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## Queer Slashers

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**QUEER SLASHERS**

by

**PETER MARRA**

**DISSERTATION**

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

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MAJOR: ENGLISH (Film & Media Studies)

Approved By:

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Advisor

Date

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## **DEDICATION**

For Jon, without whom this would not be possible

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## INTRODUCTION

*Queer Slashers* began with an image. A frame from the mystery thriller *Night Must Fall* (Richard Thorpe, 1937) starring Robert Montgomery as a winking, handsome serial killer who carries with him a hat box presumed to contain his former victim's head. Except for the severed head, and the killing, he is a charming gent. In the film's closing scene, Montgomery's character, having been arrested for his murders, faces himself in the mirror and says "I've been playing up to you," pointing toward his reflection. "I showed you a thing or two, didn't I? This is the real thing." The image is carefully staged at a seemingly impossible angle in which Montgomery faces the mirror, and yet the mirror reflection appears unobstructed, facing back at the camera, giving the impression that his mirror reflection is speaking, and pointing, directly at the audience of the film. The uncomfortable moment feels deeply implicating, as if the viewer, who has followed this murderous protagonist for the duration of the film, is being spoken to and about in his moment of self-confession. His indication that he has been playing up to us, showing us a thing or two, seems to refer both to his murderous exploits and his facile interplay with sophisticated British society. He is able to charm his way into the home of the respectable Mrs. Bramson (Dame May Whitty), convincing all but her niece (Rosalind Russell) of his kindness, and plot Bramson's death in her midst. "This is the real thing," is a confession and acknowledgement of his final moments being his first and only honest moments in the film, of the acting he has done up until now to conform to society. It confirms his status as an outsider, a killer, who has passed for some time as someone who is "normal."

A commonly described innovation of Alfred Hitchcock's 1960 horror film *Psycho* is its development of discomfort through its use of a charming, socially passable killer, Norman Bates, who is revealed only in its finale to be a murderer. Often said to further this innovation is the film's

distinct alignment of the audience with that character through first-person camera techniques, especially its POV shower murder, as well as through crucial moments in plot – for example, the suspenseful moments of worrying Norman might be caught as we see Marion’s car stall before it finally sinks out of sight in the lake. The image from *Night Must Fall*, which directly situates the viewer in the POV of a killer and deeply implicates them in his crime, undermines arguments that strictly pinpoint 1960 as the year audiences first identified with a killer, someone who is “not normal.”

This project therefore begins by positioning *Psycho* within a larger timeline of formal and thematic innovations surrounding killers who appear normal and the audience’s relation with them. This includes films prior to 1960 with implicating images of POV murder, such as *The Spiral Staircase* (Robert Siodmak, 1945), *The Lodger* (John Brahm, 1944), *Hangover Square* (John Brahm, 1945) and *High Wall* (Curtis Bernhardt, 1947). These films undermine a conventional genre timeline in horror cinema suggesting 1960 is the year where audiences enter the perspective of a killer and raise questions about both the historical trajectory of this device and the deeper implications suggested by its earlier use. *Psycho*’s position as forebear to the slasher film, most popularly seen in the canonical slasher cycle of 1978-85 in films such as *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978) and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven, 1984), must therefore be reconsidered in this larger historical context, acknowledging how POV killers predate Norman Bates. Bates, commonly described as the cornerstone for understanding the influence of pre-slasher cinematic killers on the popular slasher subgenre, must now share this history with even earlier figures, such as Laird Cregar’s murderous characters in *The Lodger* and *Hangover Square*.

Looking at this larger canon of films, it grows apparent a provocative component of the films’ depictions of their killers is a seemingly self-aware connotation of queerness about the

characters, which often extended to casting queer or queer-coded performers in these roles. A brief overview of notable queer men used in this capacity include Ivor Novello in *The Lodger* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1927) and *The Lodger* [also released as *The Phantom Fiend*] (Maurice Elvey, 1932), Farley Granger and John Dall in *Rope* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1948), Laird Cregar in *The Lodger* (John Brahm, 1944) and *Hangover Square* (John Brahm, 1945), Anthony Perkins in *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960), Victor Buono in *The Strangler* (Burt Topper, 1964), Sal Mineo in *Who Killed Teddy Bear* (Joseph Cates, 1965), and Tab Hunter in *Sweet Kill* (Curtis Hanson, 1972). Considered collectively, a pattern of gender and sexual non-normativity begins to emerge as an additional factor linking these killer/queer figures with the likes of the cross-dressing Leatherface of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974) or the campy child molester Freddy Krueger from *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. This larger lineage of characters raises questions about what to do or, better yet, what might be done with the ways in which queerness has been threaded through twentieth century killer representations, especially as it pertains to traits of the slasher subgenre. *Queer Slashers* ultimately seeks to address this queer lineage of the slasher and its queer functions in cinema history.

Not all queers in U.S. cinema are killers and not all killers are queer. Yet the frequent success of the formulaic combination of the two speaks to a particularly symbiotic entwinement. *Queer Slashers* examines a significant overlap in U.S. film history of queerness with the stalking killers popularly seen in U.S. slasher movies, including those of the canonical slasher cycle (1978-85), as well as in early slashers of the 1960s and 70s, and in very early precursors to the slasher from the 1930s and 40s whose stylistic and thematic influences have often been overlooked. Through analysis of these media texts, *Queer Slashers* argues that slasher films invite queer engagements by staging collisions between a sexually deviant outsider, the "slasher" figure, and

icons of American normativity: heterosexual teenage couples, suburbia, the prom, and summer camp, among others.

To do so, *Queer Slashers* draws on horror and slasher scholarship along with queer theory and LGBT history. Slasher scholarship has already considered the ways in which gender plays an important role in the construction of the slasher formula. Much of this work has focused on the representation of women, especially patterns of violence against women. *Queer Slashers* seeks to make additional observations about the ways in which femininity more broadly, especially the characterization of killers as femme, sissy, trans or non-binary, has been a crucial component in the history of the genre. It argues that the killer and the survivors of the slasher can be read as queer, or non-normative, whereas the primary victims of the slasher often abide normative conventions of culture, including gender and sexuality. *Queer Slashers* interweaves close readings of slasher media with theoretical conceptions by scholars such as Michael Warner, Eve Sedgwick, and Cathy J. Cohen, which posit queerness as an intersectional political resistance to normativity, including but not limited to LGBT identities. Thinking in these terms, *Queer Slashers* refers often to the films' "queer resonance," or evocation of this normative resistance through plot, style, and theme. It also considers queerness in these films through their "normative dissonance," or discordance with normative cultural structures and ideologies. Using LGBT history, *Queer Slashers* seeks to recognize important historical developments in the social awareness of LGBT identities, including political advocacy such as the homophile movement of the 1950s and gay liberation movement of the 1960s and 70s, as a meaningful context in which the slasher evolves. While no particular historical event motivates or necessitates the slasher's development and rise to prominence, the fact of this history interestingly shapes what we know about the slasher and



invites a consideration of how audiences may have seen and understood the potential for “queer resonance” in these films.

Through this study, *Queer Slashers* begins to explain the complex connections between the slasher and queerness, which seem persistent despite troubling homophobic and transphobic characterizations in the films that initially seem more likely to spur derision among queer viewers. While the films’ associations between murderousness and queerness have in the past been read as degrading and dehumanizing, *Queer Slashers* contends that they additionally invite queer engagements from all viewers through a pleasurable resistance to norms manifested in the visual metaphor of violence. The slasher figure in these films has in many cases been the most compelling character, especially when contrasted with the prototypical teen victims he dispatches, who invite minimal sympathy. This structure makes the slasher figure, who commonly bears queer connotations of sexual and gender non-normativity and who is typically a social outsider, often more appealing as a point of association to audiences. This is shared with the film’s most rational and competent teen protagonists who typically survive the film and, like the slasher, are commonly depicted as outsiders, again often with specific references to gender and sexual non-normativity. This queer perspective shifts how the slasher has typically been read in terms of gender and sexuality by shifting from a heteronormative to a queer perspective on sexuality. Thinking of queerness as an intersectional political resistance to normativity offers a language to verbalize how and why the slasher figure, however homophobic, may remain attractive to queer audiences. Though volatile, the slasher figure does communicate through his violence a critique of white middleclass heteronormative characters, rituals, and spaces – an act consistent with a queer political resistance to normativity.

### **Scholarly Context**

In 1993, Alexander Doty cited a need for a proper queer reading of the horror film. In this call, he alluded to that which is already so potently queer about horror. He describes how “the central conventions of horror...actually encourage queer positioning” and, consequently, how “everyone’s pleasure in [horror] is ‘perverse,’ is queer, as much of it takes place within the space of the contra-heterosexual and the contra-straight.”<sup>1</sup> Doty’s take on the queerness of horror is two-fold: that there is a unique space for queer readings of horror because of its violent distortions of heterosexuality, normative gender roles, etc. and that horror is also universally queer, that is positions *everyone* queerly. This is consistent with his larger stance about “queer moments” attributable to both straight and queer viewers.

In 1997, Harry Benshoff answered Doty’s call in an explicit study of this kind with *Monsters in the Closet*. Benshoff’s study interprets the allegorical qualities of the horror film as expressions of an “outsider” perspective that commonly speaks to a queerly positioned spectator. Benshoff determines that “horror stories and monster movies, perhaps more than any other genre, actively invoke queer readings, because of their obvious metaphorical (non-realist) forms and narrative formats which disrupt the heterosexual status quo.”<sup>2</sup> This continues a scholarly trajectory for perceiving the horror genre as a uniquely queer formulation apt for queer moments, queer readings, and queer positions. Like Doty, Benshoff also identifies a place for both straight and queer audiences in this practice. He articulates the experience of horror film as one like Bakhtin’s formulation of Carnival in which there are strict time parameters binding a finite celebration of deviance. However, queer viewers, he states, are more likely not to return from this place of deviance. Rather, they live there. Speaking of the particularly important role for the queer viewer in this practice, Benshoff states that “the cinematic monster’s subjective position is more readily

acceded to by a queer viewer – someone who already situates him/herself outside a patriarchal, heterosexist order and the popular culture texts that it produces”<sup>3</sup>

This overlapping investment in both queerness as belonging to unique perspectives and as a general position to be taken in terms of spectatorship can be elucidated using Eve Sedgwick’s theory about simultaneous overlap between “universalizing” and “minoritizing” understandings of homosexuality, which she describes as such.

the contradiction between seeing homo/heterosexual definition on the one hand as an issue of active importance primarily for a small, distinct, relatively fixed homosexual minority (what I refer to as the minoritizing view), and seeing it, on the other hand as an issue of continuing, determinative importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities (what I refer to as a universalizing view).<sup>4</sup>

According to Sedgwick, this contradictory overlap motivates the phenomenon of the “homosexual panic” as the perceived gay identity of the minority victim also universally implicates the attacker in a questioning of his own sexuality. Such a construction allows us to think about how horror films deal with the minority queer subject – psycho, slasher or other – yet also reflect back on both the diegetic “normals” and the mainstream audience of the film. Queer audiences are at once engaged individually from an explicitly queer subjectivity and yet still collectively have a part in a more universalized experience of queer pleasure across all audiences.

“Queer” has long been an intersectional and interdisciplinary concept characterized by conversations questioning the essential identity of gender, sex, and race and critiquing the heteronormative discourses and systems of power that structure these concepts. In his introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet*, Michael Warner articulates the breadth of the term by invoking a range of arenas for stigma & social dissonance.

Every person who comes to a queer self-understanding knows in one way or another that her stigmatization is connected with gender, the family, notions of individual freedom, the state, public speech, consumption and desire, nature and

culture, maturation, reproductive politics, racial and national fantasy, class identity, truth and trust, censorship, intimate life and social display, terror and violence, health care, and deep cultural norms about the bearing of the body.<sup>5</sup>

Here Warner articulates a queer self-understanding as a stigmatized relation to cultural norms. Gender and sexuality might be components of these relations, but they are far from the totality of these intersectional positions. Instead of using queer synonymously with LGBT identities, Warner's conception of queer contextualizes LGBT identities within a wide range of marginalized relations to normative structures of power seen in constructions such as "the family" and "racial and national fantasy." By Warner's definition, queerness includes but exceeds LGBT communities, instead focusing on shared experiences of stigma in relation to normativity affecting LGBT people, women, people of color, disabled people, migrants, workers, and others.

This intersectional approach to queer theory and queer politics is carried forward in Cathy J. Cohen's characterization of "queer" as a category more complex than merely oppositional to "straight." Considering the role of power in the restricted experiences of gender and sexual minority groups, Cohen advocates to further queer politics' connections to other groups marginalized by such power. She describes an investment in "examining the concept of 'queer' in order to think about how we might construct a new political identity that is truly liberating, transformative, and inclusive of all those who stand on the outside of the dominant constructed norm of state-sanctioned white middle-and upper-class heterosexuality."<sup>6</sup> She calls for "a politics where the non-normative and marginal positions of punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens, for example, is the basis for progressive transformative coalition work"<sup>7</sup> As with Warner's conception of queerness, Cohen posits a need to address more comprehensively the normative power structures which oppress and constrain "queer" individuals, referring to "queer" both as it is commonly understood – gender and sexually non-normative people – and to the greater queer

collective distinguished as oppositional to normativity by a wide range of factors, including class, race, ability, and social practice.

A push within horror studies to recognize the ways in which these categories are always overlapping rather than individualistic can be seen in calls to acknowledge rather than repress the manner in which physical disability underlays many critical readings of the horror genre as a site for explorations of social difference. In *Hideous Progeny*, Angela M. Smith makes the case that a reading of the monster in horror films as a metaphor for marginalized identities of class, race, gender, or sexuality “depends upon an ableist and eugenic framework in which visible disability is a powerful sign of physiological and moral defect.”<sup>8</sup> Within the Horror field we need to connect rather than fragment these stigmatized positions in relation to normativity. A queer approach to Horror ought to label the moments for collaborative work to think through the way in which a reading of a film in terms of gender and sexual difference might be relying at times on physical difference and disability to motivate its critique. Furthermore, such an approach also ought to identify the way in which the positions of LGBTQ and disabled individuals share relational potential as a collective category, queer, resisting a collective - social, physical, and political - normativity.

This conception of queerness drives my assertion that the queerness of the slasher film can be found in its staging of collisions between a social outsider, the slasher figure, and icons of American normativity: heterosexual teenagers, suburbia, the prom, and summer camp. There is often a connotation of gender and/or sexual non-normativity attached to the slasher figure. Most often it is a connotation of effeminacy or transness crudely suggested by the killer’s gender expression, backstory, or sexual deviance. In many cases this sexual or gender difference is visually reinforced through a stigmatized physicality. For example, the burned flesh of the killers

in *The Burning* (Tony Maylam, 1981), *Killer Workout* [also released as *Aerobicide*] (David A. Prior, 1987), and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven, 1984). The specificity of LGBT identifiers is less important here than what I commonly call the queer resonance of the character and the normative dissonance expressed in his acts of murder which assault normative figures, rituals, and institutions.

*Queer Slashers* also understands queerness in the ways Eve Sedgwick has phrased it as the “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning.”<sup>9</sup> In these terms, queerness resists the heteronormative impulse that everything is “meant to line up perfectly.”<sup>10</sup> In the case of gender and sexuality, this refusal to “line up” can be seen in the recalibration of relationships and identities such that gender and assigned sex and the gender and assigned sex of object choice do not “line up.” More broadly this queer perspective inflects my understanding of the potential for overlaps and multiplicities. As such I hope to square away little and perhaps suggest threads and possibilities that may coexist complexly and in an intricate array. This project follows Sedgwick’s lead in asking “What if the richest junctures weren’t the ones where everything means the same thing?”<sup>11</sup> Therefore, at many moments I will speak about a variety of possible engagements invited by the slasher, often differently formulated from film to film. I will not make a prescribed 1:1 correlation as if all slashers function uniformly. Instead I hope to highlight patterns shaped by multiple instances where queerness rises to the fore of the subgenre in ways that offer the possibility for rupture, overlap, and change.

Sedgwick’s theorization of queerness as opening up spaces for multiplicity and overlaps of meaning also shapes this project’s queer perspective on the concept of genre. This means I am not interested to formulate rigid criteria for what makes something a slasher or what excludes a film from the slasher category. In the past such categories have been shaped and though they are helpful

in laying foundation to see and understand the relations between films, it is not my intention to rewrite or revise these categories. Instead I would like to think about a queer approach to genre in which multiplicity and overlap are encouraged. Many films might be thought of as slashers as well as other genres/subgenres. Films from other genres may be thought of in context with the slasher. These open possibilities for film genre will hopefully bridge understandings about films more than close off possibilities for intersection.

While the slasher has been loosely periodized as a trend from 1978-1985, I argue that its legacy is one that can be situated within a larger body of American films. Central to this claim is the idea that there is a larger canon of films preceding 1960's *Psycho* with relevant influence on the 80s cycle. The common perception of the slasher as a significant shift in the cultural history of the horror film can be perhaps most succinctly described through the work of Andrew Tudor whose *Monsters and Mad Scientists* describes the difference between pre- and post-1960 horror cinema in clear terms as the difference between "secure" and "paranoid" horror. In Tudor's terms this marked a shift from horror films concerning "collective fears about threatening forces somewhere 'out there'" to those that "[express] a profound insecurity about ourselves" with threats that are "increasingly represented as part of an everyday contemporary landscape."<sup>12</sup> This shift from external terror outside of society to an internal, human threat is marked by a predominant turn away from creature films of the classical period toward the psychological horror of a film such as *Psycho*. Further contributing to this narrative of a crucial shift in 1960 is Vera Dika's study of the "stalker" film (a narrower subset of the slasher) which posits not only that there is no major influence on the stalker/slasher before *Psycho* but also little of note between *Psycho* and the slasher. Of John Carpenter's 1978 film *Halloween* (often cited as the first true slasher), she states, "Much of this surface material has *skipped* a generation, that is, the stalker film is not the product

of an even evolution of elements, but a conscious going *back* to an earlier stage, specifically one that predates the late sixties and early seventies, and is instead taken from works popular in the fifties and early sixties.”<sup>13</sup> This essentially reduces the slasher film to a conversation between John Carpenter and his peers in the 70s and 80s and directors such as Hitchcock circa 1960.

The conversation about the lineage of the slasher has not been entirely devoid of references to a deeper past. Several comprehensive histories of American horror films have noted associations between earlier killers and those that shape the slasher. William Schoell’s *Stay Out Of The Shower* offers a brief discussion of the role of classical Hollywood horror such as *Night Must Fall* (1937) and *The Spiral Staircase* (1945) in his larger study of the “shocker” film, which he credits *Psycho* with pioneering. He notes that these classical Hollywood films “have not had the impact of *Psycho*, nor have any of them been as influential.”<sup>14</sup> True as this may be, Schoell never considers at length the value these films had in shaping the shocker nor answers the question of what their influence on the shocker/slasher tells us about the subgenre. John McCarty’s *Movie Psychos and Madmen* plots a history of the broader category “psychofilm” using psychotic killers in cinema, both human and supernatural, as a template for considering the broader role of the horror film in the collective unconscious. Though his study puts an array of notable classical Hollywood precursors to the slasher such as *The Lodger* (1944) and *While the City Sleeps* (1956) in conversation with *Psycho* and *Halloween*, he deemphasizes the overarching importance of gender and sexual deviance in the representations of these killers and offers no explanation for changes in their representations across the twentieth century save for the occasional influence of true crime stories.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the work which comes closest to positing a valuable connection between classical Hollywood killers and the slasher film is Benshoff’s queer study *Monsters In the Closet*. Though his work on the classical period focuses primarily on queer monster allegories



such as James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1930), he briefly alludes in parts of his book to those human figures of terror that bear a striking resemblance to queer stereotypes of their time. In describing the queer presence of actor Laird Cregar, star of *The Lodger* (1944) and *Hangover Square* (1945), Benschhoff describes how "Cregar played 'sexual psychopaths,' human monsters that predate the sexually confused killers of the 1980s slasher film."<sup>16</sup> However, this exists as a minor subplot in Benschhoff's larger argument; one which befits closer attention. Interestingly Benschhoff adds, and I would develop, that these human killers "are much closer to the public's concept of homosexuals than are the vampires and werewolves of the era's B monster movies."<sup>17</sup>

In addition to thinking about the queerness of the killer in these films, there is also an important need to think about how queerness describes those characters of value who survive the films. This point is made implicitly by Carol J. Clover in her discussion of the gender nonconformity of both the slasher killer and the main female protagonist, or Final Girl. Clover states, "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."<sup>18</sup> What is useful to me here is less the characterization of masculine/feminine than the characterization of both the killer and the Final Girl as queer, or possessing gender nonconforming traits.

In his queer reassessment of the slasher film, Jack Halberstam revises Clover's notion of the Final Girl as "boyish" and instead offers the notion that she has been "de-girled," or rather that the "bodies that splatter" in the slasher are "properly gendered...female bodies" whereas female bodies that do not splatter "are in some way distanced from the gender constructions that would

otherwise sentence them to messy and certain death.”<sup>19</sup> Crucial here is Halberstam’s correlation between “properly gendered” bodies and “certain death,” which develops implicit aspects of Clover’s argument more productively. Where Clover speaks of the androgyne survivors of the slasher subgenre – the killer (who returns for sequels) and the Final Girl – as “not fully masculine” and “not fully feminine,” Halberstam rewrites this as a mutual deviation from the gender norms that doom the subordinate characters. While Halberstam directs this interpretation of the slasher toward a reading of these figures as post-human, I would like to focus instead on what this disruption of normalized gender and sexual identity means when linked to the survival of the killer/Final girl. Most specifically, that this construction figures the slasher as a subgenre in which queer people live while those who conform are “sentence[d]...to a messy and certain death.”

In order to reflect carefully on cultural constructions of LGBTQ identities in relation to normativity, it is important to consider the historical variances in how such identities functioned at different moments during the twentieth century. While a more aggressive gay political movement is known to have emerged following the Stonewall riots in 1969, existing research has clarified a more nuanced understanding of gay movements and identities across the twentieth century. Despite Michel Foucault’s observation that through medical discourse of the late 19th century, “the homosexual was now a species,” the public consensus on this was slow to change.<sup>20</sup> This discussion is reflected in what Christopher Nealon clearly describes as the “inversion” model versus the “ethnic” model. Or rather, the notion of an identity indicated by inverse gender (e.g. a woman in a man’s body) that dominated the earlier half of the twentieth century versus homosexuality as distinguishing “peoplehood” as was developed more popularly in the latter half of the century.<sup>21</sup>

Charting the former half in this divide, George Chauncey's *Gay New York* intervenes into a narrative of gay liberation by discussing the shifts in cultural repression. Particularly, Chauncey contends that gay sex was openly practiced, particularly in working class areas, during the early twentieth century. However, he clarifies that "gay" as an identity category had not formidably materialized yet as a political tool. Queerness was understood by way of deviant gender identities, stigmatizing effeminate gay men and those who performed receptive acts in anal and oral sex practices. Chauncey concludes his study by signaling the end of more tolerant attitudes toward gay sexuality following the repeal of prohibition and a movement toward pushing gay culture underground during the 1930s.

Studies such as Allan Bérubé's *Coming Out Under Fire* attest to the crucial role of World War II in stimulating an advancement of the "ethnic" model of homosexuality, notably by providing men and women with same-sex environments that inadvertently allowed those discreetly engaging in homosexual acts to discover networks of similarly inclined individuals. Developing a thesis of pre-Stonewall gay rights politics, John D'Emilio's *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities* picks up on this chronology by detailing the works of organizations such as Mattachine Society and One, Inc. in the 1950s to perpetuate the "ethnic" model of homosexuality in order to abet political mobility. These organizations encouraged Americans to see themselves as part of a larger gay community and to utilize these communal associations to advocate for better treatment. D'Emilio proposes the irrefutable importance of these groups despite the alterations made to gay political agendas following Stonewall. Most importantly, in terms of this project, more aggressive gay politics of the late 60s sought less to assimilate than to claim a separate, more radical identity. While earlier precursors of the slasher in the 1940s and even the early 60s are preoccupied with the struggles of gender non-normative killers who can pass as "normal" within society, we see in

the slasher cycle of 78-85 a more direct concern with an aggressive violence which systematically destroys idyllic icons of heteronormativity, everything from lover's lane to Christmas morning.

### **Methodology**

*Queer Slashers* builds on Horror scholarship, especially slasher scholarship, to urge recognition of the queer resonance in the slasher subgenre, its predecessors, and subsequent iterations. Horror scholarship has long discussed the highly formulaic and serial nature of the slasher, grafting meaning regarding national U.S. ideologies about gender and sexuality onto its repetitive flow. Commonly these studies have seen the slasher as a heteronormative and reactionary text promoting chasteness and punishing promiscuity, or as a form catering to the tastes of straight men.<sup>22</sup> Popular discourse about the slasher promotes the narrative that these are films in which teenagers, especially teenage women, are taught lessons about the dangers of their sexuality.<sup>23</sup> Yet there have also long been fascinating queer engagements with the slasher subgenre which complicate its meanings with added ripples of perverse joy, especially through an attachment to the slasher character, often a social outsider and sometimes explicitly queer-coded, commonly seen as the most exciting character in the film. The long history of using POV editing to position audiences with the killer further suggests there is something important, and possibly vital, about the slashers' unusual alignment of viewers with the queer outsider and against the picturesque heteronormative teen landscapes of the suburbs, prom night, and summer camp.

In order to investigate the queer functions of the slasher, *Queer Slashers* turns to queer theory and its conceptualizations of queerness. Answering "What is queer about the slasher?" is a primary goal here as there is much that suggests the slasher resonates in queer ways and especially with queer audiences but there is limited language to begin expressing the particular meanings of these attachments and interests. This is especially pertinent as the slasher is not historically a

movement from within queer cinema or pioneered by queer filmmakers. It is not an essentially queer art form, but rather a form operating in accordance with dominant taste paradigms whose structure unintentionally invites queer engagements. Slashers, after all, have tended to make queers, especially femmes, sissies, trans, and non-binary individuals, into psychotic villains brandishing knives, axes, and other inventive weaponry against the American iconography of the 1980s suburbs. I argue that the slasher performs a queer function for viewers by exhibiting a spirit of normative dissonance, a detached and critical assault on normative society, in line with theories of queerness as an intersectional political resistance to structures of normativity rather than explicitly a term connoting sexual or gender identity.

*Queer Slashers* further turns to LGBTQ history to reflect on the context of the slasher, especially noting earlier twentieth century cinema which developed some of its primary motifs in stories that foregrounded gender and sexually non-normative protagonists. These earlier films include 1940s titles that coincided with the interrogations of soldier's sexual histories during World War II and 1960s movies which follow the homophile movement of the 1950s led by groups such as Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis. The canonical slasher cycle develops progressively across the 1970s, taking shape most concretely from 1978-85. This period of development interestingly follows the Stonewall riots of 1969 and the rise in national advocacy for gay rights. By considering historical research on the gay liberation movement as well as primary documents from its advocacy groups, *Queer Slashers* aims to establish meaningful overlaps between the spirit of anti-normative queer resistance fostered by gay liberation and the subversive connotations of the slasher's emphasis on the killer's perspective and characterization of the slasher figure as opposition to heteronormative suburban teens. In each instance, the historical context for the slasher and its precursors aspires to give a sense of the cultural situation

into which the slasher and its precursors developed. I especially consider how such contexts further invite potential queer engagements by acknowledging how some audiences at those specific times might conceive of queerness and/or LGBT politics. Significant shifts in gay history alter the context for such films and therefore challenge notions that all of these films would be perceived any single way throughout their exhibition and reception. *Queer Slashers* does not make an argument for the causation of the slasher subgenre in response to gay liberation or LGBT politics of the 1960s and 70s but instead hopes to situate the slasher in this historical context and observe where overlaps might shape queer potentials for audiences of these films.

### **Significance**

*Queer Slashers* articulates the queer function of the U.S. slasher film seen most clearly in their depiction of non-normative characters agitating and disrupting symbols of power which oppress queer people. There has long been a sense that something is queer about horror, especially the slasher, which seems to most explicitly evoke queer identities by exploiting stereotypes of femmes, sissies, trans and non-binary bodies to connote “otherness” in the character of the killer. What is most odd is that despite this exploitation queerness still seems to permeate the films, and queer engagements appear fostered rather than discouraged. *Queer Slashers* offers a way to begin to understand this queer subtext of the slasher by looking past the surface stereotypes and thinking about the queer possibilities within. In doing so, *Queer Slashers* furthers slasher scholarship by formally presenting an argument for the queerness of the slasher. This progresses conversations about gender and sexuality within the slasher by adopting a queer perspective that eschews heteronormative paradigms for analyzing the films. This queer reading of the slasher, in collaboration with all previous readings, helps shape a fuller and more nuanced portrait of what the slasher means and how it operates in U.S. culture.

## Chapter Descriptions

Chapter one, "Strange Pleasure: 1940s Proto-Slasher Cinema," argues for a queer lineage of the slasher by considering the history of psychologically-motivated killers who express non-normative gender and/or sexuality in 1940s horror films during and immediately after World War II. While scholarship about the queer themes of horror has grappled extensively with queerness seen through cinematic monsters, I focus upon killer figures who are human. The chapter draws on the historical renegotiations of gender identity at the time, renegotiations compelled by queer connections forged within homosocial spaces during wartime, women's increased access to professional employment during and after the war, and the post-war experiences of veterans returning from hypermasculine military spaces to everyday personal, professional, and domestic spaces. I identify traits commonly described as innovations of the 1960s films *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) and *Peeping Tom* (Michael Powell, 1960), innovative traits which, I argue, are preceded by earlier 1940s forebears. These innovative traits are the emphasis on a psychologically-motivated killer who becomes a point of association for the audience through sympathetic character development, the use of camera techniques to situate and thereby implicate the audience with the killer's point of view, especially during scenes of murder, and the coding of the killer as queer, especially as an effeminate man.

To do this, I consider the functions of these traits in five 1940s horror films often overlooked or underacknowledged for developing killer/queer associations: *The Leopard Man* (Jacques Tourneur, 1943), *The Lodger* (John Brahm, 1944), *Bluebeard* (Edgar G. Ulmer, 1944), *Hangover Square* (John Brahm, 1945), and *The Spiral Staircase* (Robert Siodmak, 1945). In each film, a socially passable killer goes undetected amidst a murder spree. He is made a central character, sometimes the primary character, and his perspective, including murder, is often shown

to the audience through POV editing. His pathology as a murderer is commonly linked with his characterization as feminine, "soft," and strange. Making these connections extends and more deeply contextualizes the irrefutable historical influence of *Psycho* and *Peeping Tom* on the slasher within broader trends of horror cinema developing across the twentieth century. This conversation urges attention to even earlier films with thematic and stylistic influence on the slasher, especially as this influence is significantly shaped through a connection to the killer's queer-coded representations, which speaks to the legacy and history of queer themes in shaping the slasher's recognizable patterns of filmmaking and plot.

Chapter two, "Homo/cidal: William Castle's 1960s Killer Queers" makes a case for the influence of B-movie filmmaker William Castle on the slasher subgenre, especially in his contributions to the slasher's legacy of destabilizing gender norms and linking non-normative gender and sexuality to their killers. In thinking through the legacy of *Psycho* on '60s horror cinema, Castle emerges as a prominent filmmaker who rewrites and reimagines Norman Bates' effete, mother-obsessed murderer character across multiple films that bear strong traces of its influence: *Homicidal* (1961), *Strait-Jacket* (1964), and *I Saw What You Did* (1965). I look at Castle as a representative filmmaker in the post-*Psycho* landscape of '60s horror cinema in order to address the way his reiteration of *Psycho*'s themes and imagery proliferate a pattern which deeply informs the popular slasher films of the '70s and '80s.

Additionally, I argue the Castle's films, like *Psycho*, draw upon rising cultural awareness and interest about trans identities. *Homicidal*, which features a killer who, like Norman Bates, presents alternately as a man and woman, particularly draws upon increased attention to gender-nonconforming identities in the 1960s spurred by the notoriety of trans celebrity Christine Jorgensen whose transition in the 1950s became national news, and whose media presence carried



forward across the decade through her appearances on television, her cabaret show, and further headlines covering her failed attempt at legal marriage. In addition to Jorgensen, Ed Gein became a major news headline following his arrest for murder and grave robbing in 1957. Gein was widely misreported as exhibiting symptoms of gender dysphoria and desiring to be a woman. Emphasis on his reputation as a gender non-conforming queer and/or trans murderer significantly influenced the Norman Bates character in Robert Bloch's original 1959 novel *Psycho*, which Hitchcock adapted into the highly influential film of the same name, and whose influence bears heavily on the Castle films discussed here. In addition to historical circumstances which color perceptions of the gender non-conforming characters in the film, this chapter argues that Castle's filmmaking style and deployment of plot, which have been highly critiqued for their incoherent and disjointed qualities, further the queer resonance of these films as they accentuate the audience's ability to read the films in multiple overlapping ways and construct myriad queer potentialities from their fragments.

Chapter three, "Queer Bogeymen, or What Is Queer About the Slasher?" specifically investigates the queer functions of the canonical slasher cycle from 1978-85. This chapter argues that the queer lineage established in chapters one and two bears a crucial influence on the slasher subgenre and, furthermore, that the slasher subgenre progresses queer themes and styles in US film history. This chapter further strengthens the slasher's ties to queerness through parallel readings of popular mainstream slashers and alternative queer cinema of the time, comparing the gender non-conforming killer Leatherface from *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974) with John Waters' representations of drag queen muse Divine as a murderous and perverse filth queen in *Female Trouble*, also released in 1974. Considering early slasher precursors of the late 60s and early 70s with ties to queer production methods and contexts, *Multiple Maniacs* (John Waters,

1969) and *Silent Night, Bloody Night* (Theodore Gershuny, 1972) - starring Andy Warhol's Factory stars and collaborators, I contend that although a mainstream genre, the slasher draws on many of the same cultural energies manifested in more overtly queer alternative and indie productions which share narrative and stylistic traits.

