

# Final Girl: Analysis of the Slasher Film Trope

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**Horvat, Ana**

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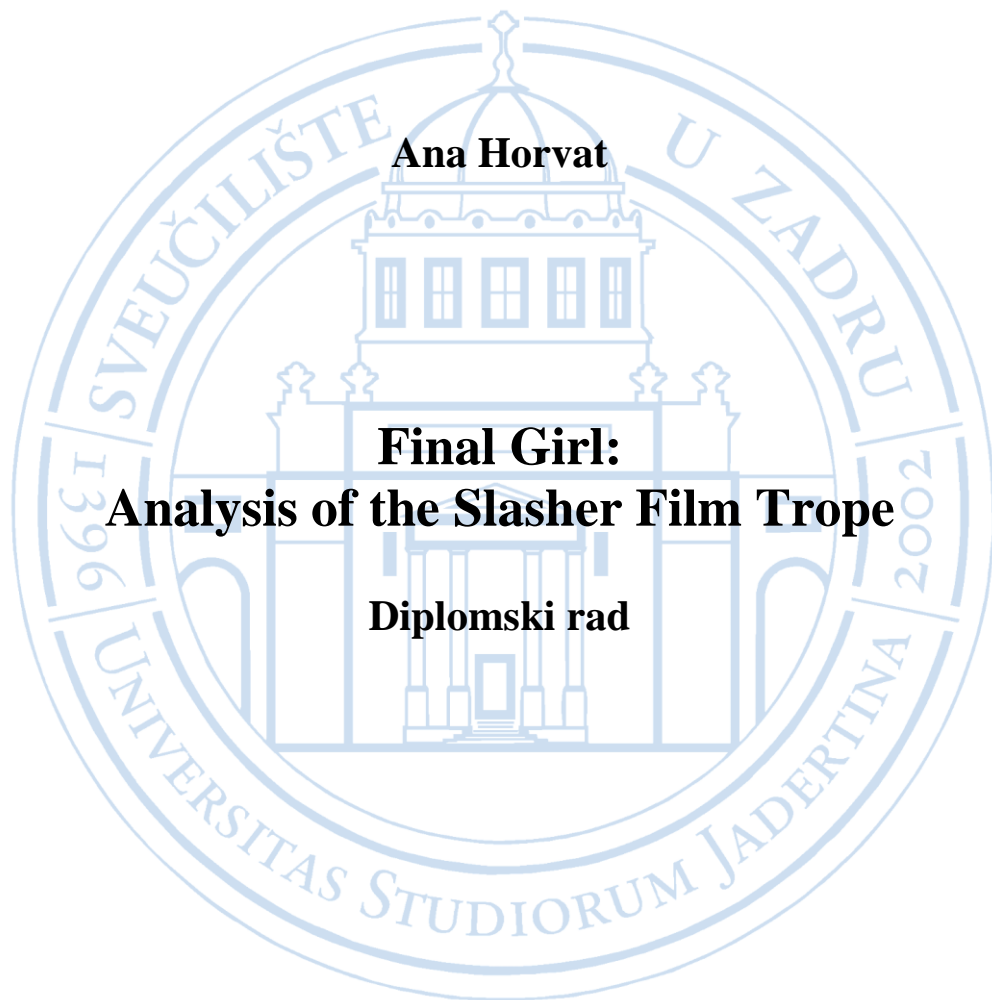
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Odjel za anglistiku

Diplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnosti: znanstveni smjer



**Ana Horvat**

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Final Girl: Analysis of the Slasher Film Trope

Diplomski rad

Student/ica:

Ana Horvat

Mentor/ica:

doc. dr. sc. Marko Lukić

Zadar, 2018.



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## 1. Introduction

The representation of women within the world of art, specifically in film, is a widely and continuously discussed topic. Aside chronic underrepresentation, there is also a lack of positive female representation in film with predominance of gender stereotypes reflecting, and thus enforcing, socially upheld behavioral norms and imposed views of gender. As a subgenre of horror film which first and foremost seeks to evoke negative emotional reactions from its audience, the slasher film is known for its specific narrative, tropes and clichés that serve as a representation of our society and have become a staple of the genre, setting it apart within the horror genre itself. Viewed as primarily focused on the young male audience, the slasher film generates ambivalent reactions from its audience as well as being ambivalent itself regarding gender representation and fluidity. The core of horror and slasher films lies in the power struggle between easily relatable human protagonists, in terms of their certain behavioral traits and the antagonist, i.e. the monster ranging from a psychopathic human killer to a paranormal force (that used to be human). As any other genre, horror comments on the current state of society, yet in a very specific way. Its influence on society and vice versa is undeniable:

Horror films explore more fundamental questions about the nature of human existence, questions that, in some profound ways, go beyond culture and society as these are organized in any given period or form. Here lies the special significance of horror, the factors that truly differentiate it from the other genres and that make it conform most deeply with our contemporary sense of the world. (Prince 2)

In other words, horror films are viewed as more honest and raw than any other genre, an idea the slasher film evidently follows. The basic plot line of the slasher film typically revolves around a psychopathic killer gruesomely murdering a group of young people until there is only one left standing - the Final Girl. One of the key tropes of the slasher genre, whose

existence and traits have been an inexhaustible source of contrasting opinions and theories throughout the years, the Final Girl character represents the last person left alive to confront and destroy the killer thus ending the murderer's reign of terror. A victim at the beginning of the film, the Final Girl undergoes a metamorphosis to be transformed into the female heroine in the end, but at what price? The Final Girl trope is interpreted in different ways. For instance, some view it as an epitome of a stereotypical female corresponding to a conservative mindset, pointing out that to survive and face the killer at the end of the film, the woman needs to assume more "masculine" traits. Others note that leaving the woman as the last survivor in the film enables the male audience to identify with the female character, empowering women on screen at the same time.

This paper focuses on the analysis of the ongoing conventions of the Final Girl trope based on three following slasher films: *Halloween* (1978), *Scream* (1996) and *You're next* (2011) and their individual Final Girl. This research aims to deconstruct the structure of the three slasher films to offer insight into the Final Girl trope, its presence in slasher films and its evolution over the course of decades. The character of the Final Girl is typically comprised of several traits that make her stand out from the rest of the characters. These contrasting traits include her name, her looks, her sexual status, moral principles, heightened sense of awareness and finally, her behavior when faced with the threat of death by the hand of the antagonist. Furthermore, the aim of this research is to analyze the conflicting opinions about the Final Girl trope as well as her above mentioned traits in order to try and conclude whether the trope provides a visible adjustment in terms of gender representation within the horror genre and how it is perceived by both male and female audiences. Laura Mulvey, a feminist film theorist, Carol J. Clover and Barbara Creed, both professors of film studies, have developed theories about the portrayal of women in film, producing such an echo within the feminist film theory that most writers still assume their basic parameters and take some

version of their theories as a starting point of their own researches. Their writing will inform both the theoretical and analytical approach to the subject matter.

## 2. Cinema – Where Women are Objects, not Subjects

In order to understand the way in which stereotypical gender roles are constructed and upheld within the slasher film and how they are being applied to the trope of the Final Girl within the slasher film narrative, it is necessary to shed light on stereotype theory and feminist film theory. First to use the term stereotype in 1921 was Walter Lippmann in his book *Public Opinion* where he explained that the image of the world existing in the mind of society often does not have correspond to reality of the world with the dominant group enforcing the false images, i.e. stereotypes. Lippmann states that “we do not first see, and then define, we define first and then see. In the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world we pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture”.<sup>1</sup> Although stereotyping can function in a positive as well as a negative way, they generally function “to keep minority people in positions of low power and prestige” (DeFleur & Dennis 482). Different groups are portrayed differently in the media and entertainment. Within the world of film, certain characteristics and qualities are assigned to women that are usually exaggerated and more negative than those assigned to men. This kind of stereotypical portrayal influences the perception of and interaction with other groups, consequently affecting communication socialization (ibid. 480). Even though there are more women than men in the world, i.e. women make up most of the population, they are not perceived as the dominant group, as the role of the dominant group is occupied by men. Entertainment, including films, is therefore primarily focused on the male audience, establishing

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<sup>1</sup> wps.pearsoncustom.com; *Public Opinion*, 1921, Walter Lippmann



stereotypical portrayals of women on screen thus enforcing the idea of what a woman should look like and behave like in the mind of the male spectators.

