DO YOU WANT TO WATCH? A STUDY OF THE VISUAL RHETORIC OF THE POSTMODERN HORROR FILM

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This article explores the psychological and social effects of horror (slasher) movies, focusing on the 2003 thriller feardotcom. The question, “Why do we watch?” is investigated, using narrative and philosophical theories to analyze this and slasher films’ far-reaching cultural implications. The visual rhetoric of the postmodern horror movie is also analyzed in relation to its value as a social text, specifically questioning the validity of the Final Girl as an archetype for feminine power. Slasher film critics such as Carol Clover, Daniel Linz, Edward Donnerstein, Fred Molitor and Barry Sapolsky disagree about whether or not slasher films are primarily misogynistic texts and if the most recent depictions of the Final Girl can be read as a step towards feminine empowerment. This article uses narrative theory to interrogate the construction and grammar of the slasher film, among other things, investigating who the male and female audiences are encouraged to identify with while watching.

I am irresistibly drawn to horror movies and simultaneously repulsed by them. For years I have been watching “men” in various forms of physical or mental deformation chase a predominantly young, adolescent population of victims through dark homes and cornfields, wielding knives, chainsaws, drills, axes, and other weapons of destruction. The brutalization is often predictable, so predictable, that I often know when the monster-villain will appear, who will die and in what order victims will be disposed of. The conventions of slasher films are familiar, but nonetheless disconcerting. At night, after having watched a horror film from in between my fingers, I switch on an extra light to help ease my discomfort, even though I am in my early thirties and should have long since overcome my fears of the bogeyman.

Slasher films (the terms slasher and horror will be used intermittently to refer to the same genre) are those films characterized
by a psychotic human or superhuman (i.e., monster, alien, poltergeist) that kills or stalks a succession of people, usually teenagers, and predominantly females. Slasher films are frequently snubbed as sensationalized low-culture thrill by film reviewers and critics; in *Narratology*, Mieke Bal calls this the “hierarchal subordination of visuality to language” (165). Yet, despite existing disdain for the genre, scholars and academics continue to explore the cultural implications of slasher films. As observed by Carol Clover in *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, “These slasher films, although ‘beyond the purview of the respectable (middle-aged, middle-class) audience’ have importance as cultural texts, both because of their immense popularity with adolescents, and because of their firmly entrenched status as ‘outsider’ cinema, apart from more accepted forms of film and their more acceptable mainstream messages” (21). The focus for this examination will be on postmodern slasher movies, what Isabel Cristina Pinedo refers to in *Recreational Terror* as those horror films produced after 1968.

The first principle of postmodern horror relies on the man/monster who already threatens an already violent and untrustworthy social order. Second, postmodern horror does away with binary logic by blurring the distinctions between good and evil. Third, postmodern horror occurs in a world where one’s ability to adapt to their “supernatural” surroundings or monster-villain determines their ability to survive. In other words, logic and reason fail in this world and those who attempt to use them also fail at their attempts to survive. Fourth, postmodern horror resists closure, with the man/monster rising from the dead/undead or the protagonists’ systematic deaths (Pinedo 5). For this discussion, the psychological and social effects of slasher movies will be explored, with emphasis on the 2003 thriller *feardotcom*. The question, “Why do we watch?” will be investigated, using narrative theory to examine audience interest in slasher films and to interrogate the grammar of what ultimately proves to be a masculine text, despite popular theoretical arguments that female viewers are invited to either “gender cross” and relate to the film’s final male survivors or to align themselves with the final female survivor, more commonly known in horror movie rhetoric as: the Final Girl.

