

**Being A Woman Is Murder:**

**The *Scream* Series, Why Women are Being Killed, and Why Women are Watching Enthusiastically**



**Mandolay Magninie**

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**Feminist and Gender Studies department**

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## **Introduction**

I was sitting in the University of Chicago basement when it happened. I knew, well I hoped, that I had found the perfect thesis topic. It wasn't too obvious but it would have the subtle shock factor I wanted.

The speaker, Vickie Sides, commented about how one of the ways that we become desensitized to violence against women is through horror films. As a feminist, it's difficult to not view media through a "save the women" lens, but somehow horror films had slipped through the cracks. I needed to know why.

## **What is a Slasher?**

If one sub-genre of horror was somehow most responsible for the slaughter of women, it would have to be the slasher film, also referred to as the teen slasher. I agree with Cythia A. Freeland when she informs that, "I use the term 'Slasher' as a generic label for a movie with a psychopathic killer, usually a male, whose assumed blood lust drives him to a sort of extreme violence against women" (161, 2000) The slasher genre is simplistic in nature, yet released hundreds probably thousands of films.

The history of the slasher exists as this: "The teen-oriented slasher film came into its own in the 1970's, with the release of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) and *Halloween* (1978), and became one of the most popular horror subgenres in the decade that followed" (Wee, 44, 2005) The 1970's and 1980's were the golden years of the slasher and created a script that all slashers followed. There was an almost always male killer and a group of teenagers who would inevitably be killed, save for one "final girl." Also, it is important to note that "The films' obsession with the torture and often brutal killing of nubile young women appeared to be a

particular draw for this audience” (Wee, 45, 2005) The audiences of these slasher films knew what was going to happen, so they started to come for how it was going to happen, how were these attractive women, and a scattering of men, going to be killed.

*Scream* was produced in the 1990’s, and came after the glory days of the slasher. By the late eighties, audiences had become numb to the slasher, they knew the plot and the killings were no longer enough to get them to pack theaters. As well, the teen characters in the movies were getting to be more and more unrealistic. Although the horror genre knows how important it is for characters not to sympathize too much with the characters, making them not care at all is not beneficial either. Audiences began to ask why the character would run outside instead of try to call the cops, or why she would go upstairs where her only option was to jump out a window or be cornered by the killer. They wanted a more savvy group of teens. *Scream* provided them that, a smart group of teens that was aware of horror films before them. They knew the rules of the game. The series allowed for audiences to feel that horror films were once again grounded in reality. As Valerie Wee puts it so gracefully “*Scream* and its sequels are primarily films about slasher films” (Wee, 47, 2005)

Looking at the horror genre is important, because just like any other film genre “Their (horror films) very existence and popularity hinges upon rapid changes taking place in relations between the ‘sexes’ and by rapidly changing notions of gender—of what it means to be a man or a woman. To dismiss them as a bad excess whether of explicit sex, violence, or emotion, or as bad perversions, whether of masochism or sadism, is not to address their function as cultural problem-solving. Genres thrive, after all, on the persistence of the problems they address; but genres thrive also in their ability to recast the nature of these problems” (Williams, 280, 1999) If we, the audience, the critics, forget this very important fact, we are liable to miss any sort of

meaning of these films. Horror films, more than other genres, are susceptible to being seen as fun films, or as films that are just to be seen and then forgotten without any real thought or discussion. “Self-awareness is important, *Scream* says, because what we think we are saying and standing for may not be what we’re actually doing” (Kessinger, 95, 2011)

## **Methodology**

This thesis will employ feminist film theory to analyze the *Scream* movie series. In this paper, I present an intra-filmic exploration as has been proposed by Cynthia A. Freeland. Freeland writes that feminist interpretations of horror films “should focus on their representational contents and on the nature of their representational practices, so as to scrutinize how the films represent gender, sexuality, and power relations between the sexes” (1996; 752). Because in the simplest terms, feminism’s goal is to achieve the equality of women in all realms of society, feminist critiques aim to analyze films in terms of the roles they allow women to perform. For example, a feminist critique of horror films might look at whether a given film puts women more or less into the role of the submissive, the role of the sex object, the role of the wife, of the daughter, of the prostitute, of the victim, etc.

In my project, I will shed feminist light into the film genre of horror, examining specifically the roles of women in the *Scream* horror films. Do these films typecast women as traditionally feminine, or do they allow for more complexity? Are the killers, the people who are most traditionally exerting power, all male? Is the killer’s role the only one able to possess power? By looking at questions such as these I will explain how the horror series of *Scream* expresses gender.

