



# WHEN MOCKUMENTARY MEETS SLASHER FILM: COMEDIC FIRST-PERSON NARRATIVE IN *BEHIND THE MASK: THE RISE OF LESLIE VERNON*

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## INTRODUCTION

Since cinema usually narrates its stories through the camera, the structure of a typical film is in third person. Although cinema has a third-person narrative, there are some elements that can provide a sense of a first-person narrative, such as voice-overs of a character, point-of-view shots, close-up shots, and dream sequences. One of the genres that use these first-person narrative elements is horror. In 2006, the film *Behind the Mask: The Rise of Leslie Vernon* (Glosserman) redefined the first-person conventions and incorporated them in the formula of the slasher film, one of the most well-known and important subgenres of horror.

Several well-known slasher films, like *Scream* (1996) build postmodern narratives by blurring the boundaries between real and fictional worlds. As I examine in this essay, *Behind the Mask* follows this postmodern lead by incorporating it in mockumentary conventions that affect the entire narrative. In *Behind the Mask*, mockumentary strategies allow the audience to follow the killer preparing his murders and stalking his alter ego, the Final Girl.

## THE SLASHER FILM SUBGENRE AND THE POSTMODERN TREND

To understand the narrative perspectives of slasher films, I will first outline the characteristics of this subgenre. The main feature of these films is that evil is embodied in human form, and the “monster” is often a male serial killer hunting potential teenage victims. Female-coded characters are the majority of the victims, and they face a more brutal death than men. In the end, a girl, usually a virgin, survives, confronts the serial killer, and defeats him.



The origins of this subgenre are trace back to 1974, when *Black Christmas* (1974) and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) were released in theaters and set the basic rules of the subgenre's formula (Petridis 2014a, 76). Four years after these films, *Halloween* (1978) premiered and facilitated the standardization of the classical formula of the subgenre, leading to a decade of slasher films using the exact same conventions and techniques until the mid-1990s when postmodernism came to the fore.

Based on systematic research of the history of the subgenre and its evolution, there are three basic cycles in the lifetime of slasher films: the classical cycle (1974–1993), the self-referential cycle (1994–2000), and the neo-slasher cycle, which started at the beginning of the new millennium (Petridis 2019). The central theme of the classical cycle is the punishment of the sexually active characters, something that is reflecting of conservative beliefs of the 1980s. Secondly, the self-referential cycle is based on the postmodern approach of the parody, which was a major trend in the American society of the 1990s. Lastly, the neo-slasher cycle is centered around the search for the causes of evil, a theme that became essential for the structure of these narratives. The slasher film subgenre has evolved considerably and changed its norms based on the needs of every period over 40 years.

One of the most well-known theories around this topic is Carol J. Clover's study, which centers on the representation of gender and sexuality in the slasher films. In fact, it was Clover (1992, 35–41) who introduced the term "Final Girl," which refers to the character that eventually stands out from the crowd and survives. In a typical slasher film, two characters are the most important people of the narrative: the killer and the Final Survivor. At the beginning of the subgenre and especially in the classical cycle of the subgenre in the 1970s and 1980s, the survivor, who was usually a female character (the Final Girl), had specific traits that were reproduced across different films.

In the classical cycle, the Final Girl is the female character who survives and defeats the killer. The trope is built to distinguish her from the rest of the characters in the filmic text, and crucially, she is not sexually active. From her appearance to her personality, she has virginal traits that are unique compared to the other characters who end up dead. Although the Final Girl is smaller and physically weaker than the killer, she manages to avoid and sometimes kill him. Some other characteristics of the Final Girl are that she is intelligent, resourceful, and watchful almost to the point of paranoia (Clover 1992, 39). The slasher film subgenre focuses its narratives to the heroine's growth from an uncomfortable and hesitant young woman to a fully-fledged adult woman, a coming of age story that develops through frantic stress and murderous bloodletting (Greven 2011, 146).

The Final Girl, as Clover defined it, started to decline as the subgenre was entering its self-referential cycle at the beginning of the 1990s. The main characteristic of postmodernism that became part of the subgenre was the element of parody and



pastiche. Fredric Jameson (1991) argued that “pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style (...) the imitation of dead styles, speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global culture” (16–17). The MTV music channel, which became known for the image and sound editing that relies on fast cuts and the composition of different visual style, is a multimedia example of popular culture pastiche of the 1990s whose aesthetics influenced the slasher subgenre (Phillips 2005, 170).

Linda Hutcheon's approach is more suitable to the slasher film subgenre. Unlike Jameson's pastiche, Hutcheon (1988, 11) articulates a parody simultaneously incorporates and provokes its mockery elements, usually through caustic and/or ironic approaches. In other words, through an interactive dialogue between the old and the new, something new is produced, usually with caustic comedic elements.

