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Gabriel White

Killer Fears: Slasher Films and 1980s American Anxieties

The opening scene of the film *Scream IV* frames a film professor nervously waiting at a restaurant for her blind date. While waiting at the bar, she received a phone call from her date informing her that he got lost and could not find the restaurant. She decides to find him. Remaining on the phone with her date as she attempts to pinpoint his location, the conversation shifts to the topic of slasher movies and their importance. “You can really examine the culture of the moment by looking at the tropes of the time,”¹ says the professor before being gutted by her supposed blind date. This scene illustrates the significance of studying slasher movies.

Horror films, as an all-inclusive genre, have been produced for generations. Each era of horror film has left its mark on society. From the early horror classics such as *Nosferatu* and *Frankenstein* to more recent films such as *Get Out* and *X*, American audiences have eagerly consumed horror for over a hundred years.² However, one horror subgenre arguably stands out from the rest: the slasher film. First popularized in the late ‘70s and amassing an even larger audience in the ‘80s, the slasher genre and its slew of antagonistic characters have become iconic. Although many people appreciate slasher movies, others discredit them as cheap and dirty entertainment. Slasher films, however, are much more than just entertainment. They can provide historians a gateway to understanding the past by focusing on society’s anxieties captured in the celluloid. These films offer a glimpse of the socio-economic, political, and cultural anxieties of the historical period when they were produced. Understanding these slasher films is important as they can provide an accessible and easy-to-understand bottom-up approach to many issues plaguing the United States in the ‘80s. Using cultural theorist Stuart Hall’s notion of encoding and decoding media texts, this study shows how slasher films can provide glimpses of the socio-economic and cultural issues

1 *Scream VI*, directed by Matt Bettinelli-Olpin and Tyler Gillett (2023; Montreal, Canada: Paramount Pictures, 2023), Theater.

2 *Nosferatu*, directed by F.W. Murnau, (1922; Germany: Jofa-Atelier Berlin-Johannisthal, 1922), Streaming; *Frankenstein*, directed by James Whale, (1931; Universal Studios, CA: Universal Pictures, 1931), DVD; *Get Out*, directed by Jordan Peele, (2017; Fairhope, AL: Blumhouse Productions, 2017), DVD; and *X*, directed by Ti West, (2022; Queenstown, New Zealand: A24, 2022), DVD.

occurring when they were made. It follows Kara M. Kvaran's methodology deploying Hall's ideas "which states that texts can have multiple meanings that are then interpreted by audiences in different ways depending on their subject position. The creators may not intend these decoded meanings and can be collectively or individually understood by the audience."³

The Rise of 1980s Slasher Films

Slasher films are a subgenre of horror movies that often involve a wicked character that stalks and kills a group of people, usually youth (high school/college age), involved in inappropriate and what society or their parents deems as immoral behaviors. These behaviors include premarital sex, underage drinking, and illicit drug use. While not all slasher movies depict these behaviors, the most prominent slasher films, such as *Friday the 13th Part III* and *A Nightmare on Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors*, do.⁴ These two films include characters who participate in these behaviors, including a drug abuser and characters who engage in premarital sex and underage drinking. Along with portrayals of youth engaged in improper conduct, slasher films tend to have a sole survivor who successfully defeats the killer. This surviving character is usually a woman who does not participate in the aforementioned immoral behaviors.⁵

While many view the 1960s classic *Psycho* as the first slasher movie, the film does not meet many of the earlier characteristics of traditional slasher films, like having a youthful cast or heavy use of drugs and alcohol.⁶ The earliest examples of traditional slasher movies include *The Texas Chain Saw*

3 For the work of Stuart Hall, see David Croteau and William Hoynes, *Media Society: Industries, Images, and Audiences* (London: Sage Publications, 2003), 269; and for Kara M. Kvaran, see Kara Kvaran, "'You're All Doomed!' A Socioeconomic Analysis of Slasher Films," *Journal of American Studies* 50, no. 4 (November 2016): 953-970.

4 *Friday the 13th Part III*, directed by Steve Miner (1982; Saugus, CA: Paramount Pictures, 1982), DVD and *A Nightmare on Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors*, directed by Russell Chuck (1987; Los Angeles, CA: New Line Cinema, 1987), DVD.