Traditionally, such authors as Kristeva have done feminist horror film critiques using a psychodynamic methodology. My methodology is not psychodynamic, asking why people watch these films, but is instead an internal analysis of the content of the films, asking why they were written and produced as they were. I examine the female gender roles and male gender roles in *Scream*. I also challenge the easy and incorrect assumption that only male youth

audiences watch these films. Looking at the female roles is important because one of the major themes in feminism is to make sure that representations of women are realistic and not limiting.

Looking at the male roles is important because a problem in the past has been that males always get all the roles with agency, with power. Feminist critiques continually aim to explore power imbalances between men and women and between women and others.

The issue of the audience lies within the issue of who is taking pleasure, being entertained by the media that is being shown to them. If the audience is mostly male, as Clover and most feminists of her time inferred, it implies that women do not respect, value, or enjoy the horror film. This is just as concerning as the first two problems because it isn't true. While male audiences may predominate, many women do like horror; I am among them. Part of my interest is in analyzing why this is so.

I am looking at the *Scream* series because I appreciate the way in which it both complicates and reaffirms the horror genre. *Scream* is reaffirming to the horror genre because it establishes rules and, for the most part, plays by those rules. However, it is complicating because it sometimes goes against these rules as a way involve the audience's prior sophisticated knowledge of the horror genre. This makes films such as *Scream* both self-referential or "self-aware." In essence, these films contain embedded critiques of themselves. This complicates the perspective of the audience in interesting ways.

*Scream* is an important series to look at because of the immense popularity of the series. It is the highest grossing horror series ever, with the final number (including the 4th) coming in at \$330 million dollars nationwide (<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/franchises/chart/?id=scream.htm>).

This is significant because one could study any little known B horror film and claim that the

genre as a whole stands for something that it clearly does not, but by choosing something that was well-watched and well-read by the public, it is more acceptable to generalize what is happening in the films as a phenomenon that happens in the genre.

I will be looking specifically at the ways in which women are killed in *Scream*. By this I don't mean to imply an in depth analysis of any one kill, but rather is it a prolonged death, or quick? Do we watch the woman die or is it implied? Of particular significance is the length of the scenes in which women are killed. This tends to take much longer than the killing of men. As well, women are murdered more brutally and often with more gore and attention to detail.

In this thesis, I will especially analyze the character of Sidney Prescott, who is in all the films, in this case in her repeating role as "the final girl." I will look at how the Prescott character complicates and also reinforces the final girl stereotype brought forth by Clover and her analysis of the horror genre (citation of Clover).

I present just as much analysis of the killers. My analysis will start by looking at the generic role under which the killer operates, as in each film the killer is masked as the character(s) "Ghostface." What I mean by "generic" is that unlike other serial killers, whose outfits/costumes are less ambiguous, the cookie cutter uniform of Ghostface allows the audience to be uncertain of the gender of the killer.

Other horror genre killers like Freddy Krueger in *Nightmare on Elm Street*, Leatherface in *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, and Jason in *Friday the Thirteenth* all have either extreme physical prowess or they are so physically big that the audience almost always infers, and correctly so, that the killer is male. Ghostface is as important to *Scream* as Sidney Prescott because it is through the killer that we gain insight into Sidney, and vice versa.

An important part of my thesis will be to look at the way that the original trilogy differs from the fourth installment, because originally *Scream* was supposed to be a trilogy. I will view the fourth *Scream* as an anomaly, because of the length of time in between the third and the fourth as well as the major differences in plot and characters.

## Literature Review

### **Scream**

These are several books that have examined the *Scream* film series. The chapter *Scream, Popular Culture, and Feminism's Third Wave* in the book *Motherhood Misconceived* speaks in many ways very directly to my topic. The sub title of the article is “I’m not my Mother” which makes an indirect comparison between Sidney Prescott and her mother, which many of the films hint at, as well as a comparison between Second Wave feminists as mothers and third wave feminists as misunderstood daughters. The thesis point of the article is that Kathleen Rowe Karlyn sees an analysis of the *Scream* trilogy as a “missed opportunity for women of my generation—feminists of the Second Wave, or the ‘mothers’ of contemporary feminism—to learn about where our daughters are today and to mend or at least better understand some of the rifts and fissures that divide us” (178, 2009). Although this is not my direct aim through my thesis, it does provide a perspective that would otherwise be missing. I intend to expand upon Karlyn’s analysis by exploring the ways in which the mother daughter relationship complicates the *Scream* trilogy. In the majority of horror films the mothers are either absent or very rarely shown. In *Scream* however, Sidney’s mother, Maureen, is what brings terror and death into Woodsboro and in turn into Sidney’s life.

