



BETWEEN TWO HALLOWEENS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF JOHN CARPENTER AND ROB ZOMBIE'S *HALLOWEEN*

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The main feature of slasher films is that evil is embodied by human nature, something that can be observed by the fact that their narratives revolve around a serial killer, usually male, who is spreading fear in the local community by killing innocent people. Nevertheless, usually a female character is the one who survives and confronts the serial killer. This essay compares and thoroughly analyzes two slasher films: John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978) and its 2007 remake directed by Rob Zombie. I claim that a significant differentiation of their narratives is based on the fact that the two films belong to different cycles of the subgenre; Carpenter's *Halloween* belongs to the classical cycle, in which the representation of sexual behaviors and the punishment of the sexual transgressors had a central role, whereas Zombie's *Halloween* belongs to the neoslasher cycle, which is based on extensive stereotypical representations of social classes.

In my book, *The Anatomy of the Slasher Film*, I argue that three chronological cycles can be identified in the history of slasher films: the classical (1974-1993), the self-referential (1994-2000), and the neoslasher cycle (2000-2013). The central thematic of the classical period is the punishment of the sexually active characters. According to Clover (1992, 26-42), the killer is usually a male—often characterized by sex-related disorders as well—who engages in punishing the sexually active members of the community. He looks like a human male outsider, but at the same time he bears some supernatural features with the most basic of them to be the fact that seems to be invincible. In the killer's logic, any character in these films that smokes, has sex, or does drugs has to die. The victims are both male and female, but there is a crucial difference in the way they die; the death of male characters is swift and seen from a distance or sometimes is not viewed at all, whereas the killings of female characters are filmed at a closer range, in more graphic detail, and at greater length.



The most important member of the community of a classical slasher film is the Final Girl, who manages to stand out from the crowd and, eventually, be the survivor of the killing spree. The term “Final Girl” was introduced by Clover to describe the intelligent and resourceful female character that survives and defeats the killer. With the help of Clover’s theory (1992, 26-42), we can identify the social community of the classical period as a middleclass, conservative society. In the films, the teenage characters usually exhibit deviant sexual behavior, so the killer represents a narrative means of compliance and a trigger for the community to enforce its orders.

Because of the predictability of the classical formula and the decline of its popularity at the beginning of the 90s, the subgenre changed its conventions and led to the creation of two different cycles. The renewal of the subgenre that took place in the mid 1990s began with filmic texts such as *New Nightmare* (1994) and *Scream* (1996), which were the first self-referential slasher films that changed the narrative rules of the slasher subgenre and stepped away from the classical conventions of the strict sexual punishment. Slasher films started to mock the conventions of the classical period by inserting self-referential elements in their narrative. The conventions had become widely known to the public and thus, the slasher films of the 1990s played with this predictability by including hyperconscious characters who seemed to know the formula of the subgenre and try to alter it.

Of course, self-referentiality was not enough to reinvent slasher films and the subgenre soon faced a new decline that pushed the creators into the formation of the neoslashers. The new landscape changed the conventions of the subgenre, which started to represent the social anxieties of the new millennium based on informal struggles between social classes. The slasher film subgenre started to explore in depth how evil was created, and the killers started to have more realistic motivations and a three-dimensional psychological structure.

This is the theoretical basis of the analysis of the selected films. Carpenter’s 1978 version follows the classical conventions of the subgenre with the sexual punishment being one of the main traits of its narrative, while *Zombie’s Halloween* (2007) follows the rules of the third cycle of the subgenre providing a more realistic representation of the killer.

HALLOWEEN (1978) – THE ORIGINAL FILM AND THE CLASSICAL CONVENTIONS

Halloween is one of the most well-known slasher film franchises of the American horror cinema. Its story starts on the night of Halloween of 1963, when young Michael (6 years old: Will Sandin; 23 years old: Tony Moran) murders his sister, moments after she had intercourse with her boyfriend. Then, the filmic narrative skips to October 30th, 1978 (the day before Halloween), when Michael escapes from the clinic facility where he was held during all these years. The movie then depicts the fear Michael spreads



through the community of Haddonfield, following Laurie (Jamie Lee Curtis), a young female teenager, and her efforts to survive from the killer.

The narrative is based on the representation of a community, which is centered on everyday middle-class anxieties or activities, such as babysitting or family events (Fhlainn 2007, 196). The characters of the film can be divided into two main categories: the adults and the teenagers. The adults are most of the time absent and they are usually not participating in the narrative progression. An example of this observation is the scene in which Laurie tries to escape from Michael and runs to a neighbor's house in order to ask for help; even though the lights are on and we can see a human figure at the window, the neighbor does not open the door. The only adult that actively participates in the narrative progression and has a positive representation is Dr. Sam Loomis (Donald Pleasence). Dr. Loomis is the embodiment of the exact opposite of what Michael Myers represents, as he is trying to do the right thing and protect the whole town, apparently without any personal interest. His obsession with Michael is not based on any concrete motivations forcing him to pursue him, but rather he does for the community's good. Dr. Loomis puts himself in danger in order to save Laurie, even if she is a total stranger to him.