5 For films containing the trope of sole survivor, see *Halloween*, directed by John Carpenter (1978; Pasadena, CA: Compass International Pictures, 1978), DVD; *Friday the 13th*, Cunningham (1980; Blairstown, NJ: Paramount, 1980), DVD; *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, directed by Wes Craven (1984; Los Angeles, CA: New Line Cinema, 1984), DVD. For films depicting sexual situations, see *Halloween*, Carpenter, 1978. *Friday the 13th: The Final Chapter*, directed by Joseph Zito (1984; Santa Clarita, CA: Paramount Pictures, 1984), DVD; *Sleepaway Camp*, directed by Robert Hiltzik (1983; Glens Falls, NY: American Eagle Films, 1983), DVD. For films containing drug and alcohol use, see *Prom Night*, directed by Paul Lynch (1980; Toronto, Canada: Guardian Trust Company, 1980), Streaming. *Halloween*, Carpenter, 197; and. Cunningham *Friday the 13th*, 1980.

6 *Psycho*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock (1960; Universal Studios, CA: Shamley Productions, 1960), DVD.

Massacre and *Black Christmas*, both released in 1974.⁷ These movies popularized many of the tropes that later became staples of the genre. Both films featured a cast of late high school/early college-aged people who unexpectedly become targets of a malevolent killer. In some movies, there are multiple killers, such as *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, where the survivor characters face a family of cannibals. *Black Christmas* and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* also created the “final girl” trope as both movies focus on a female lead who manages to survive the killer. These films also ignited a trend of having the storyline occur in a single location. *Black Christmas* takes place at a college sorority house, while *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* occurs at a house in the middle of nowhere.⁸ The confining of the plot to a single location became a common occurrence in the slasher genre. This boundary created greater tension for both the on-screen characters and the audience, as both parties would feel like there was nowhere to run from the killer. The movie *April Fool’s Day* uses this idea to full effect. The film takes place on the confinements of an island where the characters realize they have no way to escape the killer.⁹

The release of the film *Halloween* in 1978 quickly became the blueprint adopted by future filmmakers of the genre. Scholars often credit his movie as the first actual slasher film that set the standard for the slasher craze of the ‘80s.¹⁰ This film firmly brought together all the previously mentioned tropes and featured all the aspects of what became traditional slasher movies. These characteristics included an antagonistic killer stalking a group of delinquent friends, who eventually kills everyone but the “final girl,” who is not involved in the immoral activities her friends participate in, such as drug use and immoral sexual practices. In the article “Razors in the Dreamscape: Revisiting ‘A Nightmare on Elm Street’ and the Slasher Film,” James Kendrick discusses the trope of the “final girl.” He describes some characteristics of the “final girl” and states, “Unlike her girlfriends, she is not sexually active.”¹¹ This quote helps explain why the “final girl” is supposed to be of a higher moral character than her friends, which is why she is the one who survives the terror. *Halloween* also includes a very self-contained setting, a small town in Illinois. Critics have noted *Halloween’s* influence on many popular slasher movies, such as *Friday the 13th* and *My Bloody Valentine*, on establishing the tropes and

7 *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, directed by Tobe Hooper (1974; Watterson, TX: New Line Cinema, 1974), DVD; and *Black Christmas*, directed by Bob Clark (1974; Toronto, Canada: Warner Brothers, 1974), DVD.

8 Ibid.

9 *April Fool’s Day*, directed by Fred Walton (1986; British Columbia, Canada: Paramount Pictures, 1986), DVD.