The *Scream* Trilogy, “Hyperpostmodernism”, and the Late-Nineties Teen Slasher Film is fairly explained in the title. A sub- topic of my thesis is about the concept of hyperpostmodernism, which Valerie Wee describes as “ (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 videos...” (44, 2005). I chose to only briefly address my concept in my thesis because although the self-reflexivity of *Scream* is one of the reasons it is so popular, this phenomenon does not seem to affect the gender roles within the trilogy. The main point of Wee’s article is to discuss the *Scream* trilogy through the lens of hyperpostmodernism, which provides a critique that I will expand upon.

In the book *Scream Deconstructed: An Unauthorized Analysis* Scott Kessinger analyzes all four of the films up to date. The point of his book is to “Movies, like any art form, say things, and these pages are devoted to interpreting just what the *Scream* films—the four of them made as of this writing—are saying” (8, 2011). The book seems to make one of the most general, non-academic arguments, and through looking almost solely at the films alone, Kessinger makes solid analyses of what is going on in all four films. This is the only book that mentions *Scream 4*, seeing how it has only come out a year ago.

### **Horror film theory**

In *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, Jeffery Sconce talks about the general horror films. He specifically compares the last *Nightmare on Elm Street*, at least at the time, to *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*. This is crucial to my project because it is an analysis of a horror film, but it also looks at the way that *Nightmare on Elm Street* differs from other slashers. This indirectly helps my project because Wes Craven, the director of *Scream*, also does the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series. But most directly, this work is important because it helps to explain why the slasher subgenre is so successful.

In *Killing Women*, Steven Jay Schneider talks about why there are not more female serial killers and why many serial killers are feminized. This is mildly helpful in my analysis of the

*Scream* series but this chapter also provides me with some generic facts about the amount of men killed to women killed which helps for the basis of my investigation.

In *The Naked and the Undead*, the gore of the slasher film is explained. It is explained through the motivations of the serial killer, and through other points of view. It talks about how we are fascinated by the idea of a serial killer. It also has a specific chapter dedicated to questioning whether there is such a thing as a feminist slasher. This article will provide the framework under which I question if *Scream* has a place as a feminist slasher.

### **Final Girl Theories**

Clover is the basis of most Feminist Horror research. One of her most important chapters is called “Her Body, Himself” in which she talks about many important issues regarding my thesis. The first point is about the audience and how they are able to transgress the boundaries of gender while watching horror films. It does this in the way that allows the audience to both identify with the final girl—female- and the killer—usually male---. This is important because in a sense it both reinforces and breaks down gender as a construct. It reinforces the gender boundaries because it allows the movie to all be about male audience members, for half the film they get to fantasize about death through the lens of the killer, and then for the second half of the film, at least according to Clover, they get to go into the masculinized final girl and then defeat the killer. It breaks down gender boundaries because it allows all audience members to transcend gender in order to fit into the characters who are currently triumphant.

The second way in which Clover is important is her theory on the final girl. Clover believes that the final girl also serves as an interpretation of the teenage male in the audience. The final girl must take on masculine traits or as Clover calls them, the tools of patriarchy. These

include but are not limited to, fighting, aggression, and boyish names. In my thesis I will bring this theory into question and see if it is entirely reaffirmed in the *Scream* trilogy.

In *Misfit Sisters*, Sue Short talks about the final girl. In her chapter, “Sex and the Final Girl: Surviving the Slasher” she emphasizes, like Clover, that one of the final girl’s powers lies in her abstinence. She talks specifically about *Scream* more than *Clover* though. Short touches the tip of the iceberg on the mother daughter relationship of Maureen and Sidney and how this issue of sexuality plagues Sidney for numerous years of her life. “This (horror films script of killing the sexually active) helps to explain why Casey Becker is so chillingly murdered at the outset of the film, as she not only fails the scary movie trivia quiz, but flirtatiously lies about not having a boyfriend. Once again, the sexually active female is punished...” (Short, 63, 2006) Like so many other feminist critiques, she never does anything but states the obvious, that the sexual female is punished by death, she doesn’t even fully complicate it.

## Analysis

### **Roles of Women in Scream**

Many feminist scholars have looked at the horror film as a place of inherent sexism and misogyny. Steven Jay Schneider makes the point that, “to the dismay (or is it the delight?) of those who would accuse the genre of a conventionalized if not inherent sexism, for every dumb male jock or clueless stoner dude to get sliced and diced in your average slasher movie... it is practically guaranteed that two or three young women depicted either as bimbos or bitches will suffer a death that is both more protracted and more sadistic at the hands, knives, or worse of the killer” (Schneider, 238, 2006) While he makes this claim, and for many of the slasher films it is true, in *Scream* it is not so much the number of women being killed as much as it is the length of time it takes them to be killed. In all four *Scream* films the ratio of men to women killed is fairly equal, but considering the films are on average two hours long, and they consist of around 10 deaths, the time ratio of male to female deaths is not equal.

