Laughter, Screams, and Survival: Final Girl Fandom and The Texas Chain Saw Massacre

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by

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ABSTRACT

Since Carol Clover coined the term Final Girl to describe the female character who survived to the end of a slasher film, the Final Girl archetype has been a central analytical subject for horror scholars – and a favorite among horror fans. This thesis examines an unlikely fan favorite, Sally Hardesty of Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), to understand the fan culture around Final Girls as horror lovers negotiate what kind of female representation they want from their favorite genre. The fans surveyed here use the intertextual framework as a lens to insist on Sally as a heroic figure because of her survival. And having already decentered authorial intent by reading *Chain Saw* principally in relation to later films, some fans further challenge the horror auteur model by centering the artistic agency of the actress Marilyn Burns in creating the character of Sally Hardesty.

Introduction

In her landmark 1992 study of the slasher film, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, Carol Clover coined the term Final Girl to describe one of horror's most memorable archetypes. In Clover's words: "The image of the distressed female most likely to linger in memory is the image of the one who did not die: the survivor, or Final Girl" (35). Linger in memory she did; Clover and her fellow scholars were not the only ones to recognize this character's ubiquity in the slasher subgenre. Horror fans and creators noticed her too, adopting Clover's nomenclature, and the archetype has only grown in popularity. The last ten years have seen not one but two films named for the trope – *The Final Girls* (dir. Todd Strauss-Schulson, 2015) and *Final Girl* (dir. Tyler Shields, 2015). Novels like Riley Sagar's *Final Girls*, Grady Hendrix's *The Final Girl Support Group*, and Stephen Graham Jones' *The Last Final Girl* imagine a universe of Final Girls making sense of life after survival. Since 2005, horror fan, artist, and podcaster Stacie Ponder has operated the horror fansite finalgirl.rocks, taking on the Final Girl moniker as an informal nom de plume. More recently, in 2018, Claire C. Holland published *I Am Not Your Final Girl*, a collection of poems inspired by horror heroines. Across the internet, horror fans rank their favorite Final Girls and debate what the term means in a world where slashers no longer rule the megaplex. It is safe to say that the Final Girl thrives at the crossroads of scholarship, fandom, and the creation of new horror works.

Though horror fans of all genders enjoy rooting for their favorite Final Girls, the archetype has a special importance to female fans for whom slasher movies and their heroines were an enticing entry point to the genre. Consideration of the Final Girl's place in horror discourse is central to understanding the relationship of female audiences and

fans to horror. The Final Girl is also notable as a site of contested feminist discourse. Isabel Pinedo and Carol Clover, writing in the 1990s, both acknowledge the slasher's unsavory status and charges of misogyny. Clover locates the slasher "at the bottom of the horror heap," beyond the purview of respectability (21). Pinedo addresses the fraught position of "the female viewer accused of masochism or the female fan labeled an apologist for a woman-hating genre" (69). Even film scholar Janet Staiger, who would go on to teach *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, admitted: "the first viewing of the text affronted my feminist sensibilities" (105). Nonetheless, the agency and heroism of the Final Girl opens the potential for positive feminist readings, as Pinedo in particular argues. When female horror fans engage in Final Girl discourses, they are also negotiating what kind of female characters they want to see in their favorite genre and why.

When I began this study of modern fans' relationship to the Final Girl, I was not surprised to see an outpouring of love for such iconic heroines as Laurie Strode (*Halloween*), Sidney Prescott (*Scream*), and Nancy Thompson (*A Nightmare on Elm Street*) – women who turn wire hangers into weapons, construct elaborate booby traps, seize the weapons and costumes of their assailants, and return to fight again in the sequels. I was more surprised to find a wealth of responses to *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*'s Sally Hardesty.

The Texas Chain Saw Massacre (Tobe Hooper, 1974) follows a group of five friends as they travel through Texas to check on the grave of Sally Hardesty's grandfather after a series of grave-robbings. Following an ominous encounter with a violent hitchhiker, the friends run out of gas and are picked off one-by-one by a cannibal family,

including the chainsaw-wielding Leatherface. Sally flees to a gas station where she discovers the proprietor is also a member of the family; he returns her to their nightmarish homestead. After being tied to a chair and tormented over a grotesque dinner, Sally escapes the slaughter and is rescued by a passing truck driver. In the film's iconic final shot, the blood-soaked Sally is driven away from the surviving, dancing Leatherface, who wildly swings his chainsaw in frustration. Sally trembles with a mixture of laughter and screams; she seems utterly broken by her ordeal.

Sally doesn't fight, nor does she return (recently announced sequel notwithstanding). She survives with a lot of running, a lot of screaming, some luck, a few admittedly impressive leaps through windows, and not one but two well-timed vehicles. Even as a fan of the film, I myself have always viewed Sally as an early, even primitive example of an archetype that would be refined by later filmmakers. How then did a significant number of fans admire this character enough not only to continue thinking about her long after the final reel but to create loving fan art, write thoughtful reflections, and even proclaim her a feminist figure?

I take modern fan reception (and reclamation) of Sally Hardesty as my case study here because the character tests the limits of the Final Girl trope and expands our notions of what horror and its heroines offer to audiences. This paper surveys a variety of recent responses to *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and its heroine, including essays, poems, and Tumblr posts from film journalists and fans, men, women, and non-binary audience members alike. It is not my intention to position these readings of the film as somehow more accurate than others, or even as especially popular or prominent strands among horror audiences. These response texts were not selected for their high level of

engagement, though some are indeed popular, but rather as case studies of how viewers apply the framework of the Final Girl to the film in question, and how this discourse impacts their engagement with and interpretation of the film. Many of the fans behind these response texts are examples of what Janet Staiger calls "perverse spectators," that is, spectators that "don't do what is expected" and "rehierarchize from expectations" (37). Perverse spectatorship has no inherent political valence (32); while the viewers I study in this paper interpret *Chain Saw* and its characters in ways the filmmakers almost certainly did not intend, and while many of them align themselves with political progressivism, perverse spectatorship is not necessarily a political project.

While the fanworks, posts, and essays I study here are among the most visible traces of spectatorship, perverse or otherwise, I don't consider fans to be engaged in wholly unique forms of spectatorship. What suitably inspired online fans do on their Tumblrs or Instagrams, essays in film blogs, or self-published poetry collections, less proactive audience members do in conversation with friends, in the privacy of a theater or living room, or simply in their own head. While these audience members may root for a character to survive or cheer when she escapes from evil clutches, the online fan might make a gif set or post a screenshot of the triumphant scene, compose a poem in response to a favorite character, or create fan art celebrating a character they admire or with whom they identify. Everyday audience members may engage in strategies to manage their fear including looking away from the screen, performing bravery, or reminding themselves it's only a movie. Online fans may construct narratives of spectatorship, imagine a film's monsters as cute and non-threatening in fanworks, or intellectualize the film through the recognition of intertextual references. Online fans are socially situated; they work within

the recognizable narratives of fan communities. Matthew Hills' study of online horror fandom for example finds that (predominantly male) fans perform a narrative of their own maturation that moves from childhood fascination to adult expertise in the genre (76-85). The everyday audience member may also engage in socially determined responses; men might look, women might hide their eyes (Williams 61). More generally, modern horror audiences of any gender may try to impress their friends with a quip or joke or by otherwise making a show of bravery, display their genre knowledge by pointing out an intertextual reference, or engage in a collective experience of fear by jumping at a surprise scare or gasping in shock. An everyday viewer's intellectual response too may be inspired by the reaction of friends or a film's larger reputation. Regardless, I am interested here in the study of fandom not as a discreet phenomenon but as the most visible evidence of the kinds of thinking audience members engage in during and especially after they view a film.

