Gender Displacement in Contemporary Horror:
Final Girls, Confused Killers, and an Unambiguous Audience
Shannon Roulet
Virginia Commonwealth University
Award-winning Italian film director Dario Argento (1996), most famous for his horror movies in the late 70s and early 80s, established a widely held, but rarely spoken belief, “I like women, especially beautiful ones. If they have a good face and figure, I would much prefer to watch them being murdered than an ugly girl or man”(46). The contemporary horror film genre is full of gender stereotyping, slut-shaming, misogyny, and the depreciation of non-normative gender roles. Women account for a large portion of the audience that watch these films, but are more often than not misrepresented and stereotyped within their roles. Traditional gender roles tend to safely numb the viewers into a conservative coma, and the horror genre is one that frequently either facilitates these patriarchal views or challenges them with new characters that don’t follow film archetypes. I believe that the horror genre of film offers an amazing cinematic avenue to explore new roles and perceptions that gender can take. That being said, I think these films are, and have been since their creation, plagued with ideas of objectification and fetishization of women, and help to assist modern society in its rejection of nontraditional notions of gender and sexuality. These ideas of feminine denial and inadequacy only continue to reverberate into our actual society, until the question of if art imitates life or if life imitates art becomes confusing and, unfortunately, inconsequential. Horror has the potential to openly confront gender in a way that can help society move past stifling and deep ingrained prejudices, but I also understand that currently it has a lot of misconceptions to overcome to fully reach its potential. Using several films, I hope to dissect how horror really addresses gender and traditional ideas of femininity and masculinity and to find those misconceptions and reveal them for what they really are.
With gender being such a quintessential conflict in contemporary horror, it seems appropriate to start with then the “final girl.” The final girl, a term coined by the film theorist Carol Clover in 1992, spans all throughout horror. The final girl is a cinematic trope that refers to the girl, or woman, who is left after all the other characters are dead. What makes this character so interesting, and historically dynamic, is the constant variation of opinions on whether or not this character should be viewed as an empowering archetype that women can strive to be or a warped doll that only exists to promote slut-shaming, misogyny, and inequality. Some viewers ride the fence, saying the “final girl” may have some un-feminist characteristics, but can be perceived as a positive feminine image.

However, Clover (1996) disagrees with these notions and establishes in her article, “Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film,” that “the Final Girl is a male surrogate in things oedipal, a homoerotic stand in, the audience incorporate; to the extent she ‘means’ girl at all, it is only for purposes of signifying phallic lack, and even that meaning is nullified in the final scenes” (100). In Clover’s mind, the final girl is even further from being a female hero. While I don’t agree entirely with Clover, to her, the final girl is literally furthering the gap between equality among genders. The final girl is an object for male consumption, just another buxom babe, only with this archetypal female, the heterosexual male audience that horror generally targets can directly relate to her masculine demeanor and (usual) abstinence from boys. So if this trope is so demeaning to women, why do we continue to use and create more final girls throughout horror? Is it to qualm the complaints of ‘femi-nazis’ that say we don’t have enough leading ladies in contemporary film? Is it to simply boost box-office revenue by opening up the horror demographic to not only target males but also females? Or perhaps it is, as Clover (1996) puts it, to create an outlet for the male audiences’ “sadomasochistic incest fantasies” because
they “sit more easily with the male viewer when the visible player is female” (98). The final girl may simply be a tool; a wolf in sheep’s clothing, but I believe her reach doesn’t stop there. She is capable of revealing underlining gender qualms in these films, and her existence should be used to delve deeper into issues involving inequality among genders.

