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Taking a Stab at Theory: How the New Halloween Movies Complicate the Horror Genre

by

Carson Haley Honeycutt

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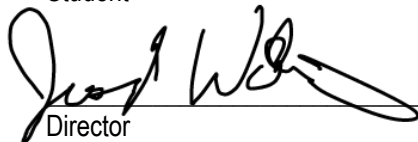
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Introduction

Throughout our cinematic history, the horror genre has been steadily growing and continues to thrive despite many cultural shifts. In 2021 alone, the horror genre grossed \$572,957,624 at the domestic box office, making it the third highest grossing genre of the year (Nash Information Services, LLC). Given its steady growth, it is no secret that horror films are incredibly relevant to the culture of American society. Within this popular genre, it is understood that certain themes resurface time and time again, making horror films incredibly predictable – a feature that is often seen as a main draw of the genre rather than as a drawback (Clover 9). However, the repetitive nature of these themes causes many to question exactly what it is about the genre that causes this continued interest despite the majority of its “newest” offerings existing only as a rethinking of past creations.

As expansive as the horror genre is, so too is the field of horror genre analysis. Much research has gone into “pinning down” trends behind the success of this genre, and across this abundant research three theories in particular continue to provide relevant insight: the fascination of women as sexual devices, body-horror as a driving theme, and women as a desirable projection. While these themes are often discussed by many authors working with the horror genre, they are especially dissected by the authors and their work discussed most heavily in this paper.

This essay begins with a literature review section to thoroughly explain vital gendered themes and their relevance to the continued success of the horror genre. An understanding of these themes is required to properly interpret the second section of this paper, in which these themes are analyzed as they are portrayed in three movies from one of the most famous horror franchises: *Halloween*. The goal of this analysis is to question the modern relevance of these

long-standing horror movie themes. In other words, this paper seeks to answer quite the loaded question: is the success of horror films truly linked to the repetition of these tried and true gendered themes, or is it possible that the modern horror movie could reject these structures without losing industry success? However, such a question seems to raise more questions still; even if a modern horror film “rejects” the original gendered themes of the genre, can the film be said to truly be free of these themes, or has it simply created new themes in their place? Further, reminiscent of the horror genre spirit, could these new themes simply be slightly re-hashed forms of the tried-and-true themes known in the genre? By analyzing the presence – or lack thereof – of the original gendered themes across *Halloween* (1978), *Halloween* (2018), and *Halloween Kills* (2021), this paper aims to bring solace to these questions and add to the vast existing number of horror genre analysis media by providing a niche discussion of themes at work within one famous horror movie franchise across two very different decades.

Use of Gendered Themes in Horror Films: a Literature Review

The first essay discussed in this literature review is “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” by Laura Mulvey, in which Mulvey discusses at length the not-so-subtle themes of masculinity, femininity, and the sexuality concerning the two as it is acted out through on-screen metaphors and subtleties. The second essay utilized for this section is “Return of the Repressed” by Robin Wood, wherein Wood discusses the foundational concepts that constitute horror films and isolates the driving factors behind these themes occupying the forefront of the genre, specifically the concept of repressed values and ideologies resurfacing in a media that can be processed distantly by the public rather than having to experience the ideologies themselves. This section also discusses *Dark Directions* by Kendall Phillips, in which she focuses on the theory of body horror and explains its relevance and use in several popular horror films. Another essay relied heavily on is Robert Kilker’s “All Roads Lead to the Abject: The Monstrous Feminine and Gender Boundaries in Stanley Kubrick's ‘The Shining’,” in which he describes femininity in popular horror film “The Shining” as abject and highlights this theme throughout the film. The last piece of literature highlighted in this section is Carol Clover’s book, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, in which Clover discusses the role of gender in modern horror films and places particular emphasis on the relevance of the role of the male viewer and his relationship with the on-screen female. While these texts may seem to cover widely varying topics, each provides a unique foundational insight into the themes explored throughout this essay.

Since the foundation of the horror genre, research into these themes has been quite extensive. However, because of the expansiveness of this academia, a summary of these themes as they relate to each other does not yet exist. The goal of this literature review is to clearly outline each of these themes as they express themselves in the horror genre in films pulled from

1960 to 2021, and to discuss the basis of these film themes as they relate to the continued success of the genre as a whole. An understanding of these themes will drive the analysis included in the next section of this essay, in which the role of gendered structures, body horror, and related themes of the horror film woman will be analyzed in three films from the *Halloween* franchise.

Fascination of Women as Sexual Devices

In her 1975 essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” author Laura Mulvey introduces the use of psychoanalysis to determine underlying themes found throughout the horror genre that are continually consumed and reinforced by an audience carrying a pre-existing pattern of fascination towards these themes as a result of their surrounding culture and upbringing (Mulvey 837). Mulvey asserts that these films center a sense of “phallocentrism,” or perhaps more specifically the idea of women symbolizing the castration threat by existing without a penis and serving as a maternal figure (Mulvey 837-838). This repeating theme, Mulvey argues, begins to clearly identify the roots of feminine oppression as it exists within a patriarchal structure (Mulvey 838).

Understanding this ideology, the analysis of women as a sexual device becomes clearer. Mulvey introduces Freud’s research into scopophilia as a basis for the pleasure-obsession with and objectification of the horror woman character from an audience (Mulvey, 839). In his research, Freud offers scopophilia as a driving factor in an individual’s life as it pertains to their sexual development and pleasure. Freud asserts that members of an audience can display this voyeuristic tendency by developing a desire to view taboo scenarios and activities played out on-screen, especially through one they can project themselves onto, which they achieve by viewing the people on-screen as objects.

