyperpostmodernism," identifying its characteristics across the *Scream* trilogy in two ways:

> (1) a heightened degree of intertextual referencing and self-reflexivity that ceases to function at the traditional level of tongue-in-cheek subtext, and emerges instead as the actual *text* of the films; and (2) a propensity for ignoring film-specific boundaries by actively referencing, "borrowing," and influencing the styles and formats of other media forms, including television and music video strategies—strategies that

> have further blurred the boundaries that once separated discrete media. (Wee 2005: 44, emphasis in original)

Wee rightfully notes that the teen slasher film has used intertextual referencing since its very inception: in *Halloween*, for example, physiatrist Dr. Loomis is named after *Psycho*'s Sam Loomis; *Halloween III: Season of the Witch* (1982) shows a television set playing a theatrical trailer for *Halloween*; and *Friday the 13th Part VI: Jason Lives* (1986) sees one camp counsellor deliver the infamous line, "I've seen enough horror movies to know that a weirdo wearing a mask is never friendly." Yet, the *Scream* films supposedly demonstrate a "hyperpostmodern" exceptionalism whereby the intertextual references become text itself. "The *Scream* films, therefore, take the previously subtle and covert intertextual reference and transform it into an overt, discursive act" (Wee 2005: 47). This is illustrated most clearly in *Scream* when Randy (Jamie Kennedy), watching *Halloween* at a house party, warns the guests how to survive the night. As Randy recites "the rules" of the slasher film, Wee argues that they become "the rules" of *Scream*, subverted to then be reaffirmed.

Building on Wee's assertion that *Scream* is representative of an advanced stage of hyperpostmodernism, Fran Pheasant-Kelly argues that "even though *Scream* alludes to a significant number of films, artworks and music as intertexts, it nonetheless gives rise to an innovative product that is markedly different to its component parts" (Pheasant-Kelly 2015: 155). Here, she draws on the work of Jameson who describes this process as a "cannibalisation of all styles of the past," but although this cannibalisation involves a "turn to the past" that is grounded in nostalgia, it nevertheless creates a "new" cultural product where the past has been modified (Jameson 1991: 18). This leads Pheasant-Kelly to conclude that, "even though it simulates other films, [*Scream*] is at the same time often antithetical to them, and, even though it is a copy, it has come to replace the original," representing itself as a straight slasher film "by integrating intertext and interimage within

diegetic sequences to afford genuinely tense instances that are neither homage, pastiche or parody" (Pheasant-Kelly 2015: 160; see also Tudor 2002).

Before dismantling the "generative apparatus" of postmodernism, situating the implications of Wee and Pheasant-Kelly's work in relation to camp and the gay sensibility, it is first important to consider how the creative/intellectual labour of Kevin Williamson and director Wes Craven are frequently dichotomised in critical accounts of *Scream*. Despite the collaborative nature of film production at all levels and stages, critical discourse is predicated on rigid assumptions about *who* contributed *what* and *why*, succumbing to the essentialist assumptions of auteur theory. Kevin Williamson wrote the original screenplay for *Scream* before it was acquired by Dimension Films in 1995, long before Wes Craven was tied to the project (Rockoff 2002; Schauer 2009). Nevertheless, Williamson's contributions to the film are near always downplayed by critics and theorists, attributed instead to Craven who is widely recognised, in Adam Rockoff's words, as "the slasher film's reigning intellectual" (Rockoff 2015: 38). On the occasion that Williamson is recognised by critics and theorists, he is said to transform *Scream* from "postmodern horror" to "teenage soap opera" (Hutchings 2004: 215), ensuring that the film is "characterised by a hybridised fusion of horror, comedy, and teen melodrama with a concomitant emphasis on interpersonal relationships" (Craig and Fradley 2010: 84). Craven, on the other hand, is deemed responsible for the "postmodern" nature of the film (Petridis 2014; Pheasant-Kelly 2015; West 2019). This leads to a near insulting approach to Williamson's work, typified by Steven West's description of *Scream*'s Laserdisc commentary:

> Williamson himself is engagingly modest about what he set out to do with his script while Craven . . . seemed to view the film in more sophisticated terms than his writer. Their slightly awkward conversation about postmodernism on the

> commentary track reflects the idea that *Scream* originated from an upcoming writer keen to break into the mainstream and aware of how 80s horror films of his youth represented an anachronism that, nonetheless, could be incorporated into a commercially viable property for equally acute contemporary audiences. (West 2019: 95)

Combined with the fact that *Scream* is often associated with its "supposed *feminisation* of horror cinema," fused with teen melodrama and its focus on interpersonal relationships (Craig and Fradley 2010: 83, emphasis in original), not only is it sexist to assume that Williamson's contributions to the film are unsophisticated; his erasure in most accounts, not to mention the charge of anti-intellectualism in comparison to director Wes Craven, is deeply embedded in systemic homophobia. By reinstating the camp aesthetics of *Scream*, then, it becomes apparent that the gendered ("feminine") discourses at work in theory and criticism are not antithetical to the postmodern ("masculine") discourses at work, currently articulated through the division of labour between Williamson and Craven. Indeed, the ideological project of *Scream* is mediated through Williamson's use of postfeminist camp, reconfiguring the gender politics of teen slasher through self-reflexivity.

When critics and theorists acknowledge Kevin Williamson in relation to *Scream*, his sexuality is frequently written out of discourse, allowing the politics and ideology of the film to be taken at face value. As Martin Fradley writes, in the wake of *Scream*, "perhaps *the* key structuring element in the evolution of teen horror since the mid-1990s has been its overt address to a young female audience," with films that "insistently foreground the female hero's experiential transformation from an uncertain young woman to an adult empowered by the gaining of feminist social and political knowledge" (Fradley 2013: 206; 210, emphasis in original). Here, Fradley defines the female hero based on David Greven's observation that teen slasher films "are like sped-up, phallically fuelled female bildungsromans in which women rapidly develop into their adult versions, coming

of age through frantic stress and murderous, if retaliatory, bloodletting" (Greven 2011: 146). What Fradley does not give sufficient weight to, then, is the fact that Greven describes the slasher film as such to theorise the Final Girl as a point of identification for gay male spectators. "Although Greven is perhaps too in thrall here to Clover's theorisation of horror heroines as tomboyish male substitutes," Fradley notes, "his emphasis on teen horror's allegorical expressions of *transformation* is key" (Fradley 2013: 210, emphasis in original).

Where Fradley is particularly interested in the "apparent tension between the widespread disillusionment with the limitations of postfeminist media culture and the gendered political expression of recent horror" (Fradley 2010: 207), this tension is best explained through the popularisation of Williamson's postfeminist camp. In order to critique heteropatriarchal structures, the gay screenwriter must assimilate into those very structures, working with and through existing definitions and representations. Accordingly, it is precisely through the use of postfeminist camp that the teen slasher film is "both symptomatic *of*, and a potentially oppositional force in relation *to*, the socially emaciated politics of postfeminist culture" (ibid.: 207). Here, the widespread disillusionment with the limitations of postfeminist media culture mourns the loss of the gay screenwriter, lost to existing definitions and representations. As such, the gendered political expression of contemporary teen horror requires the collectivist recognition of both female *and* gay male spectatorships, aligning both through their "feminine" subject position.

This does, of course, raise questions about appropriation. Prior to the theatrical release of the long-awaited *Scream* (2022), Williamson was interviewed by Adam White for *The Independent*. Here, in what is arguably one of the first interviews where Williamson

openly discusses his sexuality in relation to his work, he reflects on his own viewing experiences as a gay child and how it translated into *Scream*:

> As a gay kid, I related to the final girl and to her struggle because it's what one has to do to survive as a young gay kid, too. You're watching this girl survive the night and survive the trauma she's enduring. Subconsciously, I think the *Scream* movies are coded in gay survival. (Williamson in White 2021)

While the Final Girl in *Scream* and other teen slasher films at the turn of the millennium are often celebrated for their "overt courting of a female demographic," characterised by "a refreshingly alert (post-)feminist sensibility which both refers back to and updates the proto-feminism of the slasher film's Final Girl from the late 1970s and early 1980s" (Craig and Fradley 2010: 87), the fact of Williamson's sexuality does raise numerous questions. Who is the Final Girl actually for, who is she targeted at, and what are the implications?

Valerie Wee, in considering how Williamson intentionally orientated *Scream*'s narrative toward concerns particularly relevant to teenage girls, uses his words from a 1997 interview with *USA Today* as the basis for her argument. "I try to write very smart women [. . . who have to] deal with issues of betrayal and trust," Williamson states, particularly in relation to boyfriends who are characterised as "ordinary people [. . .] capable of great deception" (Williamson in Weeks in Wee 2006: 60). This incites Wee to make the following analysis:

> The [*Scream* trilogy's] plots essentially examine the issue of trust in romantic relationships, using the slasher film conventions as an allegory through which we explore the turmoil of female adolescence. Sidney's horror at discovering that she had unknowingly dated the boy who raped and killed her mother may be read as a metaphor for every teenage girl's fear that she does not really know her boyfriend. The fact that Sidney discovers this after she sleeps with him introduces another issue of concern to teenage girls: the boyfriend who turns against his girlfriend after sex. (Wee 2006: 60)

Again, however, Williamson's comments on which Wee bases her argument—that he writes about "very smart women" who have to deal with issues of betrayal and trust—have more recently been situated in his own personal experiences as a gay man: "One of the things I've wrestled with is trust, and Sidney trusted no one . . . Did she really know her mother? Is her boyfriend who he says he is? In the end she wasn't even trusting herself" (Williamson in White 2021). Even though the mainstream acceptance of queer horror has been on the rise in recent years, explaining why Williamson is now only just discussing the *Scream* franchise in relation to his sexuality, it is not effective to simply argue that previous accounts of *Scream* and female spectatorship are now only applicable to gay men. As Pamela Robertson writes in theorising feminist camp:

> Most people who have written about camp assume that the exchange between gay men's and women's cultures has been wholly one-sided; in other words, that gay men appropriate a feminine aesthetic and certain female stars but that women, lesbian or heterosexual, do not similarly appropriate aspects of gay male culture. This suggests that women are camp but do not knowingly produce themselves as camp and, furthermore, do not even have access to a camp sensibility. Women, by this logic, are objects of camp and subject to it but are not camp subjects. (Robertson 1996: 5)

By theorising Williamson's application of postfeminist camp in *Scream*, then, more productive questions about the relationship between female and gay male subjectivity can be addressed:

> At the very least, would it not be important to determine why women enjoy so many of the same cultural texts as gay men? Asked another way: Why do gay men like so many of the same cultural texts as women? Inversion? Misogyny? By viewing the exchange between women and gay men as a two-way street we could begin to better understand gay male camp and stop taking for granted camp's

> reliance on feminine images and styles (as if these acts of appropriation were "natural"). (ibid.: 7)

As is to be demonstrated, it is by the means of postfeminist camp that *Scream* takes the previously subtle and covert intertextual reference and transforms it into an overt, discursive act. In doing so, *Scream* subverts expectation of the teen slasher film, writing "the rules" of the film into discourse so that they can be actively undermined. Although many characters in the film do die, having not followed "the rules" in some way, two notable characters break "the rules" and live to tell the tale: Sidney Prescott (Neve Campbell) and Gale Weathers (Courtney Cox). However, where Sidney and Gale are typically considered exemplary of how *Scream* characterises "two Final Girls" (Wee 2006: 58), Williamson's use of postfeminist camp makes it clear that only Sidney is a Final Girl. Gale is a would-be victim but, by subverting generic discourse, postfeminist camp allows Williamson to update the representation of the female collective in the first teen slasher film cycle. Here, *Scream* announces that the female victim and the Final Girl are a collective identificatory body, allowing the characterisation of both to survive. Accordingly, even though *Scream* simulates other films, its characterisation of the female collective is antithetical to them. By demonstrating the female victim and the Final Girl as a collective identificatory body, emphasised by allowing the survival of both, *Scream* emerges as a "new" cultural product that replaces the original teen slasher film.

Kathleen Rowe Karlyn observes that *Scream* is structured around the theme of "maternal abandonment" (Rowe Karlyn 2011: 108) and, indeed, it is this that organises the film's representation of the female collective: Sidney, her best friend Tatum (Rose McGowan), and TV journalist Gale Weathers. *Scream* is set nearly one year after the rape and murder of Sidney's mother but, where Tatum frequently offers love and support, Sidney must face Gale as she reports on a new murder spree in Woodsboro, California.

Here, it is revealed that Gale had originally reported on the death of Sidney's mother, arguing that Sidney falsely identified an innocent Cotton Weary (Liev Schreiber) as her mother's killer. As the female collective find themselves entangled in another murder spree, then, it is not wholly characterised around female friendship but conflict too. Because Sidney and Gale have been theorised as the so-called "Final Girls" of *Scream*, however, Tatum is frequently neglected in critical discourse, despite the fact that her death is essential to the later characterisation of the film's female survivors.

Much like the dynamic between Laurie and her friends in *Halloween*, Sidney is much more reserved than Tatum. Yet, despite their intrinsic differences, their friendship is endearing to watch. Tatum actively sets out to empower Sidney in their conversations, consoling her through trauma and grief as well as endless relationship problems, and in doing so their navigation of personal problems works to depoliticise and assimilate scenes of feminist consciousness-raising in the Hollywood mainstream. Modelling the New Woman of the first teen slasher film cycle, that is, Tatum is both likeable and confident, encouraging both female and gay male audiences to identify with her, but her imperfections are what make her realistic and relatable, capturing the subject position of young women (and, by extension, gay men) in a neoliberal, postfeminist cultural landscape.

Further capturing the postfeminist subject position of young women and gay men, Tatum must endure scenes of casual sexism throughout *Scream*, characterising the heteropatriarchal nature of the diegetic world. It is no coincidence, either, that the perpetrator is always her boyfriend Stu (Matthew Lillard). This first happens when the two are with their wider friendship group and, after everyone has been questioned by the police following the film's opening murder of Casey Becker (Drew Barrymore) and Steve Orth (Kevin Patrick Walls), Tatum asks why only the men were asked if they hunt for sport.

Stu: It's 'cause there's no way a girl could've killed 'em.

Tatum: That is so sexist, the killer could easily be female. *Basic Instinct*?

Randy: That was an ice pick, not exactly the same thing [as a hunting knife].

Stu: Yeah, and Casey and Steve were completely hollowed out. And, the fact is, it takes a man to do something like that.

Tatum: Or a man's mentality.

Remarks are made again later in the film when Stu hosts a house party. When Sidney asks why Jamie Lee Curtis is in so many slasher films, Randy refers to her as the "scream queen," to which Stu responds, "With a set of lungs like that, she should be." As Tatum calls out their remarks, turning to Sidney and reducing the straight man's fascination with Jamie Lee Curtis to "tits," Stu proceeds to demand her domestic labour as a woman. "Grab me another beer, would ya?" Although Tatum does so, it is not without recognition of the underlining sexism. As she responds, "What am I, the beer witch?" As Stu is later revealed alongside Billy as one of the killers, the film's representation of violence against women can be politicised through Stu's derogatory comments. This is clearly spelled out when Tatum retrieves Stu's beer from the garage, where she is subsequently murdered, as Stu exploits the imposition of sexist stereotypes to get Tatum alone.

When Tatum is approached by Ghostface in the garage, she initially perceives him as a joke, proceeding to act out the scenario of a slasher film. "Oh, you wanna play psychokiller? Can I be the helpless victim? Okay, let's see… Please don't kill me, Mr. Ghostface, I wanna be in the sequel." Here, Tatum mocks the discursive configuration of the female victim as a two-dimensional archetype and, as Ghostface proceeds to attack her, she completely rewrites the discursive script. Tatum does not accept her victimisation

and, where the female victim in the first teen slasher film cycle passively resists, Tatum actively fights back, throwing beer bottles at the killer and going as far to call him a "fucker." Tatum dies, of course, crushed to death by the garage door. She does not die in vain, however, as the morbidity of her death and its affective politics highlight the limits of "empowerment" in postfeminist culture.

It is significant that, soon after Tatum's death, *Scream* breaks the third wall in one of the film's most well documented scenes. When Billy (Skeet Ulrich) compares Sidney to Jodie Foster in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), she replies, "But this is life, this isn't a movie," to which Williamson's script enunciates that the diegetic world of *Scream* is a fabrication. "Sure it is, Sid," Billy replies, "it's all a movie. It's all one great big movie." Only after this reminder, when a group of friends watch *Halloween* at Stu's party, does Randy recite "the rules" of the slasher film.

> Randy: There are certain rules that one must abide by in order to successfully survive a horror movie. For instance, number one, you can never have sex . . . Sex equals death, okay? Rule number two, you can never drink or do drugs. The sin factor, it's a sin, it's an extension of number one. And number three, never ever, ever under any circumstances say you'll "be right back" because you won't be back.

Where critics and theorists subsequently view this scene as subverting the codes and conventions of the teen slasher film to then reinforce them, turning "the rules" of the slasher film into an overt, discursive act, this does not consider the fact that Sidney and Gale actively break those rules to live and survive the tale. As Williamson writes Tatum as an empowering point of identification for young women and gay men, he uses postfeminist camp to parody the discursive configuration of the female victim as a two-

dimensional archetype and, in turn, rewrites the female victim as a failed agent of active violence. By rewriting the discursive script of the female victim that dies, then, Williamson immediately updates that discursive script so that the female victim does not have to die at all, turning the female victim into a successful agent of active violence. Following Tatum's death, Williamson assures audiences that *Scream* is "one great big movie," and as his screenplay proceeds to recite the discursive configuration of teen slasher's rules, Williamson uses postfeminist camp to rewrite the discursive conditions of survival.

Valerie Wee describes Gale as "career orientated, selfish, vain, ambitious, and largely immoral," confirming her subject position as an icon of postfeminist camp (Wee 2006: 59). Where Wee interprets Gale as a Final Girl, however, her immoral character traits and her conflict with Sidney indicate a certain unlikeability. Conscious identification is certainly made difficult. When Gale unironically says that she will "be right back" shortly after Randy recites the rules of the slasher film, she confirms herself as a would-be victim. And, like Tatum, when Gale attempts to shoot Billy and Stu upon revealing themselves as the killers, she becomes a failed agent of active violence. She leaves the safety on, allowing Billy to knock her unconscious, yet Williamson's script gives the would-be victim a second chance. As Billy attacks Sidney, Gale emerges, successfully shooting Billy in the chest. "Guess I remembered the safety that time, you bastard." Williamson allows the failed agent of active violence to become the successful agent of active violence, rescripting the discursive script of the female victim and defying "the rules" of survival.

Although Sidney is established as the Final Girl of *Scream* from the outset, Williamson aligns her with the female victim throughout. When the killer first calls Sidney, for example, he asks why she does not like scary movies. "What's the point, they're all the same," Sidney replies, "Some stupid killer stalking some big-breasted girl

who's always running up the stairs when she should be going out the front door, it's insulting." As the killer proceeds to attack Sidney, then, she proceeds to run up the stairs, unable to get the front door off the latch. And, of course, she commits the cardinal sin of losing her virginity and having pre-marital sex with her boyfriend. This scene is intercut with Randy watching *Halloween* and, as he calls out "the obligatory tit shot" when Lynda has sex with her boyfriend, the scene cuts back to Sidney as she takes her top off for Billy. Visually, Sidney is aligned with Lynda, the female victim of *Halloween*.

Sidney's sexual agency has generated much celebratory criticism. As Rowe Karlyn writes: "She has sex according to her timeline, not her boyfriend's, and the loss of her virginity doesn't mean the 'end of the story' for her, as it does in the traditional slasher film" (Rowe Karlyn 2011: 106). And, as Alexandra West similarly notes:

> *Scream* not only tackles the problem of women's narrative, giving Sidney room to explore her self-doubt, guilt and sexuality in the span of the film, but also allows her to come out on top and give her narrative new meaning in a context she subscribes to. (West 2018: 71)

This is to forget, however, that Sidney is manipulated into sleeping with Billy so that he can kill her. "Fuck you," she shouts when Billy reveals his identity. "We already played that game, remember? You lost," he coldly replies. Moreover, to what extent is it celebratory that Sidney uses her sexual agency to have sex with the man that raped and murdered her mother a year prior? This is not to suggest that Sidney's sexual agency is characterised in wholly reactionary terms but, rather, the way it is approached in critical discourse needs to reframed. Although the Final Girl in the first teen slasher film cycle is much more sexually active than critics and theorists are willing to suggest, the Final Girl's discursive configuration is nevertheless virginal, and Sidney brings the Final Girl's sexual agency to the forefront of discussion. Here, Williamson rewrites popular discourse,

updating the rules of survival—or, rather, subverting myth—so that the Final Girl can at least appear sexually liberated.