In “When the Woman Looks,” Linda Williams (1996), a film professor at the University of Texas, writes, “the dubious moral status of such heroines, and the fact that they must be punished in the end, undermines the legitimacy and authentic subjectivity of this look, frequently turning it into a mere parody of the male look” (19). Questioning the authentic nature of this character can open up a new discussion about what may be the real meaning behind the creation of the final girl. I agree with Williams that through the ‘punishment’ of these women and also through their overwhelmingly masculine demeanor, these final girls can just become ‘mere parodies of the male look.’ But she does appear in a different light in some films. For example, in Johnathan Demme’s 1991 thriller, *Silence of the Lambs*, Clarice Starling, played by Jodie Foster, is a fresh out of academy female recruit who must work with an incredibly intelligent and well-known male serial killer (Hannibal Lecter) to try and learn more about an infamous and untraceable woman-killer and catch him before it’s too late. What makes her character so interesting is that she is represented as an intelligent woman who can hold her own in a male dominated space and also in the end defend herself. Starling was sort of a hybrid final girl that transformed and mutated from classic final girls in the 1970s to 1980s and signified a real shift in how the horror genre confronts gender.

For a more contemporary look at the final girl, you could apply Alex Wingard’s 2011 slasher *You’re Next*. The “final girl” in this film is an Australian girlfriend with an unexpected yet extensive survivalist background. Over the course of the movie, she transforms from the
bubbly girlfriend character into a blood-smeared avenger. I think this film and many others like it portray the ‘final girl’ as not simply a symbol for men to relate to, but instead literally a powerful women who doesn’t question herself and knows how to act to keep herself alive. In You’re Next, I think this is true because she is clearly in an adult relationship, meaning sexual inactivity is questionable, and she doesn’t have the overwhelming “tomboy” nature with which most final girls are typecast. Erin, the Australian survivalist, is most definitely a women and most definitely knows how to fight to the death. New, more progressive female characters are appearing all throughout horror and could symbolize a new era of gender roles.

The history of the final girl’s existence may be tainted with misogyny and gender discrimination, but her purpose doesn’t stop there. Horror film’s iconic “final girl” can address issues that some fear are too taboo to discuss. According to Taylor (2012), “Through the appropriation of masculine behaviors, the ‘Final Girl’ feminizes her (male) assailants and often penetrates them with knives, bullets, chainsaws, etc. and, in doing so, poses a threat of castration to masculine discourse” (35). I will first address the ideas surrounding the “appropriation of masculine behaviors.” As discussed, the classic final girl of horror tends to follow a certain standard, especially physically. While many would immediately think that she would be a mega-babe with as little clothes on as possible, it is actually more often than not the opposite. Speaking of the classic final girl, Terrones (2012) suggests, “Her physical appearance is portrayed to be that which is reminiscent of a man, rather than of her own female gender - a characteristic very pertinent to the horror genre” (26). The final girl adopts the appearance and becomes what she thinks will allow her to survive: a man. It’s easier to think of it as disguising than imitating. While this can be viewed as a negative repression of her gender, I see it more as a leveling of the playing field. It shows the assailant that there is even less that is different between victim and
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killer. The final girl can finally “demonstrate that she is not separate from the male: she too has sexual feelings that must have an outlet; she too is strong-skilled and assertive” (Terrones, 2012, 26). She is not only capable of committing the same acts he can, but just her existence challenges the masculinity of the killer. This is where ideas on the phallic and non-phallic nature of the final girl-killer relationship come into play.

Many get caught on the word penetration and all they see is, very literally, sex, but in the context of horror movies, words like penetration should be thought of in a more conceptual way. These ‘final girls’ are literally ‘penetrating’ these “(male) assaillants,” but they are in the process of also penetrating and further dissolving the gender construct that we have inherited from society. In actuality, it is the killer with the phallus that is overtly lacking. Rehling (2007) points out, “However phallically encoded their stabbing and slashing of female victims might be, it always belies the fact that phallic subjectivity eludes them” (1). The final girl, though thought to be lesser simply because of her lack of phallus, is in fact more aware of the world around her due to her “phallic subjectivity.” While the killer is forever trapped in a world of phallus, the final girl can come and go, experiencing her surroundings both phallically and non-phallically, giving her the upper hand in the big scheme of things. While final girls do get the short end of the stick most of the time, they are allowing the negative stigmas that society inflicts on us to be shown under bright lights so we can investigate exactly what is wrong with these ideas. While I agree that tropes like the final girl can be perceived backwards, this character unlocks doors to create more open conversations on gender issues and help to construct progressive representations of gender identity and femininity.