Slasher films and films in general mirror the position and perception of women in society, and feminist criticism of slasher films analyzes how the portrayal of women within this subgenre relate to the lives of real women in society (Boyle 176). As Clover stated in her essay titled *Men, Women and Chain Saws*, “identifying male sadism, especially toward women, and holding men at least theoretically culpable for such acts as rape, wife beating, and child abuse are major achievements of modern feminism” (ibid. 226). Women have been trying to regain an equal role to men within the societal system through feminism. Feminist film theory is a result of women trying to find their own space in film as what has come to be recognizable as the stereotypical idea of gender roles in the real world has found its way into film scripts and onto the silver screen. Women in film have faced underrepresentation and objectification, with female characters being domesticized and sexualized resulting in them having little or no part in the narrative. Although female representation has unarguably evolved over the last few decades, stereotyping is still visibly prevalent in entertainment.

### 2.1. Cinematic Theory of the Male Gaze and Victimized Women

In her essay titled *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Laura Mulvey utilizes Lacanian psychoanalytic theory<sup>2</sup> in order to criticize mainstream cinema by demonstrating how the pre-existing behavioral patterns of patriarchal society affect and shape the contemporary cinematic world as well as our film viewing experience. Approaching film from a rather pessimistic point of view, Mulvey notes that not much has changed regarding the position of women since the 19<sup>th</sup> century literary tradition, as the female gender remains enclosed within the boundaries continuously enforced by the dominant patriarchal ideology. The main premise of Mulvey’s theory is that women in film are exploited as mere objects of

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<sup>2</sup> Psychoanalytic theory was developed by Sigmund Freud and further developed by Jacques Lacan, according to which the human subject is created through social interaction.

the male gaze<sup>3</sup>, as the Hollywood film narrative “reflects, reveals and even plays on the straight interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle” (833). Not only are female characters in film subjected to the curious and objectifying gaze of the spectators, they are also subjected to the gaze of other male characters within the film narrative. Thus, they assume passive and submissive position and are therefore, rarely in control.

Considering that men, especially directors, dominate the film industry and are the ones in control of the camera, Mulvey proposes that the camera serves as the cinematic instrument of patriarchal subjugation which in turn means that spectators, both female and male, experience film from the male perspective exclusively. Crucial to Mulvey’s theory is the argument that the interpretation and identification of the spectators with the male perspective takes place on a subconscious level thus giving these perpetuated images of gender oppression an air of acceptability. Be it as it may, women are ultimately cornered as they are left to identify either with the male point of view of the camera and/or the male subject within the film narrative or with the objectified female character in a masochistic way (Man 1993). Therefore, female spectators are forced to unconsciously drift from one identity to another, i.e. from the passive female identity to the active male one. Another important aspect to which Mulvey draws attention is the woman’s lack of penis which stands for “a threat of castration and hence, unpleasure” for the male gender (840). According to phallocentrism<sup>4</sup>, the woman has two functions to fulfill: “she first symbolizes the castration threat by her real absence of a penis and second thereby raises her child into the symbolic” (833). Herein lies the paradox of the phallogentric symbolic order, being that the woman exists only to symbolize a lack of phallus, i.e. she lacks the symbol of male power and

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<sup>3</sup> The term *male gaze* was coined by Laura Mulvey in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*.

<sup>4</sup> *Phallogentrism* is the ideology according to which the phallus (male sexual organ), is the central element in the organization of the social world.

sexuality, thus providing symbolic meaning and order to the world of phallogentrism. In other words, the woman “can exist only in relation to castration and cannot transcend it” (834), and once this process is carried out, her meaning is brought to a close.

According to Mulvey, one of the pleasure-producing mechanisms involves the objectification of another person by subjecting them to one’s gaze. The term she uses to describe this process is the term Freud used in his studies, scopophilia (840). In her theory of scopophilia and voyeurism, Mulvey claims the male unconscious has two avenues of escaping the anxiety of castration. The first avenue – sadistic voyeurism – refers to the preoccupation with demystifying the mystery of the woman and asserting complete control by either punishing or saving the guilty object (ibid. 840). The second avenue – fetishistic scopophilia – refers to complete repudiation of castration which can be done by either substituting the fetish object or turning the repressed figure itself into a fetish (ibid 841). This is what spectators eventually view projected onto the screen, a patriarchal division of roles in which men are active protagonists and bearers of the gaze whereas women are stifled, passive objects of the male gaze subjected to complete control of both male characters within the film narrative and spectators in the cinema. In her 1993 book, *The Monstrous Feminine*, Creed contrasts Mulvey’s theory which puts emphasis on the woman as the victim, by arguing that women in horror are often the monsters due to their power to castrate (11) Creed finds that horror films differ from any other genre in that they allow the male audience to view the abject, maternal figure with power to castrate and destroy the threat of the dominant male, but at the end the boundaries of the established patriarchal order are brought back into place (12). In other words, after the film is over, nothing has changed in the real world. Clover, who tackled the topic of gender representation in modern horror films and coined the term Final Girl, discusses the very same topic of male gaze within film text in her 1987 study *Her Body*,

*Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film*<sup>5</sup>. She, on the other hand, suggests that there are several types of gaze and the one that Mulvey refers to, Clover identifies as the “assaultive gaze” (77). If one understands gender as a social construct, rather than solely determined by the subject’s possession or lack of a penis as Mulvey’s Freudian analysis takes for granted, he/she may not be able to wholly categorize the character’s, camera’s and audience’s gaze as so one-sidedly gendered. In other words, it may be argued that this black-and-white binary opposition between the active, dominant male and passive, submissive female create a false dichotomy. To paraphrase Clover – if both men and women are made to identify with the male gender, how can one explain the success and appeal of the slasher film that features a female hero/victim to a primarily male dominated audience (78)? The slasher film undoubtedly comments on the position of men and women within society, raising opposing opinions on whether it represents a step back or a step forward in the portrayal women.

### 3. The Slasher Film

As a remarkably prolific genre, the slasher film offers an array of flicks, tropes, clichés and Final Girls for possible analysis and discussion. Viewed as misogynistic and criticized for the excessive display of blood, gore and gratuitous violence directed first and foremost against women, the slasher genre nevertheless managed to propel the Final Girl as its key trope and female heroine to stardom among horror loving audiences. Dismissed by many mainstream film critics as “neck-and-neck to hardcore pornography in the race to be the most execrable type of film” (Harper 6), the slasher has managed to raise a lot of dust within and outside of the cinematic world as it continues to enforce and facilitate, as well as to challenge patriarchal views through an array of portrayed characters. The resounding impact of horror films – within as well as outside of the boundaries of the cinematic world – is undeniable, which is why Mark Jancovich emphasizes the importance of the study of

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<sup>5</sup> The study was later expanded into a larger study titled *Men, Women and Chainsaw's: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*.

horror by stating that “claims about it have had political effects - effects which extend far beyond the limits of the genre itself” (8). With the influence of mainstream cinema shaping our perception of female characters subordinate to male characters, it is not surprising that suspense and tension, which horror films are built on, derive from the fact that the psychopathic killer is chasing none other than a female victim: Interestingly enough, slasher films present us with intelligent female characters, women who fight for their life and survive due to their own resourcefulness, seemingly challenging the established ideas of how a woman behaves in perilous situations. Understanding the origin and integral elements of the slasher film will lead to better understanding of the various interpretations as well as conflicting theories revolving around the subgenre itself and the key element of the slasher film narrative, i.e. the Final Girl.

Slasher films belong to a distinct subgenre of horror films and are “characterized by a psychotic human [...] that kills or stalks a succession of people, usually teenagers, predominantly female” (Keisner 411-12). The conventional slasher narrative is a particular one and easily distinguishable from other film narratives involving a murderer or a serial killer, yet there is always room left for the plot lines to vary in one way or another. In *The Horror Film*, Hutchings describes the slasher film as “a horror film in which isolated psychotic individuals (usually males) are pitted against one or more young people (usually females) whose looks, personalities, and/or promiscuities serve to trigger recollections of some past trauma in the killer’s mind” (194). The killer in slasher films typically carries out the murders using one or a variety of cold weapons, such as knives and chainsaws, even blunt objects, leading to the portrayal of graphic, torturous and gruesome murders. Considered to be the predecessor of the American slasher film, the Italian giallo film genre<sup>6</sup> put more emphasis on allure, mystery and crime, rather than sheer brutal killings of innocent victims

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<sup>6</sup> *La ragazza che sapeva troppo* (The Evil Eye), Mario Bava's 1962 thriller, is attributed to be the first cinematic giallo.

that constitute the integral part of the classic slasher narrative (Luther-Smith 1) However, with the popularity of the giallo film reaching its peak during the early 1970s and gradually declining after 1975, the American slasher film came to the forefront.

