

## AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Abstract approved: \_\_\_\_\_  
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A topic of concern for feminists, film critics, media researchers, and film scholars alike who believe in a causal connection between film violence and real life violence have found an enemy in the slasher film. Critics of slasher films, a subgenre of horror, often charge these films are uniquely violent toward women and feature violence juxtaposed with sexual images. According to research, “non-pornographic” images of violence against women, such as those found in slasher films, provoke negative responses that vary from “changes in rape related attitudes to instances of aggressive behavior” among men (Linz & Donnerstein, 1986, p. 601). The purpose of this paper will be to explore the research that supports a link between slasher film violence and violence towards women. The first chapter of this paper will provide an introduction to the overall issue at hand, i.e. slasher film violence including definitions and statistics. The second chapter will provide a selective history of the slasher film. The third chapter will review the empirical research that shows a casual connection between media violence and violence against women exists and also theories explaining the effects of media violence on viewers. The fourth and final chapter will provide a discussion and conclusion on the information included in the previous chapters. It is the position of this paper that there is indeed cause for concern.

Key Words: Slasher, Violence against women.

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Do Slasher Films Breed Violence Against Women?  
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## CHAPTER ONE

### DO SLASHER FILMS BREED VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN?

#### Introduction

In 1996, a teenage male, along with his friend, decides to exact revenge for the dissolution of his parent's marriage on the members of the small California community in which they live. His friend has no real reason for joining along aside from his desire to be a part of the action. For a period of a week or so, the two young men viciously murder town members, including their friends, under the guise of a ghost face Halloween mask. When the two are finally revealed to be behind the gruesome murders, one of the young men (the one with no "real" motive) explains his behavior "as an experiment to test the effectiveness of citing media violence as his defense" (Wee, 2006, p. 57). In 2000, a teenager in Paris, while wearing a ghost face mask, murders his parents in cold blood (Rockoff, 2002, p. 22). The first scenario comes straight from the plot of the 1996 slasher classic, *Scream*. The second scenario, in which the teenage wears the "Ghostface" mask from *Scream*, actually occurred.

#### *Definitions and Statistics*

Adam Rockoff, author of *Going to Pieces: The Rise and Fall of the Slasher Film, 1978-1986* (2002), defines the slasher as "a subgenre of horror movies which share similar formula and stylistic elements and adhere to a fairly rigid paradigm" (p. 5). It should be noted, that Rockoff first offered this makeshift definition to John Dunning, producer of two classic slasher films: *My Bloody Valentine* and *Happy Birthday to Me*, who did not know what a slasher film was. Very few have attempted to define the term slasher. However, much like pornography, people know a slasher when they see one. This is because slashers, aside from a few variations here and there, have remained largely consistent through the years. It is

the distinctive and consistent elements of the subgenre that are used to help define the slasher film most often. These elements are:

1. The Killer- Ambiguous (but it is often implicit throughout that he is male), asexual, epitomizes masculinity to the extreme (Rockoff, 2002). According to Rockoff, “He is not only tough, he is immortal. He is not only strong, but powerful enough to string his victims up as human booby traps for their horrified friends to find. He is not only aggressive, he is psychotic (6).” He is the “other” and his otherness is often denoted through his appearance (a mask for example) (Muir, 2006).
2. The Weapon- A golden rule of the slasher film is that the weapon is never a gun (Clover, 1993; Rockoff, 2002; Muir, 2007). Instead, a more intimate weapon is used such as a chainsaw, a butcher knife, a machete... Whatever the weapon may be, it is often a choice “that ties into the organizing principle of the film” (Muir, 2007, p. 24).
3. The Location- Muir (2007) refers to this as “the organizing principle” because beyond being a mere location or setting, “the organizing principle provides the slasher production a series of connected *leitmotifs* that grant a narrative an umbrella of unity (20). Clover (1992) is less invested in this particular element simply stating that the location “is not home, at a Terrible Place” (pp. 23-24).
4. The Past Event- Some horrific event that triggers the killer’s transition from normal to homicidal (Muir, 2007; Rockoff, 2002). The killer spends the duration of the film seeking revenge for whatever wrong he has suffered.
5. The Final Girl- The lone survivor. She, like the killer, is recognizable as being “other.” Clover (1992), who coined the term, points out that unlike her friends the Final Girl is not sexually active, she is not naïve or oblivious but rather “watchful to

the point of paranoia” (p. 39) and she is also “intelligent and resourceful in a pinch” (pp.39-40).

While these elements will vary in aspects due to the plot of the films, it is the familiarity of these generic elements that has allowed the slasher to endure in the face of fervent opposition. Of particular interest to this paper is opposition based on the assumptions that slasher films “single women out for injury and death” and that “scenes of explicit violence are juxtaposed with sexual or erotic images” (Sapolsky, Molitor, & Luque, 2003, p. 2). These popular assumptions provide the bases for the argument that slasher films cause real life violence against women.

Violence against women is a serious public health and human rights issue (World Health Organization [WHO], 2009). According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention’s *Adverse Health Conditions and Health Risk Behaviors Associated with Intimate Partner Violence – United States 2005* report, 1 in 4 will experience intimate partner violence at some point in their life (as cited by The National Domestic Violence Hotline). Intimate partner violence (also known as domestic violence) is just one part of what is a larger problem. Violence against women, as defined by the United Nations, is “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life” (WHO, 2009).