Another trait of the classical cycle that can be found in *Halloween* is the central presence of teenage characters. Teenagers are represented as sexually active and with a deviant behavior, which includes use of drugs and alcohol. Of course, all these characters end up dead at the hands of the killer and only the Final Girl manages to survive. Worth mentioning is the fact that even though the film includes a lot of murders, there are no gore scenes.

Michael is the killer the narrative revolves around, or in other words the "monster" of this horror film. Even though he is human, he has some supernatural characteristics; the most important of them is the fact that he seems to be invulnerable, something that can be seen at the end of the film when he manages to escape even after Dr. Loomis shoots him. This stimulates the feeling in the audience that evil cannot be defeated. About this specific issue, Carpenter said that:

It was all to make a new legend. There is something really creepy about the fact that evil never dies. It can't be killed. If as in the movie he really is just a force of evil, he's like nature. Well, in the end, he's back up again (in Rockoff 2002, 57).

One last trait of Michael paradigmatic of the classical film is the extensive use of point-of-view shots (POV) stimulating the viewers' identification with him. Based on the opinion of J. P. Telotte (1984, 26), horror films often achieve their ends by creating a sense of involvement of the viewers themselves in its world of terror. This is something that applies to the narrative of the classical *Halloween* and an example of this statement is the first sequence of the film. The filmic text begins with a scene where young Michael watches his sister and her boyfriend from a distance. The scene ends with the



murder of his sister and the arrival of their parents. This action is covered by a unique POV shot of Michael. As Kelly Connelly (2007, 15) comments, “[t]he opening scene of *Halloween* further reinforces the incredible, and sometimes destructive, power of the male gaze.” Through the POV shot, the narrative forces the viewer to identify with the monster because s/he sees the story through the killer’s eyes.

Of course, the audience understands that, apart from Michael, another character is important to the narrative—Laurie, or in other words, the Final Girl of the film. The aforementioned conventions of the classical cycle and Laurie’s asexuality are the chief elements allowing her to be the final survivor of the narrative. As Steve Neale (1984, 332) comments, “in babysitting on Halloween night while her friends anticipate a night of sex, she is cast in the roles both of virgin and mother, two roles which are signified elsewhere as exempt from Michael’s aggression. Of the four adolescent women who are attacked, it is therefore, logically, Laurie who survives.” Even in the most difficult moment, Laurie sets the children as her main priority and tries to protect them instead of herself by hiding them in a safe room. So, this female character obeys the norms of the classical cycle and manages to survive.

Apart from her asexuality, there are a lot of male characteristics that are explained by Clover’s theory (1992, 26-42). Laurie is active, energetic and fearless, characteristics that was usually related with a male character. All these traits and the fact that she is also a virgin makes her the Final Girl of the film. nonetheless, even though she is active for most of the film, at the end she needs to be rescued by Dr. Loomis, who manages to shoot Michael and save her.

Halloween of 1978 is a good example of a classical slasher film, since all the paradigms and archetypes of the narrative obey the norms of this period. The monster is a human male with some supernatural characteristics, while the main victims are sexual transgressors and the virgin girl is the one that survives. Twenty-nine years after the first release of *Halloween*, Rob Zombie, a well-known contemporary horror film director, made a remake of this classical film but, as expected, the new film presented a lot of innovations that had nothing to do with the norms of the classical cycle.

HALLOWEEN (2007) – A MORE REALISTIC VERSION OF THE CLASSICAL FILM

Zombie’s *Halloween* opened on August 2007 and despite receiving a drubbing by critics, it reached top spots at the box office (Nelson 2010, 105). This film is considered a neoslasher product, a definition that can be justified by the period in which it came out and the characteristics of the narrative development, which have changed radically in comparison to the classical traits of the original filmic text.

Zombie’s film follows the life of Michael Myers (age of 10: Daeg Faerch; adult: Tyler Mane) and analyzes the reasons that turned him into a serial killer. In the entire first half of the film, the viewers witness his first murders and the consequent isolation in



a mental institution for seventeen years. Then, in the second half of the film, the viewers see the return of Michael to Haddonfield and the appearance of Laurie (Scout Taylor-Compton). A very important element of the story that does not exist in the original film is the relationship existing between Michael and Laurie. Michael is represented as the eldest brother of Laurie, a relationship of which she is not aware until the end of the movie and which justifies his obsession with her. At this point, it is relevant to acknowledge the fact that this connection between the two main characters also exist in the second part of the original film series, *Halloween II* (1981), but Zombie decided to combine details of the two movies.

If we analyze in depth the two parts of Zombie's film, we can understand how they represent two different social classes based on stereotypical and negative representations. The film starts with Michael and his family as the main characters. Their representation and the space in which the first half of the film takes place in gives the impression of negatively represented working class family. His mother is a stripper, his stepfather is an unemployed alcoholic and his sister has no manners and a provocative style. Even their house is dirty and has damages, two facts that are closely connected with the stereotypical representation of the working class.