Alfred Hitchcock's notorious 1960 film *Psycho*<sup>7</sup> is, to this day, viewed as the one film to have laid the foundation for future slasher films to come (ibid. 2). Hitchcock's *Psycho* came out during the period of 1960s that was marked by a change in social consciousness (Jancovich 83) as this was a time of great social, political and economic turmoil in the world and in America. As society was becoming increasingly more focused on itself, *Psycho* (alongside other films) introduced a shift from vampires, demons, werewolves and the like, i.e. the supernatural adversary to a far more frightening one – ourselves. A door was now opened to a new and horrifying possibility that anyone could now be revealed as the killer. According to Hutchings, their “cheapness, crudeness and formulaic repetitiveness” (193), alongside graphic and extreme violence, are just a few of the reasons why slasher films are frequently perceived as being of low quality and, in effect, shallow. Furthermore, the victims in slasher films are mainly women who are being stalked, terrorized and murdered, which is why slasher films are not only considered to be low quality, but also misogynistic, “branded as violent and pernicious reactions against feminism” (ibid. 193). In support of the view, according to which film provides a perfect platform for gender biased views to be forced upon audiences, Robin Wood – a critic of the genre, in his 1987 essay on modern American horror film titled *Returning the Look: Eyes of a Stranger* renames slasher films into “violence against women films”. Wood viewed horror films as nothing but a hysterical response to 60s and 70s feminism where the male spectator enjoys a sadistic revenge on women who have begun to refuse to slot neatly and obligingly into his patriarchally predetermined view of the way things should naturally be (196). He bases his theory on the factual existence of gender

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<sup>7</sup> It is disputed whether or not *Psycho* belongs to the slasher subgenre.

differences in influenceability within society and points out the greater impact of male influence in the cinematic world that has led to denying women their rights and “men projecting their own innate, repressed femininity on to women in order to disown it as inferior” (74). Nevertheless, there are also those who recognize hints of positivity within the slasher narrative that are embodied by the character of the Final Girl. Carol Clover addresses the issue in *Men, Women and Chainsaws* by pointing out that, in the end, the female protagonist is always the one to survive.

Still, there are further key elements constituting the typical slasher narrative format that could be viewed as supporting the idea of female oppression in slasher subgenre. The first key element is certainly the killer himself. The background story of the killer is either revealed at the very beginning or the end of the film to provide insight into why the killer is the way he is, as a form of justification. “In most slasher films, the killer is an ordinary person who has suffered some terrible-and sometimes not so terrible- trauma. It is because of this past injustice that he seeks vengeance- and the bloodier the better” (Rockoff 6). If the background story is saved for the end of the film, it is left to spectators to decide whether the killer is male or female, which has proven to be an easy task regarding the slasher film, with a few exceptions<sup>8</sup>. Rockoff acknowledges these exceptions confirming that the killer in slasher films is “overtly asexual, aside from the brief bouts of voyeurism which tend to precede the murders” (6).

A staple in slasher films are also prolonged, torturous deaths of female victims opposed to swift murders of the male victims. One simply cannot disavow and un-see the lingering of the camera as it focuses on the ever so elaborate slaughters of helpless women in slasher films. In comparison with death sequences of the male characters, sequences portraying the death of the female ones are usually longer, more torturous and much more

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<sup>8</sup> The first instalment of *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* revealed Jason’s mother to be the killer. Only after she was killed in the first film, Jason started killing people instalments that followed.

detailed. Another key element is the inevitable body count that usually covers a higher number of female victims, than that of male ones. In her essay titled *In Her Body: Himself, Gender in Slasher Films*, Clover herself points out this issue by stating how “even in films in which males and females are killed in roughly even numbers, the lingering images are inevitably female. The death of a male is always swift; even if the victim grasps what is happening to him, he has no time to react or register terror” (201). Female victims exhibiting fear and terror, is not only of the ever-present elements in slasher films, but it is also an example of stereotyping, considering that this type of behavior, i.e. displaying helplessness and weakness, is socially expected of women. In this way, the narrative of slasher films undoubtedly incorporates Mulvey’s theory of sadistic voyeurism and fetishistic scopophilia, at least at first glance. Mulvey’s ideas of the voyeuristic principal of cinema and of female oppression in slasher films are irrefutable, as women are in fact slaughtered in the most brutal ways for expressing their sexual desires (e.g. Lynda Van der Klok in *Halloween*, Tatum Riley in *Scream*, Tina Gray in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, Sandra Dier in *Friday the 13th*). Although the argument can be made that male victims in slasher films are not spared the same fate of a brutal death by the hand of the killer, all of the above-mentioned factors point to the existence of difference between female and male roles in slasher films. Clover claims, that although not all men and women in slasher films die as a result of engaging in sexual relations “boys die, in short, not because they are boys but because they make mistakes. Some girls die for the same mistakes. Others, ... because they are female” (200).

Women who die in slasher films are not always portrayed as sexually promiscuous, i.e. they do not have to be portrayed as promiscuous in order to die, as some of them have boyfriends and are shown as being in a steady and happy relationship. For women in slasher films, enjoying the act of intercourse has been enough to get them brutally slain, with sexual morality being an important element of the slasher film, enforcing preconceived notions



about female sexuality. In other words, if a woman chooses to engage in a form of sexual activity, she is not worth of life. The only female character who is in control of her own sexuality, i.e. abstains from sex, gets to live. Confirming the misogynistic tendencies of the slasher film, Jamie Lee Curtis who played Laurie in John Carpenter's *Halloween* stated: "There is a sexual factor, yes. They kill the loose girls and save the virgins in most of these movies" (Rockoff 14).

As another element of the slasher film, Clover introduces the Terrible Place (197). The Terrible Place is the term she uses to refer to the location where the victims typically find themselves entrapped by the killer. Although initially represented as a safe haven, where everyone is having a great time and enjoying themselves, the Terrible Place ultimately becomes a prison where the victim is finally forced to fight the psychopathic killer as "the same walls that promise to keep the killer out quickly become, once the killer penetrates them, the walls that hold the victim in" (ibid. 198).

Weapons used by both the killer and the Final Girl in slasher films are of importance for the slasher film narrative, adding to the brutality of the violence spectators witness on screen. Firearms are typically avoided as death by firearm is usually swift failing to produce the desired effect of shock and terror. Rockoff emphasizes how victims are usually attacked by and killed with sharp objects, with knives being the number one choice for killers and Final Girls (7-8). "The preferred weapons of the killer are knives, hammers, axes, icepicks, hypodermic needles, red hot poker, pitchforks, and the like. Such implements serve well a plot predicated on stealth, the unawareness of later victims that the bodies of their friends are accumulating just yards away" (Clover 198). By avoiding the usage of firearms, the slasher film portrays killings that are more brutal, torturous and personal, thus engaging the audience on a higher level.

Following the major changes of the 1960s, came Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. Introducing another major shift within the slasher subgenre, this time in the audience's point of view (Jancovich 104) *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* became the most iconic slasher film of the 1970s. Whereas previous slasher films directed the audiences' focus onto the victim by rarely showing the murderer, so as to make the viewers identify with the horror the victim is subjected to, in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* the psychopathic, cannibalistic killer is given character and the viewers identify with him due to the usage of a subjective camera perspective. The usage of point-of-view shots combined with music makes the audience aware of the killer's arrival prior to the victims in the film. This way, the spectators are enabled to use their own imaginations to interpret what is about to happen. "This subjective view allows audiences to feel involved in the „game” of the slasher – the major points of which are figuring out just who and where the killer is, and when and how he will strike – heightening both their enjoyment and excitement" (Rockoff 15). Some feminist film critics claim that the usage of point-of-view shots enables the predominantly male audience to identify with the typically male killer, rather than with the female victims, creating the possibility for the male spectator to give in to their carnal fantasies in a darkened cinema (Boyle 5). This goes hand in hand with Mulvey's theory of scopophilia and voyeurism according to which, women are presented as objects and submitted to the male gaze fetishizing their feminine form. However, what makes the slasher film stand out within the horror genre is blurring the boundaries of traditional gender roles by taking one female character and placing it in the role of the hero. The above-mentioned slasher film, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* introduced certain changes that have remained a constant to this day. Not only was it the first slasher film to feature under-aged teenagers getting butchered, establishing elements that came to be integral parts of the slasher narrative, but it also gave rise to the slasher film staple, the lone survivor in every slasher film thus far – the Final Girl.