In chapter three I argue that a queer function of the slasher is its assault on icons of normativity, significantly taking the shape of heterosexual romance: including the teen couples who make up the slasher's primary victims, as well as culturally normative rituals of youth which reinforce heteronormative structures, rituals such as prom night, graduation day, and summer camp. The primary agent of this assault is the slasher, arguably the films' most compelling figure, and often a harbinger of queer resistance to the normative tropes he/she/they destroy(s). The slasher, who descends from queer-coded killers of earlier cinema, is commonly denoted as gender and sexually non-normative and/or distinctly unusual or removed from normative society. The audience's alignment with this figure via POV and his/her/their recurrent iterations in sequels and franchises as the ongoing antagonist of these films speaks to a distinct connection between slasher audience and a resistant queer ideology that playfully loathes the normative objects of the high school dance, the suburban street, the dull clichés of lover's lanes and teenage heterosexual monotony. In the slasher, what survives is primarily queer. The most normative characters – the jock, the cheerleader, the bully, the prom queen – die fastest and most assuredly. Characters marked for survival exhibit deviations from normative behaviors, especially heteronormative behaviors. This marking of difference sometimes involves aspects of non-normative gender and sexuality – boyishness on the part of the Final Girl, or femme queer characteristics on the part of the killers – but might also take shape more broadly along a spectrum of queer identity that opposes normativity.

I argue that the potential for queer resonance within the canonical slasher of 1978-85 can be better recognized when we consider the historical context of the gay liberation movement following the Stonewall riots in 1969. Early slasher precursors such as *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and *Black Christmas* emerge in the first half of the 1970s and the subgenre's most prominent archetype, John Carpenter's *Halloween* premieres in 1978. While the slasher draws from trends associating queerness with murderousness much older than gay liberation, the notable popularity of this subgenre at this time urges a consideration of how these widely viewed films might have particularly invited queer engagements from queer and straight audiences at this time and how such audiences might have seen and understood what is queer about these films.

Chapter four, "'It' Follows: Queerness, Normativity, and Post-2000 Slasher Media," argues that the shifting cultural relationship between gayness and queerness reshapes the slasher's connections to the queer traits of non-normative gender and sexuality which marked previous iterations. The chapter charts the directions that the slasher has gone in recent years by considering a range of media, including film, television, digital media, and drag performance. The chapters looks at the films *The Final Girls* (Todd Strauss-Schulson, 2015) and *It Follows* (David Robert Mitchell, 2014) and television series *Scream Queens* and discusses their respective renegotiation of the queer connotations of both the slasher killer(s) and the survivor figure(s). This media is released around the time of the 2015 Obergefell v. Hodges Supreme Court decision which upheld same-sex marriage and in a cultural moment where discourse around queer inclusivity is at a relative high. As a result, the chapter explores what it means to think about a queer-coded slasher or survivor in an era where gay and lesbian identities are moving into the mainstream more readily.

Writer/producer Ryan Murphy, co-creator of *Scream Queens*, is also well known for bringing fairly assimilative and normalized gay characters to the fore, such as musical theater star

Kurt in the hit series *Glee*, and a pair of gay fathers in the strategically named *The New Normal*. Thinking about gay as *normal* urges a reconsideration of what is queer about the killers and survivors of *Scream Queens*. It also draws out a complexity in modern LGBTQ media wherein gay characters sometimes participate freely in the dominant hierarchy of characters rather than being marginalized. If, in fact, being gay can be normal, what is queer about whomever survives these horrors? The chapter argues for the recognition of an intersectional queer politics in modern slasher media which advocates for the survival of all and recognizes the systems of oppression which affect victims more broadly, including gender, race, class, sexuality, and ability. While earlier and canonical slashers conceived of the queer survival traits of the slasher and the Final Girl commonly in terms of non-normative gender and sexuality – be it Laird Cregar cast as a fey killer or Jamie Lee Curtis playing a “boyish,” resilient Final Girl – the intersectional queer politics advocated by Michael Warner and Cathy Cohen take clearer shape in this later slasher media wherein the gay kids and the social outsiders may or may not be synonymous and a path to survival more often is not specifically dependent upon an association with LGBT traits and identities. Ultimately, the modern slasher is less invested in marking the queers in opposition to the “normals” and instead forces us to consider the destructive relations of all characters to oppressive systems of power.

By additionally looking at digital queer mediations and stage performances of horror-inspired drag that invokes iconic slasher and horror villains such as Freddy Krueger, I aim to draw connections between the canonical slasher’s more radical queer connotations and his redeployment as a figure in queer drag performances to advocate for a more avant-garde, weird, and transformative queer performance culture. I highlight drag queens Sharon Needles and Peaches Christ, two performers who express a love for horror images and a distaste for conventional beauty

drag, to explore how horror's link to more radical queer ideology serves a political function in their drag performances. The chapter closes by considering the political cooption of the Babadook by queer artists, including drag artists, during the 2017 Pride season, following the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States. The pride marches, largely rebranded as resistance marches, which popularly featured drag versions of the Babadook commemorated the Stonewall riots in June of 1969, and demonstrated a vital political connections between the queer monster, resistant politics, and LGBTQ history.

## CHAPTER ONE

### STRANGE PLEASURE: 1940S PROTO-SLASHER CINEMA

The slasher subgenre of the horror film has become synonymous with a certain prominent formula, namely the stalking masked male predator in pursuit of vulnerable teen girl prey. The classic version of the slasher finds expression in iconic iterations such as *Halloween* (1978) and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984). In her book *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, Carol J. Clover succinctly describes the conventions of the slasher subgenre in this way: “The killer is with few exceptions recognizably human and distinctly male; his fury is unmistakably sexual in both roots and expression; his victims are mostly women, often sexually free and always young and beautiful.”<sup>24</sup> *Peeping Tom* (1960) and *Psycho* (1960) have frequently been identified as precursors to the slasher that introduce horror tropes essential to its formulation. A popular argument in horror scholarship is that the year 1960 signals a dramatic turn in the nature of horror from gothic monsters to “psycho” killers. However, critics have often overlooked even earlier examples that deploy similar narrative and thematic patterns to those which Clover conveys as the slasher norm. These classical Hollywood horror films also foreshadow the principal innovations most commonly ascribed to the 1960 “turning point” of *Peeping Tom* and *Psycho*: the emphasis on a psychologically motivated killer who functions unrecognizably in normalized society and elicits audience sympathy; the distinct association made by the film between its audience and the “killer perspective,” specifically through the use of POV shots; and the formulaic structure of a make killer stalking women as prey, often women who are showgirls or in some way suggestively associated with displays of sexuality.

One reading of these films might follow Clover’s lead in asserting the way in which these proto-slasher classical Hollywood films formulate reactionary relationships between the killer and women’s sexuality. What more explicitly interests me here is the way in which these killer

encounters with women evoke a sexual voyeurism but instead manifest these sexual energies in instances of physical violence. This construction is indeed also a present part of Clover's understanding of the slasher, which argues "Actual rape is practically nonexistent in the slasher film, evidently on the premise...that violence and sex are not concomitants but alternatives"<sup>25</sup> Robin Wood's work on the slasher film makes a similar observation. Discussing *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974), he makes the case that violence sublimates sexual impulses. He writes, "Here sexuality is totally perverted from its functions into sadism, violence, and cannibalism. It is striking that no suggestion exists anywhere that Sally is the object of an overtly sexual threat: she is to be tormented, killed, dismembered, eaten, but not raped."<sup>26</sup> These observations identify a peculiar history in the slasher of focusing upon perverse reconfigurations of heterosexual encounters, ones where the prospect of sex becomes impossible and the killer is noted for his sexual fecklessness, inadequacies, and overall femininity. This effeminacy appears to drive the expectation for violence by the killer in these films often under the pretense of destroying in the woman that which the killer hates about himself. Coded 1940s language from these films terms this as "softness," "strangeness," or "weakness." In essence, the killer's compulsion is driven by a relation to queerness, seen here in terms of effeminacy (gender non-normativity) and sometimes compounded by connotations of disability.<sup>27</sup>

The queer allusions to sexual and gender non-normative characteristics in the killers of these films also need to be considered in combination with the films' influential uses of POV and audience alignment with the killer prior to 1960. Collectively these developments suggest a deepening of the association between audiences and killer/queer characters and highlight a connection between the killer's queerness and his murderousness. While *Psycho* and *Peeping Tom* undoubtedly popularize the style of aligning audience with a killer/queer protagonist, this figure

is significantly prefigured by films from the classical Hollywood era, such as *The Leopard Man* (Jacques Tourneur, 1943), *The Lodger* (John Brahm, 1944), *Bluebeard* (Edgar G. Ulmer, 1945), *The Spiral Staircase* (Robert Siodmak, 1945), and *Hangover Square* (John Brahm, 1945).

Each of these films positions its audience in relation to a killer who passes easily through society and who possesses a psychological motive for murder. However, the common discourse around the classical Hollywood horror film canon has been to emphasize supernatural and fantastical horror characters such as the classic monsters found in *Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1931), *Dracula* (Tod Browning, 1931), their myriad peers, and subsequent sequels. While it may be fair to categorize these trends in horror as the dominant pattern of the time, there has been limited consideration for what these lesser known non-supernatural killer films may offer to a study of the period.<sup>28</sup> Particularly worthy of a closer study is the earlier development of audience association with killers, significantly those who are murderous *and* coded as queer. This alignment fragments narratives about 1960's unprecedented innovation and raises questions about some of the cultural narratives suggested by the emphasis on this shift.

In *Monsters and Mad Scientists*, Andrew Tudor identifies 1960 as the most drastic shift in the history of film horror, one which befits a reading of the genre as “paranoid” – namely focused on everyday manifestations of horror emanating from within society – rather than “secure” – with emphasis only on outside threats from sources removed from the mainstream: the “monsters and mad scientists” of classical Hollywood horror.<sup>29</sup> He sets the innovations of *Psycho* and *Peeping Tom* in a distinct position of historical importance, stating “Their overt concern with repressed sexuality, voyeurism, gratification through violent attack and women as victims is central to the burgeoning psycho-movie for the next 25 years.”<sup>30</sup> In “When the Woman Looks,” Linda Williams also designates *Psycho* and *Peeping Tom* as a turning point in film horror, writing “they marked a



significant break in the structure of the classic horror film, inaugurating a new form of psychological horror.”<sup>31</sup> Vera Dika too, in her discussion of the stalker cycle (a more narrowly defined subset of the slasher subgenre), determines that the slasher is not a descendent of progressing film developments but a reconfiguration of strategies from specific horror forebears. She states, “Much of this surface material has *skipped* a generation, that is, the stalker film is not the product of an even evolution of elements, but a conscious going *back* to an earlier stage, specifically one that predates the late sixties and early seventies, and is instead taken from works popular in the fifties and early sixties.”<sup>32</sup> These observations pick up on the very real and visible influence of *Psycho* in popularizing certain patterns of psychological horror, especially with an emphasis on people rather than monsters, and on fear about an invasion of privacy – notably dramatized by *Psycho*’s famous shower scene.

Nonetheless, the catalyst of *Psycho* can be better understood by opening rather than closing paths traceable before its arrival in 1960, especially given that Hitchcock’s career traces back to include 1940s psychological killers typically seen as sexually non-normative, deviant, or sociopathic in *Rope* (1948) and *Shadow of a Doubt* (1946). This undermines the notion that 1960 had a mythical power of transformation that made audiences suddenly question their safety, question other people, whereas they had previously felt a “secure” distance from monsters. This is important to an understanding of queer representations as it challenges the notion of uniformity in the audience experience and instead posits that audiences were able, and in fact filmically encouraged, to see and relate with killer/queer characters in the earlier half of the twentieth century.

In *The Lodger*, Laird Cregar stars as a fictionalized version of Jack the Ripper. Here Cregar’s stalking male murderer, Mr. Slade, is overlooked by his landlords in pursuit of “the ripper” because Slade is a respectable doctor. Ultimately, we learn the core of Slade’s neurosis

stems from the moral and physical decline of his brother caused, in Slade's opinion, by the charms of a wanton woman. This loathing leads him to both desire his female victims and murder them before he succumbs to their beauty. Director John Brahm and Cregar reunite one year later for another relevant title, *Hangover Square* in which Cregar plays another respected gentleman, Geroge Harvey Bones, a talented composer, who becomes seduced by a showgirl, Netta (Linda Darnell), and experiences "psychic breaks" during which he murders her and others. Netta serves as a muse for Cregar's troubled composer and he as her source for cabaret tunes. However, the revelation that Netta's romantic advances have been manipulative attempts at extracting more songs prompts one of Bone's merciless "breaks."

This artist/muse dichotomy also works in *Bluebeard*, a recasting of the French folklore as the tale of a Parisian artist, Gaston Morrell (John Carradine) who paints his models before he kills them. Gaston passes imperceptibly through society as a mild-mannered gentleman known around town for performing elaborate puppet shows in the park to the great pleasure of his audiences, none of whom suspect his murderous inclinations. He picks out a young woman named Lucille (Jean Parker) as his latest conquest, and it is this pursuit which becomes his undoing. Though named Bluebeard after the French tale about a reclusive murderer of wives, the emphasis on "models" (often suggestively prostitutes) and the city's collective hysteria over a murderer at large more accurately recall the story of Jack the Ripper.<sup>33</sup>

Robert Siodmak's *The Spiral Staircase* unfurls another tale about a town made frantic by a serial killer. In this instance, his victims are those who exhibit culturally perceived signs of weakness, categorized by the killer as all women, but especially those with disabilities. This anonymous stalker lurks around the lush mansion of the respectable Warren family in pursuit of Helen (Dorothy McGuire), a mute woman whose "affliction" fascinates and disgusts him. In time,

the killer is revealed as the family's own well-to-do and educated son, Professor Albert Warren (George Brent), whose rage is stimulated by a psychological lack put in place by his own father's disappointment with his failures to meet social standards of masculinity.

Another such anonymous serial killer prowls *The Leopard Man*.<sup>34</sup> He is eventually revealed to be Dr. Galbraith (James Bell), a former college professor and cultured intellectual with a mysterious past who attacks young women under the guise of a loose and wild leopard. A romantic couple, Kiki (Jean Brooks) and Jerry (Dennis O'Keefe), ultimately bring Galbraith's murderous underpinnings to light.

I aim to insert these 1940s psychological killer/queer films into the historical timeline for understanding the association of the audience with the killer, revising the historical narrative that equates classical Hollywood with comfortable detachment from its movie monsters and attributes uncomfortable killer closeness exclusively to post-60s horror cinema. Such a revision identifies these classical Hollywood titles as being in conversation with *Psycho*, *Halloween*, and the slasher subgenre rather than seeing 1960 as a singular moment of cultural and filmic rupture wherein audiences first lose their sense of secure distance from murderous minds. These films also establish an early precedent for the slasher as a queer figure due to their distinct patterning of the killer as non-normative in terms of gender and sexuality, including femme, effete, sexually repressed, or sexually deviant.

My intention here is not to deny the historical value of the *Psycho* and *Peeping Tom* nor dispute the manner in which they mutually contributed thematic and stylistic patterns to a longstanding tradition of psychological horror developed across decades into a popular formula including, but not limited to, the slasher picture. More accurately, I mean to reconfigure this discussion from one of singular filmic rupture (i.e. 1960 changes *everything*) to one about an

ongoing series of films throughout the twentieth century contributing to an overall pattern heretofore overly associated with respected auteurs. By considering the 1940s, which distinctly predates Dika's deadline of slasher influence and occupies Tudor's "secure" period for horror, I hope to open the conversation of influence up to earlier films. I also point out some of the crucial ways that non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality during and after World War II can be seen in the figure of the killer/queer in classical Hollywood horror. However, it is essential to distinguish these forties killers from the period specific slasher killers of 1978-1985. These proto-slasher titles are not equal in style and ideology to the slasher, but simply related in numerous respects, particularly through their innovation of certain stylistic and thematic concerns that scholarship has incorrectly attributed to later films. In order to assess their relevance to the larger twentieth century concerns over non-normative killers and voyeuristic POV murders, I will consider the following attributes: socially passable, psychologically motivated killers, an audience association with the killer, and a thematic development of non-normative gender and sexuality as a component of the killer's identity.

### **1. Socially Passable, Psychologically Motivated Killers**

The danger of a psychologically motivated and socially passable killer works integrally within the mystery structure of several of these horror films of the 1940s. In shaping the story as a "whodunit" tale keeping the audience in suspense by omission, *The Lodger*, *The Leopard Man*, and *The Spiral Staircase* imply that any ordinary person could be harboring ruthless designs for murder. Moreover, throughout all of these films, the terror of normality is emphasized as a particular source of dread. Notably, when pressed for the identity of the killer, an investigator in *The Spiral Staircase* draws no boundaries between the murderer and the townspeople. He plainly states that the killer must be "Somebody in this town. Somebody we all know. Somebody we see

every day. Might be me. Might be you.” *The Lodger* opens with a similar warning printed on a signpost: “Murder has been committed in our midst. Police inadequate.” The “in our midst” makes reference to the communal nervousness around the imperceptible killer, the murderous man. It is echoed in the opening scene of *Bluebeard* where a similar sign reads: “WARNING! CITIZENS OF PARIS! A murderer is in your midst!” In a subsequent scene in *Bluebeard*, Lucille and her friends are shown discussing the dangers of walking home after dark with Bluebeard on the loose. They walk in a row of three down a dark street in Paris, startled by the approaching silhouette of a mysterious man. They gasp, and then laugh upon discovering that it is only “the puppeteer” (Gaston). Despite being comforted by Gaston’s familiarity, they have indeed unknowingly collided with the killer Bluebeard in the night.

Similarly, the killers in other films often go undetected because of their status as respectable citizens within the community. While the charms of the killers offset any expectations of murderous intentions, their high status in society ensures their mobility throughout social spaces without suspicion. Mr. Slade in *The Lodger* is repeatedly identified as bearing likeness to the killer and being seen with similar possessions (a small black tool bag). However, the Bontings, who lodge him, are frequently shown writing off the possibility that he could be the killer because he is a doctor, a gentleman. Likewise, Dr. Galbraith in *The Leopard Man* holds a Ph.D. and is a former college professor. Mr. Bone in *Hangover Square* is a famous composer married into an upper class family. Albert Warren in *The Spiral Staircase* is both the son of a respectable family and a professor himself. He is perceived as the kinder of the two Warren sons, leading several characters, including their mother, to suspect it is his roguish womanizing brother Steven (Gordon Oliver) who murders women.

These films also often cite specific historical instances of violence in their plots and dialogue, suggesting to viewers that the potential for these types of socially passable killers are far from limited to the screen and indeed come from actual inspirations of killers infiltrating communities. This directly contradicts the notion that these classical Hollywood films might be thought to make audiences feel “secure” rather than “paranoid” and foster a comfortable distance between audiences and the sources of fear and horror in the films. Unlike most movie monsters, which may seem supernatural and unlike the lived experiences of audience members, these cinematic killers and their real world inspirations underscore just how uncomfortable viewers ought to feel, implying instead that the source of horror, the killer, is “in our midst” and “somebody we all know.”

*The Lodger* takes Marie Belloc Lowndes’ 1913 novel of the same name and adapts the tale of a mass killer similar to Jack the Ripper (in the novel, he is called “The Avenger”) into one which specifically identifies the subject of the story as Jack the Ripper in 1889 Whitechapel. Thus the main character relates to the historical figure. Jack the Ripper is also named by Dr. Galbraith in *The Leopard Man*. When posed a question about the sort of man who might be compelled to kill, he confers, “There was Bluebeard in France, Jack the Ripper in London. It’s not uncommon.”<sup>35</sup> *The Leopard Man* also depicts in its climax a memorial procession passing through its New Mexico setting. A dialogue exchange informs us that the procession commemorates an entire village of Native Americans being wiped out by the Conquistadors in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Meanwhile, *Hangover Square* integrally features Guy Fawkes Day and the ritualistic “burning of the Guys” (burning effigies meant to resemble Guy Fawkes, who attempted to blow up Parliament in 1605). The central killer even disposes of one of his victims by placing the corpse on top of the bonfire of Guys, clearly identifying his murder as a continuation of a long line of cultural violence.

A further gesture toward making the killers in these films feel entirely plausible and vivid to audiences can be seen in the attempts to ground the killers' motivations in an emotional reality, often allowing them whole monologues to expound upon their motivations and psychological afflictions. While Andrew Tudor maintains the popular assumption that "In the thirties, forties, and fifties there are few films that even vaguely conceive of threatening insanity, and they pay little attention to either the mechanics or the sources of insane behavior," I argue that these 1940s films do present psychological causes for their killers' violence, often pertaining to a sympathetic childhood trauma.<sup>36</sup> Linda Williams uses sympathetic past traumas as a crux for understanding the new, more human killer from the latter half of the twentieth century. She states that in these new psychological horror films, the audience is asked to "identify with [the killer's] point of view, and even sympathize with the childhood traumas that produced this deranged behavior."<sup>37</sup> However, a burgeoning consideration of psychological motives for murder can be traced throughout the bulk of these films, and often a sympathetic trauma is used to add complexity to the killer character. Mr. Slade in *The Lodger* recounts the story of his brother's decline and death, suggesting the manner in which his actions avenge the ruination of his sibling. Albert in *The Spiral Staircase* murders women with physical disabilities in a compulsive attempt to reenact his father's torment over what he perceived to be Albert's personal weaknesses. Dr. Galbraith in *The Leopard Man* is perhaps the least psychologically developed of the killers discussed here but the language of his confession suggests a deranged psychology both troubled in its terrible compulsion to kill and eerily preoccupied with the "soft" femininity of his victims: "In the whole world there isn't a single human being who knows what it is to be tormented this way... I didn't want to kill, but I had to... I saw her white face turned up to me – the eyes dark and wide with fear – the fear – that was it – the little frail body – the soft skin." *Hangover Square*'s Mr. Bone experiences a similarly

sympathetic agony in which his murders take place during “psychic breaks” brought on by underlying issues of anger and emasculation. He murders Netta following the revelation that she is not romantically interested in him, but instead has only been using him for his songs. Though these systematic “breaks” might defer his active participation in the murders, much like *Psycho* they do not disavow his bodily involvement and the underlying psychology which motivates them. In most cases, the audience has access to an articulated rationale for killing and is often drawn into the killer’s story through his descriptions of his personal history and psychological difficulties. We will also see this association with the killer developed as a pattern in these films’ choices to situate the audience *with* rather than *against* the killer/queer figure.

## 2. Audience Association with the Killer

Association between the killer and the audience can be found in the narrative references to sympathetic psychological compulsions, but find clearest expression in the spatial alignment between the killer and audience via first-person perspective. This access to the killer’s violence via POV shots is most explicitly embodied by scenes of murder photographed through the POV of the killer. The use of perspective to implicate the film viewer in the violence has been seen as a crucial component in the innovation of *Psycho* and in reiterations of *Psycho* such as John Carpenter’s *Halloween*. In assessing *Halloween* as a pioneering work in the stalker cycle, Vera Dika reads the use of POV shots in relaying violent impulses to the audience and involving the audience in the psychic spaces of Norman Bates and Michael Myers respectively:<sup>38</sup>

By seeing along with the killer, the viewer can satisfy an infantile desire to investigate the woman. This position allows him to be deeply implicated within the space but unfettered by a specific mediated presence. The unidentified quality of the fictionalized voyeur allows the responsibility for the sadistic action to be displaced onto a character who is decidedly ‘not like us.’<sup>39</sup>



While I would agree with Dika that by withholding the character identity of the killer, “the viewer is figuratively put in a spatially congruent position with him, but not a narratively congruent one,” I would differ in her understanding of this as a way of preserving audience security and distance.<sup>40</sup> In the case of the 1940s horror films discussed here, there is an overarching paranoia perpetuated through the integration of the seemingly normal killer within the society. As the inspector in *The Spiral Staircase* suggests, we could all be killers and in these moments of first-person violence wherein we see only from the killer’s position, we *are* all killers. The implication of the viewer in the violent attack is the grandest of these films’ gestures toward a generalized cultural violence. No one is exempt from the films’ uncomfortably interactive murders.

In a central scene of murder within *The Lodger*, Jack the Ripper (whose identity the film withholds for most of its duration) cuts the throat of Jenny, a lower class street musician. The dimly lit sequence, set in Jenny’s bedroom, is built significantly around a shot in which the camera is aimed directly at Jenny and she reacts to it as if seeing a person, the realization of danger setting into her face as she stares back at it. As the camera lumbers forward, shaking and shifting in its approach as if it were taking human steps, Jenny’s fear rapidly accelerates to a muted scream of terror as she struggles to draw sounds from her own throat under the imminent threat of killer/camera violence. The camera’s approach is the killer’s approach and its proximity brings her death. The camera’s occupation of the killer’s perspective in this scene also allows the audience to experience the killer’s approach in a visceral, first-hand manner. The camera’s approach is the killer’s approach and this too is our approach of Jenny.<sup>41</sup>

*Hangover Square* also includes POV violence in its opening murder wherein Mr. Bone lowers a knife into his victim. Prefiguring the famous opening sequence of *Halloween*, the movie begins with an unidentified first-person murder which puts the audience in the position of the killer

before we know his identity. Unlike *The Lodger*, which simply recreates the gait and movement of an approaching male, *Hangover Square* creates a full visualization of the act of murder complete with a knife bearing arm swinging down in front of the camera. The animated limbs even more deliberately express the interactivity of the murder sequence, implicitly suggesting more than just an equation between the camera's sight and the killer's eyes but also giving him arms to kill. Elsewhere in the film, Bone's psychological instability also becomes formally expressed through POV shots. During the moments of his "psychic breaks," we see Bone's POV with the object of his gaze blurred and distorted to suggest his psychological conversion into his killer persona.

*Bluebeard* similarly varies this emphasis on experiencing the perspective of a killer, essentially by reversing the impulse to see through the killer's eyes. Rather than showing the scenes of murder through subjective shots, the off-screen murder happens during extreme close-ups on the killer's bulging eyes. John Carradine's performance conveys a passionate rage while dramatically distorting his face to create protruding eyes which communicate the manner in which his look and his violence are equal extensions of the same aggression. "Looking" is deeply integrated into the film's sense of violence as Gaston first studies his victims with his eyes, captures them in paint on a canvas, and then as an expression of this visual domination, proceeds to physically strangle each model.<sup>42</sup> First-person camera is used throughout the film to significantly emphasize a connection between the audience and Gaston's dangerous gaze, particularly early in the film when Gaston peers through a hole in the puppet theatre and spies on Lucille in the audience. A POV shot provides his perspective as it finds and then locks in upon Lucille. Much as a hunter peers through a gun sight, this predatory looking signals the audience to Gaston's selection of Lucille as prey.<sup>43</sup>

While it does not contain a POV murder, *The Spiral Staircase* is exceptionally worth noting for its way of more deeply aligning its audience not only with the killer's perspective, but with the killer's psychology. As with *Bluebeard*, extreme close-ups of the killer's looming eye are used to identify his point of perspective. Rather than cutting from shots of the eye to shots of what is being seen, as is typical to first-person camera techniques, *The Spiral Staircase* creates a superimposition over the image of the eye that allows the audience to see the eye and the object of its gaze simultaneously. In a particularly striking instance indicative of greater psychological depth, the camera slowly pushes in on the image of the killer's eye. Superimposed over his eye is a shot of the film's mute protagonist, Helen, looking in the mirror. These shots take the vantage point of the killer (behind Helen) which allows us only to see the back of Helen's head. At the moment in which the killer's eye compasses the whole frame, a superimposition is shown over the eye not depicting what the killer sees (the back of Helen's head staring into the mirror) but what he imagines he sees: Helen's face in a close-up with her mouth surreally blurred out. This echoes the killer's motivations to correct flaws by killing women which he perceives as having "weakness." It develops the aforementioned connection between the killer's eye and the film's audience into one which presents us with a deeper link to the killer's psychology by allowing us to share in his imagination as well as his vision.

In almost all of these films the central killers become the subject of a manhunt and each of them is ultimately identified, or "unmasked" to the public. *The Lodger* and *Hangover Square* both frame this through the use of POV shots which create for the audience the experience of being the subject of the manhunt, of being "found out" for one's true identity behind the socially normalized mask of civility. These themes further play on the paranoia of exposure associated with non-normative gender and sexuality, which factors as a component of the killer/queer identity. In a

reversal of the films' systematic presentation of the killer's violence from his perspective as a camera moving toward the victim, these films now give us the POV of the frazzled killer as his captors approach him. Close-ups of his nervous realization that he has been discovered are cut together with shots from his perspective as the police and/or community move in closer toward him. The perspectives of the representatives of authority are withheld. We are not given the perspective of those whom we should typically identify in conservative horror (the police, the townspeople, the "safe" community) and instead see as the killer. In as much as we are vicariously complicit through our visual access to murder, that involvement is now punished and we as a group are made to feel the weight of collective societal judgment. We associate with the killer. We take his perspective. We sympathize with his compulsions. He is not "other than" and "outside society" but continuous with the viewing body of pretenders wearing the normative mask of social acceptability.

*The Leopard Man* performs a similar feat with some unique variation. In this instance, the film spotlights a murder spree of young women, and repeatedly photographs these young women walking down dark alleys and cemeteries, nervously reacting to sounds, and ultimately screaming at the sight of a thing which the audience is unable to see. The POV of the victim which would reveal the attacker is withheld. The camera remains trained only on their harried expressions and never allows them to return the killer's gaze. In its final act, the film's protagonists, Jerry and Kiki, setup a sting to catch suspected killer, Dr. Galbraith, by tricking him into believing his most recent victim, performer and dancer Clo-Clo (Margo), is haunting him. Walking down the same dark alley as Clo-Clo's murder, he begins to hear the sound of Clo-Clo's castanets (the product of Jerry and Kiki's deception) and believes she is following or haunting him. During the ruse, Dr. Galbraith is made to experience a similar dark walk as his victims and as such is literally put into the victim's

perspective. The audience experience is again to understand events through his senses. Shots of his attentive face mark each sound of the castanets. The camera shows Galbraith's concerned stare and then cuts to his POV as he peers down the dark alley alone. His perspective is now emphasized as a potential victim in yet another reversal which puts the killer on the receiving end of the pursuit and the audience there with him.<sup>44</sup>

### **3. Non-normative Gender and Sexuality**

There is already a scholarly tradition documenting renegotiations of heteronormative masculinity in 1940s film noir, which was a movement parallel to these psychological thrillers during and after World War II.<sup>45</sup> Film noir, a style primarily associated with '40s U.S. cinema, has a long history of depicting complex and often fractured masculinity, which films often associate with veterans returning home to restructured gender politics. Dana Polan discusses the trope of the "postwar neurotic man" as one which foregrounds cultural issues of masculinity in flux, being heightened for military service and then deflated by the ordinariness of a domestic post-war life. He states, "According to the postwar discourse, the problem of the neurotic man is not necessarily only his capacity for violence but, as much, his potential refusal to form a family, to enter into the traditional patterns of domesticity and home building."<sup>46</sup> Mark Osteen draws direct connections between this cultural trope and the characters of film noir, determining that these male characters are suggestive of the tension created when veterans need to dispense with their wartime roles. The resulting friction causes them to be described as "hypermasculine, aggressive, impatient with women, and incapable or unwilling to alter their warrior mentality for humdrum realities of civilian life."<sup>47</sup> Weakness is essential to this discourse as military service, coded as highly masculine work, now gives way to post-war trauma and often physical disabilities or psychological disorders. Conflating masculinity with a superior physicality, veteran characters often "define masculinity

*against* disability: if masculinity equals strength and achievement, disability must signify weakness and inadequacy.”<sup>48</sup> This construction significantly resembles the opinions of Albert Warren, who murders the “weak” (also conflating physical disability with the “weakness” he perceives in women) in *The Spiral Staircase*. The horror genre’s comparable 1940s trope of the psychologically motivated killer/queer figure similarly depicts aggressive men who loathe what they conceive to be “weakness,” often femininity in all its forms, disability, or other characteristics which contradict heteronormative narratives of masculine strength, which were especially amplified during wartime. Moreover, these films also draw on traits of queer sexuality, which historical scholarship describes as unexpectedly mobilizing, albeit with obvious resistance, during and after World War II.<sup>49</sup> That is to say, in addition to depicting killers as coping with their own failed masculinity defined against hypermasculine wartime culture, they also invite inspections of the ways hypermasculine wartime culture may have tolerated gay sexualities and sex acts in homosocial military spaces.

These post-war representations can be further contextualized within the history of gay social development and the preview of forthcoming cultural shifts in the 1950s homophile movement. Scholars of gay history during World War II note the intrinsic tensions of a military space both intolerant of gay soldiers, who were formally not allowed to serve, but also obviously populated by gay soldiers despite attempts during screening processes to omit them. They also point to the unexpected consequences of living and working in areas that were segregated based upon assigned sex, namely a sense of community that formed between gay soldiers who began to understand there were others like them and the increased acceptance of same-sex affection in a barracks where only same-sex companionship was available, and therefore more tolerated. In a section of his book *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities* titled “Forging a Group Identity,” John

D'Emilio discusses World War II as a historical shift that facilitated better self-understanding and collective awareness of the social potential between gay Americans, forging connections that would later be capitalized upon by homophile groups Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis in the push for a social and political collective. D'Emilio writes that potential recruits were put through a psychiatric interview, which among other things, inquired about same-sex attraction and experiences, in order to rule out homosexuals from service. This open discussion of same-sex eroticism was highly unusual for the time. "For gay and nongay men alike," D'Emilio writes, "it represented the first and perhaps the only time that they faced such inquiries in a public setting." Despite such inquiries gay men were, by and large, not detected during enlistment except in cases of overt effeminacy and/or a criminal history.