Staiger's model of spectatorship is not limited to responses in the theater but includes the many kinds of responses that take place after the credits have rolled (53). This study, by necessity, focuses on those post-viewing responses. For modern viewers, especially viewers of a nearly fifty-year-old film, the theater is hardly the most important site of spectatorship. Modern viewers of classic horror are much more likely to watch their films alone or with a few friends in private. And while in-the-moment spectatorship may leave online traces, live-tweets of a film viewing being only one example, retrospective responses are easily the most common. This study of spectatorship thus turns away from the space of the theater and instead to the ways in which movies are remembered by audiences in the days, months, or even years after the film has ended and

the viewer has left the theater, turned off their TV, or closed their laptop. What kinds of interpretations of or narratives about a film do viewers create in their memories, and what do these interpretations offer them?

Using the case study of Sally Hardesty in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, this thesis examines how engagement in Final Girl fandom shapes how audience members interpret a given film. Final Girl fans bring an intertextual approach to slasher films, applying the framework and expectations shaped by their familiarity with the subgenre. They bring this even to films like *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* which, as early slashers, are neither self-referential nor include any references to other slasher films. While some fans do in fact dismiss Sally as a weak early example of the trope, others draw on the Final Girl framework to present Sally as a heroic and even feminist figure. By emphasizing her position as a survivor, fans value the Final Girl archetype for her narrative of survival, which even allows some fans a way to think about real-life trauma. And having already decentered authorial intent by reading *Chain Saw* principally in relation to later films, some fans further challenge the horror auteur model by centering the artistic agency of the actress Marilyn Burns in creating the character of Sally Hardesty. Above all, the Final Girl fans surveyed here are active agents who draw on genre knowledge in transformative ways, extract feminist narratives from politically ambivalent texts, and challenge the scripts of horror fandom.

Part 1: Intertextuality

Fans of the slasher subgenre in general, and the Final Girl archetype in particular, take a highly intertextual approach to their favorite films. They draw on their knowledge of the subgenre to recognize patterns and make predictions as they watch, rank their

favorite movies and characters, and spot references to earlier films. Work from Staiger and Hills identify the purposes intertextuality serves in fan communities. Fans may position themselves as connoisseurs of the genre, demonstrate expertise, intellectualize their enjoyment, distance themselves from fear, and feel that they are in on a joke with a film-maker, positioned as expert, and other members of the fan community. But as we'll see, intertextuality for Final Girl fans is not just a way to appreciate the expertise and care that went into their favorite films; it also shapes the way they interpret a film, and may have little deference to authorial intent. Fans who have learned to expect an active female protagonist from a slasher film may encounter a character like Sally Hardesty, who screams, runs, and ultimately survives, and see not a victim who gets lucky but a heroic character in the tradition of later Final Girls. It matters little that Tobe Hooper made *Chain Saw* before the Final Girl pattern was established, and few fans bother to ask if he meant Sally to be a victim or a heroine. In short, Final Girl fans do not look to identify the references Hooper includes to earlier films, but project their knowledge of the patterns of later films onto *Chain Saw*.

This section begins by considering Staiger's and Hills' work on the purposes intertextuality serve for spectators, then places the intertextuality utilized by Final Girl fans in the context of the binaries of fandom studies. Finally, I examine the practices through which Final Girl fans draw on intertextuality to demonstrate the way in which knowledge of the subgenre may serve as a potentially transformative interpretive framework.

Upon rewatching *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* in preparation for a class, film scholar Janet Staiger found herself experiencing a troubling reaction: laughter. Staiger

writes: “I was laughing at scenes that had outraged me during my first viewing. Moreover, I was laughing in places that were not even in the loosest sense likely to have been placed there for comic relief and catharsis” (180-181). Staiger finds her laughter not only inexplicable but morally dubious; while terror responses, including shock and vomiting, “seem moral and appropriate,” her laughter causes her students to “worry about [her]” (181). In the need to justify her laughter, Staiger ultimately identifies the film’s intertextuality–its many references to Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho*–as the source of her mirth. Staiger is self-aware that her explanation is doubly defensive; her laughter protects her from the fear she might otherwise feel at a film she first found unpleasant and distasteful, and her explanation for her laughter protects her from the possibility that she finds the violence itself amusing. As Staiger puts it: “obviously my personal invoking of the intertext of *Psycho* has been a means to defend myself from the sadomasochistic fantasies I am also constructing in viewing the text […] I can laugh at the intertextual jokes rather than end up assaulted by the nonstop intensity of the plot” (185-186). In other words, Staiger intellectualizes her ‘inappropriate’ response to a brutal film as a product of her cultural savvy–her recognition of references to Hitchcock’s classic–and as an alternative to the terror of “the ‘average’ viewer” (185).

Staiger’s experience neatly demonstrates several of the reasons why intertextuality is so pleasurable for the horror spectator: amusement, protection from fear, and the display of subcultural capital. The latter two in particular are on display in Matt Hills’ 2005 study of (mostly male and British) horror fandom spaces. Hills notes that fans use their recognition of intertextuality within a horror film or novel as a way to transform horror from what Linda Williams calls a “body genre”–a genre that elicits physical

responses such as tears, chills, or a quickened heartbeat–into a "mind genre" that rewards intellectual engagement. As fans develop their knowledge of the genre, they describe moving away from fear and towards an intellectual appreciation. Says Hills: "fans expressed pleasures typically appear to be those of connoisseurship rather than fear, disgust, intellectual hesitation or ideological subversion/reaffirmation" (76). This intellectual engagement is also a way to obtain or display the subcultural capital of genre expertise: "Through this cultural reproduction, horror becomes a matter of performed cultural value – 'mind genre' rather than a 'body genre' – for sections of its readership/audience possessing higher levels of cultural and/or subcultural capital" (171). Highly intertextual horror works such as British novelist Kim Newman's reworkings of the Gothic canon are described by fans as a "litmus test" for legitimate fandom: "if you 'get' the references than you display your 'true' fan status and accrue symbolic capital as a result" (175). 'Getting' references, as Staiger does in her viewing of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, thus serves as a way to decenter fear in the experience of horror and display one's fan credentials.

Metatextual horror films, most famously *Scream* (1996), cater to horror fans' appetites to show off their genre savvy and laugh along at the in-jokes. Sue Short describes the film's winking relationship with the audience: "The film acknowledges that audiences, far from being the dumb teens that tend to be portrayed in slashers, are discerning connoisseurs who appreciate the subtleties of such films," while also "revis[ing] established rules" (63). *Scream* and its many imitators demonstrate how intertextuality can be employed as a source of comedy by filmmakers, while allowing them to acknowledge and modify the established formula, much to the delight of fans.

Fandom studies have used a range of terminology to observe a spectrum within fandom: at one end, fans who appreciate and celebrate their favorite media; on the other, fans who seek to alter or transform that media in some way. Greg Taylor, in his work on film critics, describes a binary between the cult spectator, who carefully curates a non-mainstream canon, and the camp spectator, who can turn any old trash into a good time (15-16). Suzanne Scott contrasts "affirmational fans," who "enter into a 'collaborationist' relationship with both the text and its producers," with transformational fandom, which is "all about laying hands upon the source and twisting it to the fans' own purposes" (31-32). The intertextuality-loving fans described by Matt Hills most closely resemble the affirmational or cult end of the spectrum. They curate a countercultural horror canon, privilege the artistry and authority of directors, authors, and SFX artists, and position themselves as genre connoisseurs. The other end of the spectrum recalls Staiger's definition of perverse spectatorship. These audience members are less concerned with the efforts of a film's creators, its intended meaning, or even its artistic merits; rather, they *transform* the film in question, whether through interpretation or fanworks, in ways the filmmakers could not have anticipated.