### 3.1. Final Girl: The Key Trope of the Slasher Film

As the archetype of the last surviving woman in a slasher film, the character of the Final Girl has been a source for debate between opposing opinions within the feminist film critic theory according to which the Final Girl either represents a positive change in the portrayal of women in film or is simply a victim forced to assume masculine traits in order to become the hero. An almost ubiquitous feature of the slasher film, the Final Girl is the most developed character in terms of psychological detail (Clover 201). Possessing certain characteristics, the Final Girl is easily distinguishable from the rest of the marginal characters who are marked for death from the very beginning presenting her as the only one deserving of life and survival. In Clover's words: "If her friends knew they were about to die only seconds before the event, the Final Girl lives with the knowledge for long minutes or hours" (201). The Final Girl is a combination of various traits that have long been debated on by feminist film critics. What makes the Final Girl trope particularly interesting in terms of gender representation is its fluidity. The much-debated binary categories of masculine and feminine traditionally embodied in separate male and female figures are seemingly collapsed into one and the same character – an anatomically female character possessing characteristics traditionally attributed to male characters in real life as well as on screen, around which the narrative is centered.

One of the main features of the Final Girl, setting her apart from other female characters, is her name which is typically gender neutral. One could argue that giving the Final Girl a name suited to both male and female bearers is a reinforcement of outdated gender ideas. By avoiding giving the Final Girl a strictly female name, she is masculinized from the very beginning of the film, contrasting her to other girls in the slasher film who all have girly names. However, as Clover points out, the Final Girl has to be an anatomical female, for if the tables were turned and in the place of the Final Girl character was a man,

spectators would not feel the same level of fear nor would they be able to relate to the character in the same way: “If you have a haunted house and you have a woman walking around with a candelabra, you fear more for her than you would for a husky man” (42).

Another distinguishing feature of the Final Girl is the way she looks. The Final Girl is always pretty, tall with nice facial features obeying to the stereotype of the gorgeous female lead. Not in any way less good looking than her friends, the Final Girl is typically dressed more modest as a sign of self-control regarding her own sexuality and desires, never showing much skin. As Clover states, “she is feminine enough to act out in a gratifying way, a way unapproved for adult males, the terms and masochistic pleasures of the underlying fantasy, but not so feminine as to disturb the structure of male competence and sexuality” (51).

The Final Girl’s strong moral sense is another trait differentiating her from other female characters. Whereas her both female and male friends die for having sex, doing drugs and drinking, the Final Girl avoids death by not engaging in sexual activity as well as by having no vices. She possesses traits such as maturity, intelligence and resourcefulness which would be perceived as typically male in any other genre. Both Clover and Jancovich call attention to what they call masculinization of the Final Girl, with Clover describing her as “boyish, in a word. 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” (40). The femininity of the Final Girl is therefore compromised not only by the name she carries, but also with her looks and behavioral patterns.

Mulvey’s theory of scopophilia and the male gaze is undeniably applicable to various cinematic narratives, including that of slasher films. It easily combines with the way Jancovich describes the slasher as an attack on femininity by stating that “rather than identifying with the female victim in these films, the audience is encouraged to identify with

the killer and his violence against his female victims (105). However, Clover provides a different perspective by arguing that the gaze is not always male nor is it always active (78). Quite contrary to Mulvey's suggestion, Clover believes gender fluidity enables the Final Girl to adopt the gaze, more specifically the "active investigating gaze", and make it female as 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 the extent of the threat" (ibid. 79). From the beginning of the film until its end, the Final Girl undergoes serious character development through which gender fluidity is even more highlighted. She transforms from the helpless child who is traditionally gendered feminine (passive, emotional, sensible) to an autonomous adult who is traditionally gendered masculine (active, resourceful, in control), as "the passage from childhood to adulthood entails a shift from feminine to masculine" (ibid. 81). To do so, the Final Girl is exposed to a high level of violence including witnessing the killings and mutilation of her friends as well as getting slashed and mutilated herself "not only to signify her own castrated state, but the possibility of castration for the male" (Grant 44).

By the end of every slasher film, the Final Girl takes up a weapon such as an axe, a knife or a chainsaw and carries out the act of literal and or figurative castration of the killer. With this "phallic appropriation" contributing to the masculinization of her character, she unmans her oppressor and brings the development of her character to completion by recreating herself as masculine (Clover 81). In the final scene, when she is the only one left standing alive and victorious, the Final Girl delivers herself into the adult world. Implementing Lacan's theory into the context of the slasher film, Clover points out how "the achievement of full adulthood requires the assumption and, apparently, brutal employment of the phallus" (ibid. 81). This would mean that male viewers perceive the character of the Final Girl as female only in terms of her lacking a phallus – a situation eliminated by placing a

phallic knife, chainsaw or axe in her hands, bringing the horror to a halt for the male spectator. Therefore, Clover establishes, the Final Girl is a far cry from a feminist dream (ibid. 83) as she views the slasher film as being “ambivalent about gender identifications and sanctions” (Grant 307). With the Final Girl performing the act of castration through employment of phallic symbols, the male spectator is enabled to give in to his sadomasochistic fantasies wherein lays the appeal of the slasher genre to the predominantly male audience. The male spectator is able to identify with both the male characters who, when faced with the killer, always try to defend themselves (albeit unsuccessfully) as well as the Final Girl wielding a cold weapon and destroying the killer. Female spectators are forced not only to watch “typical” female characters trying to flee and dying gruesome deaths, but also remove themselves from their own femininity in order to identify with the virginal, highly moral and vice-less Final Girl who stays alive due to her setting her apart from every other female on screen, alienating her from the female audience as well.

In order to further delve into the analysis of the Final Girl and grasp the evolution of the trope, three films made and released in different decades as well as their Final Girls will be analyzed and discussed. Slasher films *Halloween* (1978), *Scream* (1996) and *You're Next* (2011) have made a definite mark within as well as outside of the slasher genre with their tropes, clichés and Final Girls whose names have become a synonym for the strong woman capable of surviving all on her own, facing death and horror as they do so, despite the general perception of slasher films and their main narrative as being “explicitly about the destruction of women” (Grant 254). If the Final Girl serves as a reflection of women and their positions within society, it is necessary to keep in mind that each of the slasher films analyzed in this paper functions as a comment of the particular period they were released in and as a reaction to the position of women within society at that moment in time.

### 3.1.1. *Halloween (1978): Laurie Strode*

Owing its success to the simple premise of a serene suburban neighborhood becoming a place of unspeakable horror and brutal violence, John Carpenter's 1978 *Halloween* is the first film of a successful film franchise that became a classic of the slasher film genre. *Halloween* has influenced a great number of slasher films that followed and is first and foremost known for introducing one of the ultimate Final Girls of all time – Laurie Strode. At the beginning of Carpenter's *Halloween*, the audience is introduced to the back story of Michael Myers, a lunatic that has managed to escape from an insane asylum he was committed to after murdering his own sister at the age of five on Halloween night. After spending 15 years in the asylum, Michael manages to escape and is now wreaking havoc in Laurie's neighborhood with her being his ultimate target.