Movies have long since been considered an entertainment form with few people acknowledging the social and psychological ramifications; yet, movies are designed to direct emotions and
entire thought processes, possibly the single largest influence on humans’ interpretation of reality—second only to TV. Where TV allows the viewer to feel a sense of superiority and control over the plot and characters, movies stretch an audience’s sense of control to its limits; ultimately the struggle can be reduced to a struggle for power (Edmundson 83, 86). Mark Edmundson writes: “The [horror film] in effect gathers up the anxiety that is free-floating in the reader or viewer and binds it to a narrative. Thus the anxiety is displaced and brought under temporary, tenuous control” (12). Movies not only play into the psychological need for power but also explore perceptions of reality; thus, it is important to understand the underlying message communicated through them. Movies are narratives and as Mark Currie points out, identity is illustrated and understood through narrative: “The only way to explain who we are is to tell our own story” (5). Film theorist Bela Balazs grasped the monumental potential of movies as early as the 1940s:

And unless we study its laws and possibilities carefully, we shall not be able to control and direct this potentially greatest instrument of mass influence ever devised in the whole course of human history . . . the mentality of the people, and particularly of the urban population, is to a great extent the product of this art, an art that is at the same time a vast industry. Thus the question of educating the public to a better, more critical appreciation of . . . film is the question . . . of the mental health of . . . nations. (qtd. in Barry 192)

Because of their lack of character development and weak dialogue (in addition to gory scenes overflowing with senseless hacking), horror films have frequently been snubbed by film critics. Anne Mary Seward Barry, author of *Visual Intelligence* points out, however, that people decipher more meaning when they are initially presented pictures (images) than from words (75); thus, the message is communicated more poignantly than if dialogue had been polished but the imagery left to imagination. Barry writes, “The perceptual power of the image may also be seen in its ability to dominate the written or spoken word when they appear together”(78). Creators of horror movies rely on this quintessential fact, and because of it, special effects have become the horror movie’s means to survival and popularity. While plots follow the basic postmodern horror criteria described above, maniacs/
monsters and gory scenes become increasingly more graphic, quenching a desensitized audience’s thirst for more realistic images. It is no wonder in this century of quick thrills—theme parks, Reality TV, and extreme sports—that an inherent part of the viewer’s attraction to horror film is its ability to scare, to excite, to thrill, in much the same way as a ride at Disney World. Horror films offer an instant thrill ride of terror.

William Malone, the director of *feardotcom*, relies on the image’s ability to psychologically affect the viewer. In this horror movie, a male detective and his female partner investigate the deaths of four people who inexplicably die 48 hours after logging onto the website Feardotcom.com. In an effort to uncover the source of the mysterious deaths, the detective logs onto the Internet site. He is greeted by a seductive voice on the site asking, “Do you want to watch?” What follows is a flash of images: unclothed skin, tied wrists, pouty lips. The sultry voice asks, “Do you want to see more?” When he clicks “yes,” the nightmare begins—he and the movie audience are shown a montage of disturbing images, each image lasting less than a second on screen before being replaced by another, and before returning to the primary narrative of the story. Among other haunting images, the viewer is assaulted with pictures of a woman’s hand dripping blood, a screaming ghostly apparition, the remains of a tortured body on a table, a mangled bloody head, a large egg with a growth inside of it, a man’s lifeless face frozen in terror. The images are bathed in predominantly dark and murky shades of brown, black, gray, rust, green, and blue. Of the psychological power of this technique Malone comments, “In *feardotcom* we use special effects to layer subtle, small elements that are hardly noticeable, but which play upon the audience’s psyche and strengthen the suspense and uneasiness of the experience.” For his movie sets, Malone uses disturbing dark blue-gray-green hues as a backdrop, never allows daylight in, and drowns every scene in rain; it is an atmosphere similar to the earth’s ruin created in *Blade Runner*. In this way, Malone externally focalizes through the gray-green tones and dark rooms; he visualizes “nightmare.” The hero/heroine’s office is dimly lit and apartments of victims are run-down and dark; nothing is inviting except for the seductive voice on the site www.feardotcom.com asking, “Do you want to watch?” The popularity of slasher movies at the box office answers, “Yes. We do.”
The thrills of viewing horror movies manifest themselves into the accompanying quickened heart rate, agitation, and fight or flight (simulated fear) response that ensues. Horror movies incite emotional and physical responses from the viewer before a rational one. The premise of feardotcom relies on this neurological fact—visitors to the site www.feardotcom.com are literally scared to death by the images that accost them. Like the voyeurs of feardotcom who are terrorized by the horrific images on the screen, the viewers of slasher movies react emotionally to the film as if a part of the action. Pinedo refers to the experience as “recreational terror” and realizes the experience simulates a struggle for control (5). Two of the dilemmas of viewing horror films occur when (a) the viewer is unable to separate the simulated experience from reality and an understanding of the way the world works, and (b) the viewer does not apply reason to make sense of emotional responses. Barry writes, “Image is therefore capable of reaching the emotions before it is cognitively understood. The logic of the image is also associative and holistic rather than linear, so that not only does the image present itself as reality, but it also may speak directly to the emotions, bypassing logic, and works according to the alogical principles of reasoning” (78). A steady diet of “media drama” may potentially alter the way “current physical reality is perceived when memory [of realities created on the TV or movies] is used to judge present situations” (Barry 62). Thus, repeated exposure to the conventions of the horror movie can alter the way the viewer perceives his or her current reality. The consequences of horror movie violence become heightened in the emotional reactions of children, who have not yet formed a logical notion of reality.