Final Girl fans take an inherently intertextual approach to the slasher film, placing the characters they admire in a lineage of other, similar characters from separate movies they have seen or heard about. They use the template of other films they are familiar with to make predictions and form expectations about a film and identify how filmmakers engage with or subvert subgenre expectations. Their approach, on the surface, seems to follow the affirmational or cult model of spectatorship. As a female survivor became a part of the slasher formula, filmmakers included the Final Girl archetype in their films to

imitate or (increasingly) comment on proceeding films. The character herself is an intertext, a link to other films in the subgenre. Final Girls fans are in the position of recognizing this intertext as it appears throughout a range of films. A quick scan of the "Final Girl" tag on Tumblr shows that one of the most common types of posts consists of line-ups of fans' favorite Final Girls, as still images (svspiria) or gif sets showing the Final Girl looking determined or fighting back (ginny-higgins, eraserheadbabies). These posts are often accompanied by inspirational quotes, excerpts from theorists like Clover, or brief explanations of the archetype. Each post curates a canon of Final Girls united by common characteristics, which can include violently confronting the killer, surviving the film, saving herself from danger, and/or serving as a point-of-view character.

But I contend that Final Girl fandom defies the typical binaries of fandom studies; it is both affirmation in assembling a collection of films to appreciate, and transformative in the way a focus on the Final Girl intertext shapes fans' interpretations. In observing intertexts between horror films featuring Final Girls, fans are making interpretive moves, deciding which characters count as Final Girls and reinterpreting Clover's original definition by inducting unlikely characters into the canon. These interpretive moves may also decenter authorial intent (rather than positioning a savvy reference-dropping filmmaker as genre expert) and even change the meaning of the film. Just as Staiger's camp perverse spectators may turn a "villain(ess)" into a "hero(ine)" (37), fans may apply the Final Girl label to transform a horror villain or victim into a sympathetic protagonist. Final Girl fandom thus displays an additional purpose of intertextuality not explicitly noted by Staiger or Hills: fans apply archetypes and patterns from other films to make

sense of–and even transform the meaning of–the film at hand. Intertextuality is a potentially transformative lens through which to understand a given text.

Posts or fanworks that construct a canon of Final Girls, even when they cite Clover, often use the term in a far broader sense than Clover's "one who did not die" (10). Clover's definition emphasizes the Final Girl's youth and sexual inaccessibility (39), as well as her androgyny or "boyishness" (60). Nonetheless, Final Girl fans may include characters who tick only a few–or none–of these boxes. A post from Tumblr user eraserheadbabies for example cites Clover's argument that audiences transfer their identification from killer to Final Girl, and includes still images of several of the characters discussed by Clover, alongside two more recent horror heroines: Sarah of *The Descent* (2005) and Adelaide of *Us* (2019). Both are protagonists who survive the film, but are not the typical virginal teenagers; they're mothers. Furthermore, Adelaide is not her film's sole survivor but survives the film alongside her husband and children. They are also more morally complicated than the typical Final Girl–the former leaves her best friend to die, while the latter is revealed to be a doppelganger who switched places with the real Adelaide when they were children. A fanart collection by Tumblr user bexatomarama entitled "Final Girl icons" includes another horror mother, Wendy Torrence of *The Shining* (1980). And some of the women depicted in the series are neither traditional heroes nor survivors. The fanart series also includes Carrie White and Jennifer Check of *Carrie* (1976) and *Jennifer's Body* (2009) respectively, both of whom constitute the supernatural threat in their films and both of whom die before the credits roll. Likewise, Claire Holland's poetry collection *I Am Not Your Final Girl* includes poetic tributes to a range of women in horror, using the playful rejection of the Final Girl

label to encapsulate characters as wide-ranging as the werewolf of *Ginger Snaps* (2000), the cannibal sisters of *We Are What We Are* (2013), and the unnamed alien from *Under the Skin* (2013). These fanworks insist on an expansive definition of the term, one that may include any protagonist or sympathetic female character in horror. They also insist that these characters, who are sometimes murderous or monstrous in their own right, are indeed the heroines of their stories, whether the filmmakers intended them as such or not. To apply the Final Girl label to a character in a horror text is thus an interpretive intertextual move, likening her to characters from other films, understanding her story within an established framework, and identifying her as the text's central sympathetic figure.

Evidently, the degree to which fans embrace a character as a Final Girl is often unrelated to whether or not the filmmakers intended her to fit the archetype. While a character like Sidney, the star of the intentionally and explicitly metatextual *Scream*, may be written to exemplify and modify the trope, this is not true of every character celebrated by Final Girl fans. It's certainly not true of Sally Hardesty, who hails from the slasher's earliest days before the emergence of the Final Girl archetype. So fans who identify Sally as a Final Girl and as a precursor to later characters they love are engaging with intertextuality in a very different way than Staiger's intertextual viewing of the same film. Staiger's intertextuality is all about authorial intent and shared genre knowledge between savvy audience member and even savvier filmmaker. Writes Staiger: "I am constructing for myself the role of a listener to a joke I am attributing to [director Tobe] Hooper" (185). But fans who watch *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* through the intertextual lens of the Final Girl look not for the way Hooper includes references to his

influences, but to identify a resemblance to later films that *were influenced by* Hooper's work. In their analysis of the character of Sally Hardesty, whether or not Hooper intended her to be a heroic or admirable figure is scarcely considered.

Audience members who watch *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* who are familiar with and invested in the Final Girl figure come to the film with a set of expectations about these kinds of characters that Sally, in many ways, fails to meet. She doesn't use violence to defend herself or fight back against the killer, and she certainly doesn't defeat the killer at the end. Her victory lies in escaping with her life but (it is strongly implied) without her sanity. Some fans may find themselves disappointed and dismiss the character as weak or even antifeminist. On the other hand, many fans find ways to fit Sally's character arc into the framework of the Final Girl's heroism and perceived status as feminist icon. Rather than viewing her as another of horror's screaming female victims who just happens to survive, these fans view Sally as a heroic figure alongside other, more proactive Final Girls they admire, framing her survival not as a fluke but as a feat of strength comparable to the actions of Final Girls who *do* fight back. Either approach draws on a framework that expects an active and resourceful female figure to be at the center of the slasher film, a framework that was established by a cycle of films that began with *TCM* and its contemporaries but did not exist at the time Hooper's film was made.

In the section that follows, I examine how Final Girl fandom approaches questions of authorship, authorial intent, heroism, and positive female representation, using fans' treatment of Sally Hardesty as a case study. Final Girl fans' use of an intertextual archetype that is not always intentionally included by filmmakers is only part of a larger pattern of challenging the notion that the director is the primary author of a

film. Rather, fans center the effort–and creative power–of the performers who bring their favorite characters to life. Additionally, as fans ask whether Sally is a 'good' example of the Final Girl, they negotiate questions about what it means for a female character in horror to be empowering or feminist, offering new insight into what makes the Final Girl such an appealing figure for many fans.