10 Carpenter, *Halloween*, 1978.

11 James Kendrick, “Razors in the Dreamscape: Revisiting ‘A Nightmare on Elm Street’ and the Slasher Film,” *Film Criticism* 33, no. 3 (2009), 26.

techniques of how those films were shot.¹²

Slasher movies gained a massive amount of success, especially during the 1980s. One reason slasher movies were so popular during this period was the introduction of strong female leads and the inclusion of female characters who defied typical gender roles. Strong women protagonists were not the norm in horror movies. In the past, lead characters were predominantly white men who came to the rescue of women characters needing to be saved. For example, the films *Dracula* and *Creature from the Black Lagoon* end with women being taken away to the monster's lair and having to be saved by courageous men.¹³ The slasher genre changed the norm, however, with the introduction of strong female leads as the women became the ones who would fight against evil. This empowerment attracted a female audience to buy tickets to watch slasher movies. As Kara Kvaran notes, "The target demographic of slasher films, historically speaking, was adolescent males, though a large part of the audience was likely to be female."¹⁴ More women became interested in slasher movies due in part to this shift in which female characters went from always needing to be saved to now becoming the ones who defeated the killer and survived the carnage. For example, in the 1988 slasher film *Child's Play*, a single mother unknowingly buys a possessed doll for her son but soon must fight against it to save her life and her son's. While this film does not contain a teen lead like other slashers, such as *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, it has a female lead role like *A Nightmare on Elm Street*.¹⁵ This woman empowerment can help explain why slasher films became so popular, especially with younger women who wanted to fight back against the more traditional gender roles stressed by the conservative adults, not only as a result of the age gap but also in terms of the changes in the political climate of the nation. This lead woman embodies the 'Final Girl.'

The Final Girl is often the very last member of the teenage group alive at the end of the slasher; this includes characters like Laurie Strode (*Halloween*) and Nancy Thompson (*A Nightmare on Elm Street*).¹⁶ These characters have been important in demonstrating women's empowerment in horror movies and how the role of women changed during the 1980s. Carol Clover's article "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film" discusses this relationship between women and empowerment in films. In her article, Clover details

12 *Halloween*, Carpenter, 1978; and *My Bloody Valentine*, directed by George Mihalka (1981; Sydney Mines, N.S.: Paramount Pictures, 1981), DVD.

13 *Dracula*, directed by Tod Browning (1931; Universal Studios, CA: Universal Pictures, 1931), DVD; and *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, directed by Jack Arnold (1954; Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures, 1954), DVD.

14 Kvaran, "'You're All Doomed!,'" 958.

15 *Child's Play*, directed by Tom Holland (1988; Chicago, IL: Universal Pictures, 1988), DVD; and Craven, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, 1984.

16 Carpenter, *Halloween*, 1978; and Craven, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, 1984.

the evolution of the Final Girl throughout the history of slasher movies and describes the characteristics of these characters. She breaks down the main elements of a slasher film, which include the killer, weapons, 'Final Girl,' and the "terrible place." According to Clover, the terrible place is a location, typically a house or tunnel, where the victims find themselves at the mercy of the villain.¹⁷ James Kendrick also discusses the Final Girl in his paper "Razors in the Dreamscape: Revisiting 'A Nightmare on Elm Street' and the Slasher Film." Kendrick also discusses similar characteristics that were mentioned in the previous article, such as the fact that the Final Girl is usually not sexually active.

A source from *A Slash Above* dotcom created a comprehensive list of slasher movies released over time.¹⁸ This list included 604 individual slasher movies spanning from 1960 to 2015. Of these 604 movies, 264 debuted between 1980 and 1989. In other words, 42% of the films on the list came out in just the 1980s. The author of the list noted that there were some movies left off because they did not meet the author's criteria, which is why there are a few problems with this source. It does not include *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, a commonly held slasher franchise.¹⁹ This omission makes one question the validity of the source as it is challenging to know what other slasher films were left off and what ones were included that should not have been, which means that the number of slasher movies in the '80s could be higher or lower than what the list shows. Nevertheless, this source still provides a way to illustrate that more slashers were produced in the '80s than any other decade before or after.

One of the reasons why slasher movies were so abundant during the '80s was that they were very lucrative and easy to make. Often, the production cost for these films was less than two million dollars; however, they grossed millions at the box office.²⁰ Slasher movies did not require an all-star cast or various filming locations. All they needed were young actors and a unique idea of a killer. They usually do not even need a complex plot or a deep story. One of the most significant examples of a slasher with a minimal story and small budget is the original *Friday the 13th*.²¹ The production budget for the first movie was only \$550,000, while it grossed \$60 million worldwide.²²

17 Carol Clover, "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film," *Representations* no. 20 (Autumn, 1987): 187-228.