The representation of the characters presented in the second half of the film is part of the middleclass. The only character that functions as a link these two "worlds" is Michael, who belongs to the working class and spreads the fear in the middleclass community. If we interpret this from a different perspective, we could say that there is a representation of a struggle between these two classes. The members of the middleclass community live the American dream based on a utopia, whereas the representative of the working class tries to steal that dream by spreading the fear.

This representation reveals a critique of a very conservative ideology that was part of the American society. The film's narrative seems to highlight the way that the working class threatens to infiltrate the American middle class, but at the end, the viewers understand that the film is only parodying these concerns and does not adopt them at all. This gap between the two categories of characters of Zombie's film will be clearer after the analysis of the two main characters that represent them—Michael and Laurie.

As it happened in the original film, Michael interprets the role of the monster of the narrative. The main difference in his representation is that Zombie decided to provide a more realistic justification of Michael's actions. So, in the first half of the film, the viewers face the reasons that pushed him become the serial killer we all know. The film starts with the introduction of Michael's family. In this toxic environment, where violence is something usual, we witness the birth of a killer. First, Michael starts to kill animals. Then, he makes a transition to human victims, which have a negative impact on the protagonist's life so that the viewers cannot identify with them, such as the murder of a student that bullies Michael. Even the killings of the members of his family



are justified by this mechanism. Ronnie (William Forsythe) is a negative paternal figure and Judith (Hanna Hall) has the role of the wicked sister. Even though there is a high amount of murders, Michael is the only protagonist of the first half of the film and the viewers witness the events through his perspective. This convention has exactly the same result as the aforementioned POV shots of the classical film, because the viewers are forced to identify with the killer. Of course, the classical film uses a more unconscious way, while *Zombie's Halloween* accomplishes it purposely by means of the narrative structure.

Besides the representation of Michael, even the presence of Dr. Loomis (Malcolm McDowell) has changed. In the original film he was the exact opposite of pure evil that was embodied within Michael, while in *Zombie's* film, because of Michael's more realistic approach, Dr. Loomis has been altered in order to obey the realistic context of the narrative. The 2007 iteration of Dr. Loomis tries to help little Michael getting through these events and becoming a sane person again, but in vain. So, he thinks himself as responsible for the events of Haddonfield and this is the intrinsic incentive that pushes him to help Laurie. There is a turn to a more realistic world and even the Final Girl can justify this argument.

Laurie lives with her stepparents in a middleclass community with no apparent concerns, until Michael comes up. She is not represented as a virgin among potential victims with sexual needs. She does not have androgynous characteristics and she does not actively participate in the narrative progression, two chief elements that made the classical iteration of Laurie famous. Of course, the end of the film finds her alone with Michael, something that forces her to be more active and kill him with her own hands. In this film, Laurie is the one that this time saves herself.

It is clear that the subgenre is stepping away from the sexual punishment as a trigger for the killings and moves towards a new era of class-conscious informed stories. In this context, *Zombie* decided to add a more realistic representation to the franchise's universe. There are no sexual transgressors to be punished and the Final Girl has nothing to do with the character that Clover (1992, 26-42) described. The separation between good and evil is not so clear anymore, and the characters' motivations seem to be relaying somewhere blurry between.

CONCLUSIONS

As we can conclude from the above analysis, the original film tries to give a supernatural essence to a realistic world, while *Zombie's* film steps away from any non-realistic element and tries to restructure the narrative to this new realistic context. So, based on this context, the induced identification of the viewers with Michael has changed. In the original film we had the POV shots that helped viewers identify with him. In *Zombie's* film there is no POV shot of Michael, so the identification is achieved through the story itself, because we follow him from his childhood through his adulthood. Worth



mentioning is the fact that in Carpenter's film the actions between the first murder of Michael and his return to Haddonfield take place in the first fifteen minutes of the film, while in Zombie's film the same narrative time frame composes a whole half of the film.

Another element that demonstrates the big differentiation between the original and the remake film is the description of the teenage victims. While in the first filmic text there are a plethora of teenagers with allegedly deviant sexual behaviors that are slashed to pieces, in Zombie's *Halloween* there are only few of them. Aside from Michael's sister, the first murder of a teenage character takes place in the seventieth minute of the film. Before this incident, there are a lot of murders, but the victims are exclusively adults, with the exception of Michael's bully who is a kid. Even the limited murders of teenagers that follow the aforementioned incident are justified by the story and have nothing to do with their sexual behaviors.

Zombie took the franchise and added a more realistic and political subtext that re-proves the ways American contemporary community works. Michael is no longer an inhuman legend who spreads the fear without any known and logical reason. He is a human being, and during the narrative we witness his transformation from an innocent child to a mass murderer. Even the Final Girl is represented in a different way, having a more three-dimensional psychological structure and without any stereotypical virginal characteristics.

In conclusion, in Carpenter's film there is a struggle between two generations regarding sexual behaviors and on the other hand, in Zombie's film there is a struggle between two social classes regarding the way of living.

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