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Archetypal Characters Within the “Slasher” Film Sub-Genre

by Jonathan King

One of the most telling traits of a society is how it entertains itself. Although Americans of the late twentieth century have many choices for distraction, one medium has had a particularly significant impact upon the fabric of American culture: film. Through pandering to the ideas and beliefs of the audience, filmmakers parallel those ideas and beliefs in their creations. This correlation was demonstrated in the glut of so-called “slasher” films during the period 1974-1984. Although the films were diverse in form and execution, the basic plot of these movies involved some sort of deranged psychopath gleefully stalking and killing a number of unfortunate teenage victims. Within this sub-genre there can be found a number of basic character styles, or archetypes. These archetypes not only serve to bind certain movies into the slasher category, but also to provide a window into the culture that they cater to.

In order to present a specific example of each archetype, I have chosen four films that are exemplary of the overall sub-genre. Tobe Hooper’s *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) tells the story of a van full of traveling teenagers and their run-in with a family of backwoods cannibals. John Carpenter’s *Halloween* (1978) has killer Michael Myers strangling baby-sitters on the night of said movie title. Sean Cunningham’s *Friday the 13th* (1980) looses a hockey-masked psychopath upon a host of unsuspecting camp counselors. Finally, Tobe Hooper’s *The Funhouse* (1981) finds four teens trapped in a carnival with a murderous sideshow freak.

The most evident archetype within the slasher sub-genre is the Virgin. Usually the Virgin is the protagonist of the film, a female teenager of moral purity and physical desirability. *Massacre*’s Robin, *Halloween*’s Nancy, *Friday*’s Jane, and *Funhouse*’s Cynthia all fit this description. The Virgin, as her title implies, is depicted as a non-sexual being, devoid of any erotic thoughts or actions during the film. Although the trait is usually only implied, both *Halloween* and *Funhouse*’s protagonists are explicitly stated to be actual virgins. This asexuality is a symptom of the overall noble behavior that the Virgin characters share. *Massacre*’s Robin is constantly fretting and fussing over her handicapped brother, and *Halloween*’s Nancy relinquishes an anticipated date to baby-sit for family friends. Being the central character, the Virgin must eventually do battle with the antagonist slasher. After a failed attempt to escape the slasher, the Virgin usually turns to the offensive, as when *Friday*’s Jane dispatches the killer with a well-placed machete swipe. Essentially, the Virgin will seek a passive release from her situation, but will resort to violence if necessary.

In contrast to the immaculate, angelic Virgin is the Slasher, a deranged murderer who will stop at nothing to end the lives of the generic band of teens he encounters. This generally male archetype has a penchant for wearing something to cover his face, be it a hockey mask in *Friday*, or a Frankenstein face in *Funhouse*. The Slasher also almost never uses intelligible speech. The Slashers in *Massacre* and *Funhouse* only communicate in primate-like grunts, while those in *Halloween* and *Friday* choose not to make a sound, remaining ominously silent. Despite the Slasher’s complete insanity, these killers usually have a fairly rational motive for their nefarious deeds. Vengeance is a common motive, as when counselor neglect led to the apparent

drowning of *Friday*'s villain. Other, more practical motives for murder can be found, as in *Massacre*'s killing for dietary needs, or *Funhouse*'s need to cover up a previous murder.

Although not as necessary to the slasher film as the Virgin or the Slasher, the Doomsayer is another elementary archetype within the sub-genre. This character is usually portrayed as a older person, disheveled and harmlessly eccentric. The Doomsayer arrives in the first half of the film to predict danger for the main characters. The Doomsayer's warnings are generally taken as insane ramblings, although they almost always come true. For the most part, however, the Doomsayer's predictions are due to a disoriented mind, not to concrete evidence of the Slasher's presence. When *Friday*'s Old Man Connor exhorts "Doomed are the lot of you! This camp is cursed!", he unwittingly foreshadows the deaths of most of the skeptical counselors.

The acceptance and frequent use of an archetype like the Virgin has much to say concerning the morality of contemporary society. While the Virgin is morally pure in thought and action, the remainder of the teenaged cast is quite the opposite, frequently engaging in premarital sex and drug use. One teenager in *Funhouse* even uses the death of a cashier to steal the contents of the till. Interestingly, the immoral supporting characters are systematically slaughtered while the Virgin lives to remain virtuous for another day. What this turn of events implies is that sin equals death. If a person is involved in premarital sex, illegal drugs, or any other social wrong, that person will eventually meet an unfortunate and miserable end. In contrast, those who live a good life, according to cultural norms, will be rewarded with survival.

Since the Virgin is the ultimate representation of good within the slasher film, the representative of evil must be the Slasher. What is most intriguing about this archetype is how inhuman the character always seems. The Slasher almost never uses the markedly human trait of speech, and any human features the villain might have are usually covered by a mask. If the "good" Virgin is portrayed as a human, then why is the "evil" slasher not? What does this relationship say about the culture's beliefs concerning good and evil? Like the Virgin, man is inherently good and pure, despite the occasional slip-up or mistake. Evil, like the slasher, appears to be an inhuman, external force that is constantly endeavoring to bring ruin to the righteous works of man. Essentially, the relationship between the Virgin and the Slasher is identical in the eyes of society to the relationship between man and evil, with right always triumphant in the end.

The presence of the Doomsayer in slasher films parallels the existence of the many "gloom and doom"-spouting paranoiacs that populate society. From journals dedicated to conspiracy theory to the crazed homeless who scream, "The end is near," people everywhere see great danger in the future. While the doomsayer in real life is generally wrong, the Doomsayer archetype is almost always correct in his predictions. Does society want to believe in the doomsayer in reality like it can in a slasher film? Quite possibly. Man has always wanted to believe the outlandish, from UFO's to proof of leprechauns. The accuracy of the archetypal Doomsayer creates a world where man can believe in the strange and terrible, and be correct about it.

While the primary heyday of the slasher film ended many years ago, America is in the midst of a fresh trend of the sub-genre that began with the Wes Craven's *Scream* (1994). These films are not only helping to carry the archetypes of *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th* to a new generation of moviegoers, but also updating them as the culture has updated itself. Despite the changes some form of these archetypes will continue to exist, no matter how much American society alters. As long as a teenager yearns for the adrenaline rush from a masked murder, slasher films and their archetypes will endure.

Works Cited

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