Part 2: Feminism and the Final Girl

Carol Clover's original conception of the Final Girl doesn't consider how female audiences might respond to the character but instead makes the case that men are willing to identify with an androgynous female figure as an acceptable outlet for fear. In this paradigm, the Final Girl is less a female character and more a cipher for male viewers to identify with, so Clover did not consider her to be a feminist figure, saying that "to applaud the Final Girl as a feminist development […] is, in light of her figurative meaning, a particularly grotesque expression of wishful thinking" (53). Jody Keisner even suggests that the Final Girl is exclusively available for male audiences to identify with, while "female viewers are not identifying with the victorious Final Girl, but with the unlucky [female] victims" (424) who are more outwardly feminine. The scholarship that has followed Clover's lead in considering the gender dynamics of horror has had to contend with the culturally prevalent notion that horror is, as Katherine Farrimond puts it, a "bad object" for feminism. Writes Farrimond: "Amidst the ubiquitous list articles of feminist horror films on popular culture websites, it is difficult to find one that does not begin with a disclaimer about horror films' propensities toward misogyny" (151). Scholarship too has had a tendency to treat the genre as dangerous for women and especially for feminists. Even Pinedo begins her argument in favor of the pleasures of the

slasher film with the observation: “Dancing through the minefield of the contemporary horror film, with its bloody display of the all-too-often female body in bits and pieces, is fraught with danger for women” (69). In popular and in scholarly discourse, the horror genre has regularly been treated as at odds with feminism.

Likewise, the slasher film in particular has been a source of contention amongst female fans. Both Farrimond (150) and Brigid Cherry (188) have demonstrated that, contrary to Clover, women do in fact make up a substantial portion of the horror audience, and they are hardly homogenous. In Cherry’s survey of female horror fans, the slasher genre was overwhelmingly the least liked subgenre of horror; nonetheless, other survey participants defended their enjoyment of it, either by arguing against charges of misogyny or insisting that they were unbothered by the treatment of female characters (193). Though the slasher was divisive, many survey participants enjoyed horror films like *Alien* (1979) that feature heroic female protagonists. Cherry notes: “for some viewers […] watching heroines who behave like heroes, in a masculine fashion, was itself attractive” (194) and, in a challenge to Keisner’s hypothesis about women’s inability to identify with horror heroines, “female viewers strongly identify with the feminized hero because she is literally female” (199). While Cherry classifies *Alien* as science-fiction/horror rather than a slasher film, her description of the female heroines admired by her survey participants matches up neatly with the active and heroic Final Girl.

Indeed, in online fan spaces, fans and writers have pointed to the Final Girl as especially appealing to female audiences. As fan Lisa Fremont puts it in a blog post: “I have long maintained that one of the many reasons horror resonates with females the way that it does is because of the Final Girl. It’s pretty rare that a genre loves to put a female

front and center and then be brazen enough to let her overcome." Fremont takes it as a given that readers of the Haddonfield Horror blog for which she writes agree that horror holds a special appeal for women, and understand the Final Girl as an especially popular figure. On a Tumblr post offering advice for writers who may wish to create their own Final Girls, writer T.L. Bodine echoes Fremont's point that, because of the Final Girl, the horror genre has an abundance of female protagonists. Writes Bodine: "[the trope] is simultaneously demeaning and empowering to women. No other genre features as many female protagonists, even in times when women were historically not given many lead roles. In horror, female characters get the chance to rise above adversity and overcome terrifying obstacles–although, the underlying reasons for these creative voices may sometimes be problematic." Though Bodine is more ambivalent than Fremont about the archetype, they emphasize the possibility that the figure may be empowering for audience members who are eager to see a female character in a heroic and active role.

Scholar Isabel Pinedo expands on the suggestion that the Final Girl is a uniquely empowering figure for female audiences. Pinedo "disrupt[s] the facile assumption that the genre does not speak *to* women but only *about* them" (70) through an account of the possible pleasures of the slasher film. For Pinedo, a positive feminist reading of the Final Girl hinges on the character's ability to enact violence. While female characters in film are often punished for wielding agency or violence, "passive women [in the slasher film] suffer far greater consequences than those who fight back" (85). Viewed in this light, the Final Girl offers the uncommon pleasure of a woman whose violence is condoned by the narrative. Says Pinedo: "Consider how the genre violates the taboo against wielding violence, supplies excessive narrative justification for the surviving female to commit and

the audience to enjoy the violence, and puts it in the capable hands of the surviving female who becomes a powerful source of identification and pleasure for female viewers" (84). In Pinedo's reading, female audience members identify with the Final Girl as an aspirational figure because of her ability to use violence in the name of self-preservation and to take down the killer.

Even though scholars and fans disagree on whether or not the Final Girl is a feminist figure–and why–the archetype is still associated with feminism and celebrated by many as an empowering figure. Horror audiences with an awareness of the archetype who encounter a film that features a Final Girl-like character are thus inclined to expect an active and empowering role, even if the character was, like Sally, not written as an intentional example of the trope. Within Pinedo's framework, Sally Hardesty is not at all an enjoyable Final Girl. She never wields a weapon, never defeats or even incapacitates her attackers, and is rescued as she flees by not one but two passing male drivers. The final moments of the film show the shrieking and blood-covered Sally looking on as Leatherface, unstoppable, swings his chain saw towards the Texas sun. Pinedo locates *Chain Saw* as part of the earliest slasher cycle, in which "women are saved by the intervention of men," as opposed to later films, which Pinedo implicitly suggests are more enjoyable and empowering to female audiences, "where women must rely on themselves to kill the killer and survive" (77). If Pinedo is right and violence is central to the Final Girl's appeal, then Sally is an especially unsatisfying example of the archetype.

Indeed, modern fans who center violence, agency, action, or heroism in their definition of the trope are inclined to leave Sally off the list entirely. One Tumblr list, entitled "Kick ass chicks in horror flicks," focuses on Final Girls who fulfil the criteria of

wielding violence and playing an active role in their stories (horrorplus). The post's caption clearly lays out its criteria: "This is not just a 'final girls' list, this is a list of girls who actually kicked ass in the movie or following sequels." Half of the gifs accompanying the post feature Final Girls using or preparing to use various weapons, while the other five depict the heroines bravely surveying their surroundings or identifying the killer, demonstrating an investigative gaze. A character like Sally may be a Final Girl–technically–but according to this fan she's not a "kick ass chick." The fan makes it clear that, in her eyes, not all Final Girls are equal. Her criterion for an enjoyable Final Girl recalls Pinedo's explanation of the Final Girl's appeal–the use of violence, or 'kicking ass.' A similar post, accompanied by the stock inspirational quote "She needed a hero, so that's what she became," similarly emphasizes violence, featuring gifs of heroines fighting back against their assailants and the hashtags "strong female characters" and "strong female lead" (ginny-higgins). Once again, Sally is left off the list.

Posts like this negotiate the question of what makes for good (or "strong") female representation in the horror genre. Both posts value a specific kind of horror heroine, one who can be calm in the face of danger, turn chairs and sewing needles into weapons, and most importantly fight back against monsters and villains. These spectators follow Pinedo's model of female spectatorship in which the violence of Final Girls makes slasher movies pleasurable for female viewers.

When Sally is invoked by fans who share this perspective, she is often a negative example, a counterpoint to a more pleasurable or subversive story arc in a different film. After all, Sally is most remembered for her incessant screaming. A humorous Tumblr post, "Final Girls as stock photos," sums up her reputation–while the other classic

heroines are depicted as models armed with weapons, the stock photo standing in for Sally is a blonde woman screaming (micycle-myers). Some viewers even call Sally's position as the film's sole survivor into question through pessimistic readings of the film's ending, suggesting that Sally has barely survived at all. Film columnist Hannah Holway places *Chain Saw* squarely in the exploitative and misogynistic camp of films featuring "a scantily-clad woman consistently sexualized and tortured throughout the film" and understands Sally's final laughter to mean that she has been "supposedly driven to insanity through the torture she's endured." Holway juxtaposes *Chain Saw* with the more recent film *Midsommar*, which she frames as a subversion of a less feminist moment in horror exemplified by the earlier film. Columnist Martyn Conterio similarly contrasts Sally with a smiling horror protagonist, in this case the heroine of Italian supernatural horror film *Suspiria* (1977). Conterio says of that film's closing shot: "Instead of screaming at the top of her lungs in the style of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*'s Sally Hardesty, she momentarily appears bewildered and then does something which feels profound yet contradictory to the ironclad tenets of horror cinema: Suzy smiles." Because Sally doesn't fight back, and because Sally is traumatized by her experience, viewers like Holway and Conterio classify *Chain Saw* as an example of an un-feminist, even misogynistic entry into the genre. In this reading of the film, Sally is barely even a survivor, only a victim.