Even further than simply the ‘final girl’ character, horror films address and exploit age-old ideas on what gender identity is all about and what it means to question one’s gender. The
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demonization of the non-phallic serial killer runs rampant in horror, thrillers, and slashers (Rehling, 2007, 1). Though the killer should be made out to be evil just based off the fact that he is a murderer, the interesting part about it is the fact that more often than not, the killer is tortured by some sort of gender identity disorder or other non-socially acceptable “sexual inflictions,” much like Norman Bates cross-dressing in Psycho (1960) or Leatherface’s habit of wearing the faces of those he kills in Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974). What makes this interesting is the consistent use of this “non-phallic,” effeminate, or just socially “non-traditionally masculine” male as the evil-doer. Unconsciously or (perhaps even worse) consciously, horror films are creating a stigma towards real people in society who have gender dysphoria, or a conflict between a person's physical gender and the gender he or she identifies as, and societally unaccepted sexual fetishes or habits. The imagery created by putting these killers in dark basements and decrepit houses and making their existence shameful, resonates in real life and facilitates hatred towards individuals who do, on some level, identify with them. If you think about the ‘bad-guy’ in any contemporary horror or slasher film, he is usually some kind of deviant aside from his murderous tendencies. Hitchcock’s Psycho set the cinematic stage by introducing a killer with mommy issues.

Silence of the Lambs continued the almost Freudian trend by introducing Buffalo Bill, a man who doesn’t identify with his born gender, and whose whole modus operandi is to murder women and use their skin to make a suit so he can finally be a woman. Bill lives in a dilapidated house where he keeps his victims in a deep well before he starves and skins them. Rehling (2007) writes about the character, saying that, “Buffalo Bill’s gruesome murders of women are directly attributed to his gender confusion and his psychic need for female identity, which the film represents through a variety of images of sexual transgression: polymorphous perversity,
male effeminacy, homosexuality, transvestism, and would-be transsexuality” (1). By using characters like Bill over and over again as the ‘monster’ of the film, horror is helping define individuals who identify with these ideas of “gender confusion” or “male effeminacy” as bad people or at least people who are, by nature, predisposed to do bad things. The warning created by contemporary horror towards questioning one’s gender resonates through society. It also introduces the idea of gender fusion and the indication that these final girls and killers are having a sort of metamorphosis throughout these slasher and horror films.

This idea of metamorphosis plays a huge role in horror in part because of the frequent transition or transcendence of characters in the genre. In films like *Silence of the Lambs*, metamorphosis is represented by a more obvious imagery. In Buffalo Bill’s case, it was the moth or cocoon he left as a calling card in his victims. For the final girl, it’s her violent and difficult descent to “gaining” her phallus. Clover (1996) states, “The moment at which the Final Girl is effectively phallicized is the moment that the plot halts and horror ceases” (98). It is that final scene where she shoots, stabs, decapitates, or just plain kills the assailant that has been stalking her this entire time. While the entire movie is her metamorphosis, it is in these final moments that she becomes the newly phallicized “butterfly” she was always meant to be. The symbolic nature of her metamorphosis can be viewed as simply her makeshift imitation of a man, but I see it as women achieving their full potential. While the female might physically lack a phallus from birth, who says it cannot be claimed? The phallicization of the female character is actually quite a brilliant concept that should be revered and strived for instead of denied. And the same thing goes in the case of the killer tortured by gender dysphoria. Why should they not also reach a higher state of themselves? Horror seems to pick apart many groups of minorities, but it also reaches into some majority demographics, especially that of Caucasian men.
In addition to the “gender confused killer,” it is an increasing trend in horror for the serial killer of the film to be a white male. By using white males as the typical serial killer, it creates the idea that the white male is in fact the empty one, not the phallus-less female, or the woman in horror that is forced to earn her phallus by murdering or challenging her assailant. Rehling (2007) talks more about this in her article, stating that white masculinity “is both all and nothing — grounds for both privilege and anxiety” (2). This idea is that the white heterosexual male is a bare existence and that a male will do anything to gain an identity is an interesting one. Apart from its assigned role as oppressor, the white male is a blank canvas. Terrones (2012) said, “Classically, the horror film used a male or monstrous killer as a mirror to the Otherness of the woman, or to reinforce the idea that there is pleasure in masculine subject positions punishing or dominating feminine objects” (28). While most of the concepts surrounding contemporary horror involve both the “phallicization” and masculinization of just about everything, it seems that finally we find a link between most cinematic serial killers. This also creates links between audience perspectives and the perspective of the (male) killer. By inserting the audience into the perspective of the killer, it creates a sort of paradox where the masculine is just blank and the feminine is an indefinable polymorphous concept. Taylor (2012) suggests, “While female identity is fluid and polymorphous, phallocentricism is rigid in its perpetual decline, a condition exacerbated by feminine rejection of the traditional position of matriarch in favor of individualistic professionalism” (25). It is this ingrained fear of female freedom and autonomy that causes such a violent rejection of the feminine and the sudden fear of the male being the lesser. And this, in turn, makes the paradox of the audience perspective that much more obvious.