Researchers Joanne Cantor, University of Wisconsin, Madison, and Kristen Harrison, University of Michigan, discovered that the effects of watching horror movies in childhood and adolescence can survive into adulthood. Harrison states, “These effects were more serious than jumpiness at a slammed door or the need to use a nightlight. They ranged from inability to sleep through the night for months after exposure to a steadfast and continuing avoidance of the situations portrayed in [. . .] the movies” (“Scary Movies” 16). More detrimental than the movie’s ability to manipulate immediate psychological reactions or thinking is the movie’s ability to alter one’s long term attitude, behaviors, and values.
Viewers become emotionally involved in the horror movie experience, not logically involved. If, as Barry points out, the viewer does not have a concrete, logical understanding of the world and their own value system, then the message of the movie has potential to alter the viewer’s idea formation (173). This is certainly the case for young children. However, slasher movies have the ability to change value systems in most age groups, regardless of the viewer’s educational level. Researchers at the University of California, Santa Barbara, found that college freshman asked to watch three violent films within five days responded with significantly less empathy for domestic abuse victims than before viewing the films (“Slasher Basher” 10). There is no shortage of evidence exploring the connection between horror movies and the viewer’s resulting desensitized views of violence. Taking this data into consideration, the question becomes, “Why watch?”

Horror movies have become postmodern, in part, because of their questioning of reality; they push viewers to consider their own notions of what is real. Horror films are a simulation of a reality, or more accurately, they fall under Jean Baudrillard’s definition of a simulacra—a creation of a reality that never existed. One essential characteristic of the horror film is the science fiction or supernatural element. Horror film monsters/ maniacs defy human mortality, often rising repeatedly from the dead, as evidenced by sequels such as Nightmare on Elm Street (1984); Nightmare on Elm Street Part 2, Freddy’s Revenge (1985); Nightmare on Elm Street 3, Dream Warriors (1987). Freddy Krueger, once human but burned alive by frenzied parents for his prior crime of molesting children, rises from the dead/undead to haunt the movies’ protagonists in their dreams. Literally invincible, he is impossible to stop using any logical, rational methods. In her examination of how desire functions in narrative, Teresa de Lauretis writes, “Classical mythology of course was populated with monsters, beings awesome to behold, whose power to capture vision, to lure the gaze, is conveyed in the very etymon of the word ‘monster’” (209). Further, she argues that the few existing monsters of modern narratives are “semantically associated with boundary.” In postmodern slasher films, the monster represents the underbelly of society, the uncivilized, the unethical; these monsters give in to their unacceptable (and psychotic) desires, representing the “bestial, animal side of man that must be sought
out and conquered” (209). In *feardotcom*, both a human and a supernatural form are responsible for the killing: (1) Alistair Pratt, the sociopath doctor who tortures women to the point of begging for death, while users logged onto www.feardotcom.com watch, and (2) the “force” created by Dr. Pratt that is able to surmise the greatest fear of each visitor to the site and kill them exactly 48 hours after they log onto the website. As mentioned earlier, the fourth component of the horror movie paradigm occurs when logic fails, reality collapses, and the only way to survive is to adapt to the monster/maniae’s alternative reality. Pinedo writes, “Postmodern horror constructs a nihilistic universe in which casual logic collapses and one cannot rely on the efficacy of science or authority figures” (5). To survive the force behind the supernatural killings in *feardotcom*, the hero and heroine must first watch the site, step into the unexplainable reality created there, and accept it as a possibility for explaining the bodies that begin to pile up.

