



NEW MEDIA STUDIES

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Media Criticism CA1 Essay

Does hyperpostmodernistic texts illustrate Roland Barthes response to structuralism by being texts that acknowledge a wide variety of texts, authors and the wider media culture within their narratives?

Hyperpostmodernism can be seen in several films in the slasher subgenre. Does hyperpostmodernism help illustrate Roland Barthes response to structuralism ¹that texts are not 'a line of words releasing a single "theological" meaning (The "Message of the author-god") but is a space of many dimensions in which are wedded and contested various kinds of writing, no one of which is original.' Hyperpostmodern texts in the slasher subgenre such as the 'Scream' franchise², 'Cabin in the Woods'³ and 'The Final Girls'⁴ are self-aware of the conventions/tropes of their subgenre, the social issues that inspired them, the body of works of the subgenre that have come before and the need for the subgenre to move forward to move past it's long-established structure. This essay will look at these films, the articles others have written analysing them in the hope of expanding the conversation by linking these discussions to Roland Barthes post-structuralist ideas.

A slasher film is a distinct subgenre of the Horror genre that are defined by three conventions: ⁵a maniacal killer, a vulnerable group of victims and high levels of graphic on-screen violence. The subgenre is full of tropes that permeate through the majority of the subgenres works from the need for excessive nudity to be present in the work, to characters

¹ Roland Barthes, *The Death Of The Author*, 1967.

² Wes Craven, *Scream* (Hollywood: Woods Entertainment, 1997).

³ Drew Goddard, *The Cabin In The Woods* (Hollywood: Mutant Enemy Productions, 2011).

⁴ Todd Strauss-Schulson, *The Final Girls* (Louisiana: Groundswell Productions, 2015).

⁵ Jim Greene, "Slasher Film", *Salem Press Encyclopedia*, 2020.

that engage in certain activities such as pre-marital sex and drug use being extremely likely to be one of the victims of the killer. Whereas a virgin character (usually female) has the best chance of survival commonly known as the 'Final girl' in this case they survive by subduing, escaping or halting the killer and are then safe until at least the sequel comes out. ⁶

Hyperpostmodernism is a label used by Valerie Wee in her paper on the Scream Trilogy to denote an advanced stage of post modernism which she believes the Scream Trilogy to be a part of. She denotes two main ways this advancement can be identified in the trilogy: 1. 'a heightened degree of intertextual referencing and self-reflexivity that ceases to function at the traditional level of tongue-in-cheek subtext, and emerges instead as the actual text of the films;' and 2. 'A propensity for ignoring film-specific boundaries by actively referencing , "borrowing," and influencing the styles and formats of other media forms, including television and music video-strategies that have further blurred the boundaries that once separated discrete media.'⁷

This is demonstrated in several of the scenes in the first 'Scream' film where Jamie Kennedy's character Randy Meeks predicts what's going to happen in the movie based on conventions/tropes of the slasher subgenre. ⁸ The movie even has fun with subverting our expectations by having Randy and Sidney live. This subverts and makes fun of the 'Final Girl' trope by having the female lead who is not a virgin survive and having Randy play the Role of the surviving virgin. He even exclaims "I probably should be. I never thought I'd be

⁶ Greene, 2020.

⁷ Valerie Wee, "The Scream Trilogy, "Hyperpostmodernism," And The Late-Nineties Teen Slasher Film", *Journal Of Film And Video*, 57.3 (2005), 44-61 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/20688497>> [Accessed 8 December 2020].