18 "A-Z of Reviews and Full List of Slasher Movies," *Aslashabovedotcom*, accessed Apr. 14th, 2023, <https://aslashabovedotcom.wordpress.com/a-slash-above-slasher-index/>.

19 Craven, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, 1984.

20 John Hoskins, "Top 20 highest grossing slasher films of the '80's," *IMDB*, Apr. 13th, 2023, <https://www.imdb.com/list/ls009410482/>.

21 Cunningham, *Friday the 13th*, 1980.

22 "Friday the 13th Box Office History," *The Numbers*, Apr. 4th, 2023, <https://www.the-numbers.com/movies/franchise/Friday-the-13th#tab=summary>.

When adjusted for inflation, this equals \$2 million and over \$200 million, respectively. The success of *Friday the 13th* demonstrated how a studio could make a profitable movie with such a small amount of money.

The rise of slasher movies also parallels the rise of another film genre that was very prevalent: the teen film.²³ Both film genres contained similar features, such as a group of youth throwing parties; however, the characters in slasher movies had a worse fate than those in typical teen films. Slasher films provided a dark contrast and a stressed-filled take to the lighthearted teen films of the decade. While teen films gave the youth a vision of what they wanted their life to be, slasher films showed the audience a glimpse of that life before the killer disrupts it. When related to real life, the killer is a representation of the fears and anxieties many teens had during the 1980s.

Slasher Films and the '80s in Literature

The slasher genre gained its most success from the late 1970s to the end of the 1980s when the United States underwent a broad societal change. The 1980s saw a rise in conservatism. Conservatism is a political ideology that greatly emphasizes traditional values over change. In the 1980s, conservative ideals began to become mainstream due to the presidency of Ronald Reagan. Reagan was widely known as a proponent of conservative beliefs, mainly traditional "family values." For example, as Simon Heffer stated, Reagan advocated returning daily prayer to schools and supported a bill allowing school prayer to return.²⁴ He also fiercely opposed communism and enacted many neoliberal policies. As Reagan's time in office sparked moves towards conservatism for American culture, many Americans began consuming more traditional media forms. In "America During the '80s: Summing up the Reagan Era," Karl Zinsmeister explains this return to conservatism and how it specifically affected many means of expression. He explains that there was a push to return to more traditionalist and conservative ideals, especially in film and music.²⁵ These ideals often included family and religious Christian values. These values are often not represented in many slasher movies.

Karl Zinsmeister also discusses the United States under Ronald Reagan's leadership in the article "America During the '80s: Summing up the Reagan Era." This article details the socio-economic and political landscape of the United States in the 1980s. It discusses government spending as well as the eventual recovery of the economy. The author also describes that with this

23 Tim Dirks, "The History of Film The 1980s," *Filmsite*, accessed, Apr. 13th, 2023, <https://www.filmsite.org/80sintro.html>.

24 Iain Dale and Simon Heffer, *The Presidents: 250 Years of American Political Leadership* (London, England: Hodder & Stoughton, 2023), 430.

25 Karl Zinsmeister, "America During the '80s: Summing up the Reagan Era," *The Wilson Quarterly* 14, no.1, (Winter 1990), 117.

recovery, American families had more money to spend on luxury items such as electrical technologies, better houses, and even increased movie theater ticket sales. Zinsmeister also explains the social problems that were occurring, such as the crime and drug waves. The *Bureau of Justice Statistics* states that “The number of Federal cases involving drug offenders and the sanctions against them [drug offenders] increased dramatically between 1980-1986. There was a higher filing rate for such offenders than for all other crime categories.”²⁶ The issue with drugs was so severe that Nancy Reagan, the wife of President Ronald Reagan, championed the “Just Say No” campaign, which aimed at encouraging children to reject the use of recreational drugs. Zinsmeister ends his article by explaining that many films, books, and music looked to return to praising traditional values.²⁷

Kara Kvaran looks at slasher movies through a socio-economic lens in the article “‘You’re All Doomed!’ A Socio-economic Analysis of Slasher Films.” In this article, Kvaran explains that the slasher movies of the ‘80s provide a way for historians to understand the United States economy in the ‘80s and how the youth of that era felt about it. She argues that the slasher movies arose during a period of great recession, which helps explain their dark tones.²⁸ Kvaran also explains how, in these movies, the youth battle a seemingly unstoppable evil, representing the economy to her. She concludes that the youth used slasher movies as a way to escape the stressors facing them in adulthood and, thus, a possible bleak future.