The fascination of women as sexual objects is not a new construct. The concept of using women as a sexual device dates back even to fairytales and folklore, one of which being “Little Red Riding Hood,” which author Gina Wisker discusses alongside its 1981 horror adaptation “The Company of Wolves” in her essay “Women's Horror as Erotic Transgression.” Wisker points out the use of color and language in the original fairytale are heavily suggestive of an innocent pubescent girl encountering the concept of sex – particularly nonconsensual sex from a stranger – and Wisker offers “The Company of Wolves” as a work that highlights these themes intentionally. In “The Company of Wolves,” these originally subtle themes are exacerbated into a blatant tale of sexual discovery and power, in which it becomes clear that “Little Red Riding Hood” dually serves as both a cautionary tale for women against discovering the sexually taboo as well as a tale of triumph and happy endings in a world where women are saved by a benevolent patriarchal structure when other women cannot help them and they cannot fend for themselves (Wisker 5). These now overt instances of sexual themes cause the reader to think back to the original fairytale and become more aware of the themes that existed there all along, subtly driving the story and its morals.

The concept of the Final Girl in the horror film is yet another theme stemming from the sexuality of women within the genre. The term itself coined by author Carol Clover, the Final Girl is defined as “an agreed-upon fiction...[for] the male viewers' use of her as a vehicle for his own sadomasochistic fantasies” and is typically virgin, innocent, and sometimes even “boyish” in that she is typically given an androgynous name such as “Charlie,” “Stevie,” or “Billie” and is usually small in stature, thin, and lithe (Clover x-xii). As the working stand-in for male viewers, the Final Girl holds these boyish attributes in order to make her more relatable – men can, when

they want to, imagine her as an adolescent boy, and can remember she is a girl when they'd rather distance themselves from her (Clover xii). Clover says of this structure:

[The Final Girl] is feminine enough to act out in a gratifying way, a way unapproved for adult males, the terrors and masochistic pleasures of the underlying fantasy, but not so feminine as to disturb the structures of male competence and sexuality (Clover xii).

Indeed, the Final Girl becomes the final surviving member of the film's characters not despite these characteristics, but *because* of them. Throughout the film, she is portrayed as the victim, chased by the killer through the film's climax, if not through the entire film. However, the victim role of the Final Girl is not reduced only to her role as the killer's victim – often, she is also the victim of her peers, usually as a result of her being more socially inept than those around her because she is less sexual or more studious, for example. Then, just at the height of the film's climax, she finds the strength and ability to fight back – although Clover points out the Final Girl's weapon of choice is usually not planned or reliable, often a simple object such as a shard of glass or a wire coat hanger (Clover x). This last-minute fight-back and survival of the Final Girl, Clover points out, builds her image as more of a tortured survivor than a true hero, and makes her survival feel quite accidental in nature (Clover x). Later in her book, Clover makes the statement that “boys die...not because they are boys, but because they make mistakes...[Girls die] because they are female” (Clover 34). It would seem, then, that the converse of this statement is also true: when girls live, it is because they have made some mistake.

Body-Horror as a Driving Theme

The concept of body-horror as a theme is not a new one; as long as horror films have existed, filmmakers have centered their plots on the body and its dysmorphic destruction. But how exactly do we define body-horror? In the most basic of terms, the concept of body-horror is

one in which the construct of normalcy in relation to the human body is challenged, resulting in a sense of “mutilation” of the body. In “Return of the Repressed,” author Robin Wood asserts that a challenge to normalcy is a vital factor in the “basic formula” of a horror film and explains that a break from normalcy can be defined as any shift from the dominant social norm (Wood 26). Wood then explains this shift from normalcy in the horror film is orchestrated by some entity dubbed “the monster,” and he asserts that it is the relationship between the monster and normality that truly defines the horror film at its core by serving as the basis for the entire plot (Wood 26). Wood offers several examples of popular relationships of this construct, including the example found in Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, in which both the monster and normality are contained within the same body rather than represented by two separate, external entities, and resulting in one body “mutilated” by the struggle between the monster and normalcy contained within it (Wood 26). This special-case, one-bodied relationship between the monster and normality can be defined as the concept of body-horror.

In her book *Dark Directions*, author Kendall Phillips discusses the body-horror theme by analyzing its use in the films of George Romero. Phillips chooses to emphasize Romero’s films in particular as her examples because of his attention to cultural norms and their impact on human bodies (Phillips 17). In his films, Phillips explains, Romero produces body-horror by imagining scenarios in which human bodies are not confined by either the cultural standards or natural laws we understand to regulate our world – a concept that is coined “the unconstrained body” (Phillips 17). A break from cultural standards, such as the refusal to abide by certain laws, serves as the basis for many horror plots and tropes, particularly those centering criminals or sociopaths. Likewise, breaks from natural laws are also very common themes in horror films and

can be seen reflected in plots centering concepts such as mutation, transformation into a fictitious creature, or resurrection from death.