Instead of looking at the ratio of deaths, we should look at the length of time it takes for characters to die. “According to Stephan Prince, ‘in a content analysis of the ten biggest-grossing slasher films, James Weaver found that the average length of scenes showing the death of male characters was just under two minutes and those showing the death of female characters was just under four minutes, and those lengthy intervals were accompanied by expressions of fear, terror, and pain’” (Schneider, 238, 2006) Using this data the inference is that women are somehow being punished in their deaths while men are simply being killed. As was said in the first quote, Schneider makes the distinction that these women are transformed into bitches and bimbos, terms that our society deems unacceptable. If these women were “good” by societal standards they would have survived the horror film. In this regard, I do believe that horror films are

reflections of a society that believes that women, and teenagers in general have rules that that should abide by or be punished.

The largest taboo in the slasher film is girls having pre-marital sex. “ The legacy can be traced from *Psycho* (1960) in which Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) introduced to us having had sex outside marriage, shortly dies thereafter, just as a host of sexually active females in the slasher are destined to die soon after copulation. That the girl who tends to survive such films is distinguished by her relative virtue may accordingly be seen to endorse a specific morality—rewarding restraint and responsibility” (Short, 46, 2006) In the case of Sidney Prescott we see the issue of sexual relations complicated into heights previously unknown or unseen in the horror genre.

Sidney Prescott is not only dealing with the pressure to have sex with her boyfriend, but is also dealing with the pressure to not become a whore like her mother. Sidney’s mother, Maureen Prescott, was raped and killed by a man and she had the reputation for sleeping with half of Woodsboro’s men which then sets up Sidney’s unwillingness to sleep with anyone. Sidney throughout the first three *Scream* films is trying not to become her mother. Carol J. Clover makes the claim that “To the extent that the monster is constructed as feminine, the horror film thus expresses female desire only to show how monstrous it is” (Clover, 238, 1999) This is certainly true of *Scream* and Maureen Prescott, we see and hear about Sidney’s mother as a monster, a woman who ruins families, whose promiscuity cannot be contained or controlled. Sidney is afraid that if she has sex, she will become her monstrous mother.

But at the end of the first *Scream*, Sidney does in fact cave in and have sex with her boyfriend, Billy, who is also the killer. In any other horror movie this would lead to her demise

and Billy tells her this is his speech. Even though Sidney broke a horror movie rule and had sex, she survives, but how can this be explained?

Once again using an example from *Nightmare on Elm Street*, the problem of having sex and getting killed is demystified. Short explains that “Nancy proves her good character and this scene implies that, while Nancy may not be a virgin, she is a moral figure nonetheless.

Humphries argues that what differentiates the Final Girl from the more promiscuous girl that usually winds up dead is a matter of individualism versus altruism, arguing that the final girl is more ‘socially responsible’” (Short, 54, 2006) We then see that it is not only the fact that women are having sex but that women are being irresponsible and immoral. Like Nancy, Sidney has sex with Billy because he was proven innocent and she thinks she is being unfair to him. She chooses when to have sex with him and therefore it is more empowering and responsible.

The “Final Girl” is a famous figure in the horror genre, she is the one who gets to tell the tale because she is the last one standing. “She is intelligent, watchful, level-headed; the first character to sense something amiss and the only one to deduce from the accumulating evidence the patterns and extent of the threat; the only one, in other words, whose perspective approaches our own privileged understanding of the situation” (Clover, 236, 1999) In the *Scream* series, one could argue that the convention of the final girl is convoluted. We instead are left with a final trio, Sidney, Gale and Dewey at the end of all four films. This is significant in a couple of ways.

The first of which is the fact that there are two final girls. While Sidney is arguably the traditional “final girl,” dismissing Gale as unimportant would be a mistake. Gale assumes the role of this surrogate mother figure. She is an older woman, a reporter in the films, and the conversations and interactions that her and Sidney have seem to hint at a parent child

relationship. Although less than Dewey, Gale is always concerned with Sidney's well-being, in every film there seems to be an instance of small talk where they ask one another how their lives have been. Gale and Sidney also seem to have this tumultuous relationship that many mothers and daughters have. They don't always see eye to eye but they do care for one another and realize that they need one another to survive movie after movie. Although it's far from a traditional mother daughter relationship I would argue that the role Gale assumes is not one of a secondary final girl, but as a mother figure to Sidney.