Researchers of the effects of mass media violence on viewers focus on aggressive behavior as opposed to violent behavior (Huesmann & Taylor, 2006). Felson (1996) defines aggression as “any behavior involving the intent to harm another person” (p. 104). In this

paper, the terms aggression and violence will be used interchangeably. The term “mass media” will refer to “any form of communication that simultaneously reaches a large number of people” (Wimmer & Dominick, 2010, p. 2), including television, films, recordings and magazines. Here, the term “mass media” will be used interchangeably with the term “media.”

### *The Question*

Do slasher films breed real violence towards women? This question finds its origins in another question that has been debated since the introduction of television: Does mass media violence cause real life violence? The debate on how much of a connection there is between media violence and real life violence looms especially large in the United States where research on violence in the media is prevalent (a fact attributed to the United States being one of the first countries in which the television was introduced (Anderson, Berkowitz, Donnerstein, Huesmann, Johnson, Linz, Malamuth, & Wartella, 2003)).

For decades now, media researchers have concerned themselves with the effects of mass media violence on viewers. Some researchers have found mass media violence to have a negative effect on viewers whether the effect is direct (aggressive behavior) or indirect (modification of thought patterns, sexual arousal patterns) (Malamuth & Briere, 1986; Bushman & Anderson; 2001), short term or long term (Felson, 1996), small or large (Huesmann & Taylor, 2006). People began paying close attention to the effects of mass media on the public when in 1965 “violence in the United States began to increase fairly dramatically... exactly when the first generation of children raised on TV began to reach the prime ages for committing violent crimes” (Bushman & Anderson, 2001). Out of concern for the children, interest in research related to violent and sexual content in television

programming increased (Wimmer & Dominick, 2010). However, the debate on television's effects on viewers was not the first time the elements of sex and violence in the media had come under scrutiny. Sex and violence have a long history of generating debate within the film industry, particularly around the subject of censorship.

### *Why Slasher Films?*

Within the film industry, no other genre mixes the elements of sex and violence for viewer entertainment quite like the slasher. For decades now, critics of the subgenre have charged that slasher films are overtly violent towards women and represent violence in a sexual context. Along the way, some mass media researchers have found evidence that backs these charges (e.g. Linz & Donnerstein, 1994; Linz, Donnerstein & Penrod, 1988; Mullin & Linz, 1995). Such research has been used by slasher film opponents to make the argument that slasher films breed real violence towards women. It is the position of this paper that there is a causal connection between slasher film violence and violence against women and this connection is cause for concern.

## CHAPTER TWO

## A Selective History of the Slasher Film

Before an analysis of the general arguments and claims against slasher films' treatment of women can take place, it seems appropriate to provide an overview of the evolution of the subgenre. This is an important step in gaining a sense of why some academics and researchers find the slasher to be worthy of their time and attention even though it has often been dismissed by the larger academic and research communities as being unworthy of any serious study. The history that follows should not be seen as exhaustive or definitive as it has been constructed out of the film's most notable in slasher history.

*Origins and Influences*

You could look back at the slasher films of horror cinema and cite American serial killer Ed Gein as the root of the subgenre. In fact, Gein is often seen as the prototype for all fictional serial killers in slasher films (Abbott & Leven, 2000).



**Figure 1**

In addition to being a mass murderer, according to Rockoff (2002), Gein "was also a cannibal, transvestite and necrophiliac (28)." Gein's influence is most notable in *Psycho*'s Norman Bates, "Leatherface" in the 1974 film *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and "Buffalo Bill" in the 1988 novel and 1991 movie *The Silence of the Lambs* (Nixon, 2010). *Psycho*

(1960), as the direct descendent of the slasher (Rockoff, 2002; Clover, 1992) is where we first see Gein's influence on the subgenre. Alfred Hitchcock purchased the rights to Robert Bloch's book Psycho (1959), based off the actions of the Wisconsin killer and had the work adapted into a screenplay for a film by the same name ("Penguin Reader-Psycho", 2008, ¶ 2).

While it is a topic of debate within the horror community as to whether Hitchcock's classic *Psycho* (1960) is classifiable as a slasher, it is generally accepted that the film is responsible for introducing some of the primary generic elements critical to the subgenre. According to Schneider (2002) these elements include: "an 'explanation' of the killer's motives in quasi-psychoanalytical terms, a figuring of the main victim as a sexually transgressive female, and a focus on intimate assault with sharp, phallic, penetrating implements (¶ 3)." Carol Clover in her seminal work Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film (1992) identifies the elements as: "the killer is the psychotic product of a sick family but still recognizably human; the victim is a beautiful, sexually active woman; the location is not-home, at a Terrible Place; the weapon is something other than a gun; the attack is registered from the victim's point of view and comes with shocking suddenness" (p.22-23). These elements while not original, under the direction of Hitchcock and woven in to a complex story line, proved to be irresistible.

What follows is a very basic outline of *Psycho's* plot. Marion Crane is a Phoenix, Arizona office worker who, in a spur of the moment, decides to skip town with the \$40,000 her boss entrusted to her. She does so in order to start a new life with her lover, Sam, who has to give most of his money away in alimony. Heading towards Sam's California store, Marion is caught in a rainstorm and is subsequently forced to find shelter for the night at the desolate Bates motel. The motel is run by a peculiar young man, Norman, who appears to be

dominated by his invalid mother. Exhausted from the long drive and the stress of her criminal act Marion decides to take a hot shower before going to bed. As she showers a female figure ascends from the background and plunges a knife into Marion's body repeatedly. Blood washes down the drain signifying the death of Marion. A week later, Marion's sister arrives at Sam's store in Fairvale to tell him Marion has disappeared. Together with a private



**Figure 2**

detective, Milton Arbogast, they begin searching the area and eventually come across the Bates Motel. Through a series of events, it is revealed that Norman is Marion's killer. The female image during the death scene was in fact Norman dressed in a wig and women's clothing. It is further revealed that Norman suffers from psychological issues due to his relationship with his mother whom he killed as a young child (Hitchcock, 1960).