One concept of body horror is defined simply as the abject. The abject can be reduced in simple terms to a bodily process or concept that is viewed as repulsive by nature, and whose repulsive nature is exemplified by knowing the disgusting process is related to our own bodies. In his essay “All Roads Lead to the Abject: The Monstrous Feminine and Gender Boundaries in Stanley Kubrick's ‘The Shining’,” author Robert Kilker asserts that the use of horror surrounding women is due to the general public’s fear of the abject and offers horror classic “The Shining” as an example in which both women and the concept of femininity are offered as threats (Kilker 54). Kilker explains that the role of femininity is feared as abject because it “defies boundaries of separation from the self,” and explains that the abject is seen as horrifying because it is viewed as disgusting while also existing as something tied to us, either it coming from us or us coming from it, with birth existing as “the most terrible abjection of all” (Kilker 58). Throughout “The Shining,” Kilker addresses many subtly feminine themes that exist as abject horror, perhaps most notably of which being the role of the umbilical cord, which Kilker identifies in the role of the winding road connecting Jack to the Overlook Hotel, which he sees as the start of his new life – his rebirth (Kilker 58). These subtle feminine themes are vital to discuss, as it is clear that their use throughout “The Shining” (and, indeed, horror films as a whole) is meant not to be comforting, the way one may expect of the use of a motherhood-related theme. Rather, these themes are meant to be unnerving and perhaps foretelling of some imminent danger for the characters on-screen, cleverly disguised as the comfort we would typically expect of motherhood. It is in this way we see the concept of body horror as it is used specifically *against* the female body in the horror genre: the female body, if not femininity as a whole, offers

concepts one may expect to be comforting, but are instead continually utilized by horror films to bring danger and harm to those that interact with them.

Women as the Desirable Projection

The concept of the horror film woman serving as a projection for the male viewer's desires in many ways stems from the two aforementioned theories. As a sexual device, the horror film woman serves the male viewer by acting as a type of vessel for emotions and scenarios male viewers may not feel comfortable imagining themselves directly involved with. In her book *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, author Carol Clover discusses this vessel-theme, describing it as a "vessel for the uncanny" and asserting that male viewers can use this tool to process the on-screen female character fighting male viewers' own "most embarrassing" fears and insecurities in a "safe" way that does not serve to injure their masculinity or self-perception in any way since these on-screen themes are being experienced by a female character (Clover 18). The male viewer requires someone not of his own to experience that which he cannot due to external (or perhaps internal) circumstances.

Similarly, the concept of women as a desirable projection can be described as stemming from theories of body-horror as a driving theme. In her book, Clover analyzes a Stephen King quote discussing what he believes caused *Carrie* to become so wildly successful. King says the film displays the revenge of a bullied teen that "any student who has ever had his gym shorts pulled down...or his glasses thumb-rubbed...could approve of," and Clover points out that despite Carrie's character being a woman and experiencing mainly woman-specific difficulties on-screen – such as getting her period in public, being berated by her mother for not being a "godly" woman, and being tricked by female peers into believing she has won prom queen – King uses he/him pronouns for this theoretical viewer who would relate to Carrie's trauma (Clover 4).

Additionally, Clover notes these methods of bullying described by King in his quote are not methods of bullying seen in *Carrie* or even within female circles at all; these methods of bullying are specific to males. Therefore, Clover concludes that male viewers, whether consciously or subconsciously, are more than willing to project their own hardships onto the horror film woman in order to watch the woman grapple with her problems in place of the male viewers themselves (Clover 5).

The question could be asked then of the relevance of such mostly women-specific experiences to male viewers; wouldn't a horror film lacking details on women's issues be more relatable for male viewers and therefore more successful? The answer to this question, perhaps surprisingly, is "no." In *Dark Directions* by Kendall Phillips, the body is introduced as a site for either a break from cultural laws or natural laws, and it is this breaking from familiar rules that creates a nearly-familiar concept for the viewer to relate to while also including an uncanny twist meant to both unnerve and enthrall the viewer (Phillips 17). A topic such as a woman's period, as discussed in Clover's analysis of Stephen King's *Carrie*, serves as a break from natural laws known to male viewers, since they (as a majority rule) do not experience menstruation. King's character Carrie abides by the natural laws placed upon men until she experiences her period unexpectedly, which causes her to panic (De Palma 1976). This serves as a dual-break from natural laws expected by men; first, by getting her period, Carrie breaks from her previous existence under the umbrella of natural laws ruling men, and then by panicking in response to her period Carrie has effectively broken from another natural law known to male viewers, namely the idea that a woman knows how to deal with her period and can handle it quietly herself. It is in this way that through applying the body-horror theory presented by Phillips to

Clover's analysis of King's *Carrie* that the function of women as a desirable projection in horror films becomes clear.

Conclusion

While the horror genre as a whole may be incredibly vast, so too is the academic field that aims to dissect it. Among the theories presented by those in the field, three stand out for this essay's purposes: the fascination of women as sexual devices, body-horror as a driving theme, and women as a desirable projection. The reviewed literature serves to present a stable base for each of these theories and aims to show the relevance of analyzing these themes in the horror genre by presenting popular media, pointing out the incredibly recurring nature of the tropes within, and concluding that there exist underlying cultural structures that drive the popularity of these themes – particularly within their largest consumer base: the male. By summarizing each of these theories and introducing their interconnectivity, a basis has been established upon which the next section can build in order to provide in-depth analysis on the presence – or total lack – of these themes in three films from the *Halloween* franchise.

Use of Gendered Themes in *Halloween*: an Analysis

In 1978, the first film in what is now known as the *Halloween* franchise was released – and, with it, so too were many now fundamental horror genre themes cemented into famous theory. While certainly groundbreaking for a great culmination of reasons, most relevant to this paper is the film’s ability to effortlessly weave together several critical themes to capture the attention of audiences – and filmmakers – for decades to come, and the aftermath of this continued entrancement throughout the horror genre.