The second problem is that Sidney both embodies and denies the notion of the "Final girl." She does have sex, breaking the final girl is always a virgin rule, and unlike Clover, I don't believe that she achieves her masculine role as the final girl so the male audience can identify with her. "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." (Clover, 2006, 1999) Sidney goes by Sid frequently in the movie which could represent a masculine nature, but I think that it a missed opportunity that Clover doesn't give the final girl a space to expand the boundaries of femininity instead of cross over into masculinity.

We know that the audiences of horror films are not all teenage males so the role of the "Final girl" does not have to cater to male audiences. When trying to support Clover's theory, the best examples I could find were Sidney in the first film versus Sidney in the third film, see figure 2 and 3. In figure 2, we see that Sidney has long hair identifying her as feminine and she has sex with her boyfriend which also proves her femininity. This can be contrasted with the third film

where Sidney's hair is shorter and she wears her former boyfriend's Greek letters, signifying her maleness. But even when I tried to simplify these scenes into something that would support Clover I wasn't sold on her theory. Sidney is a girl, and like most girls in society, she doesn't fit in all the femininity boxes. She will fight back because she wants to live, not because of some masculine nature that lies within her.

Pinedo comments the problem with this masculinization of the "Final girl" in this quote: "What is at stake when the femaleness of the survivor is reduced to her display of abject terror, and agency is relegated to masculinity? Nothing less than the impossibility of female agency within this formulation" (Pinedo, 82, 1999). Clover's lack of allowing women to be women and not the cookie cutter female takes away any agency that the Final girl could truly possess. If she is just a vessel through which the teenage male is supposed to take his horror journey, women can never possess any power. And if no other movie challenges the notion of this theory, *Scream* certainly does. Gabrielle Moss claims "Scream bent traditional horror film rules pertaining to female sexual independence and mores, and conveyed a strong message of female empowerment (the film's heroine shoots the villain with the assurance that in 'her movie' he won't come back)" (Moss, 2) If nothing else, this quote tells us that Sidney is acting within the realm of feminine power, it's her movie, she had sex with him on her terms, and she is going to continue on.

Another interesting fact about women in the slasher film is that they constantly find their power in their victimization. "Just how essential this victim is to horror is suggested by her historical durability. If the killer has over time been variously figured as shark, fog, gorilla, birds, and slime, the victim is eternally and prototypically the damsel" (Clover, 234, 1999) If we take this fact to be true then where does Sidney fit into the equation? Sidney, being the self-aware character she is even writes a book in the fourth *Scream*, titled "Out of Darkness" which is a

memoir about her life, and she comments to a TV show that she was the only one that could pull herself out of this cycle of victimization. In fact, there are very few instances of Sidney being the victim, she is rarely cowering and much more often than not fighting against and running from the killer. She is not the screaming girl in the corner.

The fourth *Scream* film seems to throw most of these gender conventions out the window. Whereas Sidney has worked so hard to end her cycle of victimization and have power in her life, Jill tries to become famous by creating her own victimization. When Sidney returns to Woodsboro to promote her book, Ghostface re-appears and killing begins once again. At the end of the film it is revealed that Jill, her niece and another boy Charlie, were responsible for the murders. Jill's entire motive is becoming famous and making big money, and Charlie once again just wants to fit in and get the girl, not be invisible. It is interesting to see the motives between the male killers and the female killers, with the exception of Jill, all have motives that deal with revenge or peer pressure. "Thus, whereas male psycho-killers tend to be depicted as either arational or in some sense hyperrational, female psycho-killers are almost always depicted as irrational. The murders these women commit can usually be interpreted as crimes of either passion or obsession" (Schneider, 244, 2006) Schneider's point works beautifully in terms of Jill. Jill in this movie, once she has been revealed to be the killer, seems completely insane. She killed her own mother, and all of her friends, to become famous. And this is famous as a victim, not even as the killer. She is seen as a compulsive, selfish liar. Whereas I could at least make some sort of a case for all the other killers, Jill's motive is completely and entirely ridiculous.

*Scream 4* was produced in 2011, which is a change from the original film in 1996. An interesting picture to look at from the movie is figure 4, which shows two of the characters. Charlie is a boy with long hair and fine features, while Kirby is a tomboy with a gender

ambiguous name, and she has more horror film knowledge than anyone else in the film. From this knowledge alone one could definitely assume that Kirby would be the final girl, but she is betrayed by Charlie in his attempt for fame. These gender-bending characters however, show a new horror film where the rules are being re-written. We now make spaces for tomboys and men with long hair and even a gay character. This is not to say that they all don't get killed, but the fact they are visible in the film shows that the times are changing.