Where, earlier in the film, Sidney mirrors the female victim in *Halloween*, Sidney mirrors Laurie in the film's climatic sequence. Here, as the climatic scenes of *Scream* mimic the climatic scenes of *Halloween* which plays in the background, the postfeminist sensibility of Williamson's *Scream* explicitly refers back to and updates the discursive configuration of the virginally passive Final Girl, emblematic of Laurie's characterisation in *Halloween*. As Laurie hides and cowers in the closet in *Halloween*, passively resisting Michael Myers' violent rampage, Sidney bursts out of the closet in *Scream* and stabs Billy with brutal strength. Stu, on the other hand, is electrocuted as Sidney pushes the television set playing *Halloween* onto his head. Again, the image on the television set shows Laurie still crying and cowering. However, as Sidney weaponises the television set to kill Stu, she reclaims Laurie's disempowered image which becomes active in the violence that ensues. While Williamson's use of postfeminist camp and intertextuality in *Scream* works to rescript the teen slasher film for the empowerment of young women and gay men, then, it was not his only original teen slasher film to do so in the late 1990s.

"The Hook Is Really a Phallic Symbol…": Postfeminist Camp in Kevin Williamson's *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997)

I Know What You Did Last Summer opens on the coastal city of Southport, North Carolina, and follows four high school friends: Julie James (Jennifer Love Hewitt), Helen Shivers (Sarah Michelle Gellar), Barry Cox (Ryan Phillippe), and Ray Bronson (Freddie Prinze Jr). During the city's annual Fourth of July celebrations, the group attend the Croaker Queen beauty pageant where Helen emerges as the winning finalist. Here, in the film's opening dialogue, Julie supports her friend from the balcony. However, conversation

quickly turns to the objectification of Helen and the heterosexist tradition of the American beauty pageant.

> Julie: God, look at her. I mean, she was born for this.
>
> Ray: I had no idea her breasts were so… ample.
>
> Barry: Dude, she does these exercises to pump 'em up.
>
> Julie: Guys! Hi! I'm on sexist overload as it is. Kill the commentary.

Although Julie soon smiles at the interaction, indicating that this is unenlightened talk between straight men who mean no harm, Julie's character is immediately coded as a "safe" point of identification for female and gay male spectators, using the language of feminism to distance herself from heterosexist principles. Moreover, once this exchange makes a clear distinction between Julie and the men that surround her, the beauty pageant itself becomes a camp spectacle, bringing its artifice to forefront. Where the men seem to take the pageant at face value, Helen's performance on stage makes it clear that she is in on its heterosexism, knowing exactly what she needs to say and do in order to win.

> MC: Now, in the spirit of Mother Teresa, what will your contribution be to your community and the world at large?
>
> Helen: Well, Bob, at summer's end, I plan to move to New York City where I'll pursue a career as a *serious* actress. It's my goal to entertain the world through artistic expression. Through art, I shall serve my country.

Helen's delivery is grounded in camp theatricality. Yet, while Julie sits visibly happy for her friend, Ray cannot see beyond the female masquerade. "Do you feed her this shit?,"

he barks at Julie, assuming he knows what women talk about. What Julie and Helen actually talk about is shown shortly after, however, as they make their way to Barry and Ray at a post-pageant party.

> Helen: How's my hair?
>
> Julie: Hurricane-proof.
>
> Helen: Hey, it's all about the hair. Don't you forget that, especially when you become some big hotshot lawyer. Those professional women types think it's all about brains and ability and completely ignore the do.
>
> Julie: So, the do's vital. Got it.

Julie and Helen proceed to laugh, arm in arm, in which this scene of apparent "girl talk" neatly unveils the inner workings of the female masquerade. Helen's voice sounds tonally different from her performance on stage and, while her emphasis on hair might seem superficial, it largely serves to reclaim girlish femininity in postfeminist terms. Indeed, she subverts the archetypal myth of the "dumb blonde" by demonstrating how women use femininity and the masquerade to navigate through heteropatriarchal structures. While Julie is clearly informed by (post-)feminist ideals surrounding women's professional lives, furthered by her opening comments on Ray and Barry's overt sexism, "girl talk" is used here as an exchange of knowledge between women. Julie and especially Helen demonstrate how they are more than two-dimensional archetypes and, although Julie is the Final Girl and Helen a victim, their friendship creates an identificatory collective. Given that *I Know What You Did Last Summer* works intrinsically hard to code itself as a feminine identified text from the outset, then, this scene logically ends by further distancing itself from representations of heterosexist masculinity: Max (Johnny Galecki)

interrupts Julie's conversation with Helen to unwantedly flirt with her, Barry drunkenly starts a fight, and Ray uses his masculine birth right to break it up.

Julie and Helen, Barry and Ray soon make their way to Dawson's Beach—indeed, a pre-emptive nod to Kevin Williamson's hit TV show *Dawson's Creek* (The WB, 1998-2003)—where, in a scene that resembles the opening of Debra Hill and John Carpenter's *The Fog* (1980), the teenagers tell ghost stories around the campfire. Here, they recite the urban legend of "The Hook" but, when Ray insists that the legend is real, Julie is quick to correct him. "It's a fictional story created to warn young girls of the dangers of having premarital sex." Ray, unable to accept this, proceeds to undermine Julie's knowledge with overt sexism. "Well, actually, honey, and you know how terrified I am of your IQ, but it's an urban legend—American folklore—and they usually originate from some sort of real-life incident." Soon, when the young couple are alone on the beach, Helen and Barry making out elsewhere, Ray playfully runs towards Julie. "I'm gonna hook you!" As the two lovingly caress, then, Julie further questions him.

Julie: Hey Ray, you don't really believe all that crap, do you?

Ray: It's true!

Julie: Please, the hook is really a phallic symbol.

Ray: Oh really?

Julie: Yeah, ultimately castrated.

Because *I Know What You Did Last Summer* is considered a self-reflexive slasher film in the same vein as *Scream*, its reference to "The Hook" and urban legend might be theorised as the displacement of traditional slasher codes and conventions, allowing these to be deconstructed in the same way that *Scream* deconstructs *Halloween*. Yet, where Kevin

Williamson's script for *Scream* admits that "it's all one great big movie," his script for *I Know What You Did Last Summer* emphasises "real-life," grounding the diegetic world in Truth or Reality. Accordingly, *I Know What You Did Last Summer* does not self-reflexively deconstruct traditional slasher codes and conventions as traditional slasher codes and conventions. Rather, Julie's explanation of "The Hook" educates audiences in pop psychoanalysis, giving them the basic knowledge to understand what the killer's hook represents later in the film.

I Know What You Did Last Summer is perhaps best known for the tragedy it depicts in the film's opening quarter. Julie and Ray, Helen and Barry, gather together again after finding separate spots to have sex on the beach. Julie and Ray, both of whom are sober, are seated in opposition to Helen and Barry who are drunk. As Ray drives everyone home, Barry proceeds to stand up through the car's sunroof, shouting and drinking liquor along to the sound of heavy metal, which leads Ray to accidentally hit a pedestrian walking by the coastal road. As the group of teens panic, assuming that the pedestrian is dead, they agree to dump his body in the nearest docks, promising never to speak of the incident. Ravaged with guilt, however, Julie insists on at least knowing his identity before dumping the body.

> Julie: Should we check his wallet and see who he is?
>
> Barry: Why?
>
> Julie: I don't know, okay? Just to know.
>
> Barry: Let's just pretend he's some escaped lunatic with a hook for a hand and we're doing everybody a favour.

One year later, as the now disbanded friendship group start receiving notes ("I KNOW WHAT YOU DID LAST SUMMER!"), the narrative of *I Know What You Did Last Summer* assumes a relatively generic whodunnit murder mystery. Guilt, trauma, and revenge become recurring motifs as Julie and Helen, Barry and Ray, work together to find out who knows their secret and, more specifically, who is trying to kill them. This is to forget, however, that written into the script *is* the killer's identity, created by the group themselves: a hooked psychokiller whose wrath, quite simply, is to show the dangers of premarital sex. And while Julie, recounting "The Hook" on the beach, provisionally suggests that the legend warns young *girls* of the dangers of having premarital sex, Kevin Williamson's aesthetics seem much more invested in the dangers of young *men* having premarital sex. Here, furthering the identificatory framework established in the film's opening, *I Know What You Did Last Summer* uses postfeminist camp to capture its female protagonists as "safe" points of identification for female and gay male spectators, openly knowing and reflexive of heteropatriarchal structures. Williamson's use of erotic aesthetics, on the other hand, capture the male body as spectacle, turning representations of heterosexist masculinity into objects to be looked at, denying the otherwise oppressive nature of their characterisation.

Although the accident's one year anniversary brings the group back together, the guilt and trauma of their actions does not rekindle old friendships nor loving romances. Of particular interest, here, are the gendered dynamics in the group's homosocial bonds. While Barry and Ray argue and fight at any given occasion, Julie and Helen seem to grieve what they once had, putting aside their differences to work together and investigate who is stalking them. Although Helen later dies in a prolonged chase sequence, that which visually refers back to suspenseful chases sequences in *Halloween* and *Prom Night*, it becomes apparent that Julie and Helen collectively have access to an active investigating

gaze that the Final Girl has only historically had access to. As Julie and Helen investigate the house of a suspect, pretending that their car has broken down, Kevin Williamson's use of postfeminist camp is epitomised to stress this point. Before knocking on the suspect's door, Helen refers to *The Silence of the Lambs*, anxiously reminding Julie that "Jodie Foster tried this and a skin-ripping serial killer answered the door." As the suspect proceeds to answer the door, letting Julie and Helen in to use her phone, they subtly navigate their way through the home to investigate. When the suspect eventually reminds Julie that they came to use the phone, then, she panics and quickly thinks up an alias for Helen.

> Julie: Jodie, will you call Triple-A?
>
> Helen: You got it…, Angela.

While Julie, of course, refers back to Helen's earlier reference to *The Silence of the Lambs*, Helen presumably refers to Julie after Angela Lansbury, better known for her portrayal of Jessica Fletcher in *Murder, She Wrote* (CBS, 1984-96) and Miss Marple in *The Mirror Crack'd* (1980). Such camp allusions evidence that both Julie and Helen recognise themselves as equals, despite a critical tendency to separate the Final Girl and the female victim, heralding themselves after the stars of psychological thrillers and quaint murder mysteries. Throughout this investigation, too, Julie and Helen's friendship seems to be patching up, showing their capabilities as women working together, empowering individual spectators, and having fun along the way. This is what makes the end of the scene so impactful when, in the car, Helen asks Julie about their friendship. "What happened to us? We used to be best friends. I miss you," all of which is met by a guilt-ridden apathy from Julie.

I Know What You Did Last Summer invests much of its time in the spectacle of female friendship, referring back to and updating that represented in *Halloween* and *Prom Night*,

determining a stark contrast in its representation of male characters. Julie and Helen configure Ray as primary suspect, and Barry has regular violent outbursts, maintaining their heterosexist subject position from the film's outset. Both of these characters are deemed "unsafe" yet soon, in an arguably defensive act, *I Know What You Did Last Summer* situates Barry in a sadomasochistic subject position that allows him to be deemed "safe" as spectacle for women and gay men.

Barry is first captured as spectacle following the film's first murder sequence. After an intensive workout with a punching bag at the gym, Barry takes his vest off and hits the shower. With various shots of Barry topless, immersed under water which drips down his body, a shadow soon emerges that startles him. Covered only in a towel, his toned body on show, Barry gets out of the shower to find a polaroid tucked in his locker. "I KNOW," it reads. Alarmed, Barry traces through the locker room, vulnerable with no clothes on, and with no one in sight, he hurriedly puts them on. Outside, Barry's car is stolen and, as he proceeds to chase after it, the car stops. With the headlights switched on and the car revving up, Barry must run for his life again as the car speeds to mow him down. Barry is eventually hit and, as his body lands on the bonnet of the car, it crashes through a building. Barry lies on the floor, injured and in pain, begging for help, and asks the killer what he wants. As The Fisherman stands over him, then—audiences invited to adopt Barry's point of view—he brandishes his hook for Barry to see and, as he continues pleads, the scene fades to black. Although, in this sequence, The Fisherman does not kill Barry, its homoeroticism is overt. Barry displays himself as spectacle and, just as Julie tells us that the hook is really a phallic symbol, The Fisherman shows it off, letting him free. Indeed, the scene is foreplay, leading to their eventual "hookup" later in the film.

As Helen returns to the Croaker Queen beauty pageant as reigning winner, Barry watches by himself from the balcony, hoping to rekindle their relationship. One of the

contestants sings a rendition of Irene Cara's *Fame* on stage, bringing a moment of camp, as Helen loses the will to live on stage. Barry watches from afar with a smirk on his face before The Fisherman emerges from behind, grabbing Barry and knocking him to the ground. As Helen screams for Barry, calling for help on stage, The Fisherman gets on top of him. Between shots of The Fisherman raising his hook and violently penetrating Barry, extreme close-ups of Barry's face show him thrust with each movement, moaning in pain. As sex is displaced onto violence in the most homoerotic spectacle, The Fisherman effectively "kills" Barry in the missionary position, thinly veiled as male-on-male violence.

While critics have historically noted an inherent misogyny in the slasher film, noting how male victims are dispatched quickly while female victims are filmed at closer range, in more graphic detail, and at greater length, *I Know What You Did Last Summer* provides a rare exception. Indeed, a comparative analysis of Barry's death against Helen's is indicative of the politics and ideology at play. Although Helen's chase sequence is significantly extended, entangled in both abject terror and the determination to survive, the moment of her death is filmed in near darkness and barely visible, slashed behind stacked tyres in a shadowy alley that overlooks the Fourth of July parade. Since the legend of "The Hook" warns young people about the dangers of premarital (straight) sex, then, and because the hook is really a phallic symbol, *I Know What You Did Last Summer* announces that when The Fisherman kills Barry, he instigates penetrative sex. Compared to Helen's restrained, shadowy death, again, the homoerotic spectacle could not be clearer.

The homoeroticism that underlies *I Know What You Did Last Summer*, that which arguably depicts gay panic, achieves its full realisation in the film's climax. When, after being attacked by The Fisherman, Julie and Ray flee on the boat of a Ben Willis (Muse Watson), Willis reveals himself to be the killer. "When you leave a man for dead, make sure he's really dead," revealing his identity as the pedestrian the teenagers thought they

killed. Willis, following his short monologue, proceeds to slash Julie with his phallic appendage. Yet, where Willis covets Barry's body, he is impotent in his pursuit of Julie, and his hook gets caught in rope. Here, Willis is pulled into his boat's rigging and his hand is cut off. Indeed, he is "ultimately castrated," so Julie tells us at the beginning of the film. Since, in Freudian psychoanalysis, male homosexuality is largely considered in relation to castration and lack, *I Know What You Did Last Summer* seems to flaunt The Fisherman's symbolic meaning at film's climax. Willis is ultimately castrated, forever laid to rest at sea.

Conclusion

Queer horror at the turn of the millennium is synonymous with low-budget, independent Gaysploitation horror. Gaysploitation was popularised in 1999 when Canadian filmmaker David DeCoteau created Rapid Heart Pictures, "his own boutique production company specialising in beefcake horror films" (Benshoff 2012: 134). Rapid Heart Pictures "originally marketed their products to a wider female audience," implicitly targeting a gay male demographic through this address, yet Darren Elliott-Smith problematises this marketing strategy insofar as it "assimilates gay masculinity not only with femininity but with an adolescent girlish sexuality" (Elliott-Smith 2016: 100). Because Gaysploitation and DeCoteau's filmography is recognised near exclusively in terms of its erotic appeal, it is easy to theorise the discursive overlap between female subjectivity and gay male subjectivity as the assimilation of feminine sexuality. "DeCoteau fills his screen with sexy young men rather than nubile young women," Harry M. Benshoff writes, "making 'straight' horror films with gay appeal" (Benshoff 2012: 134). DeCoteau himself elaborates further:

> The films I do have basic gay appeal, but the character's sexuality is always fluid or unspecific or ambiguous. It's more a matter of trying to cover a lot of different bases . . . you know a gay market, straight female market, couples market, trying to keep it as open as possible in order to sell the movie in lots of different ways. (DeCoteau in Elliott-Smith 2016: 100)

Consider, however, the fact that DeCoteau's Gaysploitation films explore many different horror subgenres including slasher films such as *Final Stab* (2001) and *The Frightening* (2002). Here, pre-existing definitions of queer horror mean that *Final Stab* and *The Frightening* are accepted as legitimate queer slasher films; they are independent, low-budget films that exist outside the mainstream Hollywood canon and are therefore subcultural. Since Gaysploitation films "parody and 'rip off' existing horror titles and narratives" (Elliott-Smith 2016: 91), it is implied that queer horror films are only legitimate if their aesthetics trickle-down from the Hollywood mainstream, parasitic of the cultural zeitgeist. It is for this reason, then, that the works of DeCoteau mimic the creative strategies of *Scream* and the third teen slasher film cycle, as well as other Hollywood teen horror films such *The Craft* (1996, directed by the openly gay Andrew Fleming) and *The Faculty* (1998, written by Kevin Williamson). As Benshoff observes:

> Mostly the films copy the look and feel (and marketing strategies) of theatrical teenage horror films from the late 1990s, such as *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997) and *The Faculty* (1998). Indeed, like those films, DeCoteau's can easily be identified by their repetitive cover designs—usually four or five of the nubile cast seductively posed below or around some signifier of horror such as a monstrous face, a scary mask, or a Satanic symbol. (Benshoff 2012: 135)

This chapter, by analysing *Scream* and *I Know What You Did Last Summer*, subsequently evidences how Gaysploitation and the films of David DeCoteau do not simply "queer" the aesthetics of the Hollywood mainstream in a trickle-down exchange. Rather, DeCoteau's Gaysploitation films find queer inspiration in the camp aesthetics of Kevin

Williamson, and in doing so DeCoteau "outs" Williamson's films as he navigates within the heteronormative representational system of Hollywood. Although Williamson's teen slasher films are said to target a female demographic, and DeCoteau's Gaysploitation films are said to target a gay male demographic, a comparative analysis of the studies that surround them indicate that both use the same marketing and production strategies.

Williamson's aesthetics did not only inspire low-budget, independent filmmakers either. In the late nineties, teen slasher films entered their third production cycle following the box-office successes of *Scream*, *I Know What You Did Last Summer*, and *Scream 2* (1997). Although these films are often described as being "like *Scream*," criticised as copycats and cash-ins, it is critical to note that a proliferation of gay creatives are behind these films. Williamson's use of camp in *Scream*, *I Know What You Did Last Summer*, and *Scream 2* accordingly created new generic possibilities for other gay screenwriters, directors, and producers working in Hollywood at the turn of the millennium. As well as Williamson serving as Co-Executive Producer of *Halloween H20: 20 Years Later* (1998) and Producer of *Scream 3* (2000), Silvio Horta wrote *Urban Legend* (1998), Don Mancini wrote and was Executive Producer of *Bride of Chucky* (1998), Gus Van Sant directed and was Producer of *Psycho* (1998), Jeffrey Reddick co-wrote *Final Destination* (2000), Aaron Harberts co-wrote *Valentine* (2001), and Victor Salva wrote and directed *Jeepers Creepers*. To focus on the camp aesthetics of the third teen slasher film cycle, however, is not to give sufficient weight to the intersectional specificity of Williamson's use of *postfeminist* camp.

Where, in the first teen slasher film cycle, women on both sides of the camera used vernacular feminism to empower a target female demographic, Williamson's *Scream* and *I Know What You Did Last Summer* translate vernacular feminism into postfeminist camp. This writes gay male subjectivity into the language of (post-)feminism and, in turn, demonstrates how the postfeminist politics and ideology of the teen slasher film speak to

both female and gay male audiences by the same mode of address. Although the female victim and the Final Girl of the first teen slasher film cycle constitute one identificatory body, the female collective is frequently undermined by the death of the female victim, leaving only the Final Girl by film's end. As Williamson uses postfeminist camp to subvert the codes and conventions of the teen slasher film, accordingly, he writes the significance of the female collective into discourse, bringing into question the marginalisation of the female victim. In *Scream*, the female collective has two survivors, indicating that the Final Girl (Sidney) and the would-be victim (Gale) share equal value in their archetypes. Although *I Know What You Did Last Summer* reverts back to characterise a sole female survivor, then, thoughtful scenes of friendship between the Final Girl (Julie) and the victim (Helen) narrativise how they rightfully view each other as equals. As the next chapter proceeds to demonstrate, however, not only is it writers and directors of the teen slasher film who seek to reclaim the female victim. Indeed, repeat viewing allows female and gay male audiences to actively "reidentify" with the female victim who succumbs to death, allowing them to undermine her "victim" status.