Baudrillard postulates that humans live their lives based on the absence of profound realities because everything is a reproduction of something else, something that was once real; he writes, “everything is already dead and resurrected in advance […] the real is no longer what it was.” Further, he calls this time a “panic-stricken production of the real and of the referential” where people agree to a collective, shared reality in order to co-habitat and function (6; 7). The horror film challenges this notion of a (fabricated) shared reality (created by authority figures) by offering the alternative. The survivor of the horror film, like the survivors of *feardotcom* must embrace the alternative reality in order to escape death. The horror film essentially asks, “What is reality?” Not only do slasher films examine the falsity of a shared notion of reality, but they also call into question the method through which reality is enforced. Suburban, middle-class neighborhoods often produce the monsters in slasher films. In the *Halloween* series, Michael Myers, the movie’s killer, is shown as a young boy growing up in a white, middle-class American neighborhood. Likewise, Freddy Krueger of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series and Jason Voorhees of the Friday the 13th series are all products of middle-class suburban neighborhoods and thus, inflict harm on the very neighborhoods (and authority figures) that produced them. In addition, authority figures are often portrayed
as untrustworthy, evil characters themselves; protagonists who trust authority figures end up dead, thus adding to the appeal for its largely teenage viewers who are in the stereotypical “rebellious” stage before adulthood.

Never straying too far from the paradigm of postmodern horror, feardotcom’s Dr. Pratt has been born without emotional responses and is representative of a postmodern society so overrun with media images and violence that it has become entirely desensitized. Dr. Pratt does his killing solely for the pleasure of his middle-class American audience of Internet users. Without the successful response from normal people watching his site and clicking “yes” to the question “Do you want to watch?”, Dr. Pratt’s site would not flourish. Thus, no one would die. Dr. Pratt and other slasher monsters, whose creation attests to the notion of “making emptiness” (in the sense of devaluing and destroying life), operate as what Baudrillard terms “models of deterrence” that serve to enforce social mores and norms. Baudrillard writes, “All around, the neighborhood is nothing but a protective zone—remodeling, disinfection, a snobbish and hygienic design—but above all in a figurative sense: it is a machine for making emptiness” (61). In feardotcom the crime is the desire to watch that which is taboo—the systematic torturing and murdering of young women. Once users log onto the web site, a young woman’s voice summons them, “Do you want to watch?” “Do you want to see more?” If the visitor clicks “yes,” the nightmare begins—the viewer (voyeur) sees a series of disturbing images that cause hellish hallucinations, leading to the voyeur’s death. The visitor also sees a real woman, bound and gagged, who is being tortured. To survive the website www.feardotcom.com, one must decide against indulging temptation and click “no.” The force created by Dr. Pratt guards social norms by destroying those who dare to succumb to their urges.