*Psycho* proved to be both a critical (although not immediately) and financial success. The film was nominated for four Academy Awards including those for Best Director and Best Supporting Actress (International Movie Database [IMDb]). The film grossed over \$30 million in the U.S. and \$50 million word wide (IMDb). Williams states that Hitchcock was



**Figure 3**

so struck by the film's success that he sought out the Stanford Research Institute to conduct a study to understand the film's effects on the audience (as cited in Clover, 1992). *Psycho* laid the ground work for the Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974), a film that would also be an early influence on the subgenre.

The plot of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* is fairly simple. The film opens by revealing that a cemetery in rural Texas has been vandalized; several gravesites have been desecrated, the bodies dug up and arranged into bizarre "sculptures." Sally Hardesty, upon learning that her grandfather's gravesite may have been among those vandalized, recruits her invalid brother Franklin, boyfriend Jerry and friends Pam and Kirk to help investigate. En route to the gravesite the group picks up a hitchhiker who exhibits increasingly disturbing behavior. The hitchhiker is eventually ejected from the vehicle after having cut himself and Franklin. Shortly thereafter, the group ends up at a small, sinister looking house where they



**Figure 4**

encounter a cannibalistic family consisting of a masked maniac (Leatherface), his grave robber brother (the hitchhiker), and their police chief father and decaying grandfather. One by one, the group members are hunted down and murdered by Leatherface who has sledgehammers, chainsaws, and knives at his disposal. In the end, Sally is the only group member who is able to escape as a truck driver comes to her aid just as Leatherface catches up to her, chainsaw in hand (Paraino & Hooper, 1974).

Like *Psycho*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* is quite heavily influenced by the actions and life of Gein. Director Tobe Hooper got the idea for the film from past life experiences including a “trip to a Montgomery Ward department store, where he was delayed in a row displaying chain saws, and the childhood story he used to hear from his relatives [about Gein] (Rockoff, 2002, 42).” As stated previously, the character Leatherface is loosely based off of Gein. Tobe Hooper even referred to the murderous family in the film as “A whole family of Ed Geins” (Abbott & Leven, 2002). Even the film’s handling of a taboo issue such as cannibalism is a clear influence of the Wisconsin killer. While *Psycho* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* share certain connections, the later is considered a cinematic trailblazer in its own right.

*The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, among other things, “revised the *Psycho* template” (Clover, 1992, p. 24). It contributed the slasher “staples” of having a group of young people as the main victim pool, the “Final Girl” (although this term was not yet coined) who is the sole survivor, and the non-verbal masked killer (Abbott & Leven, 2000). Made for anywhere from \$93,000 to \$230,000 (there are conflicting reports on the amount) the film collected over \$20,000,000 at the box office (Rockoff, 2002, 42). While the film was a financial success no one could have imagined the kind of cultural impact it would have. Rockoff (2002) summarizes the film’s impact thusly:

It would be wrong... to discount *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* as a mere novelty. It is a powerful disturbing film in which Hooper combines the desolation of the barren Texas locale with a renegade filmmaking style to produce a dynamic study of rampant madness. In fact, New York City’s Museum of Modern Art added the film to its permanent collection, validating its claim as legitimate, albeit, unconventional art (42).”

While some may debate *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* as legitimate art, the film is an important piece of horror cinema history as it evolved the slasher film template established

by *Psycho* into a new “formula” that would help ignite the slasher film craze of the 1980’s.

### *Early Slasher Films*

John Carpenter’s *Halloween* (1978) and Sean S. Cunningham’s *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* (1980) are most often considered as the films responsible for igniting the slasher craze of the 1980’s (Rockoff, 2002; Muir, 2007; Wee, 2006). These films, inspired by *Psycho* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, found financial success which led to numerous sequels and countless imitators and solidified the slasher as a viable genre.

*Halloween* (1978) is considered to be the film that introduced the mainstream to the slasher subgenre (Abbott & Leven, 2000) and its success paved the way for other efforts such as *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* and *A Nightmare on Elm Street*.

Directed by Wes Craven over a period of 20 days (Rockoff, 2002, p. 52) and starring Jamie Lee Curtis, daughter of Janet Leigh who starred as Marion Crane in *Psycho* (Abbott & Leven, 2000) the film tells a story of horrific murder and mayhem on the scariest holiday. The film begins on Halloween 1963, with the small town of Haddonfield, Illinois shocked by the murder of 17-year-old Judith Myers. Further sensationalizing the event is the fact that Myers was brutally killed at the hands of her 6-year-old brother, Michael. For 15 years Michael is incarcerated in the Smith’s Grove Sanitarium under the care of psychiatrist Sam Loomis. On October 30, 1978, Michael escapes from the sanitarium steals a car (and a white mask in the process) and sets out for Haddonfield and his baby sister Lorie Strode. Realizing the potential symbolism of the situation, Dr. Loomis tracks Michael back to Haddonfield where he hopes to, with the help of the Sheriff, stop him before it is too late. As Dr. Loomis and the Sheriff frantically look for Michael they do not know that Laurie is baby-sitting Lindsey and Tommy and that Laurie’s friends Annie, Lynda and Bob are disappearing one by

one. Michael is the first to locate Laurie and soon the two are locked in a game of cat-and-mouse. Michael is victorious as he strangles Laurie; however, at the last minute Dr. Loomis appears and shoots Michael multiple times. Michael is sent flying over a balcony, presumably to his death. However, when



**Figure 5**

Loomis and Laurie go to observe Michael's dead body he is gone (Hill & Carpenter, 1978).