### **Roles of Men in Scream**

In the traditional slasher film of the seventies and eighties, the killer was almost always a male. This is problematic because the killer in a slasher film is one of the most developed characters in the whole film, we know their back story, and we know and sometimes even mildly agree with why they are killing the droves of teens. For example, take Freddy Krueger in *Nightmare on Elm Street*, unlike most of the teenagers, that many of us can't even name, we know that Krueger was a child murderer and that he was acquitted on a technicality and then the people of the town, the teens parents, killed him in a boiler room. The only other character most of the audience will remember is Nancy, the final girl, and that's only because she survives the massacre. As told by Jeffrey Sconce, "Most of the teenagers in the series are flatly drawn 'types,' blank to the point that they repel even the most rudimentary form of character identification. Freddy, meanwhile, is the only character who gets any decent lines in the picture. Most importantly, Freddy continues from film to film. The teenagers do not" (Sconce, 113) The killing male is the one who has power, who has agency. The female characters do not, of course with the exception of the final girl.

In the case of the original *Scream* trilogy, the killer Ghostface is purposely ambiguous, see figure 1, but I believe that seasoned horror viewers will still assume that the masked killer is

male. The proportion of male to female killers is so unbalanced that anyone suggesting that the killer is female is written off or laughed at. We see this represented in the scene where Sidney and friends are talking about the murder of Casey Becker and Stu comments that “Yeah, Casey and Steve were completely hollowed out. Takes a man to do something like that.” (Craven, 1996) The implication is that only men would know how to gut someone or something, and to hang someone from a tree takes a good amount of upper body strength.

The problem is that making the killer always a male, it seems that he gets to be in the active role, and the role with agency. He gets to terrorize, he gets to kill. All the rest of the characters are being acted upon, it seems like they are passive in their being killed, their being crippled in fear. This is essentially the other side of the double –edged sword of the slasher film gender roles, males are killers and women are victims, men can only find power if they kill and women can only have agency in their victimization. The males who are not the killer find themselves killed and often quickly forgotten about. If the kills that are the most inventive, the most memorable, are all female deaths, it begs the question of what do the audiences take from these movies? It has rarely, if ever been claimed that through horror films we learn that teenage boys should not have sex until they are married, or that they shouldn't be complete jerks. But bitches and bimbos get punished for the feminine equivalent of these traits.

In *Scream*, many of the characters do kill to regain power in their often otherwise chaotic lives. In the first film, Stu and Billy are the two killer. Stu's excuse for killing is that he caved to peer pressure, while Billy claims that Sidney's promiscuous mother drove him to do it. If he had had a mother figure in the house, he would be more well-adjusted and less prone to fits of homicidal rage. In the second film we see our first female killer, Ms. Loomis, as was talked about in the previous section, but Mickey's motive is that he can and will blame the horror genre

for his violent acts. Mickey however claims that this defense will make him an “innocent victim” (Craven, 1997) which in many ways leads to his downfall. Men who are killers have no chance of surviving in horror films when they take on the victim role, especially when they are actively claiming it. The human killers in *Scream* complicate the traditional roles that exist within the horror genre. We then are presented with characters that are not one hundred percent homicidal monsters, but that exist within the human realm and with human conventions. But if the Clover theory is bought into, everything in a horror film is labeled either as masculine or feminine, victimization is feminine, and only one “female” survives.

To complete the trilogy, Roman kills again because of issues linked to his mother, which in this case is also Sidney’s mother. He feels rejected, feels displaced and therefore wants to destroy the child and half-sister his mother did raise and love. Roman of course also has to kill anyone else who gets in his way, but this is his solution to his problem of being rejected. Roman feels entitled to the family he should have had, the live he should have lived. He takes it into his own hands to rectify these discrepancies.

If we then apply the argument that “Some feminists would argue that the only way to deconstruct or undo the damaging myths of fascination of monstrous killers is to argue, persuasively and rationally, that they are not extraordinary or monstrous and deserve no particular attention” (Freeland, 185) we begin to really see what is going on with Ghostface. By unmasking the killer, much like in Scooby-Doo fashion, Sidney Prescott and a few other characters start to lessen the terrifying nature of the killer. He/she is no longer a mysterious masked figure, but a classmate or other human being. By revealing these murderers to be human, the *Scream* cast effectively disillusioned the killer and brings him/her down to their level, allowing for the death of these killers.

Carol J. Clover makes an interesting claim that “In either case, the killer is himself eventually killed or otherwise evacuated from the narrative. No male character of any stature lives to tell the tale.” (Clover, 236) To refute this claim, I will use the example of Dewey who remains a character through all four of the *Scream* films up to date.