Chapter Three

"On the Bright Side, You'll Come Back"

Repeat Viewing and the Politics and Ideology of Reidentification in *The Final Girls* (2015), *Happy Death Day* (2017), and *Happy Death Day 2U* (2019)

Repetition is the organising feature of the slasher film. Here, the compulsion to repeat manifests itself through cyclic structures that recur at every level of production. While critics and theorists often delineate a set of essential features that constitute the slasher film, it is the repetition of those features that engenders a coherent generic discourse: the foregrounding of young adults, recreational excess, familiar locations, killers, victims, shock, suspense, bladed weapons, set-piece deaths, Final Girls, and the ever-increasing probability of other survivors. By further examining the narrative structure into which these components are arranged, as demonstrated in Chapter 1, the killer's systemic dispatch of victims compulsively equates to a cycle of violence that repeats itself over and over again. When the killer is eventually subdued or killed, rarely is this cycle of violence broken; open endings are a constant in the slasher film, traumatic events unprocessed, killers never dead, the propensity for violence interminable. Such endings are, at the heart of their mechanism, part of an industrial strategy that allows for the sequelisation of cinema, establishing Hollywood franchises that repeat the same formulaic arrangement with little variation, extending to remakes, prequels, reboots, reimaginings, episodic television, and video games: *Psycho*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Halloween*, *Friday the 13th*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Hellraiser*, *Child's Play*, *Candyman*, *Scream*, *I Know What You Did Last Summer*, *Urban Legends*, *Final Destination*, and more recently *Happy Death Day*, to name the most timeless examples (see, for rigorous discussion of this phenomenon, Budra

1998; Wells 2000; Tudor 2002; Harris 2004; Jess-Cooke 2009; Nowell 2012; Dixon 2017; Clayton 2020; Ochonicky 2020; Bernard 2021). Even the longevity of the slasher film itself is predicated on cycles of Hollywood production and distribution, oscillating between waves of prosperity and decline, ensuring that the subgenre never dies in its cyclic compulsion to repeat its own success (see, for a comprehensive account of slasher film cycles, Dika 1987; Ryan and Kellner 1988; Dika 1990; Schneider 1999; Shary 2002/2014; Dika 2003; Hutchings 2004; Wee 2005; Wee 2006; Kendrick 2009; Nowell 2011a; Nowell 2011b; Nowell 2012; Kendrick 2014; Wee 2014; Conrich 2015; Kvaran 2016; Petridis 2019; Clayton 2020; Dika 2023).

Just as compulsive repetitiveness organises the slasher film, it also permeates the critical discourse that surrounds it. Here, text-based theory and criticism appear to have reached an impasse, unable to move beyond those seminal works from the 1980s and early 1990s that continue to dominate the field: Carol J. Clover (1987; 1992), Vera Dika (1987; 1990), Robin Wood (1978b; 1979; 1983), Barbara Creed (1993), Linda Williams (1984; 1989; 1989/1999; 1991), and so forth. Accordingly, critics and theorists repeatedly focus on the linear narrative trajectory of formulaic texts and, in the noteworthy tradition of Clover and Dika in particular, compulsively centre the killer and the Final Girl in their dichotomised plot function, without necessarily considering the psychoanalytic specificity of Clover's approach or the structuralist specificity of Dika's approach. This confines any consideration of the slasher film to an imagined cinematic/theatrical spectatorship, configuring a one-off spectator who watches any given text from beginning to end, despite the fact that the subgenre's popularity is predicated on home video cultures. *Halloween*, for example, did not perform well on its initial theatrical release in 1978; only in 1979 and continuing throughout the early 1980s did it slowly accumulate notable returns via several theatrical re-releases and videocassette rental (Nowell 2011a: 100). Although Clover's

thesis is built around the cinematic apparatus, she herself aligns the success of the slasher film with the so-called "video boom" that entered into the 1990s, polling some sixty employees of rental outlets to confirm the young male clientele (Clover 1992: 6-7). Even *Scream* opens with Drew Barrymore getting ready to watch a video, her death creating a run in the mass murder section of the local video store, before a small group of teens watch *Halloween* at the film's climatic house party among a selection of tapes that include *The Evil Dead*, *Hellraiser*, *Terror Train*, and *Prom Night*.

Emphases on home video cultures do not necessarily disrupt how critics and theorists approach the linear narrative trajectory of the slasher film. In addition to slasher films being programmed on broadcast television, home video cultures allow consumers to stream/download, rent or buy any given film to watch for the first time, not to mention the recent surplus of original films that have been distributed via streaming platforms: the *Fear Street* trilogy (Netflix, 2021), *There's Someone Inside Your House* (Netflix, 2021), *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Netflix, 2022), *They/Them* (Peacock, 2022), *Hellraiser* (Hulu, 2022), *Terror Train* (Tubi, 2022), *Terror Train 2* (Tubi, 2022), and *Sick* (Peacock, 2022), derivative of the ever-present demand for direct-to-video and made-for-television films. What home video cultures do bring into question, rather, are the prospects of repeat viewing, otherwise constituting what Barbara Klinger refers to as "replay culture" (2006; 2008; 2010). As Klinger elaborates:

> [Replay culture] dramatically enhance[s] a single text's presence and availability, enforcing its iteration across multiple platforms—from theatrical screenings and home distribution on numerous platforms (including VHS, cable TV, and DVD) to novelisations, soundtracks, and theme parks—while providing viewers with unparalleled access to media. (Klinger 2008: no pagination)

Bemoaned by some as the "co-option" of cult cinema (Sconce 2008; Stanfield 2008), perceived as the watered-down "mainstreaming" of cult phenomenon (Klinger 2010: 2), replay culture is intrinsic to how particular films and (sub)genres achieve cult status and amid technological change. While pioneering theorists of cult film once considered repeat attendance of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) an exceptional behaviour (Austin 1981; Wood 1991; Kinkade and Katovich 1992), the means of repeat viewing in the form of new technologies allow "any movie today [to] become a cult movie" (Corrigan 1991: 81; see also Hawkins 2000; Hollows 2003; Jancovich et al. 2003; Hills 2006; Staiger 2008; Badley 2010; Pett 2013; Hills 2015; Hills and Sexton 2015). If slasher is a cult film type because it relies, in part, on replay culture and the habitual viewing practices of fans as well as casual audiences, exemplified by the *Scream* franchise, it becomes necessary to question the linear narrativity that dominates critical discourse. While text-based theories of characterisation, identification, and spectatorship are built around narrative structure, it remains to be considered, what are the political and ideological implications of repeat viewing?

Repeat Viewing: Surveying an Understudied Phenomenon

Repeat viewing itself is a gravely understudied phenomenon in film studies, even though the prevalence of home video cultures and new technologies are widely recognised. What little research exists, moreover, does not consider the interdisciplinary potential of similar work in similar subjects, namely the study of television reruns that began in journalism, media and communications (see, for an indicative account, Furno-Lamude 1988; Furno-Lamude and Scudder 1990; Nelson 1990; Furno-Lamude and Anderson 1992; Litman and Kohl 1992; Furno-Lamude 1994; Williams 1994; Spigel 1995; Weispfenning 2003; Kompare 2005; Kompare 2010; Gilbert 2019), and the study of rational addiction, repeat

viewing, and the pastime of moviegoing in media economics (see, non-exhaustively, Collins et al. 2008; Yamamura 2009; Castiglione and Infante 2016; Chang et al. 2016). Such an observation is, of course, problematic in its Western oversight. An established discourse exists on the cultural specificity of repeat viewing in Indian cinemas, for example, cutting across boundaries of age, gender, and social class. As Lakshmi Srinivas writes, the term "repeater" is used in India to describe "an extreme type of viewer who sees the same film over and over, to set apart such viewers from general Indian audiences who also routinely see films they like more than once," elaborating further:

> Repeat viewing facilitates the participatory and interactive style which Indian audiences adopt in their engagement with popular cinema. Repeaters have had time to form a relationship with the characters and talk back at the screen, sing along with the soundtrack. They loudly "predict" what will happen next or carry on a conversation with a character responding to each line of dialogue with their own improvised dialogue. Repeaters applaud and cheer seconds before the occurrence of an event on-screen and provide sound effects which preview the scene for other viewers and make sense to first-timers only after the scene has shifted. A community atmosphere emerges in the theatre. (Srinivas 2002: 167-8; see also Kakar 1980; Banaji 2006; Ciolfi 2012; Srinivas 2013; Srinivas 2016; Appadurai 2019)

While Srinivas seeks to problematise how critics and theorists worldwide have been governed by the Western tradition of film studies, particularly in its approach to cinematic spectatorship, it is perhaps ironic that Western theorists of repeat viewing either ignore or deflect from Indian discourse. Srinivas' very point is that patrons of Indian cinema "apply different levels of attention to different scenes," revealing that "the 'film' experience cannot be equated with following the narrative or with absorbing textual meaning" (Srinivas 2013: no pagination). To what extent is this not applicable to repeat attendees of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* or, say, the distracted viewer at home who wants something easy to watch in the background? Although concerns over cultural appropriation are at

play in Western theorising, Srinivas herself questions the absence/erasure of non-Western approaches to spectatorship and audience reception when they are still widely applicable. Lest we miss the point, the Western tradition of film studies is not globally specific, yet it has nevertheless been deployed worldwide. One might argue, here, that the Western tradition of film studies is maintained in part through the neoliberal policing of cultural appropriation; the fear of cultural appropriation in Western circles results in the relegation of non-Western scholarship, a process that limits non-Western scholarship to the regional/national/continental cinemas that it examines on the grounds of cultural specificity, which frames Anglo-American and/or Western European discourse as default.

In what is claimed to be one of the first dedicated studies on film spectatorship and repeat viewing, Vinzenz Hediger observes that "the practice of repeat viewing has always been part of the repertoire of cinema going." However, only since the 1970s with the advent of new technologies such as VCR and DVD has repeat viewing "become a culturally and economically significant factor of spectator behaviour, at least in the Western world" (Hediger 2004: 24). Here, Hediger draws on historical reception studies to build a cultural genealogy of repeat viewing in North America from the 1920s into the 1990s, analysing the discourse(s) at work in discussion of exhibition and distribution practices, articles published in trade papers, and archival materials that engage with moviegoers and their frequency. Hediger, in other words, draws on historical reception studies to imagine and hypothesise patterns of repeat viewing based on discourse analysis; an approach that he describes as "preliminary at best" (ibid.: 26).

Subsequent Anglo-American scholarship on repeat viewing indirectly responds to the preliminary nature of Hediger's work, developing a quali-quantitative approach to repeat audiences in recognition of media reception studies as a social science (see, for example, Klinger 2006; Pett 2013; Barker et al. 2016). That is, researchers gather primary

data in the form of audience surveys and, in analysing responses, analyse the discourse(s) at work, using audiences themselves to explain the cultural phenomenon of repeat viewing. Klinger's work is most indicative and, although it might seem limited in scope, "based on a survey [she] conducted in 2000 with students from a dozen largely introductory classes in the Department of Communication and Culture at Indiana University" (Klinger 2006: 137), its wider applicability is evidenced in her later theoretical work on the relationship between cult film, gendered subjectivity, and replay culture (2008; 2010). Moreover, while some critics and theorists argue that home video cultures undermine the integrity of cinema (see, for example, Ellis 1982/1992; Corrigan 1991; Sontag 1996), Klinger's findings on repeat viewing seek to reclaim the narrative, complexifying Andreas Huyssen's (1986) observation that mass culture is associated with women and, thus, the modernist tendency to degrade television/video ("low culture") for its association with the feminine, domestic space of the home, contrary to cinema ("high culture") and its more prestigious association with masculine, public exhibition. According to Klinger, the functions and pleasures of repeat viewing are predicated on mastery and control, that which forms routine and habit through a whole host of devices:

1. **Familiarity.** Repeat viewing is grounded, first and foremost, in familiarity. Rewatching any given film creates a sense of comfort and safety within the domestic space, otherwise constituting a "cosy" atmosphere. Because familiarity is a symptom of repeat viewing, however, it frames all other reasons for the practice. (Klinger 2006: 151-2)
2. **Aesthetic Appreciation.** Repeat viewing cannot be without the foreknowledge of narrative. Although this is reason for the overall "cosiness" that a familiar film elicits, it also allows audiences to register

those aesthetics and narrative elements that were previously overlooked. Here, repeat viewers are most actively engaged in processes of mastery and control, dedicated to a forensic deconstruction of the film. (ibid.: 152-64)

3. **Therapy.** Comfort and familiarity often contribute to the "feel-good" feeling that is associated with repeat viewing. Yet, with the foreknowledge of a film's emotional register, audiences might rewatch a film to lean into other emotions based on their needs, such as those that traverse in sadness, tragedy, and melancholia. Alternatively, audiences might rewatch films to deal with or compensate for their own personal problems, drawing parallels between their own lived experience and the fantasy scenario on screen. (ibid.: 164-74)
4. **Nostalgia.** Repeat viewing allows audiences to immerse themselves in nostalgia. Here, repeatedly watched films inform personal histories, providing a point of reference through the trajectory of one's life. While nostalgia is typically considered a conservative phenomenon, then—our perception of events change in memory, nostalgic for a time that never existed—it can be weaponised for more progressive means, allowing repeat audiences to reflect on a sociohistorical moment that requires escapism. (ibid.: 174-81)
5. **Dialogue Memorisation.** Just as repeat viewing cannot be without the foreknowledge of narrative, neither can it be without the foreknowledge of dialogue. Over time, repeat viewing allows audiences to memorise lines and perform them. During these moments, extending their appreciation of aesthetics and narrative, repeat viewers are most actively involved in processes of mastery and control. (ibid.: 181-6)

Because theorists such as Klinger turn to audiences themselves to explain the functions and pleasures of repeat viewing, what appears to emerge is a politics of the self. That is, repeat viewing is theorised in personal terms, depoliticised in its focus on individualism. To reiterate, repeat viewing is structured around familiarity, foregrounded by notions of comfort, safety, and "cosiness" that are associated with domestic surroundings; domesticity is private and, beyond the purview of the public sphere, rendered apolitical. By being familiar, audiences get to know the films they repeatedly watch; anthropomorphised, almost, like old friends. As audiences get to know these films, then, they crucially perceive themselves to achieve a sense of mastery and control over the text, be that through their fulfilment of desire and emotion, their identification with characters, their recognition of overlooked aesthetic and narrative elements, or their ability to memorise the dialogue backwards. That audiences feel the need to master and control the films they repeatedly watch at all, however, demands further enquiry that cannot be explained through the current theoretical paradigms surrounding repeat viewing; paradigms that bring audiences themselves to the forefront of discussion. Central here is the notion that audiences *perceive* themselves to achieve a sense of mastery and control by repeatedly watching films, suggesting that the perception of mastery and control is a prerequisite of the films themselves. As such, if the functions and pleasures of repeat viewing are predicated on a politics of fierce individualism, it is important to interrogate the politics and ideology of repeat viewing as a precondition of film today; that which, framed through the slasher film, can be approached most appropriately through recent developments in the study of horror, cult, and extreme cinema.

Since the millennium, critics and theorists examining horror, cult, and extreme cinema have taken an interest in home video cultures and new technologies, particularly

in how they broaden film as an object of study. Here, special features associated with digital formats (LaserDisc, DVD, Blu-ray) have been used as paratexts, contributing to the negotiation of textual meaning and/or discourse: audio commentary, interviews, behind-the-scenes featurettes, deleted scenes, extended scenes, alternative endings, and so forth (see, for different approaches, Hawkins 2000; Brookey and Westerfelhaus 2002; Hight 2005; Atkinson 2007; King 2010; Kooyman 2010; Wester 2012; Jones 2013; Bernard 2014; Henry 2014; Tompkins 2014; Christensen 2016; Hobbs 2018; Sheldon 2020). Although such studies focus squarely on the implications of paratexts on film narrative and discourse, never warranting further consideration of film spectatorship in the backdrop of technological change or "convergence culture" (Jenkins 2006), their conclusions nevertheless set the precedent when interrogating the act of repeat viewing.

Not everyone will watch the same film repeatedly, in much the same way that not everyone will watch the accompanying special features on a physical media release, yet home video cultures still give audiences (read consumers) a sense of control, granting a neoliberal freedom and autonomy that puts them above film as a medium, or so it seems. Given that the emergence of home video cultures parallels the rise of neoliberalism, notably when slasher was first popularised in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the politics and ideology of film is mystified by the fallacy of consumer freedom and cannot be determined by the film text itself. If the so-called "film text" describes a pre-packaged product that disseminates its politics and ideology through the undisrupted flow of a linear narrative, repeat viewing would at first appear to be subversive in its ability to disrupt this process, but then consider how the disruptive potential of the digital paratext has been theorised on the contrary to reaffirm the heteropatriarchal politics and ideology of contemporary horror. Claire Sisco King, for example, evidences how *Hellbent* (the so-called "gay slasher" film, discussed at length in Chapter 4) is actively "un-queered" by its

DVD extras, revealing the film's primary cast as straight, allowing the film's representation of gay and bisexual masculinities to be assimilated in heterosexist terms (King 2010: 257). Claire Henry similarly examines how *Teeth* (2007) "works to sooth" the castration anxiety it evokes via the film's DVD extras, displaying and explaining the prosthetics used in the film to disarm their emasculating affect (Henry 2014: 62). Somewhat differently, Maisha Wester and Kyle Christensen respectively address how *Hostel: Part II* (2007) and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (2010) knot an ideological entanglement between text and paratext: while *Hostel: Part II* reinforces the very masculinity it claims to critique in one behind-the-scenes featurette (Wester 2012), the alternative and theatrical endings of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* negotiate the (anti-)feminist discourse(s) at work in the film (Christensen 2016).

Such assertions as that of King, Henry, Wester, and Christensen bring the work of Robert Alan Brookey and Robert Westerfelhaus to the forefront of discussion, their words on *Fight Club* (1999) and its DVD extras (that which they refer to as "extra texts") largely applicable to the mode of repeat viewing enabled by home video cultures and new technologies. Here, Brookey and Westerfelhaus argue that the special features associated with digital formats give audiences (read consumers) "greater control over the viewing experience" but this is an illusion under the conditions of neoliberalism, providing only "a greater (*perceived*) sense of agency" (Brookey and Westerfelhaus 2002: 22-4, emphasis added). Elaborating further, they write:

> DVD technology seems to empower the consumers by making available a wider range of viewing choices than were previously available on other formats. These choices, however, have been carefully selected by those involved in making and marketing the product, and may include material that points to a preferred interpretation of the film. (ibid.: 25)

By applying Brooker and Westerfelhaus' conclusions to the mode of repeat viewing enabled by home video cultures and new technologies—one among a wide range of viewing choices—it might be argued that the politics and ideology of the slasher film has been strategically disseminated beyond the film text, preferred interpretation(s) determined with the knowledge that slasher is a cult film type that relies on the habitual viewing practices of fans. When the first teen slasher film cycle emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s, so theory tells us in Chapter 1, the politics and ideology of such films appeared to be clear-cut, repeating the same formulaic arrangement. In much the same way that "Carpenter [and Hill] could not have seen *Halloween* as a slasher movie because there was no such category at that time" (Jancovich 2002: 22), subsequent cash-ins recognised themselves not as slasher films but as variations of *Halloween*, reaffirming its politics and ideology (see Dika 1990). Such an approach solely emphasises the film text, yet such an approach was obsolete by the late 1980s when the slasher film had accrued its own commercial identity and cult following, turning slasher films into franchises and franchises into brands, exemplified by *A Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Friday the 13th* (see, for example, Conrich 1997; Hills 2007; Conrich 2010; Nowell 2012).

A Nightmare on Elm Street and *Friday the 13th* created a generic shift that was predicated on the early beginnings of replay culture, turning the likes of Freddy Krueger and Jason Voorhees into household names via merchandising: toys, videos, games, fancy dress, tie-in books and novelisations, soundtracks, singles, MTV specials, even spin-off TV shows like *Freddy's Nightmares* (syndication, 1988-1990). Where the politics and ideology of the slasher film had previously been taken seriously, particularly in its representation of violence against women, this generic shift sought to depoliticise the slasher film as a matter of harmless fun, child-friendly entertainment, attempting to delegitimise any serious consideration of these films (see, in their broad account of violent media, Barker and

Brooks 1998; see, in relation to *Friday the 13th*, Hills 2007). Moreover, just as Klinger's insights into repeat viewing demonstrate how audiences use this practice to achieve a sense of mastery and control over the text, replay culture creates the illusion that slasher audiences are above the text (that is, its politics and ideology), furthered by the ever-increasing knowingness and camp self-reflexivity of the subgenre.

To summarise thus far, it has been suggested that through their familiarity with repeatedly watched films, audiences ascertain feelings of mastery and control over the text. Situated in the backdrop of technological change and replay culture, however, these feelings do not belong to any individual. Under the conditions of neoliberal ideology, home video cultures only grant audiences a sense of agency and control, promoting a politics of fierce individualism and "freedom" that work to uphold consumer capitalism. By providing unparalleled access to media, replay culture seeks to empower audiences (read consumers) by making the prospect of repeat viewing widely available. In doing so, audiences are permitted to test the boundaries of cinema, emboldening those feelings of mastery and control as they seemingly defy the politics and ideology of linear narrativity, refusing film's end since the last time they watched. Yet, in the wake of replay culture, those involved in the production of film increasingly strategise around repeat viewing, developing more nuanced ways of propagating the politics and ideology of film narrative. While the slasher film has only briefly been considered, until now, what follows is the development of a theoretical framework that logically reinterprets Clover's original thesis, interrogating the politics and ideology of repeat viewing via processes of identification.