In the majority of horror films, premarital sex is most often the “crime” the protagonists commit before meeting their doom; those who ignore the social mores of celibacy before marriage suffer a brutal death. Clover coined the term the “Final Girl” to describe the last girl to survive in the postmodern slasher film. The Final Girl is most often virginal or celibate, reinforcing the notion that to survive destruction, one must remain chaste until marriage, sending a clear message to the predominantly teenage
audience who view slasher films: premarital sex is bad; watching pornography/violence on the Internet is bad, thus communicating social expectations while simultaneously attacking the societies that produce them. Because authority figures are themselves often evil figures, the survivor(s) must rely on only the self—no one is to be trusted in postmodern horror. Not only does the horror movie monster serve as a model of deterrence in the fictional reality created, but the movies themselves serve as models of deterrence for the mostly teenage audience, illustrating what behaviors equal death. This model of deterrence becomes more complex when realizing the potential for pleasure for some viewers—a theme feardotcom keeps returning to. The movie audience is allowed to watch and “enjoy” (“enjoy” is used lightly here since so many viewers report increased anxiety and levels of fear) without the same “punishment” as the movie’s victims, even though the actors who succumb and watch the same images on screen die. Which is the worst evil: the deranged mind of the killer or of the voyeur (victim)? What responsibility do the movie audience of voyeurs have in this nightmare? Boundaries between moral and immoral are blurred in interesting contradictions between good and evil.

According to Baudrillard, the world has become saturated with media, advertisements, and reproductions of life, and because of this extreme pervasion, reality (i.e., profound reality) has been lost to the imitation of it (79–94). In an effort to get at this lost reality, Mark Taylor, author of the hypertext Hiding, asserts that people attempt to transgress the body’s limits and that this transgression is realized through the intense experience of pain. Taylor writes, “Scoring the skin transgresses boundaries that are supposed to be closed securely [. . .] Love and death meet in the ecstatic pleasure of pain. The anguish inflicted by the needle attracts as much as it repulses. What draws in the drawing is loss, radical loss that ends with the loss of self” (131). While Taylor is here referring to the act of tattooing, he later applies his principles to skin stretching (from flesh hooks) and scarification. In order to “shatter repressive structures” one must surpass society’s rules (methods of deterrence) by rituals of piercing, tattooing, skin stretching, and mutilation (133). Horror movies, while one step removed from the experience, allow viewers a vicarious opportunity to experience the moment of death without actually dying—a safe way to
play with death. Thus, the viewer is simultaneously watching a model of deterrence and attempting a vicarious transgressing beyond it and the body’s limitations—creating, at once, a pleasurable and terrifying experience. While the unfortunate victims of www.feardotcom.com suffer horrific deaths after viewing the intense images and brutalization of a young woman, the viewers of feardotcom watch the same forbidden images safely from a movie theater seat. It then becomes as Baudrillard posits: as the distinctions between fiction and reality become blurred, reality collapses; the real becomes the hyperreal (35). The graphic scenes of violence, created for “recreational terror,” become reality and the viewer reacts to “real” violence as if it were entertainment.