From a different standpoint, slasher movies suggest that the villains of the stories represent the conservative and religious revival underway during the 80s. Conservatism and a religious revival swept through the nation, and as a result, many forms of expression, including music, art, and films, were under attack for promoting ‘satanic beliefs.’ John Brackett suggests that religious groups believed that these forms of entertainment, such as heavy rock and slasher movies, contributed to the decline of American morals.²⁹ Slasher movies were considered part of the problem as they not only depicted violence, but the characters in the films were participating in acts such as premarital sex, uncontrolled drinking, and drugs.

Alternatively, slasher movies can be understood as sites of both pro and anti-conservative values. While it was previously mentioned that slasher films contain images that are very much against conservative beliefs, it also, in a sense, demonstrates that characters who participate in immoral acts get

26 Jan M. Chaiken and Douglas C. McDonald, “Drug Law Violators, 1980-1986,” in *Bureau of Justice Statistics* (Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1988).

27 Zinsmeister, “America During the ‘80s,” 115-17.

28 Kvaran, “‘You’re All Doomed!’,” 953-970.

29 John Brackett, “Satan, Subliminals, and Suicide: The Formation and Development of an Antirock Discourse in the United States during the 1980s.” *American Music* 36, no. 3 (2018): 274-275.

punished like the conservatives suggested. So, looking at both sides, these movies can be seen as both pro and anti-conservative. The films promote and contain many anti-conservative images while at the same time making it clear that those who do partake in them will be punished. Richard Fink discusses this in his article "How Slasher Horror Movies Reflect Conservative Values," where he states, " These films are typically the favorite of a younger audience, as they tap into the unseen darkness hiding in the shadows as well as featuring plenty of nudity and bloodshed that makes for a cinematic experience.... While these villains are trapped in darkness, they are also instruments to remind young people to stay on the proper path."³⁰ This quote does a great job of encapsulating the tension between pro and against conservative values.

The idea of adult abandonment is very prevalent in many slasher movies. In the article "You're All Doomed! A Socio-economic Analysis of Slasher Films" Kvaran explains how in many slasher films, the cast is primarily comprised of youth, and the adults are often either not present at all or are unhelpful when they are present. She implies that in most cases, an adult represents authority and safety, but in slasher movies, however, they often do little to help or hinder their survival.³¹ Pat Gill also echoes this in the article "The Monstrous Years: Teens, Slasher Films, and the Family," arguing that even the caring parents will often be too distracted to help or may even create the monster.³² This trope is essential to slasher movies and understanding the relationship between the young and generations in the 1980s. The lack of help from the parents in slasher movies can be seen as a reflection of reality, with the parents standing by and allowing the new conservative ideas to attack the freedom of expression and behaviors that many of the youth enjoyed.

Slasher Films and Disposable Income

The beginning of the '80s was marked by stagflation when an economy suffered from high inflation coupled with a high unemployment rate.³³ As the decade progressed, this began to improve, and many Americans eventually enjoyed increased prosperity. Karl Zinsmeister noted that during the Reagan years, many Americans were able to enjoy leisure activities more frequently. These activities included buying new houses, going on trips, and increasing attendance at leisure events, including sports games and art shows. As a result of the leisure spending, there was an increase in theater

30 Richard Fink, "How Slasher Horror Movies Reflect Conservative Values," *MovieWeb*, accessed July 10, 2023, <https://movieweb.com/slasher-horror-movies-conservative/#:~:text=Audiences%20looking%20deeper%20at%20the,stay%20on%20the%20proper%20path.>

31 Kvaran, "'You're All Doomed!'," 959.

32 Pat Gill, "The Monstrous Years: Teens, Slasher Films, and the Family," *Journal of Film and Video* 54, no. 4 (2002), 17.