First, reinterpreting Clover's often overlooked argument that the formulaic nature of the slasher film "stands as a narrative manifestation of the syndrome of repetition compulsion" (1992: 213), this chapter appropriates Clover's use of cine-psychoanalysis to examine the relationship between repetition compulsion and the slasher film in

sociocultural terms. In doing so, this chapter appropriates repetition compulsion to interrogate the politics and ideology of repeat viewing in postfeminist media culture, considering female subjectivity and gay male subjectivity at the intersections of spectatorial identification. Here, it is argued that the compulsion to repeat originates from the trauma of heteropatriarchal oppression and, by repeat viewing the same slasher film, women and gay men achieve a sense of mastery and control over their marginalisation. Subsequently, repeat viewing is structured around two processes of "reidentification": "primary reidentification" with the immersive properties of the film (the mise-en-scène) and "secondary reidentification" with the characters of empathic choice. If slasher films are designed to elicit fear, primary reidentification invites audiences to disarm those feelings of threat, overcoming fear with the foreknowledge of scary scenes. Similarly, secondary reidentification invites audiences to reidentify with female characters, temporarily breathing new life into the female victim, trying to overcome the inevitable. Although reidentification grants audiences a sense of mastery and control, then, this chapter demonstrates its limits, steeped in a cyclic masochism that cannot elicit change.

Over and Over: Repetition Compulsion and Reidentification in the Slasher Film

One of Clover's most fascinating yet understudied observations is that the ideological project of the slasher film is grounded in repetition compulsion, succumbing to the pain of unresolved anxieties and fears that refuse to go away. Repetition compulsion is a psychological phenomenon first developed by Freud and, although the concept has been underutilised in film theory and criticism (see, for example, Silverman 1983; Silverman 1992; Nuetzel 1994; Kline 1998; Tschofen 2002; Blake 2003; Bilton 2013; King 2013; Corbett 2017; Crumbo 2019; Schafer 2019), it remains most underutilised in consideration

of the horror genre (see, most notably, Greenberg 1975; Greenberg 1983; Clover 1992; Chua 2004; Jess-Cook 2009; O'Hagan 2012; Earle 2016). Despite this, consideration of repetition compulsion remains prevalent in current psychoanalytic and psychiatric literature which, at the very least, indicates that the phenomenon is not as outdated as it might seem with its origins in Freudian psychoanalysis (see, for example, Levine 2020; Blass 2021; Sanchez-Cardenas 2021; Weiss 2021; Picht 2022). Where Michael Sanchez-Cardenas (2021) calls for the retirement of a psychoanalytic approach to repetition compulsion altogether, then, Rachel Blass provides a much more holistic approach:

> All human behaviour and experience can be studied and explained at different levels, including social, political, chemical, physical and psychological. Within each level there can be further subdivisions: the person's behaviour can be explained neurologically and hormonally, in terms of evolution and class theories, behaviourism or psychoanalysis, etc. (Blass 2021: 1014)

Blass suggests, for the purposes of this chapter, that instead of retiring a psychoanalytic approach, repetition compulsion should be studied and explained at different levels across different disciplines. Here, by studying and explaining the phenomena at different levels across different disciplines, the cause/origin of repetition compulsion can be fully interrogated and theorised, illuminating the grey area of a psychoanalytic approach in which "[t]he function and effects of repetition compulsion are not clear" (Clover 1992: 213). Psychoanalysis, in this light, provides just one vocabulary with which to articulate the politics of repetition compulsion, with different disciplines providing different vocabularies that might seem antithetical but do, in fact, interconnect to create a more unified conceptualisation. Contributing to an interdisciplinary conceptualisation of repetition compulsion, then, it is useful to recount Clover's psychoanalytic approach to

repetition compulsion in the slasher film, deconstructing the appropriative language of cine-psychoanalysis to revise her theory in more obvious sociocultural terms.

Clover's definition of repetition compulsion is derived from the work of Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, both of whom engage with the Freudian script:

> At the level of concrete psychopathology, the compulsion to repeat is an ungovernable process originating in the unconscious. As a result of this action, the subject deliberately places himself [*sic*] in distressing situations, thereby repeating an old experience, but he [*sic*] does not recall this prototype; on the contrary, he [*sic*] has the strong impression that the situation is fully determined by the circumstances of the moment. (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973: 78)

Here, psychosexual trauma constitutes the origin of repetition compulsion, in which Clover notes that the slasher film is organised around thoughts of beating and castration, "with louder or softer overtones of sexual penetration" (Clover 1992: 214). Indeed, psychosexual trauma describes the "old experience" that the subject does not recall—that which determines their sexuality in adult life—yet the forgotten trauma is unconsciously manifest in compulsive acts and patterns of behaviour, situating the subject in traumatic situations. For young straight men in particular, the slasher film compulsively depicts the psychosexual trauma associated with masochistic fantasy, Clover paraphrasing the scenario set forth in Freud's "A Child Is Being Beaten" to illustrate her point:

> All children, male and female, are subject to the unconscious fantasy that they are being beaten—that is, "loved"—by the *father*. Whereas the girl's fantasy is "straight" (at least in Freud's reading), the boy's involves a gender complication: to be beaten/loved by his father requires the adoption of a position coded as "feminine masochism" or receptively homosexual. Thus, "feminine masochism" refers not to masochism in women, but to the essence of masochistic perversion in *men*. (ibid.: 215, emphasis in original)

According to Clover, it is precisely through the slasher film's trade in the psychological economy of feminine masochism that the subgenre is rooted in the compulsion to repeat. Discussed at length in the Literature Review and again in Chapter 1, feminine masochism requires spectatorial misrecognition, allowing the male spectator's psychosexual trauma to safely play out in the staging of a heterosexual scenario. As the male spectator is invited to identify with the female body, the female victim serves as a heterosexual deflection that averts a homoerotic scenario through displacement; the male spectator can safely experience *his* masochistic perversion through *her* trauma. By restaging trauma, repetition compulsion is driven by a desire for mastery and control, yet this desire for mastery and control is never truly met. For example, the Final Girl might emerge as a masculinised figure by film's end, completing the Oedipal trajectory, but how does this truly achieve mastery and control if the male spectator proceeds to watch yet another slasher film? Indeed, the male spectator finds himself trapped in a relentless masochistic cycle, endlessly seeking fulfilment but never truly breaking free.

While critics and theorists often assume that cine-psychoanalysis is incompatible with sociocultural approaches to the horror film, Peter Hutchings neatly evidences how Clover's overall thesis on the slasher film can be rendered in sociocultural terms, articulating the politics and ideology of male spectatorship in a different vocabulary. Here, Hutchings rightly notes that male audiences are "subjects of patriarchy, that is they are located in relation to various institutions, discourses and beliefs which identify, support and perpetuate male power in society" (1993: 91-2). In turn, he argues that "male submission to disempowerment"—that is, the "feminising" experience of horror spectatorship—"is merely a way of confirming possession of that power." However, the male spectator "has power" only because he is "the subject of patriarchy." Thus, male spectatorship works on two contradictory factors: to "reconfirm feelings of power,"

allowing for a sense of mastery and control in the Oedipal trajectory of the slasher film, but also to "cover over the fact that this . . . power is structural and provisional rather than personal," explaining why the male spectator can suspend feelings of power (ibid.: 92).

Using Hutchings' sociocultural approach to male spectatorship to reinterpret Clover's account of repetition compulsion in the slasher film, it becomes apparent that the male subject's trauma is determined by the fact that he is a heteropatriarchal subject. Although the male spectator might be situated in relation to various institutions and discourses that support and perpetuate male power in society—cinema itself is one such institution, the cinematic apparatus being an ideological state apparatus that upholds hegemonic masculinity through Oedipal structures—the male spectator cannot help his privilege and is, in many ways, another victim to heteropatriarchal gender relations. Indeed, young men must adhere to impossible standards under heteropatriarchal order, inauthentically succumbing to rigid definitions of maleness, manhood, and masculinity. Although the slasher film might warrant feelings of mastery and control, then—the Final Girl's climactic battle completes the Oedipal narrative, reaffirming the male spectator's masculine subject position in heteropatriarchal gender relations—the male spectator's compulsion to watch more slasher films indicates a longing to be liberated from his heteropatriarchal subject position, as if to reject the Oedipal dictates of the film text itself. That is, although the cinematic apparatus tries to uphold the dominant ideology by creating subjects (read spectators) who are complaint with heteropatriarchal law, repetition compulsion emerges as a site of anti-heteropatriarchal (anti-Oedipal) resistance. Subsequently, Clover argues for a radical revaluation in the analysis of film narrative, demonstrating how linear narrativity cannot be relied on to interrogate the politics and ideology of the slasher film:

> If one focuses (as critics tend to) on the endings of horror films, one sees sadism. But if one takes it as a point of fact … that endings (as well as beginnings) are generically overdetermined and that it is in narrative middles that crucial matters are contested, and if one accordingly focuses on those parts of horror films—their middles, especially their "late" middles—in which the tension is greatest and the audience body most engaged, one sees masochism, and in remarkably blatant forms. (Clover 1992: 222)

Here, although Clover's thesis is structured around the cinematic apparatus, it is fitting that she pre-empts the significance of replay culture, not only discussing the popularity of modern horror in movie theatres but home video (see, for all of Clover's passing references, ibid.: 6-7; 42; 167). Francesco Casetti neatly summarises the implications, writing that "the cinematic dispositive no longer appears to be a predetermined, closed, and binding structure, but rather an open and flexible set of elements; it is no longer an *apparatus*, but rather an *assemblage*" (Casetti 2015: 69, emphasis in original). Accordingly, the narrative trajectory of the slasher film is not necessarily fixed in a predetermined, closed, binding structure; home video cultures create an open and flexible set of elements, most notably the prospect of repeat viewing. Where Clover draws on repetition compulsion to explain the slasher film in and of itself, then, replay culture means that repetition compulsion can be used to further explain the phenomenon of repeat viewing. As such, home video cultures and the prospect of repeat viewing further solidify Clover's call for a radical revaluation of narrative in film analysis, further indicating that linear narrativity fails to consider the true extent of the slasher subgenre's politics and ideology.

Having used Hutchings's sociocultural approach to male spectatorship to reinterpret Clover's account of repetition compulsion in the slasher film, his emphasis on heteropatriarchal power relations can be furthered to consider the politics and ideology of female spectatorship and gay male spectatorship; spectatorships that are gendered "feminine" in psychoanalytic terms and are therefore marginalised in social relations.

Subsequently, by framing Clover's account of repetition compulsion in relation to the phenomenon of repeat viewing, its political and ideological implications can be explored through female and gay male subjectivity, explicitly situated in a postfeminist context. Here, the female subject's trauma and the gay male subject's trauma is determined by their position in heteropatriarchal gender relations. That is, marginalisation and oppression are registered as a trauma, derived from experiences of sexism, misogyny, and homophobia. Although the slasher film ultimately depicts fantasy violence, it nevertheless reflects the trauma of heteropatriarchal violence. In doing so, repeat viewing allows female and gay male audiences to master and control the heteropatriarchal script by their own perception; a heteropatriarchal script that, in reality, they have no mastery or control over.

With the compulsion to repeatedly watch the same slasher film over and over, audiences develop a certain familiarity with that particular film: the film's narrative, the film's aesthetics, the film's dialogue, the film's characters, and so forth. Thus, audiences have the foreknowledge of what happens. This creates the illusion that audiences are above the slasher film they repeatedly watch, particularly in relation to its politics and ideology. Where neoliberalism relies on postfeminist subjectivity and homonormative subjectivity to respectively assimilate women and gay men in consumer capitalism, indicating that the demands of feminism and gay liberation have been achieved—indeed, creating the illusion that feminism and gay liberation are no longer needed—the illusion that repeat viewing creates is particularly disconcerting in relation to female and gay male audiences of slasher. As female and gay male spectators repeatedly watch the same slasher film—that is, as female and gay male spectators repeatedly watch the same narrative of heteropatriarchal violence—they become desensitised or detached from their original affective response. Grounded in a fierce individualism that otherwise seeks to empower female and gay male spectators in personal terms, as theorised at length in Chapter 1, those first-time feelings

of fear, threat, and disempowerment that are so important to politicise are left defunct. Just as repetition compulsion is driven by the desire to achieve mastery and control, then, repeat viewing among female and gay male spectators is driven by the desire to achieve mastery and control over the heteropatriarchal scenario. However, that female and gay male spectators are stuck in a cycle of rewatching the same pre-packaged slasher films over and over, feelings of mastery and control substitute for real change. That is, feelings of mastery and control do not overrule the subject's inability to dismantle the heteropatriarchal origin of their marginalisation and oppression. Until the slasher film becomes irrelevant, they will remain a product of the heteropatriarchal culture that creates them, and female and gay male spectators will remain cyclically chasing the two processes of "reidentification" that repeat viewing is structured around.

First developed by Christian Metz (1975), primary identification describes the spectator's identification with the cinematic apparatus, most notably the audiovisual properties of the film (the mise-en-scène) that allow the spectator to become immersed. Here, primary identification provides the illusion that the spectator is "looking in on a private world" (Mulvey 1975: 9), creating a space where the spectator can identify with characters. Where "identification" is typically a phenomenon associated with characterisation, then, for primary identification to be theorised at all, a formalist approach to film is required; that which analyses the style and form of film (the mise-en-scène) because it is self-evident. Steven Shaviro neatly voices the rhetoric of a formalist approach, writing:

> Images confront the viewer directly, without mediation. What we see is what we see; the figures that unroll before us cannot be regarded merely as arbitrary representations or conventional signs. We respond viscerally to visual forms, before having the leisure to read or reinterpret them as symbols. (Shaviro 1993: 26)

Wickham Clayton subsequently uses Shaviro's words to justify a formalist approach to the slasher film, set out in the following terms:

> While filmmakers design all kinds of movies with the viewer's response in mind, slashers are created specifically for this impact. We "jump" out of our seat. We "cringe" at the cutting of a victim. We instinctively cover our eyes when we know something is coming, but are not quite sure when. We feel scared or intense. (Clayton 2020: 5)

While Clayton proceeds to outright dismiss cine-psychoanalysis and its surrounding theories of "identification" to develop a formalist approach to the slasher film (ibid.: 12), he downplays the extent to which critics and theorists have used psychoanalysis only to further interrogate the affective politics of the slasher film, in which a formalist approach can only go so far. Here, much has been written to demonstrate how the mise-en-scène creates suspense in the slasher film that often leads to jump scares. As Steve Neale writes in regard to Michael Myers in *Halloween*, suspense is grounded in the spectator's uncertainty over Michael's position in the film, applicable to all other slasher films that have since followed: "will he appear, when, where and in relation to whose look?" (Neale 1981: 28; see also Dika 1990). Where spectators might cover their eyes in these moments, "others claim that they cover not their eyes but their ears in the 'scary parts'" (Clover 1992: 204). Whether through formalist or psychoanalytic means, nevertheless, it is agreed that the primary function of the slasher film is to scare audiences.

If primary identification describes the spectator's identification with the cinematic apparatus, "primary reidentification" describes the spectator's identification with the immersive audiovisual properties of the slasher film on repeat viewing. Given that slasher films are primarily designed to make audiences feel scared or intense, primary reidentification allows audiences to actively disarm how the slasher film is designed to

make them feel on first viewing. Here, audiences no longer have to cover their eyes or ears, exempt from jump scares and other scary parts; they have all necessary foreknowledge to master and control their original fear. And yet, if the heteropatriarchal narrative of the slasher film remains, the female spectator and the gay male spectator have to accept a basic truth; the slasher film they repeatedly watch might no longer scare them, but the very real threat of heteropatriarchal violence remains in the outside world.

Neatly dovetailing the implications of primary identification, if secondary identification describes the spectator's identification with characters on first viewing, "secondary reidentification" describes the spectator's identification with the same characters on repeat viewing. While an oversaturation of scholarship seeks to theorise the Final Girl, no adequate theory has been developed to explain how she reappears as victim in sequels. Indeed, Alice Hardy (Adrienne King) is murdered in the opening scenes of *Friday the 13th Part II*; Nancy Thompson (Heather Langenkamp) is killed in the climatic scenes of *A Nightmare on Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors* (1987); Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) sacrifices herself in *Alien³* (1992); Jamie Lloyd (Danielle Harris) is murdered in *Halloween: The Curse of Michael Myers* (1995); Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis) is killed at the beginning of *Halloween: Resurrection* (2002); and Sally Hardesty (Olwen Fouéré) meets her end in *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2022). Although secondary reidentification is not developed in mind of the Final Girl—on the contrary, secondary reidentification is developed to move beyond the Final Girl—that the Final Girl has been understudied as victim in sequels demonstrates the need to rethink identification in the slasher film, made possible through consideration of repeat viewing.

Building specifically on the identificatory framework set out in Chapter 1, secondary reidentification (referred to as "reidentification" hereon) further demonstrates how the female victim and the Final Girl are registered as a collective identificatory body.

In Chapter 1, it was argued that how women and gay men identify with the female collective is why they identify with the Final Girl as a mode of resistance by film's end. Indeed, the female victim is the characterisation of the New Woman, prototypically empowered by the gains of second wave feminism. As characterisations of the New Woman, female victims are both likeable and confident, encouraging women and gay men to identify with them, but their imperfections are what make them realistic and relatable, capturing the subject position of female youth (and, to a lesser extent, gay men) in postfeminist culture. As the female spectator and the gay male spectator are vicariously empowered through the female victim's postfeminist characterisation, the original affective response to her death is particularly painful; as she so frequently resists her death, she does not want to die, nor do women and gay men as a collective force. As the Final Girl eventually kills or subdues the killer, then, the female and the gay male spectator identify with her as a force of resistance, avenging the death of her friends.

Repeat viewing allows female and gay male audiences to reidentify with the female victim, habitually giving her new life in an attempt to overcome her inevitable death. Where her death was once painful, over the course of repeat viewing, the affective response becomes less intense; her death is only temporary, until the next time. Just as replay culture gives audiences a greater sense of agency and control over the viewing experience, audiences can play with the female victim's narrative trajectory, creating a sense of empowerment. As such, reidentification allows audiences to reclaim her narrative, further highlighting that the female victim is a victim to discourse. However, reidentification is only provisional and has no actual impact on the narrative trajectory of the slasher film itself. Although audiences can actively reidentify with her, the female victim will always die, steeped in an inescapable masochism that cyclically repeats itself with each rewatch. Just as reidentification has no actual impact on the narrative trajectory of the slasher film,

neither does it do anything to meaningfully address the unresolved anxieties that traumatise the female spectator and the gay male spectator who exist in heteropatriarchal culture. While the victim of heteropatriarchal violence in the slasher film might be the subject of reidentification, the victim of heteropatriarchal violence in real life gets no second (or third, or fourth, or fifth) chance to change the outcome of their trauma.

By providing unparalleled access to media in postfeminist culture, replay culture seeks to empower audiences by making the prospect of repeat viewing widely available. In doing so, female and gay male audiences in particular are permitted to test the boundaries of cinema, emboldening those feelings of mastery and control as they seemingly defy the politics and ideology of linear narrativity, refusing film's end since the last time they watched. Yet, in the wake of replay culture, those involved in the production of film increasingly strategise around repeat viewing, developing more nuanced ways of propagating the postfeminist politics and ideology of the slasher film. To conclude, then, three films are analysed that intricately narrativise what is at stake in repeat viewing, turning the politics and ideology of replay culture into text itself. Of significance, here, is that all three films are written and/or directed by openly gay men, tying the aesthetics of postfeminist camp into the ideological implications of replay culture.

"I know in the movie you're supposed to die, but that doesn't mean you have to": Reidentification in *The Final Girls*

Written by M.A. Fortin and Joshua John Miller, both of whom are openly gay, in a relationship, and work together exclusively in collaborative partnership, *The Final Girls* follows Max (Taissa Farmiga) as she comes to terms with the tragic loss of her mother. Before her death, Amanda (Malin Akerman) was a fading actress best known for playing Nancy in *Camp Bloodbath*, a fictitious teen slasher from the 1980s that refers back to such

summer camp slashers as *Friday the 13th* and *The Burning*. When Max is invited to a double bill screening of *Camp Bloodbath* and its sequel, she and her friends enter the diegetic world of *Camp Bloodbath* when the movie theatre catches fire, repeatedly forced to live through the events of the film in a never-ending cycle. Although Nancy is a victim who is scripted to die in *Camp Bloodbath*, Max consistently saves her because she looks like her mother, maintaining the temporal loop that otherwise narrativises the process of reidentification. By film's end, Nancy makes the ultimate sacrifice and allows her scripted fate to be, murdered at the hands of Billy Murphy (Daniel Norris). As Max and her love interest Chris (Alexander Ludwig) watch *Camp Bloodbath*'s end credits roll from within the diegesis, rolling behind them in the sky, a white light blinds them. They awaken in a hospital ward surrounded by their friends, each of whom was killed one by one in *Camp Bloodbath*, indicating that their experience was some kind of collective hallucination. However, feelings of reassurance are quickly dashed when the group hear Billy's theme. Brandishing through the corridor as part of the *Camp Bloodbath 2: Cruel Summer* title card, Billy returns for blood as Max and her friends find themselves back in the temporal loop.