This fostered the potential for gay community during military service found in the social conditions of same-sex isolation. "In this setting," according to D'Emilio, "gay men could find one another without attracting undue attention and perhaps even encounter sympathy and acceptance by their heterosexual fellows."<sup>50</sup> In *Coming Out Under Fire*, Allan Bérubé characterizes social behavior between World War II servicemen, both straight and gay, as explicitly drawing upon and acknowledging homosexual tensions. Bérubé documents military patterns of jokingly strutting in stages of undress around barracks, especially shower areas, in intentionally feminine manners as a social practice within the military. His accounts detail this so-called "homosexual buffoonery" as publicly recognized behavior which officers described as "normal" and a "safety valve" for "homosexual anxieties stimulated by barracks life."<sup>51</sup> Barracks entertainment also frequently involved acts of drag and female impersonation by soldiers. This behavior drew on taboo histories of female impersonation from outside a military context, however Bérubé remarks "with the help of the press, [the military] found ways to use drag entertainment

for the duration while walking a fine line between its homosexual and heterosexual meanings.”<sup>52</sup> The blurriness of such a distinction remains apparent as both social and performative acts of femininity and homosexuality operated quite differently for straight soldiers and those with gay histories and/or gay inclinations, who were still more likely to be stigmatized if discovered. Nonetheless, the blurry conditions facilitated opportunities for social and sexual relationships between men, including gay men, and offered opportunities for public expressions of femininity, including drag, by men whose feminine and homosexual behaviors were more stringently restricted in non-sex-segregated spaces.

World War II service offered an opportunity for increased friendship between gay men, and increased a general social awareness of homosexual behavior, moving closer toward the idea of a homosexual identity which was advocated for more forcefully in the 1950s. Much of film noir and other wartime genres’ fascination with non-normative, or metaphorically “fractured,” masculinity may also be said to reflect the period’s increased awareness and interest in queer masculinity and gay men. In this scenario, the predacious voyeurism of killers in these films connotes a form of sexual deviancy, albeit abstractly, which suggests effeminacy or some preoccupation with womanly beauty and “softness.” There is no room in a classical Hollywood feature for the direct and unmitigated expression of same-sex desire. Gay sexuality and same-sex eroticism is mostly absent save for occasional innuendos. Instead the filmic preoccupation seems to be on men whose sexuality is ill-configured and inappropriate, ending in murder rather than sex. These men are also consistently linked to effeminacy and other stereotypes of gay men of the period.

These connotations of “strangeness” or “softness” can be found in *The Leopard Man* which speculates sexual queerness as a catalyst for psychological abnormality. In his own dialogue, Dr.



Galbraith in *The Leopard Man* answers for the men with “kinks in their brain” by attesting to the historical lineage and violent proclivities of “men who kill for pleasure – strange pleasure.” The use of “strange” as a modifier here evokes the idea of perversion and deviancy without stating any clear association to homosexuality. “Strange” in the film connotes social abnormality which becomes policed throughout the film by way of assessing masculine conventions. Dr. Galbraith and Jerry engage distinctly in coded conversations about masculinity through use of the term “softness.” Jerry’s love interest Kiki warns him, “don’t be soft,” following the first murder. When called upon to help in a search party, Jerry shamefully identifies himself as a “tenderfoot.” After Dr. Galbraith learns that Jerry has forced himself to join the search party in spite of his inexperience and earlier stated inability, Jerry deflects Galbraith’s judgment by stating, “Where I was brought up, you had to be tough.” Galbraith, the film’s pathological killer, stands throughout the film as a symbol of non-normative masculinity, even before his true nature is known. His background as a professor gives him the effeminized codifications associated with inactive, intellectual work. Characters refer to his past with “fancy college courses.” He is most pleased at meeting Kiki, a stage actress, and proclaims his glee in loaded terms, stating “You lead such a gay and exciting life.” He makes detailed references to his love of theatre. This includes a reference to an ecstatic experience he once had waiting to see Mrs. Leslie Carter after a performance of *Zaza*. Galbraith boldly embodies the “softness” of the effeminate, intellectualized male as well as the “strangeness” of the men with “kinks in their brain.” Jerry’s journey is a constant negotiation of his desire not to appear soft and likewise to attempt some preservation of normality in the face of the destabilizing gender and psychology of Dr. Galbraith. Not surprisingly, the film concludes with the death of Dr. Galbraith and the arm in arm departure of the heterosexual couple, Jerry and Kiki, suggesting some return to heteronormative stability. Standing in front of the police station, where they met earlier

in the film, Jerry and Kiki reminisce on their that first encounter where she deemed him “soft.” Jerry laments “How do you think I felt when you told me not to be soft?” and Kiki assures him he has precisely the right quotient of softness to be desirable to her: “Oh, Jerry. I want you to be soft. You are soft inside, where it counts.”

*The Spiral Staircase* revolves around similar discourses of “weakness” and “imperfection” and likens such categories to an absence of heteronormative masculinity. The film’s killer, Albert Warren, attempts to compensate for his effeminacy in the eyes of his father by acting out violently toward “weak” or “imperfect” women and thereby destroying the weakness (and the womanliness) he sees in himself. Albert is yet another intellectual, a professor, who does not demonstrate the degree of active interest in courting women which his brother Steven does throughout the film. Steven plainly states, “You know I’m inclined to think that father was disappointed by both of us. Neither of us fitted his concept of what a real man should be – a gun toting, hard drinking, tough living, god fearing citizen. He always used to say, ‘the strong survive the, the weak die.’” It is the approval of his judgmental father, who deemed him “weak” (suggested by Steven’s dialogue to mean the opposite of a “real man”) that Albert seeks to attain through violence. When he ultimately corners Helen in a final showdown, he expresses very clearly that his act of murder will obliterate the “weakness” in Helen that equals that which his father saw in him. As Albert puts it, “Steven is weak as I once was. What a pity my father didn’t live to see me become strong, to see me dispose of the weak and imperfects of the world whom he detested. He would have admired me for what I’m going to do.”

In *Bluebeard*, Gaston tells Lucille that he cannot paint her because he loves her. Here he distinctly separates this potentially sincere connection from the perverse relationships of looking and violence that he has with his models/victims. Gaston relays to Lucille that when he was a

“sensitive” child, a starving artist, he stumbled upon an ill woman in the street named Jeanette. To pass the time, he painted her portrait. He recounts his passion for both her tranquility and her pain, stating “There was something in her fevered tormented eyes that was almost spiritual” He says he saw in the recovering woman an image reminiscent of The Maid of Orleans (Joan of Arc). This fixation on the peaceful, yet long suffering female image inspired his first masterful painting and ignited his career. Following his success, he tracked down his muse and discovered a fully recovered Jeannette working unashamedly in a brothel. He describes her as a “low, coarse, loathsome creature.” In a flashback, we see her try to pay him for his services, mocking him both with her flagrant sexuality and her fiscal independence. By refusing Gaston’s vision of female passivity, Jeanette infuriated the painter by, in his words, “defiling the image [he] created of her.” Gaston retaliated by strangling Jeanette. He subsequently strangles all of the women he paints in a recreation of this original act, for he sees in all of them the potential to defy him just as Jeanette had done. This offers a variation on previous representations of the relationships between the killer and his victims. Whereas earlier killers murdered women because they saw their own femininity reflected back at them, Gaston murders because women for their power, especially their power to make him feel emasculated. This still plays on the idea that murder is a response to a perceived effeminacy in the killer but alters how the women in the story relate to the killer’s sense of identity.

*Hangover Square* conveys the central killer’s sexual deviance in a similar manner by focusing upon his feelings of being mocked and emasculated. Mr. Bone, a composer, stalls his work on an important symphony in order to write more songs for Netta’s cabaret act. He makes her career his primary goal. When Bone turns up unexpectedly one night at Netta’s apartment, she brushes him off by claiming she is too ill to see him. When he later sees her leaving in full costume for a singing engagement, Bone recognizes that he has been lied to and rejected in his romantic

advances. Netta chastises his conservative attitudes, calling him a “bore.” His wife later berates him for wasting his talents on a club singer with a poor reputation, seemingly less bothered by his potential infidelity than by the potential embarrassment he may cause to the family in squandering his musical prestige. Under the weight of these condemning remarks from the various women in his life, Bone strikes out, strangles Netta, and burns her with the Guy Fawkes effigies. While Dr. Galbraith (*The Leopard Man*) and Albert Warren (*The Spiral Staircase*) murder women in an attempt to destroy the “softness” and “weakness” they see in themselves, Gaston and Dr. Bone strike out at those who make them feel weak, or remind them of their weakness not by exhibiting weakness themselves, but actually by being notably independent and strong. In all cases, the murder seems tied to futile attempts to rid themselves of the qualities of weakness and effeminacy that might mark that as deviant from heteronormative masculinity.

Mr. Slade in *The Lodger* expresses sexual deviance in perhaps the most explicit manner through his taboo infatuation with his deceased brother, which is said to motivate his need to murder women. In conversation with Mrs. Bontings, Slade brims with excitement as he shares a self-portrait of his deceased brother, erupting “I had a brother and he was a genius and I loved him very dearly.” As he shows her the self-portrait, he compliments the arch of his brow, the “sensitivity about his lips.” When Mrs. Bontings notes how “peculiar” it is to paint so small and suggests Slade’s brother must have had excellent eyes, Slade turns darker stating “he had strange eyes...he was a strange man.” The term “strange” here might be thought to intersect pointedly with Dr. Galbraith’s similar use of “strange” and other carefully chosen adjectives that denote difference, perhaps perversion. Here we see a connotation of sexual deviance in the description of Slade’s brother and in the eerie infatuation Laird Cregar projects through his performance as Mr. Slade.

Slade goes on to speak obliquely about the manner in which women's beauty led to the ruin of his brother. In a conversation with the Bontings' daughter Kitty, a chorus girl, Slade boasts that his brother could have captured her beauty "for all time." She remembers he was an artist and Slade sternly corrects her: "He was a genius." Connecting Kitty's beauty to his brother, Slade proclaims "it was the beauty of women that led him to his destruction." and adds "Yours is a beauty which could destroy men...or it could destroy you." Kitty happens to remark, "That's a very queer thing to say." It's interesting to note that it is the beauty itself which Slade terms as destructive. He especially argues that women's beauty is fine in private, but becomes dangerous in public, when on display. Within a heteronormative paradigm there are easily ways to complete this story in one's imagination that does not necessarily invoke queer sexuality. Yet the incompleteness of the story invites an engagement with its explicit potentiality. It requires the audience to imagine how Slade's brother came to ruin through women's beauty. For queer spectators there may be more options for imagining how a "strange man" might be destroyed by women's beauty, particularly we might think of those who may have been incarcerated or suffered violence for displaying themselves in feminine ways, including wearing women's clothing in the 1940s, or performing publicly in drag. The stigma of femininity and of displaying one's feminine beauty may very well have brought ruin to Slade's brother in manners owing to queer expressions rather than heteronormative narratives of a woman's betrayal.

Slade's disgust includes a complex duality, which he openly acknowledges, whereby he is both fascinated by women's beauty and finds its display contemptible. He articulates in plain and striking terms the very construction in a dressing room conversation with Kitty just before she goes onstage. He says, "You wouldn't think that anyone could hate a thing and love it too." To which Kitty responds, "You can't love and hate at the same time." Slade returns, "You can." In

this moment, Slade steps forward and we cut to a medium-wide shot, showing Slade's image multiplied in a row of dressing mirrors. The visual shift underscores his verbal correction of her by introducing visually a multiplicity of image and verbally a multiplicity of meaning. One *can* love and hate just as one can have more than one self-representation or expression. Slade continues, "A man can destroy what he hates and love what he destroys." That there is "evil in beauty," but "when the evil is cut out of a beautiful thing, then only the beauty remains." In Slade's description there is an intimate connection between love and hatred which acknowledges excitement and interest in femininity and feminine beauty while also displaying contempt for its display. Slade articulates a muddled self-construction that desires beauty but also hates this very desire, a somewhat self-loathing way of craving yet condemning one's attachment to beauty and feminine expression.

We see this duality in action when Slade attempts to murder Kitty following a scene in which he watches her perform in a chorus number on stage, "Parisian Trot." The camera pushes in slowly on Slade's increasingly excited expression. Shots of the dancers do not take Slade's POV but instead rapidly splice together images of the performance from multiple angles. As the camera pushes in closer to Slade, the cuts to the dancers become increasingly rapid, and Laird Cregar's performance as Slade expresses an intense excitement. Thus, the thrill of his experience watching the dance is conveyed formally by the film. Following this visual spectacle of beauty, Slade becomes determined to murder Kitty. This scene visually connects the excitement Slade experiences for her performance to Slade's motivation to kill. While Slade's ideology remains somewhat convoluted throughout the movie, as viewers we are given at the very least a sense that it owes to conflicted feelings within himself about being fascinated with women's beauty and

loathing it, and himself, as well. Thus, the move to kill can be read as an attempt to “cut out” what he hates about the very thing that he loves – femininity and women’s beauty.

### **Conclusion**

While scholarship commonly asserts that forties horror represents a relatively static period populated only with juvenile sequels and comic variations on the major movie monsters of the 1930s, the complexity of the horror films discussed here poses a problem to this narrative.<sup>53</sup> Particularly, the nuanced psychologies of the human killers in *The Leopard Man*, *The Lodger*, *Bluebeard*, *Hangover Square*, and *The Spiral Staircase* offer a link between horror cinema of the 1940s and significant concerns of the decade over the simultaneous valorization of the hypermasculine soldier and subsequent domestic displacement of this hypermasculine figure upon return to a more independent generation of working women. Cinematic traces of this cultural shift are located frequently in the psychologically fractured men of film noir, yet the similarly damaged male characters in horror have been significantly marginalized as inconsistent outliers set against the dominant norm of the classical Hollywood monster. However, as has been shown here, a striking set of commonalities emerge when considering these titles side by side, particularly the audience’s association with the killer’s POV and the killer’s characterization as sexual deviant, gender nonconforming, or preoccupied with fears of being read as effeminate (“soft,” “strange,” etc.). Such consistency is suggestive of a significant trend of its time. Additionally, the relevance these themes continue to have throughout twentieth century horror cinema, particularly as is discussed in the aftermath of 1960, suggests these films are crucially important to the ongoing development of killer/queer characterizations, and the use of POV to implicate the audience in the killer’s acts of murder. That critics have produced fruitful discussions of these themes as found in *Peeping Tom*, *Psycho* and the slasher subgenre, raises the questions about how these discussions

might be extended to an earlier period of relevance. To begin with, this implicates the former half of the twentieth century in cynicism often reserved for the latter half. Namely, the idea of internal cultural security, where community members rightfully trust each other and need only worry about foreign dangers (metaphorically, the supernatural), seems challenged by these films. Indeed, charming killers did exist before Norman Bates. The internal discomfort of imperceptible danger did not emerge as a cultural concern of the 1960s but rather the sixties continued the development of preexisting nervousness around potentially volatile, yet seemingly ordinary men. Through the perverse implication of the spectator via POV murder and the general proliferation of paranoia about the killer “in our midst,” these 1940s horror films betray conservative notions of sanctity within World War II era America. Instead, they suggest that in addition to those foreign “monsters,” the nation also feared the curious men in its midst, the ones unknowably perverse and psychologically inclined toward dangerous acts of strange pleasure.<sup>54</sup>



## CHAPTER TWO

### HOMO/CIDAL: WILLIAM CASTLE'S 1960S KILLER QUEERS

Alfred Hitchcock's influential 1960 feature *Psycho* turns on a distinct rupture from a developing plot. Central to the shock of the film is the fact that the initially established storyline becomes secondary to one raised about 40 minutes into the film. The first plot involves Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) stealing \$10,000 from her employer under the ruse that she will deposit it at the bank on her way home from work on a Friday afternoon. She expects it will not be until Monday morning that anyone notices that it, and she, are missing. Instead of making the deposit, Marion sets out from Phoenix, Arizona to meet her boyfriend, Sam, in Fairvale, California with the newly acquired cash. We learn in the film's opening scene that they have been stuck meeting up in hotels because neither can afford to start a life together. The cash represents to Marion the genesis of a romantic future with Sam, likely a marriage and various other forms of heterosexual bliss to follow. Enter Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins), the effete mother-obsessed caretaker of the decrepit Bates Motel. Marion is blinded by the torrential rain, ends up somehow off the highway, and at the Motel's door. The shock of *Psycho* structurally, its sudden left-turn in plot is echoed in its arrival at a queer space, and the impact of a queer entity. Norman's psycho-drama of loving and hating and becoming his mother sets the story off-kilter, breaking the conventions of Hollywood narrative and defying the hierarchy of stardom – Leigh was the film's biggest and seemingly most important star. Most especially this notorious turn in *Psycho* is a visceral intervention by a queer spirit into the pattern of Hollywood's heteronormative romance. Marion laments in the opening hotel room scene that she wants to live a "respectable" life, the life she envisions she could buy for herself and Sam with \$10,000. The arrival at the Bates Motel, and the entrance of Norman, spells the end of respectability for Marion, and the thwarting of her plan to access the "respectable" heteronormative life she values. Instead of being a movie about Marion's

mad love, and her desperation to actualize her romantic dreams, *Psycho* becomes a dark satire of their foolishness. As Norman carelessly tosses the wrapped newspaper holding Marion's \$10,000 bounty into the trunk of her car and sinks it in the lake, he signals a shift of priorities, an ironic disinterest in all that Marion wrapped herself up in – the money, the husband, the “respectable” life. Norman's queerness, his murderousness, his differently oriented priorities express a profound rebuttal of normative values, a violent investigation of culture, and a spirited queer resistance to the restrictive range of possibilities driving Marion and others toward the perverse frenzy of “respectability.”

The legacy of *Psycho* is hardly measurable, but in the years (or even year) following the film's rapturous popularity, there were many imitators that expanded its template of queer antagonists who disrupt tonally, structurally, and narratively the normative aims of their victims. Histories of the slasher film (or parallel categories of similar names) such as Adam Rockoff's *Going to Pieces*, John McCarty's *Psychos and Madmen* (“psychofilms”) and William Schoell's *Stay Out of the Shower* (“shocker films”) chart popular commercial histories of films emulating *Psycho*'s combinations of mad killers and shock murders in the US, UK, and Italy. This includes *Dementia 13* in 1963 produced by Roger Corman and directed by the then unknown Francis Ford Coppola who has since stated he was told by Corman to make a “knock-off” of *Psycho*.<sup>55</sup> Several British filmmakers developed themes from Hitchcock's *Psycho* and Michael Powell's peer-film *Peeping Tom* with scenes of compulsive murder and sexual deviance. Notably, Freddie Francis delivered a string of *Psycho*-ish thrillers with similar titles such as *The Psychopath* (1966) featuring a child-like mother-obsessed killer who leaves behind dolls dressed like his victims. Its poster prominently featured the tagline “Mother may I go out to kill?”<sup>56</sup> British filmmaker Peter Collinson also directed multiple films with perverse killers, including a 1975 remake of the serial

murder mystery *The Spiral Staircase* and *Fright* – a 1971 film about a babysitter attacked by a killer who has escaped a mental institution. In Italy, Mario Bava directed the segment “The Telephone” as part of the anthology film *Black Sabbath* (1963), in which a woman receives increasingly disturbing phone calls from a stranger who threatens to encroach upon her home. His stylish feature, *Blood and Black Lace* (1964), also depicts the sequential murders of fashion house models by a mysterious masked man.

Among those filmmakers who progressed stylistic and thematic materials popularized in Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, American filmmaker William Castle perhaps offers an especially comprehensive and evolving perspective on how *Psycho* was repeatedly rewritten and reimagined across the 1960s. Castle’s 1960s thrillers made under the immense commercial and artistic influence of Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960) – *Homicidal* (1961), *Strait-Jacket* (1964), and *I Saw What You Did* (1965) – advance important thematic and stylistic trends in twentieth century American horror, and I contend 1) The films develop the figure of the killer/queer, a persistent figure in horror with historical roots at least as far back as the early twentieth century whose non-normative gender and sexuality are linked by cinema to murderousness and 2) That figure’s historical trajectory can be better understood in context of expanding national visibility of gay Americans in the 1960s and the increasing conception among gay Americans and straight Americans that “gay” signified a collective identity rather than discreet sexual behavior. Considering Castle’s films from a contemporary queer perspective and articulating stylistic, narrative, and thematic features of his work with queer resonance, I address the historical context of these films at a transitional moment in the gay rights movement between the relative conservatism of gay rights organizations such as Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis in the 1950s and more radical gay rights politics following the Stonewall riots in 1969. From a genre

studies perspective, this chapter posits that the killer/queer's increased prominence following Stonewall coincided with rising gay visibility and that the killer/queer's increased prominence significantly influenced the popular slasher cycle of 1978-1986. Thus I argue here Castle's redeployment of *Psycho*'s style and themes, often deemed derivative, actually progresses crucial trends that lead to the slasher. While the slasher has been largely studied as a subgenre bearing the influence of Hitchcock's *Psycho*, it has hardly, if ever, been studied as a subgenre bearing the influence of William Castle. In reinstating Castle's importance as a genre pioneer I hope to refocus attention on his contributions to twentieth century American horror as a director who progresses the killer/queer figure, and who shapes conventions of the popular slasher cycle.

#### **“Daddy, what is a homosexual?” or The Rise of Gay Visibility in the 1960s**

By the arrival of *Homicidal* in 1961 gay visibility in America was significantly rising and advocacy for gay rights was taking shape. In the 1950s, gay rights organizations such as Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis made the first major pushes to unite gay and lesbian Americans socially and politically to achieve positive advancement. One of the primary goals of Mattachine in the '50s was to encourage gay Americans to recognize themselves as a part of a collective gay community. This concept was relatively new and had been fostered by the homosocial communities developed during World War II.<sup>57</sup> Michel Foucault famously articulated the roots of this shift based in nineteenth century medical science as the transition from an understanding of sodomy as a sex act to homosexuality as a “personage...a type of life, a life form.”<sup>58</sup> “The sodomite had been a temporary aberration,” he remarks; “the homosexual was now a species.”<sup>59</sup> This new understanding of homosexual as an identity was formed around the idea of gender inversion, “a hermaphroditism of the soul.”<sup>60</sup> Christopher Nealon describes this shift as the “inversion” model versus the “ethnic” model. Or rather, the notion of an identity indicated by

inverse gender (e.g. a woman in a man's body) that dominated the earlier half of the twentieth century versus homosexuality as distinguishing "peoplehood" as was developed more popularly in the latter half of the century.<sup>61</sup> Mattachine, in its inciting manifesto, calls for the fair treatment of gay people with the expectation they, as a society, might convince straight America that "homosexuals can lead well-adjusted, wholesome, and socially productive lives,"<sup>62</sup> This more assimilationist gay politics radically differed from the post-Stonewall gay liberation movement which called for the dismantling of normative society and the rebuilding of an alternatively queer country.<sup>63</sup>

Another crucial factor in the nation's collective cultural reconsideration of sexuality at the time were the publications of Alfred Kinsey's studies on male sexuality in 1948 and female sexuality in 1953. These reports garnered national attention for, among many other things, survey-based data that suggested homosexual sex was far more common than social norms might suggest. Kinsey subsequently theorized that such behavior might increase should the penalties discouraging homosexuality be removed. A key outcome of Kinsey's work was to suggest that homosexuality was far less abnormal than believed and that it was instead an "inherent physiologic capacity."<sup>64</sup>

Despite historic advancements in destigmatizing queer sexuality, reactionary attitudes were highly prevalent. Notably, these objections were (as they have oft been) framed around concern for the wellbeing of children and, in the case of national political visibility, framed as issues about children's corrupted sense of knowledge about sexuality. In the 1959 race for mayor of San Francisco between Russell L. Wolden and the incumbent George Christopher, Wolden famously raised homosexuality as a major issue facing the city. In a public radio broadcast he claimed the city had become "the national headquarters of organized sex deviates."<sup>65</sup> The city itself had recently become chronicled in national news when San Francisco police raided the City Lights

bookstore in June of 1957 and arrested its owner, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, on charges of selling obscene literature. The text in question was gay poet Allen Ginsberg's poem *Howl* which featured vivid details of homosexual sex.<sup>66</sup> Ultimately, the court ruled against the prosecution. In a biography of Mayor Christopher published soon after these events in 1962, George Dorsey laments "And San Francisco parents were uncomfortably alone among the father and mothers of America that fall in having to field such questions from eleven- and twelve-year olds as, 'Daddy, what is a homosexual?'"<sup>67</sup> Thinking of Castle's movies as parallel to this reactionary panic to queer influence, particularly on children, makes evident the historical stakes of Castle's queer representations.

### **What Is Queer About Castle?**

My use of the phrase "queer" here draws on the complex and intersectional work of scholars such as Michael Warner and Cathy J Cohen. In his introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet*, Michael Warner sets out to describe a new queer politics which "no longer content to carve out a buffer zone for a minoritized and protected subculture, has begun to challenge the pervasive and often invisible heteronormativity of modern societies."<sup>68</sup> Here and throughout the introduction he argues that queerness contests such normative concepts as the "the family," "class identity," and "racial and national fantasy." Warner contends "queer" is more than just vernacular for LGBT and instead signals connections between non-normative gender/sexuality and broader political and social positions which similarly question normativity. His approach to queer theory and queer politics is carried forward in Cathy J. Cohen's characterization of "queer" as a category more complex than merely oppositional to "straight." Cohen considers the role of power in the restricted experiences of gender and sexual minority groups, and advocates for "queer" to unite these groups with others marginalized by race, class, etc. She describes an investment in "examining the concept

of ‘queer’ in order to think about how we might construct a new political identity that is truly liberating, transformative, and inclusive of all those who stand on the outside of the dominant constructed norm of state-sanctioned white middle- and upper-class heterosexuality.”<sup>69</sup> Both authors situate queerness within a political project to transform oppressive structures rather than tethering the term exclusively to a gender or sexual identity. In this spirit, when I look at what is queer about the killer queer figures of Castle’s cinema, I seek not to ascribe LGBTQ identifiers retroactively to characters but to assess what queer resonance these characters might have. How are they positioned as non-normative along the lines of gender and sexuality, but additionally how might they work against heteronormative ideologies more generally throughout the films?

Building on these queer representations, Castle’s delightful incoherence as a B-movie filmmaker lends itself to a decidedly queer feeling in his features. The director has often been criticized for making films with absurdist plots, cheap novelties, and limited formal innovation. A review of *I Saw What You Did* in the *Los Angeles Times* makes a case against Castle’s effectiveness by citing his weakness in achieving filmic continuity: “William Castle is sufficiently a moviemaker to be able to photograph one scene, photograph another scene and paste the two together, and the mechanics of moviemaking are such that two scenes viewed consecutively can cause a certain amount of apprehension to be generated in the onlooker.”<sup>70</sup> It goes on to critique the contrived and non-sequitur plot, the unbelievable sights and sounds – including stilted and implausible performances. The review concludes, in an interesting turn of phrase, “Castle doesn’t so much make a movie as play around with it.”<sup>71</sup> Indeed Castle is perhaps best known for the popular interactive gimmicks used in films such as *The Tingler* (1959) and *13 Ghosts* (1960). *Homicidal* features one such gimmick – a popular point of dismay in reviews – a “Fright Break” at the film’s climax in which a ticking stop watch appears on screen and offers patrons the option to flee the

theater if they are too scared to stay for the ending. This interactivity and novelty suggest that Castle is at play in his films. This discordance with classical Hollywood continuity – in which a sealed diegesis is the norm and films commonly intend to make seamless their editing from shot to shot and scene to scene – invites a different audience interaction, one that can be said to function in a queer capacity.

As Eve Sedgwick phrases it, one way to think about queerness is as a failure for everything to “line-up.” A normative gender and sexual identity presumes that a number of features about a person will neatly line up: their chromosomal sex, gender, masculine or feminine traits per your sex and/or gender, the perceived gender of a partner, the chromosomal sex of that partner, the masculine and feminine traits of that partner per their sex and/or gender, etc. Queerness then is disjuncture from this normative line-up of things. It refers to “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning.”<sup>72</sup> It poses the significant question “What if the richest junctures weren’t the ones where *everything means the same thing*?”<sup>73</sup> Conceivably then, what has earned Castle the ire of film critics – disjunctive filmmaking, lacking cohesion and with convoluted plots, stilted performances, and incoherent dialogue – might also be said to make Castle’s work decidedly queer, open to a multiplicity of meanings and interpretation, not “lined up.”

Among those features David Bordwell describes as conventional to classical Hollywood narration is desire for “us to see it as presenting an apparently solid fictional world.”<sup>74</sup> That is to say the classical Hollywood narration commonly aspires to create the illusion that the camera is merely presenting an objective reality. Story construction is then predicated upon “character-centered – personal or psychological – causality... the drive toward overcoming obstacles and achieving goals.”<sup>75</sup> That demands clearly defined characters comprised of “a consistent bundle of



a few salient traits.”<sup>76</sup> This “psychological causality, presented through defined characters acting to achieve announced goals, gives the classical film its characteristic progression”<sup>77</sup> Castle’s films might be conceivably thought of in these terms as failing to create the sense of consistent character-centered progress. As critics have noted, plots can appear convoluted and the motivation of characters from scene to scene can be unclear. While the failure to make clear and motivated causal connections might be seen by critics to make Castle’s films “bad,” they also create myriad possibilities for interpretation that speak to queer reading practices. Or, rather, where Classical Hollywood structure often demands consistency and continuity, Castle’s work might be said to be queer in its inconsistency, its failure to come together or “line up.” Interestingly, *Homicidal*’s prominent forbear also famously eroded the anticipated character-motivated chain of causality expected by Hollywood film audiences. The shocking death of Janet Leigh’s Marion Crane in *Psycho* marked the movie’s most indelible moment and its greatest departure from Hollywood’s narrational norms. While I argue this inconsistency or incoherence of the text develops queer themes at the level of narration, Bordwell still describes *Psycho* as only a “limit-text,” which tests the boundaries of Hollywood norms without breaking them.<sup>78</sup>

In thinking about how queer readings might occur, we must further consider what David Bordwell’s explanation of how story is formed by Hollywood audiences. Bordwell articulates the important difference between the Russian formalist terms *fabula* (story) and *syuzhet* (plot). “Plot,” he states, “is, in effect the film before us,” referring to narrative information as it is organized by the film.<sup>79</sup> “The story,” he continues, “is thus our mental construct, a structure of inferences we make on the basis of selected aspects of the plot.”<sup>80</sup> Of key importance here is that while plot refers to narrative as presented by the film, story is independently constructed by each audience member based upon those plot details presented. In the case of potentially disorienting or inconsistent plot,

story (how the plot becomes organized and understood by the audience) thus also becomes subject to varied interpretation.

### **Polysemy, Meaning, and Murder in *Homicidal***

The potentially queer qualities of character and narration converge in interesting ways in the first Castle title of note here: *Homicidal*. The film's central queer character displays a noted inconsistency about his/her/their gender and sexuality. Likewise, the film's confused plot allows queer viewers to structure a story in more fluid ways.

In an opening scene, we are introduced to a children's playroom, filled with gendered toys – boxing gloves and trains for a boy, dolls for a girl. The room is organized spatially such that the camera begins in the “boy” section of the room and slowly pans right toward the “girl” section. A young girl is shown having a tea party with a doll. A boy enters behind her and watches her play. He snatches her doll away and she cries, “No, Warren!” The camera pushes in on his hands clutching the doll. At first glance the scene suggests a young girl being teased by a boy peer, possibly a sibling. The stealing of the doll seems a sneaky gesture designed to upset. However, what the film develops from this point forward raises questions about this perception of the scene, including the genders of the characters, the gendered relations between them, and the motivations that guide their actions. We learn to question if Warren is being purely mischievous here or if, indeed, he merely lusts after the coded “girl” side of the room from which he is spatially and socially segregated.

The film turns next to a visceral and bluntly satiric scene of marriage. A mysterious woman checks into a hotel under the name Miriam Webster. She offers the bellhop \$2,000 to marry her at midnight on the sixth of September and he agrees. At midnight on the sixth, “Miriam” and the bellhop drive to the Justice of the Peace, Alfred S. Adrims, wake him from his sleep, and offer to

pay double for his services at such a late hour. The Justice extracts an additional fee from the eager couple for the performance of accompanying wedding music despite his wife's harried objections that it will disturb the neighbors. "Play soft," he barks at her.

The wedding is a tepid by-the-numbers exercise comprised of the couple in plain clothes and the Justice of the Peace and his wife in robe and nightgown. When the groom is asked if he takes the woman as his wife, he replies "I guess so." When Justice Adrimis announces his intention following the ceremony to kiss the "little lady," the camera cuts to an extreme close-up of the woman's enraged eyes. She removes a knife from her purse and stabs him to death.

The childhood spat and gruesome marriage scenes open *Homicidal* to discourses on gender and normative gender relations that color the entire film. As with the scene of Warren possibly coveting a baby doll, the marriage sequence depicts a dissonant relationship to a set of gender norms and cultural rituals. It first reduces heterosexual marriage to a cash-in-hand ploy, then shreds any semblance of niceties by using the wedding as the site for a bloody murder. Moreover, the sequence of events suggests Justice Adrimis' attempt at kissing the bride inspires and/or expedites Miriam's plan of murder. Her refusal of his patronizing and gender specific affection – kissing the bride whom he calls "little lady" – is a grand and violent display against her heteronormative role in marriage as a customary object to be kissed.

*Homicidal* consistently presents characters who bristle with gender norms and/or are incompatible with a binary logic of gender. These representations function queerly by raising the audience's awareness of such norms of gender and sexuality and visualizing disjunctive relations with such norms that provide queer resonances. This queer characteristic is crucial to the core character drama of the film, which requires some elaboration to clarify.