Laurie Strode is introduced into the narrative as she accepts to do a favor for her father on her way to school. Visually, Laurie looks as one would expect the typical Final Girl as described by Clover to look like. With her "prude", although feminine, outfits and stacks of books she constantly carries around, the smart, virginal and vice-free girl, Laurie possesses the necessary traits of the typical Final Girl established by Clover in her 1992 essay, including a unisex name. Conforming to the "masculinizing" process of the slasher film, Laurie is strongly contrasted to her peers from the very beginning of the film. In his 2004 book *A Legacy of Blood*, Jim Harper argues that John Carpenter's original intention was to represent Laurie as an awkward virgin in order to indicate that she is repressed and dysfunctional, just as Michael, who is later on revealed to be her brother (38). Furthermore, Laurie works as a babysitter for a neighbor boy named Tommy, positioning her in the role of the maternal feminine who represents the strength that can be associated with that role. This is later emphasized in the scene where they are both standing in front of the abandoned Myers house with Laurie patiently answering Tommy's questions, assuring him that there is nothing

to be afraid of, making her maternal instincts abundantly clear (ibid. 43). Playing into Mulvey's theory of the male gaze and Clover's assaultive gaze, the first close-up of Laurie's face happens when she is shown sitting in a classroom and gazing through the window. She notices a suspicious looking man in a mask, standing behind a car and staring directly at her. For a second, Laurie is unsettled. This is the close-up that sets her apart from other character as she is given the ability to look – however, not unpunished, as will be elaborated later on. The first time Laurie sees Michael, it is presented as a close-up, but when Michael sees her for the first time it is presented as a long shot where Michael looks at Laurie from behind. After this scene, the alternations between Laurie's close-ups and Michael's voyeuristic gaze continue even throughout the film. Laurie is given the power of the female gaze as she sees Michael in situations where others do not. Even though it seems Laurie is given the power to look as a tool for survival, it ultimately becomes clear that everything she has seen has left her traumatized considering she ends up in a mental hospital herself.

Mulvey's and Clover's theories have also found their place in the representation of the three teenage girls antagonized by Michael, as *Halloween* introduces the audience to three stereotypical high school girls. While Lynda and Annie are marked as the pretty and popular blonde and the rebel, Laurie is the smart, awkward outcast. Lynda and Annie smoke, they are "loud" and have boyfriends – and for this, they are eventually punished, paying with their life. While Annie is killed in the car, heading to pick up her boyfriend whom she plans on having sex with, Lynda and her boyfriend Bob are murdered by Michael post-coital. Laurie is shy and not only is she without boyfriend, but completely avoids dating as it makes her feel uncomfortable and her friends make fun of her for it. While Laurie is presented as the only one who is aware of her surroundings and is the first one who senses something is amiss in the neighborhood, Lynda and Annie lack this sense of awareness, resulting in them suffering a violent death in scenes that are, compared to the death of the male character, obviously



prolonged. The fact that Lynda and Annie are sexually active is what ultimately costs them their life. Placed in the position of the traumatized male, Michael also slaughters Lynda's boyfriend Bob who represents the sexually potent and active male wholly different from his own self.

In accordance with Mulvey's theory, when Laurie finally looks at Michael while inspecting the house of her friend, she is inevitably victimized and punished. Not only is Laurie the freakish object in the eyes of the traumatized male, but she also represents the site of trauma for the monster. Michael killing his sister Judy at the beginning of the film, after she slept with her boyfriend does not only make him the monster, but also places him in the position of the traumatized male, i.e. a kind of victim. As Hutchings states, when a male character is victimized, in this case the killer himself, he is "nearly always marked as unusual. As if the presence of a disempowered male poses certain credibility problems and requires special explanation or justification" (91). Alongside their half-naked bodies reminding Michael of his own sister and her non-castrated body, Lynda and Annie are immediately punished for looking at the monster, their reaction while being attacked by Michael is the stereotypically expected female reaction in the face of danger which includes closing their eyes and screaming, not fighting for their life. The camera lingers on the half-naked bodies of these women during their final moments perpetuating the objectification of the female form, in correspondence to Mulvey's theory of female exploitation, whereas Laurie, the virgin, lives with only a cut on her arm and disheveled hair.

Despite the fact that Laurie mostly adheres to her own theory of the Final Girl, Clover contrasts her with Sally from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, and views Laurie as a much fiercer version of the Final Girl who is not passive but takes the necessary action to save herself as well as others from the crazed killer: "Given the drift in just the four years between Texas Chain Saw and Halloween- from passive to active defense-it is no surprise that the

films following Halloween present Final Girls who not only fight back but do so with ferocity and even kill the killer on their own, without help from the outside” (202). However, if the Final Girl does more than just scream and run away when faced with her attacker and is the one pushing the narrative further due to her heightened sense of awareness, it does not necessarily have to mean she is assuming the role of the male hero. There is usually a fair amount of clichéd feminine activity to be found in slasher films as searching for male protection and, of course, screaming which has been and is generally associated with women.

After going through an ordeal whilst fighting for her life, as the Final Girl does, Laurie eventually turns the tables on Michael by choosing to defend herself alone. This leads to the final showdown between the two in the house where Laurie babysits Tommy, turning the house into Clover’s Terrible Place. Although Clover marks Meyer’s house as the typical Terrible Place, the major part of Laurie’s and Michael’s combat takes place at Tommy’s house which Laurie is more than familiar with and is therefore on her on turf. As Fairfax points out, the Meyers house is in fact the place where Michael sees Laurie for the first time and therefore sets the off the horrific series of events that plays out, yet the actual events occur in Lindsay’s and Tommy’s house (46). While Clover uses the Bates Motel from *Psycho* and Jason’s hut in *Friday The Thirteenth II* as examples of the Terrible Place – a place far away from home, in *Halloween* Laurie’s Terrible Place ends up being a place that she feels very much at home. Tommy’s house puts her in a position of advantage and with the familiarity heightening her active gaze Laurie is ultimately able to survive.

Laurie is also inventive when it comes to her choice of weapon. Whilst fighting for her life, Laurie attacks Michael with two items that are associated with domesticity and women, one being a wire coat hanger she turns into a weapon and sticks it into Michael’s eye and the other one a sewing needle which she sticks into his neck. Both weapons Laurie uses to protect herself and attack Michael, emphasize her mastery of the domestic sphere as well

as her resourcefulness. Finally, she takes Michael's own knife to strike and deliver what she thinks to be the final blow for the psychopathic killer. As stated earlier, Creed finds that the slasher genre arises castration anxiety by representing the woman in the twin roles of castrated and castrator" (127), but Laurie takes the phallic knife away from the killer and uses the weapon Michael killed her friends with, successfully turning it against him. Laurie successfully goes through the metamorphosis from the powerless to the powerful, illustrating Creed's theory according to which the woman is more than capable of performing the act of castration in order to defend herself. Thinking that Michael is finally dead, Laurie immediately goes to check up on the children she was babysitting and sends them to get help. However, Michael rises once more and is finally shot down by Dr. Loomis. A male character shooting the killer at the end of the film could imply the end of progressiveness for Laurie as she is seemingly stripped of the possibility to save herself. However, up until that point, Laurie has managed to save herself by herself three times due to nothing but her own quick-wittedness and Dr. Loomis did not actually manage to put a definite end to Michael Myers as he continued to spread terror in further installments of the *Halloween* franchise. Realizing that she is now safe (for the time being) Laurie covers her mouth with her bloody hands and shuts her eyes, choosing to eliminate the power of her own gaze (Mulvey 45) as she is shown traumatized by the horror and violence she witnessed.

Laurie's proactiveness within the narrative is unquestionable, also in that she firstly takes care of the children whom she is babysitting, before deciding to face Michael alone. More often will the Final Girl decide to face the killer alone, only after all her defense options and possibilities have been exhausted (Harper 39). In addition, when the Final Girl does face the antagonist, she uses her own methods of self-defense and attack, rarely responding with a "traditional aggressive outburst" (ibid. 39). Laurie Strode is neither too feminine nor too masculine, and with this, adheres to Clover's theory of the Final Girl in detail. As Kendall R.

Phillips in his work *Projected Fears: Horror Films and American Culture* points out, Laurie acts like a true mother to Tommy on numerous occasions "... in which she assuages his fears, chastises him for his naughtiness, and even tries to elevate his reading material" (139). Laurie's mastery of the domestic sphere is even more emphasized during the final showdown between her and Michael. Her familiarity with the house and her surroundings helps her utilize the space in the best way possible in order to hide from Michael. The fact that her mastery of the domestic sphere plays such an important role in her survival raises the issue whether or not Laurie is as masculinized as Clover's Final Girl should be, despite her gender-neutral name. Finally, it is Laurie's familiarity with her feminine side which plays a crucial role in her survival. A point could be made by saying that what ultimately saves Laurie is her mastery of the domestic sphere, her virginity and the feminine aspects of her character rather than the masculine ones – up to the point where she is ultimately rescued by Dr. Loomis. In accordance with Mulvey's theory, the dominant role of the savior somewhat in control of the events within the film narrative is ultimately given to a male character, even though he also failed to put a final stop to Michael, as slasher films tend to have further installments with the killer coming back to kill again. Laurie is left punished and victimized by the terrible ordeal she went through that also left her friends dead. As a Final Girl she is undeniably proactive and effective, yet remains under the restraint of the patriarchal norms and stereotype enforced by the slasher film according to which the only the virginal girl survives and is deemed worthy of it, yet still has to be punished for being a woman. However, Laurie represents at least a partially positive change and a movement towards a more powerful portrayal of the Final Girl, paving the way for Final Girls such as Sidney Prescott in 1996 *Scream*.