⁸ Lauren Crane, *Scream - Horror Conventions*, 2019 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CLbNwzrAda8&feature=youtu.be&ab_channel=LaurenCrane> [Accessed 8 December 2020].

so happy to be a virgin!”⁹¹⁰

This prediction of events is actually one of the appeals of the subgenre to its fanbase “The growing popularity of these films was in fact tied to the increasing familiarity of these conventions. Andrew Britton argues film audiences were drawn to the predictability of the plots, so “that the only occasion for disappointment would have been a modulation of the formula not a repetition of it”¹¹ This repetition of a formula has been so integral to the subgenre that professors and academics have been able to write focused papers just measuring the chances of a character surviving in a typical slasher film based on data they’ve accumulated from a number of prominent slasher films.¹²

The formula became dry in the late 80’s and the subgenre saw a decline until the late 90’s as a result. The subgenre had to shift to acknowledge the changes in the media industries and the changes in the teen culture while attempting to maintain as many conventions of the subgenre as possible. The new slate of slasher films had to be prepared for a teen audience that ‘were overly familiar with the conventions of slasher film and would never accept a mere rethread of the old genre’.¹³ As well as dealing with as John Carpenter put it “the cynical, young, new [1990s teenage] audience who believe very sincerely that they’re smarter than the movies they see”¹⁴ That’s where ‘Scream’ came in. It’s a film that directly acknowledges the

⁹ Lauren Crane, "Entering Hyperpostmodernism Through Self-Reflexivity – Death In The Digital Age", Courses.Digitaldavidson.Net, 2019 <<https://courses.digitaldavidson.net/death19/2019/02/27/entering-hyperpostmodernism-through-self-reflexivity/>> [Accessed 7 December 2020].

¹⁰ Lauren Crane, Scream - Randy, 2019 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xgjb3HdvjAk&feature=emb_title&ab_channel=LaurenCrane> [Accessed 8 December 2020].

¹¹ Wee, p.44.

¹² A. Dana Ménard, Angela Weaver and Christine Cabrera, "“There Are Certain Rules That One Must Abide By”: Predictors Of Mortality In Slasher Films", *Sexuality & Culture*, 23.2 (2019), 621-640 <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-018-09583-2>>.

¹³ Wee, p.45.

¹⁴ Wee, p.45.

subgenres tropes and has its characters acknowledge them by having actual debates where they compare their circumstances to that of famous movies like 'Friday the 13th' or 'Halloween'. Not only that but it seeks to subvert our expectations as said previously with my examples of the subversion of the final girl trope as well as having an unexpected twist of there being not one but two killers.

Roland Barthes 'The death of the Author' brings forth the idea that no text is original, that all texts are somehow connected to the writings of the past. Not one author is the true sole 'author god' of their work.¹⁵ These hyperpostmodern texts are embracing that they are not truly original works and instead seek to acknowledge it and pay tribute to the past texts and culture that informed them. They are not placing the director on a pedestal as the author god of the work, rather they are embracing the subgenre's history. Though the second hyperpostmodern text 'The Cabin in the Woods' takes a different approach to *Scream*, true it references/plays homage to a number of famous horror films, monsters and conventions (most obviously being the cabin of the title which is an obvious reference to the *Evil Dead* franchise).¹⁶ It also, under some lenses can be seen to be criticizing the audience for consuming generic slasher flicks and not giving enough attention to less formulaic films of the subgenre.¹⁷

¹⁵ Barthes.

¹⁶ Cecil Trachenburg, *Every Reference In The Cabin In The Woods*, 2014
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yGz2xdQa1ho&t=268s&ab_channel=GoodBadFlicks> [Accessed 8 December 2020].

¹⁷ Crane, "Entering Hyperpostmodernism Through Self-Reflexivity."

Under this interpretation in a meta sense ‘The Ancient Ones’ that the North American branch of the organization are seeking to appease by performing the ritual in the film can be interpreted to represent the audience.¹⁸The ritual under this perspective is a checklist of slasher conventions that the Directors/writers must ensure happens in the film for the audience to be satisfied. Failure to meet these demands risks the movies viability (box-office results) and in turn in the movies lore (the world’s survival). The checklist consists of several common conventions of the subgenre in the western world including there must be at least five archetypes that are punished: Athlete, Whore, Scholar, Fool, and Virgin. A harbinger must warn them of their upcoming deaths, they must choose to ignore his warnings willingly, the whore must be the first to die, if the virgin is to die, she must die last.¹⁹

Fitting to this lens the leader of the North American Branch in the film is run by a woman simply named ‘The Director’ played by ‘Sigourney Weaver’ who is well known for her role in the ‘Alien’ franchise. She could be interpreted to represent the role of ‘The Director’ of slasher films and their role in ensuring that the audience will be satisfied with the finished production. She only makes an appearance on screen when the audience ‘The Ancient Ones’ are extremely dissatisfied after the ritual is thwarted.²⁰

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Scene From Cabin In The Woods, 2012

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RctbDINuNUY&ab_channel=jreese720> [Accessed 9 December 2020].