Following the wedding murder, “Miriam” returns home. We learn she is here called Emily. She is caretaker to Helga, a wheelchair-bound mute woman. Emily’s relationship with Helga appears caring in public but in private Emily is verbally abusive and threatens Helga’s safety. Emily, we learn, returned home with Warren, the owner of the estate, and Helga following a stroke Helga had while she and Warren were in Denmark. Warren visits sporadically to check on Helga. Warren’s sister, the real Miriam Webster, grows increasingly suspicious of Emily’s odd and threatening behavior toward her. This includes breaking into Miriam’s flower shop, threatening to kill her, and, of course, using her name to murder Adrims, which is revealed to Miriam late in the film. When Miriam finally convinces her brother Warren that Emily is unsafe, the two return home to aid Helga who has been left alone with Emily. Miriam enters the house to find Helga decapitated. Emily then reveals to Miriam that she is, in fact, also Warren. Emily/Warren explains that he/she/they mean to kill Miriam and frame “Emily” for the murder. Emily/Warren cuts herself/himself/themself with a knife and means to be discovered as a wounded “Warren.” However, a family friend, Dr. Jonas, interrupts and tussles with Emily/Warren. During the fight, Miriam shoots Emily/Warren leaving her/him/them seemingly dead.

In a final scene reminiscent of *Psycho*’s ending, Lt. Miller, who has been investigating the Adrims murder, emerges to explain the story of Emily/Warren. He explains that Emily/Warren’s seemingly misogynist father wanted a son as heir to his estate. When Emily/Warren was born biologically female, he/she/their mother along with Helga, who delivered the baby, and Justice Adrims, who was County Clerk at the time, conspired to enter the sex as “male” and to raise Emily/Warren as a son. Otherwise, the family inheritance would go directly to Emily/Warren’s older sister by another marriage, Miriam. Emily/Warren’s father died believing that “Warren” was his son. Then, in a subtle remark, the investigator notes following his death, Helga took Warren to

Denmark and “what happened there, we don’t know.” Following Helga’s stroke, he continues, “Warren” returned with “Emily,” using “Emily” to kill those who knew of the deception and/or could stand in the way: Adrims, Helga, and Miriam. This narration of events is purely subjective. It is delivered by Lt. Miller with the corroborating documents of William Webster’s will and Warren Webster’s birth certificate. There is no visual or audio clues to suggest Emily/Warren survived his/her/their gunshot wound and no indication anyone has spoken to Emily/Warren to extract the details of this story. This, of course, raises the question: Where do the details of this story come from? Particularly, as the story purported here claims that all who would know these details are deceased: Adrims, Helga, Emily/Warren. Here Lt. Miller produces a story that it is impossible for him (or anyone) to know. In *Psycho*’s comparable ending, a psychiatrist emerges having spoken to Norman as “Mother” and relays what Mother has told him about the events depicted in the film. Here there is no suggested conversation with Emily/Warren, who, as best the audience knows, died from Miriam’s bullet.

This leaves the audience with a number of polysemous plot points, of which the narration of Emily/Warren’s story by Lt. Miller is one. There is the potential to read the film according to the narrative provided and indeed Lt. Miller’s story does seem a reasonable and not totally disprovable story pieced together from the plot of the film. However, what if we take Lt. Miller’s story as a heteronormative rationalization for a gender non-normative body? If Lt. Miller, Dr. Jonas, and others perceive “Warren” as a man with a vagina, this might lead to speculation. How can one normalize this body? The film’s decision not to have an objective narration close the film leaves open myriad possibilities to consider the multiply queer resonances of the Emily/Warren dilemma.

In *Hollywood Androgyny*, Rebecca Bell-Metereau notes how even the subsequent credits continue the uncertainty around gender. As the androgynously named actor Jean Arless is given screen credit for the dual roles of “Emily” and “Warren,” the film shows us Arless simultaneously in both character costumes thus sustaining the ambiguity of even the performer’s gender. In fact, the actress Joan Marshall played the two roles and the pseudonym Jean Arless was never credited again. Interestingly, Bell-Metereau demonstrates the kinds of fluid viewing experience with gender and sexuality I describe such a film as affording its audiences. She contextualizes *Homicidal* in a section on transvestite and drag movies like *Some Like It Hot* (1959) and though she maintains that Arless’ gender is unknowable she nonetheless remarks that “Jean Arless is a totally convincing woman” and “the entire plot of *Homicidal* relies on the completely undetectable female impersonation performed by Jean Arless.”<sup>81</sup> However, Marshall identified as a woman, meaning her screen performance was actually an impersonation of a man. Nonetheless, this slippery uncertainty is wholly conducive with the kinds of gender play the film encourages in the viewer.

One generative path to consider as an undercurrent in Emily/Warren’s non-normative gender identity and expression is emerging awareness of trans identities in this period. A connection to this history seems implicitly suggested with the curious references made to Emily/Warren’s time in Denmark.<sup>82</sup> *Homicidal* was released in 1961, about nine years following the national news story profiling Christine Jorgensen, who famously received her gender confirmation surgery in Denmark and emerged as a point of public interest in December of 1952 with a *New York Daily News* headline reading “Ex-GI Becomes Blonde Beauty.” Jorgensen went on to stage a successful nightclub act and make frequent public appearances on television and radio.<sup>83</sup> In 1959, shortly before the release of *Homicidal*, Jorgensen’s story became a renewed subject of national interest when she announced that she intended to marry Howard J. Knox, a

statistician who worked in Washington, D.C. Jorgensen was famously denied a legal marriage because she could not legally prove her sex as female. Howard J. Knox lost his job following the news coverage of the incident and terminated his engagement to Jorgensen soon after.<sup>84</sup>

In addition to Lt. Miller's intentionally vague references to time spent in Denmark, there is the mystery of the murder weapon Emily/Warren uses on all her/his/their victims: a surgical knife. In an eerie scene Emily/Warren pays to have the knife sharpened by a man who inquires about the strangeness of the knife. When Emily/Warren informs him that "doctors use it," he returns, "What do you use it for?" to which she/he/they answer sheepishly "various things." Advertisements for the film suggest something visceral about the surgical knife. At least five different variations of the poster for *Homicidal* feature a woman at the center of the image with the surgical knife overlaying her at the waist. The construction dually suggests perhaps the kinds of phallic connotations scholars have often given to the knife of the killer in the slasher picture, or perhaps also a castrating connotation consistent with connections to "sex change" and mysterious surgeries in Denmark.<sup>85</sup> The bloody knife in each case makes up the "I" in the word "HOMICIDAL" and perhaps taps into the trans killer possibilities at the core of the film and in the public imagination at the time. While to suggest the use of a surgical tool here implies a connection to a gender confirmation surgery reinforces some of the film's own implicitly transphobic and anatomy oriented logic, it is nonetheless important to note how the film codes Emily/Warren with Denmark, surgery, and, at times, gender dysphoria to allude to other possible interpretations of the film's story based upon its plot. Trans identities at the time of the film's production were relatively misunderstood and compacted with other queer identities. For example, Ed Wood's famous film about crossdressing, *Glen or Glenda* (1955), was originally intended to tell the story of Jorgensen

under the title “I Changed My Sex.” Wood’s film, though not about Jorgensen, was still marketed with the phrase “I Changed My Sex.”

This period was also deeply affected by a darker news story that drew conversation to the concept of non-normative gender identities: the murders, grave robberies, and bodily mutilations of serial killer Ed Gein. In 1957, news broke of Gein’s Wisconsin “house of horrors” which was decorated with remnants of corpses, including those he had sewn into furniture. Gein was ultimately found guilty of murdering two women and robbing nine graves.<sup>86</sup> It is not entirely clear how Gein’s mutilation of women’s bodies began to become narrativized as the actions of a frustrated transgender person, but this seemingly mythic characterization grew quickly in popularity. Harold Schechter, author of the Gein biography *Deviant*, offers details about a possibly influential *Milwaukee Journal* article crediting an “unidentified investigator” who attended Gein’s interrogation. The source described Gein as having a ritual which “gave him great satisfaction” in which he would don a mask and vest made of women’s skin and wear them around his farm. The source tied this to Gein’s supposed desire to become a woman, stating Gein “considered inquiring about an operation to change into a woman and even thought of trying the operation upon himself, but did nothing about such plans.”<sup>87</sup> *LIFE* magazine published similar uncited details in an eight-page photo spread that promised an inside look at Gein’s farm. The magazine reported that “He often wished, he said, that he were a woman. Psychiatrists studying his actions believe he is schizophrenic, or split personality.”<sup>88</sup> These two sentences closely link possible non-normative gender with mental illness. Screen representations of Gein, or inspired by Gein, seemed to pick up on this unverified crossdressing or transgender aspect of his story and develop it to their own end, often also conflating it with mental illness and a murderous pathology. Robert Bloch’s 1959 novel *Psycho* and the Hitchcock film of the same name released in 1960 both heavily fictionalize the



story of Gein in the form of mother obsessed effete crossdresser Norman Bates. As the impact of *Psycho* loomed heavily over *Homicidal*, Gein's story may also have affected how audiences understood Emily/Warren's non-normative and inconsistent gender presentation.<sup>89</sup>

One pivotal and emotional scene for Emily/Warren features "Emily" breaking into Miriam's flower shop and vandalizing her floral wedding displays, including figures of brides and grooms in conventional white dresses and tuxedos respectively. Wheeler Winston Dixon notes in *Straight* that the Emily/Warren dichotomy is itself "a careful rehearsal and construction of performative body tropes" – dressed in a suit and suspenders as Warren but shifting aptly to a gown with white gloves reminiscent on Donna Reed as Emily.<sup>90</sup> This engagement, and perhaps frustration, with coded gender norms is evoked as Emily picks a groom figurine from a display and rips its head off. She then picks up a framed photo of "Warren" and shatters it. This scene is not given much context or addressed at any other point during the film. One possible interpretation is that Emily/Warren is repressing romantic and/or sexual feelings for Carl, the local druggist and paramour of Miriam whom she flirts with briefly at the pharmacy just one scene earlier. In this case Emily/Warren is stifling an attraction to avoid the social impropriety of the appearance of a homosexual attraction by "Warren" toward Carl. Most clearly, the scene signifies Emily/Warren's discomfort with gender norms and the heteronormative representations of marriage suggested by the gender coded bride and groom figures. Emphasis is placed on tearing off the head of the groom, and destroying Warren's portrait, perhaps showing Emily/Warren's anger at the need to perform a masculine persona.

This sentiment is echoed throughout the film in scenes where Emily/Warren expresses outrage over her/his/their upbringing. In one scene Emily/Warren revisits the children's playroom of the opening scene along with Miriam, both adults now. They reminisce in a melancholy tone

about their childhood, how Helga kept the two of them apart to make “Warren” more of a man. How their father paid neighborhood boys to start fights with “Warren” to toughen him. How Helga beat “Warren” with a switch at his father’s orders. The scene emphasizes the exhaustive work making “Warren” into an acceptably masculine persona. Scenes like these resonate with the personal experiences of femmes, trans women, and transfeminine people, feeling socially pressured to accomplish a correct and socially recognizable masculinity, to be toughened and masculinized through violence, to be separated from femme things like girl toys. The film’s final shot shows the doll Emily/Warren once stole from Miriam, the one Helga tried to keep away, fall forward and land atop the switch Helga used to beat Emily/Warren into a “man,” visually suggesting an opposition to the binary which plagued Emily/Warren as it does many queer people.

### **Queer Desire and Subjective Narration in *Strait-Jacket***

*Strait-Jacket*, like *Homicidal*, offers a fiscal motive for murder but nonetheless dwells more complexly on the psychological motivations of the killer, which supersede the practical rationale for the act. In *Strait-Jacket*, Lucy Harbin, described as a self-assured, sexual, and confident woman, returns home to find her husband in bed with another woman. She is so emotionally affected by this sight that she decapitates her husband and his lover in their sleep. Her young daughter, Carol, watches the events transpire from her bed. Twenty years later, Lucy is released from the mental asylum. Lucy, played by Joan Crawford, is now a more mature, gray-haired woman in drab clothes where at the time of the murder she had been shown in a bold print dress with a stylish hairdo and gaudy bangle bracelets. She returns home to the care of her now adult daughter Carol. Carol takes an odd interest in restoring Lucy to her former aesthetic, leading her on a shopping spree that returns her visually to her exact style and appearance at the time of the murders. Not long after returning home Lucy appears to experience audio and visual

hallucinations. She hears children chanting a Lizzie Borden inspired schoolyard rhyme (“Lucy Harbin took an ax/Gave her husband 40 whacks”) and finds a bloody ax and severed heads in her bed. Eventually, murders begin again, and Lucy suspects she is responsible. A shapely figure with brown hair and bangle bracelets is seen committing the crimes. Ultimately, it is revealed that Carol has been committing the murders while dressed as Lucy (including a custom rubber mask) to frame her mother. Part of Carol’s plan was to murder her fiancée’s parents, a wealthy couple who did not approve of Carol. With the couple gone and Lucy in prison for their murders, Carol and her fiancée could marry and avoid scrutiny.

While this financial motivation stands as a logical possibility at film’s end, the film itself develops more complex connections between Carol and her mother that suggest it does not fully explain these events. Carol’s obsessive need to recreate her mother as she appeared during her childhood conveys a non-normative attachment not only to her mother, but to a specific aestheticized version of her mother. Her rebuilding of Lucy into her former self echoes the obsessive need of Scottie in Alfred Hitchcock’s film *Vertigo* (1958) to return Judy back into the aestheticized vision of Madeline down to her grey suit and pinned up blonde hair. Here Carol has her mother wear a dark wig, a bright patterned dress, and clanking bangled bracelets again. Scotty’s need to refashion his lover in *Vertigo* has often been analyzed as a sign of sexual domination and obsessive attachment. Here Carol exhibits a queer affection and physical obsession with her mother.

The scene of Lucy’s first murders emphasizes the link between Lucy and her daughter Carol. Following the decapitations, the camera cuts to a shot of Carol watching her mother’s murders. Footage of Lucy in a strait-jacket shouting “Leave me alone! I’m not guilty!” is superimposed over Carol’s image. It appears Lucy is being removed from the scene and taken to

an asylum. The disturbing superimposed footage of Lucy in restraints persists as the underlying footage alternates between Lucy bringing down the ax and Carol's shocked expression. In this way, Carol is filmically interwoven into the scenes of Lucy's murders and their aftermath. The camera pushes in to an extreme close-up of young Carol's eyes as she watches the murders. The shot of young Carol's eyes dissolves into a shot of adult Carol's eyes, visually informing the viewer that this new actress, Diane Baker, takes on the role of Carol. While this technique importantly cues the audience to recognize the character as performed by a new actress, it also suggests something more sinister. That young Carol's trauma shapes her as an adult. A sound-bridge of sirens and Lucy's screaming carries over into the shot of adult Carol, emphasizing this connection.

This sequence is revisited following the revelation that Carol, posing as Lucy, has committed the recent murders. Carol alternately shouts "I hate you!" and "I love you!" as she clutches and sometimes punches the mask of her mother's face she wore to kill. Her screaming image is then superimposed over the extreme close-up of young Carol's eyes in a direct echo of Lucy in her strait-jacket at the film's start. It continues to be superimposed over footage of Lucy swinging the ax twenty years ago, and the footage of Lucy screaming in her strait-jacket. At points their screaming faces and wide open mouths lay nearly exactly one over the other in temporary moments of graphic match. The implication that the early trauma carried into Carol's adulthood suggested at the film's beginning comes to fruition here as screaming adult Carol is now enfolded into the series of terrifying images.

Carol's role as killer also complicates her subjective narration. The opening flashback detailing Lucy's ax-murders of her husband and lover are narrated by an adult Carol as told to her fiancée on the eve of her mother's return. Thus, the narration the audience is given about Lucy's actions rely solely on the subjective perspective of Carol, already entwined in a murderous plot to

frame her mother for additional murders. Like *Homicidal*, it raises interesting questions about the reliability of the narration provided and instead suggests a multiplicity of stories able to be assembled from available plot. For example, could Carol's manipulation of her mother extend even further back than the present? How might the narrative be different when told by Lucy, or another subjective narrator? Hitchcock's *Stage Fright* very famously featured a so-called "false flashback" in which a character relays the details of a murder in a manner that demonstrates his innocence. The film seems to visually reinforce this narration through representational images of what the character describes, suggesting a return by the film's plot to an earlier point in the story (a flashback). However, by film's end we learn these images were representations of a character's subjectivity; the events visualized as told by the character were untrue and he was guilty. The trappings of Carol's narration similarly suggest an objective filmic flashback by returning the audience visually to this moment. Her voice-over is an impersonal one with no reference to her identity. It is not until the end of the alleged flashback when the film cuts to adult Carol in the present that it becomes clear this is a subjective diegetic narrator.

Gerard Genette describes these qualities of narrations using the term "focalization," a contraction referring to the "focus of narration." The opening scene of *Strait-Jacket* appears to be an omniscient narration not told from a character's point-of-view but by a third-person non-character narrator. Genette's categorization would describe this as nonfocalized or zero focalization, meaning the film does not rely on any one character's perspective to convey the story to the audience. However, with the dissolve and the graphic match of Carol's eyes from childhood to adulthood we come to learn that indeed the scene is internally focalized, relayed exclusively from Carol's restricted perspective. Genette's model is helpful as it allows for shifts in narrator and changes from zero to internal focalization, including shifts between different internal

focalizations. For example, in a reversal of the opening scene in which Carol speaks for Lucy, Lucy closes the film with her own internally focalized narration of Carol's murderous plan.<sup>91</sup>

### **Seeing and Knowing in *I Saw What You Did***

Perspective plays an important role in director William Castle's *I Saw What You Did* (1965) since, as the title suggests, the film foregrounds subjectivity and limitations of sight. In it, Libby Mannering invites her friend Kit to visit while she babysits kid sister Tess. The three girls decide to amuse themselves by making "crank" calls and whispering the phrase "I saw what you did...and I know who you are." Posters and promotional materials often marketed the film using the completed tagline *I Saw What You Did and I Know Who You Are*, which fittingly expresses a core concern of the film with both *seeing* and *knowing*. Two acts that work in tandem though neither encompasses the other. The relationship between the two, particularly the potential misunderstandings about what has been seen and what is known, make up a significant amount of the tension in the film. "I know who you are" explicitly shifts its emphasis from an action to an identity. Not "I know *what you did*" where the seeing confirms the action, but "I know *who you are*" where the action seen confirms a deeper truth of the receiver's identity. At the level of plot, this suggests a vulnerability for the characters on the receiving end. To be known and identified allows for criminal prosecution. However, the line moves fundamentally beyond the fear of being identified superficially, by one's legal name, address, and phone number. Instead it focuses on the instability of knowable identities. The three girls pick a name and number from the phone book, Steve Marak. They know who he is on the page. Yet his presumption is that they have seen and known something far more intimate about him.

During the first third of the film, the prank phone calls remain a facile ploy. They give the girls voyeuristic access to strangers' personal lives, suggesting a fun engagement with worlds

beyond their own. Notably, the film plays with the sexual dimensions of other, older people's lives which seem to titillate the seemingly novice protagonists. The girls adopt breathy faux sexy voices and call various men, stringing along hostile wives and bemused couples with innuendo about sexual liaisons. The calls playact exaggerated heteronormative roles as the girls each manufacture flirtatious personas of similar affectation and tone. Such repetition emphasizes the cultural construction of gender roles and the functions of playacting in adolescent explorations of heterosexuality. When the girls switch to their "I saw what you did...and I know who you are" calls, the accusations continue to be tinged with sexual implications. One call reaches a man and woman kissing in bed illuminated only by the dim light through a window pane. The man answers the phone and presumes the girls refer to his current sexual encounter. "You did?" he asks. Then he pauses and adds, "Nothing is sacred."

In the instance of Steve Marak, the initial breathy mistress call is met with a cold indifference by Marak's wife, who insists the caller must be mistaken. The wife enters the bathroom to find it violently torn apart. She shouts at Steve through the shower door, "You wonder why I'm leaving you? You're not jealous. You're not that normal. You're insane!" He then pulls her into the shower and stabs her to death in a sequence that vividly recalls the shower scene in *Psycho* including imitative shot compositions and editing techniques. Unable to get a response, the girls hang up. Meanwhile Steve disposes of his wife's body. Later in the evening, the girls call back to prank him again and this time whisper "I saw what you did...and I know who you are." Unlike the typical heteronormative implications of sexual indecency and extramarital affairs, Marak's call instigates paranoia about totally unexpected aspects of his identity that the teen girls do not, perhaps cannot, even conceive: Steve as murderer. Moreover, unlike with other calls, Steve's life seems unmarked by heteronormative attitudes toward sex and romance. He is married,

but displays no emotion or affection for his wife whom he murders. His neighbor, Amy, played by Joan Crawford, spends the film making romantic advances toward him that he coolly ignores. When he eventually murders her, he stands stone-faced while she desperately leans in to kiss him as she falls to the floor, deceased. Though Steve certainly inhabits a heteronormative world, he appears characteristically at odds or indifferent to its pleasures.

Steve's noted disinterest and detachment from heteronormativity coupled with an immense anxiety over the discovery of a non-normative identity by his mystery caller speaks to deeply held fears of being "outed" which are persistent in queer culture, but especially potent in the film's more conservative time of release. More overtly queer films of the time such as *Victim* (1960) and *The Children's Hour* (1961) dramatized the persecution of gay characters by gossip and blackmail. *I Saw What You Did* ultimately reflects a desire to understand and distinguish individuals based upon limiting discursive categories of identity, what Michel Foucault calls the "will to knowledge." Such a desire is intimately linked to the invention of the homosexual as an identity category after which the homosexual was, in Foucault's words, not just a person but also "a past, a case history, and a childhood...a secret that always gave itself away."<sup>92</sup> *I Saw What You Did* dramatizes a cultural desire to know secrets, investigate people's sexual interests and identities, and very literally *see* what they do and *know* who they are. The very first shot situates us as voyeurs while Libby and Kitt talk on the phone. Each character is enclosed within a respective almond-shaped "eye" frame. A perspective for the eyes is never established. We never know who, if anyone, is looking at them, besides us. Moreover, it is a composite perspective as each character is suggested to be in a different home, making it impossible to be seen by any left and right eye at the same moment.



Just as the voyeuristic opening joins improbable spaces, *I Saw What You Did* tonally creates an odd composite of two incompatible genres whose formal conventions clash against one another. The picture is decidedly a teen babysitter movie at some point and at other points a *Psycho*-ish thriller. This contrast results in dissonant cuts between shots of Steve violently murdering his wife and those of young girls laughing about prank calls while eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. The two narratives present a heavy contrast in tone that disrupts the continuity and plausibility of plot for the viewer. The most importantly mismatched scene is when Kit and Libby finally reach Steve Marak to deliver their “I saw what you did...and I know who you are” line. Steve’s character occupies a world of murder and paranoia. Thus the prank line evokes an intense response in him. The girls, whose world consists of light-hearted teen antics and the rife potential for heteronormative romance, mistake his serious reaction as flirtation. “He’s playing along,” Libby proclaims excitedly. When Steve asks with chilling intentions “Who is this?” she giggles and breathily coos “Suzette.” When he presses “Where are you calling from? Where can I reach you?” she shrieks “What a swinger!” The girls hang up, laughing casually, while Steve registers their call as a sincere threat.

The disruptive mismatch in tone is echoed musically throughout the film in composer and bandleader Van Alexander’s score. The young girl’s central theme – a bubbly horn melody with a bouncy 4/4 time signature – sharply juxtaposes Steve’s musical cues comprised of sharper and moodier string sounds reminiscent of Bernard Hermann’s score from *Psycho*. At least one review noted this, stating “one thing particularly disturbing about this film is the soundtrack. Its tendency for abrupt and ill-timed changes in mood become very distracting.”<sup>93</sup>

Here the tonally, visually, narratively and sonically disjointed qualities of the film develop its queer themes. Each of these features exaggerates the high contrast between Steve and the girls

to the extent that words have different meanings in their respective contexts. Most importantly, where the girls play around in a sandbox of heteronormative desire, likely acquired from media and imagination, Steve wholly misunderstands this display of sexuality. He is, in fact, that only call recipient that night to do so. His distinct and singular difference from this rest of the characters in the film develops a theme of queer detachment from heteronormative society. Further, he dramatizes something deeply profound about the fear of discovery for queer people. By 1965, “gay” as a sexual identity had relative hold and the idea that one could be detected would make cogent sense. Where *Homicidal* and *Strait-Jacket* play with queer desire and gender identity, *I Saw What You Did* evokes the queer experience of the closet and the fear of exposure.

### **Shaping the Slasher Through Queer Representations**

The killer/queer remains a significant character moving forward into ‘70s cinema. Both in queer cinema – for example, the murderous drag persona of Divine in the films of John Waters – and in mainstream cinema whose legacy I would argue offers queer resonance – such as the Ed Gein-inspired killer androgyne Leatherface in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974). Castle’s work in the ‘60s, though mostly considered derivative of Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, meaningfully develops the killer/queer seen in Norman Bates across the decade to its pinnacle of historical popularity – the slasher cycle, 1978-1986. Castle progresses themes of gender non-normativity and sexual difference as intrinsic features for understanding the killer/queer. His films touch on gender fluidity, queer desire, and feelings of stigma. Their structural oddness and narrative incoherence expand the queer potential of these works as queerness itself defies normative structures. Ill-explained characters – Emily/Warren – and oddly disjointed narratives – prank calls/murders – all speak to a potent failure to produce “coherence” as it is culturally constructed – a queer feat.

Castle's *I Saw What You Did* expands the peeping tom moments of Norman Bates leering at Marion Crane in *Psycho* with a significant thematic examination of voyeurism. This is showcased in the opening scene of Kit and Libby as objects of sight and in the plot where Kit and Libby become voyeuristic audio spies prying into the private sex lives of their neighbors by telephone. *I Saw What You Did* also grows the role of the telephone as a vessel for sexual voyeurism which would become even more crucial in the slasher. Consider the lewd calls made to the sorority in *Black Christmas* (1974), the call from inside the house that terrorized Carol Kane in *When A Stranger Calls* (1979), or the tongue of Freddy Krueger licking Nancy through the telephone in the dream world slasher *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984).<sup>94</sup> *I Saw What You Did*'s parallel narratives of teen babysitters and a psycho killer also strongly prefigure this common setup for the slasher. In Castle's film the dramatic climax occurs when Steve Marak follows Libby and Tess to their home and terrorizes them on their property. This deeply echoes the plot of John Carpenter's 1978 film *Halloween*, commonly cited as the first "true" slasher. While much of '60s horror mimicked *Psycho* in some way or form, the choice to merge *Psycho*'s key traits with a teen movie appears to be Castle's own very important contribution to this lineage leading toward the slasher.

### Conclusion

William Castle has often been thought of as a critically-maligned novelty filmmaker, but his '60s thrillers, however repetitive of Hitchcock's work, are rife with radically queer potential. In thinking of Castle's work from a queer perspective, the emotionally queer resonances of a person struggling with gender identity – Emily/Warren – or facing a threat of being "outed" and socially stigmatized – Steve Marek – come to the fore. Moreover, what has made him a critical target speaks positively to the film's queer qualities. Queer theory helps to show how Castle's

polysemous plots, sometimes called muddled or incoherent, speak to queer multiplicities of meaning and inconsistencies with cultural norms, including the “continuity” of classical Hollywood. Reflecting on queer culture of the ‘50s and ‘60s allows one to recognize aspects of political and social discourse about queer lives which existed in the background of the increasingly popular *Psycho*-ish thrillers of the ‘60s. These films commonly built themselves around killer/queers whose increasing popularity with moviegoers mirrored the increasing visibility of queer people in America. That the stylistic elements of *Psycho*, including the killer/queer, only escalate further in popularity in the 70s and 80s with the slasher picture allows for a continued conversation about the historical context of gay rights movements, which reach a pivotal turning point with the 1969 Stonewall riots, as a means to consider the queer resonance of the slasher subgenre. While Castle was only one filmmaker participating in this larger trend, his work is outstandingly rich with queer emotion and normative dissonance, offering us new ways to consider this important director’s unique contributions to queer cinema and horror cinema.<sup>95</sup>

### CHAPTER THREE QUEER BOGEYMEN, OR WHAT IS QUEER ABOUT THE SLASHER?

At the beginning of John Waters's 1970 indie feature *Multiple Maniacs*, carnival barker Mr. David (David Lochary) advertises to casual passersby on the Baltimore streets the shocking sights of The Cavalcade of Perversion, a traveling tent attraction that promises among other things "real live queers!" He succeeds in luring in respectable citizens with the promise of the perverse, the grotesque, and the unsightly. Once inside, owner and hostess Lady Divine (Divine) robs the unsuspecting rubes at gunpoint, killing one of them. She and the cavalcade stars make off with their money and jewelry. *Maniacs* is at its core a film about the attraction of repulsion and the self-identified glory in filth. As in later, more famous Waters films *Pink Flamingos* (1972) and *Female Trouble* (1974), drag performer and Waters muse, Divine, portrays a character seeking self-fulfillment through her quest to become the world's filthiest woman, an impulse that typically begins with sexual perversity and bodily grossness before accelerating to serial murder. In the concluding moments of *Maniacs*, Lady Divine takes up a knife to murder the two-timing Mr. David, his lover, Bonnie (Mary Vivian Pearce), and others. She professes herself to be truly filthy, crossing a threshold from human to monster through her journey into depravity:

Oh Divine, you have to go out in the world in your own way now... You have x-ray eyes now and you can breathe fire. You can stomp out shopping centers with one step of your foot. You can wipe out entire cities with one blast of your fiery breath. You are a monster now and only a monster can realize the fulfillment I am capable of feeling. Oh Divine, it's so wonderful to feel this far gone, this far into one's own depravity. I am a maniac.

Covered in blood and foaming at the mouth, Divine takes to the streets in a bombastic assault on the citizens of Baltimore. She steals a car by yanking a terrified woman from the driver's seat and tossing her brown paper bags full of groceries to the pavement. Later, she is shown stomping across a snowy front lawn in high-heels dragging a sledgehammer behind her as she approaches a heterosexual teenage couple kissing in the front seat of a car. She removes them violently from the

car and smashes every window with the sledgehammer. Emerging onto a crowded Baltimore street, hordes of passersby turn and flee from Divine as if from the creature in a monster movie, like the crowds escaping Godzilla as he ravages downtown Tokyo. Eventually the U.S. Army arrives and guns Divine down in the street while the audience around them applauds. The final images of the crowd cheering over Divine's lifeless body are set to a choir rendition of "America the Beautiful."

*Multiple Maniacs* precedes the canonical U.S. slasher cycle of 1978-1985 by some years and its status as an indie queer film has kept it removed from most conversations of the subgenre. However, its final images of a knife wielding Divine preying upon, among others, a kissing teenage couple evokes much of the feeling of these later films. It also establishes a dual strangeness of purpose, a queer desire to realize one's fully radical potential and a peculiar fascination/repulsion by normative audiences, who delight in the queer deviance of the *Cavalcade of Perversion* but still cheer the death of the queer monster at film's end. The slasher's nuanced relation to queerness is rooted in its own inconsistent history. There is not one singular way in which queerness is deployed in these films and no clear history of queer creators behind most of the films. They are ultimately homophobic and transphobic films that villainize non-normative identities, yet they have also historically allowed queer killer figures to channel the forms of perverse power as signaled by Divine in *Maniacs*.

### **The Slasher as "Freak Show"**

In a special 1980 episode of "Sneak Previews," Chicago critics Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert dedicated an entire broadcast of their show – typically home to reviews of upcoming movies – to a critique made against what Ebert called "a disturbing new trend at the movie box office...exploiting the plight of women in danger." The films discussed include a range of horror titles, most of which could be called slasher pictures, a trend booming at the United States box

office following the breakout success of *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978) and imitators such as *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* (Sean S. Cunningham, 1980). Central to their critique of these films is the emphasis on terrorizing and murdering women. Ebert states flat out, “These films hate women.” The critics’ rationale is that the films are an altogether new response on the part of American “sleaze merchants” to capitalize on a negative reaction against the women’s movement. As Siskel puts it, while the sexual liberation and personal freedom of the ‘70s is seen as positive for men, it becomes deadly for women. He states, “The behavior that these women are engaging in, if done by men, would be considered brave, bold, and fun... a woman tries to do something like that in these films WHAMO! They get sliced up.” Indeed Siskel and Ebert’s commentary identifies cruelty against women as the sole satisfaction of these films, explaining at length how such work offers no narrative, stylistic, or aesthetic pleasure.

Siskel and Ebert ultimately dilute their critique based upon sexist violence in their consideration of *Halloween* as a preferred parallel to the vile films they condemn. Ultimately, the redeeming qualities they identify in the film have nothing to do with its treatment of women. In *Halloween*, both men and women are murdered by a killer, but female deaths outnumber male deaths three to two, with the main target of attack, Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis), standing as the last surviving victim (a common trait of the slasher subgenre described by Carol J. Clover as the “Final Girl”). Women’s sexuality is sometimes also a factor in scenes of murder, most significantly in the death Lynda (P.J. Soles) who is strangled during a phone call with Laurie, who mistakes her gasps for air for erotic noises. What rescues *Halloween* for the critics is not anti-sexism, but rather “artistry.” Siskel contends that “*Halloween* loves film and filmmaking.” He even goes as far as to state that while watching Laurie Strode trapped and attacked in the film’s climactic closet struggle with killer Michal Myers, he barely even thinks about “the woman,” but

instead focuses on the developing musical score and the detail of the light shining through the slats in the closet door. Ebert likewise adds that “artistry can redeem any subject matter” and that “there is a difference between a horror movie and a freak show.” What renders *Halloween* less repulsive than its peers is not a favorable attitude toward women but rather its respectability as cinema.