### 3.1.2. *Scream (1996): Sidney Prescott*

Wes Craven's 1996 slasher film *Scream* introduced an interesting new concept. It revolves about the knowledge of typical slasher film narrative and everything it entails, simultaneously mocking the slasher film tropes. The characters are in a horror film and use their own knowledge of the slasher genre to their own advantage, deconstructing the narrative of the film itself as the plot moves forward. Although the characters mock the plot they themselves are in and the horror genre clichés occurring around them, they still manage to fall prey to the gruesome slasher narrative. The film opens with a pretty, blonde girl named Casey who is home alone. She looks innocent enough for a Final Girl and, being that she is the first one to be introduced, the audience expects it.<sup>9</sup> Yet, she is brutally slashed to death by the killer in the first 15 minutes of the film. With a concept like that, it is no surprise that Craven's 90s slasher hit *Scream* delivers quite a particular Final Girl in the form of Sidney Prescott.

In 1996 *Scream*, the audience first meets Sidney as a high school student trying to come to terms with her mother's brutal murder the year before. On the anniversary of her mother's death, a series of gruesome murders starts happening in her neighborhood and Sidney as well as her friends become victims of terrifying phone calls and attacks by a killer in a ghost face mask, known as Ghost Face. Three films were released after this one, and in each one Sidney goes from being the terrorized victim at the beginning to becoming the heroine who defeats the killer at the end of the film. By doing so, Sidney completes Clover's aforementioned shift from the powerless to powerful. At first glance, Sidney Prescott fits perfectly into Clover's mold of the stereotypical Final Girl. Alongside her seemingly good girl attitude, modest and tomboyish fashion looks and an androgynous name, the beautiful Sidney is also a virgin – thus embodying the most important characteristics of the Final Girl,

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<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Casey is played by Drew Barrymore who was the biggest star of in the film in 1996, making it obvious she was to be the Final Girl.

as described by Clover. However, with the new concept wherein which the character mocks the stereotypical ideas promoted by the slasher films, Craven also decided to introduce a Final Girl different from her predecessors. In contrast with the traditional expectations the audience would have of the slasher films up to this point, Craven removed tradition from *Scream* by having Sidney engage in sexual relations with her boyfriend Billy in the last half hour of the film. A Final Girl is usually accompanied by a boyfriend,<sup>10</sup> regardless of whether she is sexually active or not. This is the most common way of emphasizing the sexual attitude of the Final Girl, who is either the virginal or the repressed type (Harper 37). Having Sidney sleep with her boyfriend, after making comments how women who have sex in slasher films always die, places her in stark contrast to the Final Girls that came before her and Clover's theory. Although Sidney is given a background of emotional issues and trauma keeping her from having sex with her boyfriend, when she ultimately triumphs over the two killers, the Final Girl is no longer a virgin. Interestingly, the first time the audience sees Sidney, she is in her bedroom, wearing a nightgown suitable for an old lady. When her boyfriend Billy climbs up through her bedroom window, she makes it more than clear she is not ready to sleep with him, which is to be expected of the Final Girl. However, before he leaves, Sidney flashes Billy, thus hinting that there is more to her than meets the eye. Contrasting Clover's theory of the stereotypical Final Girl, Sidney breaks out of the box of sexual repression caused by the death of her mother showing that she does not lack sexual interest, nor does she have to pay for it with her life. *Scream* not only mocks the slasher tropes within its own narrative, but also mocks the audience's expectations about the shy and virginal Final Girl. With *Scream* "outing" the slasher genre tropes and clichés, referencing 1987 *Halloween* that birthed the trope of the virginal Final Girl was inevitable. At one point in the film, Stu – revealed to be one of the killers, says to the now devirginized Sidney – "You gave it up. Now you're no

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<sup>10</sup> Unlike Laurie Strode in the first instalment of *Halloween*, who avoided dating altogether.

longer a virgin. Now you've got to die. Those are the rules." (*Scream*). Yet, Sidney breaks the rules of horror by surviving. Moreover, events leading up to Sidney and Billy sleeping together, show that Sidney is much more than a one-dimensional character. Namely, after Sidney finds evidence pointing to Billy as the killer, she turns him in without hesitation. After some time passes and Billy is no longer a suspect, Sidney makes a conscious choice about wanting to have sex with him and shows no sign of regret. This type of flawed behavior and her acting on her emotions and instinct, make Sidney easily relatable, even to the female spectator. Despite engaging in sexual behavior, Sidney does not get killed off as the rest of the characters, reigning as the not so stereotypical Final Girl in all of the sequels following the original *Scream* film. An obvious shift in the dynamics of the slasher genre and its tropes in relation to the 1978 *Halloween* is the fact that teens seem to be far less concerned with issues of morality, virginity and sexual promiscuity (Brewer 44). The idea of the virginal or sexually repressed Final Girl marked the 80s slasher films, before the backlash against the tropes and traditions of the slasher film lead to a turnover of its narrative (Harper 36). Since the 90s, the virginal Final Girl has turned from a trope into a cliché. Not only is the 90s Final Girl more active and a stronger female character than before, she also has the support of her friends surviving "on group dynamics rather than surviving alone" (ibid. 44). As Hutchings points out, the 90s slasher films may still have a central female protagonist, but she is not as isolated as the Final Girl in *Halloween* and *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>*, "instead, and this is particularly true of *Scream* and the *I Know What You Did Last Summer* films, it is the young protagonists acting in concert with each other who manage to defeat the killer" (214). Unlike Laurie Strode, who faces Michael Myers all on her own without her friends not even being able to see the killer lurking in the shadows and sense something amiss until it is too late; Sidney has the luxury of being able to rely on the help of her horror connoisseur friends, alongside her own resourcefulness and wits.

In accordance with the new 90s concept introduced by Craven's *Scream*, when Sidney is asked why she does not watch scary movies, she says: "Because they're all the same. It's always some stupid killer stalking some big breasted girl who can't act, who always runs up the stairs when she should be going out the front door. It's insulting." (*Scream*). In *Halloween*, Laurie makes the grave mistake of running into the house and up the stairs when Michael comes after her. By pointing out the Final Girl trope, Sidney gains power over it, turning it into a cliché. However, when Sidney finds herself in the same situation, chased by Ghost Face and running for her life, she immediately runs up the stairs rather than out the door, committing the same mistake as Laurie.

Sidney, as opposed to Laurie is completely robbed of her power to look most of the time with the killer harassing her over the phone. (Harper 38-39). As the killer is able to watch her every move from a safe distance, Sidney is unable to see him, with the camera showing close-ups of her face changing its expression from amusement at first to horror as her conversation with the killer progresses. This makes the audience feel as if they are watching Sidney from the killer's point of view, turning Sidney into an object of the voyeuristic gaze of both the killer on screen and audience in front of it. Thus, Sidney she fails to return the gaze of a male who desires her allowing him to watch her with no danger that she will return the look (Mulvey 61). Not only is Sidney unable to see the killer, but she also mistakenly accuses another character, Cotton Weary, for the murder of her mother. When confronted by the reporter Gale Weathers, Sidney punches her in straight in the face as she knows Gale is writing a book about the murder of her mother. By doing so, Sidney makes herself easily relatable as she acts on her emotions and instinct – whether she is happy, angry or sad, she shows it. When she is ultimately given the power of the look, Sidney discovers that her boyfriend Billy and his best friend Stu are in fact the real killers. As slasher films typically have one psychopathic killer stalking and murdering his victims, Craven also made



a step forward, opting to place two individuals in the position of the killer. In accordance with its new concept, *Scream* features Sidney's boyfriend Billy both as the dominant male of the narrative as well as the killer/monster. During the final showdown, it is revealed that Sidney's mother was Billy's father's lover. Billy blames her for the destruction of his family and after killing her mother a year ago, he now seeks revenge on Sidney, as he views her as the non-castrated mother or a representation of his own weak father (Brewer 35). This implies that Billy wants to kill Sidney for the fear of himself getting castrated. Unknowingly giving in to the desire of the monster, Sidney escapes with her life but is left to suffer the consequences.

