

Gender, Genre and the Gaze: Queerness in Horror

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Horror movies are an addicting film genre that has captivated audiences since the early twentieth century. The appeal of horror movies is multifaceted, with some viewers drawn to the thrill of being scared while others are fascinated by the psychological aspects of the genre. However, no matter what draws people in, what tends to keep them engaged is the undertone of unpunished voyeurism. Horror movies from social commentary as they explore themes of fear, anxiety, and the dark side of human nature. The genre tries to mold its monsters after what will best horrify and disgust their audiences. Through its portrayal of villains, the genre offers a striking perspective on the aspects of humanity that are often considered taboo and unacceptable in society. However, it is not only through the villains that the genre explores what people find taboo, as often the main protagonist is an outsider who is unsettling for audiences in a different way. A film's creators use these characters to reflect the common beliefs on various identities, providing audiences with a distinct and often unsettling look at the taboo through what might we consider "the gaze." "The gaze" is a complex aspect of film that viewers can approach in many different ways. However, in its most standard form, "the gaze" is structured to resemble that of a white cisgender heterosexual male. Also, considering that this is the same viewer demographic that has historically consumed the most American horror, it is not surprising then that the leading characters of horror movies often reflect what is then the most taboo to the white cishet male. In this sense, horror movies often feature characters that are queer-coded. The queer gaze is thus oppositional in both sexuality and gender. This characterization of the genre's leads allows their

heterosexual audiences to become voyeurs, gazing into what they deem “the other” and “the abnormal” without challenging their beliefs. Largely due to how traditional horror films are engaged with, viewers are often drawn to the thrill of being scared by something they perceive as different *from* themselves while also being able to experience that difference *as* themselves. Queerness then becomes an integral aspect of the villain and protagonist or Final girl.

In their criticisms of the genre, Carol J. Clover and Linda Williams discuss problems with the “standard gaze” of cinema, instead considering the “female gaze.” Each discusses the role that gender plays in horror movies. While William’s analysis lacks a queer perspective, Clover considers how homoeroticism, homosexuality, and gender queerness all impact the horror genre. Whereas in Judith Halberstam’s analysis of the 1999 film *Boys Don’t Cry*, he describes what he calls the “transgender gaze.” While this essay has nothing to do with the horror genre itself, the “transgender gaze” is heavily attached to both Clover’s analysis of the Final Girl and William’s discussion of the “female gaze.” In reading each of these scholars’ approaches to their respective topics, I found myself pulling them together in the intersectionality between gender, genre, and the gaze.

Carol J. Clover is an American professor of film studies and has a Ph.D. from UC Berkeley. She is credited with the development of the Final Girl. The Final Girl is defined as the sole Survivor among those whom the villain terrorized. The Final Girl must be deemed “worthy” of survival because of her moral high ground. The Final Girl is virginal, pure, and androgynous. She is always the one who saves herself in the very end. Published in 1987, “Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film,” Clover portrays the emerging patterns of horror movies where the female protagonist eliminates the male antagonist. In this, she explores gender queerness in

horror. Clover examines how the genre explores narrative and identification expectations of its audiences to understand the structure and expectations of gender. She argues that slasher movies complicate the understanding of gender through the feminization of the male spectator versus the female, androgynous hero and male villain, turning all parties genderqueer. In contradiction to other genres, horror movies place a female lead in front of the standard gaze. However, because of this female lead, the gaze transitions throughout the film. It is through the killer's eyes, meaning the camera's framing, that we first see the Final Girl. In this moment of the film, audiences naturally will resonate more with the killer, as he stands for the standard gaze and maleness. However, towards the end of the film, the gaze shifts, and it is through the Final Girl's perspective that we then see the killer, and in Clover's perspective, the gaze becomes female. Scopic control leads to the breakdown of the standard gaze as a result of the Final Girl.

However, Clover decides that this character has little to do with femininity or the female gender. She writes that "Figuratively seen, 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 scene" (Clover 214). The Final Girl, as a homoerotic stand-in, shifts the standard gaze to a queer gaze as it forces the cishet male to not only identify with her but also forces the Final Girl to identify with the cishet male. In terms of gender, Clover suggests that the Final Girl is not actually a girl but instead is genderqueer. Men can relate to the Final Girl by viewing her only as "not male." This leads to questions about gender's impact on audience identification. As horror allows traditional audiences to engage with the taboo, the Final Girl allows cisgender audiences to experience the genderqueer. Clover questions if this is only to the benefit of men who can identify with the

female by turning her transgender. She asks, “Does the Final Girl mean “girl” to her female viewers and “boy” to her male viewers?” (Clover 214) In Clover’s question over transgender identity and the Final Girl, the “double gaze” of Judith Halbertam is brought to mind.