Meanwhile, some viewers, equipped with the expectation from their knowledge of the genre that the Final Girl is a heroic character, do find ways to interpret Sally as an admirable and heroic protagonist. In their appreciation of Sally, these fans indicate that there are other aspects to the Final Girl's appeal in addition to her use of violence. In

analyzing these interpretations of Sally and *Chain Saw*, I do not mean to make the argument that *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* is in fact a feminist film, that Sally is a feminist character, or that Tobe Hooper intended to create an empowering narrative. Instead, I argue that the character of Sally Hardesty clearly means something to the fans who find her to be a pleasurable, admirable, cathartic, or otherwise meaningful character, and I ask why a character who has often been dismissed as a screaming victim is in fact important to some members of the audience. Farrimond makes the argument that, in the rush to rank media by degrees of feminism, audiences' agency and ability to negotiate a complicated text is overlooked. Writes Farrimond: "popular culture and its consumers have been routinely dismissed as feminine and passive" (157), but there *is* popular media criticism in which "female viewers are understood as active and negotiating, capable of diverse responses to the same material" (158). I intend to take the latter approach. Sally's defenders are not dupes who have been fooled into defending a misogynistic text, nor have they discovered a heretofore unrecognized feminist essence in the film. Rather they are active audience members engaging in a transformative interpretation of the film in which they apply their own life experiences, genre knowledge, worldviews, and desires to extract from the existing film a story that is meaningful to them. Examining how they do this allows us to better understand what the slasher and the Final Girl offer to its audiences (whether these films intend to or not).

An article by Vincent Bec for the horror blog *Anatomy of a Scream* demonstrates how approaching *Chain Saw* with positive expectations for a Final Girl can shape one's experience of the film. Upon initial viewing, Bec considered Sally to be a negative female representation: "a weak, regressive character for women in horror." On rewatch,

Bec paid close attention to the character of Sally, with the express intent of sizing her up as a Final Girl, and found himself with new appreciation for the character. Bec admires her "strong, badass survival instinct" and her "determination to survive even at a risk to her body," concluding that "Sally is not able to stop Leatherface, but that doesn't mean there isn't strength in her ability to just survive." Impressed by Sally's endurance, resilience, and grit, even as the movie gives her no tools or opportunities to defend herself outright, Bec concludes that Sally's survival itself is a feat of heroism.

Among Sally's fans, Bec's emphasis on Sally's impressive survival is a recurring theme. In a blog post, Lisa Fremont cites Sally as her favorite Final Girl, in part because *Chain Saw* was her earliest exposure to the slasher subgenre, but also because of Sally's feats of survival, which Fremont likens to the exploits of an action hero. Fremont describes the lengths Sally must go to survive: "she has to run as much as Tom Cruise did in Mission Impossible 3. Yes, despite the fact that Grandpa has been drinking her blood […] Sally manages to escape and JUMP OUT A WINDOW! This fierce bitch cannot be stopped!" Given the intensity of the threat Sally faces, her desperate attempts to escape, breathlessly recounted by Fremont, are in and of themselves heroic. Though Fremont does appreciate Final Girls who more closely match Pinedo's criteria for a satisfying heroine, she finds the monsters Sally faces to be especially terrifying, making her survival all the more impressive. Comparing her to the Final Girls of *Halloween* and *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, Fremont says: "neither of these girls had to run from a man that was based on reality and was carrying a chainsaw." Fremont demonstrates how, through a focus on Sally's most impressive acts of physical determination and an emphasis on the horrors she endures, fans can construct a narrative of heroic survival.

A piece of fan art from the artist Laura Freeman, who works under the alias Nasubionna, presents a visual representation of Sally as the ultimate survivor. The art depicts Sally in a familiar Final Girl pose, a determined stance and calm expression, holding a hammer resembling the weapon used by Leatherface in *Chain Saw*. The border of the image is adorned with flowers and a banner reading: “survive.” In her caption, Freeman explains the significance of the imagery: “The flowers are Amsonia aka Blue Star, and according to the internet they symbolize endurance, strength and determination. Seems fitting for Sally, who is put through an absolute marathon of suffering and has to face off against four killers intent on murdering her, not just one.” While Sally’s pose and weapon align her with the proactively violent Final Girls who earn the title of ‘kick ass chicks,’ Freeman’s use of the symbolic flowers and the language of survival emphasize instead Sally’s ability to endure suffering and extreme danger. Her survival, rather than use of violence, is given as proof of her strength. Freeman also acknowledges that, under a framework like Pinedo’s, Sally fails to stack up against other horror heroines, saying “She may not have the same sort of feminist empowerment emphasis of some final girls who came after her, but she’s still absolutely a survivor.” Freeman doesn’t contest the standard that places more proactive Final Girls as more feminist, but

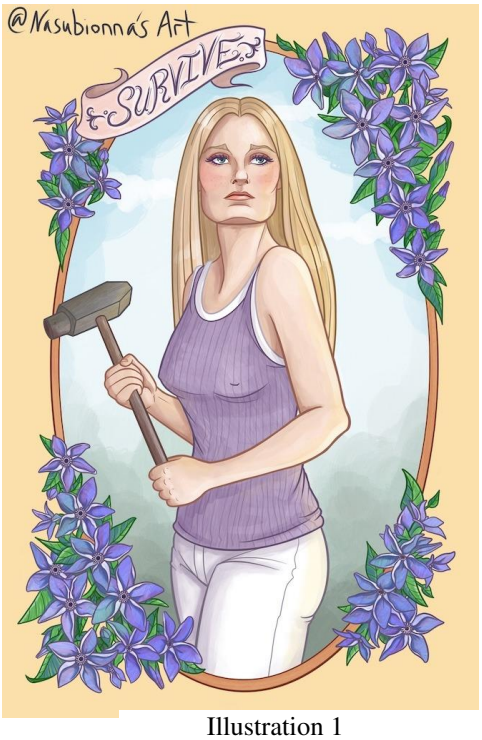

Illustration 1

nonetheless insists that Sally's position as a survivor is notable and worth paying tribute to.

Since Sally's position as a survivor is so central, many of her defenders pay close attention to *Chain Saw*'s ambiguous ending. While filmgoers like Holway and Conterio have pessimistic interpretations of the film's final moments, understanding the ending to indicate Sally's emotional and mental collapse and to undermine the possibility of her survival, other viewers find something more hopeful, even relatable, in the precarity of Sally's fate. The poet Claire Holland, in her collection *I Am Not Your Final Girl*, offers an interpretation of the film's final moments, implicitly likening Sally's survival to the trauma of sexual violence.

Holland's poems, each dedicated to a specific female horror character, are curated into four sections. Her poem for Sally appears in the first section, entitled Assault, alongside films that directly deal with or depict sexual violence. The poem reads as follows:

> Her face,
> bathed in blood. Her smile,
> crazed.
> The sounds she makes
> as she escapes.
>
> There is nothing else in this world
> like realizing

you're going to live

and not being sure

you can.