This threat of the slasher to the respectability of artistic cinema further appears representative of a larger fear espoused by Siskel and Ebert’s broadcast. Namely, that these films might diminish the respectability of their heteronormative middle class spectators, the so-called upright citizens whose sensibilities Siskel and Ebert most fear will be polluted by these “complete trash” films. The critics pay considerable attention to the structure of perspective within the style of these films, noting what they perceive as a disturbing alignment between the audience and the killer rather than the audience and the victim. Ebert articulates disgust not only with the films but with the experience of seeing them in the company of a wrong-minded audience. He states, “To sit there surrounded by people...who are cheering these killers on is a very scary experience.” His concern is not only that the films represent violence against women but that an audience might feel collectively thrilled by such a spectacle of destruction, encouraging the anarchical murderers in their annihilation of high school proms, slumber parties, camp fires, and teen romance. He goes as far as to call one exemplary seatmate, a lone male spectator, a “vicarious sex criminal” with “antisocial attitudes.”

In addition to attracting undesirables, Siskel and Ebert pose that these violent thrillers also put “bad ideas in society” and caution their audience about the potential influence such spectacles will have on more respectable viewers such as the couples on dates (presumably, heterosexual couples) that they also see in the theatre. In an expression of concern Gene Siskel laments the potential perversion of respectable audience members, stating “The majority of middle class



people are going to see these films. That's why they're such big hits." Indeed Ebert identifies this respectable crowd of middle class viewers, who would naturally bristle against the violence and cruelty of the slasher subgenre, as the broadcast's target audience by reporting, in a set of climactic remarks, "Our intention is simply to report on this trend and to warn unsuspecting people who might go to these films thinking they're merely good old-fashioned horror films." An audience tolerant and *suspecting* of the "antisocial" principles at work in these films stands outside the intended recipients of such a warning.<sup>96</sup>

Janet Maslin published another scathing critique of the burgeoning slasher subgenre in her 1982 *New York Times* article titled "Bloodbaths Debase Movies and Audiences." Here she similarly speculates upon the debasement of moviegoers caused by the slasher film's violence. She links this danger to what she perceives to be the perverse and negative consequences of pornographic filmmaking, emphasizing the way in which her opinion of the slasher is entwined with a sexual morality. Her piece includes one particularly striking pair of sentences that demands consideration. "Go see one," she says, "and you'll have empirical proof that a film like this makes audiences mean. You will leave the theater convinced that the world is an ugly, violent place in which aggression is frequent and routine." Her use of the word "mean" here does not seem to suggest that she supposes a spectator might become outwardly aggressive, cruel, or unkind following the screening of a slasher. As the following sentence clarifies, she worries more about the negative effects on an audience member's social perception resulting from contact with a slasher film. It will make viewers "convinced that the world is an ugly, violent place." She worries here that the slasher disenchants U.S. moviegoers and fosters a perception capable of envisioning cruelty and violence. Such concerns presume an audience without contact to cruelty and violence outside the movies. They presume personal safety, a certain condition of life, and an indoctrinated

comfort within a normative society. Like Siskel and Ebert's critique of the slasher which worried about nice middle class couples on dates being influenced by antisocial attitudes, Maslin's piece worries that those comfortable within heteronormative culture might be made uncomfortable, capable of perceiving its ugliness.<sup>97</sup>

### **Seeing the Slasher Queerly**

It is important that we think about how predominantly heteronormative critiques of the slasher have been. How specifically they characterize the audiences for the films as straight middle-class people. There is much to the slasher that conforms to misogynist patterns in cinema which value women's bodies less and judges their sexuality more harshly. There are also interesting gaps in these films, empty spaces able to be read into, or filled up with, queer potentiality. In one way, Laurie Strode's sexual reluctance in *Halloween* might be read as a virginal purity which marks her as special and which thereby distinguishes her sexually active peer group as "tainted," or deserving punishment for their sexuality. The conventional narrative of the slasher – that virgins live and promiscuous teens die – is predicated upon a very heteronormative reading of this scenario. A parallel reading, from a different sort of spectator, might deeply relate with the social experience of being tempted and teased by a potential prom date with Ben Tramer, and the need to shyly defer because maybe you aren't really interested in Ben Tramer, or any boy, at all. In his essay on "sissy spectatorship" titled "Last to Leave the Theater," A. Loudermilk argues as a queer youth, he saw the slasher as confirming the paranoia of women and queers that they were indeed the targets of men's violence: "A target, in my case, for bullies loitering outside the theater after the movie's over. Having been beaten up under the marquee in sixth grade, I'd become reluctant to attend horror movies. But I had to go."<sup>98</sup> There is likely a vindictive misogynist audience for the slasher. However, there certainly exist many parallel experiences with the slasher

and those experiences respond meaningfully to stylistic and thematic elements recurrent in the slasher and essential to its formulation as a popular genre. Sissies are not interested in women baring their bodies. They are interested in witnessing a femme creature's survival. While the A. Loudermilk account is but one alternative preoccupation with the slasher from a queer perspective, it signals the necessary reconsideration of how these films work, one that pushes us to think more generously about the wider potentials for these films and more practically about the fact that many in the audience for these films were not the straight middle-class men whom critics seem to presume.

I propose here that widespread critical contempt for the slasher film – its violence, sexism, sexuality, etc. – overlooks how the slasher film represents an affront to multiple white middle class heteronormative constructs: “morality,” “civility,” “society,” “decency,” “artistry,” “family,” “safety.” Moreover, through its abrasion with these concepts, the slasher serves a distinctly queer function. These degraded “sleaze bucket” films, as Roger Ebert called them, stand on the outskirts of cinematic society, a misbegotten and perverse canon of films that assault normative depictions of United States youth. They disenchant the American iconography found in prom night, summer camp, Christmas morning, etc. They propose a pleasurable satisfaction in siding with the killer whose role is to literally dismember teenage bodies and to metaphorically disassemble representations of normativity.

The antagonistic and socially deconstructive politics Siskel, Ebert, and Maslin describe contemptibly in the slasher – its propensity to “corrupt” middle class audiences and render them “mean” – significantly interplay with the politics of gay liberation which rose to the forefront of gay culture and became a national issue of concern in the 1970s (the decade of the slasher's rise to prominence). Following the Stonewall riots in June of 1969, gay politics shifted significantly

from a milder, conformist platform articulated by early gay rights groups such as Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis to a more radical platform articulated in the manifestos of groups such as Gay Liberation Front and Third World Gay Liberation. Whereas Mattachine sought out a “dignified” place for homosexuals within the existing social structure and attested that “homosexuals can lead well-adjusted, wholesome, and socially productive lives,” the gay liberation movement intended to aggressively restructure society at large, shunning aspirations of inclusivity and cooption.<sup>99</sup> A 1971 statement by Third World Gay Liberation states explicitly “We want a new society,” and proceeds to demand “a revolutionary socialist society,” which obliterates capitalism, the nuclear family, and organized religion and puts the needs of people first.<sup>100</sup> Gay Liberation Front similarly addresses in its 1971 manifesto contentions between gay men and women and the structural conditions of “family,” “church,” “the law,” etc. Its mission statement expresses that “We intend to show you examples of the hatred and fear with which straight society relegates us to the position and treatment of sub-humans,” and “We will show you how we can use our righteous anger to uproot the present oppressive system with its decaying and restrictive ideology...to form a new order, a liberated lifestyle.”<sup>101</sup> These organizations, working within the larger context of gay liberation, did not mean to assimilate into heteronormative society, but instead endeavored to overthrow it. They directly challenged the fundamental structures of middle-class normativity, seeking to reshape society into one which accommodated queer people.

In this chapter, I argue that the slasher film invites queer engagements through its staging of collisions between a sexually deviant social outsider, the slasher figure, and icons of American heteronormativity. Such collisions, I argue, evoke the frictions of a queer political engagement working collectively in opposition to structures of power which oppress marginalized people. Thus far, comprehensive studies of the slasher film have significantly constructed the category (or

alternate, narrower categories) by criteria owing largely to plot, mise en scène, and cinematic style. While I would like to build upon earlier conceptions of the “slasher” as a horror subgenre or popular cycle of films, I would also like to think less rigidly about the criteria needed to essentially define the slasher and consider more broadly the experiences such a film invites of their audiences. What is the transactional exchange between moviegoer and slasher film that has sustained the slasher as a cultural experience? I especially consider those engagements which help refigure the restrictively moralistic and heteronormative framework often used to characterize these films.

Robin Wood attempts to explicate the popularity of this kind of 1980s film in two ways: first the more juvenile form, the “teenie-kill pic” and second the more adult thriller, which he simply calls the “violence against women movie.” He equates the former with the *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* movies and the latter with more “classy” titles such as *Dressed to Kill* (Brian De Palma, 1980). The main difference between the cycles as observed by Wood is the motive for “punishment” on the part of the killer. “In general,” he states, “the teenagers are punished for promiscuity, while the women are punished for being women.”<sup>102</sup> His determination that the films revolve around acts of punishment owing to determinations about gender and sexuality leads him to describe their project as “depressingly reactionary.”<sup>103</sup> In characterizing the films, Wood names these essential components: 1) “the look,” or use of first-person camera to conceal the killer, provide a sadistic attachment to him, or both. 2) “the other male characters” who are linked stylistically to the killer in order to generalize the pattern of male violence. 3) “The women” who serve as the main focal point of the film, are typically the only to survive, and who end the film either mentally unstable or with the persistent threat of a killer on the loose.<sup>104</sup> Wood identifies the models for these two possible endings as *Halloween*, in which the female protagonist is rescued by a man, and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974), in which the female protagonist ends up

psychologically unstable, while also naming *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) as a shared influence.<sup>105</sup>

In a more carefully detailed explanation, Vera Dika defines what she calls the “stalker” film, a narrower cycle intersecting with the slasher film and Wood’s “teenie-kill pic” but whose categorization leaves less confusion. Dika argues that there are nine films firmly situated within the stalker cycle, beginning with John Carpenter’s *Halloween* in 1978 and concluding with a spate of imitators in 1981.<sup>106</sup> These films, like Wood’s “teenie-kill pic,” focus on teenage sexuality, centrally a young female protagonist. They include a violent killer whose presence is signaled by first-person camera. Dika also very deliberately names the method of production and distribution for the “stalker,” stating that to qualify a film must begin as a low-budget independent production and reap high profits for a distributor between 1978 and 1981.<sup>107</sup> In terms of influence, Dika reads *Halloween* as a postmodern reiteration of *Psycho*, suggesting the stalker works largely as a pastiche of that film and its ilk. Problematically, Dika’s highly specific categorization leaves us without language to describe the periphery titles omitted by such stringent criteria. While the stalker cycle helps to demonstrate a cogent throughline within these films, it leaves questions about how to consider the many overlapping titles which stand outside its requirements.<sup>108</sup>

My study of the slasher as a popular subgenre of the horror film considers it as a multivariate cinematic trend evolving significantly across the twentieth century. In chapter one, I considered the emergence of a popular trope in 1940s of psychologically damaged and sexually non-normative male murderers in horror and these films act as a significant point of development in this ongoing trend. The slasher film as it is commonly understood – a cycle of films beginning with *Halloween* in 1978 and continuing through a series of franchise sequels ending about 1986 – is then not an isolated moment, but part of this ongoing pattern in cinema. While the era of the

slasher cycle may signal its inarguable peak in popularity, hardly any scholar of the slasher would contend the point of influence for these films does not precede *Halloween*, nor that narratively and stylistically comparable, albeit non-identical, films significantly predate Carpenter's film. Indeed Richard Nowell describes in *Blood Money* that many of the seemingly instantaneous *Halloween* imitators such as *When A Stranger Calls* (Fred Walton, 1979) or *The Silent Scream* (Denny Harris, 1979) were either in production or had already completed filming at the time *Halloween* became a major success, suggesting that the rise of the slasher was not exclusively motivated by that film.<sup>109</sup> Significantly earlier films of the same period such as *The Town That Dreaded Sundown* (Charles B. Pierce, 1976) and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* had already demonstrated the commercial success and creative effectiveness of the stalking masked killer formula.

Most importantly, rethinking the slasher in this larger context raises a question about what is continuous in the slasher's use of a killer/queer figure. I argue that while they vary in style and presentation the killer/queer figure has consistently invited queer engagements with aspects of the character's gender and sexual non-normativity. He has thus been linked at times to psychosis (or other psychological conditions), childhood trauma, excessive maternal influence, and a perversely violent (rather than romantic or sexual) attachment to women, or to sexual adolescents more generally. These queer factors are suggested by the screen persona of gay actor Laird Cregar in his films *The Lodger* (John Brahm, 1944) and *Hangover Square* (John Brahm, 1945), by Anthony Perkins' psycho-femme performance as Norman Bates in *Psycho*, and by the stalking antisocial and non-normative relationship of the 70s-80s slashers (such as Michael Myers) to the heterosexual youth culture they assault. These films also commonly invite sympathy for the killer/queer figure, an overriding pleasure of anti-normative indulgence achieved often through compassionate portraits of killer psychology (more common in earlier forms), the grotesque

exaggeration of normative gender roles (more common in the traditional slasher cycle), and the use of first-person camera to position the viewer, at times, with the killer figure. Although the cultural circumstances and visual style of the slasher may likely have cultivated uniquely queer viewing experiences, my emphasis here will not be on spectatorship but on the fabric of the films which prompt such potential. I do not wish to perform a reception study quantifying queer practices of spectatorship around the slasher. Instead I want think more broadly about the kind of experience the slasher film invites of all audiences and, most importantly, to think of the ways it fosters queer engagements.

While frameworks such as the “teenie-kill pic” and the “stalker film” are helpful in considering narrative, stylistic, and thematic characteristics of this body of films, they predominantly emphasize structural patterns of character and narrative which can be limiting, or obscuring to some overarching trends within the more collective, intersectional body of films commonly described as the slasher. Moreover, characterizations of slashers as “reactionary” often overlook their potentially subversive queer subtext. Such an undercurrent mirrors the repulsion described earlier in this chapter by film critics such as Siskel & Ebert, which regard their “trashiness” and moral “wrongness” as dangerous. I would like to offer an alternative to conceptions of the slasher’s violence as purely a sexual punishment doled out to promiscuous teens. Taking a cue from the intersectional models of “queerness” proposed by Michael Warner and Cathy J Cohen, I would like to consider the slasher from a queer perspective that addresses its anti-normative characteristics, thinking not about its opposition to “straightness” but instead its opposition to “normativity” that fulfills a queer promise. I focus on trends within the slasher film that serve non-normative or anti-normative aims. I consider films that use violence as a visual metaphor in order to dramatize an attack on normative identities, images, and structures.



Particularly, I consider the relation of the sexually non-normative killer to adolescent victims participating in normative sexuality. I think of the slasher as a diverse body of films with overlapping, and sometimes inconsistent variables. While the films discussed here provide a reasonably dependable set of characters and narrative threads – a stalking killer, a suggestion of sexual deviance, a group of nondescript adolescent characters as victims, an emphasis on the killer’s POV and perspective – I seek to broaden the frame beyond these criteria when necessary to consider a specific anti-normative experience invited more generally by these films. As many films that contain slasher elements such as those described here do not work on this anti-normative level, I will keep my study focused on the significant number of these films which do. I do not wish to contend with Dika’s, Wood’s, or other’s categories. I want to offer a parallel viewpoint from which to see this set of films differently. Such a perspective will inevitably bring some films to the fore and omit others which do not work in ways many others might.

In “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture,” Frederic Jameson offers a framework for considering works of popular culture which eschews traditional judgments formed around the high/low culture dichotomy. He observes that one common perspective values the mass exposure of popular media and argues for its significance based upon the number of people who encounter it. High culture is thereby discredited as a niche interest for the intellectual set. Conversely, he articulates the ways in which theoretical arguments have commonly been made which question the role of mass culture objects as commodities. Drawing from the Frankfurt School and Marx’s theory of commodity reification, Jameson explains the manner in which commodity culture meaningfully disengages means from their ends or, rather, unifies seemingly disparate activities under the single outcome of monetary exchange. This commodification works against traditional definitions of art such as Kant’s characterization as “finality without an end.” While Jameson preserves this

skepticism about the commodity structure of popular culture, he suggests that this theoretical conception lacks in its “valorization of modernist high art as the locus of some genuinely critical and subversive, ‘autonomous’ aesthetic production.”<sup>110</sup> To move away from this unproductive binary, Jameson suggests that “we read high and mass culture as objectively related and dialectically interdependent phenomena.”<sup>111</sup> Both forms, according to Jameson, serve a function in coping with social anxieties. Mass culture, in particular, “represses them by the narrative construction of imaginary resolutions and by the projection of an optical illusion of social harmony.”<sup>112</sup> Jameson contends that a consideration of mass culture must crucially address both its Utopian potential and its demand for ideological resolution. The Utopian function is critical about the social order which created the product while the ideological function necessarily reinscribes this social order at the same time.<sup>113</sup>

In the case of the slasher there is a generalized assault on images of normativity, commonly seen in the disruption and disenchantment of heteronormative youth culture, its rituals, and settings (e.g. prom night, graduation day, sleepaway camp – all of which spawn slashers of the same name). The encroaching dread of the slasher upon otherwise sunny and fun teen scenarios works to undermine the traditional norms presented. The teen scenarios become comically petty. Moreover, upon the collision between teen life and the slasher killer, they are further wrecked by violence. I argue this filmic pattern serves a critical anti-normative function by refusing to present with pleasure very normative gender roles, cultural practices, and ideologically familiarized spaces meant to suggest a uniform middle-class heteronormative scenes of bliss. Anti-normative slashers represent extremely idyllic scenes of normative culture and offer pleasure in its systematic decay and destruction at the hands of a slasher killer whose legacy, I argue, is a longstanding one of gender and sexual non-normativity. However, even taken individually, these killers perform a

queer function in the very act of this attack of icons of American normativity. This means that histories of non-normative gender and sexuality inform the queer role of the slasher but are not essentially required of each figure to fulfill his/her/their queer role in the slasher formula. The potential for pleasure on the part of an audience in watching the violence of the slasher has proven a point of critical concern for both popular critics such as Siskel & Ebert and scholars such as Robin Wood. I argue that from a queer perspective these representations serve a pleasurable function in their dismantling of normative society through the visual metaphor of violence.

While the anti-normative slasher's critical stance toward gender binaries and normative culture may offer what Jameson refers to as Utopic potential, its individuation of this general appeal onto a queer body offers its necessary ideological reinscription of the social order. While I have noted the appeal of anti-normative slasher to queer audiences as a subversive representation, there is the additional question of their appeal to straight audiences, which obviously made up a very significant number of moviegoers at the time of their release (as well as their contemporary audience). Consider those middle-class couples Siskel & Ebert feared for and those moviegoers Maslin worried the films would turn "mean." To be aligned with the killer/queer and to root against the prom queen, town jock, camp counselor, etc. seems a central appeal in these films.

Lee Edelman discusses in his work on antisocial queer theory, *No Future*, a manner for considering the way in which queers are figured negatively in representations. He states the child serves as "the emblem of futurity's unquestioned value" whereas the queer "comes to figure the bar to every realization of futurity, the resistance, the internal to the social, to every social structure and form."<sup>114</sup> Edelman advocates for the refusal of oppositional identity politics and "meaning" and for the acceptance of the burden on queerness to figure the cultural "death drive." Edelman contends that the queer and the child serve as oppositional markers in a cultural logic designed to

sustain futurity by displacing the “death drive” onto the shoulders of the queer, who stands for the failure of reproduction and violence against the future (the child). Indeed the slasher, in which a psycho queer preys upon sexually active adolescents seems a fitting parallel to the representations Edelman describes. I would like not to focus exclusively on reproductive futurity as principal divide here but to instead consider the ways in which anti-normativity (including queer relations to sexuality) figures as a queer movement against the normative rituals in these films. I would also like to consider Edelman’s characterization of queer figuration as it works in the representational form of the slasher without necessarily articulating a queer politics of anti-sociality beyond the screen. That is to say that while Edelman poses a need to embrace this figuration as it appears in media as a political position, I would like to address the ways in which slashers work as pleasurable, finite representations which antagonize normative society from a queer perspective and meaningfully generalize this position to all audiences. I would also like to emphasize the qualities in Edelman’s work which assess the use of queers to satisfy broader cultural imperatives. Specifically, he articulates how queers are used to figure the cultural “death drive,” “the negativity opposed to every form of social viability.”<sup>115</sup> As Jameson suggests, mass culture commodities offer simultaneously Utopian and ideological functions. While the slasher’s anti-normative move against gender binaries and normative culture offers Utopia, the deferral of blame for this destructive impulse onto the individualized queer figure (the slasher) provides ideological resolution. The slasher allows audiences to comfortably participate in contempt as a social attitude. It presents a playful countercultural mood which audiences may comfortably “try on” while predictably passing the blame to queer people.

### **The Queer Who Stole Christmas**

A consideration of the ways in which the slasher functions queerly requires a discussion of its dystopic characterization of popular American national and religious holidays. Slashers have a longstanding history of exploiting such holidays for optimal effect. In the case of John Carpenter's *Halloween*, the macabre atmosphere of the holiday serves to accentuate the horror plot. Elsewhere, holidays serve less comfortable roles within the film, creating tonal collisions between grisly murders and their contrarily festive atmospheres. In the case of *My Bloody Valentine* (George Mihalka, 1981), there is a particular collision between heteronormative romance and the discordant undercurrent of dread. Elements of Valentine's Day rituals are exploited throughout the film as part of the clashing mise-en-scène. The film's central killer delivers messages in heart shaped boxes resembling Valentine's Day presents each with a rhyming note that resembles a romantic greeting card ("Roses are red, violets are blue; one is dead and so are you"). The backdrop of Valentine's Day also fills each scene with heart-shaped decorations with red and pink streamers, a discomforting counterpoint to the bloody violence performed throughout. In a scene during which Mabel (Patricia Hamilton) is murdered in her laundromat, we observe her from the killer's POV peering through a window adorned with hearts and flyers for the Valentine's Day dance. She is dressed in a bright red sweater with a white heart stitched into it. These details make the moment the lights switch off and the killer attacks particularly jarring as chaos intrudes upon the comforting rituals of the holiday.

The film also routinely parallels dull scenes of teen romance with murderous scenes of violence. The core romantic plot involves a tedious love triangle between principal characters T.J. (Paul Kelman), his ex-girlfriend Sarah (Lori Hallier), and her new beau Axel (Neil Affleck). Scenes of T.J. apologetically pleading with Sarah to reconsider their romance are off-set by stalking murder sequences, which harshly undercut any emotional sweetness possible of the teen

drama. The ultimate revelation that romantic rival Axel is indeed the killer of the film further entangles the two threads – teen love triangle and stalking killer – rendering the romantic characterization of Valentine’s Day as a national holiday sullied by the film’s juxtaposition with grotesque violence.

While Valentine’s Day offers a juxtaposition with heteronormative romance, Christmas has served as a particularly fruitful counterpoint for the slasher by offering it a multifaceted backdrop of normative culture. Indeed a small canon of “Christmas slashers” emerged during the slasher cycle, including some early titles sometimes labeled proto-slashers: *Silent Night, Bloody Night* (Theodore Gershuny, 1972) [also released as *Deathouse*], *Black Christmas* (Bob Clark, 1974) [also released as *Silent Night, Evil Night*], *To All A Goodnight* (David Hess, 1980), *Christmas Evil* (Lewis Jackson, 1980) [also released as *You Better Watch Out*], *Don’t Open Till Christmas* (Edmund Purdom, 1984), and *Silent Night, Deadly Night* (Charles E. Sellier Jr., 1984). While the slasher formula generally incited criticism, the Christmas variation seemed to particularly bother critics and audiences. Most notably, *Silent Night, Deadly Night* garnered harsh reviews upon opening and incited protests which ultimately contributed to the film’s withdrawal from theaters (along with its significant box office decline).<sup>116</sup> A *New York Times* piece on the incident notes that protestors outside the theater sang Christmas carols.<sup>117</sup> The film tells the story of Billy (Robert Brian Wilson), the survivor of a brutal attack in which a carjacker in a Santa suit murdered his parents. As an adult, Billy takes a job at a toy store. However, when asked to fill in as the store’s Santa Claus, Billy becomes dangerous and murders those he deems “naughty.” Bothered by the sight of a killer in a Santa suit, critics passed judgment on the film for its exploitation of Christmas icons familiar to children. In an infamous television review, Gene Siskel reads aloud the names of those involved in making the movie and says to the camera “Shame on

you!” Roger Ebert thanks Siskel for reminding audiences of these names and adds “I would like to hear them explain to their children and their grandchildren that it’s only a movie.”<sup>118</sup>

The particular offense of contaminating Christmas seems bound in a significant intersection of confronted norms. Eve Sedgwick effectively outlines an understanding of queerness through its oppositional relation to the uniformity Christmas conveys. “The depressing thing about the Christmas season,” she states, “is that it’s the time when all the institutions are speaking with one voice.”<sup>119</sup> The Christian holiday is presented as religious but also by the state as a legal holiday and by advertising as a time to shop and by the news a crux of major stories, leading to reports on natural disasters which revolve around their impact on families’ Christmases. Sedgwick particularly addresses the ways in which Christmas becomes so emphatically linked with the notion of “the family,” a universal entity in which identifiers are “meant to line up perfectly.”<sup>120</sup> Queerness then, serves to question this oppressive and singular voice embodied in the concepts of “Christmas” and “family.” It refers to “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning.”<sup>121</sup> It poses the significant question “What if the richest junctures weren’t the ones where *everything means the same thing*?”<sup>122</sup> The queer function of the Christmas slasher is its rupture of a singular, censoring, “parental” voice of nurturing concern for child welfare. It is the pleasure of a homicidal Santa. It is the recognition that the image of Santa can mean something other than what dominant discourse defines it to mean. It is a refusal of the “holiday mood.” It is an offense to normative tastes and a cultural narrative about what one ought to do, be, and feel as a part of a singular group once each year at Christmas time.

An effective dramatization of this occurs in *Black Christmas* in which a stalker makes disturbing phone calls to a sorority house and slowly picks off each of its sisters. One crucial scene depicts Jess (Olivia Hussey) opening the door to greet a flock of doe-eyed children singing “O

Come Let Us Adore Him.” This is crosscut with a scene in which Barb (Margot Kidder) rests in bed, unknowingly in the sight-line of the killer whose presence is indicated by a tracking first-person camera (and heavy breathing). The two incidents are linked by the sound of the carolers, faintly audible in Barb’s room as the killer approaches. The film dramatically cuts between shots of the killer stabbing Barb with a crystal unicorn and close-ups of the caroling children’s cherubic faces. Their song ends exactly as Barb dies and her hand falls limp to the floor. Jess claps with excitement. Parallel editing has a significant place in the slasher as a means to provide a counterpoint to the otherwise comfortable, often romanticized, cultural images presented side-by-side with the killer narrative. Here the image of caroling children and the sound of religious hymns are significantly undermined by the parallel visuals of violence and murder. While critics have emphasized the way that the slasher tends to focus on and interrupt sex in these films, suggesting a moral punishment, the slasher seems to use parallel editing more interestingly and broadly as a form of critique. Placing murder beside scenes of heteronormative romance and sexuality (such as the parallel between the killings and the love triangle in *My Bloody Valentine*) but also beside more generally normative scenes and rituals. For example, crosscutting between murders and school dances, such as in *Prom Night* (Paul Lynch, 1980), holiday parties, such as in *New Year’s Evil* (Emmett Alston, 1980), slumber parties, such as in *The Slumber Party Massacre* (Amy Jones, 1982), and so on. As with the slasher’s work at dismantling the oppressive singularity of Christmas, it works most consistently in this way to create discomfort about normativity.

In his book *Crackpot*, director John Waters describes Santa Claus as “the ultimate movie star,” encouraging audiences to “skip *White Christmas*, *It’s A Wonderful Life* and all the other hackneyed trash” in favor of Christmas slashers, including his favorite *Christmas Evil*.<sup>123</sup> In his book and in his Blu-ray/DVD commentary for Vinegar Syndrome’s 2014 release of the film,



Waters develops a queer reading of *Christmas Evil* which relishes its connections with fetish and sexual identity. In the film Brandon Maggart plays Harry Stadling, a man who as a child witnessed his mother kissing Santa Claus (in much the way the classic 1950's Jimmy Boyd song suggests) and grows up deeply obsessed with becoming Santa Claus.<sup>124</sup> He spies on neighborhood children in a creepy way that Waters observes has a pedophilic edge and marks them down in his "nice" and "naughty" book. This perverse spying on small children exploits the basic concept of Santa ("He sees you when you're sleeping / He knows when you're awake") and complicates the cultural myth with sexuality. Further, Waters discusses the way in which Harry's obsession with Santa works as a fetish. He describes in detail a scene in which Harry stares at himself in the mirror, excitedly gluing a beard to his face and taking pleasure from his transformation into Santa Claus. Within the pages of *Crackpot*, Waters' essay "I Love Christmas" offers a broad context for a queer appropriation of the holiday. In addition to regular screenings of *Christmas Evil*, which subverts a normative nonsexual Santa, Waters tells stories about encouraging femme homosexuals to go caroling in conservative neighborhoods and gluing Charles Manson's face on the baby Jesus in greeting cards.<sup>125</sup> "The best thing to do is get Hallmark cards and deface them!" Waters says. "Change them to say 'Season's Beatings,' you know? I'm really into taking the traditional Christmas and twisting it."<sup>126</sup>

### **"Grinding up the little sports fans," or Queer Relations to Attacks on Normativity**

Waters' "twisted Christmas" works as a prime consideration for how queer reclamations of the holiday function at the level of the Christmas slasher and beyond. Waters early work as an underground queer filmmaker with drag performer Divine excitingly exploited the subversive power of camp violence. Divine's persona in Waters' films such as *Multiple Maniacs* (1970), *Pink Flamingos* (1972) and *Female Trouble* (1974) was that of the "filthiest woman alive" and a proud

murderess who at the end of the latter film is famously executed for her crimes. That Divine in *Female Trouble* parallels an equally unconventional and murderous figure such as Leatherface in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) suggests room to discuss the ways in which slashers, comparable independent “trash” films of the ‘70s, potentially serve a function similar to Waters’ own self-avowed trash. Horror films, after all, were a large part of Waters’ inspiration to “make the trashiest motion pictures in cinema history.”<sup>127</sup> As we see in *Multiple Maniacs*, *Female Trouble*, and others, Divine serves as a dual purpose killer, luring normative audiences in by their curiosity and then punishing them through robbery, assault, and murder. In addition to the earlier described *Maniacs* instance of the Cavalcade of Perversion, *Female Trouble* features a famous scene in which Dawn Davenport (Divine) attracts an audience for a live nightclub performance that involves jumping on a trampoline and sitting in a playpen filled with fish before. She then reveals a gun and opens fire on the crowd, shouting “Who wants to die for art?” Much like her character in *Maniacs*, Divine’s Dawn Davenport is again executed at film’s end. This time she is tried for the murders in her nightclub act and sentenced to death in the electric chair. Her final moments show her being strapped down and prepared for execution as she delivers a proud career-spanning acceptance speech for her lifelong achievements in murder, filth, glamour, and fashion. This scene, like the ending to *Maniacs* melds a radical queer claim to power and self-valorization through monstrosity with an instance of violent and public execution.

The killer in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (released the same year as *Female Trouble*, 1974) presents us with a comparably queer murderous figure in a widely released film with a significant mainstream audience. Like Divine, Leatherface appears in forms of drag or gender non-normative expression, wearing a grisly skin-sewn mask upon which rouge and eye shadow are applied. The character wears different wigs and different styles of makeup at varying points in the

film, suggesting he/she/they take care with these expressions and that conscious choices are made by the character to express in feminine ways. While Divine's queerness as a drag queen actor is obviously recognized by viewers and critics, Leatherface's queerness has often been obscured by the fact that *Chain Saw* has not especially been considered a queer film, or a film by queer filmmakers, in the way John Waters's canon has been. Nonetheless, the ways in which Waters' aligns himself with trash and with a disruption of norms, including violence against voyeuristic normative audiences, feels deeply resonant to the patterns we see repeated in *Chain Saw* and other slashers.

While none of Waters's films would be conventionally considered a slasher film, one early slasher, a precursor of the canonical slasher cycle of 1978-85, does interestingly blend independent horror and queer cinema production histories: *Silent Night, Bloody Night* (Theodore Gershuny, 1972) [also released as *Deathouse*]. The film starred actress Mary Woronov, best known at the time for her appearances in films directed by Andy Warhol, including *Chelsea Girls* (1966), as Diane, the daughter of the mayor in a town with a dark secret. A man once thought dead, Wilfred Butler, is actually alive and murdering townspeople in a sequential slasher fashion. Wilfred had many years earlier impregnated his daughter Marianne. In order to mask his daughter's subsequent trauma from this incident, he transformed his luxurious mansion into a psychiatric hospital where Marianne could continue on as a patient. The doctors of the hospital, visualized in flashbacks as lazy and indulgent lusers, are so egregiously negligent and unhelpful to the patients that in a fit of rage Wilfred opens the doors of the hospital and lets all of the patients roam free. They begin murdering the hospital staff and mistake Marianne for a part of this corrupt ruling class, killing her as well. Wilfred in the film's present has returned from his faked death to murder the former patients who have since become the ruling body of the town: the mayor, the sheriff, etc. In an

interesting move that furthers associations between this slasher and the Warhol Factory, many of the inmates who are shown in flashbacks are former Warhol stars, most notably Ondine, who portrays the primary inmate in the rebellion, with appearances also by Warhol stars Tally Brown, Jack Smith, and others.<sup>128</sup> The choice of underground cult actors from queer cinema, many queer themselves, to portray psychiatric patients in a violent murderous overthrow of authority works, like Divine's violent rebellions, to suggest queer resonance to these acts of disenfranchised characters and performers taking pleasure in vengeance against the authorized abusers who marginalize, oppress, and degrade them. The crossover between the Factory and the slasher also further speaks to the way the mainstream slasher, though widely removed in terms of production from the queer cinema underground, does intersect in terms of plot and themes with early '70s queer cinema. *Silent Night, Bloody Night*, perhaps even more than the Waters's films, demonstrates a unique overlap between the investments of queer underground cinema at the time and the emerging patterns of the slasher film, at least allowing for the serious consideration of what is queer about the slasher's violence as it interweaves with alternative and queer productions of its time.