Many of the vital themes explored in the original *Halloween* (1978) may now seem to be quite cliché to modern audiences. However, it can be argued that these themes are only able to be seen as cliché today because *Halloween* (1978) helped to make them so iconic in our public sphere. Main character Laurie served as one of the horror genre’s most iconic Final Girls, complete with her “accidental” survival using the “accidental” weapon of a coat hanger, her societal rejection as a result of her “mature” and “pure” nature, and her thin, lithe appearance paired with her gender-neutral name. Throughout the film, violent murder is intrinsically linked to the concept of sex, with instances as blatant as killing characters immediately after sexual encounters by means of phallic devices that would make even Mulvey proud. *Halloween* (1978) is also an ideal example of body horror, including violent death scenes and morbid corpse desecration by the killer, who is himself an excellent manifestation of abstract body horror with his human physique contrasted against his incredibly inhuman movements, behaviors, and appearance, most notably exacerbated by his emotionless, pale white mask that obscures his true features and hides his eyes from the audience. The film offers even more abstract concepts of abject body horror by presenting motherhood not as a place of comfort, but as one of violence – or, at least, one filled with the ever-present threat of violence as the repercussion for failing at

mothering. Time and time again, *Halloween* (1978) presents us with examples of women who “fail” at mothering, whether this be by not providing a “pure” enough example for children, by being distracted by things other than their children, or by altogether leaving their children to the care of others – and, in each instance, women who perform these failures find themselves the victims of Michael’s twisted, obsessive killings. Only women who “succeed” at motherhood are spared by various twists of fate that they seem to be unable to control by any means *other* than through being a good mother.

While there is certainly no question of the success of *Halloween* (1978) with generations of audiences around the world, the very success of this horror classic raises another question altogether: if these gendered themes’ presence made the original film a success, are they *still* the most crucial aspects of a successful modern horror film? And, if not, are these gendered themes required to *any* degree for a horror film to achieve the same levels of success as can be observed from *Halloween* (1978)? Because the horror genre is expected by nature to repeat and rehash preexisting themes, knowing exactly to what extent the repetition of themes influences the acceptance of the films’ audiences is critical. By analyzing the presence of gendered themes in succeeding *Halloween* franchise films decades after the original’s blockbuster success, this paper aims to provide insight into whether the originally studied gendered themes are truly still the most pivotal pieces of creating a successful horror film in present day.

Halloween (2018)

Halloween (2018) continues the *Halloween* franchise trend of rewriting sequels that have come before itself; set 40 years after the events of the original *Halloween* (1978), the film establishes that the plot of any movie made between *Halloween* (1978) and *Halloween* (2018) are now untrue – they never happened. Instead, *Halloween* (2018) follows original main

character Laurie, her estranged daughter Karen, and her granddaughter Allyson as the trio attempt to understand each other and overcome their differences in time to defend themselves, their loved ones, and their town from Michael, who has escaped from prison and is believed to be heading their way.

Given the understanding of the gendered themes presented in this paper's Literature Review, this section dissects *Halloween* (2018)'s portrayal of these themes as they oppose the original film's work – particularly in its varied approach to the portrayal of its female lead character archetypes and traits. While Laurie Strode's original *Halloween* character was most heavily centric upon her perfect embodiment of the Final Girl trope, *Halloween* (2018) turns Laurie's character on its head; the new Laurie we see in this film is a hardened warrior, paranoid of the eternal threat of Michael's return to Haddonfield. As opposed to her quite accidental survival in the original film, Laurie is now trained and prepared to fight tooth and nail should her survival ever once again be in question. Traumatized by her experience with Michael 40 years earlier, Laurie has undoubtedly attempted to improve herself by way of securing her survival through strength. Interestingly, strength and desire for violence are traits that are normally only seen in male horror characters, and are typically a mark of foreshadowed death when portrayed by a female character, especially in modern horror sequels. Consider, for example, the violent death of original main character Sally Hardesty of *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* in the 2022 sequel film, in which she is portrayed as stoically prepared to fight her original tormenter tooth and nail, only to be stricken dead by the end of the film – although luckily not before she is able to connect emotionally with and pass on her legacy to new perfect Final Girl Lila. Further, consider the ultimate survival of original main character Sidney Prescott of *Scream* in the 2022 sequel film; like Laurie and Sally, Sidney is a hardened and prepared woman ready and willing for a

fight with her tormentor, but she interestingly survives this modern horror film remake. Why? How is it that horror women seem to simultaneously die despite their preparedness, while also surviving explicitly because of it? The answer to this question may not be one that at its surface seems to have any link to one's survival status: it is quite possible that the survival of the modern horror woman is no longer dependent upon her survival being either accidental or earned, but rather upon her success as a mother.

The knowledge of the Final Girl trope is not one that is rare in modern film audiences; in fact, it is quite common for horror fans to joke that as long as a character is female and adheres to purity culture – “just don't have sex!” – then she will survive. While it is true that horror film audiences seem to love some degree of regurgitation of age-old tropes, it is also the nature of film to evolve its tropes and plots in at least minute ways in order to keep their audience on the edges of their seats – and, of course, to keep ticket sales up at the box office. Just as it was once not commonplace to see the Final Girl trope as one worthy of serious attention, the assertion that motherhood could be the new focus trope of the horror film woman may seem perhaps outlandish at first. After all, what relation does motherhood have to one's survival? In real life, of course, this characterization has no effect. However, film is not real life – it exists to entertain successfully first, and to be repeatably successful second. Therefore, the shift of focus in modern horror films from the Final Girl trope to one of motherhood is not such a radical concept at its core.