*Scream* does not play by traditional slasher rules. Although it does definitely have a final girl, it is not only the final girl that gets to tell the tale of the massacre she just lived through. The two other characters that have the privileged role of survivor throughout the series are Dewey Riley and Gale Weathers. Gale has already been talked about above, but it is now time to give Dewey his time under the spotlight. Dewey breaks a lot of horror movie conventions because he is seen as not very intelligent, and his job as a police officer all but insures his death. A common theme in horror films is that the authority figures, figures that represent the moral order are killed. We see *Scream* do this in the killing of the principal in the first film. But Dewey survives and lives through all four films, though in the second and the third he does have some near death experiences. Scott Kessinger has one of the best explanations for this phenomenon, “Dewey brings heart to Gale and Gale brings brains to Dewey, and, if you’ll forgive the cheesy expression, together they form a bond that fights for truth and justice for the sake of Sidney, who’s become a kind of guardian of reality” (Kessinger, 68, 2011). Dewey has the role of fighting for the moral right, which cannot be eradicated because while Sidney is moral, she doesn’t exemplify all the traits necessary to be the quintessential “Final girl.” Dewey as the less than brilliant cop may not have the intelligence necessary, but he does fight for what’s right at all costs.

Dewey also plays as a surrogate father figure throughout the series. If one takes Gale to be Sidney’s surrogate mother figure, then Dewey by no other means than his relationship with

Gale, takes his place as the father. Throughout the film series, Dewey goes out of his way to protect Sidney and to comfort her, and they maintain a very close relationship. In this right, Dewey must survive as a line of defense to ensure Sidney's survival.

### **The Audience**

Audiences in the eighties had become bored with the predictable plots and the unrealistic nature of the characters in horror films. This led to a major outcome, siding with the killer instead of the teenagers. "Instead, he (Freddy) promises to honor the generic contract negotiated across the entire film series, one that promises to subject a nameless series of dim-witted teens to incredible spectacles of death" (Sconce, 112) The eighties and early nineties knew both to play by these rules, and how to invent imaginative deaths in order to keep audiences watching. By the time *Scream* comes around in 1996, the genre has completely worn itself thin.

The term hyperpostmodernism is an important one in regards to the audience. It was the solution to a lot of the problems the slasher genre was having in the Eighties. It solved the unreliability fact of the genre by making the characters more self-aware. They had seen horror movies, some of them were even horror film buffs. I think that in the nineties and beyond it is almost impossible to not see a horror film by the time you have reached eighteen, they are shown at girl's slumber parties, at high school parties in general, and yes, I bet that many people/groups have had their own versions of "Stab-a-thon" (Craven, 2011). This hyperpostmodernism is also crucial because it allows for a kind of conversation to happen between the movie and the viewer. As opposed to before where girls would completely detach from the mindless bimbo, we now see complicated girls like Kirby, whom the audience can root for and identify with. Hyperpostmodernism, both in American society and in horror films allows for a type of connectivity not allowed in slashers before.

A misconception about horror movie audiences was that they were perceived to be all male teenagers. If this is who horror producers are marketing to, female audience members are bound to feel under represented. One horror film that reinforces the stereotype that the audience is teenage boys is *Jennifer's Body* (2009). Although the movie is said to be empowering to women, the only thing that me and any of my friends can remember is the completely unrealistic make-out scene between two girls.

In fact I would have to say that one of the most female empowering horror films I have seen is the *Scream* series. Though it does fall prey to some of the conventions of the horror film, through bending and breaking some rules, they allow themselves to complicate the genre to be something more than misogynist. As Isabel Christina Pinedo says, "Narrative pleasure derives from the intelligibility of the genre, from appreciating the deployment of generic conventions to discern the logic to the madness and from innovations that violate audience expectations" (Pinedo, 110, 2004) *Scream* is a culmination of both these ideals.

But how exactly does *Scream* provide a more positive experience for women viewers? Sue Short claims that "In endeavoring to understand what these films might mean to a female audience this point is fairly crucial, as our sympathies are clearly invited towards the girl whose disposition sets her apart from friends who are seemingly interested only in having sex, girls who are typically presented as 'air-heads' that deserve neither admiration, identification, or pity." (Short, 46) While I don't agree with her theory whole-heartedly, because I don't believe that Sidney is a woman whom everyone can identify with, her theory does have merit. Sidney, and in essence all final girls are the moral ones, the ones whom society deems acceptable. One would naturally assume that all the girls and women that fill horror film audiences are not this type of woman. But I do agree with the theory that Sidney and other final girls are the types who are

willing to stand up for themselves and not just scream and cower as the killer approaches, and this is something that female audiences can identify with. Very few women that are in horror audiences would claim that they would be the girl who screams and then dies. All women would at least like to think that they would fight for their lives. The final girl does provide an opportunity for that to happen.