Judith Halberstam, also known as Jack, is an American academic and author best known for his book *Female Masculinity* (1998). Halberstam’s works are heavily focused on queer and transgender identities in popular culture. Halberstam has been a professor in the Department of English and Comparative Literature and the Institute for Research on Women, Gender, and Sexuality at Columbia University since 2017. In “The transgender gaze in *Boys Don’t Cry*,” Judith Halbertam analyzes the transgender gaze showcased in the 1999 film *Boy’s Don’t Cry*, which tells the true story of Brandon Teena, a trans man who moves to Nebraska in order to find love and solidify his identity but instead becomes the victim of a brutal hate crime committed by two men. The film forces the audiences into Brandon’s perspective in order to establish Brandon’s unquestionable gender expression. By allowing the audience to see the world through Brandon’s eyes, the movie effectively challenges traditional gender roles and forces viewers to reconsider the way they view transgender people. Halberstam explained that “The transgender gaze in this film reveals the ideological content of the male and female gazes, and it temporarily disarms the compulsory heterosexuality of the romance genre” (Halberstam 294). The transgender gaze in the film disrupts the traditional power dynamic between the male and female gazes, as it subverts the idea that the male gaze is superior and that film must conform to it in order to be accepted. By exposing the compulsory heterosexuality of the romance genre, the transgender gaze forces viewers to reassess their own assumptions and interpretations of gender.

While this essay does not discuss horror movies, Halbertam's analysis is vital when considering the queer gaze in horror and the role of the Final Girl. In horror, the Final Girl is in a similar position to that of Brandon, the main character in *Boys Don't Cry*. Both the Final Girl and Brandon are characterized by their gender, which is established as a precondition of their respective narratives. This gendered precondition shapes the audience's expectations of the character's behavior and the challenges they will face throughout the story. Despite the differences in genre and storylines, the roles of Final Girl and Brandon both highlight the ways in which gender influences the construction of fictional characters and their narratives. This is further explored through the specifics of the transgender gaze that is described through a shot/reverse shot sequencing, as it emphasizes the expected gender identity versus that which the character claims. The shot/reverse-shot "secures and destabilizes the spectator's sense of self" (Halberstam 296). In *Boys Don't Cry*, the shot/reverse-shot sequence involving the two Brandons serves to destabilize the spectator's understanding of gender stability and to confirm Brandon's manhood at the very moment that he has been exposed. The Final Girl experiences similar sequencing in her interactions with the killer. As the camera shifts between the two characters, audience expectations of gender performance are both stabilized as we are reminded who is the girl and who is the monster while simultaneously reminding audiences, specifically male audiences, that they relate to the final girl instead of her male counterpart, the killer. As the camera shifts between the two characters, audience expectations of gender performance are both stabilized and unstabilized.

On the one hand, the camera reminds us who is the girl and who is the monster. The girl is typically young, innocent, and vulnerable, while the monster is older, stronger, and more

dangerous. This traditional gender dichotomy is reinforced by the camera's focus on the girl's physical appearance and her emotional reactions to the violence she is experiencing. On the other hand, the camera also reminds us that the Final Girl is not simply a passive victim. She is a strong, resourceful, and determined survivor. This destabilization of gender expectations is particularly evident in the Final Girl's interactions with the killer. In many slasher films, the Final Girl is able to defeat the killer by using her intelligence and her physical strength. This subversion of traditional gender roles is often seen as empowering to female audiences, who are able to see themselves represented as strong and capable survivors.

In addition to stabilizing and destabilizing audience expectations of gender performance, the camera's shifting focus between the final girl and the killer can also serve to remind male audiences that they relate to the final girl more than they do to the killer. By shifting the focus between the two characters, the camera reminds male audiences that they are not the killers but the victims. They are the ones who are being hunted and terrorized. This can be a powerful and unsettling experience for male audiences, who may find themselves confronted with their fears and vulnerabilities. As a result, the audience reinstates the gender queerness of the Final Girl, making it not Girl vs Man but non-girl vs non-man. As audiences experience the taboo through both characters, queerness becomes an overwhelming aspect of the gender identity of the Final Girl and the Killer.