*Halloween* cost roughly \$325,000 to make and it went on to gross \$47,000,000 (Wee, 2006, p. 52), becoming one of the most successful independent films of all time (Muir, 2007, p. 19). The idea and name for the film were the brainchild of Irwin Yablans, an independent distributor/producer who described his vision for the film at the time as: "...I want it to be spooky, scary, but leave much of it to the audience...I think that one of the great successes of *Psycho* and the *Exorcist* was the anticipation. Hitchcock did that very well (Rockoff, 2002, p. 53). Much like *Psycho*, the success of *Halloween* was unforeseen and a shock to many. The financial success of the film and the readiness of its generic components to be duplicated, many films attempted to copy *Halloween*, and thus the slasher subgenre was born. One such attempt proved to be even more successful than *Halloween's*, and that distinction belongs to Sean S. Cunningham's *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>*.

*Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* (1980) owes much of its success to *Halloween*. Rockoff (2002) puts it best when he observes of the film: "It was not some high-concept idea which Hollywood producers pushed through assured of box-office gold (75)." A film that studios normally

would have passed on seemed profitable in light of the enormous success of *Halloween*. Even so, *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* is a notable entry in slasher film history on its own merit; first though, the film's plot in a nutshell. In 1957, at Camp Crystal Lake, a young boy named Jason drowned. In 1958, two camp counselors were murdered. In 1962, fires and bad water thwarted the camp's reopening. Now, in 1979, Steve Christy finally reopens Camp Crystal Lake with the help of a few new counselors. The re-opening goes off without a hitch until a storm hits the camp and the power goes off sparking a series of grisly murders. The last survivor, camp counselor Alice, comes across Mrs. Voorhees in the middle of the night and it seems as though she has found her saving grace. Soon after, Mrs. Voorhees reveals that she is in fact the killer. Her actions are in response to the death of her son Jason many years ago due to the neglect he suffered at the hands of careless camp counselors who were engaging in sexual behavior rather than doing their job. Mrs. Voorhees then sets out to kill Alice. However, Alice is able to finally beat Voorhees by decapitating her. Afterwards Alice sets out in a canoe to the middle of the lake to wait for help to arrive. Just as the police show up, the decomposing body of Jason rises from the water and pulls Alice from her canoe. As Alice drowns she is suddenly awake and in a hospital bed. In the end, Alice is left to believe that Jason is still out there and still waiting for his revenge (Cunningham, 1980).

Costing \$700,000 to make, *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* earned over \$37,000,000 at the box office (Wee, 2006, p. 50) in large part due to the fertile climate created by *Halloween*. However, *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* is a notable entry in slasher history not because of its box-office haul, but because it took the slasher formula to the next level as it was more sexy, bloody and graphic than its predecessors (Rockoff, 2002, 74). The film's heavy use of special effects had much

to do with its gory and graphic nature. What the film lacked in plot, it more than made up for in increasingly elaborate and unique deaths. *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* introduced audiences to the type



**Figure 6**

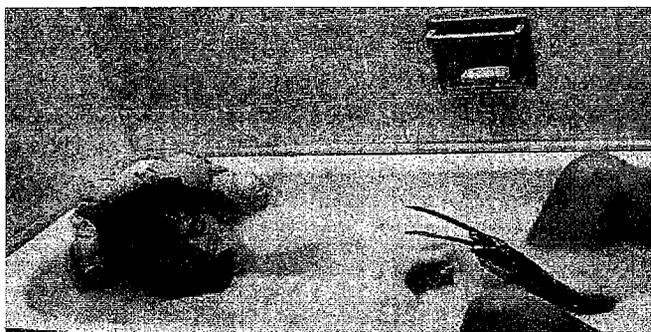
of graphic death scenes that became staples of the slasher film. *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* would not be the only slasher film of the 1980's to evolve the formula nor would it be the only film to dominate the era.

#### *The Golden Age*

The 1980's are considered to be the golden age of the slasher film. *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* was a cultural phenomenon and had solidified the slasher film as a bankable enterprise. During this time *Psycho*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Halloween* and *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* sequels reigned supreme alongside some new franchises, most notably one in which the villain would complete the trifecta of slasher film icons.

*A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) is an important milestone in slasher history as it brought a supernatural and comedic twist to the slasher formula. Despite its supernatural twist, director Wes Craven got his inspiration for the film from real life events. Craven got the idea for *A Nightmare on Elm Street* from a series of articles in the *Los Angeles Times* that involved people "who had suddenly been wracked by the worst nightmares they had ever had... and eventually when they feel asleep they died (Rockoff, 2002, p. 152)." Dreams are central to the film's storyline which is described thusly. In the early 1980's, a psychopath

named Freddy Krueger - known as the Springwood Slasher - murdered several children with a glove outfitted with straight razor blades attached to the fingers. When Krueger is released on a technicality the parents whose children were terrorized and tormented take matters into their own hands burning Krueger alive in the boiler room where he worked. Years after his death, the children whose parents were responsible for Krueger's death - including Nancy Thompson, daughter of the police officer who arrested Krueger - are experiencing terrifying nightmares involving a burned man wearing a glove with razor blades on the fingers. One by one, Nancy's friends are murdered in their sleep. It is only when her mother tells her of the circumstances surrounding the death of Krueger that Nancy realizes he is responsible for her the death of her friends. Along with her boyfriend Glen, Nancy devises a plan to catch Krueger that involves a series of booby-traps. However, before the plan can take effect Glen is killed in his sleep in it is up to Nancy alone to face Krueger once and for all. While the final scenes at first prove Nancy to be successful in destroying Krueger, in the end Krueger



**Figure 7**

is victorious as he traps Nancy in her car all the while dragging her mother back into the house presumably to her demise (Shaye & Craven, 1984).