Both Billy and Stu were using a knife to kill their victims during their murder spree as Ghost Face, whereas Sidney attacks Billy with an umbrella, piercing his chest. While Billy stands in front of the closet, a scene from *Halloween* with Laurie hiding in the closet, with Michael attacking her, is shown playing on the TV. In contrast to Laurie, Sidney leaps from the closet wearing the Ghost Face mask and black robe, attacking Billy. The Final Girl reverses the roles, placing herself in the position of the monster not only by attacking her antagonist but also by visually taking on the form the audience has associated with the monster up until this point. Sidney is very much active in her predetermined role of the Final Girl but is also stepping out of the frame, choosing not to be a victim. After rendering Billy unconscious, Sidney kills Stu by pulling the TV on his head, electrocuting him. When Billy comes to and attacks her, Sidney's only weapon is her own finger which she sticks into the wound on Billy's chest with her being the one "penetrating" him now. Finally, mirroring the scene from *Halloween* where Dr. Loomis shoots Michael seemingly killing him, Gale shoots Billy in the chest saving Sidney – a woman saving a woman. Just as the audience is coming to terms with the Final Girl not delivering the final blow, Billy rises once more. Completely unfazed, Sidney pulls the trigger of the gun she took from Gale, looking Billy dead in the eye whilst killing him, stating: "Not in my movie" (*Scream*). This is the point where Sidney

completely breaks the boundaries of the stereotypical Final Girl resulting in *Scream* rising above the traditional slasher film narrative.

Sidney is the Final Girl who takes control of her own fate. She does not linger or watch as things happen to her. In accordance with the concept of the film, Sidney recognizes herself as the Final Girl, fighting to break out of the role. In order to do so, this Final Girl has to create her own narrative, which she ultimately manages to do. Adhering to the Final Girl trope in the beginning, Sidney shatters them one by one as the story progresses. Contrasting to earlier slasher films, *Scream* introduces female characters surrounding Sidney who are equally as courageous and resourceful, without taking their femininity away from them or gratuitously sexualizing them. Opposing Mulvey's statement that women are "bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of a woman still tied to her place as the bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning" (50) by creating her own narrative and subverting the Final Girl Trope, Sidney shows that she in fact is the maker of meaning.

### 3.1.3. *You're Next* (2011): Erin Harson

The third and last Final Girl that will be discussed in the paper is the heroine of Adam Wingard's 2011 home invasion slasher film *You're Next*. Unlike *Halloween* and *Scream*, *You're Next* did not leave such a significant mark within the slasher genre itself, but it did bring an interesting and entertaining new Final Girl to the foreground – Erin Harson. The plot of *You're Next* revolves around a family being attacked and brutally murdered by a group of assailants in animal masks. The masked killers on the rampage are set to murder everyone present at the family reunion in a brutal murder spree, unaware of the fact that this Final Girl is a force to be reckoned with.

The film opens with a couple having sex and getting brutally murdered soon after, falling victim to one of the basic slasher genre tropes. The woman gets killed first, without

her murder being shown. When the man comes back from the bathrooms, he discovers her dead body on the floor with the words “you’re next” written in blood on the bedroom window. Immediately, he starts to panic and is killed by a person wearing an animal mask and wielding a machete. This scene serves as an introduction to the gruesome murders that are about to happen in the house next door and as a slasher film staple, showing two people getting punished for giving into their bodily desire.

When the wealthy family meets up in the mansion to celebrate the parents’ anniversary, the olive-skinned Erin immediately stands out from the rest of the lot with her attitude. As her predecessors Laurie and Sidney, Erin also carries a unisex name – but this is where the similarity between her and the above-discussed Final Girls (more or less) stops. Carrying the same name as the 2003 *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* Final Girl, Erin crosses the boundaries of the Final Girl trope even before arriving to her boyfriend Crispian parents’ countryside mansion by insisting that they stop for alcohol. She knows how to indulge herself and is not portrayed as viceless, making her relatable from the get go. Furthermore, Erin and Crispian are in what seems to be a serious adult relationship, making it doubtful that their relationship is non-sexual or that Erin is a virgin. As this issue is not addressed at all during the duration of the film, it is safe to say that this Final Girl also has no issue with her sexuality. Within the first 15 minutes of the film, the audience is made aware that Erin is far from the stereotypical Final Girl who shies away from sex due to personal issues or unresolved trauma and is vice-free. Erin is neither the virginal nor the sexually repressed Final Girl, representing a noticeable shift from 1978 *Halloween* and Laurie Strode. She transcends the trope of the stereotypical Final Girl who is marked by past trauma standing in the way of her present sexual relations and life in general. Similar to Sidney, Erin demonstrates that “she is not separate from the male: she too has sexual feelings that must have an outlet; she too is strong-skilled and assertive” (Terrones 26).

When the brutal killings at the mansion begin – starting with two people getting impaled by crossbow arrows – Erin's initial reaction does not include either screaming or running away. Unlike Crispian's mother Aubrey, who reacts by screaming hysterically, Erin does not display reactions signaling femininity such as “crying, cowering, screaming, fainting (or) trembling” (Clover 300). Erin displays emotions of surprise and fear at first, but within moments she composes herself swiftly switching to survival mode by trying to bring everyone who is still alive to safety. Soon after, Erin reveals that she was raised on a survivalist compound and is trained in combat. This fact removes Erin from the Final Girl trope instantly, as she is fully prepared to fight for her life at any given time. Whereas Laurie and Sidney go through the Final Girl metamorphosis, Erin is not portrayed as a victim at any point within the narrative, as she is her own hero from the very start.

In contrast to *Halloween* and *Scream*, *You're Next* does not portray events happening over the course of days, but over the course of a single night, adding to the violence the Final Girl is forced to endure. In comparison to Laurie who survived with just a wound on her arm, Sidney faced carnage that left her covered in sweat and blood, yet her face was completely clean with her make up practically untouched. By the end of *You're Next*, Erin is covered in her own blood and that of other people, with splatters of blood covering her face. Looking completely disheveled Erin steps away from the stereotypical standard of beauty to which even Sidney adhered with her clean face. Within one night, Erin is faced with and single handedly kills three masked killers, alongside Felix and Zee who are revealed as the ones that arranged the murders as well as Crispian. The brutality of the murders in *You're Next* is incomparable with that of *Halloween* or *Scream*, as 5 killers are placed in one house and are given a broad array of weapons to conduct the murders, including a machete, garrote wire, an axe and a knife. Similar to Laurie, Erin uses household appliances to defend herself, however she does so for entirely different reasons. Erin is not familiar with Crispian's

parents' mansion, but shows resourcefulness in the Terrible Place, due to her survivalist father teaching her to set homemade traps and to react to danger with a sense of calm. At one point in the film, Crispian asks Erin: "Where is Felix?" Erin follows with a response: "I put a blender on his head and killed him" (*You're Next*, Dir. Adam Wingard, 2011). Throughout the entire ordeal, Erin defies Clover's and William's notion of the woman serving as a mere spectacle. She is not the "bearer of the wound" (Mulvey 34) but inflicts these onto others both male and female characters, without hesitation. Erin turns the tables on her assailants in the blink of an eye, turning them into her victims. This type of behavior, unexpected from a woman whose image is controlled by the patriarchal society, places Erin in the role of Creed's monstrous feminine who defies societal expectations of what a woman should be like.