Sally Hardesty of *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, while certainly one of the (if not *the*) original Final Girls of the horror genre, is not a “good mother” – or, at least, not in the way the horror genre seems to expect a woman to be. While it is true Sally never had any children herself, her “failure” at motherhood is not so simple as this. In the 2022 sequel film, Sally steps

in to protect sisters Lila and Melody, which is her first step towards successful “mothering.” However, she ultimately fails at her newly acquired role when she “abandons” the girls by locking them in her car while she heads out to face Leatherface alone, leaving the sisters to scream and beg for their freedom to no avail. In perhaps the most crucial moment, Sally fails to protect the girls by not shooting Leatherface when she has the chance, leading him to turn from her and attack the sisters Sally trapped in her car. Although Sally eventually attempts to right her wrong by shooting Leatherface to distract him from his attack on the girls, this is apparently too little too late – she has already failed her mothering role, and she is swiftly attacked and left to bleed out on the pavement.

Because Sally’s “mothering” role may have been brief, it may be easy to consider this conclusion a stretch. However, it is important to remember the context of the film this series of events is contained within; *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* as a franchise has always featured explicit and overt themes of obsessions with motherhood, and the 2022 sequel is no exception – after all, it is the death of his mother-figure that spurs Leatherface to begin his murderous rage once again after years of peace, and his coping mechanism for her death is to *become* his mother by wearing her face and using her makeup. In this way, the film establishes that not only is mothering an incredibly overarching and ever-present theme, but to be – and feel – “good,” one must become an ideal mother. Understanding that such explicit mothering themes are present in the film, it no longer seems like such a stretch to assume a far more implicit example may also be present.

Similarly, the 2022 sequel of *Scream* features Sidney Prescott in a crucial mothering role, although this time her role is much more literal than Sally’s was. For the first time in any of the *Scream* movies thus far, Sidney is now a mother – not once, but three times over. When she hears of Ghostface’s return to a murderous rampage in Woodsboro, Sidney initially intends to not join

the fight at all. However, when she learns Dewey has been killed, Sidney wastes no time in springing to action, stating explicitly that she cannot sleep until Ghostface is dead because she has three children at home. While both Sally in *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2022) and Sidney in *Scream* (2022) are original Final Girls who rise to the challenge of their returned tormentors, Sidney's motivation is far different from Sally's; Sally left the girls for the selfish motivation of killing Leatherface in order to get her own personal revenge, while Sidney left her children for the selfless motivation of killing Ghostface in order to secure her children's safety. It is in this way that Sidney proved herself "successful" at motherhood and secured her survival when Sally failed and was killed off, even though on the surface it may seem as though both women performed the equal face-value action of simply fighting their original tormentor in a 2022 sequel.

In the original *Halloween* (1978), Laurie's survival based on her Final Girl status in fact already somewhat included her survival based on her success as a mother; her friends (and even, arguably, Michael's older sister) who "failed" at portraying a responsible "mother" appearance – either through being a "poor example," being too self-absorbed, or altogether abandoning the child in their care to Laurie's care instead – met with grisly ends, while Laurie not only survived herself, but made sure to see the children in her care to survival as well, often putting herself in life-threatening situations to ensure their wellbeing. However, it is the modern franchise's remakes that make the more explicit shift towards a focus on motherhood. *Halloween* (2018) presents us with a Laurie who not only is a mother, but who is a failed mother; her daughter Karen was taken away from her by the state, and now as an adult wants nothing to do with her and tends to her own family. Karen's daughter Allyson has a difficult relationship with her mother due to her inability to understand their separation from her grandmother Laurie, and so

the question of effective mothering is established as a pivotal topic very early on in this new *Halloween* trilogy.

Further cementing the importance of a focus on motherhood specifically, the film kills off Karen's husband and Allyson's father. While this could be argued to have been written in to provide Allyson and Karen with a reason to fight Michael with renewed motivation, this reasoning is flimsy at best; Karen was raised by Laurie in her fear of Michael and is well trained on how to fight for herself and others, and she shows no renewed desire to fight Michael after her husband's death. While Allyson does comment in the second film, *Halloween Kills* (2021), that she must join the fight against Michael because he killed her father, to argue her father had to be this motivation would be arguing for a hypocrisy; Allyson's best friend Vicky was already killed by Michael while babysitting on the same night, reminiscent of Laurie's friends deaths with babysitting 40 years earlier. Laurie's original character did not require motivation beyond the murder of her friends, so it is reasonable to assume Allyson's character would require only the same – and that is to say nothing of her close connection with her grandmother, which would have undoubtedly caused Allyson to stand with Laurie in the fight against Michael regardless of her father's death. Beyond the question of this man's death, it could further be argued that his very *existence* as a character proves he was created only to be killed off; Laurie was written as a single parent, so it would have been easy enough to write Karen the same. Because of these interconnected character writing decisions, it is my firm belief that Karen's husband and Allyson's father was created to be killed, a move that tightens the audience's focus on these three generations of women and establishes yet again this film's emphasis on the girls and their themes specifically.

However, it is not only through continuing to establish implicit focus on motherhood that the new *Halloween* movies complicate the horror genre; rather than either fully commit to or abandon traditional horror film themes, the new films choose to provide its own twists to these age-old tropes. Instead of portraying the traditional gender roles expected for horror film men and women, *Halloween* (2018) almost immediately establishes that it will be merging these gendered expectations for all characters regardless of sex.