*A Nightmare on Elm Street* is a classic slasher film and important horror film, for many reasons. With a budget of under \$2,000,000 and shot in a mere 32 days (Rockoff, 2002, p. 154), the film was a financial success grossing \$25,500,000 (Wee, 2006, p. 52). Its

success established New Line Cinema as a major power player in the movie industry (the company to this day is referred to as “The House That Freddy Built”) (Rockoff, 2002, p. 156). The film also sparked the evolution of the slasher villain into a cultural icon- a kind of anti-hero. Freddy Krueger, along with Michael Myers from *Halloween* and Jason from *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>*, became a marketable product. The *Nightmare on Elm*



**Figure 8**

*Street* franchise knew no bounds with sequels, merchandise and even a short lived TV show starring the Freddy character (Muir, 2007, p. 408). This over-familiarity with the slasher formula and certain slasher villains, such as Freddy, led to the decline of the slasher film in the late 1980's. By the early 1990's slasher films were largely relegated to straight-to-video releases and those that were lucky enough to be released in the theater were mostly the last installments of franchises from the golden era (Wee, 1996, p. 53). It would take another evolution in the slasher formula to revive the entire subgenre.

### *The Revival*

*Scream* (1996) is the film that revived the dead slasher subgenre, but to an extent, it also killed it. *Scream* successfully revised the conventions of the 1980's slasher (Wee, 2006, p. 52) which led to a new style that dominated the late 1990's slasher cycle and no doubt influenced the millennium's version of the slasher. The plot of *Scream*, like its predecessors, is simple enough. A masked serial killer, known as Ghostface, starts terrorizing and brutally

murdering the high school teenagers in fictional Woodsboro, California, a small town that just one year earlier was rocked by the rape and slaying of Maureen Prescott. Maureen's



**Figure 9**

teenage daughter Sydney, eccentric and dramatic Officer Dewey, and selfish and ambitious reporter Gale Weathers investigate the murders. However, with the killer's true identity unknown anyone is a suspect and at one point Sydney's boyfriend Billy is arrested under suspicion that he is the killer. Eventually he is released and the murders continue. By now, word has gotten out that a killer is on the loose. In response, school is canceled and a curfew set in place but Sydney and a group of her friends decide to throw a party that night. At the party, the kids receive notice that their principal has been murdered and most head to the school to see the body. Those that stay behind, including Sydney, a few of her close friends, Gale Weathers and Officer Dewey are terrorized by Ghostface. As people are killed off or injured and Sydney is the only one left, the killer is finally revealed. Her boyfriend Billy is in fact the killer but he has an accomplice, his friend Stu. Billy is also responsible for the death of Mrs. Prescott who was having an affair with his father which eventually led to the dissolution of his parent's marriage. Stu has no real reason for being involved in the murders except for wanting to be a part of the action. Billy reveals their plan as wanting to frame Mr. Prescott, who they have kidnapped and conveniently tied up in the closet, for the murders. As part of their plan, to make themselves look innocent, they begin to stab one another to look as

though they have been attacked by Sydney's father. With Billy and Stu both weak from loss of blood, Sydney sees an opportunity to escape. With the help of Gale, she is able to kill both men (Konrad & Craven, 1996).

*Scream*, written by Kevin Williamson and directed by slasher veteran Wes Craven, was a box office success grossing over \$100 million (on a \$15 million budget) (Rockoff, 2002, p.182). As stated previously, the film's success paved the way for a crop of new slasher films to be made in the late 1990's such as *I Know What You Did Last Summer* and *Urban Legend*. Both films would get sequels in the 2000's and *Scream* would get two more. Besides sequels, the 2000's would see many new slasher films (Rob Zombie's *House of 1,000 Corpses* and *The Devil's Rejects*, Eli Roth's *Hostel I* and *II*, and the *Saw* franchise) and many more remakes and prequels of golden era slasher films (*Halloween*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>*, to name a few). In fact, as recent as April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2010 a remake of the classic slasher *A Nightmare on Elm Street* was released. Per usual, the film was critically panned and yet it won first place at the box office during its opening weekend with a \$32.2 million (the film has made well over \$56 million total) (Box Office Mojo).

#### *Chapter Conclusion*

*The New York Times* movie critic Janet Maslin (1982) famously surmised of the slasher film: "These films aim simply at shocking and numbing their audiences, and perhaps the only good thing to be said about them is that their future isn't bright (§ 11). With a history spanning over thirty years including a decline and a revival, and now what appears to be a second golden age, the slasher film is clearly here to stay. The slasher's staying power should be an indication to the academic and research communities that while the subgenre's

low status may be warranted cinematically, the subgenre is deserving of more “serious attention” from these communities than it has been given. Rockoff (2002) says it best when he states of the availability of research sources on the slasher film: “Source materials on these films are, to say the least, scarce. There was a lack of articles, essays, and reviews about these films upon their release, and now, 20 years later in some cases, the original documents are nearly impossible to track down” (p. 3). From what is available and easily accessible, there is a general consensus amongst the opposition that slasher films do need more attention paid to them, specifically due to their extreme use of sex and violence for entertainment purposes.