Horror typically has an apparent male perspective, and according to Terrones (2012), “Classically, the horror film used a male or monstrous killer as a mirror to the Otherness of the
woman, or to reinforce the idea that there is pleasure in masculine subject positions punishing or
dominating feminine objects.”(29) Many horror films also use the strict male point of view in
films as a tool, sometimes to propel the story forward; *Friday the 13th* used this to it’s advantage
by tricking the audience into thinking the killer was a man, when, in fact, it was a sweater-
wearin older woman. Other times, it’s simply a way to accurately show how uncomfortable and
threatened a character feels, like again in *Silence of the Lambs*, when the point of view is up
higher, angled down on Clarice Starling as she stands in a room of male police officers. Jerslev
(1994) argues, “Maybe this is what makes the contemporary horror film so appealing to a wider
audience: it evades unambiguity and rather stages fairy tale kingdoms of multiple possibilities. In
this respect, the horror film echoes the postmodern condition” (21). I’m intrigued by this idea of
evading unambiguity. People sometimes poke fun at the idea that these films aren’t really made
for women, why should a director make a film for the people that cover their eyes at the scary
parts? Williams (1996) writes, “Another excellent reason for the refusal to look is the fact that
women are given so little to identify with on the screen” (17). I believe this lack of identification
stems from the fact that these films do have an innate masculine point of view. Horror is a very
headstrong genre with a many distinctive and identifiable characteristics, one of them being that
it isn’t, for lack of a better word, scared of applying a very masculine perspective to its movies.

While horror may have a stifling amount of prejudices on gender, I honestly feel like it is
a unique genre of film that can shed light on topics that are often considered taboo. Between its
unflinching display of gore, incest, sexuality, and murder, horror is a genre that has the ability to
be incredibly brave while simultaneously being cowarly. The horrendous portrayal of
minorities, idealization of the perfect man/woman, glamourizing of intolerance, and the intrinsic
and overbearing sexism and racism help to make this one of the more controversial forms of
popular art around today. But, where this could hold it back, it in fact opens the genre up to many different possibilities. Not only does horror have little to no real substantial reputation to live up to, but it has an incredibly huge and dedicated fan base, making horror one of the best ways to get a message across both without offending and with relative ease. Using art to address difficult issues in society has been a trend for centuries, so we shouldn’t exclude horror movies from that discourse. Instead of immediately writing off the new slasher flick that comes out because you know that the girl is undoubtedly going to be killed in the most erotic way possible, go in with open eyes, and use your knowledge of the genre to further understand the workings of today’s society. Of course, it’s important to keep in mind the blatant misogyny and hate that veil these films, but it’s even more important to understand the underlying themes and messages of these movies and to be willing to dissect those messages to further understand how we can challenge some of society’s most backwards ideals. Horror will always have a stigma to it, but if more people were willing to open up to some of the ideas being thrown around in the genre, we would have a more positive society where acceptance sways over intolerance.
REFERENCES


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