Even though *The Final Girls* has received little attention in academic discourse (Audissino 2019; Pagnoni Berns et al. 2019; Paszkiewicz 2020), all provide surprisingly serious consideration of a film that is innately low-budget and tongue in cheek, interrogating the film's representation of gender. Katarzyna Paszkiewicz's interrogation of the film is perhaps the most convincing, situating *The Final Girls* in relation to postfeminism. Here, she notes that "the film overtly questions the misogynistic and homophobic discourses hyperbolised in the 1980s *Camp Bloodbath*," citing one particular scene that all theorists equally appear drawn to (Paszkiewicz 2020: 251). Among the characters in *Camp Bloodbath* who are typecast as generic stereotypes, Kurt (Adam Devine) is a horny chauvinist jock, binarised against Chris who is a millennial with liberal views.

As Kurt reads *Playboy* magazine, Paszkiewicz notes how "*The Final Girls* playfully challenges [Kurt's] toxic, hegemonic masculinity" by having Chris, "a more intelligent and less hyper-masculine athletic young man, re-educate Kurt, by untiringly reprimanding his offensive, misogynistic and homophobic language" (ibid.).

> Kurt: Look at the pair on her! I would just motorboat those for hours.
>
> Chris: Yeah, but look at those articles, I could read those all night long.
>
> Kurt: What are you, a fag? You don't like some nice big hoots, hootin'?
>
> Chris: My dads are gay, so shut the hell up.
>
> Kurt: Yeah, right, gay guys can't have kids! They're too busy going to discos and having sex with each other. It's actually a pretty cool lifestyle…

This interaction is telling about the intersection of female and gay male spectatorships, addressing misogyny and homophobia in the same instance, aligning both women and gay men in their politics. Although it is refreshing to see misogyny and homophobia almost called out in explicitly political terms, however, the fact that Chris calls out Kurt's misogyny and homophobia is indicative that misogyny and homophobia are outdated, no longer relevant in today's society. This is, of course, a falsehood; misogyny and homophobia are rife and, since repeat viewing of the slasher film is structured by repetition compulsion, female and gay male spectatorships remain rooted in heteropatriarchal trauma. Moreover, the scene's use of postfeminist camp works to depoliticise the heteropatriarchal discourse that underpins Kurt's misogyny and homophobia. Kurt is not misogynistic and homophobic because he embodies "toxic, hegemonic masculinity" but, rather, Kurt is misogynistic and homophobic to cover over his own homosexuality. Indeed, gay men have "a pretty cool lifestyle," and Kurt's assumption that they are "too

busy going to discos and having sex with each other" is a projection of his own desire. Nevertheless, this scene clearly spells out the stakes that both women and gay men share in the politics and ideology of postfeminist media culture.

Instead of reading *The Final Girls* at surface level like other theorists have, the aim of this analysis is to demonstrate how the film's style and form literalises the theory of repetition compulsion and repeat viewing that has been developed in this chapter. Lest we miss the point, *The Final Girls* opens with Max watching the theatrical trailer for *Camp Bloodbath* on her phone, demonstrating the extent to which replay culture provides unparalleled access to media. On finishing the trailer, Amanda joins Max in the car, and the film proceeds to represent their dysfunctional mother-daughter relationship. As Amanda stresses over bills, jobs, and boyfriends, Max ironically mothers her, yet their dysfunctional relationship never reaches closure as Amanda gets distracted and causes a lethal collision.

On the anniversary of her mother's death, three years later, Max attends a special double bill of *Camp Bloodbath* and its sequel with her friends. At the screening, as Max watches her mother's performance as Nancy, it is no coincidence that *Camp Bloodbath* is shown in a movie theatre. Indeed, Max is situated as part of the cinematic apparatus, trauma and grief situating her in an inherently masochistic position. As Gaylyn Studlar observes, discussed at length in the Literature Review, masochism describes the child's painful longing to be at one with the pre-Oedipal mother, characterised by the "masochistic aesthetic" of the cinematic apparatus in which "pleasure does not involve mastery of the female but submission to her" (Studlar 1984: 272). As the movie theatre mysteriously sets ablaze, then, Max cuts a vaginal-like slit in the silver screen; projected onto it is an image of her mother in *Camp Bloodbath*. As Max enters into the vaginal-like slit, she finds herself fully immersed in the diegetic world of *Camp Bloodbath*, engulfed into

a sense of oneness with her mother. And as *Camp Bloodbath* repeats itself over and over, in the exact same way that female and gay male audiences reidentify with the female victim in a bid to reclaim her narrative trajectory, Max does not allow Nancy to meet her fate as victim.

In the final run of *Camp Bloodbath*, the one that Max aims to "get right" in order to break the cycle, Paula (Chloe Bridges) the Final Girl is unexpectedly killed. As Vicki (Nina Dobrev) reveals to the oblivious diegetic characters that "this is just a movie, and Paula was the only one that could kill Billy," Nancy proceeds to nominate herself as *Camp Bloodbath*'s new Final Girl.

> Nancy: I can do it. I can be the Final Girl. I'm a virgin too. I didn't sleep with Kurt so now, I guess, I'll be able to save myself for George Michael after all.
>
> Vicki: I wouldn't hold your breath, honey.
>
> Nancy: Why?
>
> Vicki: It doesn't matter. Nancy, you can't be the Final Girl. It's not in your DNA…, or whatever. You're the shy girl with the clipboard and the guitar and you get laid and then you die. You're just part of the body count. No offence.

Vicki reduces the female victim to a two-dimensional archetype and having taken offence, Nancy leaves the room. Max soon goes to find her and, in doing so, conjures up a plan.

> Max: Look, I know in the movie you're supposed to die, but that doesn't mean you have to, right?
>
> Nancy: Right?

Max: And if you don't die, then that means you'll be around at the end of the movie, when we leave.

Nancy: Right?

Max: So then, who's to say you can't just—You can't just come home with me?

At surface level, Max's plan involves giving her mother new life, bringing the character she plays in *Camp Bloodbath* into the real world. Beneath the script, however, Max's plan spells out the mere function of reidentification in the slasher film. Although, like Nancy, the female victim is supposed to die, reidentification means that she does not necessarily have to die. Indeed, the end of the film is not necessarily the end of an audiences' journey with her, and repeat viewing habitually gives the female victim new life in an attempt to overcome her scripted death. This involves recognition of the female victim as more than a two-dimensional archetype and, indeed, Max's subsequent dialogue with Nancy points to her potential as a fully realised New Woman.

Max: If you come home with me, you can be whoever you want. You don't have to be the shy girl with the clipboard and the guitar. And you could—

Nancy: I could, like, go to college.

Max: Right!

Nancy: And drive a convertible.

Max: Totally!

Nancy: And go shopping at the mall.

Max: Actually, people don't really shop at malls anymore, they shop online.

Nancy: What's online?

Max: Never mind, I made that up. Just, keep going…

Nancy: Well, I wanna show up online and I wanna start over, y'know?

Despite this, *The Final Girls* strongly implies that until Nancy reprises her role as victim, *Camp Bloodbath* will endlessly repeat itself in a cycle, inescapable for Max and her friends. "I know how to fix it," Nancy tells Max towards the film's climatic sequence. "I'm just the shy girl with the clipboard and the guitar." Nancy makes the ultimate sacrifice and pursues the trajectory of her narrative but, in her last words to Max, she offers reassurance. "You'll always know where to find me," identifying *Camp Bloodbath* as a comforting source of reidentification, "but you have to let me go." That is, although reidentification provides a sense of comfort as audiences "find" the victims they feel an emotional connection to, they have no power over how the victim is written in the slasher film. Because the victim's death is fixed, audiences are also required to let her character go, cyclically repeating the same masochistic identification as the film is watched repeatedly. Just as female and gay male audiences reidentify not with a real person but a character who feels real, by *The Final Girls*' climatic sequence, Max realises that the visual representation of her mother in *Camp Bloodbath* is just that. Indeed, Nancy is a character, not a real woman, and she cannot resolve the grief that Max feels over her mother's death.

While Nancy is supposedly characterised as a "dumb blonde" archetype, notwithstanding the fact that *The Final Girls* alludes to her potential as a New Woman, Emilio Audissino argues that her sacrifice—fulfilling the narrative trajectory of *Camp Bloodbath*—is grounded in feminism:

> Nancy is freed from the externally determined role of the terrorised helpless victim under the male control—the damsel in distress—and given the active role of the self-determined woman. She is killed, but she is because *she* has so decided, and she offers herself without giving the sadist the satisfaction of hearing a single terrorised

> scream, unlike the previous scripted image of her seen in the original *Camp Bloodbath*. (Audissino 2019: 233, emphasis in original)

What Audissino describes, on the contrary, is clearly implicated in a postfeminist politics and ideology. To what extent is it a feminist development for a character to take up the active role of the self-determined woman and accept her death because *she* decided so, not even permitting herself to scream in agonising pain at the hands of a violent misogynist? Instead of arguing that the scene is inherently structured around feminism, then, it needs to be recognised as a dignified (appropriate) moment in which law and order is restored. Nancy takes up her role as female victim to end the vicious cycle that Max and her friends find themselves in. Even after Nancy's death, however, the syndrome of repetition compulsion remains, Max and her friends finding themselves stuck in the cyclic loop of *Camp Bloodbath 2: Cruel Summer*.

While critics and theorists emphasise the mother-daughter relationship between Max and Amanda/Nancy to explain how *The Final Girls* deals with trauma, little has been made of Duncan (Thomas Middleditch) who arguably curates the events of the film. Indeed, Duncan is the slasher film fanatic who has seen *Camp Bloodbath* and its sequel more than once; he is the one to organise the double bill feature and invite Max as a guest. Although played for comedic effect, once immersed in the diegetic world of *Camp Bloodbath*, Duncan recalls a recurring dream about his father: "If this is a dream, then there's a very strong chance that my dad's gonna come up to us naked and offer us some pecan pie. But don't take any. It is not pecan pie." This throwaway joke, or so it seems, is relevant to the blooper reel of *The Final Girls*, where the actors and the characters that they play are not clear cut, and when Thomas Middleditch is credited, he is shown in character saying: "Ever since I was a little boy, I've dreamed of being the Final Girl." It is also relevant to the film's open ending, when the friendship group realise that they are now in

the cyclic loop of *Camp Bloodbath 2*, and Duncan excitedly states, "Oh my God, of course… The sequel! This is great. The sequel is so much cooler than the original!" Whereas Max's trauma is grounded in the loss of her mother, turning to the masochistic aesthetic of the cinematic apparatus, it is apparent that *The Final Girls*' compulsion to repeat is otherwise grounded in Duncan's masochism. Indeed, Duncan dreams of his father naked, offering pie that contains excrement—an explicitly homoerotic scenario—and if Duncan wanted to be the Final Girl since he was a little boy, Clover would certainly situate him in relation to feminine masochism; a "receptively homosexual" position. Although it might be tenuous to suggest that Duncan is a queer coded character, then, his masochism nevertheless points to the Law of the Father as the site of trauma. And, indeed, heteropatriarchal order is the one thing that women and gay men have no control over; a trauma that aligns women and gay men in their compulsion to repeatedly watch the same slasher film over and over, hoping to "get it right" and save the female victim from the heteropatriarchal script.

"I was dying… again": Reidentification in *Happy Death Day* and *Happy Death Day 2U*

Written by Scott Lobdell and directed by openly gay director Christopher Landon, *Happy Death Day* follows Theresa "Tree" Gelbman (Jessica Rothe) as she relives her birthday over and over again, murdered each night by the Babyface Killer. Where the style and form of *The Final Girls* literalises the theory of repetition compulsion and repeat viewing that has been developed in this chapter, *Happy Death Day* works to narrativise reidentification by different means. Following Chapter 1 where it was theorised that the female victim and the Final Girl constitute an identificatory female collective, *Happy Death Day* characterises the female victim and the Final Girl in one ontological body. Tree starts

off as a victim, repeatedly murdered every night, but as she develops and grows as a person—her name is, by no coincidence, Tree—she definitively becomes the Final Girl. While this might sound no different to Clover's original conceptualisation of the Final Girl as a "victim-hero," *Happy Death Day* is different insofar as no other victims are characterised in the narrative. Tree, in other words, wholly characterises the female collective in one body.

As Tree undergoes an investigation into who the Babyface Killer is, she is eventually hospitalised for the injuries that she has sustained. Although she is a Final Girl, Tree's ontological status as victim is made apparent when her X-rays come back, verbalised by her doctor:

> We just got these back from imaging. These are signs of major trauma. Given the severity of the scar tissue and the size of the lesions… This is gonna sound crazy but, technically, you should be dead.

When Tree later watches a news report on serial killer John Tombs (Rob Mello) who has already targeted six young women, then, she naturally concludes that he is the one stalking her, discovering that Tombs has been caught and stationed at the same hospital under inept police supervision. Realising that she is the victim of heteropatriarchal violence, Tree makes several attempts to master and control the scenario, working each night to stop Tombs from murdering her again. Preceding the night that Tree successfully puts a stop to Tombs' reign of terror, she makes amends with her estranged father (Jason Bayle) who she has been distant with since the passing of her mother, and she confesses attraction to love interest Carter (Israel Broussard). Yet, even after subduing Tombs, Tree still wakes

up the next day in the same temporal loop. Indeed, demonstrating the limits of individualism, Tree's desperate attempt to achieve mastery and control is ineffectual.

Where Tombs' characterisation indicates at least an attempt to draw attention to heteropatriarchal violence, the postfeminist politics and ideology of *Happy Death Day* are brought to the forefront when the killer is finally revealed in the film's climatic sequence. Lori (Ruby Modine), Tree's roommate, is revealed as the culprit, envious of Tree's opening affair with college professor Gregory (Charles Aitken). As Tree proceeds to fight with Lori and eventually kill her, the temporal loop is broken, yet the heteropatriarchal trauma that structures repetition compulsion is ultimately depoliticised. Although *Happy Death Day* has the potential to politicise heteropatriarchal violence, on the contrary, the climatic sequence of *Happy Death Day* chooses to pit young women against each other as they fight over men; a staple of postfeminist media culture that promotes a fierce individualism to dismantle sisterhood.

Although *Happy Death Day* succumbs to a reactionary politics and ideology, it is perhaps telling that Christopher Landon proceeded to write and direct *Happy Death Day 2U*, making significant adjustments to the postfeminism of *Happy Death Day*'s conclusion. Even though *Happy Death Day 2U* goes out of its way to explain the temporal loop—the film itself was poorly received, criticised as being more of a teen sci-fi movie than a slasher—exposition does not stop the temporal loop from feeling inherently personal to Tree, as she finds herself back in the same cycle as *Happy Death Day*. This cycle, however, has some major changes. Most notably, in the quantum shift, Tree's mother (Missy Yager) is still alive. Moreover, Lori is the one having an affair with Gregory.

In *Happy Death Day 2U*, from the outset, it is made clear that Lori is not the killer. And, with Tombs' return to the narrative, heteropatriarchal violence is again brought to the forefront of the film. Where Lori was the killer in *Happy Death Day* which delegitimises

any serious consideration of heteropatriarchal violence, then, the killer reveal in *Happy Death 2U* works to relegitimise a serious consideration of heteropatriarchal violence. Indeed, Gregory is revealed to be the Babyface Killer, motivated to kill Lori so that she remains quiet about their affair. Here, Gregory's identity highlights how heteropatriarchal violence works through different institutions, discourses, and beliefs; Gregory and Tombs represent very different masculinities that are, nevertheless, violent and oppressive. While Gregory's wife Stephanie (Laura Clifton) works with him in an attempt to kill Lori, instead of simply representing women pitted against each other as in *Happy Death Day*, Gregory shoots Stephanie, condemning her actions while simultaneously depicting how she is also victim to heteropatriarchal violence. Where *Happy Death Day* appears to hide over the prevalence of heteropatriarchal violence, then, *Happy Death Day 2U* is actively invested in uncovering its intricate workings.

Important to consider, too, is the mother-daughter relationship between Tree and Julie. Tree provisionally decides that she wants to stay in the same universe as her mother, as if *Happy Death Day 2U* takes direct inspiration from *The Final Girls*, until the film's climax. When saying goodbye to her mother, Tree reveals to Julie that she thought she could "have it all"—she thought, by repeating the temporal loop, that she could "get it right" and be find happiness—but, as Tree realises, her mother in this universe is not her real mother. Although, like *The Final Girls*, the mother-daughter bond is not reason for the temporal loop, its affective politics is nevertheless used as metaphor to narrativise the limits of reidentification in the slasher film. Just as female and gay male audiences feel like they can "have it all" by rewatching the slasher film, reidentifying with the female victim, her fate is written and said audiences will never achieve true happiness with her narrative. In much the same way that Julie cannot resolve the grief that Tree feels over her mother's

death, reidentification cannot resolve the trauma felt by audiences over the death of their screen surrogate.

Conclusion

Women on both sides of the camera sought to develop thoughtful depictions of female friendship in the first teen slasher film cycle. In doing so, the teen slasher film develops a "feminine" mode of address, characterising the female victim and the Final Girl as a collective identificatory body that speaks to the cultural experiences of both women and gay men. Although the female victim dies and the Final Girl lives, creating a double standard in critical discourse where the archetypes are respectively (de-)valued, audiences and Hollywood creatives have long since created ways of reclaiming the female collective where the value of different archetypes is made equitable. Kevin Williamson, for example, popularised the use of postfeminist camp in the third teen slasher film cycle. *Scream*, most notably, turned "the rules" of the teen slasher film into a discursive act, allowing both the Final Girl and the female victim to subvert these rules and survive the narrative. While creatives such as Williamson explicitly change the way that the female victim is characterised, then, audiences have similarly developed authorial strategies in repeat viewing that try to change the female victim's narrative trajectory.

As this chapter has sought to demonstrate, repeat viewing allows female and gay male audiences to develop an authorial viewing strategy called reidentification. Since replay culture gives audiences a greater sense of agency and control in the film viewing experience, repeat viewing of any given slasher film invites audiences to reidentify with the female victim, reclaiming her status as "victim" and giving her meaning beyond the heteropatriarchal violence that she is defined by. Where creatives such as Williamson have

the power to actually script the female victim's survival, however, reidentification can only temporarily breathe new life into the female victim. Although repeat viewing might provide the perception of agency and control, situating audiences above the film's narrative, reidentification cannot overwrite the female victim's scripted fate. Audiences, in turn, enter into the compulsion to repeat; the cyclic loop of repeat viewing is grounded in a masochistic identification that is always only temporary, ending in death, and although audiences want to "get it right" and save the female victim from the heteropatriarchal script that defines her, it is impossible.

Reidentification, in this light, might seem antithetical to the ways that creatives such as Williamson have rescripted representations of the female victim in the slasher film. However, in more recent years, gay creatives have explicitly scripted processes of reidentification in film narrative itself. *The Final Girls* depicts a female spectator attempt to save the female victim, for example, while the *Happy Death Day* franchise is structured around a temporal loop that cyclically brings the female victim back to life. These films might seem cynical in their realisation of reidentification, demonstrating the limits of this identificatory process. Indeed, in order for these films to end, the female victim must either die (*The Final Girls*) or live to become the Final Girl (*Happy Death Day*). However, *Scream VI* (2023) indicates a new direction in the realisation of reidentification, rejecting the death of the female victim altogether. Where Kirby Reed is killed in *Scre4m*, she is brought back as a main protagonist in *Scream VI*, evidencing that death is not necessarily the end for the female victim. By the logic of *Scream VI*, then, the female victim is only ever presumed dead, and reidentification offers a sense of hope in the face of heteropatriarchal oppression.

Chapter Four

Beyond the Devil Daddy

Gender and Sexuality in the Gay Slasher Film after *Hellbent* (2004)

Hollywood slasher films, whether conscious or otherwise, have long given rise to gay discourses. Whether through uses of camp or the appropriation of a (post-)feminist politics and ideology, the subgenre adopts a feminine mode of address, targeting both women and gay men as the object of its address. Exemplified in Chapter 2's discussion of the third teen slasher film cycle, Kevin Williamson's use of postfeminist camp in *Scream* and *I Know What You Did Last Summer* created new generic possibilities for other gay screenwriters, directors, and producers working in Hollywood at the turn of the millennium. Yet, because the gay discourses at work in these films take up the aesthetics of heteronormativity and consciously erase LGBTQ+ representation, Hollywood's compulsory heterosexuality at face value means that these films are ignored as "gay" films. A dissonance exists, then, between the "mainstream" slasher film and the "gay" slasher film. If the "mainstream" slasher film can be inherently gay, however—as Chapter 2 sought to demonstrate—the aim of this chapter is to demonstrate how the "gay" slasher film can be inherently straight.