## CHAPTER THREE

## Review of Theories and Empirical Research

*Theoretical Explanations of Media Violence Effects*

While there are a variety of theoretical explanations for mass media effects there are four theories that are most often discussed. Excitation transfer theory, social learning theory, desensitization theory and priming theory are discussed below.

## Excitation Transfer Theory

Developed by theorist Dolf Zillman (1971), excitation transfer theory acknowledges that arousal dissipates slowly and, therefore, has the increased likelihood to be transferred from one context to another. This transfer has the power to enhance the probability and magnitude of certain emotional responses, for example aggression. Baron and Richardson (1994) provide an excellent example of Zillman's theory. The premise of the example is that a jogger is coming home from his workout and is provoked by his neighbor. Although the man's heart rate and breathing have increased due to exercise, he attributes his arousal to his neighbor and therefore responds aggressively. In the context of violent mass media, this theory contends that viewers may become aroused and transfer that arousal to another context, for example, "viewers who become 'excited' by sexually violent media transfer that excitement to another context by committing a sexually violent act on a woman or, to a lesser extreme, by becoming accepting of such attitudes and behaviors towards women (313)."

## Social Learning Theory

Theorist Albert Bandura (1977) believed that aggression is learned either personally or through the media and environment. The modeling of behaviors and attitudes of others is central to the theory. According to this perspective consumers of violent mass media "could

learn information regarding the norms of sexual (gender) relationships and might model behaviors they have viewed (Emmers-Sommer, Pauley, Hanzal, Triplett, 2006, p. 313).” Therefore, if it is violent material that is being consumed then it is violent behavior that may be adopted. Furthermore, according to the theory, behaviors are more likely to be adopted if they are positively reinforced or rewarded. For example, if a male aggressor is portrayed as not suffering any ramifications for his action then such behavior is more likely to be adopted (Emmers-Sommer et. al, 2006).

#### Desensitization Theory

This theory hypothesizes that exposure to violence in the mass media may desensitize viewers feelings of concern, empathy, or sympathy toward victims of actual violence. For example, it is often argued that exposure to scenes of explicit violence juxtaposed with sexual images “blunt males’ emotional reactions” to such depictions leading them to be less “disturbed by scenes of extreme violence and degradation directed at women” (Sapolsky et al., 2003, p. 2). Desensitization has this effect because the emotions, such as unpleasant psychological arousal, that it acts upon have “an inhibitory influence on thinking about violence, condoning violence, or behaving violently” (Anderson et al, 2003, p. 96). So, once the emotions are desensitized the more likely it is a person will think or behave violently.

#### Priming Theory

This theory functions on the belief that media information “primes” existing scripts and cognitions. Anderson et al (2003) explains further: “Aggressive primes or cues make aggressive schemas more easily available for use in processing other incoming information, creating a temporary interpretational filter that biases subsequent perceptions” (95). Bushman (1998) concluded from two studies that “violent media prime cognitive-

associative networks related to aggression (p. 537).” In other words, violent media such as slasher films do have a priming effect on the aggressive behavior viewers.

### *Why Male Subjects?*

To researchers, males are of particular interest as subjects on the effects of media violence because violence is predominantly a male phenomenon (Katz, 2006; Alder, 1997). Research indicates that men are often the perpetrators and victims of violence (Alder, 1997). Historically, research has focused primarily on male-on-male violence and it was not until feminist research took the initiative that attention was drawn to male violence against women (Alder, 1997). Men are widely recognized as the primary perpetrators of violence against women (Katz, 2006; Malamuth & Briere, 1986). In one research study, nearly 60% of college men admitted they would rape a woman if there were no repercussions (Warshaw, 1988). In another study conducted by the American Academy of Pediatrics, coercive behavior that 43% of college-age men admitted to using when trying to get a woman to have sex included “ignoring a woman’s protest, using physical aggression, and forcing intercourse” (as cited in Katz, 2006). These percentages, like the outcomes of the experiments reviewed below only represent a fraction of the male population. Not all men are rapists or abusers of women; however, men are the primary perpetrators of violence against women. In the context of researching behavioral effects of sexually violent media, another reason why men are prime subjects is that men are found to be more favorable than women are to media that contains sex and violence (Emmers-Sommer et al, 2006). Furthermore, in regards to slasher films, males have traditionally been the target audience for such films. So, it would make sense to study the primary viewers of such material.

### *Review of Empirical Research*

Multiple studies have shown that violent media do have a causal effect on aggressive thoughts and behaviors that can lead to real life violence. Researchers of media violence are particularly interested in young children as subjects in such studies because “the best single predictor of violent behavior in older adolescents, young adults, and even middle-aged is the occurrence of aggressive behavior in childhood” (Huesmann & Taylor, 2006, p. 394). However, researchers are less apt to use child subjects in studies on the effects of sexually violent media content because society tends to view such content as less permissible than violent content. Therefore, research on the effects of viewing sexually violent images have focused on college-age viewers, most often employing actual college students as subjects. Donnerstein and Berkowitz (1981), Malamuth and Check (1981), Linz, Donnerstein and Penrod (1988) and Mullin and Linz (1995) are four classic studies that used college students to demonstrate the causal connection between sexually violent images and aggression towards women. I review the four studies below.