33 Kvaran, "'You're All Doomed!'," 956.

attendance. Zinsmeister notes that the admissions increased from “\$4.5 billion in 1988 versus \$2,7 billion in 1980.”³⁴ More people could see new movies in theaters, which helps explain why slasher movies were so profitable.

Slasher movies also appealed to a wide range of teen audiences as their characters lived an idealistic middle-class life that teens strove to have. The film *A Nightmare on Elm Street* portrays this ideal middle-class life. In this movie, a man terrorizes a group of teens in their dreams. The characters in this movie live in very nice homes, wear expensive clothes, and have luxury items like their own cars and TVs. Thus, much of the young adult audience envied the luxurious lives and freedoms the fictitious characters in these films seemed to enjoy. They watched movies like *A Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Halloween* and longed to be in the same financial situation as the characters in the film.³⁵ However, the socio-economic and political realities of the ‘80s made this dream of a luxurious life unrealistic for many teens.

Fear of The Cold War and Nuclear Fear

One of the most explicit connections that can be made is the connection between slasher films and the Cold War. While the war was stabilizing and eventually came to an end in the late 80s, there were still many fears about a potential nuclear war. John Muir writes about this in his book *Horror Films of the 1980s*. In the introduction, Muir explains that the idea of an “apocalypse mentality” was prevalent in horror during the ‘80s. This idea responded to the public’s fear of a potential nuclear war.³⁶ This anxiety can be seen in many famous horror movies of the 80s, such as *Friday the 13th*, where a group of people tried to live out their lives, but all the while, there was a foreboding presence threatening to kill them all.³⁷

The fear of nuclear annihilation was at the forefront of many Americans’ minds during the 1980s. This fear was due to the Cold War, which was an ideological battle between the United States and the Soviet Union that had been ongoing for decades, ever since the end of WWII. One of the most important developments that came with the Cold War was the threat of nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons were used by the two superpowers (the U.S. and the Soviet Union) as a way to intimidate other nations, especially each other. While the Americans were the only nation to use nuclear weapons on their enemies, the Soviets’ testing of similar weapons caused panic among many Americans. Many Americans feared that the Cold War would eventually lead to a massive military conflict that could end civilization entirely. John Muir’s *Horror Films of the 1980s* illustrate the idea of apocalypse

34 Zinsmeister, “America During the ‘80s,” 117.

35 Craven, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, 1984; and Carpenter, *Halloween*, 1978.

36 John Muir, *Horror Films of the 1980s*, Vol. I (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2013), 6-7.

37 Cunningham *Friday the 13th*, 1980.

mentality and how it shaped many artistic expressions during this era. Muir argues that apocalypse mentality is the fear of a sudden apocalyptic event occurring, such as a nuclear war. He notes that many Americans, especially the youth, had this fear during the 1980s, creating a sense of foreboding doom for them.³⁸ Most of the slasher movies of the 80s follow the pattern of having youthful characters attempting to enjoy the pleasures of American life, yet they are always under the shadow of an evil force. For example, in *The Evil Dead*, the main character Ash opens the Necronomicon Ex-Mortis, also known as the Book of the Dead.³⁹ The opening of the book acts as a catalyst for the remaining events of the movie, where a demonic entity slowly kills off the characters. The opening of the Necronomicon can also be seen as a metaphor for the Cold War, where the opening represents the firing of a nuclear weapon, which would lead to massive destructive events that would follow.

The common theme of carefree youth living under the threat of a menacing force, like in slasher films, is a good analogy of what it was like to be a teenager in the 1980s. During this period, the possible occurrence of an apocalyptic-like event was not out of the realm of possibility. Once nuclear arms were introduced into their daily lives, many Americans began to question whether they were genuinely safe since the enemy had a way of causing significant damage to the country from afar. People began to fear that the places they felt most safe no longer provided that same sense of security. Many slasher movies play into this idea through their filming locations. Places like high schools, summer camps, suburban homes, and even one's dreams became unguaranteed of safety. These fears of loss of security and the previously mentioned possibility of nuclear annihilation are represented in slasher films.