Written and directed by Paul Etheredge, *Hellbent* (2004) is a micro-budget feature that was marketed as "the first all gay slasher film," centring a cast of gay male characters in West Hollywood. While John Mercer (2015) accurately refers to the film as "gay *giallo*," which is not dissimilar to slasher, other critics and theorists have appropriated the generic identity of the film for their own purposes, considering the film not as slasher per se but queer horror (King 2010; Elliott-Smith 2016). As Darren Elliott-Smith puts it, *Hellbent* provides "a queer appropriation of the slasher horror formula," proceeding to frame the

film through queer horror aesthetics (Elliott-Smith 2016: 136). By considering *Hellbent* as a queer horror film that claims to be the first of something, however, critics and theorists often downplay the significance of *Make a Wish* (2002) which was released two years prior, written by Lauren Johnson and directed by Sharon Ferranti. *Make a Wish* is typically considered the first lesbian slasher film, centring a cast of lesbian characters. By considering *Hellbent* a "gay" slasher film and *Make a Wish* a "lesbian" slasher film, then, the importance of both can be recognised in slasher's generic history, registered outside the "queer horror" canon which otherwise pits the two films (and, thus, gays and lesbians) against each other (see, illustratively, King 2010: 265n1).

Where *Hellbent* is often celebrated as the "first" gay slasher film, released the same year as Don Mancini's *Seed of Chucky* (2004), it is critical to note hereon the absence and decline of openly gay screenwriters, directors, and producers in mainstream production; those who majorly popularised the Hollywood slasher film at the turn of the millennium. Although, first and foremost, this shift needs to be situated in the sociopolitical climate of post-9/11 America and the nation's turn to a more fierce neoconservatism under the Bush administration (Lizardi 2010; Wetmore 2012; Hayt 2016), the politics of this shift in terms of genre and industry are equally as important and profound. Just as the inherent "straightness" of Hollywood's third teen slasher film cycle is taken at face value, the mainstreaming of *Hellbent* as a "gay" slasher film is taken at face value. This indicates that a certain sense of "equality" has been achieved at a representational level—straight audiences have "straight" slasher films and, given their fun-size cake, gay audiences have "gay" slasher films—yet, in doing so, it fundamentally denies the gay consumers and producers of "straight" slasher films. Moreover, it relegates gay audiences, gay screenwriters, gay directors, and gay producers to the margins of queer cinema, profiling such peoples and situating them in sole relation to queer horror. Within the Hollywood

mainstream, then, after *Hellbent*, the aesthetics of compulsory heterosexuality in the slasher film become reified *as* the politics and ideology of compulsory heterosexuality. Where previously, the slasher film showed compulsory heterosexuality to comment on it through an inherently gay lens, now the slasher film shows compulsory heterosexuality to reinforce it through an inherently straight lens.

Just as critics and theorists often recognise *Hellbent* not as a slasher per se but queer horror, Claire Sisco King's conclusions about the film are particularly interesting, claiming that "this film has helped usher in a host of *imitations* also bearing the label of 'queer horror'" (King 2010: 263, emphasis added). While Elliott-Smith (2016) goes to great lengths to contextualise King's statement, for the purposes of this chapter, it is important to note that *Hellbent* had little to no impact on the production and distribution of gay slasher. Situated in the generic terms of slasher, *Hellbent* did not usher in a host of imitations; Mark Jones's *Fraternity Massacre at Hell Island* (2007) was the only gay slasher film released in the immediate wake of *Hellbent* and, still, it was premiered three years after. This is not to deny a cycle of more recent gay slasher films that has emerged in recent years, however, including a diverse range of texts: *Pitchfork* (2016), *Killer Unicorn* (2018), *Knife+Heart* (2018), *Into the Dark: Midnight Kiss* (Hulu, 2019), *Cuties* (2020), *Death Drop Gorgeous* (2020), and *They/Them* (2022), extending to television in *American Horror Story: NYC* (FX, 2022).

Where *Hellbent* and *Fraternity Massacre at Hell Island* are relatively clear-cut in their generic identity as "gay" slasher films, this current cycle of "gay" slasher films presents a number of implications that need to be highlighted. Firstly, it is important to note that *Pitchfork* belongs to the tradition of *Hellbent* and *Fraternity at Hell Island*, and it is incidental on temporal grounds that it can be classified as part of the current cycle. Secondly, where *Hellbent*, *Fraternity Massacre at Hell Island*, and *Pitchfork* are appropriately referred to as

"gay" slasher films, certain examples in this current cycle are "queer" in who they represent. *Knife + Heart* follows a lesbian photographer of gay porn, for example, while *They/Them* contains representation across the LGBTQ+ acronym, set in a conversion camp. Thirdly, that many films in this current cycle are slasher films at all is a matter of marketing and discourse: *Killer Unicorn* presents itself as a slasher film with intertextual references but also borrows from the aesthetics of *giallo* and the narrative of rape-revenge, *Knife + Heart* is an unmistakably European film that hybridises *giallo* and slasher traditions, and *Death Drop Gorgeous* mostly relies on the tradition of *giallo* throughout, reaching climax as a vampire film which repurposes the trash aesthetics of John Waters.

Thus far, this thesis has sought to interrogate how gay male audiences identify with "straight" narratives, largely deflecting how gay male audiences identify with "gay" narratives because critical discourse already gives so much attention to this approach. This chapter, however, necessarily brings into question processes of characterisation and identification in the slasher film when "straight" narratives are not available, interrogating the political and ideological implications of the gay slasher film. In doing so, this chapter identifies and interrogates three distinct stages in the development and evolution of the gay slasher film. Since, to date, the gay slasher film has been theorised in sole relation to *Hellbent*, this chapter begins by considering how the film downplays representations of gay and bisexual masculinities, downplaying representations of sex and death in mind of straight audiences. Subsequently, this chapter addresses the heteronormative configuration of the "gay slasher" to then examine how more recent "gay slasher" texts radically subvert the formula, beginning with the start of the current cycle. Here, written by José D. Álvarez and directed by Drew Bolton, this chapter draws on *Killer Unicorn* to demonstrate how the film intricately associates gay sex with death in ways that are not assimilable, set in a queer subcultural community that is abound in BDSM. In turn, it is

argued that *Killer Unicorn* adopts a politically radical gaze which relies on a very specific homoerotic affective response, inviting a subculture of gay audiences to call the "gay slasher" their own. *Killer Unicorn*'s radical reinterpretation of the "gay slasher" was short-lived, however, reprimanded by the two best known "gay slasher" texts to emerge from the current cycle. Respectively premiered on US streaming platforms Hulu and Peacock, *Midnight Kiss* and *They/Them* have both attained mainstream status in the current cycle, yet it is precisely in their mainstream status that their politics and ideology seem to regress. As this chapter concludes, then, it is demonstrated how the most recent examples of "gay slasher" revert to the assimilative politics of *Hellbent*, albeit by different means. Again, propagating the notion that "gay slasher" is unprofitable—its target audience too niche—*Midnight Kiss* and *They/Them* are made for straight viewing.

"Holy shit, were they boning each other?!": *Hellbent*, Sex, and the Straight Man

Although Elliott-Smith describes *Hellbent* as a queer appropriation of the slasher subgenre, he nevertheless frames this through the aesthetics of queer horror, stating that "it can be considered a part of the Gaysploitation subgenre" (Elliott-Smith 2016: 136). According to Elliott-Smith, Gayspolitation emerged at the turn of the millennium and "focuses upon the celebration, erotic display, torture and evisceration of the male body spectacular" (ibid.: 89). These films are most often directed by gay men who tease a certain homoeroticism, or overtly depict the sexual endeavours of gay and bisexual men, marketed towards gay male audiences who are otherwise considered a niche demographic. What is particularly fascinating about *Hellbent* as a Gaysploitation film, then, are the ideological implications at play in the film's affective politics. Indeed, as Elliott-Smith writes, although these films often lean towards softcore pornography, they remain

"curiously chaste" in their representation of "nudity, violence and, above all, horror" (ibid.: 19).

Given that *Hellbent* is widely considered "the first all gay slasher film," nearly two decades later, the film remains a cult favourite and is often celebrated in queer horror fan communities. Set during the West Hollywood Halloween Carnival, addressing a niche demographic of gay audiences who might be familiar with the real-life annual event, *Hellbent* depicts a psychokiller known as Devil Daddy (Luke Weaver) as he stalks a small group of gay and bisexual friends: Eddie (Dylan Fergus), Chaz (Andrew Levitas), Joey (Hank Harris), and Tobey (Matt Phillips). As Devil Daddy stalks the boys, he gradually preys on them one by one, beheading them with a scythe. With this basic synopsis, while theorists such as King and Elliott-Smith have each provided a thorough interrogation of the film's narrative, *Hellbent*'s synopsis can be interpreted accordingly in colloquial terms: Devil Daddy is horny in his costume, going out and getting head. Here, it is no coincidence that when Eddie, Chaz, Joey, and Tobey have their first encounter with Devil Daddy, they mistake him for cruising and proceed to shame him.

Arguably, in its marketing as "the first all gay slasher film," *Hellbent* largely emerges to exploit gay male audiences and the pink dollar. This is particularly evidenced in relation to the film's publicity materials; those which broadly describe *Hellbent* as "mainstream horror" to expand general interest in the film, assuming that the film's gay interest is a given. Here, Elliott-Smith summarises Greg Riefstek's article on *Hellbent* for *Fangoria*, observing that writer/director Etheredge and co-producer Steven Wolfe "wanted to create a film that offered gay audiences an alternative to the low budget 'gay films' that thematise homosexuality as a political issue" (ibid.: 137). What is implicit, here, is that *Hellbent* is neither camp nor political in its representation of gay masculinities. This assimilates the

gay slasher film into the safety of "mainstream" (read heteronormative) horror. *Hellbent*, in short, is rendered safe for straight viewing.

Despite *Hellbent*'s heteronormative configuration in marketing and publicity, the film's distribution fundamentally brings into question the need for this strategy at all. Claire Sisco King notes that *Hellbent* received only a limited theatrical release in the United States, playing a total of 39 small or independent theatres and grossing less than $200,000. In addition, the film mostly travelled on the LGBTQ+ festival circuit, programmed at approximately thirty festivals between June 2004 and April 2006, including but not limited to the Los Angeles Outfest, the Austin Gay and Lesbian International Film Festival, the Honolulu "Rainbow" Film Festival, and the Seattle Lesbian and Gay Film Festival (King 2010: 249). Subsequently, on the film's original release, *Hellbent* was largely received by LGBTQ+ audiences, and continues to be received by LGBTQ+ audiences due to its cult following. Despite denial in marketing and publicity, *Hellbent*'s distribution indicates that the film was definitively made with gay audiences in mind, bringing into question precisely who *Hellbent* was described as "mainstream" for and why. If *Hellbent* largely capitalises on the then recent emergence of Gaysploitation—that which downplays representations of nudity, violence and horror—to whose anxiety does *Hellbent* address?

Discussed at length in Chapter 2, auteurism has long permeated critical discourse on horror and the slasher film, speculating near exclusively on the artistic imprint of the director. Logically, this approach has also permeated critical discourse on queer horror, first developed by Harry M. Benshoff. Otherwise constituting his second approach to queer horror, in which his thesis develops a category of four, Benshoff writes:

> The second type of homo-horror film is one written, produced, and/or directed by a gay man or lesbian, even if it does not contain visibly homosexual characters. Reading these films as gay or lesbian is predicated upon (what some might call a

> debased) concept of the cinematic auteur, which would argue that gay or lesbian creators of film products infuse some sort of "gay sensibility" into their films consciously or otherwise. (Benshoff 1997: 14)

As Elliott-Smith observes an emergent brand of queer horror at the turn of the millennium, he proceeds to update Benshoff's above definition, designating queer horror as "horror that is crafted by male directors/producers who self-identify as gay, bi, queer or transgendered [*sic*] and whose work features homoerotic, or explicitly homosexual, narratives with 'out' gay characters" (Elliott-Smith 2016: 2). Elliott-Smith recognises Gaysploitation as a subgenre within this brand of queer horror and, to a certain extent, situates *Hellbent* as such. Here, again, auteurism permeates the generic definitions of Benshoff and Elliott-Smith, both of whom situate gay creativity in individualist terms. However, by recognising gay creativity as an individual process, theorists such as Benshoff and Elliott-Smith do not consider the compromised nature of film production. That is, they do not sufficiently consider the necessary creative negotiation that inevitably takes place between directors, producers, and writers as a collective body. As Peter Bloore writers, contributing to an emergent critical discourse in screenwriting studies, "creativity is part of a wider system and not solely dependent on the individual's creative ability" (Bloore 2012: 133).

Bloore visualises directors, producers, and writers in a "creative triangle" where, in an idealised image, "communication is clear and power is equally shared." Such a creative triangle is said to visualise "the surest way to build a film with a coherent vision" and encourages "a strong and trusting relationship between the writer, producer and director" (ibid.: 69). This conceptualisation of working relationships is utopian and unrealistic, however, not to mention that it does not take issues of power and influence into account. Bloore himself notes that, in this creative triangle, writers, directors, and producers are

actively "working in complementary but potentially conflicting roles" (ibid.: 84). "Power and influence shifts regularly," he most crucially writes, most notably when producers work with financiers during script development (ibid.: 92). Indeed, the film industry is a business built on the foundations of capitalism, first and foremost, and when the creative process is not romanticised, it is subject to systemic negotiation. Given that the cinematic apparatus was once otherwise referred to as an ideological state apparatus, even under the current conditions of neoliberalism, marginalised voices are still often the first to be dismissed.

To visualise the creative triangle of *Hellbent*, in colloquial terms, it becomes clear that writer/director Paul Etheredge was topped by a group of a mostly straight producers throughout much of the creative process. Here, it seems that Etheredge's status as a gay writer/director was used as a vehicle through which the producers could legitimise their making of a gay slasher film, strictly in neoliberal terms. That is, Etheredge's sexuality was weaponised to validate *Hellbent*, otherwise justifying the ideological shortcomings of the film; those which are largely homophobic. Lest we miss the point, Etheredge is written out of the creative discourse that *Hellbent*'s marketing creates, alluding to the sole contribution of executive producer Joseph Wolf: "FROM THE CO-CREATOR OF *HALLOWEEN* AND THE EXECUTIVE PRODCER OF *A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET*." Although Wolf was co-creator of *Halloween*, perhaps more importantly to his contribution to *Hellbent*, he was also the executive production of *Halloween II* and *Halloween III: Season of the Witch*. This is where Wolf's role in *Hellbent*'s creative triangle becomes particularly problematic, namely, in mind of Gaysploitation's heteronormative approach to nudity, violence, and horror.

While Clover's comments on the gendered inequity of death in the slasher film has been much contested, in order to fully interrogate the affective politics of *Hellbent*, it is worth reciting again in full:

> But even in films in which males and females are killed in even numbers, the lingering images are of the latter. The death of a male is nearly always swift; even if the victim grasps what is happening to him, he has no time to react or register terror. He is dispatched and the camera moves on. The death of a male is moreover more likely than the death of a female to be viewed from a distance, or viewed only dimly (because of darkness or fog, for example), or indeed to happen offscreen and not be viewed at all. The murders of women, on the other hand, are filmed at closer range, in more graphic detail, and at greater length. (Clover 1992: 35)

Given that the killer holds a phallic weapon, again, the male victim is typically killed off quickly to avoid an overtly homoerotic scenario. In such scenes, the male spectator is not permitted to see explicit depictions of male-to-male penetration; scenes in which sex is displaced onto violence. This further maintains the myth that the male figure cannot be sexually objectified—turned into spectacle—unlike his female counterpart. As the female victim is shot through a misogynistic lens, then, the male spectator can safely experience male-to-male penetration because it is represented through the guise of male-to-female penetration. Here, the female victim serves as a conduit through which the male spectator can experience his forbidden (homosexual) desires and disavow them, using the female victim's characterisation at face value to distance himself from homoerotic implications.

Situating Clover's comments in relation to *Hellbent*'s affective politics, it is essential to note the film she draws on to articulate her point. "*Halloween II* illustrates the standard iconography," Clover writes, on which *Hellbent*'s Joseph Wolf worked as executive producer (ibid.: 35). This is a theme that runs consistently throughout Wolf's later productions, too, most notably *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. Here, women's bodies are frequently violated and made penetrable from below the neck, whereas men's bodies are

treated with a sense of masculine camaraderie, shot from above the neck when penetrated. Strangulation, instead, is a much more common method to rid male victims in Wolf's filmography.

Elliott-Smith's approach to *Hellbent* considers gay audiences in psychoanalytic terms, arguing that the film examines the relationship between "penetration anxieties and desired models of masculinity within gay male culture" (Elliott-Smith 2016: 136). Although his reading of the film is convincing, by evoking what Clover has written about masochism and young male audiences, a psychoanalytic approach to *Hellbent* actually tells us much more about the relationship between penetration anxieties and heterosexual masculinity, given the film's production context. While slasher is infamous for equating sex with death, penetrative death appears to be absent in *Hellbent*. Indeed, while slasher films are usually experimental in their set-piece deaths, *Hellbent* exclusively represents decapitation as its mode of killing. *Hellbent* does not even reward audiences with the raw spectacle—that is, the money shot—of decapitation. Moreover, in the same way that audiences are not offered the spectacle of penetrative death, audiences are not offered the spectacle of penetrative sex either, despite *Hellbent* leaning towards the aesthetics of softcore pornography.

Hellbent opens with a young gay couple, making out in the middle of nowhere, tucked away in a car. While the couple tenderly kiss and undress each other, *Hellbent* captures the essence of softcore pornography with intimate chat about lasting a long time, yet the softcore aesthetics soon enter conflict with the film's curiously chaste representation of nudity, sex, and violence. As Mikey (Samuel A. Levine) leans his head out of the window, audiences hear the sound of his zip being undone, and as Jorge (Miguel Angel Caballero) proceeds to give him oral, the act is solely implied through Mikey's pleasured look. Suddenly, as the Devil Daddy appears in front of Mikey, Mikey blurts "Oh

shit!" in orgasmic ecstasy. It is no coincidence, colloquially, that the Devil Daddy proceeds to behead Mikey in the middle of receiving head, and the exact moment of Mikey's decapitation ties with him reaching orgasm. Instead of showing the Devil Daddy's scythe cut through Mikey's neck, however, *Hellbent* opts to show Mikey's foot kick the car window in. "Holy shit, you really are ticklish," Jorge responds, and as he proceeds to register Mikey's decapitated body, his death is only implied as the Devil Daddy slashes his way into the car.

The opening of *Hellbent* might appear inherently gay and, due to the film's micro-budget, it might be a matter of logistics that Mikey's decapitation is not given a set-piece. Consider the opening's depiction of gay sex, however, in comparison to the film's subsequent depiction of straight sex. As Eddie walks by roommate Chaz's parked car, rocking side to side, he looks inside. Whereas Mikey's receiving head was wholly implied, here, the camera adopts Eddie's point of view, cutting between the fragmented parts of Chaz and "Girl in Car" (Rachel Sterling). Although it is unclear what they are doing, exactly, it is nevertheless shown *what* they are doing. As Eddie's arrival disrupts the act, "Girl in Car" mistakes him for a cop, telling Eddie "I'm eighteen, I swear, I can prove it." As Chaz introduces "Girl in Car" to Eddie, the provisional comedy of the scene is innately heterosexist, offering some sort of joke about underage sex that goes nowhere. Yet, the scene's real gag comes when Chaz evacuates his car. "Alright, party's over, everyone out of my car," he announces. Chaz proceeds to lift "Girl in Car" and, as the camera focuses on the door, "Boy in Car" (Eric Stiles) emerges. It is revealed, all along, that this depiction of straight sex was actually the depiction of a bisexual threesome. Where it is important not to delegitimise overt representations of bisexuality—and, indeed, Chaz's introduction in the film confirms that *Hellbent* is not "the first *all* gay slasher film"—it is apparent that

the reveal seeks to cover over the fact that *Hellbent* sought to represent straight sex, pretending that the act is "queer" after allowing straight audiences to enjoy the spectacle.

As sex is displaced onto violence through the rest of *Hellbent*, the film's two opening representations of sex—only a matter of minutes apart—set the scene for the rest of the film. Indeed, if it is gay, the act cannot be seen, leading to three subsequent death scenes that deny the spectacle of male-on-male violence. Joey has a bag placed over his head and, as the Devil Daddy decapitates him with a scythe, Devil Daddy's silhouette is seen on the blood-spattered bathroom wall. Chaz dances by himself in the middle of a nightclub and, as strobe lighting distorts the goings on, he is slashed by the Devil Daddy and is soon decapitated. Tobey forces himself on the Devil Daddy who denies him wearing drag but, as he de-drags in an alleyway in a desperate bid for a hookup, silhouette captures the Devil Daddy decapitate him.