#### Donnerstein and Berkowitz (1981)

This experimental study sought to demonstrate that sexually violent images with a positive outcome would lead to increased aggression in male subjects and in turn a greater willingness for them to aggress against women. In the experiment, male university students were divided into four subject groups. Those in group one (G1) viewed a neutral movie containing no sex (a talk show interview). Group two (G2) viewed a movie depicting a rape in which the female victim starts to enjoy herself (tagged as a positive outcome). Group three (G3) viewed a similar movie only this time the victim does not enjoy herself (tagged as a negative outcome). Group four (G4) viewed an erotic movie depicting consensual sex. Prior to the film viewing, a female insulted half of the test subjects and was neutral to the others.

Results showed that subjects in G1, G3 and G4 chose not to act on aggression towards women. Subjects in G2, those who had been insulted, acted on aggression towards women in the form of fake (unbeknownst to the subjects) electric shocks to the female who had insulted them. It is important to note that the G2 subjects were not only insulted prior to their “retaliation” but also they had viewed the film in which there was a positive outcome or, to put it another way, no negative consequence to the sexual assault they viewed. According to the social behavior theory, viewers are more likely to adopt a behavior if there are no apparent negative consequences which for G2 subjects there were none. This study also serves as an example of the excitation transfer theory. G2 subjects adopted the aggressive behavior in the films and then transferred that aggression to the following context of the interaction with the female they had met prior to the film viewing session.

Malamuth and Check (1981)

This was an experimental study of particular interest because all of the films shown were part of a campus film program. Male university students were randomly assigned to view either a feature-length film that portrayed violence against women as having a positive outcome (*Swept Away*, *The Getaway*) or a non-sexual or violent film (*A Man and a Woman*, *Hooper*). The researchers hypothesized that male subjects who viewed the positive outcome films would be accepting of violence towards women (social learning behavior theory) as indicated by scores on the AIV (Acceptance of Interpersonal Violence) and the RMA (Rape Myth Acceptance) Scale questionnaire. Several days after viewing the films, subjects were given the AIV and RMA. Subjects who viewed *Swept Away* and *The Getaway* had higher scores. However, it should be noted that the RMA score did not reach statistical significance. It would have been interesting to see the difference in scores between a week long exposure

period and a three day exposure period. Research has shown that, with clinical desensitization, the effects begin to dissipate after two days but can take up to a week following exposure to slasher films for resensitization to occur (Mullin & Linz, 1995). The comparison may have been especially helpful to the RMA score reaching statistical significance.

Linz, Donnerstein and Penrod (1988)

Linz et al. examined the effect that prolonged exposure to three types of films had on male subjects. Subjects were 156 male university students. The three types of films included slasher films (*Maniac*, *Toolbox Murders*, *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>*, *Part 2*, and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*), non-violent teenage-sex films (*Porky's*, *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, *Private Lessons*, *Last American Virgin*, and *Hots*), and non-violent X-rated films (*Debbie Does Dallas*, *Health Spa*, *The Other Side of Julie*, *Indecent Exposure*, and *Fantasy*). The male subjects either viewed two films or five films, one every other day. Prior to the film viewing, subjects were told they would be viewing either three or six films. The additional films were videotaped reenactments of a rape trial to be used in the second part of the study which commenced after the final film-viewing session. In the rape trial portion of the study, subjects viewed one of two versions of the tape, one involving an acquaintance rape scenario (the victim and rapist were friends) and the other involving a stranger-rape scenario (the victim and rapist had just met). Subjects who viewed slasher films in the first part of the study showed signs of desensitization and were therefore less sympathetic to both rape victims. Linz et al. had correctly hypothesized that desensitization would occur leading to a difference in response to the rape trial for that group.

Charles Mullin and Daniel Linz (1995)

Mullin and Linz hypothesized that exposure to sexually violent films would lead to desensitization in subjects and thusly a lack of empathy towards victims of domestic abuse. The study was basically a replication of past desensitization studies. Researchers exposed male subjects to three slasher films to be viewed every other day. Subjects completed pre- and post-mood changes and film evaluations. In the second part of the study, participants were asked to evaluate female victims of domestic abuse. Also, researchers attempted to measure the persistence of the desensitization effect post-slasher film exposure. The researchers hypothesized it would take from five to seven days for resensitization to occur. Accordingly, subjects evaluated the domestic abuse victims either three, five or seven days after exposure. Researchers concluded that male viewers of slasher films do indeed become desensitized and therefore have less sympathy and empathy for victims of domestic abuse. Also, this desensitization begins to dissipate shortly after the three day period following film exposure.

#### *Chapter Conclusion*

Huesmann and Taylor (2006) assert that when dealing with empirical evidence regarding a correlation (e.g. Bartholow & Anderson, 2002; Calvert & Tan, 1994; Kirsh, 1998) between mass media violence and violent behavior it is best to integrate evidence collected from experimental studies, cross-sectional surveys and longitudinal surveys into your conclusion (p. 395). Their suggestion is well warranted. Experimental studies like the ones reviewed above lack external validity which is, according to the Web Center for Social Research Methods (2006), "the degree to which the conclusions in a study would hold for other persons in other places and at other times." Also, such experiments deal strictly with the short term effects of sexually violent content and provide no insight into long term

effects. However, this paper is concerned with violence against women and it is safe to assume that it is adult men who are primarily responsible for acts of violence against women. Also, this paper is concerned with the effects of sexually violent images in slasher films on male viewers and it is primarily experimental studies that have dealt with this specific topic. Lastly, working on such an esoteric subject as slasher films and working with a specific space constraint has meant making certain concessions. While the key examples discussed above may not be representative of the multiple approaches to research that are available, the examples fit the particular subject, purpose and design of this paper.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