In his essay "Why I Love Violence," Waters suggests a functional anti-normative imperative for violent representations. While he avowedly means no physical harm to anyone, he describes a lifelong obsession with violence from a young age when he would play "car crash." Waters relays this obsession in a manner which implicitly reinforces its anti-normative function. To be obsessed with violence is to work against the norms of comfort and safety. He is the only boy on the rollercoaster disappointed when it does not combust. His pleasure refuses a system of norms by affectionately attaching to what repulses others. Disgusted with a cultural obsession with sports, Waters maligns the normalcy of men asking him about local teams and presuming his

interest based on perceived gender. He poses that he could just as easily enforce a demand for all men to provide insights into the latest Fassbinder film. He expresses this cultural resistance through fantasy violence most succinctly when he describes his glee about an incident where an entire scout troop was “eaten by a berserk escalator on ‘Scout Day’” at Memorial Stadium when it accidentally sped up to five times its speed and “began grinding up the little sports fans.”<sup>129</sup>

Waters’s joyfully obscene account of scouts – the proverbial benchmark for ordinary adolescence – being annihilated in the throes of sports adoration – an oppressive and detestable American pastime – echoes the slasher’s work in giving audiences the thrill of representationally chopping up school kids, camp counselors, prom queens. Adolescents here figure something deeply normative – normative sexuality evident on the surface, but also the children parents protest the slasher to protect, the hyper-resonant image of the child Edelman suggests as the ever-redemptive image of an attachment to a future. While on the surface such violent representations may seem vicious and unproductive, the notion of a mass cultural object sold and marketed to mainstream audiences in which sexually non-normative figures – however marginalized – are cheered for murdering normative gender archetypes seems deliciously rife for reclamation. While I agree that such images have often been dangerously used to vilify queers, I respectfully believe their value as subversively queer media needs to be further considered. Indeed the killers are often the most compelling parts of the slasher. A 1986 *San Francisco Chronicle* article describes *Silent Night, Deadly Night* as “another teenage bloodbath movie where the murderer, a lonely outsider, is the most sympathetic character in the picture.”<sup>130</sup> The article proceeds to describe with disgust the acts of violence in the film, disappointedly recalling “and the audience laughs.”<sup>131</sup> A *New York Times* review of *Terror Train* (Roger Spottiswoode, 1980) likewise describes the train full of teens

who “booze it up” and “tramp it up” as insubstantial characterizations, stating “They are props, and you are unlikely to care if one of them gets runs through with a saber or not.”<sup>132</sup>

### **Nobody Loves A Meathead, or Normative Adolescents in the Slasher**

Critics and scholars alike note how exceptionally daft, uninteresting, and forgettable the stock type characters of the slasher often are, usually identifying this as a flaw in their storytelling. However, the commonality of archetypically sexist norms raises a distinct awareness of the palpable contempt present in the slasher for the society it depicts and whose destruction its formula facilitates. Vera Dika describes the characters who popular the slasher film as “undistinguished, or nonspecific. They are dressed in clothes that do not distinguish any particular style or trend...and most all characters in the film are white, middle-class Americans.” She further gestures to the ways in which they signify less a real body of individuals than a conceptual cross-section of appealing norms. She states that “these characters embody the America of the print ad, of the television commercial”<sup>133</sup>

While critics have rightly noted the excess of violence directed at women in the slasher, I would like to consider the way in which stock types operating along binary genders have been a more universal target. Focusing on the masculine archetype of the “meathead,” I will discuss exaggerated representations of male gender norms falling victim to the slasher film’s violence. Among behaviors ascribed to reckless male youth is the habitual need to joke and “prank” peers, particularly among young men. A prominent demonstration of this can be seen in *The Burning* (Tony Maylam, 1981), which centrally exacerbates the meathead motif by situating the slasher as the victim of a summer camp prank gone wrong. When several boy campers at Camp Blackfoot decide to shock caretaker Cropsy with a worm covered skull with burning candles for eyes, he awakens suddenly, knocks the skull over, and runs from his cabin aflame. Seriously charred and

disfigured, Cropsy seeks vengeance by murdering the campers five years later. The majority of characters that populate the film (and die at the hands of Cropsy) satisfy Dika's account of being "undistinguished." In the idyllic milieu of the American summer camp, the characters engage in sports, sex, and humorous shenanigans. Male characters particularly exhibit chauvinist tendencies in sexually pursuing women and vie for superiority amongst male peers through pranks which seem to increase perceived social standing. These jocular antics render such characters expendable by associating them with grossly mundane masculinist behavior. The two characters that survive the film – Alfred (Brian Backer) and Todd (Brian Matthews) – are portrayed as more sensitive and compassionate figures who fall victim to the system of pranks and scares their peers use to assert dominance. Eventually, Todd is revealed to be one of the campers involved in the prank that burned Cropsy. His sensitive reflection on this past allows him to counsel Alfred about coping with social pressures. Alfred is notably awkward and confesses to not having friends and being disliked. In a scene in which Alfred reveals he is reluctant to swim (as he is reluctant to partake in most of the camp's activities, including its sexual exploits), we see his male peers encouraging him not to "wuss out." A first-person camera shot then approaches Alfred from behind, shoving him into the water. It is revealed as the perspective of Glazer (Larry Joshua) who earlier taunted Alfred and called him a "little fucking weirdo." The shot mirrors the technique of first-person POV largely associated with the approach of the slasher upon his victims, suggesting a link in their respective violence. Interestingly, in an earlier scene, Glazer threatens to "tear up" Alfred to the point where he is unrecognizable.

In addition to dramatizing the foolish hijinks of normative American males (and disenchanting this scene with the introduction of violent danger), *The Burning* offers a particularly grim depiction of heterosexual sex. The normative male meatheads amount to a group of lechers,

coercing women into a host of uncomfortable sexual encounters. In one particularly miserable indiscretion Glazer brings Sally (Carrick Glenn) into the woods for sex. She expresses concern and discomfort, asking him to stop. She is told “Hold still” and following Glazer’s premature ejaculation she asks “That’s all?” Indeed the film exhibits a general distaste for normative masculinity, cultural misogyny and the systemic habits of sexual abuse and rape. The approach of *Crosby* that leads to Glazer and Sally’s deaths is only one reproach of these normative sex and gender practices.

Pig-headed masculinity and deadly pranks also run amuck in *Final Exam* (Jimmy Huston, 1981). In one particularly prolonged sequence, fraternity pledge Gary (Terry W. Farren) is stripped to his underwear, doused with ice water, sprayed with fire extinguishers, lathered in shaving cream, tied to a tree, and left alone at night. Gary – who bears the brunt of his fraternity’s aggression and whose girlfriend Janet (Sherry Willis-Burch) describes him as “sensitive” – is being punished for giving her his fraternity pin. The camera slowly pushes in on Gary tied to the tree, alone in the dark. He hears the rustling of leaves and cracking of branches. He encounters Mitch (R.C. Nanny), a campus police officer, who refuses to free Gary because he will not “mess with tradition.” When a first-person camera tracks behind the tree and cuts Gary’s ropes free, he believes it to be Janet, rescuing him. Instead we learn that it was not Janet who freed him but the killer, who quickly stabs Gary to death. By and large the fraternity and sorority characters of the film are presented as vapid and passionless, moving from one frat prank or banal sexual encounter to the next. A later kill underscores the inconsequence of these stock characters by jokingly cutting from a dead fraternity brother to the basketball court scoreboard which lights up “1” point for the “guest” team.

Perhaps the singular most lucid takedown of the normative jock/frat stereotypes represented and dismantled by these films is featured in *Happy Birthday to Me* (J. Lee Thompson,



1981). Greg (Richard Rebiere) is bench pressing alone at night. An unknown, shapeless figure dressed in black enters. Greg recognizes this figure and asks them to add more weights to his barbell. They oblige. He asks them to add more still. They oblige. The scene builds an expectation. Eventually the phantom figure will add too much weight. Greg will fall victim to his narcissistic need to impress with feats of strength. Finally, Greg does begin to struggle and the weights begin to become difficult for him to hold. He asks the figure to spot him and they refuse. However, before Greg can succumb under the natural pressure of his barbell, the figure tosses a heavy weight on his crotch, causing Greg to recoil and drop the barbell onto his throat. It is a particularly vicious scene that works both as a slasher kill and as a quite visceral representation of a normative, “meathead” masculine culture crushed.

### **In A Queer World, What Survives?**

It is important to consider how these killings work disruptively to unseat a normative position commonly at work in mass culture and particularly youth culture. In considering the historical circumstance of the slasher, which emerges in its commonly intelligible form in the early to mid-1970s, it is important to recognize the parallel between its dramatization of cultural contempt and the perceived role of gay liberation in critiquing these systems beginning in the late 1960s. The Gay Liberation Front notes in its 1971 manifesto an ambition of obliterating the gender binary, a system which the slasher functionally mocks and violates. As one of its primary aims, the Gay Liberation Front states the following.

The long-term goal of Gay Liberation, which inevitably brings us into conflict with the institutionalised sexism of this society, is to rid society of the gender-role system which is at the root of our oppression. This can only be achieved by eliminating the social pressures on men and women to conform to narrowly defined gender roles. It is particularly important that children and young people be encouraged to develop their own talents and interests and to express their own individuality rather than act out stereotyped parts alien to their nature.<sup>134</sup>

This language suggests an imperative need to rethink gender and avoid normative gender roles. The slasher's insistent distaste for such practices, dramatized in the form of its sexually lecherous meatheads, the bad, futile sex they perpetuate, and the systematic mistreatment of women and femme men they sustain, allows an audience to confront grotesque constructions of such norms and to pleurably engage with their dismantlement through the visual metaphor of violence.

In thinking of gender roles and how they are sometimes reworked by the slasher, it is important to think about the film's survivors, who are much discussed for their nuanced relation to gender. Carol J. Clover has most prominently made this connection, describing the "Final Girl" who survives the film as "boyish, in a word...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."<sup>135</sup> This "boyishness," according to Clover works to satisfy young male viewers whom she cites as the films' majority audience. Young men, according to Clover, relate to the struggle of the "Final Girl" as she moves from feminized (passive, looked at) to masculinized (active, looking) which Clover argues mirrors adolescent males' experiences growing into manhood. The "Final Girl" is then something of androgyne whose boyishness works to please a presumed heterosexual male viewer. Though the killer is often a man, Clover contends that he is comparatively feminized, presenting signs of gender distress and psychosexual fury.<sup>136</sup> These qualities make him a mirror of sorts for the "Final Girl," a "boyish" woman.

While Clover's account of these non-normative gender roles focuses on their work at preserving heterosexuality, it is clear that they might also be thought of as queer positions in relation to a gender binary. Common descriptions of the survivor figure in these films identify them as "virginal" in comparison to the sexual teenagers who die. However, this is not always the

case. I consider them less “virginal” than “uninitiated” or often visibly uncomfortable with the cultural rituals and gender performance associated with sex and romance. While truly no single set of criteria could be formed to articulate every survivor, or survivors (sometimes there are multiple), commonly in the slasher it seems the likelihood of death is less about being sexless than non-normative in terms of cultural positions, including identities and expressions of gender and sexuality. Indeed while non-normative gender and sexuality form one operational definition of queerness, categorically issues of class and disability factor as well. Freddy Krueger of *A Nightmare On Elm Street* (Wes Craven, 1984) is differentiated as a pedophile, connotatively a queer one, but also recognizably burned and disfigured in an accident. So too is Cropsy of *The Burning*. This aspect of non-normative identity is foregrounded in *Killer Workout* (David A. Pryor, 1987) [also released as *Aerobicide*] in which a model (Marcia Carr) scarred in a tanning bed accident takes revenge by murdering the attractive young members of her gym. In the case of the infamous *A Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge* (Jack Sholder, 1985), Freddy's physical and sexual difference seem entangled as he pursues Jesse (Mark Patton), a highly queer-coded character whose dreams include following his high school PE teacher to a leather bar and watching Freddy whip said teacher's bare ass with a towel in a shower room. The potential transformation of Jesse here (as a final survivor figure) is less about moving from feminine to masculine as Clover discusses than it is the about transforming into a non-normative identity both in the sexual connotations of Freddy's approach and the physical threat of Jesse turning into Freddy Krueger. Jesse has nightmare visions where his hands become Krueger's knife hands, for example, that dramatize a non-normative transformation as both a question of body normativity and gender/sexual normativity.

In a queer reassessment of the slasher film, Jack Halberstam revises Clover's notion of the Final Girl as "boyish" and instead offers the notion that she has been "de-girled," or rather that the "bodies that splatter" in the slasher are "properly gendered...female bodies" whereas female bodies that do not splatter "are in some way distanced from the gender constructions that would otherwise sentence them to messy and certain death."<sup>137</sup> Crucial here is Halberstam's correlation between "properly gendered" bodies and "certain death," which develops implicit aspects of Clover's argument more productively. Where Clover speaks of the androgyne survivors of the slasher subgenre – the killer (who returns for sequels) and the Final Girl – as "not fully masculine" and "not fully feminine," Halberstam rewrites this as a mutual deviation from the gender norms that doom the subordinate characters. While Halberstam directs this interpretation of the slasher toward a reading of these figures as post-human, I would like to focus instead on what this disruption of normalized gender and sexual identity means when linked to the survival of the killer/Final girl. Most specifically, that this construction figures the slasher as a subgenre in which queer people live while those who conform are "sentence[d]...to a messy and certain death."

This conception of the slasher as a formula reasonably consistent in disenchanting audiences with cultural norms, including gender norms, allows us to think in a more nuanced way about how these survivor figures can be thought queer. Where Clover's assessment dwells on psychoanalytic terms of masculine/feminine as distinguished by who is thrusting versus who is being thrust at, a queer reflection on the survivor figure can assess their difference in terms of a more successfully Utopian inclination. They signal non-normative positions that work against a gender binary among other cultural forces. Laurie Strode in *Halloween* can be argued to possess a form of "masculinity" in her utility with knives and her eventual poking of her pursuer, Michael Myers, with a coat hanger. However, there is a feature about Strode which Clover acknowledges

that we could still further develop. That is her basic intelligence and her distance from the foolish patterns of her friends who designate social and sexual interests that mostly correspond with a set of uncritical culture norms. Likewise, consider how *Hell Night* (Tom De Simone, 1981) presents central characters Marti (Linda Blair) and Jeff (Peter Barton) compared to their fellow housemates Seth (Vincent Van Patten) and Denise (Suki Goodwin). The former pair have sincere conversations upon arrival where the latter make daft comments between sex and are presented as so indifferent they can never remember each other's names. Marti may be seen as "masculine" because she ultimately survives through her knowledge about repairing cars (a trait conventionally attached to men). However, she is also indicated as important in other ways. Clover notes that Marti seems instantly distinguished because she refuses to share a bed with Jeff. Perhaps we should add to this distinction qualities such as her casual ability to critique his class politics. "Oh, it's just that the rich capitalist feeds on the life of the downtrodden poor," she tells him, shrugging. Intelligence is not a new criterion for a survivor, but ultimately I would like to put it toward an understanding of the survivor as non-normative. Where a scholar like Edelman advises queers take on an antisocial perspective by embracing the antagonism between queerness and normative structures, these surviving figures propose less drastic adaptation by refiguring one's role in society at the level of the individual. Less severe than Halberstam's non-gendered post-human entity, the survivor may often be seen to possess self-assurance, intelligence, and, potentially, gender non-conforming traits. They do not require particular configurations of "masculinity" or "femininity" but rather they collectively denote non-normativity.

### **Conclusion**

At the end of John Carpenter's *Halloween*, protagonist Laurie Strode asks of Michael Myers "Was it the bogeyman?" and Dr. Loomis affirms for her that "As a matter of fact, it was."

While the slasher consistently showcases queers as nightmare figures, murderous, and at odds with the values of peaceable suburban life, they have also allowed significantly for audiences to interplay with queer and anti-normative ideologies and emerge unscathed by displacing these interests onto the queer figure of exile (Michael, Freddy, etc.) Michael Myers is a figure for whom Laurie Strode has no speakable language to describe besides “bogeyman.” He signifies to her an impossible “other” that challenges all of the comforts of her life. I argue a conceptual and ideological assault plays out narratively and stylistically in the slasher, and that this assault is most commonly visualized as an affront to the characters’ physical safety. It is true that the slasher ultimately projects its subversive potential onto the figure of phantom “others,” figures with historical associations to non-normative gender and sexuality. However, in the midst of their chaos a vulgar attachment to violence and a disenchanting spirit toward 80s sexual and gender norms as well as cultural practices (prom, graduation), holidays (Christmas), and spaces (summer camp, the suburbs) persists.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### ‘IT’ FOLLOWS: QUEERNESS, NORMATIVITY, AND POST-2000 SLASHER MEDIA

Addressing queer representations in cinema is a difficult task. It begs the identification of a quality (queerness) that has long been understood as flexible, multiple, imperfect, and overlapping. Queerness is about the multiplication of meaning rather than the limitation of it; it is about the possible gaps and overlaps, rather than the stringent wholeness of singularity. So, attempting to speak about what is queer in media requires room for flexibility of meaning. Yet queerness requires attentiveness to its historically-specific conditions and recognition of how the specificity of these conditions is bound to the ebb and flow of what contemporary queer people might call LGBTQ politics. Colloquial terminology shifts over time as do self-identifications, expressions, and political aims. It is therefore important to this chapter on post-2000 media to reflect on a shift in representations from earlier classical Hollywood films (discussed in chapter one) to these more contemporary media objects.

At one time, no one was gay in cinema. Characters were femme, or butch, effete, foppish, or manly. They could signal exoticism or sexual difference. Yet we never really saw any undeniable gay or lesbian disclosure for same-sex partnership. That is until the 1960s when characters in films such as *Victim* (Basil Dearden, 1961) and *The Children’s Hour* (William Wyler, 1961) began to express unmitigated same-sex desire. Then, following the 1969 Stonewall riots, gay liberation emerged as a political movement. Representations of gay characters took shape around the specific identities fought for by this movement, LGBT. Advances like the 2015 Supreme Court decision of *Obergefell v. Hodges*, which upheld the legality of same-gender marriages, along with the more common representations of gay characters in film and media have put gay-identifying people of certain kinds – largely assimilationist and socially normative – in the position to distance themselves from the more radical queer politics of gay liberation which sought

to restructure rather than join heteronormative society. LGBTQ communities have also proliferated across a wider portion of the U.S. population. A 2017 Gallup Poll indicates the more Americans identify as LGBT than ever before in history.<sup>138</sup> It follows that the historically queer features of the horror genre, and the slasher subgenre in particular, need to be refigured for contemporary audiences.

The 1948 Hitchcock film *Rope* paid especially close attention to the relational specificity of gay sexuality to its time period, and serves as a place to begin to understand a 1940s lexicon for expressing something not able to be spoken aloud. The film depicts two murderers, Brandon (John Dall) and Philip (Farley Granger), whose story ambiently conveys queerness. They are said to share a single bed in a single bedroom and appear to be regarded by other characters as a romantic and sexual couple. Yet there are no concrete indications or depictions of sexual or romantic affection. The romantic and sexual nature of the relationship is hinted at, but never confirmed. Describing his work on the film many years later, queer screenwriter Arthur Laurents recalled: “What was curious to me was *Rope* is obviously about homosexuals. The word was never mentioned...It was referred to as ‘It.’ They were going to do a picture about ‘It,’ and the actors were ‘It.’”<sup>139</sup> Though the conventions of the time demanded that they be publicly closeted, it is now known that Granger and Dall were queer actors. Granger and Laurents were sexual and romantic partners at the time of filming *Rope*, which - as Laurents remarks - was titillating to Hitchcock, who seemed to relish the perverse implications.<sup>140</sup> Granger reflected on the film’s tenuousness around the sexuality of the characters in a later interview, departing meaningfully from Laurents’s more essentialist conception of the film as being strictly about homosexuals: “You got to realize this was 1947. No one discussed those things openly then. People forget that. The word ‘gay’ wasn’t even appropriated yet.”<sup>141</sup> Fittingly, Granger would identify himself as bisexual



when he officially came out in his 2007 memoir *Include Me Out*. Granger's and Laurents's remarks push for a consideration of how linguistic and cultural ambiguities in the former half of the twentieth century allowed for conceptions of queerness and queer characters beyond the scope of retroactive LGBT identifiers. Laurents clearly associates 'It' with homosexuality; however, the linguistic abstraction of the term 'It' connotes normative dissonance without denoting any specific gender or sexual identity.

This more abstracted notion of 'It' reflects a certain way of thinking through the contrast between normative society and deviations from those norms. The concept of queerness as put forth by queer theorists Michael Warner and Cathy Cohen does not propose a binary opposition with straightness, but rather describes a position of intersectional political marginality working against normativity, defined by Cohen as "the dominant constructed norm of state-sanctioned white middle- and upper-class heterosexuality."<sup>142</sup> Queerness then is not synonymous with gayness. It is a collective political project by individuals across a spectrum of marginalized identities including gender, sexuality, class, race, and disability who are unified by their resistance toward normativity.

The divide between the normative and the "other" plays a strong role in characterizing the murderous impulse in *Rope*. Much of the movie pivots on the central killers' self-aggrandizement over their professed intellectual and cultural superiority. In selecting their murder victim, they choose someone they deem "ordinary," with whom they have no emotional or personal quibbles, someone to be killed for sport, purely because Brandon and Philip are superior. They then boldly place the body inside a book chest, host a party full of their victim's family and friends, and serve a meal from his makeshift coffin. Brandon and Philip believe their ability to commit a callous and calculated murder free of the conventional emotions common to such an act distinguishes them as superior beings compared with their victim, and their party guests. They are additionally

differentiated from the rest by their queer sexual and romantic partnership, which is remarked upon in subtle ways throughout the party. Arthur Laurents disclosed that Hitchcock was especially fond of the overlay of queerness upon murderousness in *Rope*: “What he liked was not that they were homosexual but that they were homosexual murderers. If they were just murderers he wouldn’t have been interested. If they were just homosexual he wouldn’t be interested.”<sup>143</sup> The intentional combination of these two traits presented in *Rope* suggests the ways in which the superiority Brandon and Philip take pride in might also extend to their self-identification as living outside of normative social relations and heteronormative romantic partnerships. Their queer difference, ‘It,’ becomes one such feature that distinguishes them from those conventional beings they see fit to kill.

Hitchcock would go on to develop the link between non-normative sexuality and non-normative relations to sociality and social mores (i.e. violence, murderousness) in films such as *Strangers on a Train* (1951) – also starring Granger – and his infamous *Psycho* (1960), in which queer actor Anthony Perkins portrays a cross-dressing mother-obsessed killer. In both films queer-coded characters are distinguished as non-normative by both their queerness and murderousness. The tension in these films between the killer queers and the rest of the normative cast lies both in their queer presentations – cross-dressing in *Psycho*, femme characterizations and flamboyant dress in *Strangers on a Train* – and their murderous dispositions, which as Laurents notes, Hitchcock loved to overlap in his films.

*Psycho* famously marks a key point of inspiration for the rise in the ‘70s and ‘80s of the popular slasher cycle, the conventions for which are arguably solidified by John Carpenter’s *Halloween* (1978). Drawing on themes popularized by Hitchcock in the ‘40s and ‘60s, the slasher continues a central tension between queerness and normativity. The killer, commonly gender and

sexually non-normative, stalks and murders sexually active heteronormative teenagers. His greatest match is the equally non-normative Final Girl whose general competence and reluctance about her peers' normative sexual and social behavior distinguishes her for survival among a group of hyper-normative stock character types. As Vera Dika notes, the locales of the slasher are surreally idyllic and timeless U.S. suburbs and "most all characters in the film are white, middle-class Americans."<sup>144</sup>

The slasher dramatizes a clash between normative suburban America and queerness. Accordingly, its rise to prominence during the '70s and '80s parallels the rise in national gay rights politics. Following the Stonewall riots in 1969, LGBTQ issues became an unavoidable part of national news in the United States. Not only were gay rights groups mobilizing, but they did so under more solidified linguistic monikers. No longer unspeakable "It," utterable gay, lesbian, bisexual, and early trans identities began to come to the forefront of public consciousness, pushing cinema to reconsider the murkiness of earlier queer-coded characterizations and respond in kind with openly LGBT representations. Overtly gay and lesbian characters began to emerge in mainstream Hollywood films of the '70s and '80s. Nonetheless, the low budget and widely independent slasher subgenre seems to most impactfully demonstrate the continued friction between radically queer non-normativity and heteronormative middle-class America. Their queer-coded killers continue the normative dissonance seen in Hitchcock's killer queers while the Final Girl survivor posits a queer model for survival, differentiated from the complacent and normative teen peers who perish by the slasher's blade. These two figures utilize violence as an expression of queer resistance to the oppressive structures of normativity.

Contemporary reformulations of the slasher, which continue the work of dramatizing collisions between queer and normative cultures through violent imagery, have since forced

reconsiderations of how to see and understand what is normative v. non-normative (queer). The blurring of conventional gender binaries and the development of broader gender identities, including non-binary identities, make evident a contemporary reevaluation of queerness, especially among youth culture. Adolescents living after the year 2000 were all born following the gay liberation movement and have always lived in a culture where LGBT identities exist in language and can be mediated on film. Additionally, advances in LGBTQ issues, including the 2015 Obergefell v. Hodges Supreme Court decision, have furthered suggestions that gay people might pursue a homonormative path, further distancing queer (as in intersectional anti-normative) politics from specific LGBT identity categories. This nuanced and evolving rewriting of queerness begs the question: if the slasher and Final Girl are marked by non-normativity, or queerness, how then do they signify this in contemporary media? This chapter argues for new conceptions of the slasher in contemporary film (*It Follows*, *The Final Girls*), television (*Scream Queens*), and drag performance (Sharon Needles, Peaches Christ) by considering the role of normativity in shaping conceptions of otherness and demonstrating how contemporary renegotiations of sexual and gender normativity complicate conventional narratives of the killer queer and queer “otherness.”

### **The “It” of *It Follows***

*It Follows* (David Robert Mitchell, 2015) draws heavily from the timeless suburban imagery of the slasher, particularly *Halloween*. The costumes, set designs, and props, including automobiles, reflect anachronistic combinations of different historical periods. Many of these details, per director Mitchell, borrow from the ‘70s and ‘80s. However, some details are entirely fictional. In one scene, a group of teenagers sit around an outdated cathode ray tube style TV watching a black and white film. One of them scrolls through text on what Mitchell dubbed her “shell phone,” a 1960s-style seashell compact outfitted to look like an e-reader or cell phone

device. This blend of past/present and historical/fictional is used by Mitchell “to create the effect of a dream—to place it outside of time, and to make people wonder about where they are.”<sup>145</sup>

This instability in time mirrors the way queerness manifests and operates within the film, as a polymorphous entity known only as ‘It.’ In the film, Jay (Maika Monroe) has sex in the back of her boyfriend’s car. Afterward, he explains to her that he has passed ‘It’ to her. ‘It’ appears as a slow walking being always headed directly toward the person who has acquired ‘It.’ To pass ‘It’ on to another person, she must find someone to have sex with just as he did with her. If she dies, ‘It’ will come for him again, and go back down the line to its unknown person of origin. Unlike the stalking masked man of the slasher, such as *Halloween*’s Michael Myers, *It Follows* presents an indefinable, inconsistently gendered, and non-human entity, which challenges stable notions of gender and identity. ‘It,’ we are told, can appear as someone the target knows, or a stranger. Anyone can be ‘It,’ and ‘It’ often changes its image from man to woman, tall to short, young to old. When we finally see ‘It’ attack and kill Jay’s neighbor Greg (Daniel Zovatto), it does so in an incestuous sexual assault in the physical form of his mother. ‘It’ here signifies something ambiently perverse but indefinable, a range of overlapping identities with no stable gender or sexual identity, an antithesis to heteronormative certainty. Eve Sedgwick helpfully explains that queerness is itself a term denoting “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning.”<sup>146</sup> Heteronormativity oppositely presumes consistency with gender identifiers, sexual orientation, etc. Harkening back to the suggestive ‘It’ of the queer undercurrent found in *Rope*, the ‘It’ of *It Follows* continues this framing of queerness as normative dissonance, ill-ease with a set of heteronormative structures, rather than singular LGBT identifiers. Moreover, ‘It’ brings this quality to bear in an appropriately ambiguous vessel. While *Rope*, *Halloween*, and its slasher peers located queerness in the specific bodies of queer-

coded, often feminized men, connoting queerness, but also gayness, effeminacy, cross-dressing, and/or transness, 'It' signals queer with the unknown. It suggests that the femme or gay man is not himself an appropriate vessel for this queer (as in anti-normative) function, but rather the timelier representation of queerness is the non-gendered, non-identified, non-human amorphous entity known solely as 'It.'

The collision between 'It' and normative concepts of gender, sexuality, and identity is further underscored by the inflection 'It' gives to heterosexuality. Namely, it renders heterosexual sex and coupling a purely perfunctory measure, not a joy but a preservationist undertaking. As Jay succumbs to her fear and has sex with Greg, we see her turn away from him with nervous, passionless eyes. In conjunction with this joyless dramatization of heterosexual sex, the film foregrounds the ambient heteronormativity in popular narratives of love, dates, and sex. Following Jay's sexual encounter with her boyfriend in the car, she reminisces on her childhood vision of heteronormative adolescence: going on dates, driving in cars with friends, and holding hands with a cute guy. When she is unceremoniously returned to her home following the encounter, she interrupts her friends playing the card game "Old Maid," which is named after the worst fate of all within heteronormativity: the manless spinster. Sitting up waiting for 'It' later that evening, Jay and her friend Paul (Keir Gilchrest), who constantly expresses unrequited love and attraction for her, discuss their shared first kiss, a time when they found a collection of porn magazines, and the subsequent "sex ed talk" they received. The dialogue makes potently clear that these characters have always been told the story of heterosexuality, always visualized themselves within it, and presumably see no way out of it. The altogether unthinkable perverse 'It' pushes them ever more into this cyclical pattern, requiring them to couple without pleasure to reassert their subject formation, their gender identity, their sexuality, and their historical narratives of self-preservation

and reproduction. In one of the bleaker endings for a survivor figure, or figures, the Final Girl here is replaced by the concluding couple (Jay and Paul) walking down a suburban street blind to the ambiguously 'It' figure following behind, a trailing reminder of the perverse disarray that their self-affirming partnership of convenience means to stave off.

### **What Puts the “Final” in Final Girl?**

While *It Follows* explores modern queerness in the form of 'It,' *The Final Girls* (Todd Strauss-Schulson, 2015) poses new criteria for the Final Girl in the modern slasher. It explores the cultural differences between the normative stock character types found in the '70s and '80s slashers and the contemporary renegotiated norms of gender and sexuality amongst adolescents. In a complex setup, Max (Taissa Farmiga) and a group of her friends step inside the slasher-within-a-slasher *Camp Bloodbath*, which stars Max's deceased mother (Malin Akerman) as the character Nancy, a classic wallflower who loses her virginity to the jock and gets murdered by the masked killer. Having entered the *Camp Bloodbath* film, Max and her friends find themselves clashing with the clichés of the old-fashioned slasher, and they begin to rewrite the movie on their own terms. Max rescues her mother's character from both the jock and the slasher, upsetting the conventions of the subgenre. Consistently, characters from the contemporary world prompt the fictional '80s slasher stock types to reexamine their identities and behaviors, accentuating the falseness of the slasher's broad characterizations and emphasizing how the slasher's tropes bristle against the more fluid conceptions of gender and sexuality common within millennial culture. This is particularly evident in an exchange between the *Camp Bloodbath* jock, Kurt (Adam Devine), and his parallel among the contemporary friends, a more intelligent and less hyper-masculinist athletic type named Chris (Alexander Ludwig). Kurt responds to Chris's disinterest in straight porn by asking, "What are you, a fag?" Chris responds with outrage, not with the implication about his

own masculinity, but with Kurt's regressive masculinist ideology and homophobic language. Chris reveals he has gay dads and tells Kurt to "Shut the hell up." The exchange demonstrates a clear turn away from socially tolerated homophobia among adolescent characters, especially adolescent men, who commonly used sexist and homophobic language in the canonical 1978-85 slasher film.

The more LGBTQ inclusive sensibilities of the film's contemporary characters motivate a reimagining of the Final Girl as more than simply "boyish" or possessing bookish and/or mechanic smarts as Carol J. Clover conceptualizes her. In a generation where the jock is not dumb, or macho, but instead compassionate enough to accept and defend his gay dads, "boyish" traits seem comparatively meager in differentiating the Final Girl as notably queer, or "other." As a clear point of comparison, the conventional *Camp Bloodbath* Final Girl, Paula (Chloe Bridges), arrives dramatically at the midpoint in the film. She is a conventionally tough looking woman wearing a leather jacket and driving a muscle car. She conveys the formulaic androgyny that will supposedly make her resilient enough to survive to the end of the film. However, Max's and her friends' interventions lead to an unexpected twist: Paula dies suddenly in an explosion, leaving the characters saviorless and begging the question: what does a 21<sup>st</sup>-century Final Girl look like? If indeed a "boyish" girl is no longer differentiated as queer, or "other," what traits define the survivor figure?