That gay sex and death are visually denied in *Hellbent* is not without frustration in the film's creative triangle. Etheredge admits "to sacrificing the display of skin and sex to appease the film's straight producers" and, in one particular interview, explicitly states that "the lack of sex was a concession made for non-gay audiences" (King 2010: 264-6). As Etheredge explains in his own words:

> I had two sets of producers, one with a horror background, one with a gay film background. The gay film guys were saying "More skin" and the horror was saying "OH MY GOD, they're kissing." I struck with the medium … the skin is not exploited. (Etheredge quoted in King 2010: 266n11)

While Etheredge's words express contempt for *Hellbent*'s approach to sex and nudity, it might be further argued that his words—specifically, "the skin is not exploited"—express a certain frustration with a lack of penetrative death. Etheredge, in other words, denounces the erasure of a masochistic aesthetic that is more expressively homoerotic. To summarise,

then, *Hellbent*'s heterocentric production team closely policed the film. In doing so, *Hellbent* is grounded in a politics and ideology of heteronormative ideals, otherwise exploiting Etheredge as a gay writer/director and gay audiences as consumers. Although marketed towards gay audiences, as male bodies are decapitated in the film but never penetrated, *Hellbent* is specifically designed not to elicit an affective, homoerotic response. In its otherwise chaste representations of sex and death, while Gaysploitation is said to bespeak the subcultural anxieties of gay audiences, *Hellbent* better bespeaks the anxieties of its straight production team. That is, *Hellbent* is grounded in a politics and ideology of "gay panic," specifically surrounding heteropatriarchal notions of gender and sexuality, masculinity and penetration.

"Why are you on Grindr when there's a severed head in your closet?!": Sexual Discourse and the Affective Politics of *Killer Unicorn* (2018)

Hellbent had little to no impact on the production and distribution of gay slasher films, failing to create an immediate cycle in its wake. When the film was released in 2007, *Fraternity Massacre at Hell Island* capitalised on *Hellbent* to a certain extent, and it was nearly a decade after that another gay slasher film would be released in the form of *Pitchfork* in 2016. While critical discourse on the gay slasher near exclusively centralises *Hellbent*, applicable to *Fraternity Massacre at Hell Island* and *Pitchfork* in their similar (assimilative) politics and ideology, such discourse does not consider many of the films that have been released following the emergent cycle of gay slasher that began in 2018. Focusing specifically on *Killer Unicorn* as one of the films that popularised the current gay slasher cycle, here, it is examined how the film addresses the heteronormative configuration of the gay slasher film to then radically subvert the formula. Indeed, *Killer Unicorn* intricately associates gay sex with death in ways that are not assimilable in heteronormative terms,

turning away from the restrictive limits of "mainstream" slasher, disrupting structures of power and influence in creative processes. *Killer Unicorn* achieves this, primarily, by being set in a subcultural BDSM community that advocates fetish and kink aplenty. Starring, written, and produced by José Daniel Álvarez—who forms an inherently queer creative triangle with director Drew Bolton—it is subsequently argued that *Killer Unicorn* adopts a politically radical look which relies on a very specific homoerotic response, inviting a subculture of gay audiences to call the "gay slasher" their own, achieving what *Hellbent* failed to deliver.

Killer Unicorn follows a group of queer friends in New York as they prepare for the upcoming Brooklyn Annual Enema Party where, to quote the film, "you come to get douched and dance." Although the film might seem like a standard Gaysploitation horror, it provides strikingly effective commentary on the intersections of gayness and toxic masculinity, sexual violence in the LGBTQ+ community, and online hookup culture. While its commentary here is important to investigate in its own right, for the purposes of this chapter, *Killer Unicorn* is to be taken at face value as a relatively silly and "unserious" film, allowing the affective politics of the film to be defined outside its overarching narrative. This, crucially, is a radical act in itself, allowing a sense of "fun" to be situated in its affective politics; that which is often policed in "serious" considerations of affect.

Killer Unicorn opens with drag queen Jess Jizz hooking up with the Unicorn: an anonymous psychokiller with a phallic unicorn mask, hypermasculine "ripped" body, and purple sequin underwear. As Jess performs oral on the bathroom floor of a club, the Unicorn starts aggressively throat fucking her, and the film's sound design starts to emphasise the sound of Jess's throat. As the Unicorn uses Jess's mouth with increasing aggression, he soon pulls a knife from behind him, lifting the knife in the air and stabbing Jess in the neck. Here, the sound of Jess's flesh being stabbed blends with the sound of

Jess's throat being violently fucked, eliciting an affective response that resonates with the act of gagging. Lest we miss the point, Jess's mouth and chin are left covered in blood, otherwise synonymous with a bloody ejaculate, and the subsequent murder of drag queen Lady Havok speaks to the affective politics at play. As Lady Havok finds the Unicorn and asks if he is the club's new go-go boy, he touches her tuck, and she feels his crotch. "Oh wow, that's a big bulge, should be glad I have no gag reflex!" The Unicorn instantly becomes aggravated and grabs Lady Havok by the throat, lifting her in the air, before putting her down again and chasing her. As the Unicorn catches up, he snatches Lady Havok's wig and gags her with it, resulting in her suffocation.

Following the murder of Jess Jizz and Lady Havok, *Killer Unicorn* develops a romantic storyline between rape survivor Danny (Alejandro La Rosa) and newcomer Puppypup (José D. Álvarez), and their chemistry swiftly results in an impassioned sex scene. Where *Hellbent* is curiously chaste, *Killer Unicorn* is unapologetic in its explicit representation, directly addressing gay audiences in its authenticity: Puppypup wears a jockstrap, both men sniff poppers and, subverting the heteronormative assimilation of gay masculinity/femininity, both men are versatile and take turns to top each other. As Puppypup stays at Danny's, the following morning, Danny receives messages from the Unicorn on Grindr (a gay hookup app), ending with "CHECK YOUR CLOSET FAGGOT." With Puppypup oblivious, Danny opens his closet to find Lady Havok's head, eliciting both men to scream. As Danny proceeds to message the Unicorn, Puppypup asks, "Why are you on Grindr when there's a severed head in your closet?!" Gay identification with this scene largely depends on mutual access to gay discourse(s)—a knowledge of poppers, a knowledge of versatile sex, a knowledge of Grindr, a knowledge of jockstraps—which is precisely why *Killer Unicorn* is able to directly address gay

audiences. *Killer Unicorn*'s mode of address is enabled by shared access to gay discourse(s) and embodied knowledge.

It is soon explained who the Unicorn is and why he is murdering a particular friendship group. At the previous Brooklyn Annual Enema Party, Danny's drink was spiked and he was raped. Danny's friends found him mid-attack and beat the rapist to the ground. As the Unicorn seeks revenge, then, it becomes apparent that he wants revenge on MDME Mortimer (Markus Kelle) in particular. As Danny's friends left the rapist bloodied and bruised, Mortimer returned for further vengeance, pulling down his underwear and sticking a thick plastic rod down his urethra. While this might be considered by some as a symbolic castration, in fetish terms, it otherwise constitutes a practice called "sounding" which is critical to the radical affective politics of *Killer Unicorn*. As the Unicorn in present day kidnaps MDME Mortimer and forcibly sounds them with a heated metal rod, the scene elicits an affective response that resonates with the act of sounding, dependent on the spectator's access to, and (embodied) knowledge of, gay discourse(s).

As the Brooklyn Annual Enema Party gets under way, so too does the Unicorn's reign of terror. Firstly, Gayson (Grayson Squire) throws a tantrum in the darkroom, unable to find anyone to "clean [him] out and fill [him] right up again," at least until the Unicorn enters. Gayson props himself in a sling and the Unicorn proceeds to douche him. While Gayson starts off enjoying himself, however, he soon comments how "it feels a little funny, what flavour is this? Is this siracha? I love sira— OH!" Gayson begs the Unicorn to take it out, wailing in pain, before his insides drop from his anus in a bloody sludge. Again, the scene elicits an affective response that resonates with the act of douching, dependent on the spectator's access to, and (embodied) knowledge of, gay discourse(s). Where the scene itself becomes increasingly intense, humour is soon used to override the

affect, as one of the partygoers bangs on the door. "Shut up, queen, it's just an enema… *Fucking bottom*."

Horrors of douching aside, *Killer Unicorn* soon turns to the horrors of watersports. Drag artist Viva Section (Rify Royalty) is introduced on stage, strapped down to a stretcher by two assistants. Suddenly, the Unicorn appears on stage and stands on the stretcher. "Who are you? You're ruining my performance. Get off my stage!" As Viva calls for security, the Unicorn places a funnel in her mouth, proceeding to get his penis out on stage and urinate in Viva's mouth. As Viva struggles to swallow, urine starts building up and splattering above the funnel, and the sound of gargling is met with Viva convulsing on stage. Drowned, suffocated, Viva dies, eliciting an affective response that resonates with the act of watersports.

As the Brooklyn Annual Enema Party is evacuated, audiences realising that Viva is dead, certain activities go on as not all partygoers receive the memo. Here, one partygoer snorts what is perceived to be "strong" ketamine, wondering "what is this laced with?" as blood pours from their nostrils, registering an affective response in the spectator who has taken party drugs. Meanwhile, in the darkroom, a Dom fists a Sub. "I can feel you in my throat," moans the Sub, before the Unicorn walks in and starts masturbating. When the Dom asks if the Unicorn wants in, he proceeds to choke the Dom and cut his arm off. As the Dom is choked to death by the Unicorn's grip, the Sub is temporarily left with a severed arm for a butt plug. Here, the Unicorn pulls the Dom's severed arm from the Sub, proceeding to strangle him with it. This scene and its affective politics are twofold, then, eliciting both an affective response that resonates with the act of being fisted and an affective response that resonates with the act of being choked.

By film's end, the three characters that *Killer Unicorn* is centred around are killed: Danny, Puppypup, and the Unicorn. Here, the Unicorn bludgeons Puppypup to death,

Danny attempts to kill the Unicorn but is stabbed in the back, and MDME Mortimer delivers an axe to the Unicorn. This ending certainly comes as an unexpected, nihilistic surprise—Danny is characterised as the Final Boy from the outset, Puppypup his surviving love interest—yet it exemplifies the extent to which *Killer Unicorn* should be received as a "serious" film, undermining its sense of fun. Indeed, the ending proves that anyone in the gay slasher film is expendable—the stakes are just as high as "mainstream" slasher—and really, identification is predicated on the identificatory collective, allowing audiences to effortlessly take up multiple and contradictory points of identification. Moreover, these films thrive on affect, and they are designed to be "fun" no matter the ending. As MDME Mortimer kills the Unicorn with an axe at the end of the film, the "seriousness" with which audiences should take it is given, delivered in Mortimer's closing line. "Jamie Lee Curtis made that look so much easier. Who has a cigarette and a bump?"

To summarise thus far, then, *Hellbent* is said to be "the first all gay slasher film." However, the film assimilates representations of gay sex and death in heteronormative terms, averting an explicitly homoerotic affective response. Although the film is written and directed by the openly gay Paul Etheredge, *Hellbent*'s anxieties better bespeak those of the (straight male) producers. Consequently, 14 years later, *Killer Unicorn* addresses this heteronormative configuration of the gay slasher to radically subvert the formula. Here, *Killer Unicorn* intricately associates gay sex with death in ways that not assimilable, set in a queer subcultural BDSM community that celebrates fetish and kink. Starring, written and produced by José Daniel Álvarez—forming a queer creative triangle with director Drew Bolton—*Killer Unicorn* adopts a politically radical look which relies a very specific homoerotic affective response, inviting a subculture of gay audiences to call the "gay slasher" their own.

"Less Than Fuckin' Perfect": *Midnight Kiss* (2019), *They / Them* (2022), and the Turn to Assimilation

Following the release of *Killer Unicorn* in 2018—that which was released the same year as Yann Gonzalez and Cristiano Mangione's *Knife + Heart*—the future of the gay slasher film looked promising, offering a radical queer aesthetics and affective politics that defied the "mainstream" and allowed for a sense of belonging among gay audiences. Many of the subsequent slasher films released in its wake, however, share an incredibly different politics and ideology. *Midnight Kiss* and *They / Them*, in particular, revert back to the assimilative politics of *Hellbent*, albeit through different means. *Midnight Kiss* and *They / Them* assimilate themselves through a different representational politics, predicated on a good/bad dichotomy that is grounded in the limits of acceptability. Here, these films represent "good" LGBTQ+ protagonists whose actions are (at the very least) redeemed by film's end, pitted against "bad" LGBTQ+ antagonists who are frequently Othered. In doing so, these films create clear (read acceptable) points of identification for both straight audiences and LGBTQ+ audiences, Othering those who do not fit in heteropatriarchal structures.

Midnight Kiss, written by Erlingur Thoroddsen and directed by Carter Smith, was first premiered on US streaming platform Hulu in 2019. Appearing to confirm itself as a "gay" slasher film from the outset, the film opens with Ryan (Will Westwater) coded as erotic spectacle for the gay's gaze: the camera lingers on his toned buttocks and ripped body as he tries on various shorts before, eventually, retiring to the bathroom. In what appears to imitate *Psycho*'s infamous shower scene, the camera continues to linger on Ryan's body before the killer pulls back the shower curtain, cutting Ryan's throat with a knife. As Ryan maintains his position as object of the gaze, with blood flowing from the slit in his neck, the otherwise conventional, heteronormative configuration of the gaze is

made apparent. Safe for straight viewing, Ryan takes on the meaning of "woman" and, symbolically castrated in his homosexuality, is subjected to the image of the bleeding wound. As the scene cuts to Cameron (August Prew), then, who is the protagonist and introduced developing a photograph of his portrait—literalising his position as spectacle—*Midnight Kiss* makes its signification clear: homosexuals are objects of the gaze, not subjects, indicating that the "gay" slasher film is largely constructed around the voyeuristic fascination of straight audiences, looking in on a "gay" world. Indeed, when Cameron is later shown in conversation with ex-boyfriend Joel (Scott Evans) and straight best friend Hannah (Ayden Mayeri), the feminisation of homosexuality is made even more explicit, much to the emasculation of Joel:

> Hannah: If you guys were ever girlfriends, you wouldn't be friends anymore, or you'd have killed each other.
>
> Joel: Okay, but we're not girls, it's like a totally different social context. I mean, we're bros, right?
>
> Cameron: For a while…

Zachary (Chester Lockhart) is the most feminine of the group, a peroxide blonde twink, and it is no coincidence that he is the only other victim to be claimed by the killer. As the killer walks in on Zachary, who happens to be in a walk-in closet, Zachary seduces the anonymous stranger. Soon, the killer proceeds to choke him, and Zachary communicates his sexual potency. "Stop, you're making me hard." This, of course, does not conform the dehumanising stereotype of gay male effeminacy in the straight eye, and soon his potency is overruled. "Too hard, babe, too hard," he winces as the killer chokes him harder. Subsequently, Zachary is forced to the ground, and the killer smashes a bottle of

champagne. As if to punish Zachary for his transgression, then, the killer turns Zachary's potency on himself, forcing him to perform fellatio on the broken bottle that is soon crammed down his throat.

The rest of *Midnight Kiss* broadly narrativises Cameron's friendship group as they celebrate New Year's Eve at a desert resort in Palm Springs, embracing tradition by playing a game of Midnight Kiss: a game where each of the friends, whether or not they are in monogamous relationships, must have a one-night stand with a stranger, entering into the new year. As the friends undergo New Year's celebrations, they are not aware that the killer is among them in the desert resort, wearing a black pup hood. By film's end, it is revealed that Joel's fiancé Logan (Lukas Gage) is the killer; a man that Cameron had a "Midnight Kiss" with years prior. Then in a monogamous relationship with Joel but perpetually struggling with commitment issues, Cameron does not remember Logan, despite the fact that Logan is in love and madly obsessed. Moreover, prior to the reveal, Logan is represented as the nicest, most moral of the group; Logan's characterisation instantly changes upon his reveal, stigmatising him in what appears to be the beginning of a mental health crisis.

Although long contested by critics and theorists, historically, the slasher film has been considered a morality tale of sorts, punishing young adults for having illicit sex, drinking alcohol, and/or taking drugs. *Midnight Kiss*, read through this lens, might otherwise be considered a morality tale, measured in relation to gay stereotypes. Where gay stereotypes have long been associated with "promiscuity" and the impossibility of happiness amid insatiable sexual desire, *Midnight Kiss* seeks to narrativise the "dangers" of non-monogamy, propagating gay couples to take up homonormative subject positions, mimicking heterosexual courtship. This is furthered by the film's violent abjection of gay male effeminacy, permitting only "straight acting" gay men to survive. By the same hand,

with the indication that Logan is a pup (a kink activity, part of a GBTQ+ subculture, in which self-identified individuals mimic the behavioural traits of dogs), Logan's villainy is coded by that which is pathologised in homonormative discourse, further perpetuated by mental health stigma. This, of course, radically alters from the ethos of *Killer Unicorn* which promotes freedom; truly "queer" in its approach to let individuals self-govern how their sexuality is realised, be that through monogamy, polyamory, sex-positivity, and so forth. Moreover, where Puppypup's chosen name in *Killer Unicorn* indicates his identity as a pup, never is pup play shown or referenced in the film, as if a strategy to humanise or depathologise the kink/subculture. As *Midnight Kiss* gives indication as to a "positive" homonormative mode of being, in doing so, the film engages in the Othering of a "negative" queer mode of being, typified by kink and non-monogamy.

They/Them, written and directed by John Logan, was produced by Blumhouse Productions and premiered on US streaming platform Peacock in 2022, marketed as the first "mainstream" queer slasher. Set in an LGBTQ+ conversion camp with a psychokiller on the loose, *They/Them* announced itself a an explicitly "political" film. And, indeed, it could have been. With the stereotype of the "repressed" conversion camp councillor in popular culture, *They/Them* had every ability to politicise the return of the repressed, demonstrating the psychological horrors entailed in conversation. This, however, was not realised in *They/Them* itself, opting for what becomes a much more slippery and ambivalent vision. Indeed, the killer in *They/Them* does not victimise those in therapy. Rather, conversion camp councillors are the victims of the killer's rampage. Here, the killer is revealed to be an ex-patient who seeks revenge, disguising herself as Molly, the camp nurse, when her real name is Angie Phelps (Anna Chlumsky). "You don't remember me, do you? So many kids have been through here, how can you be expected to remember them all?" As Angie recites to camp manager Owen (Kevin Bacon) why she seeks revenge

on him, her terms of use are inherently personal, creating a tale of personal revenge instead of political revolt and social upheaval:

> Angie: When Angie left here, it was the suicide attempts, and the loneliness, and the self-hatred, and pills, and the doctors, and, oh, the anger, so much anger. I woke up one morning and realised my soul was just hollow. But you know all about that. That's what you do to people. To children. You hollow them out. And when all of this comes out, in the news, on TV, all of the bodies, all the horror of it, no one will ever send their kids to a place like this again. And you, and everyone like you, will be burning in hell right next to me.

As Jordan (Theo Germaine), the Final NB, watches from a distance, they soon enter the scene, pointing a gun at Owen. As Angie pressures Jordan, however, they refuse to shoot. Angie subsequently cuts Owen's throat with a knife and, in a moment alone with Jordan, she proposes her vision. "There are so many camps like this, we can cleanse them all." As police sirens call from afar, Angie panics, devising a plan to pin her murderous actions on Owen. "Enough," Jordan asserts. "No more lies. Where does it end?" As Jordan supposedly gives voice to objective reason, Angie continues her vision. "When every camp like this is closed. When we've killed them all. We could do that, Jordan. You and me." Upon killing Owen, Angie's revenge at least calls for collectivist fight, yet Jordan silences her once more in a moment of fierce individualism, adopting a neoliberal vocabulary of self-empowerment:

> Jordan: You can try to stop me, but I'm going to go to my friends now. We're gonna leave this place and never look back. And no one is ever going to tell us who we are ever again. Not him. Not you. No one.

Angie is ultimately arrested, burdened with the weight of being a "villain" nearly as bad as Owen in the eyes of Jordan, and P!nk's wannabe Pride anthem *Fuckin' Perfect* plays. While Angie wallows in her trauma, Jordan and their friends choose the "feel-good" path. As they gleefully walk away from conversion camp, however, audiences joyfully forget about Angie's tireless monologue. Indeed, the ongoing cruelty of conversion therapy continues, and the film's only vocal opponent is Othered.

Conclusion

Gay male audiences have always been able to read their subjectivity in the slasher film; the female victim and the Final Girl form a collective identificatory body that resonates with the lived, cultural experiences of both women and gay men. That is, gay audiences do not need to be addressed at face value in order to be addressed, and their cultural assimilation into a "feminine" subject position means that they addressed everywhere in postfeminist media culture. Here, the "straight" worldview of postfeminist media culture is not real; it is a fabrication or, rather, an ideological mediation of reality. Yet, surface level criticism frequently fails to address this, and gay audiences are instead pigeonholed in relation to LGBTQ+ media, exemplified by the critical discourse on *Hellbent* and the gay slasher film. In doing so, the politics and ideology of gay male subjectivity is restricted, theorised through the discourses at work in LGBTQ+ media.

Although gay slasher films are credited for providing gay visibility in an otherwise "straight" media landscape, their representational politics are nevertheless superficial. Indeed, the gay slasher film presents an ideological mediation of gayness, and the discourses at work beneath the text are frequently heteropatriarchal. Gay slasher films assimilate their representation of gay masculinity by drawing on the conventions of straight masculinity and, in doing so, analysing these films reveals more about the heteropatriarchal structures that define gayness than gayness itself. Accordingly, where the gay slasher film often thematises effeminophobia to assimilate gay men in heteropatriarchal gender relations, to reclaim the ideological project of the "straight" teen slasher film takes on a politically radical significance. Here, the teen slasher film in postfeminist media culture provides a "feminine" mode of address that is fluid. Not only does this allow gay male spectators to drive against misogyny and align with female spectators on the grounds of heteropatriarchal oppression; they are invited to authentically embrace their gay identity in an effeminate manner that suits them.