The first stanza of Holland's poem, with its reference to Sally's "crazed" smile, recalls Hannah Holway's view that Sally has been driven insane by the events of the film, but Holland doesn't find that this ending makes her an uncompelling or unsatisfying character. As Holland moves from the third person to the second, she generalizes Sally's plight to the more familiar dilemma of living with trauma and realizing that survival is an ongoing process. Holland doesn't refer to sexual violence explicitly in the poem, allowing for the final lines to allude to any number of survivals, but its placement within the section entitled Assault invites readers to understand Sally's suffering and survival as a metaphor for the survival of sexual violence. Holland's introduction situates her work in the contemporary context – she takes inspiration "from the organizers of the Women's March and the #MeToo movement" (13) and is "tired of hearing the same stories, over and over again, of women being harmed and treated like playthings by men with just enough power to take advantage" (11). Though *Chain Saw* does not include onscreen or implied sexual assault, Holland positions Sally's survival at a cost as an appropriate analogy to surviving something traumatic and living with the memory. While Pinedo makes the case that slasher films are pleasurable because they satisfy a taboo violent fantasy, Holland's, Freeman's, and Fremont's enjoyment of *Chain Saw* suggests another kind of female spectatorship, one where survival itself is a hopeful, even cathartic

pleasure. Sally's suffering and screams are interpreted not as evidence of her passivity and victimization, but as proof of her strength and survivorship.

Another poetic tribute to Sally, penned by Amy Roberts and published in the fanzine *Queen of the Tracks*, uses the first person, identifying with and assuming the persona of Sally herself. The poem's brief introduction alludes to Sally's survival being its own victory by describing the character as "hysterically alive," and includes an image of Sally's escape, the same iconic scene Holland describes in her poem. The lengthy poem makes reference to Sally fleeing her attackers rather than defending herself:

> I never fought back. Was home-
> coming, was jock, was sprinting for survival
> an attack
> of resilience

Once again, the word "resilience" is applied to Sally in an admirable light, with the phrasing "an attack / of resilience" even framing Sally's resilience as analogous to the violent resistance celebrated by Pinedo. But much of the poem focuses not on narrating the events of the film but on imagining Sally's life after the credits roll, exploring the same question raised by Holland: how do you live after survival? Roberts' scenes resemble symptoms of PTSD, as memories of Sally's trauma invade her days–"The World / is a farmyard now"–and disrupt her life:

> Christ

knows, family gatherings are awkward now – *Just try a bite*

of this chicken, this beef, this pork -

before I balk, cackling

at a lampshade without a face.

The closing of the poem reframes the film's ending, as Sally realizes that she is going to live, as at once victory and sick joke:

I'm there roaring

in the back of a truck

thinking I could die

of laughter, right now, side splitting

punchline

instead of an epitaph

On Tumblr, the poem is tagged with the hashtag "feminism," indicating that Roberts (or the zine) aligns herself–and the poem–with a feminist framework. Like Holland, Roberts does not explicitly refer to sexual assault or any other real-world trauma, but nonetheless invites readers to understand her interpretation of Sally as a story of survival generally, not merely survival of a chainsaw-wielding maniac. The poem's opening lines position Sally as the survival of quotidian evil:

People

don’t believe me when I tell them about evil

and I say, It’s just a human

without

its mask.

In generalizing Sally’s experience and imagining how she lives after her escape, Holland and Roberts position Sally as an icon of survival and a relatable, admirable figure for viewers who have survived their own traumas.

It is a familiar cliché to ask survivors of sexual assault why they didn’t fight back or why they failed to defend themselves. Within this paradigm, while the violence of Final Girls may still feel cathartic or taboo-busting, it could also feel like a lot to ask. The Final Girl, as described by Pinedo, has to earn her survival by being the smartest and the toughest. Filmgoers like Freeman, Holland, and Roberts interpret Sally as a promise that the kind of resistance and endurance that Sally emblemizes is also a battle, and even a survival that leaves you in pieces is a victory. While Final Girls who fit the mettle of “kick ass chicks” may be aspirational, some filmgoers and fans identify Sally as more relatable and even more realistic. One fanpost highlighting several classic horror heroines makes the case that Sally is “perhaps the most realistic of the Final Girls” because her “survival comes at the cost of her sanity. The terrible events she goes through, the fact that she escapes twice and her fierce determination to survive make her one of the best Final Girls” (the-queens-of-horror). That Sally suffers a mental toll from her experience allows some fans to find her realistic and relatable, a message that one can be emotionally battered and still a victorious survivor.

Other scholars have noted how survival can be just as central to the Final Girl's appeal as her use of violence. Sue Short makes the case for the Final Girl as an icon of "courage and resilience," noting that "even the terrified perpetually screaming […] Sally Hardesty […] is distinguished by a commendable force of will that leads to her eventual escape" (52). Recent scholarship by Morgan Podraza confirms that fans are invested in the Final Girl trope as a reckoning with trauma, and that this interpretation of the archetype goes beyond Sally. Podraza's study focuses on Laurie Strode of *Halloween*, and while the most recent instalment in the slasher franchise places Laurie's trauma front and center, fans were already creating fanworks to imagine the lives of Laurie and other horror heroines after their ordeals (144). The impulse of Sally's fans to imagine the aftermath of her survival is indeed a common one. Podraza finds that "the persistent and transformative qualities of trauma should be present in discussions of the Final Girl trope because the representation of her experiences is closely tied to the real-world experiences of trauma survivors" (143). And because trauma recovery is aided by community, Podraza suggests that the communal nature of Final Girl fandom "cultivate[s] the 'common culture' and 'common language' shared among trauma survivors" (145). Just as Holland's embrace of horror heroines is inspired by the modern reckoning with sexual violence, Podraza argues that the rise of the MeToo movement "entangled [Final Girl] discourse in larger social and cultural conversations about gendered violence" (143). And while the MeToo movement certainly invited new attention to the slasher's stories of survival, Sue Short suggests that echoes of feminist political discourses have always been part of the subgenre: "that the sub-genre originated at a time when women were campaigning against sexual violence and organizing 'Take Back the Night'

demonstrations seems more than coincidental" (61). Whether filmmakers intended these parallels or not, the Final Girl archetype is clearly useful for fans to imagine stories about the complicated nature of survival.

While stories about trauma have become increasingly popular in the wake of MeToo, the slasher subgenre may be surprisingly well-suited to these narratives. Staiger observes the slasher subgenre's fondness for what she calls "the anti-denouement," defined as "a tag-on critique by the text that rejects a brief resolution which may present the killer as 'evacuated' from the diegetic world" and that "undermines the resolution of the movie" (223). Such endings recall the unresolved nature of trauma, and are paradoxically satisfying for being unsatisfying. The conclusion of *Chain Saw* is a particularly extreme example, since Leatherface is never 'evacuated' from the narrative at all and remains uncontained, and Sally's fate after the movie remains unclear. The ambiguous nature of Sally's emotional state and well-being after the film allows fans to imagine a personally satisfying resolution. For Fremont, that means insisting that Sally will be okay because she's 'too tough" to be institutionalized. For Roberts, it is imagining Sally's struggle to come to terms with her intrusive memories of her experience just like real-life survivors of trauma. Even those fans who feel that Sally loses her sanity may reframe this ending as a positive – Sally is relatable, she's not an unshakeable action hero – rather than proof of the movie's misogyny. Both Sally's fans and detractors are negotiating the question of what it means to survive, and what kind of survival they want to see from a genre that routinely puts its heroines through the worst and lets them come out the other side. In the ambiguity of, as Holland puts it, "realizing you're going to live and not being sure you can," the extreme anti-denouement and refusal of narrative

closure at *Chain Saw*'s end creates a narrative opening for audience members to imagine their own version of Sally's fate and negotiate the meaning of survival.