The first example of this shift happens incredibly early in the film when we are shown a conversation between a young boy and his father, in which the two debate whether the boy should be able to go to dance class or if he should go hunting like a real man. After the discussion, *both* the boy and his father are killed after happening upon the scene of Michael's prison break. Because both of the characters involved in this discussion are killed off, we can be sure the film is establishing two core concepts before continuing with the film: gender roles will be played with in this new trilogy, and these changes will be further complicated than simply by killing off feminine-presenting or masculine-presenting characters – or even by simply killing “less woke” characters to make a political statement. This complication may seem to be of low-level in the grand scheme of things; indeed, many other film genres have already eagerly participated in the “more liberal translations of gender roles” movement. However, the horror film genre as a whole tends to remain at its core quite static despite the cultural shifts of time; many of these films choose not to deal with real world issues at all, and traditional themes can be expected to ring true by the end of the film even if there were a few “woke” moments along the way.

The second reference the film makes to this willing complication is the gender-swapped Bonnie and Clyde couple's costumes Allyson and her boyfriend wear to their school's Halloween

party. This inclusion goes beyond being a subtle passing moment at a costume party, though; Allyson and her boyfriend build up the mystery of their costumes to be a big reveal they are excited to show off to their friends and families on Halloween. This additional explicit focus on intentionally skewed gender roles once again forces an audience to see this film trilogy as stepping out of the bounds of the traditional themes expected of typical horror films, and aids itself as yet another example of the new *Halloween* trilogy's complication of the horror genre.

Yet another means through which *Halloween* (2018) complicates traditional horror genre themes is its reinvention of the Final Girl trope. While many other modern horror films – particularly sequels – choose to either continue to cling to the original depiction of the Final Girl or to reject her existence completely, *Halloween* (2018) chooses both sides of this spectrum at once. In the traditional sense of the term's definition, there is no Final Girl in *Halloween* (2018). However, there is a new type of Final Girl – Allyson. Allyson's character was intelligently written to both defy and reinforce Final Girl tropes at once. Recall the most important aspects of the Final Girl trope: societal rejection, innocence, accidental survival, and final survivor status. While the latter two of these traits are indeed more explicit in Allyson's character, it is no coincidence that each of these listed aspects are present in her design to some degree.

Allyson does not experience the societal rejection audiences are used to seeing in a Final Girl, but rather her rejection is written to be more relatively implicit; Allyson experiences rejection from her parents for her choice in a partner, from her mother for her push to be close to Laurie, and from her boyfriend when she finds him cheating on her at the Halloween party. To further solidify the importance of these events as rejections, Allyson is seen leaving the scene after each of these occurrences, blatantly posing her character as being forced away by those around her. Likewise, Allyson's character also is written with a more implicit take on Final Girl

innocence. While it is true Allyson has a boyfriend in this film and cannot be argued to be “pure” in this regard, Allyson’s innocence takes a different form than the blatant one we have grown accustomed to seeing. Rather than holding true to the original Final Girl’s theme of being innocent sexually, Allyson is innocent of the world those around her in Haddonfield are knowledgeable of – particularly that of her mother and grandmother. This world is, of course, one of violence. Both Karen and Laurie are well versed in the means by which to physically protect themselves, and both women carry the same trauma from Michael’s attacks that many members of Haddonfield also share. Explained away by Karen’s refusal to pass on her childhood trauma to her daughter, Allyson remains innocent of the violent world the other two main women in this film are quite familiar with. Because the horror genre has explicitly linked the themes of sex and violence for many decades, writing Allyson as innocent through lack of knowledge of violence rather than of sex is not a revolutionary move, but it is an intelligent move that causes Allyson’s character to *seem* detached from traditional Final Girl tropes while in reality only transforming these themes to be more implicit.

The final way in which *Halloween* (2018) chooses to muddy the water of traditional tropes is in its abandonment of a monster with moral reasoning. While certainly not true of every kill by horror film monsters, Michael’s character in the original film in particular was driven to seemingly only kill for resources, survival, or for moral reasoning – that is, the killing of those not “pure” enough to deserve survival. However, in this sequel film, Michael begins what appears to be a more random killing pattern – which, in the following film, evolves further into a seemingly random or detached rage that will be discussed in more detail in the following section. This rejection of traditional horror monster roles serves as perhaps this new trilogy’s most

explicit announcement of its desire to go beyond simply regurgitating well-known and established horror film themes.

Although *Halloween* (2018) is a sequel film of one of the most successful and well-known horror films of all time, it does not attempt to cling to its original fame by shying away from complicating themes plainly observed in the 1978 film. In fact, this complication does not end with the 2018 sequel; the 2021 sequel, *Halloween Kills*, further plays with traditional horror tropes in perhaps an even more blatant manner than its 2018 prequel. In addition to continuing to expand upon themes discussed in *Halloween* (2018), *Halloween Kills* adds the horror-genre-beloved topic of body horror and gore into the mix, creating a moral massacre that provides an intricate response to the modern horror genre.

Halloween Kills (2021)

Perhaps emboldened by the success of its 2018 preceding counterpart, *Halloween Kills* continues to build upon the themes this new franchise has set in place – particularly in its skewed portrayal of feminine themes. The Final Girl trope is further muddled, the question of “good” motherhood persists, and typical gender roles are challenged, all while throwing a renewed sense of body horror into the mix.