Horror movies, and specifically postmodern horror movies, are characterized by increasingly gory, graphic dramatizing of the destruction of human bodies. It seems then, that horror movie audiences are fascinated with the eradication of the screen victim’s body. In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” Laura Mulvey calls the fascination with the human form “scopophilia,” which means “pleasure in looking.” This pleasure is a result of viewing another as an object. Movie audiences gain pleasure both by identifying with the images on the screen and by objectifying the images. Traditionally, Mulvey believes the actress’s function has been that of sexually objectified image while the actor takes an active role of “advancing the story”; it is the actor’s desires that the actress fulfills. The actor becomes the “I” that male viewers identify with and by “means of identification with him, through participation in his power, the spectator can indirectly possess [the actress] too” (181). A close study of postmodern slasher films such as feardotcom implicates the postmodern slasher film as a projection of masculine desire. Audience members who are female identify with the objectified image of woman while the male viewers identify with the movie’s main protagonist, who, more often than not, is male. Such an interpretation is supported by the observation of critics of horror films that the obsession with the body and mutilation of it is similar to the relationship between viewer and viewed in pornography. Pinedo writes, “The horror film, like pornography, dares not only to violate taboos but to expose the secrets of the flesh, to spill the contents of the body. If pornography is the genre of the wet dream, then horror is the genre of the wet death. They each whet the appetites of the
their respective and overlapping audiences for more” (61). Yet problematic in this comparison of hard-core porn with hard-core gore (coined “carnography” by Richard Gehr in 1990) is the assumption that both mediums lead to a sexual release. Clover theorizes that the release realized when viewing a horror film is one of anger, rage, and a desire to experience profound reality—that experience which is only actualized in a near-death moment (11). Like pornography, however, horror films are concerned with transcendence from the body. While pornography blurs bodily boundaries through a pleasurable sexual release, horror movies blur boundaries through the actual destruction of physical boundaries, the promise of pain, and the resulting pleasure of heightened pain. The juxtaposition of sexual images with violent ones further erases the boundaries between pleasure and pain; thus, the vicariously experienced near-death moment in postmodern horror at once incites pleasure and pain for the viewer. Another explanation for the fascination with the destruction of the human body is supported by Mulvey’s theory that the image of the human body arouses castration anxiety in the male viewers, an anxiety that is assuaged by unveiling the mystery of woman, “devaluation, punishment, or saving,” or a process called “fetishistic scopophilia” by which the female image becomes a fetish. Unfortunately, postmodern horror has typically chosen to punish its female characters.

In Postmodern Narrative Theory, Mark Currie argues that Mulvey’s generalization is too simple and no longer applies to many modern movies. Currie argues that viewers do not react so predictably to the rigid binary Mulvey has suggested and that viewers cross genders when identifying with heroes and heroines. Currie’s counterargument may have validity for many movies, but Mulvey’s assertions still hold true for postmodern horror movies, especially when examining the Final Girl. The principal reason slasher film genre has been disregarded as hyper-sensational low culture art has been its consistent portrayal of helpless female victims. Scenes depicting the torture and death of female victims last an average of ten minutes, while those depicting the torture and death of male victims last only two minutes or less (Molitor and Sapolsky 248). While female characters are frequently terrified to the point of screaming, begging, crying and then stabbed, raped, chopped up, or strangled, male characters are less likely to suffer
the same extent of mutilation and are more likely to express anger and rage onscreen and less likely to be shown during moments of terror (Nolan and Ryan “Fear and Loathing at the Cineplex”). In “Final Girls and Terrible Youth: Transgression in 1980s Slasher Horror,” Sarah Trencansky notes, “Women are repeatedly killed, apparently in conformance to the monster’s attempt at repressing the dangerous sexuality they exhibit (during an obligatory nude scene) or seek out during the course of the film.” Yet as Trencansky, Clover, Pinedo, and other leading horror film academics have discovered, the 1980s saw the rise to power of the Final Girl: the last character to survive the monster’s attacks, the girl who (a) survives long enough to be rescued by someone else or (b) becomes as aggressive or witty as the monster and escapes. As Trencansky asserts, the Final Girl must alter her perceptions of reality in order to subvert the dominating social structure she had previously obeyed. Thus, the Final Girl must learn to sort out what she had earlier mistaken for reality, and adapt to the signs the monster is sending her. She must learn how to live in his world, his reality, in order to live. The Final Girl leaves behind the untrustworthy dominant social order (most typically represented by abusive and irresponsible parents); simultaneously, the audience of moviegoers is taught (shown) that the Final Girl can only survive if she embodies certain attributes, most notably: she is virginal, masculine, and often an outsider. Thus, the mostly teen audience is given an outlet to rebel against existing social structures while they are also being taught what behaviors elevate one to hero/heroine status.