Fans who make the case for Sally's position as a feminist hero demonstrate that the pleasures of the slasher film for female and feminist audiences aren't limited to the display of female violence. Women looking to their favorite horror flicks for relatable or empowering representation may arrive at interpretations that, even to audience members also using a feminist lens, are unexpected or unimaginable. Sally's fans acknowledge the common perception of Sally as a lesser Final Girl, and even accept the framework that position Sally as less empowering. But they also make the case that watching a character go through hell and come through battered and blood-soaked but alive may offer pleasures to female audiences looking for a narrative that demonstrates that survival is possible. The ambiguity of the film's final moments, in which Sally's laughter and screams can be interpreted as anything from madness to joy, allow fans to form their own interpretation of Sally's ultimate fate, whether they want to imagine that she's tough enough to be totally fine, has to deal with the challenges of healing, or never recovers at all. Fans' appreciation of Sally demonstrates that for some, the Final Girl's survival is what makes her iconic.

Part 3: Beyond Directorial Intent

When Lisa Fremont sets out to make the case that Sally Hardesty survives her experience with sanity intact, she cites not details from the text itself nor the words of director Tobe Hooper but an interview she conducted with Marilyn Burns, the actress who portrays the character. Fremont's comment is indicative of a larger trend in a certain

sector of horror fandom to defer to the creative authority and agency of actresses and to (explicitly or implicitly) deny any notion of the horror auteur.

We have already seen how Staiger's intertextual spectatorship depends on directorial intent, with the audience member constructed "as listener to a joke I am attributing to [director Tobe] Hooper" (185). For Staiger, the intertextuality of the film is a product of director Tobe Hooper's authorship, his knowledge of film history and decisions to include references and allusions to *Psycho*. But when filmgoers think about the decision-making and artistic intent that goes into a given film, they don't just think about the director. The horror fans studied by Matt Hills appreciate and put great emphasis on the craftsmanship of special effects artists. Says Hills: "These SFX men are clearly treated as *auteurs* of a sort within sections of horror fandoms" (88). Horror fandom can incorporate an awareness of the people behind and in front of the camera in a number of ways, from appreciating pioneering special effects techniques, noticing intertextual references included by the director, or praising a director or screenwriter's overall message or ideological position. Fans who participate in the fandom surrounding the Final Girl also display an interest in the people behind the film, but in this case their interest focuses not on the director, but the actress.

Many of the fanposts and tributes to the character of Sally Hardesty name or give credit to the actress who portrayed her, Marilyn Burns. Rather than celebrating Tobe Hooper for writing a character or directing a performance that they admire, they instead locate Burns as the character's true creator. Amy Roberts' tribute poem to the character is dedicated to Burns, the only poem in the series on Final Girls to have a dedication, likely because it was published a month after Burns' death. The dedication positions the poem

as a tribute not just to the character but to the actress who portrayed her and identifies the character of Sally as a piece of Burns' creative legacy. In another example, in the caption to an early version of her Sally fanart, artist Laura Freeman refers to the challenge of rendering the likeness of the "crazy beautiful" Marilyn Burns, implicitly linking her fanart tribute to the character with an appreciation for the actress' beauty. For these fans, admiring Sally as a character and recognizing the importance and centrality of Burns to the character's creation go hand in hand.

But it is Lisa Fremont's aforementioned invocation of Marilyn Burns that is an especially clear example of how some fans think about their favorite actresses. When speculating on what might happen to the character after the events of the film, Fremont claims: "I have it on good authority (from Marilyn Burns herself) that Sally never wound up in a mental institution." The reference to Burns as "good authority" is a chance for Fremont to link to an interview she conducted with the actress, but also positions Burns as an authority–even *the* authority–on the character's ultimate fate. Fremont suggests that Burns is entitled to make definitive statements about what happens to the character she portrayed outside of the events of the film. In this framework, it is Burns' creative intent (or post-film decree) that matters in interpreting Sally's ultimate fate. It is a model of actress-as-creator.

It's nothing new for filmgoers to be fans of actors as well as the characters they portray. In horror fandom, an interest in actors has always been somewhat gendered. Brigid Cherry notes that the female horror fans display an interest in their favorite horror actors, preferring to buy horror magazines when they give "coverage […] to favourite horror films, stars or characters" like Vincent Price or Peter Cushing (51). Meanwhile,

the tendency to idolize SFX artists is predominately masculine to the point where Hills cautions against viewing it as representative of horror fandom as a whole, "since it tends to exclude many female horror fans" (88). In modern horror fandom, an appreciation for actresses retains its gendered connotations while also defying what is perceived as a normative strand within horror fandom. Horror fans who celebrate their favorite performers and even hierarchize their creative agency over others involved in film-making are engaging in an implicit or explicit rejection of the notion of director as primary author of a cinematic text. The fans who celebrate Marilyn Burns are part of a larger current within horror fandom that centers the work of women, including actresses, in the genre. This is often an implicit or explicit rejection of an auteur model of horror film-making which places the (usually male) director as the film's central creator, and credits to him all aspects of the film, including the performances.

The model of director-as-auteur is prevalent in horror scholarship, criticism, and marketing. Joe Tompkins observes how horror scholars, notably Robin Wood, have used so-called horror auteurs, including *Chain Saw* director Tobe Hooper, to legitimize horror as a subversive art form. Says Tompkins: "The notion that horror films merit serious critical attention is bound up with the proliferation of the concept of the horror auteur" (204). As early as the 1970s, film distributors helped construct horror directors as auteurs by selectively promoting the other films of a director who'd had a hit (206) and "auterism remains central to the marketing of some horror films" (212). Familiarity with horror auteurs has also served as a cornerstone of fan identity, as well as a marker of horror's subcultural status. Tompkins cites Catherine Grant's argument that the auteur allows fans to see themselves as experts and for the film industry to promote films: "consumers are

interpellated as experts of a given subculture and as connoisseurs of the work of specific filmmakers, and that they are encouraged to support the notion of a director-centered film culture" (203). Indeed, horror fandom has long been invested in the figure of the horror auteur. Craig Bernardini points to fanzines like *Fangoria*, which "participated in the construction of the 'horror auteur' for a genre audience" by prioritizing interviews with horror creatives, especially directors" (189). It seems like no coincidence that Bernardini refers to the canon of '70s horror auteurs, including Hooper, as possessing "generic patriarchal authority" (189). Positioned as the fathers of horror, this exclusively male lot are often invoked in deference to a sort of auteur authority that carries masculine connotations. Against this backdrop of a horror fandom that has legitimized itself through a celebration of subcultural auteurs, horror fans who center actresses insist on the influence of women in horror, even in male-directed films, and ultimately argue that the director does *not* have the ultimate say in what a film means, politically or otherwise.