The film itself begins with an extended flashback to the night of Michael’s original rampage in Haddonfield in 1978, showing us that Deputy Hawkins accidentally shot his own partner while trying to take down Michael and then prevented Dr. Loomis from killing Michael after his arrest – an action that Hawkins, as he now lays bleeding out, regrets deeply, and vows vengeance for. Having now returned to the present, we are shown an entirely different scene: Tommy Doyle, the child Laurie babysat and protected from Michael’s murder spree 40 years earlier, gives a rallying speech at a local bar, empathizing with fellow survivors of Michael’s

attacks that include Lindsey, the other child Laurie babysat the night of the original attack. This shift of focus to Tommy and Lindsey is the film's first hint at its continuation of its motherhood themes, with the focus specifically on the effects of Laurie's mothering once again.

Halloween Kills is not, however, simply hoping to point out Laurie's mothering role through this blatant shift in focus; rather, it aims to critique. Tommy and Lindsey were entirely absent from *Halloween* (2018), so the return of both characters to this film are quite the compounded and explicit statement indeed, and Tommy's character is even written to profess blatant lines referencing Laurie's mothering status to him, including more than one instance of firmly asserting his intent to protect Laurie because she protected him 40 years earlier. Similarly, although Karen certainly had a vital role in the preceding film – saving people from Michael is no feat to be scoffed at – her role in this film is entirely different; she exists as an example of Laurie's failed mothering by herself becoming a failed mother. Her troubled mothering connection with Allyson portrayed in *Halloween* (2018) continues to crumble, and Allyson now fully ignores her wishes and outwardly rebels by doing what Laurie wants her to do instead. In this way, we see Laurie's character implicitly stripping Karen of the last of her mothering status, reducing her to another failed mother of the horror genre.

The themes of motherhood continue as we see Karen attempt to cling to her successful caregiver status through her efforts to save mental patient Lance Tovoili from Tommy's murderous mob. Though perhaps not explicitly, this mob chase can be linked back to both Laurie and Michael's influences; the fear Michael has stricken into Haddonfield turns its citizens into a frenzied mess, and the mothering status Laurie has over Tommy leads Tommy to rally the mob for blood in her name. Interestingly, it is also Laurie's influence that drives Karen's efforts to stop the mob and save Lance – efforts that are, ultimately, the definition of unsuccessful, ending

with Lance jumping to his death from a hospital window to escape the mob. With Lance's death, so too does Karen's last-ditch effort to save her mothering status come to a gruesome end – and, true to the nature of the horror film failed mother, Karen finds her own death now sealed.

However, it is not only metaphorical gruesome ends that find a spotlight feature in *Halloween Kills*; while its preceding film contained mostly mid-grade gore and violence, this film is practically bursting with many varied forms of body horror – all of which carry a different psychological message and intent when employed. While certainly no two kills in this film are exactly alike, it is mostly comprehensive to categorize the types of death scenes in this movie between one of three classifications: face gore, throat gore, or general body gore.

It can be said that general body gore signifies the death of a character requiring mourning and acknowledgement of death without the distraction of disgust; a character we have connected previously with, for example, may be selected as a candidate for a general body gore death to eliminate the audience's reaction of horror prevailing over that of sadness or regret. A prime example of this theory at work in *Halloween Kills* can be observed in Karen's death scene; Karen is a character we have certainly connected with deeply prior to her death, so to offer her a more gory death, such as face or throat gore, would undoubtedly distract from the shock and sadness of her death, if not also risk disgusting audiences past the invisible emotional threshold that isn't expected to be crossed in this genre. For these reasons, a vaguely placed body gore death is the perfect means through which to kill a character the audience has formed this level of emotional connection with.

Conversely, characters with whom we have not yet had the time to form an emotional connection to before their deaths must find a way to disturb an audience through other means. Characters of this nature are often afforded the luxury of a throat gore death. Throat gore is used

to make a death deeply personal and unnerving to an audience, which offers a stand-in impact emotion in the absence of a true emotional connection with a character to emphasize their death. Perhaps unsurprisingly given this analysis, throat gore can be observed in many characters throughout *Halloween Kills*: the death of Hawkin's partner in 1978, the deaths of the elderly Dickerson couple, and the deaths of four of the seven on-screen mob members. Each of these scenes required the audience to very quickly process a death that was meant to stir an emotion for a character not offered the time to connect with in an extensive way; Hawkin's partner's death was meant to incur in the audience a feeling of regret and hopelessness towards Hawkin's series of mistakes, the elderly couple a deep seated fear of Michael's renewed ruthless slaughter of even the innocent, and the mob members a sense of loss and failure for those who fought so valiantly to end Michael's rampage. In this way, it is observable that the use of throat gore is no coincidence – rather, employing this manner of death is indicative of a very specific type of character, as well as their connection to the audience.

The final category of body horror employed in *Halloween Kills* is face gore, of which the subset of eye gore is the most drastic example. While general body gore is reserved for vague deaths for an emotional reprieve and throat gore is reserved for violent deaths in the absence of emotional connection, face gore is the death option chosen most notably for characters that, while relatively new to us in the scheme of the trilogy, are revered with a heightened degree of emotional connection – although not quite as much as a main character, allowing their death to be more brutal without disgusting an audience to the point of rejection. Utilized as the prime method of death for influential side characters featured in two or more separate scenes, face gore is observed in the deaths of Marcus and Vanessa Wilson, Tommy Doyle, and Big John.