In slasher films, the teens had to worry about being attacked by a seemingly unstoppable killer such as Freddy Krueger or Jason Voorhees. In contrast, in the real world, the teens had their unstoppable monster to fear in the Soviet Union.⁴⁰ The 'final girl' case, thus, is recast as the sole survivor of a nuclear or world-ending event. This reformulation can especially be seen at the end of *Friday the 13th*, as the 'final girl,' Alice, runs through the camp and finds the dead bodies of all her friends.⁴¹ Alice slowly realizes that she is the only survivor of the annihilation that happened at the camp. Another horror film depicting the idea of mass destruction emerges in *Killer Klowns from Outer Space*.⁴² While this is not a traditional slasher film, it still contains an analogy between the fears of a war with the Soviet Union and the horror films of the

38 Muir, *Horror Films of the 1980s*, "6-7.

39 *The Evil Dead*, directed by Sam Raimi, (1981, Marshall, Michigan: Renaissance Pictures, 1981), DVD.

40 Craven, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, 1984; and Cunningham, *Friday the 13th*, 1980.

41 Cunningham, *Friday the 13th*, 1980.

42 *Killer Klowns from Outer Space*, directed by Stephen Chiodo, (1988; Santa Cruz, CA: Chiodo Brother Productions, 1988), Streaming.

time. This movie features a colony of aliens invading a small town on Earth who begin to harvest the town's people until only a small group remains to defeat the Klowns. This struggle is a metaphor for the fear that the Soviet Union may invade the U.S. and destroy the American way of life, where the invading aliens are the representation of the Soviet Union coming to take over the United States. The idea of adult abandonment is also prevalent in both slasher movies and a teenager's view of the Cold War.

Adult Abandonment and Conservative Backlash, and the Religious Right

As suggested earlier, one of the most common tropes in slasher movies is the presence of incompetent adults. Throughout almost every major slasher movie, the adult figures are largely absent or uncaring throughout most of the film. Pat Gill states, "Even caring, concerned parents are impotent; often they are hapless and distracted, unaware of their children's problems and likely to dismiss and discount their warning and fears."⁴³ An example of this is seen in the film *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, where Nancy's parents do not believe her when she tells them that she is being attacked and stalked in her sleep. The parents are unhelpful to the point that during the movie's climax, where Nancy is fighting for her life against Freddy, her mother is asleep, and her father only comes to help once Freddy has already been defeated. While Nancy's parents cared for her, which is evident in that they sought help from a dream specialist, they never took her cries for help seriously.⁴⁴ This feeling was very familiar to many American youth as they felt that the adults in their society had abandoned them similarly.⁴⁵ From their continued participation in the Cold War to the adults attacking the media that the youth liked to consume, many young people felt like the characters in the films that the adults of their day had failed them.

Conservatives were also opposed to slasher movies, as stated earlier in the essay. Many felt the contents of most slasher movies went against the most prominent conservative beliefs. Sam Raimi's *The Evil Dead* is an example of a slasher movie that was not well received at the time of its release.⁴⁶ This film contains everything that traditional conservatives opposed. It depicted underage drinking, sexual deviancy, demonic possession, and a copious amount of gore. For these reasons, the film received an X rating typically reserved for pornographic films. Several foreign countries even banned it.

Religious values, in particular, became prevalent during this time as there was a rise in a group called the Religious Right, also known as the New

43 Pat Gill, "The Monstrous Years: Teens, Slasher Films, and the Family," *Journal of Film and Video* 54, no. 4 (2002), 17.