This interpretation of the Final Girl as an expression of female empowerment, or an “I” for the audience to identify with, becomes problematic when comparing gender discrepancies in horror movie portrayals and audience reactions. Furthermore, male viewers report that they enjoy slasher films significantly more than female viewers, and that enjoyment is heightened when in the company of a distressed woman. Female viewers, conversely, report more enjoyment from watching slasher films when in the company of men “who display mastery in response to such gory depictions” (Zillman et al.). Examining the narratology of slasher film further proves the majority of postmodern slasher films to be masculine texts. The most popular, oft cited slasher films, such as the Nightmare on Elm Street and Halloween series, are
focalized through a third, person, omnipotent presence that the movie audience never sees. The audience follows the focalizer via the camera from one group of protagonists to the next, seeing what the monster sees, and is invited into each intimate death scene. By focusing most frequently on the female body, in various stages of dress, undress and then mutilation, the gaze of the focalizer identifies itself as male. De Lauretis restates what feminist film critic Claire Johnston posited: “what the camera grasps is not the reality as such but ‘the natural [naturalized] world of the dominant ideology. . . . The ‘truth’ of our oppression cannot be ‘captured’ on celluloid with the ‘innocence’ of the camera: it has to be constructed, manufactured” (207). The focalizer, just like Freddy and Michael, spends more time following the females in the film, lingers longer on the female body and its anatomy than on the male body, even when both are murdered in the same scene. In “Narratology and Feminism,” Nilli Diengott erroneously argues, “Whether the focalizer or narrator is female or male is entirely insignificant” (202) to narratology, since this is the work of interpretation and not narratology per se. However, credibility and narrative authority are determined by the narrators and focalizers, and thus, “profoundly affect the way readers interpret stories” (Keen 31). It is impossible to separate narratology from reader/audience reaction/interpretation, and any attempt to do so becomes counterintuitive.

In feardotcom, we (the audience) are privy to information that the detective (and other victims) are not, mainly that the four were scared to death by images they saw and that according to the rules presented in this alternative reality, the detective most likely will be, too. This is knowledge that increases what Bal calls “suspense that lies at the root of a threat” (161) and (supposed) enjoyment of the film. The focalizer continually shifts throughout the movie from the four internet users who die (we see the frightening images that will lead to their death), to the detective, to the girl Dr. Pratt has tied up (we see the room the girl has been locked in through her eyes when she is left alone), to Dr. Pratt (we see a young girl from his vantage point where he hides in the theater rafters), and back to the detective. By shifting the focalizer, feardotcom implicates the movie audience in an interesting way. We know that clicking “yes” to the question, “Do you want to watch?” will mean the death of the innocent girl, yet our very
presence in the movie theater and the number of tickets sold answers, “Yes, we do want to watch.” The focalizers in feardotcom shift, but the main characters (Dr. Pratt and the detective who will solve the case) are both male. The audience is invited to experience this movie through a variety of perspectives; unfortunately, research shows that female audience members are more likely identifying with the women who are tortured than with the lead detective.