An important factor to consider here is that Clover's model for the slasher presumes a heterosexual man as the primary spectator. The purpose of the Final Girl, she argues, is to provide a safe avatar for adolescent boys to wrestle with the experience of maturing into masculinity. The choice of a woman allows the boy to preserve his heterosexual masculinity in this fantasy. However, the woman herself is only capable in that she acquires and achieves phallic manhood by arming herself with a knife and thwarting the killer, who by contrast becomes increasingly



feminized throughout the film and then symbolically castrated by the phallic woman. There are obvious concerns about Clover's presumption of audience. Richard Nowell has called into question the idea that the canonical slashers of the 1978-85 cycle were advertised primarily toward young men rather than women. Nowell situates the marketing appeal of the slasher in line with other popular low-budget/high-profit teen movies of the '70s, including *American Graffiti* (George Lucas, 1973) and teen horror hit *Carrie* (Brian De Palma, 1976).<sup>147</sup> Certainly, in considering contemporary slashers, especially queer and feminist appropriations of the slasher that significantly target women and LGBTQ audiences, there is a need to revisit what gives the Final Girl finality, or denotes queerness in contrast to normativity.

In the case of *The Final Girls*, the elimination of Paula forces the characters to try and determine a new Final Girl. Based upon the conventional criteria for the Final Girl, they believe they must nominate a virgin. Max becomes the consensus pick based on her lack of sexual experience, but this criterion loses weight as the conversation progresses. Nancy offers that since she never had sex with Kurt, she is therefore a virgin and can be the Final Girl; however, Max's friend Vicki (Nina Dobrev) dismisses her as just "the shy girl with the clipboard and the guitar." Vicki goes on to call Max "the brave one," undermining the notion that a Final Girl is decided by her sexual history, and instead suggesting she be heroic.

Max's transformation into the true Final Girl also becomes hinged on the death of Nancy, played by her deceased mother. Max continually rescues Nancy in hopes that if the character survives the movie, then her mother can return to the real world. Nancy realizes that she must die to make Max the last surviving woman in the film, the Final Girl, and decides to sacrifice herself to the killer so Max can live. In a scene that directly echoes Max's mother's death in the opening of the film, Nancy dances to Kim Carnes's "Bette Davis Eyes" as the killer approaches and strikes

her dead. With regards to slasher tropes, this makes Max the Final Girl capable of decapitating the slasher and bringing the movie to an end. In more personal terms, Max learns to let go of her mother and emerges stronger in character because of it. After her mother's death, Max was rendered sullen and detached. Following the symbolic re-death of her mother in the character Nancy, Max emerges as the empowered hero of the narrative.

*The Final Girls* does abide by some of the conventions of Clover's classic Final Girl. Max is a virgin with an androgynous name and she must watch her friends die before she can kill the slasher. However, the process of becoming the Final Girl is not tied to becoming masculine but instead to emotional catharsis. At the beginning of the film, Max is shown in a melancholy montage showering, brushing her hair, and watching videos of herself as a child with her deceased mother. Her transformation into the Final Girl is not one from feminine to masculine but one from death to life. To be a Final Girl and survive, she must let go of the survivor's guilt associated with the death of her mother. Her zombie-like grey existence at the start of the film becomes replaced by vitality in the film's final moments as she accepts the fact that she survived, and her mother died, that she survived and all her friends have died.

The title, *The Final Girls*, brings to the fore the contrast between two Final Girls: Paula, the classically "boyish" Final Girl of the fictional slasher *Camp Bloodbath* (who by Clover's definition exists for men's eyes) and her millennial counterpart Max, whose survival depends more deeply on her bravery and her abilities to cope with grief and reason her way through the plot. Max's role as Final Girl addresses the ways in which the dichotomy of queerness/normativity blurs in contemporary media. By rooting Max's ascent to power in emotional tenderness between women, the film complicates the narrative that the Final Girl's worth is her masculinity and surrogate maleness. The film merges emotional climax with climactic violence and undermines

any sense that the Final Girl is powerful because she has foregone femininity and assumed a conventionally masculine position. Where earlier slashers located the Final Girl's deviations from normativity in her gender and/or sexuality, *The Final Girls* posits Max's forthright intelligence, bravery, and problem solving as features that distinguish her from the female stock types common in the slasher and thereby pushes us to consider the ways in which deviations from normative behavior may not be exclusively located in nonconformist gender and sexuality. Rather nonconformist gender and sexuality, commonly understood as queer traits, make up some part of a potentially queer future that offers new ways of conceiving gender and power outside of a heteronormative framework that associates power with masculine features and behaviors.

### ***Scream Queens* and The Final Girl(s)**

This understanding of shifting gender norms and relations to queerness is further developed in *Scream Queens* (2015-2016), queer writer/director Ryan Murphy's contemporary camp sendup of the slasher, including the Final Girl, which expands questions about her defining qualities in a shifting cultural landscape of normativity. Rather than saying Murphy "queers" or "makes queer" the slasher, I pose that he instead exacerbates the queer subtext of the canonical '70s and '80s slashers, particularly by highlighting the subgenre's conflict between queer "others" and cartoonish "normal" stock characters. Yet Murphy's position within the TV landscape is a notably complex one as he is constantly navigating his own path between mainstream broadcast contexts and queer content. This dichotomy is an important piece of background information to the nuanced valences of *Scream Queens* as both a queer text and a broadcast television product. Though Murphy achieved notoriety for early series *Popular* (1999-2001) and *Nip/Tuck* (2003-2010), his first true mainstream crossover hit was arguably FOX's *Glee* (2009-2015), a high school musical comedy about ostracized theatre kids. The show was noted for its LGBTQ storylines, including a

central romance between Kurt (Chris Colfer) and Blaine (Darren Criss), beloved by fans and dubbed “Klaine.” A pivotal feature of this teen gay romance is its ability to garner a favorable response from mainstream straight audiences.<sup>148</sup> Fans clamored for Klaine’s first kiss and first sexual experience. The problems with the show’s representations stem largely from the conflict between a desire to tell queer stories and a pressure to normalize and essentialize queer relationships within the restrictive frame of the heterosexual teen drama series.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the episode entitled “The First Time,” which was widely advertised as “the sex episode” and considered a main attraction for fans attentive to the romantic narratives of the series.<sup>149</sup> The episode treats the Klaine romance as indistinguishable and parallel to the other central romance of the series: Rachel (Lea Michele) and Finn (Cory Monteith), a more conventional heterosexual pairing of the lead choir singer and school football star. In the episode, both couples have sex for the first time. These events are depicted in a montage sequence that seeks to draw close connections between the two experiences, suggesting sameness, presumably with the intention of prompting acceptance from a potentially divided mainstream audience. In the sequence, Rachel and Blaine are performing “One Hand, One Heart” as Maria and Tony from the musical *West Side Story*. In the scene from the musical they are portraying, Maria and Tony are symbolically marrying each other because they are from rival gangs and cannot be legally married without betraying those histories. They exchange rings on stage and clasp hands as they sing “not even death can part us now” in an exceedingly heteronormative display. Rachel and Blaine’s performance is intercut with footage from both Rachel/Finn’s first sexual experience and Kurt/Blaine’s first sexual experience. The clasping of hands (a symbol of the character’s marriage in the musical) is echoed visually in shots of each sexual pair clasping hands in an overt moment of graphic match that suggests continuity between the scenes. Not only

are Kurt and Blaine visually linked with the straight peer couple Rachel and Finn, but they are further enveloped in the heterosexual narrative of *West Side Story* wherein the clasping of hands in “One Hand, One Heart” is indicative of symbolic marriage. The post-coital couples are pictured in two subsequent shots. The first shows Finn and Rachel in bed with the camera tracking from their heads at the top of the bed to their feet at the bottom of the bed. The second shows Kurt and Blaine lying upside down in bed. The camera tracks from their upside-down heads at the bottom of the bed to their interlocked feet at the top of the bed. They are presented here as the inverted mirror image of the straight couple. The show seems to posit that the way to make gay sex palatable to straight people is indeed to fail to differentiate it from every other heteronormative narrative about sex in which somehow characters have sex once and are now symbolically married.

This presentation of straight-friendly normative gays raises questions about how we define normativity in 21<sup>st</sup> century representations, and in the case of the slasher, further complicates how the subgenre might dramatize tension between normativity and queerness. Seeing LGBT characters so enmeshed with norms makes it uncertain whether LGBT identities universally denote queerness or if queerness has been, in some ways, necessarily dislocated from conformist aspects of contemporary LGBT culture such as the homonormative possibilities since marriage equality and public relations pushes for LGBT representations in advertising for profit. Around the time of *Glee*, similar themes were cropping up elsewhere in television. The hit sitcom *Modern Family* situated a gay partner parented family in between two straight partner parented families, comforting audiences by suggesting these were three equal and loving nuclear families. Ryan Murphy also created the short-lived but very aptly named *The New Normal* about a gay couple’s relationship with their surrogate. The collective rhetoric of LGBT identities being equated with “normal” and normative social concepts contrasts sharply with the notion of queer as not

synonymous with “gay” but rather a political imperative that opposes normativity with the intention of uniting those marginalized by dominant structures of power. These TV series have worked to proactively push straight audiences into affectionate attachments with queer lovers and queer families.<sup>150</sup> However, the push toward normative representations for LGBT characters has increasingly put pressure on the connections between LGBT identities and queer politics.

In the case of *Scream Queens*, we see the blurring between the binary of queerness and normativity in both the series’ killers and Final Girl(s). The series begins with a flashback to 1995, when a Kappa Kappa Tau sorority sister unexpectedly gives birth during a house party. She is chastised by her sisters for her messy afterbirth and abandoned by them when the DJ plays TLC’s “Waterfalls.” “I am not missing ‘Waterfalls’ for this,” a sister tells her. “‘Waterfalls’ is my jam!” The sister left behind bleeds out alone in a bathtub while her friends dance downstairs, staining the house with a legacy of violence that haunts its future pledges. In 2015, we are introduced to Grace (Skyler Samuels) and Zayday (Keke Palmer), two smart and professionally ambitious women who join the house to revamp its image. Grace commits to the overhaul to best serve the memory of her deceased mother who was once a Kappa sister in what Grace assumes must have been a kinder house. Zayday wishes to be the first U.S. woman president and is convinced by Grace that becoming sorority president might be a strong position from which to begin her political career. We also meet the status quo of the Kappa house led by ultra-mean, chic, and elitist Chanel Oberlin (Emma Roberts), and her nameless subordinates Chanel #2 (Ariana Grande), Chanel #3 (Billie Lourd), and Chanel #5 (Abigail Breslin). The plan by Grace and Zayday to start a change in the house is supported by Dean Munsch (Jamie Lee Curtis, daughter of *Psycho*’s Janet Leigh and star of *Halloween*), an avowed feminist who openly hates the sorority system and plans a

Kappa sabotage by mandating that this year the sisters must accept all interested pledges into the sorority.

While non-normative gender expression seemed to individuate slasher protagonists of the '80s – the “boyish” characteristics of Curtis in *Halloween*, the notable “sensitivity” of queer-coded male heroes in *The Burning* (Tony Maylam, 1981) and *A Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge* (Jack Sholder, 1985) – a more intersectional “queering” of the sorority takes place throughout the show's first season. Prior to Dean Munsch's mandate, the world of Kappa Kappa Tau is that of a preserved normative white utopia. Chanel Oberlin openly describes the Greek system as one of the only places left where you can continue to exclude marginalized identities without penalty. The looming threat to its existence is the move toward a community of inclusive compassion, even if only at the level of public relations. Upon learning that her sorority must now accept all pledges, Chanel bemoans that this will lead to an influx of “ethnics and fatties.” In the opening episodes of the show's first season, the emerging crisis of a campus killer is overshadowed only by the crisis of patently uncool sorority pledges, viciously labeled with nicknames emphasizing queer and non-normative qualities of sexuality and disability such as “Neck Brace,” “Deaf Taylor Swift,” and “Predatory Lez.”

The series exhibits a cynical skepticism about inclusive PR practices designed to bolster the surface appeal of institutions who advertise themselves as progressive without substantially investing in supporting queer student populations or listening to those students about their needs. The relocation of the slasher to a setting obsessed with the optics of inclusivity allows the subgenre to further explore the relationality between queerness and normativity. The series' killers are revealed to be Hester (Lea Michele), called “Neck Brace,” and Boone (Nick Jonas), a gay Kappa sorority pledge. However, Hester is discovered to not actually have a physical disability and Boone

is shown to not actually be gay. It turns out Hester and Boone were the babies born to the mother who died during “Waterfalls” in 1995. In a flashback during the season one finale, we learn that Hester spent time in a mental hospital where she learned that marginalized identities create a sort of culture blindness that allows one to fly under the radar, even under the extreme circumstance of serial murder. Her plan is to exact revenge on Kappa Kappa Tau while feigning a disability that would make her essentially invisible to the likes of the Chaneles and allow her murders to go unnoticed. Conversely, Boone uses marginality as a means for achieving access through his exploitation of PR inclusion. Boone poses as a gay frat brother who wants to pledge the Kappa sorority. Chanel obliges, hoping to feed her PR fantasies of being the first sorority president to accept “a gay.” These two juxtapositions in characterizing the killers of this TV slasher evoke overlapping experiences in contemporary culture with regards to marginalized identities amongst millennials: the rhetoric of inclusion, which seeks and exploits the possibility of embracing queerness in a public manner (Boone), and the stigma still attached to queerness, which fosters negligence and disinterest, if not outright malice, from a normative society (Hester). It also presses upon the adaptability and misappropriation of queerness as Hester and Boone identify and exploit these experiences for their personal gain. They are not gender or sexually non-normative but they manipulate the cultural circumstances of queerness to accomplish the kinds of murderous outcomes commonly associated with killer queers and slashers. What does align them with the marginalized communities associated with queer politics is their experience as victims of normative structures of power represented by the conformist sorority, which prioritized its image and ‘90s pop music over their lives.

Normativity in the slasher is also significantly refigured and made nebulous by the narratives of *Scream Queens*. Chanel and her underlings represent an excessive white upper class



heteronormative culture. Their friction with the new diverse pledges of various races, body types, economic classes, sexualities, and abilities speaks deeply to the slasher's history of challenging the hyper-normative archetypes of the jock, the cheerleader, the prom queen, etc. While this collision is vividly realized throughout the pledge process, the series meaningfully alters the conventions of survival common to the Final Girl. The season one finale recalls, but varies, the Clover term in its title: "The Final Girl(s)," a moniker which is tentative about its plurality. *The Final Girls* assuredly offered us two "girls" to contrast, and only one who survives: the canonical Clover Final Girl, now outdated, and the millennial Final Girl whose bravery and emotional growth mark her for survival in new ways. "The Final Girl(s)" is more diffuse and less certain in signaling the differences between the classic Final Girl and her modern variations. This complexity offers interesting new ways to think about the value conferred by survival in the slasher. On the one hand, Grace and Zayday do survive *Scream Queens*. They are the smart and ambitious figures whose competence resembles the classic Final Girl's vast skill set and disinterest in rigid normativity. Then there is Hester, who lives and escapes prosecution by injuring herself and framing Chanel #1, 3, and 5 for all the murders in the series. She is an opportunistic figure who adorns herself with queer marginality to foster disinterest from a value system that mouths tolerance but performs indifference. Then there are Chanel #1, 3, and 5, who survive but are tried and convicted for the murders. They are sent to a mental hospital where in due time Chanel reestablishes social dominance and creates a new private network of underlings. Yet there are subtle differences for her in this context. In one shocking moment of brief sincerity, Chanel remarks that she has begun eating solid food again after entering the hospital since this setting has eliminated the social pressures for waifish beauty that loomed over her before. Moments such as this make it uncomfortable for the audience to merely dismiss the Chansels as norm-ish fembots. The series

asks its viewers to recognize the bizarre structures of power that govern normative culture and their ramifications across the complete cast of characters.

The outcome of *Scream Queens* untethers the slasher from binary juxtapositions of queer v. normative and instead suggests a fluidity among millennial characters in the series to access and address queer and normative aspects of themselves in different moments and in different ways. The canonical structure of the killer queer and the queer Final Girl as his only capable adversary becomes a theatrical style of play executed by Hester and Boone who perform queer personas to facilitate their murders. Yet there is an unstable, indefinable spectrum of survival here, not exclusively queer characters who can survive and the normative stock archetypes that must die.

Eve Sedgwick has argued that binaries are too limited to effectively characterize the complexity of human sexuality. She suggests rather than a binary opposition of “homosexual” and “heterosexual” that sexuality be discussed as overlapping minoritizing and universalizing discourses. There is both the discussion of a select minority that “homosexuality” specifically addresses and a larger universalizing discourse that accepts “homosexuality” as an essential part of broad cultural concepts of sexuality and identity for all people.<sup>151</sup> More fluid representations of queer people, gay or otherwise, populate modern slashers and dilute binary narratives of essential sexual orientations. In *Scream Queens* Chanel #3 is part of the hyper-normative Chanel clique, which seems oppositional to the queer “others” of the diverse pledges. Yet she has an affectionate and romantic relationship with “Predatory Lez” (Jeanna Han). Chanel #3’s sexuality is never explicitly defined and she also shows attachments to men throughout the series. She demonstrates the normative qualities of rich white elitism but still conveys sexually non-normative traits. Conversely, “Predatory Lez” as a butch lesbian of color is more rigidly identified and marginalized by her identity, branded with it as a label from the first episode of the series. These two figures

speak to how sexuality both evokes a specific gay minority and still has broader implications for the sexuality and identity of those who are not a part of this minority. Queerness is ultimately not a political project bound to progressing specific LGBT identities. As José Muñoz describes it, queerness is an always out-of-reach form of being in our future. Essential to that future is not the LGBT assimilation into normativity but a radical restructuring of sociality that ascribes equal value to those identities marginalized by normativity.<sup>152</sup>

“Gayness” in the slasher no longer has the specific connotation of making one a valued survivor for the queer future. In *Scream 4* (Wes Craven, 2011), the millennial characters recapping slasher rules state that virgins are safe and gay people are safe. Faced with certain death by the knife of the slasher, Robbie (Erik Knudsen) desperately confesses “I’m gay” but is stabbed anyway. *The Town That Dreaded Sundown* (Alfonso Gomez-Rejon, 2014), a follow-up to the 1976 slasher of the same name, similarly shows a same-gender pairing as one of several teen couples to be murdered in a secluded “lover’s lane” style sex spot. Given the slasher’s tendency to murder heteronormative characters in heterosexual encounters, these departures recalibrate death/survival along less binary lines that make “gay” no longer synonymous with queer survival. Those who do survive express a range of gender and sexual identities and vary the straight=death and queer=survival formulas to reflect shifting relations between gayness and normativity. The value of survival in the slasher, if truly queer, comes in the potential to universally reshape and restructure the restrictive conventions of a normative society.

Killer queers of 1940s cinema, labeled by those involved as unspeakably ‘It,’ preceded a cultural period of political activism in which LGBT identities became solidified and levied for social and political gain. This solidification bears out in the queer v. normative binary of the classic slasher cycle of 1978-1985, a period after Stonewall when the gay liberation movement was

mobilizing as a potent political force. In 2015, with the passing of marriage equality and the cultural turn in corporate America toward a rhetoric of inclusivity, the possibility of homonormativity, or socially acceptable married monogamous wealthy white gays, brings to the fore new imaginings of the slasher in its queer “otherness,” namely the portrayal of subversive queerness as flexibly tethered to LGBT identities and an envisioning of queer politics that work in service of intersectional marginal identities. A pertinent definition of homonormativity by Lisa Duggan describes this as “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption.”<sup>153</sup> In 2017, LGBTQ activism remains ardent and important to serve the needs of queer people; however, queerness’ move away from rigid identifiers indicates a political need to equalize people along a spectrum of identities, especially emphasizing marginality rather than only gender and sexuality. The ambiguous ‘It’ solidified into a gay politics, but this has been gently loosened by the contemporary move toward queer intersectionality, which will hopefully continue to recognize the importance of a transformational politics that, as José Muñoz suggested, might fundamentally restructure sociality toward a queer future.

### **Killer Queens, or a Transformative Politics of Drag**

Drag has become a meaningful site in which to locate performances of queer resistance to increasingly normative and mainstream-friendly representations of LGBT culture. In many instances drag inspired by horror media performs a particularly subversive attachment to vulgarity and violence – aspects which confront normative taste and values within and beyond LGBT culture. Horror drag sometimes also shows a connection with the extremely homophobic, transphobic, and misogynist renderings of the killer queer figure commonly seen in the U.S. slasher

film and its forebears. This reliance on antiquated stereotypes and violent imagery can raise questions about the function of such images in contemporary queer media and performance.

One perspective from which to consider violent representations as a component of queer art is Audre Lorde's powerful distinction between "hatred" and "anger" in "The Uses of Anger." Hatred, she says, "is the fury of those who do not share our goals, and its object is death and destruction." Conversely, "anger is a grief of distortions between peers and its object is change."<sup>154</sup> While Lorde's work deals particularly with her frustrations over being characterized as "angry" when advocating for social change as a queer woman of color to her straight white peers, this construction speaks significantly to what a transformative politics of "anger" might look like. Horror drag and other queer performances of anger manifest resistant political energies through their aggressive imagery of murder and violence. Their anger conveys an acute animosity toward oppressive norms and seeks to represent in art the possibility to see and celebrate alternative ideologies.

If the object of anger is change, as Lorde argues, it is imperative to consider the potential for horror drag to be transformative and to signal change. José Muñoz asserts in *Cruising Utopia* that queer art, including drag, visualizes the potentiality of a queer future by restructuring sociality through its celebration of gender non-conforming behavior, femme, effeminate, and trans bodies. Following Muñoz, I argue that drag's potential to visualize a restructured sociality is mirrored in its ability to restructure a value system around images of gore, horror, and the grotesque. That the queer potential offered by drag's facilitation of a transformative space in which marginalized bodies and identities are ascribed equal social value, can also be expressed through its uncharacteristic celebration of the gross, cult, strange, and unusual. Therefore, horror becomes an extension of the queer function of drag, and at times may be said to indicate a performer's push

for drag (and thereby queer culture) to encompass even more potently weird and radical representations that put pressure on politically conformist or assimilative LGBT aims.

### **Sharon Needles / Slashing Normativity**

In a 2017 interview with BFI, drag performer and winner of the television reality series *RuPaul's Drag Race*, Sharon Needles, describes her affinity for horror movies, particularly slashers, as a cathartic relationship that visualizes her animosity toward her bullies as a queer adolescent.

Growing up in a small Iowa town where there's nothing to do and clearly knowing that I was weird, there was no other salvation than the video rental store. Horror films to me was the perfect escapism for someone who's bullied or picked on. A lot of horror movies that I love were pretty much revenge films. If you look at the Jason Vorhees or the Michael Myers, it's all about returning for revenge and the archetype of the victims in 80's horror movies was always the college jock and the popular girl...I think in order for me to avoid creating another Columbine, I could vicariously live through watching my high school bullies being slaughtered in cinema.<sup>155</sup>

Crucial to these remarks is Needles's conception of herself as antagonistic toward cultural normativity, a quality she sees echoed in the slasher figure. In Needles's perspective the jock and the popular girl signify the heteronormative ideal of gender and sexuality, and are complicit within a society that facilitates her being bullied as a gender-nonconforming and queer adolescent. The slasher genre offers her a rebellion against this brand of normativity and, more deeply, a vengeful critique of it.

Needles deems Freddy Krueger of the popular *A Nightmare on Elm Street* series "the best of the franchise horror villains," noting his verbal wit when compared with other slashers such as Michael Myers and Jason Vorhees. She also points to the flagrantly queer content found in *A Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge*, which Needles calls "the gay one." Krueger has a distinct history of being linked to stereotypical representations of queer men.<sup>156</sup> Dustin Bradley Goltz describes Krueger as "the sadistic extreme of the aged homosexual predator constructed in

the rhetoric of Anita Bryant and early Hollywood tragedy.”<sup>157</sup> Needles’s drag performances as Krueger typically feature her in a femme drag interpretation of Krueger with tousled white-blonde hair spilling out from under the killer’s iconic tattered fedora. Performances alternate between Needles’s own drag makeup style and a prosthetic makeup to imitate Krueger’s burns. His famous red and green patterned horizontal stripe sweater is torn at the neck to expose the cleavage from Needles’s cartoonish and exaggerated breastplate. She pairs this with black tights and black heels. The glove with four protruding blades at the fingers remains unchanged. The performance is preceded by a modified version of Freddy’s signature nursery rhyme: “1, 2 Sharon’s coming for you...” The choices of lip-sync songs vary but typically include “Sweet Dreams (Are Made Of This)” by Eurhythmics, often in a medley with some combination of “Sweet Dreams” by La Bouche, “Rip Her to Shreds” by Blondie, “Heads Will Roll” by Yeah Yeah Yeahs, and/or “Sweet Dreams” by Beyoncé. The music alternately draws on pop music’s penchant for dramatic violent metaphors (“Rip Her to Shreds,” “Heads Will Roll”) and the repeated motif in popular music of the phrase “Sweet Dreams” and its sometimes romantic and/or euphoric connotations. The lyrics of the different song combinations play on Krueger’s persona as a killer who stalks victims in dreams.

Given Needles’s characterization of the slasher as an expression of vengeance against her normative bullies, her embodiment of Krueger as a character suggests a further alignment of herself with this surrogate figure that allows her to express her anger toward the normative archetypes seen in the slasher movie, in her own words, “the college jock and the popular girl.” It also allows for the cathartic performance of that anger through the figure of the killer queer, a problematic figure noted for its homophobia but with whom queer viewers seem to relate in both their animosity toward normative types and in their acquisition of subversive power. As Needles

notes about the murderous gender nonconforming character, Angela (Felissa Rose), in *Sleepaway Camp* (Robert Hiltzik, 1983) “it puts transgendered people into a negative light but they definitely had power in cinema and horror was the only genre you saw them in.”<sup>158</sup> This kind of reappropriation of antiquated queer stereotypes (the femme killer, etc.) suggests a desire to return to a more radically queer gay political movement performed here in the seemingly outdated, potentially offensive representations of more threatening queers figures from the past. If the femme killer, or gay man, is not necessarily a timely vessel in the present for the queer energy of the slasher, these returns to the classics convey a desire to reinvigorate what was once a radical and empowered political position able to be expressed in the violent revenge fantasies of the slasher. They bring back to the fore a desire to upset and reject normativity as an empowered queer individual rather than assimilate within normativity as what John Waters casually calls “straight gay people.”<sup>159</sup>

Needles, whose popular catchphrases on the fourth season of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* in 2012 included “When in doubt, freak ‘em out,” notably articulated the need to return gay and drag culture back to its “weird” and “freaky” roots that defied normativity. She contextualizes Krueger, or her Sharon-as-Krueger persona, within the show’s narratives of conventional beauty drag vs. Needles’s self-described “spooky” drag by interspersing references to *RuPaul’s Drag Race* rival Phi Phi O’Hara during her Krueger pop medley. O’Hara, who at the time performed more conventionally glamorous beauty and pageant drag, famously fought with Needles on the series with Needles calling O’Hara a “tired ass showgirl” and O’Hara replying “At least I am a showgirl, bitch. Go back to Party City where you belong!” O’Hara’s remarks attempt to diminish Needles’s alternative horror drag, likening it to cheap Halloween costumes purchased at Party City, and dismisses its relevance to the queer history of critical drag that opposes normativity. The exchange,



which is often quoted among fans, highlights the show's narrative in which Needles's "spooky" drag challenges the beauty norms commonly held among other performers in the series. This incident is referenced by Needles multiple times during the Krueger performance. In one moment Needles displays a prop severed head and proclaims "Hey, Phi Phi. I heard you give great head," spinning it wildly as she performs "Heads Will Roll" by the Yeah Yeah Yeahs. She concludes the number by delivering a popular Krueger tagline to her drag rival: "And remember whatever you do Phi Phi, don't fall asleep!"

In this performance, Needles recasts O'Hara, a gay man and drag queen, in the role of the normative enemy, setting up a dynamic in which the dichotomy of normativity/queer seen between the slasher and his victims has been transformed into an inter-queer conflict between two drag performers. Needles's persona on *RuPaul's Drag Race* and her stage performance as Krueger both draw out her role in dramatizing a call within the queer art of drag for more avant-garde and downright weird modes of performance that do not conform to heteronormative beauty ideals. Needles's television persona and subsequent stage acts, which interpolate elements of horror movies, address an important overlap in horror between queer/gender non-conforming individuals and violent murderousness. Most notably, Needles reappropriates villainized queer horror figures such as Freddy Krueger to help articulate her own position as a transgressive punk in an increasingly homogenized drag scene.

### **Peaches Christ's Cult of Queer**

San Francisco horror movie maven Peaches Christ similarly channeled the camp perversity of Freddy Krueger in a performance set to Metallica's "Enter Sandman" celebrating the ultra-gay *A Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge* and its star Mark Patton whose nascent queerness resonated throughout the film. Of Krueger, Joshua Grannell who created and performs the Peaches

Christ character, conveys an attachment to Krueger's queerness and an antagonism toward his victims.

I was a sissy and I felt like an outsider as a child and identified more with girls than boys...Here was this killer who was overtly sassy and fabulous and horrific and could sort of torture these kids in a way that was really fun and satisfying. And often the kids that got killed in the movies first were the kids that I would have hated. It was the person who would have been my girlfriend, you know, my buddy, my feminist pal, who would always be the final scream queen.<sup>160</sup>

Christ's film programs, such as her *Midnight Mass* series and stage reimaginations of cult and horror classics, demonstrate a transgressive celebration of her self-proclaimed identity as a sissy through the elevation of femme killers and weirdos to cult icon status. Her shows include distinct hybrid characters that represent known figures from memorable cult films but take the added step of making those characters drag performers, often a fictionalized version of the specific drag performer playing the role. Grannell remarks, "For me as a writer, I really liked also celebrating the drag character themselves who in their own way had become their own icon." In this way, Grannell's plays "channel more than one cult," as he says.<sup>161</sup> The cult audience formed around the original film as well as the cult who celebrates the drag performer. These hybrid characters allow the queer performers in these shows to celebrate their own differentiated identities along with those of the characters they play in the show, and to transform those characters into new and reimagined queer variations of them.

Such transformations create distance between the original iteration of a character and the drag hybrid character used to channel that cult figure. The distance offers potential to redevelop principal aspects of characters, especially offering opportunities to celebrate the queerness of these characters and/or recuperate queer-phobic characters in newly reimagined hybrid forms. This was the case with 2011's *The Silence of the Trans* which built on the popularity of Sharon Needles's *RuPaul's Drag Race* victory by casting Needles as Buffalo Jill, a drag queen variation on *The*

*Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991) serial killer character Buffalo Bill. In the play, Jill is murdering all the world's best drag performers. So, Latrice (Suppositori Spelling) reaches out to the notorious Trannibel Lecter (Peaches Christ) to help her solve the crime. In a striking moment that reshapes and recontextualizes aspects of the film, Needles performs her version of Buffalo Bill's famous dance to Q Lazzarus's song "Goodbye Horses" in which Bill, whose character obsesses over women's bodies and murders women to sew a skin suit, tucks their penis between their legs to suggest a vagina, presumably the body they desire. Christ's strategy of the hybrid-character that "channels more than one cult" imbues the moment with many layers of meaning. It is not merely a representation of Buffalo Bill, but instead a variation of that character, Buffalo Jill, which draws on the cult of the Sharon Needles drag persona as well as the film character. Recasting Jill as a drag performer makes her act of tucking her penis a triumphant expression of prowess, a career skill that she should be celebrated for, and indeed available YouTube recordings documenting performances of the show reveal audiences roar with approval over Needles's impressive tuck. The bleakness of the Buffalo Bill scene, in which a gender dysphoric character and serial killer, goads their own erotic performance ("I'd fuck me") while dancing alone in a dank and cavernous basement – intercut with shots of their victim trapped inside a well – becomes tempered by the injection of Needles's drag character into the mix, turning a dark moment of queer desperation into a celebrated moment of queer art and expression.

What Grannell's plays exemplify is that drag performances of popular characters are as much, if not more, about the queer experience of a popular media text as they are about the media itself. What audiences seem to value most about drag impersonations is not whether the performer is a passable lookalike of that star, or character, but whether the performer meaningfully channels their own queer fascination and attachment to the star, or character. Seeing a drag performer

impersonate someone, whether it be Liza Minnelli or Freddy Krueger, is not about seeing someone that merely looks like Liza Minnelli or Freddy Krueger. It is about seeing a queer person re-present the queer facets of that star, or character, to an audience that also recognizes and connects with those queer facets. As Grannell puts it, “It is about us...as queer people, celebrating and channeling that queer thing, that queerness in these things, to an audience who also sees the queerness.”<sup>162</sup> Grannell’s layers of cult, horror, and drag redefine for him what transformative potential there is in the realms of the personal and political. The practices of celebrating drag artists’ gender non-conforming behavior, celebrating horror in all its grotesque violence, and celebrating fringe and cult media all echo in each other a note of spirited resistance to normative taste, culture, and ideology. By celebrating the weirdness, freakishness, and over-the-top gore of horror, Christ tributes the anti-normative facets of LGBTQ culture and pushes for further transformation of the community away from assimilative aims and toward a radical and restructured queer future.

The potential for this future is seen clearly in her differentiation of the queer performer from the mass media character they tribute. This separation allows for the queer performer to remain differentiated from the cult figure they portray, and for the celebration of that character to run parallel with the celebration of the queer performer. In Christ’s theatre, queer performers of various identities are celebrated as much or equally as cult movie characters such that Buffalo Jill pays homage equitably to the queerness of Buffalo Bill and to the drag performer Sharon Needles. In these instances, the queer performer is not subsumed into the mass media characterization and is not made to equate themselves to queer stereotypes which have preceded them. They instead forge new identities for themselves, and are celebrated by audiences for those very identities.