Under this meta lens Hadley and Sitterson the two technicians who run the control room for the Cabin set could represent the writers of the film. They try to keep the audience entertained by using the control panel to help steer events to follow universally understood genre conventions and themes while also becoming frustrated with how generic the elements end up being. 'The writers are commenting on how that by including expected and familiar conventions, horror movie creators are sacrificing creating a movie that influences the subgenre and our culture.'²¹ The movie only becomes engaging once it disrupts the formula the audience has come to expect. The idea being that for an interesting movie to come out in the subgenre the industry needs to stop catering to the audiences expectations and instead focus on creating a movie that is engaging and will help influence the subgenre and our culture.

'Cabin in the Woods' similarly to 'Scream' has the film's victims/characters acknowledge the conventions of a typical horror film and even try and be smart and not make the same, often seen as dumb by the audience actions that characters in the subgenre display. For instance, the characters choose to stick together and barricade the cabin when things start to look bad rather than splitting up. The organization though has ways of ensuring the conventions are kept, to in this case they used pheromonal gas to alter Curt Vaughan's (the athlete) decision leading to the group splitting up.²²

²¹ Crane, "Entering Hyperpostmodernism Through Self-Reflexivity."

²² Lionsgate at Home, The Cabin In The Woods: Clip: "Split Up", 2012
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nAkobjlhxA&ab_channel=LionsgateatHome> [Accessed 9 December 2020].

Another film of the subgenre would be 'The Final Girls'²³ released in 2015. In the film the protagonists become trapped within a film called 'Camp Bloodbath' that is heavily inspired by the 'Friday the 13th' series. The characters at first try not to interfere with the murders but once they realise that they too are at risk of being killed within the film's world they start taking desperate measures. Some of them start to try and discourage or outright prevent the other characters from having sex, as that would attract the killer. One of the characters chooses to stick with Paula, the film's destined final girl in hopes that this will ensure that they survive until the end of the film. Though the plan doesn't work once Paula dies unexpectedly early, this teaches the cast that events of the film can be altered. The cast decides to use their knowledge of the subgenres conventions to try and kill the movie killer 'Billy'. They do this by plotting to disarm Billy and get his machete into the hands of Max as they believe she must be the new final girl after the death of Paula.

This film like the others is acting not in isolation but instead is critically pointing these conventions to the audience by showing the characters in the film not only acknowledging them but using them to survive. 'The Final Girls' is calling out the 90's and post 90's audience who view themselves as smarter than the slasher films they're watching.²⁴ It's demonstrating that even if you know the conventions that doesn't mean you can actually survive.

²³ Todd Strauss-Schulson, *The Final Girls* (Louisiana: Groundswell Productions, 2015).

²⁴ Wee, p.45.

Roland Barthes saw the reader as the place, the role that could see how a text consists of many other texts, consists of the mixing of several cultures that converse with each other, the reader is the one who can understand parody and intertextuality. The reader is the place where all this information is contained, not the author. 'reader is the very space in which are inscribed, without any being lost, all the citations a writing consists of; the unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination;'²⁵ These texts we've discussed are challenging the reader who has come to understand the conventions of this subgenre and asks them to be more critical in the kind of movies/texts they choose to go see and therefore support. If the audience chooses to support slasher films that are generic and just seek to tick all the boxes for the common conventions and themes of the subgenre then we won't see more creative or ground-breaking films that will leave a lasting effect on our culture and the subgenre as a whole.

²⁵Barthes p.6.

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