*Scream* provides the intelligent horror viewers a chance to really imagine themselves in the movie. The characters on the screen know the genre as well as the audience does, and they prove themselves by having conversations about the rules of the genre. The character of Randy in the first two films serves the role of the horror movie buff, he informs the audience as well as his friends in the film about the conventions of horror films. By allowing the audiences to see that the characters were all well informed, their deaths seem more scary. The casts of *Scream* are no longer the idiots that run up the stairs when they should be running out the door, but they still succumb to the killer. Even Randy, the resident expert cannot make it out of the trilogy alive.

The audience is as important to the horror film as the horror film is important to the audience. “The horror film is the equivalent of the cultural nightmare, processing material that is simultaneously attractive and repellent, displayed and obfuscated, desired and repressed. Just as Freud regards dreams, even distressing ones, as wish fulfillments of repressed desires, so I regard the horror film as an amalgam of desire and inhibition, fascination and fear” (Pinedo, 107, 2004) What Pinedo is trying to express by this is that there are things in every horror film you don’t want to happen and events that you do want to happen. In *Scream* more often than not these dichotomies are represented in a battle of the sexes type situation. Take for example the original *Scream*, in this film Billy and Stu, the killers represent the repression to kill people who don’t play by the rules. By seeing these people get killed, we the audience may or may not be able to

see our desires for an ideal society played out. If you as an audience member believe that teenagers shouldn't drink or have pre-marital sex, then the horror film plays this fantasy out for you.

To state it once more, Freeland says, "They (horror films) are striking not just for their depiction of the killer at their center but for the way in which they link this monster to the horrific spectacle so as to make an issue of our interest in it. To look only at spectacle here and to denounce either its seeming direct appeal or its surface violence against women is to fail to respond to the complexities of these films as films" (Freeland, 184) To deny the fact that the horror genre brings in a tremendous amount of money every year is to completely ignore the massive effect that horror film has on society.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, if nothing else the *Scream* series is good for complicating the traditional roles and rules of the horror genre. The final girl has sex with one of the killers and the killers are not all male. There is a final trio/ “family” unit showing that you can have a successful horror movie franchise without being so traditional. Sidney Prescott is a more realistic, inclusive character for girls in the 90’s and by the fourth movie, the cast themselves has included a gay male, which would have no place in the slashers of the 80’s. All in all, while *Scream* still is a slasher film, with many of the conventions, it is definitely a slasher that this feminist finds less fault in than many of the horror films. It is not offensive, or even sexist. The majority of killers are male, but they are human and have motives for killing. Regardless of whether these motives are believable or not, they are given. It almost seems to me that because everyone’s human, the genders are more concrete, but they allow for more range within the genders. While there are plenty of tradition dumb men and women getting killed, *Scream* doesn’t try to scare people by killing bitches and bimbos, it scares people by one or two masked figures with knives. While this doesn’t mean that feminists should forgive the horror genre, this does mean that perhaps the horror genre is finally trying to not repeat the same misogynist mistakes of its youth.

## Reflections

First of all, I realize that without years upon years of research could I ever truly do justice to four *Scream* films, but I am grateful that I got the opportunity to try. It was interesting to me when in my research phase that more than half the research material I looked at mentioned Carol J. Clover, and that the more I read the same quotes, the less I agreed with them. But in the end it was beneficial, both because it showed me the circular motion in which research happens, and because it really made me think about whether I was going to accept Clover's theory as the "right" one.

I learned through trying to describe something for five minutes that sometimes a picture truly is worth a thousand words. I learned that saying you have a feminist framework is a lot like saying you like food, and that by the time you have narrowed your framework down to something that's specific enough, you start thinking that feminist better unite soon, if not for themselves, then definitely for all us poor thesis students.

Horror films, especially *Scream*, reflect the world for what it is, and what is was in the 90's. It shows people killing other people and there is a terrifyingly real nature about that. In this aspect, Wes Craven knew he had to direct a film that could be placed in the real world and Kevin Williamson knew he had to write a screenplay that showed realistic interpretations of people and what terrified them. Horror isn't only scary for the monsters, it's scary because it reflects societal values and fears. *Scream* both critiques that, and exemplifies that.



Figure 1: Ghostface, 2011



Figure 2: Sidney Prescott in the first Scream film, 1996.



Figure 3: Sidney Prescott in the third Scream film, 2000



Figure 4: Charlie and Kirby (from left to right), Scream 4, 2011

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