Conclusion

"That's My Sister!"

Closing Thoughts on the Girls, the Gays, and (Post-)Feminist Solidarity

At the centre of this thesis is a very simple notion: just because something looks "straight" does not necessarily mean that it is. This is not an original idea, nor is it nuanced; Richard Dyer was making the argument as early as 1976. Yet it becomes necessary to repeat in the moment we find ourselves as contemporary film and media studies falls into the trap of surface level criticism. Take, for example, the critical discourse on postfeminist media culture. Postfeminist media texts are permeated by "images of women" which marginalises gay representation, characterising gay men as two-dimensional best friends. This positions women as the subjects of postfeminist media culture, assuming that women identify with "images of women" on screen, which actively relegates gay men as the objects of postfeminist media culture, as gay men are assumed to identify at face value with their screen surrogate. In doing so, postfeminist film and media studies reproduces the very power imbalances that are reflected in postfeminist media culture, and critics and theorists fail to hold postfeminism to account.

Given that the slasher film has historically been approached using psychoanalytic theories of cross-gender identification, the slasher film of postfeminist media culture has the potential to highlight the limits of a surface level criticism. This thesis, by adopting the slasher film of postfeminist media culture as its object of study, has subsequently demonstrated how female and gay male spectatorships are influenced by the same heteropatriarchal discourse that dictates the lived, cultural experiences of women and gay men. As women and gay men are invited to identify with characters and narratives in

accordance to their lived, cultural experiences, it has been argued that the politics and ideology of female representation informs both female and gay male spectatorships. As women and gay men are invited to identify with "empowering" female characters in postfeminist media culture, most crucially, this thesis has evidenced how a postfeminist politics of fierce individualism works to assimilate both female and gay male subjectivity simultaneously under the logic of neoliberalism. This assimilationist strategy has been situated in slasher films predominantly written by women (Chapter 1), slasher films predominantly written by gay men (Chapter 2), and slasher films predominantly authored by female and gay male audiences in their repeat viewing of any given text (Chapter 3).

Chapter 1 unearthed an unwritten history of women who are often overlooked in their vital contributions to the first teen slasher film cycle. Writers and/or producers, women such as Debra Hill, Joan Harris, Leslie Zurla, Judith Rascoe, Lisa Barsamian, Anne Marisse, Carol Bahoric, and Stacey Giachino all helped to popularise the teen slasher film in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Situating the Final Girl as part of the female collective, these films are largely centred on the nuances of female friendship which thoughtfully captures the lived, cultural experiences of young women and teenage girls. Such representation appears as a well-informed or even well-intended response to feminism, assimilating its politics in postfeminist terms, yet this so-called "feminine" mode of address is entangled in a discursive overlap; female and gay male spectatorships are addressed by the same means in narratives of heteropatriarchal violence and resistance.

Chapter 2 similarly unearthed an unwritten history of openly gay writers, producers, and directors who are also overlooked in their vital contributions to the third teen slasher film cycle. Kevin Williamson, Silvio Horta, Don Mancini, Gus Van Sant, Jeffrey Reddick, Aaron Harberts, and Victor Salva all successfully popularised the teen slasher film again at the turn of the millennium. Although these films refer back to and

update the "feminine" aesthetic and postfeminist politics of the first teen slasher film cycle—strategies that were originally implemented by women in order to target a female demographic—openly gay writers, producers, and directors appropriate such strategies in order to target a gay male demographic and assimilate their subjectivity into the pre-existing representational system of the Hollywood mainstream.

Chapter 3 then considered audiences themselves as the authors of meaning in the slasher film, theorising a politics of "reidentification" in their acts of repeat viewing. This authorial viewing strategy invites female and gay male audiences in particular to feel a sense of agency, control, and empowerment in their identification with heteropatriarchal narratives and female characterisation, informing the politics and ideology of the slasher film in postfeminist media culture in nuanced ways. So much so, in fact, that gay writers and/or directors such as M.A. Fortin, Joshua John Miller, and Christopher Landon have proceeded to explicitly script processes of reidentification into their films in more recent years, transcending the postfeminist implications of repeat viewing from authorial viewing strategy to text itself.

Having theorised the postfeminist politics and ideology of the mainstream Hollywood slasher film as inherently queer yet assimilationist simultaneously—indeed, Chapter 4 highlighted the restrictions of assimilating gay male spectatorship wholly in relation to independent non-Hollywood queer horror—this thesis has set out the foundations of a new direction in the study of female and gay male subjectivity in postfeminist media culture. This illustrative conclusion subsequently demonstrates how the recent slasher TV series *Scream Queens* (FX, 2015-16) narrativises the complexities of female and gay male identification in postfeminist media culture, acting as a platform for further avenues of research in relation to the role of television media, as well as research

into the wider implications of female and gay male writers, producers, and/or directors working in collaboration in the making of textual product in postfeminist media culture.

Scream Queens was cancelled after only two seasons yet, nearly a decade after it first premiered, the show gained a cult following among women and gay men. At first glance, *Scream Queens* suffered the same fate as *Scre4m* and subsequent franchise sequels *Final Destination 5* (2011) and *Curse of Chucky* (2013). Here, *Scream Queens*'s satiric, tongue in cheek, high camp aesthetic implied some kind of paradigm shift that would redefine the slasher subgenre beyond its post-9/11 remake cycle, dovetailing the release of films such as *Maniac* (2012), the slasher-adjacent *Carrie* (2013), and *The Town That Dreaded Sundown* (2014). Like *Scre4m*, then, despite demonstrating new possibilities in its representational politics, *Scream Queens* changed nothing in its immediate wake, nor did *Scream: The TV Series* (MTV, 2015-16; VH1, 2019) and *Slasher* (Chiller, 2016; Netflix, 2017-19; Shudder, 2021-23) which emerged at the same time, both of which advocate a more serious tone with an increasingly diverse breadth of LGBTQ+ characters.

Scream Queens refers back to sorority-based slasher films of the 1970s and 1980s, typified by titles such as *Black Christmas* (1974), *The House on Sorority Row* (1982), *The Initiation* (1984), *Sorority House Massacre* (1986), and so forth, allowing the show to specifically thematise itself around a female ensemble. This is precisely why gay showrunner Ryan Murphy describes *Scream Queens* as "what would happen if you put something like *Heathers* meets *Friday the 13th* to those genre pictures like *Massacre on Sorority Row*, that early-to-late '80s exploitation horror thing" in a promotional interview with *Entertainment Weekly* (Stack 2015). *Scream Queens* takes place in Kappa Kappa Tau, one of the most prestigious sororities at the fictitious Wallace University, as sisters and pledges are stalked and killed one by one by a mysterious figure otherwise known as the Red Devil (Riley Schmidt). Where the politics and ideology of the slasher film had previously been

rendered in personalised terms, abiding by the individualist rhetoric of neoliberalism, *Scream Queens* at the very least sought to politicise its narrative of gendered violence, indicating ways in which gay male spectators might be aligned with female characters.

Although *Scream Queens* is enjoyed by many as episodic television, its cult status has been garnered by standalone scenes that are easily contextualised in their own right. Of these scenes, perhaps the most famous is the cafeteria scene in "Haunted House" (S1E4) where sorority president Chanel Oberlin (Emma Roberts) and her so-called "minions" Chanel #3 (Billie Lourd), Chanel #5 (Abigail Breslin), and Hester Ulrich (Lea Michele) have lunch. Here, the girls eat cotton balls dipped in sauce which, Chanel #5 notes, "gives you that wonderfully full feeling without all the calories." When Hester questions their non-lunch, however, Chanel Oberlin finally caves in:

> I'm tired of depriving myself of joy and sustenance. I mean, for what, so a boy will like me? Guys can be as porky as they want and we still like them. I'm as skinny as Karen Carpenter in the morgue and Chad Radwell still won't commit to me. I may die at the end of a serial killer's blade but I refuse to die hungry. Let's go get some pizza.

While the girls' consumption of cotton balls is initially played as a joke, posing eating disorders as something to be laughed at and not taken seriously, Hester's questioning combined with Chanel Oberlin's response begins to politicise the matter at hand. This is epitomised when Tommy (Isaiah LeBorde) approaches the girls and, in turn, his words proceed to align anorexia with sexism, misogyny, and heteropatriarchal oppression. "Which one of you ladies would like to be my costume for Halloween? I'm going as Dude Having Awesome Sex with You," he jokes. Chanel #5 stares in disgust. "Who the hell do

you think you are?" Suddenly, Tommy's friend Rick (Kimani Bradley) comes to his defence:

> Ladies, alright, he was just trying to be nice, okay? I mean, what in the hell is wrong with the world when a guy can't even whistle at a chick to tell her she looks hot? I mean, how else are people supposed to meet people?

What is of most significance, here, is Chanel Oberlin's subsequent response:

> I recently took a women's studies class. Yes, because it was a requirement, but I learned a lot anyways. Like, the culture that says it's okay for a man to objectify a woman for her appearance is the same culture that pressures girls as young as ten to have eating disorders.

Chanel's words indicate a preconceived hostility towards women's studies—that which otherwise indicates a preconceived hostility towards feminism—yet an apparent dissonance exists between Chanel's preconception of women's studies and women's studies itself. Chanel's emphasis that women's studies classes were mandatory suggests her overall disinterest yet, insofar as Chanel learned a lot from taking such classes, it is apparent that the interrogation of heteropatriarchal structures in women's studies resonates with Chanel's experiences as a young woman. This leads her to explicitly politicise both her anorexic tendencies and Tommy/Rick's sexist, misogynist attitudes, that which is not a personal matter but a wider reflection of culture, though the script falls short of outing heteropatriarchal culture by name. That Chanel calls out heteropatriarchal culture makes Tommy's subsequent comments an explicit point of reference, politicising

what is otherwise personal, as he remarks on the relationship between Chanel's eating disorder and his objectification of women. "So you're basically saying I'm the one responsible for making you look hot? You're welcome." This leads Chanel to finally comment on the representation of gendered violence in *Scream Queens*, explicitly situating such violence in heteropatriarchal terms. "There is a killer on this campus murdering women. When you treat us like meat, you're no better than him."

While this entire sequence is situated in the satiric, tongue in cheek, high camp aesthetic of *Scream Queens*, bringing into question the ways in audiences receive Chanel's comments on heteropatriarchal culture, it nevertheless indicates a desperate attempt to politicise the representation of violence in slasher. Here, *Scream Queens* seeks to deconstruct the typical emphases on gendered violence in slasher, using Chanel's dialogue to explain how gendered violence is not a cause but a symptom of heteropatriarchal culture at large. As the rest of the cafeteria scene plays out, then, *Scream Queens* serves a high camp fantasy scenario; that which shows resistance and revenge against a heteropatriarchal system, manifest in the visual representation of the sorority sisters beating Tommy and Rick. As Chanel Oberlin aligns Tommy and Rick's misogyny with that of the killer's violence, Chanel #3 hits the message home to the point of parody. "You're gonna tell us to smile now? Call us sweetheart?" When Tommy responds by describing such behaviour as his "signature move," Hester steps up the loudest. "Yeah, well this is mine," she proclaims, proceeding to kick Tommy—or, rather, the manifestation of heteropatriarchal culture—in the balls.

Hester's actions act as a catalyst as Chanel #5 proceeds to trip Rick to the floor, Chanel #3 grabbing his lunch tray in the process. As Tommy calls Hester a bitch, Chanel Oberlin responds in such a way that aligns the young women in feminist terms, evidencing the need for feminist sisterhood amid heteropatriarchal culture and neoliberalism's turn to

a politics of fierce individualism. “Hey, that’s my sister, and she’s no bitch, but I am.” Chanel punches Tommy in the face, swiftly mimicked by Hester, in which Chanel #3 proceeds to smack him in the face with Rick’s lunch tray. As Tommy and Rick lay defeated on the floor, the girls start kicking them, and Hester empties a bin over them. Suddenly, Hester enters a hysterical fit of feminine rage, screaming out loud and attacking the boys with the bin she emptied on them. “You want to see me smile? Well I’m smiling,” she proclaims.

Chanel #3, kicking Tommy and Rick, suddenly takes a moment, looking depleted. “Wow, those cotton balls do not provide much energy, do they?” Although the spectacle of comedic violence serves as an empowering moment, nevertheless rendering the politicisation of heteropatriarchal culture as a means of personal empowerment among spectators in a feel-good moment, Chanel #3’s comments demonstrate the limits of the high camp fantasy onscreen. While Chanel Oberlin deconstructs the heteropatriarchal structures that oppress the girls, they are nevertheless trapped in such a culture and what it promotes, giving the girls a feminist consciousness while playing into the oppressive structures of heteropatriarchy. As everyone cheers around them, Chanel #3’s comments are played for laughs, and the scenario ends on a final note of empowerment as Chanel Oberlin delivers one final blow, kicking Tommy and Rick.

Where the slasher film serves as the perfect ground to theorise the notion of postfeminist misrecognition, where certain gay male spectatorships are invited to identify with postfeminist popular culture in such a way that assimilates their own subjectivity in homonormative terms, this scene in *Scream Queens* indicates a certain radical potential, though it is still rendered in neoliberal terms. While critics such as Peter Marra celebrate *Scream Queens*, arguing that the show “pushes against the status quo of LGBT assimilation” (Marra 2020: 75), others argue that the satirical nature of the show avoids

"any sincere commentary on sexism and homophobia" (Ryalls 2018: 175). In the context of postfeminist misrecognition, however, *Scream Queens*'s allusion to heteropatriarchal culture indicates to gay male spectators that the female characterisation that organises and assimilates their subjectivity is dictated by heteropatriarchal culture, indicating that both the cultural experiences of women and gay men are organised by the same systemic structure, even though gay men are as capable of misogyny as women are of homophobia. By bringing this to the consciousness of audiences, the representational politics of *Scream Queens* allows gay male spectators to become aware of their misrecognition, aligning with female characters in the face of heteropatriarchal culture. Female characterisation, in this light, is not about women being the face of gay male subjectivity in a heterocentric media; it is about gay men aligning themselves with women and the principles of feminism, allowing them to understand why they might identify with female characters in the first place.

The second season of *Scream Queens* goes even further to make the point, typified Tristan St. Pierre's (Pablo Castelblanco) minor arc in "Chanel Pour Homme-Icide" (S2E5). Here, as Chanel Oberlin, Chanel #3, and Chanel #5 are once again stalked by a mysterious killer known as the Green Meanie (Riley Schmidt), they seek to recruit new Chanels as cannon fodder who will inevitably die before them. Working as nurses at a hospital, the Chanels recruit patients Marguerite Honeywell (Andrea Erikson Stein) and Daria Janssen (Riley McKenna Weinstein) as Chanel #7 and Chanel #8 respectively. Concerned about the lack of numbers, however, Chanel Oberlin proceeds to recruit obsessed superfan Tristan as Chanel Pour Homme, much to the dismay of Chanel #5:

> This is not allowed. A Chanel who is male *and* gay? I mean, that's simply out of the question. He's gonna steal all of our makeup and besides, Chanel, he seems like a serial killer.

As Chanel Oberlin defends her decision to recruit Chanel Pour Homme, she states that "gays don't murder people" because "they're a peaceful, musical people," to which Tristan conforms to the stereotype and nods with Chanel in agreement. As she demands Chanel #5 name one gay serial killer, Chanel #3 steps in, listing off John Wayne Gacy, Jeffrey Dahmer, and making "a good bet that one of those Menendez brothers crawled into bed with the other one, too." While both Chanel Oberlin and Chanel #5 seek to "Other" Tristan by positioning him in relation to alternative gay stereotypes, Chanel #3 disrupts the gay stereotype that Tristan conforms to, otherwise seeking to complexify the single representation of gay male subjectivity in the episode by drawing on the heterogeneity of gay male subjectivities in real life.

Chanel #5's "Othering" of Tristan continues throughout the episode as she starts using him as a personal servant. Having been stabbed in the previous episode, Tristan brings a sandwich to Chanel #5, in which she calls for him to "stay close in case I need my face wiped or to have pieces of arugula picked from my teeth." As Tristan sits by Chanel #5, she closely stares at him, asking what is on his lips. "Nothing," Tristan hesitantly responds, looking away. "Did you steal my lipstick?" Tristan wallows in denial, before Chanel #5 confidently accuses him of having Koko K by Kylie Jenner on his lips. "It is not. I wouldn't dare steal any of your makeup. It's all expired and who knows what's living on your lips." Chanel #5 punishes Tristan by making him get more sweatpants because, to quote, "these ones are full of farts," in which the argument is then cut short. Such friction between the two characters is, of course, light-heartedly played for laughs,

but it nevertheless poses a straight woman in opposition to a gay man, indicative that although the two are aligned in heteropatriarchal relations, friendship and solidarity is not a given and homophobia is rife.

Homophobia is again brought to the forefront of discussion when Chanel Oberlin brings back Hester to reprise her role as Chanel #6, even though she was revealed as one of the Red Devil killers at the end of the first season. Chanel justifies her decision based on the fact that Hester "can help us avoid getting killed" because "she has the mind of a serial killer." First, Chanel asks Hester which of the new Chanels should be used as bait, to which Hester responds without hesitation. "Great question, Chanel. The choice is obvious. Kill the annoying twink." As Chanel Oberlin and Chanel #5 instantly proclaim their agreement, Chanel #3 firmly disagrees, allowing Hester to live with the Chanels on the condition that "we cannot kill twink." Why Chanel #3 feels such an affinity towards Tristan is never explained but, in symbolic terms, *Scream Queens* clearly spells out the need for solidarity between women and gay men, not to mention Chanel #3's brief romantic relationship with Sam (otherwise referred to as Predatory Lez, played by Jeanna Han) in the show's first season.

To celebrate the recruitment of the new Chanels, Chanel Oberlin throws a slumber party at the hospital, giving everyone makeovers. Here, *Scream Queens* shows the slumber party in a feel-good montage, distinct from the show's overall narrative as everyone has fun in harmonious friendship: dancing, nail polish, makeup, hair, popcorn, confetti, pillow fights, and so forth. "Time for gifts," Chanel Oberlin announces as the montage draws to a close, singling out Chanel #8. "We have a special surprise gift for you," Hester pounces. "A Hermès Infinity Choker hidden somewhere in the morgue that you have to go all by yourself now to find it." As Chanel #8 takes the bait and goes to look for her special gift, stalked by the Green Meanie, Tristan disrupts her search.

Tristan: Listen up, bitch. I've been saving up to buy a Hermès silver Infinity Choker forever, and I'll be damned if I'm gonna stand by and let you have it.

Chanel #8: But they said it was for me.

Tristan: Then you better find it before I do, bitch.

"Wasting space," Tristan calls out as Chanel #8 leaves, demonstrating how the homophobia he faces does not make him exempt from engaging in oppressive sentiment. Chanel #8 returns to the slumber party, explaining how "I was looking for my present, but then Chanel Pour Homme said he wanted it more than I did. So, I figured I'd just let him have it," met by the aghast expressions of Chanel Oberlin and Chanel #3. "Oh no!" Both girls run in slow motion down the corridor to the morgue, further indicating a previously understated solidarity between the girls and the gays, as both try to make it in time to protect Tristan. Alas, they arrive too late, and Tristan's body lays at rest in the morgue, cut in half with his intestines hanging out.

Where *Scream Queens* makes an attempt to move beyond the limits of postfeminist misrecognition, indicating that the gay male spectator does not merely identify with female characters because it is their only option in heterocentric postfeminist popular culture, subsequent slasher film and television shows seek to explicitly characterise the friendship between the straight woman and the gay man: *Killer Unicorn* (2018), *American Horror Story: 1984* (FX, 2019), *Scream: Resurrection* (VH1, 2019), *Slasher: Solstice* (Netflix, 2019), *Freaky* (2020), *Candyman* (2021), and *Chucky* (Syfy and USA, 2021-). In doing so, slasher has more recently indicated the ways in which women and gay men are aligned on political grounds of heteropatriarchal oppression, indicating that Christopher Pullen's work on the hetero media gaze and representations of "straight girls and queer guys" has much potential in

defiance of postfeminist misrecognition. Indeed, postfeminist misrecognition demonstrates how the union between straight women and gay men might be seen to reinforce postfeminist and homonormative identity constructs respectively, aligned via identifications with the same image of postfeminism and heteronormativity. Reading against postfeminist misrecognition, then, gay male identification with female characters in postfeminist popular culture demonstrates the ways in which both subject positions are otherwise constructed through heteropatriarchal, neoliberal structures. Exemplified to a literal extent when straight women and gay men are characterised as best friends in postfeminist popular culture, gay male identification with straight women suggests an alliance in the face of heteropatriarchal oppression, able to be weaponised in the fight for equity.

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