44 Craven, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, 1984.

45 Kvaran, "'You're All Doomed!,'" 958-961.

46 Raimi, *The Evil Dead*, 1981.

Christian Right. The Religious Right was a group of evangelical conservatives who believed that the morality of American society had begun to collapse. In a document titled "The Moral Majority And Its Goals," the group is stated to be "Americans from all walks of life united by one central concern: to serve as a special-interest group providing a voice for a return to moral sanity in these United States of America."⁴⁷ This group openly opposed the use of drugs and pornographic media and championed preserving traditional family values. The Religious Right also believed that one of the primary causes of the breakdown of American society was the films and music of the '80s. They believed that this media not only contained satanic imagery but that it also promoted it. John Brackett states that many leaders of the Religious Right "threatened to boycott the major television networks over charges of excessive and graphic descriptions of sex, violence, drug use, and other forms of immoral behavior."⁴⁸ They attributed all of these behaviors to the decline of American morality, especially in the youth. Slasher movies were under attack by this group as they went against everything that the Religious Right stood for. An example of this can be seen in the movie *Hellraiser*.⁴⁹ The film was centered on a family who found themselves under attack by an undead family member, as well as a group of interdimensional demons who are bent on imprisoning the family in a version of hell where they will experience all kinds of torture. This movie contains everything that the Religious Right was against, from satanic images and the breakdown of the traditional family to sexual deviancy.

It was not just the Religious Right that attacked slasher films, as many critics also had very scathing reviews of them. In an article from the horror movie magazine *Fangoria*, film critic Gene Siskel expressed his dislike of the genre when he noted that "To [him], these [slasher] films, [were] nothing more than killing films," he considered them "sick, and [he] fail[ed] to appreciate the entertainment value on that."⁵⁰ It was commonly understood among many adults that slasher films were a filthy genre and lacked taste. This image of slasher movies has persisted and is part of why many horror movies do not receive the recognition they deserve, especially from major film guilds. Slasher movies in and of themselves can be used to reflect the opposition to them. The survivor characters of the slashers represent the youth in the 1980s, while the force that attacks them represents the people who attacked the forms of expression that the youth commonly enjoyed. While the creators

47 Moral Majority Incorporated, "Moral Majority and Its Goals [1979]," in Robert Muccigrosso, *Basic History of American Conservatism* (Malabar, Florida: Anvil Press, 2001), 195.

48 Brackett, "Satan, Subliminals, and Suicide," 276.

49 *Hellraiser*, directed by Clive Barker, (1987; London, England: New World Pictures, 1987), DVD.

50 Joseph Reboy, "Taste Will Tell..." *Fangoria* 3, no. 15 (October 1981), 38.

of this media may not have had this specific idea in mind during the writing and production process, we can return to Stuart Hall's notion used by Kara Kvaran that "texts can have multiple meanings that are then interpreted by audiences in different ways depending on their subject position. The creators may not intend these decoded meanings and can be collectively or individually understood by the audience."⁵¹

Conclusion

The slasher films of the 1980s have become renowned worldwide and have launched several successful franchises that are still relevant to this day. However, slasher films are more than just a successful form of entertainment. Just as the film professor in *Scream VI* explains before her untimely demise, slasher films have provided historians a way to understand the past.⁵² Slasher films can help historians explain a great deal about the political, economic, and cultural anxieties of the '80s through the lens of the relationship between youth and elders. The directors of the '80s slasher films incorporated the fear and anxieties present in the 1980s, such as that of nuclear annihilation, while capitalizing on those themes by creating movies targeting an audience fearful of the future. The writers not only succeeded at making massive profits at the box office, but they also successfully produced a medium that captured the *zeitgeist* of the 1980s.

Horror as a film genre has existed for over a hundred years and has dozens of other subgenres beyond slasher. Each of these other horror subgenres has a unique perspective about the eras in which they were produced. For example, one could look at the various horror films of the '50s, like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, to understand the fear of the Red Scare and McCarthyism.⁵³ Alternatively, one might look at the slasher revival of the 2000s to understand the housing crash and the war on terror. There are countless lessons and understandings that horror films can provide. There is much more to learn in the future about movies of the past, assuming one lives to see the sequel.

51 For the work of Stuart Hall, see David Croteau and William Hoynes, *Media Society: Industries, Images, and Audiences* (London: Sage Publications, 2003), 269; and for Kara M. Kvaran, see Kvaran, "'You're All Doomed!,'" 953-970.

52 Bettinelli-Olpin and Gillett *Scream VI*, 2023.

53 *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, directed by Don Siegel, (1956; Los Angeles, CA: Allied Artists Pictures, 1956), Streaming.