True to the face gore trope, the Wilsons proved to be influential characters in *Halloween Kills*, beginning Tommy's manhunt for Michael and joining the hunt themselves in an attempt to save Haddonfield residents from death. Likewise, Tommy is certainly quite an influential character, leading the hunt for Michael, rallying a mob, and fearlessly pursuing Michael face-to-face. However, this trend of a character earning importance through joining the fight against Michael is broken in the case of our final example of face gore; Big John, along with his partner Little John, are the current residents of Michael's family home, and the two never join in on the mob's efforts to track Michael down. In fact, the couple seems to instead have a sense of deep respect for Michael, passing on his story to the neighborhood children and cherishing the house he once called home. Interestingly, their respect for Michael does not go unnoticed; before entering their home, Michael knocks – an action not spared for those whose homes he snuck into and struck silently. In fact, after knocking on the back door, Michael draws attention to the front door, which safely removes the Johns from his path through the back door and eliminates the need for their deaths. Then, although we know Michael to be capable of entering houses and rooms undetected, he leaves a very noticeable bloody handprint on the doorway, signaling his entry to the Johns. However, Michael's efforts to preserve the Johns go unnoticed; arming themselves, the couple searches for the intruder, leading to Michael being forced to kill Big John when he finds him, and then Little John when he too finds him. It is important to note that in these death scenes, although intense face gore was employed in Big John's death and may seem to insinuate deep hatred towards the characters, the deaths of the Johns are the only character deaths in the film that do not happen after a pursued chase from Michael. To further his efforts to respect the Johns, after their deaths Michael poses their bodies to match a framed photo of the couple on their mantle and sets their record player to a vinyl of love songs. It is in this way that

the film establishes the importance of the Johns as characters even without their drive to join the town's mob, and further emphasizes the value of face gore as a method of highlighting a character's importance to the film.

While body horror as a whole is of course not a new theme for horror films to make use of, and *Halloween Kills* is certainly not the first film to unite body horror concepts with character traits and emotional connection, this film's use of these body horror tropes is significant in its placement within the franchise; while *Halloween* has in the past placed value most in making deaths both deeply disturbing and unexpected, using *Halloween Kills* to complicate this goal by creating subsections of body horror that can drive deeper connections to characters and further underlying plot devices is indeed quite the complex and new take. Without straying from its roots of gruesome and unnerving death scenes, *Halloween Kills* has managed to accomplish modernizing these classic themes in such a way that successfully places renewed emphasis on the importance of subtle plot devices and themes in their newest films rather than relying on tried-and-true (although perhaps stagnated) tropes.

Conclusion

After the extremely widespread and decades-long success of the original 1978 *Halloween* film, it may be assumed on principle that the franchise would continue to regurgitate tried-and-true themes in order to recreate and continue its original success. This assumption could be further supported by the general horror film fan base knowledge that the repetition of traditional plot devices and themes is seen as a staple of the field, and is often even considered by many fans to be one of the genre's main draws. However, this educated assumption would eventually prove to be false – or, at least, it holds false for the newest installations in the *Halloween* franchise.

Beginning with perhaps the most bold modern horror film sequel yet, *Halloween's* newest trilogy proves immediately that it does not intend to hold blindly fast to familiar comfortability – unless, of course, you count its characteristic drive towards remaining an influencing founder in evolving horror themes. Picking up with traditional feminine horror genre themes (including but not limited to the Final Girl trope), *Halloween* (2018) makes the bold decision to choose the middle ground in the “to be or not to be” debate of horror films, proving that widespread success from horror fans is not reliant upon the black-and-white acceptance or rejection of longstanding, expected themes.

Encouraged by the documented success of their modernization of traditional horror genre themes, *Halloween Kills* continues the mission of complicating the horror genre by building upon the work of its preceding film and expanding on the plot devices of feminine themes, most notably of which including its elaboration on its underlying motherhood theme. This new film does not stop with themes proven for success in modernization, though; *Halloween Kills* further complicates the horror genre by adding conspired convolution to a theme that is so tied to the

horror field that it is considered a given of any film: body horror. By allowing body horror to drive more than audience reactions of pure disgust or sadness, this new film so too allows these newly detailed themes to drive its underlying plots and reinforce its unspoken arguments in just the subtle way the franchise has always been known to do.

While certainly far from the only influential modern horror film (or even the only influential horror sequel), the existence of the new *Halloween* movies and its complex themes within prove that horror as a genre has not been doomed to become stagnant. Therefore, it follows that so too should horror genre analysis not be allowed to become stagnant. Modern horror films and their sequels demonstrate contemporary interpretations of traditional horror themes, whether that entails the modification or altogether rejection of these themes. Regardless, such a shift proves that while these traditional horror themes are not irrelevant – indeed, many may be required to understand modern themes – their understanding and analysis requires an equal modernizing shift in order to properly dissect the media we are producing and consuming in our society. True to the natural passage of time, things change; writers write different works, directors direct different works, and audiences accept different works. To continue to rely on traditional horror theme analysis is to doom a new generation – and perhaps so too generations to come. Choosing to reject modern dissection and analysis does not negate the existence of modernized plot devices and moral structures; rather, this rejection will do little more than to ensure the silent transmission of implicit themes from pen to screen to viewing, without any deeper thought or understanding of the modern media's reflection of societal values in the process.

As horror fans, we have been loyal consumers of this genre for years. We have seen the growth, the shifts, the good, the bad, and the very, very ugly – and we loved it all. We are

comfortable with our genre's familiarity, its specialty stagnant state appeals to us. But the horror field is changing – just like the society it so aptly reflects, horror films are modernizing at an increasingly rapid pace. While many traditional horror theory pieces will likely remain vital cornerstones in the foundational understanding of horror themes, the concept of new themes prevailing over traditional is no longer a question – it is a statement. In fact, the only question remaining is one the horror genre poses instead to us: are we willing to move to modernity with it?

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