#### *Discussion*

This paper has presented experimental evidence that the extremely sexual and violent content of slasher films has negative effects, direct and indirect, on male viewers and their thoughts and behaviors towards women. The evidence reviewed in this paper is only a fraction of the evidence available on the casual connection between sexually violent media and violent behavior, particularly violent behavior towards women. Violence against women is a serious public health issue. The National Coalition against Domestic Violence (2009) estimates that, "The cost of intimate partner violence exceeds \$5.8 billion each year, \$4.1 billion of which is for direct medical and mental health services" (p. 1). Because violence against women is a serious issue any causal factor should be treated seriously as well.

It is unfortunate that the majority of the academic and research communities have chosen to ignore the slasher subgenre and dismiss it as unworthy of serious and critical attention, particularly when so many researchers (e.g. Huesmann & Taylor, 2006; Bushman & Anderson, 2001) argue that media violence is indeed a public health threat, only surpassed by smoking and lung cancer in terms of average correlation. Figure 10 shows the relative strength of known public health threats. Indeed, the average correlation for smoking and lung cancer is .4 followed by media violence and aggression at .3 (see Figure 10). Clearly, the correlation between media violence and aggression is serious enough to be considered a major public health threat. So why is it that the slasher film, as a seriously violent media, is essentially being ignored by the academic and research communities? There is a smoking and media violence analogy that many researchers use and

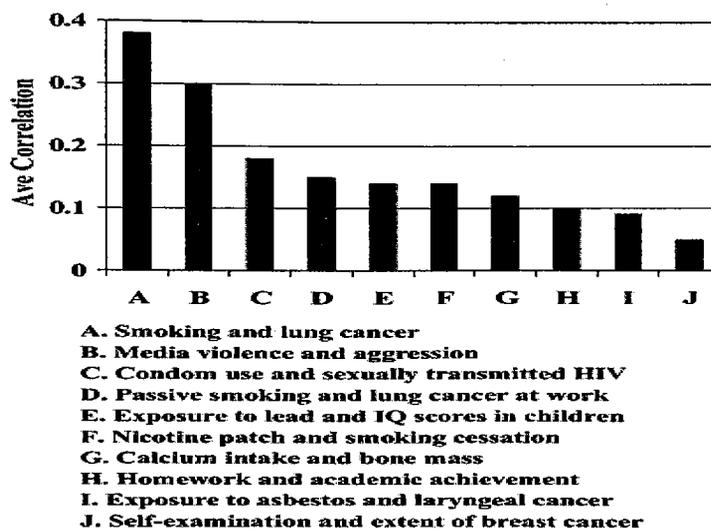


Figure 10

it fits well in explaining the need for more attention from the academic and research communities on slasher films. It is important to remember that not everyone who smokes will get lung cancer, and similarly not everyone who watches violent media will become aggressive. However, as Bushman and Anderson (2001) point out, “Suppose 10 million people watch a violent TV program. If only 1% of the viewers will become more aggressive afterward, then the violent TV program will make 100,000 people more aggressive” (p. 482). Substituting the slasher film in this scenario it is easy to see why there is great cause for concern.

For over three decades slasher films have proven themselves to be popular entertainment. The advancement of technology such as video tapes, DVD’s and the internet as well as basic cable have allowed slasher films to expand their audience. When a remake of a slasher classic like *A Nightmare on Elm Street* is able to pull in during its first weekend at the box office over \$30 million nearly 30 years after the original, it is safe to say that such films have an audience and it is a fairly large one. Tens of millions of people watch slasher films every day whether it is an original film or a remake, or at the movie theater or in the

comfort of their own home. Imagine if only 1% of male slasher film viewers became aggressive towards women how many instances of violence against women that would equate to. Even if it equated to just one case of violence against a woman, that is still one case too many.

### *Conclusion*

Slasher films uniquely portray violence towards women and this violence is often juxtaposed with sexual imagery. It should be noted that due to this sequence of acts it is often women who engage in sexual acts that are the victims of fatal violence in slasher films. This is burdensome for women as survival in slasher films is equated with virginity and death is equated with female sexuality. While this may not be an intended commentary on the part of the director, the fact that such a reading can be produced further highlights the problematic treatment of women in slasher films. Such problematic treatment is why it is necessary to have more research and academic writing done on the effects slasher films have on male viewers as men continue to make up a majority of slasher film viewers and continue to be the primary perpetrators of violence against women. Also, while there are valid issues regarding young children as subjects of sexually violent media research that does not mean that researchers should give up on finding ways to conduct such research while remaining in ethical bounds. For instance, such research could be conducted on young boys who already consume sexually violent media so that children who have not viewed such content remain as such. Clearly, the parents of potential research subjects would have to be truthful in the type of media their children consume and this may be problematic in that some parents may not want to admit their children watch sexually violent media. Hopefully, enough parents would be truthful in the name of conducting important and necessary research that may help in the

eradication of violence against women. Lastly, in the spirit of Jackson Katz and his Mentors in Violence Prevention Program (MVP), it is important that children, boys and girls, receive proper media education that includes a focus on portrayals of media violence and the effects these portrayals have on thought and behavior patterns in both genders because violence against women is not just a women's issue or men's issue, it is everyone's issue. Everyone must play a part if this ugly phenomenon is to ever disappear.

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