Clover covers a substantial amount of information surrounding gender and horror. Yet, she seems to neglect what happens when the female gaze is pushed onto the monster and when the heroine and the killer interact on screen. This is where Linda Williams and her essay, "When the Woman Looks," becomes extremely beneficial to the discussion. Linda Williams is an

American professor of film studies in the department of film studies and rhetoric at UC Berkeley. She is notably known for categorizing horror, melodrama, and pornography, all within the same genre of film. This explicitly sets a precedent about how she looks at women in horror or, more importantly, how women in horror movies look at themselves and their killers. Within her essay, "When the Women Looks," Williams aims to convey the implications on film when a woman looks both on and off the screen and the process of punishment that occurs specifically in horror movies. She discusses the immediate connection in horror movies between the women and the monster, arguing that the act of female looking is often punished and that this punishment is a way of reinforcing patriarchal power structures.

Williams begins by discussing the ways in which horror films traditionally construct the female spectator as a victim. She argues that the female characters in horror films are often objectified and sexualized and that they are frequently subjected to violence and death. However, in the moments before death, Williams accounts for the interesting phenomenon of when the woman and the killer look at each other. In the moments before death, Williams accounts for the interesting phenomenon of when the woman and the killer look at each other. As the monster and the girl, She says, "Woman's inquisitive gaze, far from driving the plot, invites her victimization and "reveal[s] not only the process of punishment but a surprising (and at times subversive) affinity between monster and woman, the sense in which her look at the monster recognizes their similar status within patriarchal structures of seeing" (Williams 62). This statement adequately captures the same situation of the transgender gaze. As the monster and the woman recognize each other, they are simultaneously playing into the defined gender roles that are predefined for them. She argues that the female characters in horror films are often objectified and sexualized,

and that they are frequently subjected to violence and death. Yet, in the moments before death, Williams accounts the interesting phenomenon of when the woman and the killer look at each other. In the moments before death, Williams accounts, interesting phenomenon of when the woman and the killer look at each other. as the monster and the girl, She says, "Woman's inquisitive gaze, far from driving the plot, invites her victimization and "reveal[s] not only the process of punishment but a surprising (and at times subversive) affinity between monster and woman , the sense in which her look at the monster recognizes their similar status within patriarchal structures of seeing" (Williams 62). The statement inadvertently links Williams to Halberstam by demonstrating how the transgender gaze functions. As the monster and the woman recognize each other, they are simultaneously playing into the defined gender roles that are expected of them. Although the monster is male, it is the woman's perspective that reinforces his gender role and emphasizes how gender roles imposed on individuals are used to manipulate the narrative.

Williams' essay, "When the Woman Looks," was published in 1984, years before Carol Clover's book, "Men, Women, and Chainsaws," which first introduced the concept of the Final Girl in 1992. As a result, Williams does not discuss the female gaze's impact on the Final Girl. However, it is worth noting that Clover's theory of the Final Girl reflects a lot of Williams' work on the female gaze in horror. In light of Clover's theory, it is possible to argue that Williams' work on the female gaze does have something to say about The Final Girl. Williams argues that the female gaze disrupts that of the standard gaze, allowing women to watch a genre that historically was against them from a different perspective, a perspective that men do not dictate. In the context of the slasher film, the female gaze can be used to empower the Final Girl and help

her to survive. Of course, it is important to remember that Williams' essay does not discuss the Final Girl, but her work on the female gaze can be used to shed light on this important figure in slasher films.

In conclusion, horror movies have a unique way of exploring the taboo and the "other" through the use of queer-coded and queer characters. The genre also offers a striking perspective on the aspects of humanity that are often considered unacceptable in society. By examining the gaze in horror movies, scholars have been able to analyze the complex relationship between gender, genre, and voyeurism. From Linda Williams to Carol J. Clover and Judith Halberstam, each scholar brings their unique perspective on the topic of The Gaze, which, when combined, provides a comprehensive understanding of the role that queerness plays in horror movies. Furthermore, through the analysis of *The Final Girl*, scholars like Carol J. Clover have shown how the genre subverts the standard gaze and provides a perspective that breaks down traditional gender norms. Overall, the intersectionality between gender, genre, and the gaze in horror movies offers a fascinating and important area of study that highlights the intricate gender performance of the genre and how that simultaneously challenges audiences and the standard gaze.

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