Studying the movie poster for feardotcom supports the notion that the horror film’s target response is the terror reaction experienced by female viewers, who have been proven to react more fearfully than male viewers “because they perceive themselves to be at greater risk of danger and are less confident in their ability to protect themselves in the event of an attack” (qtd. in Nolan and Ryan 41). Most captivating about the poster is the young girl’s/doll’s face shown in the same black, white, and blue hues that distinguish what the viewer on the other side of a camera sees throughout the movie. Before viewing the movie, it is impossible to decipher whether the image is a doll or a girl, in part due to the extreme deformation of the eyes, which is characteristic of dolls which have been transformed during play. On the girl’s/doll’s face is a leather chinstrap that covers most of the mouth and prevents the girl/doll from talking. The doll is a popular image, equated with young girl’s play—an image more readily recognized and equated to childhood by females. If the doll is indeed a young woman who has been manipulated to look like a doll, the message becomes eerily clear—women are objects, meant for easy manipulation and silencing for the entertainment of the owner. After watching the movie, it becomes apparent that the latter is the case and the image on the movie poster, video, and DVD cover is that of a young girl who has been tortured and manipulated into a doll-like image, restrained and silenced with leather devices. Further, the movie title is scripted in childlike writing, using a mix of lowercase and uppercase letters. Yet, some critics would argue that the lone survivor of Dr. Pratt’s “doll-making process” supports the Final Girl theory. Unfortunately, this Final Girl begs for death and only escapes after being rescued by the hero and heroine of the movie; it is the hero who does most of the rescuing while the heroine fights her insurmountable fear.
An exploration of the gender differences of words associated with horror films offers further evidence supporting the assertion that the Final Girl does little for female empowerment. A study of 30 men and 30 women enrolled at The University of Missouri found that the most frequent words chosen by research participants in association with horror films were disturbing, horror, girls, evil, scary, killer, and young (Nolan and Ryan 46). In addition, male participants chose words expressing anger: shocked, angry, helpless, agitated, frustrated most frequently, in comparison to female participants who choose words expressing fear: nervous, vulnerable, horrified, exposed, betrayed (Nolan and Ryan 49–50). Studies such as the one described here refute Pinedo and Trecansky’s findings that slasher films can be read as a feminist (and pleasurable) text due to the survival of the Final Girl. Likewise, Trecansky’s theory that the Final Girl becomes an “I” for both male and female audience members to identify with proves erroneous in lieu of studies such as the one reported here. Female viewers’ emotional responses disprove the theory that women are empowered through the assertive, victorious Final Girl; female viewers are not identifying with the victorious Final Girl, but with the unlucky victims. In “Afterthoughts,” Mulvey changed her original position that women identify with actresses and men with actors and acknowledged that “the ‘grammar’ of the story [can place] the reader, listener or spectator with the hero” (182). However, the grammar of horror films does not encourage its female viewers to transcend genders or to identify with its leading ladies, since the focalizer and the dominant ideology of the horror movie is the masculine gaze. It is the male viewer who gender-crosses and connects with the Final Girl; thus, ultimately experiencing any intended empowerment or sense of retaliatory violence, which is further supported when studying the gender-ambiguity of the names of Final Girls: Stevie, Marti, Laurie, Terry, Stretch, Will, Joey, Max. Final Girls are, according to Clover, “boyish, in a word”(40). As discussed earlier, male viewers report more enjoyment when in the company of a distressed female, and females when in the company of a male demonstrating his fearlessness.

A recent trend in postmodern slasher films offers further evidence that, while geared toward the terror experienced primarily by women, postmodern slasher films are a masculine text—meant to empower men. While the heroines (Final Girls) of The Texas
Chain Saw Massacre 2, Nightmare on Elm Street, and Friday the Thirteenth are able to defeat the monsters single-handedly, the Final Girls of the newest slasher films are rescued by someone else. The Final Girls of Scream, I Know What You Did Last Summer, and feardotcom, are regressing to earlier postmodern horror themes where Final Girls screamed and cowered their way through scenes, only surviving due to the intervention of stronger, usually male, characters.

Horror movies actively question a shared notion of reality by creating complex contradictions between good and evil, female and male, and pleasure and pain, forcing the viewer to question an understanding of the real. The viewers of postmodern horror movies are simultaneously subject to models of deterrence and are also provided a simulated outlet in which to transgress societal rules and boundaries, and as Pinedo argues, the human body, slashed and chopped, becomes a living/dying metaphor for the collapsing of social rules. While some critics argue that the postmodern horror movie can provide a safe, pleasurable outlet for experiencing terror, an analysis of the social context and gender discrepancies in emotional responses proves that the horror movie creates a man’s world, ultimately empowering men while females, on and off the screen, are encouraged to see themselves as victims.

Works Cited


“Scary Movies and TV Programs Have Long-Lasting Effects.” *USA Today.* April 2000: 16.