A strong case for the differentiation of the queer performer can be found in Grannell’s feature length directorial debut *All About Evil* (2010), which tells the story of Deborah Tennis

(Natasha Lyonne), a down on her luck owner of a failing San Francisco cult movie theatre, who reignites her business by writing and directing her own original gore films. However, her audiences are unaware that the films do not simulate their violent deaths, but instead capture Deborah and her crew of oddball theatre workers actually murdering those they deem disposable or deplorable, including jaded texters and people who talk at the movies.

In the film's climactic sequence, Deborah packs her San Francisco theatre with eager fans waiting to see her bloody opus *Gore & Peace*. They are instead told that they will be the stars of the film she is showing, as she turns the camera on the crowd and encourages them to all drink their complimentary cocktail – a flesh burning, body deteriorating poison. The theatre patrons break into a mad dash to the doors, fending off Deborah's violent minions. In this moment, director Joshua Grannell portrays his popular drag character Peaches Christ playing herself: San Francisco's midnight movie queen and horror taste trend setter. Peaches has shown up to *Gore & Peace* expecting a riveting expansion upon Deborah's filmography. Instead she is shown that Deborah is a mass murderer rather than an ingenious artist. In an exceptionally pertinent exchange, Adrian – a psychopathic killer in Deborah's crew – approaches Peaches with a knife. He appears dressed in full drag, or presents as a woman in this instance. Adrian's presentation reflects the kinds of queer characterizations we have seen given to killers in many horror films before: a cross-dressing, gender non-conforming killer queer whose sexual deviance matches his psychopathic murderousness. Peaches is the contemporary horror drag superstar of San Francisco. Her art practice revolves around the interpolation and representation of queer horror performance. She is a drag queen, a gender non-conforming performer, who playacts Freddy Krueger, Hannibal Lecter, and other killer figures with queer resonance. Grannell notes that Peaches here conveys this horror history through her aesthetic: "I did want that monstrous drag of like a Rocky Horror meets Buffalo

Bill archetype. Something glamorous but also monstrous and ugly.” Yet Peaches, the modern queer performer of horror drag, is not Adrian, the vestige of killer queers past. She looks at Adrian with abject horror and proclaims: “What the fuck is wrong with you?” In an echo of Needles’s remarks about horror being an outlet for aggression that would allow her “to avoid creating another Columbine,” Grannell says of the Adrian character: “In that moment Peaches is realizing ‘You are the Columbine kids. You are an American terrorist. And I am not that. That is not what I am. I have been duped into believing you were fabulous or creative or interesting. But, no, you’re just a twisted killer.’”<sup>163</sup>

Ultimately, *All About Evil* is a meditation on the important difference between utilizing the images of horror one inherits to refashion a value system that befits a queer ideology and succumbing to those images as a means of defining one’s self-worth. Peaches reimagines, reshapes, and redefines queer power by borrowing images of horror that had been used to denigrate the sissies and weirdos with whom she identifies, and using them to cast herself in a light that allows her queer performance to be celebrated. Adrian accepts the monstrous characterization of his queerness and becomes the killer queer of Hollywood’s lore. Peaches defiantly objects to Adrian and Deborah’s warped murderousness as an offense to art and creativity. They accept the terms of self-identity offered to them through horror media whereas Peaches transforms these terms and redefines her worth.

### **The Babadook Is Gay Now**

In the summer of 2017, drag and queer culture seemed to embrace a particular monster as an image of political resistance: the Babadook, the titular character from the 2014 Jennifer Kent film about a mother and young son who are plagued by the apparition of a crooked bogeyman in a black top hat and peacoat. Various apocryphal stories have emerged to explain the phenomenon.

Some cite a categorization era made by Netflix that listed *The Babadook* as a gay and lesbian film. Others say it arose out of a thread on Tumblr.<sup>164</sup> Regardless of its origins, the Babadook became an unlikely symbol of the 2017 summer Pride season, which coincides annually with the anniversary of the June 28, 1969 Stonewall riots. Various queer and drag performers, including Ariel Versace (Pennsylvania) Miles Jai (California), and Pissi Myles (New Jersey) sported Babadook looks in and around the Pride season. Myles's performance of the character included a fully produced pop single and music video merging horror imagery with drag vernacular titled "Babashook."

A standout performance of the character stars Brooklyn drag performer Lucy Balls as the Babadook lip-syncing to the Postmodern Jukebox cover of Radiohead's "Creep." The lyrics of the Radiohead song (performed now by a woman's voice, Haley Reinhart) describe feelings of weirdness and "otherness," a comparison the singer makes between herself and a so-called better class of humans: "I wish I was special/You're so very special/But I'm a creep/I'm a weirdo/What the hell am I doing here?/I don't belong here." Balls casts the Babadook as a queer figure of social difference, mourning a position on the outside of normative society but celebrating through her well-received staging of this sadness, that her weirdness and failure to conform can be received in alternative queer spaces as beautiful. The performance escalates within the framework of a striptease. With each chorus of the song, Balls peels away a long black coat – a signature component of the Babadook's crooked silhouette. The irony is that under each coat is yet another representation of a long black coat, and the expectation of revealing something new – common to burlesque and striptease – is constantly thwarted. Each gnarled, long black coat reveals another representation of a gnarled, long black coat until it is only a cardboard cutout image of the Babadook's gnarled, long black coat dangling from Balls's neck. The being she portrays cannot

truly shed its skin, cannot transform itself. It is a queer weirdo, a creep, and can find their pleasure on the stage. This broken image of an immutable outsider has the quality of being a glorious, powerful thing.

Though there were earlier traces of the queer Babadook trend (Balls performance took place in January 2017), the major rise in popularity of this phenomenon coincided with the 2017 Pride season. It is unclear why and how the trend proliferated except that it seemed to take off through Twitter and other social media at this time. The timing importantly coincides with a renewed interest in the more radical politics of gay liberation and a turn in Pride toward a focus on political resistance to the administration of the newly elected president, Donald J. Trump. Los Angeles Pride famously held a #RESIST March in 2017 in lieu of its usual Pride March and banners were seen at New York Pride and other major Pride celebrations touting the #RESIST moniker. Horror drag performing the Babadook, Freddy Krueger and other images of monstrous horror have contributed to this feeling of resistance by displaying anti-normative attitudes through figures that embody otherness but also gore, violence, and anger.

The Babadook's flagrant homosexuality may have first been noted by a user named Ianstagram on Tumblr (real name Ian), who stated bluntly: "Whenever someone says the Babadook isn't openly gay it's like?? Did you even watch the movie???" One theory for the popularity of the gay Babadook trope is that it escalated due to the flurry of antagonistic responses to the idea, making it an ideal way to troll homophobes and resilient heterosexuals who insisted that the Babadook, a fictitious Australian bogeyman, was not gay. "It started picking up steam within a few weeks," Ian (Ianstagram) says, "because individuals who I presume are heterosexual kind of freaked out over the assertion that a horror-movie villain would identify as queer — which I think was the actual humor of the post, as opposed to just the outright statement that the Babadook



is gay.”<sup>165</sup> The popularity of the Babadook as a queer symbol is its resistance to ambient heteronormativity, the idea that everything is presumed heterosexual until proven otherwise, that cultural artifacts such as films and TV shows should be interpreted as heterosexual until proven otherwise, that all people are heterosexual until proven otherwise. The random codification of the Babadook as gay makes a statement that anything and everything can be queer without proof, and that expectations for queer people to logically defend their queer engagements with media overlook the implicit presumptions of heterosexuality these critiques are predicated upon. Besides the fact of the Babadook belonging to a category of monsters with whom queer people relate, the Babadook is important in that he was publicly claimed as gay by a digital network of queer people who found in that very act a power to see and understand their world queerly. And so, the Babadook is gay now.

### **Conclusion**

As with *The Babadook*, queer engagements with slasher films and other media signal a complex relation to an unusual object. Held within these engagements is an attachment to the antagonism the slasher displays toward normativity. This antagonism takes myriad forms and does not find singular expression. It can be found in the slasher’s historical alignment with gender incongruence and sexual deviance, the slasher’s offense to “good taste” – both cinematically, as in its formal and narrative deviations from classical filmmaking, and socially, as in its affront to conservative values and concepts of “family,” “nation,” and even Christmas. It can be found in the image of a maniac drag queen dragging a sledgehammer across a suburban lawn and taking said hammer to the window of a car containing kissing heterosexual teenagers amid the throes of lover’s lane. The slasher’s reputation for being disreputable and inscrutable makes it an unsightly object to recover, and yet, in the camp killing sprees of *Scream Queens* and the winking stage massacres

of Peaches Christ we see affection for the slasher in the work of contemporary queer artists, who pick up on the queer undertones of Freddy Krueger, Leatherface, and Norman Bates. In the early 1960s, a time which saw some of cinema's earliest unmitigated expressions of homosexual attraction – *Victim* (Basil Dearden, 1961), *The Children's Hour* (William Wyler, 1961) – the preliminary gay characters we saw on-screen were the victims of blackmail and gossip; they were shamed and they suffered. In *Feeling Backward*, Heather Love makes a case for the importance of queer affections for such representations, resisting the notion that their shame must be overcome, ignored, and obstinately refused. However, the early 1960s also gave us the effete mother-obsessed killer Norman Bates in *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) and the gender incongruent killer Emily/Warren in *Homicidal* (William Castle, 1961). And though we have expressions for queer attachment to the victim, we have little to describe the experience of queer attachment to the psycho. *Queer Slashers* articulates some of what makes the slasher function queerly. It begins by thinking through a broader context for the slasher, suggesting a queer lineage of non-normative and queer-coded characterizations in earlier films of the late 1930s and 1940s which are important for understanding the tropes of the killer queer which follow them. Looking at the influx of this figure during the 1960s, I argue that the killer queer figure becomes further expanded upon and widely popularized in the wake of *Psycho*'s massive commercial success and that the spate of imitators and *Psycho*-ish films which result from this boom further proliferate the idea of the queer killer. In the 1970s and 80s, the canonical slasher cycle emerges and shapes itself more explicitly than any earlier iteration around distinct collisions between a sexually deviant social outsider, the “slasher” figure, and the normative American suburbs replete with middle-class whiteness, idyllic rolling hills, and merciless heterosexuality. That the slasher's clearest expression is a femme, sometimes cross-dressing or gender incongruent, stalking killer pursuing and murdering a cast of

anonymously prototypical teenage pre-corpses speaks to the potential to read into the slasher a queer resonance in the fabric of its serial formulation. Subsequent queer creatives, such as Ryan Murphy, Peaches Christ, and others draw upon the queer resonance in these patterned representations and expand the slasher to fit a modern tableau of their respective political moment. In these modern ruminations, slasher expressions reform the patterns of past media, building on what was already queer to create something which functions queerly, but in new directions. Whether it be Mr. Slade in *The Lodger* (1944), Norman Bates in *Psycho* (1960), Leatherface in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) or Trannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Trans* (2013), slashers share a queer lineage of mediations with queer resonance felt by queer audiences in unexpected, and likely unintended, ways; taking this history of queer slashers seriously allows for a fuller understanding of the genre's popularity, its ability to convey meaning beyond the limited scope of heteronormative critique, and its alternative potentials for individuals who identify themselves as counter to normative culture, normative taste, and normative sexuality.

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- <sup>1</sup> Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1993), 15.
- <sup>2</sup> Harry Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1997), 6.
- <sup>3</sup> Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet*, 12-13.
- <sup>4</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, CA: U of California, 1990), 1.
- <sup>5</sup> Michael Warner, "Introduction," in *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xiii.
- <sup>6</sup> Cathy J. Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" in *Sexual Identities, Queer Politics*, edited by Mark Blasius (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 204.
- <sup>7</sup> Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens," 201.
- <sup>8</sup> Angela M. Smith, *Hideous Progeny: Disability, Eugenics, and Classic Horror Cinema* (New York: Columbia UP, 2012), 27.
- <sup>9</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 6.
- <sup>10</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 6.
- <sup>11</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 6.
- <sup>12</sup> Andrew Tudor, *Monsters and Mad Scientists: A Cultural History of the Horror Movie* (Oxford, UK & Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 47-48.
- <sup>13</sup> Vera Dika, *Games Of Terror: Halloween, Friday the 13th, and the Films of the Stalker Cycle* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickenson UP, 1990), 51-52.
- <sup>14</sup> William Schoell, *Stay Out Of The Shower: 25 Years of Shocker Films Beginning with "Psycho"* (New York: Dembner Books, 1985), 3-5.
- <sup>15</sup> John McCarty, *Movie Psychos and Madmen: Film Psychopaths from Jekyll and Hyde to Hannibal Lecter* (New York: Citadel Press, 1993), 69-83.
- <sup>16</sup> Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet*, 87-88.
- <sup>17</sup> Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet*, 88.
- <sup>18</sup> Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1992), 186.
- <sup>19</sup> Jack Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham: Duke UP, 1995), 141.
- <sup>20</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 43.
- <sup>21</sup> Christopher Nealon, *Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion before Stonewall* (Durham: Duke UP, 2001), 1-8.
- <sup>22</sup> See Clover's *Men, Women, and Chain Saws* and Vera Dika's *Games of Terror*.
- <sup>23</sup> See Robin Wood's *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*.
- <sup>24</sup> Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, 42.
- <sup>25</sup> Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, 29.
- <sup>26</sup> Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 91.
- <sup>27</sup> Rondo Hatton, another figure who pioneered this killer character which I argue influences the slasher film is most notable not for sexual difference, but explicitly for physical difference shown through a disability. Hatton had distinct facial features caused by a condition called acromegaly and played a stalking killer called The Creeper in three films for Universal Pictures before his tragic death: *The Pearl of Death* (Roy William Neill, 1944), *House of Horrors* (Jean Yarbrough, 1946), and *The Brute Man* (Jean Yarbrough, 1946). *House of Horrors* is especially relevant as it depicts The Creeper stalking and murdering fashion models whose conventional beauty contrast his stigmatized physicality.
- <sup>28</sup> There are several passages dedicated to this topic of study. However, mostly these titles are invoked only to be excluded as minor examples of an unsuccessful countertrend. For such discussions see William Schoell's *Stay Out of the Shower* (3-5), John McCarty's *Movie Psychos and Madmen* (69-83), and Andrew Tudor's *Monsters and Mad Scientists* (188-190).
- <sup>29</sup> Tudor, *Monsters and Mad Scientists*, 48.
- <sup>30</sup> Tudor, *Monsters and Mad Scientists*, 194.
- <sup>31</sup> Linda Williams, "When the Woman Looks" in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1996), 24.

<sup>32</sup> Vera Dika, *Games Of Terror*, 51-52.

<sup>33</sup> With the exception of *The Leopard Man*, each of the five films of focus here sets its story in what is indicated by detail or suggested by costume and setting to be the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. This potentially suggests an underlying motive by all four films to implicitly reference the Ripper whose murders occurred in this period.

<sup>34</sup> Although Val Lewton's productions have often been singled out as superior examples amid 1940s horror mediocrity, the consistency of *The Leopard Man* in theme and style with these other forties peers suggest that the decade was rich with complex horror overall.

<sup>35</sup> See also the discussion of *Bluebeard* (Edgar G. Ulmer, 1944)

<sup>36</sup> Tudor, *Monsters and Mad Scientists*, 189.

<sup>37</sup> Williams, "When the Woman Looks," 24.

<sup>38</sup> Carol J. Clover offers an opposite understanding of the first-person camera in *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, citing its visual shakiness as a feature which calls greater attention to the filmic mediation of the experience and undermines the authority of the killer by emphasizing his limitations (187).

<sup>39</sup> Dika, *Games of Terror*, 40.

<sup>40</sup> Dika, *Games of Terror*, 40.

<sup>41</sup> This technique is in some ways preceded by a similar device at the end of an earlier adaptation of *The Lodger*, released in America as *The Phantom Fiend* (Maurice Elvey, 1932). In that film, the final approach by the killer (Ivor Novello) toward the heroine, Daisy (Elizabeth Allan) is filmed as a POV push-in on the victim. The attack, however, does not end in murder. Hitchcock's adaptation of the novel in 1927 introduced first-person from the perspective of the "possible" killer (Hitchcock's version affirms the protagonist's innocence) as he first approaches the Buntings' door. Murders often become visualized in this version only with close-ups of the screaming female victims, thereby preserving the anonymity of the killer without using POV. The subsequent remake of Brahm's forties version, *Man In The Attic* (Hugo Fregonese, 1953) preserves the POV murder technique introduced here.

<sup>42</sup> This construction is similar to Mark's process in *Peeping Tom* of filming models before and during their deaths.

<sup>43</sup> The peephole scene of *Psycho* in which Norman spies upon Marion as she undresses before stepping into the shower resembles this moment.

<sup>44</sup> *Bluebeard* does have a final confrontation where law enforcement chases Gaston and cause his fall into the water below. However, the perspective of the scene is handled in relative balance with several shots that preclude Gaston's knowledge such as one showing the authorities breaking down the door from the outside. *The Spiral Staircase* has no public revelation of the killer. However, there is the dramatic realization by the family matriarch that it was her son all along. Ultimately, she is the one who shoots and kills him, ending the murder spree.

<sup>45</sup> Interestingly, 40s film noir also experimented notably with POV editing, including scenes of murder. *Lady in the Lake* (Robert Montgomery, 1947) famously utilized first-person perspective for the duration of its runtime, limiting the film's narration to the restricted POV of Detective Phillip Marlowe (Robert Montgomery). Its trailer announced the technique as an interactive novelty, billing the film as "Mysteriously starring Robert Montgomery and... YOU!" Later that year another MGM thriller, *High Wall* (Curtis Bernhardt, 1947) perverted this interaction by forcing the audience into the perspective of a psychologically unstable World War II veteran who strangles his wife after discovering her wartime affair.

<sup>46</sup> Dana Polan, *Power and Paranoia: History, Narrative, and the American Cinema, 1940-1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 248.

<sup>47</sup> Mark Osteen, *Nightmare Alley: Film Noir and the American Dream* (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 2013), 78.

<sup>48</sup> Osteen, *Nightmare Alley*, 78.

<sup>49</sup> See John D'Emilio's *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities* and Allan Bérubé's, *Coming Out Under Fire*.

<sup>50</sup> John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: U of Chicago, 1983), 24-26.

<sup>51</sup> Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two* (New York: The Free Press, 1990), 37.

<sup>52</sup> Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire*, 68.

<sup>53</sup> For a sample of this conservative view, see Rick Worland's *The Horror Film: An Introduction* (69-75).

<sup>54</sup> An earlier version of this chapter was published in *Recovering 1940s Horror Cinema: Traces of a Lost Decade*, eds. Mario DeGiglio-Bellemare, Charlie Ellbé, and Kristopher Woofter (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2015), 27-46.

<sup>55</sup> Chris Nashawaty, *Crab Monsters, Teenage Cavemen, and Candy Stripe Nurses: Roger Corman: King of the B Movie* (New York: Abrams, 2013), 132.

- <sup>56</sup> Other Francis films of note here include *Paranoiac* (1963), *Nightmare* (1964), and *Hysteria* (1965).
- <sup>57</sup> See John D'Emilio's *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities* and Allan Bérubé's, *Coming Out Under Fire*.
- <sup>58</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990): 43.
- <sup>59</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, 43.
- <sup>60</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, 43.
- <sup>61</sup> Christopher Nealon, *Foundlings*, 1-8.
- <sup>62</sup> Harry Hay, *Radically Gay: Gay Liberation In The Words Of Its Founder* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 131.
- <sup>63</sup> For a detailed history of Mattachine and pre-Stonewall gay politics see John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities* (Chicago: U of Chicago, 1983). For a historical account of early twentieth century gay culture see George Chauncey *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).
- <sup>64</sup> D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, 33-34
- <sup>65</sup> George Dorsey, *Christopher of San Francisco* (New York: Macmillan, 1962): 187.
- <sup>66</sup> D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, 178.
- <sup>67</sup> Dorsey, *Christopher of San Francisco*, 188.
- <sup>68</sup> Michael Warner, "Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet," *Social Text* 29 (1991): 3.
- <sup>69</sup> Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens," 204.
- <sup>70</sup> Philip K Scheuer, "Phone Film That Fails to Ring Bell," *Los Angeles Times*, September 2, 1965, 12.
- <sup>71</sup> Scheuer, "Phone Film That Fails to Ring Bell," 12.
- <sup>72</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1993), 8
- <sup>73</sup> Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 8
- <sup>74</sup> David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia UP, 1985), 24.
- <sup>75</sup> Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 13.
- <sup>76</sup> Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 14
- <sup>77</sup> Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 17
- <sup>78</sup> Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 81
- <sup>79</sup> Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 12
- <sup>80</sup> Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 12
- <sup>81</sup> Rebecca Bell-Metereau, *Hollywood Androgyny* (New York: Columbia UP, 1993): 134, 7. See also analysis in Denise Noe, "Can A Woman Be A Man On-Screen?" *The Gay & Lesbian Review* 8.2 (2001), 21-22.
- <sup>82</sup> The possible allusion to a "sex change" via the dialogue about Denmark is also observed in David Sanjek, "The Doll and the Whip: Pathos and Ballyhoo in William Castle's *Homicidal*" *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 20:4 (2003), 247-263.
- <sup>83</sup> Joanne Meyerowitz, "Transforming Sex: Christine Jorgensen in the Postwar U.S." *Magazine of History* 20.2 (2006), 16, 18-20.
- <sup>84</sup> "Bars Marriage Permit: Clerk Rejects Proof of Sex of Christine Jorgensen," *New York Times*, April 4, 1959, 20. "Engagement Off, Christine Is Told," *The Washington Post*, September 9, 1959, D9.
- <sup>85</sup> For discussions of the phallic connotations of the knife in the slasher, see Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1992) and Vera Dika, *Games Of Terror: Halloween, Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>, and the Films of the Stalker Cycle* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickenson UP, 1990).
- <sup>86</sup> For full details on Ed Gein's crimes and arrest see Robert H. Gollmar, *Edward Gein: America's Most Bizarre Murderer* (New York: Pinnacle Books, 1989) and Harold Schechter, *Deviant: The Shocking True Story of Ed Gein, the Original Psycho* (New York: Pocket Books, 1989).
- <sup>87</sup> Harold Schechter, *Deviant: The Shocking True Story of Ed Gein, the Original Psycho* (New York: Pocket Books, 1989), 132.
- <sup>88</sup> "House of Horror Stuns the Nation," *LIFE*, photographs by Francis Miller and Frank Scherschel, December 2, 1957, 24-32.
- <sup>89</sup> For a detailed study of Gein's influence on screen killers see K.E. Sullivan, "Ed Gein and the Figure of the Transgender Serial Killer," *Jump Cut* 43 (2000), 38-47.
- <sup>90</sup> Wheeler Winston Dixon, *Straight: Construction of Heterosexuality in the Cinema* (Albany: State U of New York P, 2003), 20.
- <sup>91</sup> Gerard Genette, *The Narrative Discourse: An Essay In Method* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1983): 189.
- <sup>92</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, 43.

- <sup>93</sup> Raymond Robinson, "'I Saw What You Did' Is Too Long, Too Dull," *New York Amsterdam News*, July 31, 1965, 23.
- <sup>94</sup> For a study of *I Saw What You Did* as a slasher precursors and "phone film," see Marc Olivier, "Gidget Goes Noir: William Castle and the Teenage Phone Fatale" *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 41.1 (2013): 31-42.
- <sup>95</sup> An earlier version of this chapter was published in *ReFocus: The Films of William Castle*, ed. Murray Leeder (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 219-236.
- <sup>96</sup> *Sneak Previews*, "Women In Danger," directed by David Erdman, 1980.
- <sup>97</sup> Janet Maslin, "Film View: Bloodbaths Debase Movie Audiences," *New York Times*, November 21, 1982, <https://www.nytimes.com/1982/11/21/movies/film-view-bloodbaths-debase-movies-and-audiences.html>
- <sup>98</sup> A.L. Loudermilk, "Last to Leave the Theater: Sissy Spectatorship of Stalker Movies and the 'Final Girls' Who Survive Them," *Bright Lights Film Journal*, October 13, 2012, <http://brightlightsfilm.com/last-to-leave-the-theater-sissy-spectatorship-of-stalker-movies-and-the-final-girls-who-survive-them#.WwRbs-4vzcs>.
- <sup>99</sup> Harry Hay, *Radically Gay*, 131
- <sup>100</sup> Third World Gay Liberation (New York City), "What We Want, What We Believe" in *Out of the Closets: Voices of Gay Liberation*, edited by Karla Jay and Allen Young (New York: NYU, 1972), 367.
- <sup>101</sup> Gay Liberation Front, "Manifesto," *People with a History: An Online Guide to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Trans\* History*, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/pwh/glf-london.asp>
- <sup>102</sup> Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, 195.
- <sup>103</sup> Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, 197.
- <sup>104</sup> Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, 198-201.
- <sup>105</sup> Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, 195.
- <sup>106</sup> Dika's full list of "stalker films" reads as follows: *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978), *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* (Sean S. Cunningham, 1980), *Prom Night* (Paul Lynch, 1980), *Terror Train* (Roger Spottiswoode, 1980), *Graduation Day* (Herb Freed, 1981), *Happy Birthday to Me* (J. Lee Thompson, 1981), *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> Part 2* (Steve Miner, 1981), *Hell Night* (Tom De Simone, 1981), and *The Burning* (Tony Maylam, 1981).
- <sup>107</sup> For Dika's complete description of the "stalker" see *Games of Terror*, 53-63.
- <sup>108</sup> Additional models for considering the slasher include William Schoell's "shocker" film outlined in *Stay Out of the Shower* and John McCarty's "splatter" film as described in *Splatter Movies* (New York: St Martin's, 1984).
- <sup>109</sup> Richard Nowell, *Blood Money: A History of the First Teen Slasher Film Cycle* (New York: Continuum, 2011).
- <sup>110</sup> Frederic Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture" in *The Jameson Reader*, edited by Michael Hardt and Kathi Weeks (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 127.
- <sup>111</sup> Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," 128.
- <sup>112</sup> Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," 138.
- <sup>113</sup> Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," 142-143
- <sup>114</sup> Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2004), 4.
- <sup>115</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, 9.
- <sup>116</sup> Michael London, "Tri-Star Axes Release Plan for 'Deadly Night,'" *Los Angeles Times* Nov 23, 1984, E8. "Killer Santa' Movie Protested," *The Washington Post*, November 15, 1984, D15.
- <sup>117</sup> Janet Maslin, "At the Movies: 'Silent Night' Furor Hasn't Sold Tickets," *New York Times*, Nov 16, 1984, C8.
- <sup>118</sup> *At the Movies*, "Stop Making Sense/Falling in Love/Paris Texas," October 20, 1984.
- <sup>119</sup> Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 5.
- <sup>120</sup> Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 6.
- <sup>121</sup> Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 8.
- <sup>122</sup> Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 6.
- <sup>123</sup> Waters, *Crackpot*, 131.
- <sup>124</sup> Lewis Jackson and John Waters, "Commentaries," *Christmas Evil*, Blu-ray and DVD, directed by Lewis Jackson (Bridgeport, CT: Vinegar Syndrome, 2014).
- <sup>125</sup> John Waters, *Crackpot: The Obsessions of John Waters* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 133-134
- <sup>126</sup> Melissa Locker, "A Christmas Conversation with John Waters," *TIME*, December 10, 2013, <http://entertainment.time.com/2013/12/10/a-christmas-conversation-with-john-waters/>
- <sup>127</sup> John Waters, *Shock Value: A Tasteful Book About Bad Taste* (New York: Running Press, 2005), 34.
- <sup>128</sup> Uniquely, actress and trans icon Candy Darling, though a star from the Warhol Factory, portrays a party guest of the doctors, not an inmate, likely because of the mainstream glamour aesthetic she exhibited.
- <sup>129</sup> Waters, *Shock Value*, 29.
- <sup>130</sup> Mick LaSalle, "'Silent Night' A Nasty Night At the Movies," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, April 28, 1986, 56.
- <sup>131</sup> LaSalle, "'Silent Night' A Nasty Night At the Movies," 56.

- <sup>132</sup> John Corry, "Film: Spottiswoode's 'Terror Train': A Freshman's Revenge," *New York Times*, October 3, 1980, C10.
- <sup>133</sup> Dika, *Games of Terror* 55-56.
- <sup>134</sup> Gay Liberation Front, "Manifesto."
- <sup>135</sup> Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, 40.
- <sup>136</sup> Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, 26-29.
- <sup>137</sup> Jack Halberstam, *Skin Shows*, 141.
- <sup>138</sup> Gary J. Gates, "In U.S., More Adults Identifying as LGBT," January 11, 2017, <http://news.gallup.com/poll/201731/lgbt-identification-rises.aspx>
- <sup>139</sup> "Rope Unleashed," *Rope*, DVD, directed by Alfred Hitchcock (1948; Los Angeles, CA: Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2006).
- <sup>140</sup> Arthur Laurents, *Original Story By: A Memoir of Broadway and Hollywood* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 130.
- <sup>141</sup> Richard "Bugs" Burnett, "How Hollywood Star Farley Granger Lost His Virginity – Twice in the Same Night." *Three Dollar Bill*, September 2, 2011, [bugsburnett.blogspot.com/2011/07/how-hollywood-star-farley-granger-lost.html](http://bugsburnett.blogspot.com/2011/07/how-hollywood-star-farley-granger-lost.html).
- <sup>142</sup> Cathy J. Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens," 204.
- <sup>143</sup> "Rope Unleashed," *Rope*, DVD.
- <sup>144</sup> Vera Dika, *Games of Terror*, 55-56.
- <sup>145</sup> A.A. Dowd, "David Robert Mitchell On His Striking New Horror Film, *It Follows*." *A.V. Club*, March 25, 2015, <http://www.avclub.com/article/david-robert-mitchell-his-striking-new-horror-film-216215>.
- <sup>146</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 8.
- <sup>147</sup> Nowell, *Blood Money*.
- <sup>148</sup> Ari Karpel, "Darren Criss: The New Kid on the Block." *Out*, 15 March 2011, <http://out.com/2011/03/15/darren-criss-gee-out-new-kid-block>.
- <sup>149</sup> Sanda Gonzalez, "'Glee': Chris Colfer on Show's First Gay Sex Scene." *Entertainment Weekly*, 6 November 2011, <http://ew.com/article/2011/11/06/glee-chris-colfer-absolutely-expects-opposition-to-sex-themed-episode>.
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- <sup>151</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 1.
- <sup>152</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2009).
- <sup>153</sup> Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 50.
- <sup>154</sup> Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, (Toronto, ON: Crossing Press, 2007), 129.
- <sup>155</sup> BFI, "Under the Influence: *RuPaul's Drag Race* winner Sharon Needles," 29 June 2017, <https://youtu.be/K1pZmIXXE8U>.
- <sup>156</sup> Harry Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet*, 246
- <sup>157</sup> Dustin Bradley Goltz, *Queer Temporalities in Gay Male Representation* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2011), 48
- <sup>158</sup> BFI, "Under the Influence."
- <sup>159</sup> Big Think, "John Waters: Coming Out Is So Square," 14 June 2011, <https://youtu.be/GbgU8rxU5iU>.
- <sup>160</sup> Joshua Grannell (Peaches Christ) in conversation with the author, 26 August 2017.
- <sup>161</sup> Joshua Grannell (Peaches Christ) in conversation with the author, 26 August 2017.
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**ABSTRACT****QUEER SLASHERS**

by

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*Queer Slashers* argues that slasher films invite queer engagements by staging collisions between a sexually deviant outsider, the "slasher" figure, and icons of American normativity: heterosexual teenage couples, suburbia, the prom, and summer camp, among others. To do so, *Queer Slashers* draws on horror and slasher scholarship along with queer theory and LGBT history. Slasher scholarship has already considered the ways in which gender plays an important role in the construction of the slasher formula. Much of this work has focused on the representation of women, especially patterns of violence against women. *Queer Slashers* seeks to make additional observations about the ways in which femininity more broadly, especially the characterization of killers as femme, sissy, trans or non-binary, has been a crucial component in the history of the genre. It argues that the killer and the survivors of the slasher can be read as queer, or non-normative, whereas the primary victims of the slasher often abide normative conventions of culture, including gender and sexuality. *Queer Slashers* interweaves close readings of slasher media with theoretical conceptions by scholars such as Michael Warner, Eve Sedgwick, and Cathy

J. Cohen, which posit queerness as an intersectional political resistance to normativity, including but not limited to LGBT identities. Using LGBT history, *Queer Slashers* seeks to recognize important historical developments in the social awareness of LGBT identities, including political advocacy such as the homophile movement of the 1950s and gay liberation movement of the 1960s and 70s, as a meaningful context in which the slasher evolves.

## AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Prior to my degree at Wayne State University, I earned a BA in Communications & Media Studies with a concentration in Film & Media Studies from Fordham University and a MA in Cinema Studies from NYU. While at Wayne State University, I presented at a number of national conferences in Film & Media Studies, including the Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS), American Culture Association/Popular Culture Association (ACA/PCA), and Association for the Study of the Arts of the Present (ASAP). My work has been published in *Film Criticism* and included in the collections *Recovering 1940s Horror Cinema: Traces of a Lost Decade* (Lexington Books, 2015) and *ReFocus: The Films of William Castle* (Edinburgh University Press, 2018). A forthcoming essay will appear in *Final Girls, Feminism, and Popular Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan). While studying at Wayne State University I have worked as a campus organizer and advocate for diversity and inclusion, co-founding and event planning for GQWSU, a campus queer graduate student organization, and assisting with events and marketing at Wayne State University's historic Center for Latino/a and Latin American Studies (CLLAS).