Among the most outspoken purveyors of this approach is the self-proclaimed "queer feminist" podcast Gaylords of Darkness, hosted by lesbian blogger Stacie Ponder (who runs the popular Final Girl blog) and two-spirit drag performer Anthony Hudson. The pair are invested in the often-overlooked contributions of women to the genre. They regularly refer to "John Carpenter and Debra Hill's *Halloween*," positioning the slasher classic's female producer and cowriter as cocreator and equal to the famous director (Ponder and Hudson, The Necronomologue) and gush over actresses, often dubbed "perfect queens." In a recent episode on the Eli Roth film *Knock Knock*, the hosts marvel at how the horror director with the "dudebro" reputation managed to create what they read as a chaotic piece of feminist art. They ultimately give the credit to actresses

Lorenza Izzo and Ana de Armas, who play a pair of young women who seduce, torment, and manipulate a married man, the ostensible but unlikable protagonist. As host Anthony Hudson puts it: "We love this movie regardless of the fact that it's an Eli Roth film. That just seems like a bizarre accident. We love this movie because of the incredible fucking women and what they do with it." Like Fremont's assertion that Burns' word decides Sally's canonical post-film fate, the Gaylords' hosts attribute creative and artistic power to a film's lead actress(es). In this framework, performers are responsible not just for creating memorable characters, but can have the artistic power to ultimately decide what a film means. According to Ponder and Hudson, *Knock Knock* is a subversive film because Izzo and de Armas, *not* Roth, make it so.

Ponder and Hudson's love of actresses is not just an appreciation for the craft of acting but a politically charged response to the disproportionate number of men behind the camera and often predominantly-male horror fanspaces. Cherry's work on female horror fandom observes how many female fans have historically felt excluded from mainstream fandom spaces. While "certain sections of horror fandom are more appealing or accommodating to female fans," Cherry notes that "many women have also experienced a lack of welcome in horror fandom" and "are often derided by male fans. The female horror film fan, then, is doubly marginalized within horror fan culture" (43). Perhaps in response to this historical exclusion, the Gaylords of Darkness podcast, as "queer feminists," expressly position themselves in opposition to a perceived masculine and heterosexual horror mainstream and the "generic patriarchal authority" of the horror auteur" (Bernardini 189).

A clear example of this explicit positioning can be found in the recording of their first live episode, in which they hosted a screening of *Friday the 13th* and its first sequel with the films' respective Final Girls, Adrienne King and Amy Steel. In an introduction to the recording, taped after the show, Ponder recalls feeling nervous at first and noticing "a horror bro in the front row looking not entertained at all." The specter of the archetypal "horror bro," an echo of the derisive male fans discussed by Cherry, recurs throughout the actual live show, as Stacie Ponder jokes about an imaginary bro asking the actresses "what was it like to work with Jason," demonstrating that he only cares about the killer. Later, when reflecting on the long-running slasher franchise's importance to its fans, King and Steel recall hearing from people who were empowered through identification with either Jason or the Final Girls. Hudson jokes that while they don't begrudge anyone their enjoyment, the heroines are "the right answer." In a post-live-show coda, as the hosts declare the show a success, Hudson confesses their fear that, during audience questions, a male fan would make a grossly sexualized comment to one of the stars. Throughout the show, Ponder and Hudson explicitly present themselves as a rejection of a male fan culture that identifies and roots for the slasher killer while dismissing or objectifying the women of horror.

This demonstrates Staiger's point that perverse spectatorship has no inherent political valence. The male fan culture rejected by the Gaylords of Darkness is, by Staiger's definition, more "perverse" than the interpretive model practiced by Ponder and Hudson. To root for or identify with the killer is to recast the antagonist as protagonist, an unanticipated interpretive move (though filmmakers increasingly leaned into fans' love of killers by making characters like Jason more and more prominent in their respective

films). But it is Ponder and Hudson's arguably less "perverse" spectatorship that aligns with feminist politics. While Ponder comments during the *Friday the 13th* live show that queer horror fans do often relate to the monster, when it comes to slashers, she says, "the queer audience tends to identify with the Final Girl." Queer spectatorship doesn't always resist the (presumed) intentions of filmmakers; it can also resist a predominant and outspoken fan culture by offering up alternative interpretive models for identifying a horror film's true protagonist – or, in the case of *Knock Knock*, its true author.

For fans of Sally, Marilyn Burns' on-set suffering is understood as a creative act that produces the authenticity needed to make the film truly scary and impactful. In interviews, including the interview conducted by Fremont, Burns was often prompted to recount tales of her discomfort and real-life injuries during filming, about which Burns is blasé but frank. When asked by the blog Terror Trap if she remembered her finger being cut on-screen during the film's infamous dinner scene, Burns replied: "Oh, please! Like it was yesterday. I can see the blood spouting out of my little finger. My index finger. That was a bitch. I mean, it HURT!" She goes on to discuss her relief at having wrapped filming, only to have to return to reshoot the final scene, saying: "So at the end, on the truck, that's how I felt… I didn't need to sink way down deep inside me to give that ending performance." An emphasis on the physical challenges and suffering Burns endured on set presents Burns' real-life experience as a parallel to Sally Hardesty's own narrative of survival, making Burns an appealing figure for fans who, as we've already seen, are invested in Sally's heroic survival. And at least one obituary credited Burns' performance, produced by an ordeal that paralleled Sally's, for making that final moment, and the film as a whole, successful. Says Matt Singer of *The Dissolve*, "Burns may have

had to go through hell to get to that moment, but the results have chilled and mesmerized movie fans for decades. It will stand forever as one of horror cinema's most indelible images." Fans like Ponder and Hudson–or Fremont and Freeman–who are invested in locating moments of female creative agency in the horror canon, would likely agree.

It's no surprise then that filmgoers who view *Chain Saw* through the interpretive lens of the Final Girl are more likely to be fans of Marilyn Burns than of Tobe Hooper. The horror fandom that forms around actresses may be as subtle as the dedication of a poem or as overt as claiming that the actress and not the director is responsible for the film's overall theme or that the actress gets to decide what happens to a character after the film ends. Actress-centered horror fandom contrasts itself with the predominantly male-centered fanspaces that have celebrated directors, SFX artists, and the actors who play the monsters over the heroines, and as an expression of the desire to find–and adore –female horror creators. This interpretive lens rejects the idea that the decisions of the director are the most important, instead claiming that authorship may be found in the performances–and suffering–of the scream queens.

Conclusion

The wealth of fan material and audience responses available in the digital age means that insight into how spectators engage with and interpret media is more available than ever. Discourse that might have previously gone unrecorded is now documented on social media, fansites, blogs, and other online forums. These digital traces of spectatorship, of the kind I survey here, constitute a valuable body of information for scholars interested in spectatorship theory and audience reception. For horror scholars in

particular, who have long debated the processes through which audiences identify with characters and interpret films, fanworks and online discourses are full of possibilities.

The horror fans I have surveyed here operate at the crossroads of affirmational and transformative fandom. They are genre savvy and draw on their intertextual knowledge to compare films, rank their favorite characters, and construct canons within the genre. They also use this intertextual knowledge as a transformative interpretive lens to find heroic characters in unlikely places. They negotiate with politically ambivalent texts like *Chain Saw* to extract stories of survival, and debate hard questions about what strong female characters and positive female representation should be like. And they center traces of female authorship even in films with male directors so that a leading actress can be seen as the ultimate authority on a characters' fate.

Future scholarship could examine how fans participate in queer readings or retelling of Final Girl characters, how the archetype is situated as a figure of both identification and desire, how slasher fans reimagine and romanticize the figure of the killer, and how fans interact with and celebrate other Final Girl characters.

These forms of spectatorship are various and competing, and demonstrate the agency of audience members to determine the meaning of a film. The fans discussed here do not defer to the authority of an auteur and are unconcerned with determining the intentionality of a director. Rather, they interpret films through the framework of the films that followed, draw on their life experiences and contemporary discourses, and identify authorship and artistic agency that has nothing to do with the director at all. The range of interpretive possibilities opened up and explored by these viewers demonstrate the creative and transformative possibilities spectators bring.

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