Using household appliances to fight and finish off the killers one by one, Erin fights against the patriarchal symbols of oppression. Whereas Laurie was not given the chance to deliver the final blow to her assailant, Sidney got the chance to kill Billy due to Gale's intervention; with the killers fulfilling another slasher trope wherein they rise once more after falling to the ground, seemingly dead, to attack their victims one last time. In *You're Next* the Final Girl Erin does everything completely by herself without relying on anyone. Erin is also the one to deliver the final blow to none other than her boyfriend Crispian who is revealed to be one of the minds behind the killings which served as a way of collecting the family inheritance. Like Sidney, Erin is faced with the grisly truth of her boyfriend being revealed as the monster and the cause of her ordeal. Crispian's attempt at persuading her not to kill him only makes Erin angry to the point that she ultimately stabs him to death with a knife, thus destroying the monster and freeing herself from male control. According to Clover, the slasher film resolves the male castration anxiety by phallicizing the Final Girl, thus allowing her to destroy the villain. Yet, as mentioned earlier in the paper, Barbara Creed claims that the slasher genre

“actively seeks to arouse castration anxiety so in relation to the issue of whether or not the woman is castrated” (127). One could say that Erin is the embodiment of Creed’s monstrous feminine by defying the societally imposed image of the stereotypical, expected and accepted feminine behavior whilst single-handedly taking out a total of five killers in one night. Before Erin kills Crispian, he tells her: “Had you reacted normally, my parents and siblings would have been killed, you’d have been untouched, and we’d be rich.” (*You’re Next*). A normal reaction expected of a woman would have been screaming, running away and hiding when facing terror, but Erin did the complete opposite, leaving both the characters on screen as well as the audience surprised with the capabilities and fighting skills. Finally, after killing her boyfriend, Erin is shot in her shoulder by a police officer witnessing Crispian’s death, there perceiving Erin as the monster.

In the end, Erin adheres to some rules of the Final Girl in that she has good intension and wishes to help and save everyone around her but fails to do so. She is strong, pretty and resilient in the fight for her own life ultimately bringing a stop to the antagonists. However, she shatters some of the rules by not playing the victim at any given time by staying focused on keeping herself alive and setting her own booby traps all around the house. Not to forget that she was raised on a survivalist compound starkly contrasting her with Laurie and Sidney who are portrayed as simple teenage girls having to metamorphose from the role of the victim to that of a hero. As relatable as Erin was up until the point of confessing her past, certainly this fact would affect her level of relatability. Finally, the credits of the film reveal that Erin is the prime suspect in the murders that happened in the mansion as she is the only one left alive. Although it is unclear whether she will eventually be accused or not, as there are no further installments, the ending likely serves as a punishment for Erin for staying alive.

#### 4. Conclusion

While representation of women in film may not be the most imperative of issues in today's society, the importance of media and their influence on society and vice versa is undeniable. Society's fascination with film, which plays on socially established patriarchal formations and ingrained social expectations for how both women and men should look and behave thus enforcing particular social constructs, is therefore not surprising. At this point, the question whether art imitates life or life imitates art becomes a difficult one to answer. Considering that women have been and still are presented as passive objects exposed to the male fetishistic gaze within the world of art and specifically film, it is not surprising that the key character of the slasher film arouses this much interest. In a world where the quickest way to make money is by objectifying and mutilating women, the much-debated female heroine is brought to the foreground by none other than a subgenre of horror branded as violent and misogynistic. However, the fact that the horror genre has accumulated such a massive audience throughout the years which it can influence by sending a message different than that of the mainstream cinema makes it less of a surprise.

Not only an erotic object used for the pleasure of the male spectator, the Final Girl is also an object of violence – a position she needs to rise above in order to survive. She does so by adapting, fighting and adopting a type of behavior socially accepted as typical masculine behavior. This fluidity of the Final Girl in terms of gender traits has led to the emergence of different and opposing interpretations of the trope. While some view her as an epitome of a stereotypical female corresponding to a conservative mindset, and point out that in order to survive and face the killer, the woman needs to assume more “masculine” traits, others note that leaving the woman as the last survivor in the film bring the male audience to the point of identification with the female character who is left alive to tell the tale. It is difficult not to recognize the importance of the Final Girl trope as it enables male spectators to identify with

the female by processing what the woman is processing. Viewing something truly terrifying through the eyes of a woman for whom it is socially acceptable to show fear, the male spectator is given the opportunity to recognize true terror thus identifying with her trouble. Furthermore, it is safe to say that the Final Girl is no less of a female for adopting behavior tougher than expected of her by society, in order to fight for her life and survive.

On the example of the three Final Girl analyzed in this paper, it is evident that progress has been made in the portrayal of the last woman left alive in the slasher film. Each of them faithful to the basic characteristics of the Final Girl trope in varying degrees, they are also reflections of the period during which they emerged. The Final Girl is certainly not a stagnant trope. Changing with every new slasher film, the Final Girl has evolved from the teen whose life is saved by her virginity to the self-composed woman who can handle a threat. Whichever way one chooses to interpret the character of the Final Girl, one cannot deny the fact that the slasher film makes an effort to adjust the viewpoint of the spectator with that of the Final Girl in order for the spectator to truly experience horror thus eliminating the option of her position to be described as an exclusively demeaning one. As a female character allowed displaying both her weakness and strength, the Final Girl is the hero of her own story. Ranging from the virginal and maternal Laurie Strode in John Carpenter's *Halloween*, over devirginized but vice-less Sidney in Wes Craven's *Scream* to the distinctively tough and self-indulging Erin in Adam Wingard's *You're Next*, the Final Girl trope has undoubtedly evolved since its establishment. Once standing for the moralistic, prudish, victimized and masculinized woman, it is safe to say that the Final Girl trope has gone through its own process of metamorphosis into a more positive portrayal of women in horror. However, viewing slasher films as making a commentary on society and the position of women being reflected on screen through its particular narrative, whether the evolution of the Final Girl trope on the basis of the three analyzed heroines is completely positive remains debatable.



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## 6. FINAL GIRL: ANALYSIS OF THE SLASHER FILM TROPE:

### Abstract

Portrayal of women in film has always been a topic of discussion. As a subgenre of horror, the slasher film comments on the position of women within society through various tropes. The character of the Final Girl is the key trope of the slasher film narrative as well as the one raising the most questions. Established in Tobi Hooper's 1974 *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, the Final Girl represents the last girl left alive to confront the killer. She possesses a certain set of traits which set her apart from other characters. What makes the Final Girl trope the most interesting is its fluidity in terms of gender. Due to its various characteristics, the trope has been interpreted differently by feminist film critics, including Laura Mulvey and Carol J. Clover who coined the term Final Girl. On one hand, the character of the Final Girl is viewed as an embodiment of negative stereotypes depicting what a woman should be, whereas on the other, the character is said to force the male spectator to identify with a female character. Keeping some of its original traits, the Final Girl trope has been evolving over the course of decades. The main purpose of this paper is to offer insight into the Final Girl trope and its on-going conventions. The aim was to analyse the evolution of the Final Girl trope on the basis of three following slasher films – John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978), Wes Craven's *Scream* (1998), and Adam Wingard's *You're Next* (2011).

Key words: stereotype, slasher film, Final Girl, feminist film critique

## 7. FINAL GIRL: ANALIZA KLJUČNOG ELEMENTA SLASHER FILMA

### Sadržaj

Prikaz žena u filmu neiscrpan je izvor rasprava. Kao podžanr horora, slasher daje vlastiti komentar na poziciju žene u društvu putem prepoznatljivih konvencija. Ključan te ujedno najzanimljiviji element slasher filma je poznat pod nazivom Final Girl. Obilježja lika Final Girl etablirana su u slasher filmu Tobija Hoopera *Teksaški masakr motornom pilom* iz 1974. Final Girl predstavlja jedini lik u slasher filmu koji preživi brutalna ubojstva i suočava se s ubojicom. Ona posjeduje određene karakteristike koje ju izdvajaju od ostalih likova u filmu pri čemu se kao njeno najzanimljivije obilježje ističe rodna fluidnost. Njene specifične karakteristike tema su različitih teoretiziranja unutar feminističke filmske kritike, a njima se u svojem radu bave Laura Mulvey i Carol J. Clover koja je liku i nadjenula naziv Final Girl. S jedne strane, lik Final Girl biva percipiran kao stereotipan prikaz toga kakva bi žena trebala biti, dok se s druge strane ističe kako se radi o ključnom elementu slasher filma koji prisiljava muškarca da se poistovjeti s likom žene. Lik Final Girl evoluirao je tijekom posljednjih nekoliko desetljeća, zadržavajući pritom svoja temeljna obilježja. Cilj ovog rada je dati uvid u obilježja i lik Final Girl kao ključnog elementa slasher filma te prikazati i analizirati njegovu evoluciju na temelju tri slasher filma – *Noć vještica* (1978) redatelja Johna Carpentera, *Vrisak* (1998) redatelja Wesa Cravena te *Ti si sljedećia(i)* redatelja Adama Wingarda.

Ključne riječi: stereotip, slasher film, lik Final Girl, feministička filmska teorija