Intertextuality plays a central role in the self-referential cycle of the subgenre by combining references creating a sort of game for the viewer to engage in – a viewer whose narcissism is not flattered through the old-fashioned indirect identification with the characters but through the chance to demonstrate their cultural capital, achieved by the recognition of references (Stam 2006, 383). Noel Carroll (1982, 52) expands this concept by using the term allusion and stating that is:

an umbrella term covering a mixed lot of practices including quotations, the memorialization of past genres, the reworking of past genres, homages, and the recreation of "classic" scenes, shots, plot motifs, lines of dialogue, themes, gestures, and so forth from film history.

Slasher films started to mock the conventions of the classical cycle through self-referential elements in the narrative. Paul Kahn (2013, 169) states that these films work through a self-referential humor that aims to convey our fears. So, the slasher films of the 1990s played with the predictability of the previous films and included hyperconscious characters who knew the formula of the subgenre and were trying to alter it. The subgenre was reborn and succeeded by creating an interplay with the audience as well as the already known narrative rules and conventions (Kvaran 2016, 964). Even if the postmodern trend lasted only a brief period, its contribution to the subgenre is so important that often we can identify self-referential elements even in slasher films of the new millennium (Petridis 2019, 88).

## FOUND-FOOTAGE AND FIRST-PERSON NARRATIVE HORROR FILMS

The postmodern trend in horror films has taken many forms. One of these expressions led to the popularity of an innovative tendency, the found footage films. Found footage films are created and narrated in a manner that generates the illusion that what the viewers see is audiovisual material created by ordinary people, in the form of an



amateur homemade video that was found from the production company that distributed untouched. The start of this trend has its roots in metaphysical horror. *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) is considered the first film to consolidate the conventions of this innovative form of narrative. The creative team behind this film constructed its narrative by making it look like video footage that was taken by the protagonists themselves. Moreover, they strengthened this illusion by creating a website full of fake police reports about the events narrated and newsreel-style interviews. Even the IMDb page of the film listed the actors as “missing, presumed dead” for the first year after its release, making everyone unsure of whether this was a real-life documentary or a fiction film.

This approach became known to the general public in the late 1990s through the commercial and artistic success of *The Blair Witch Project*. However, the found footage style has been around for several decades, with examples such as *Punishment Park* (1971), *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980), and *84C MoPic* (1989). In the new millennium these filmic texts have flourished, with several films achieving top-grossing success in box offices around the world. In addition, the extensive coverage of 9/11 events helped real-time footage enter a new role in show business and become familiar to the mainstream audience (King 2005, 47). Among the exemplary texts of the subgenre of the new millennium are the *Paranormal Activity* franchise and film series *[REC]*, consisting of four instalments. These films are usually produced with low budgets, an aspect that has a substantial impact on the implementation of horror conventions within them.

The first-person narrative is the key element in all the aforementioned films. Traditionally, film narratives are characterized as third person, meaning that the camera is positioned as a third party which monitors the action for the audience. There are some point-of-view shots in several films, with which the audience can see some moments through the eyes of a specific character, thus recreating a first-person narrative sequence. However, these shots are not the primary method of delivery for most films. The essence of a found footage film lies in the fact that the public sees something that the leading characters have shot, and therefore, their narration is primarily delivered in first-person.

One particular form of found footage films is mockumentaries. A broad definition of this term states that a mockumentary is a film or a television show depicting fictional events that are presented as a documentary. In other words, mockumentaries are audiovisual texts in which attempts are made to use the conventions and codes of the documentaries to represent a fictional event. The term, which emerged in the 1960s, was popularly spread in the mid-1980s when director Rob Reiner used it in interviews to describe the film *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984). Some of the basic narrative conventions of these films are talking heads discussing previous events and cinéma vérité



fragments following people as they go through various actions. But, the main distinction with documentaries is that mockumentaries are fiction films.

After found footage became popular, cinematic horror embraced mockumentary conventions too. Based on its production standards and its postmodern trend, the slasher film was the right candidate to experiment with this narrative form. However, in the slasher film *Behind the Mask: The Rise of Leslie Vernon* mockumentary conventions were deployed to create a postmodern narrative that mocks the subgenre itself.

## BEHIND THE MASK: WHEN SLASHER FILM MET FIRST-PERSON NARRATIVE

*Behind the Mask: The Rise of Leslie Vernon* is a 2006 American slasher film directed by Scott Glosserman. The film takes place in the small town of Glen Echo in Maryland – which exists in real life – and centers on a journalist named Taylor Gentry (Angela Goethals) and her two cameramen, Doug (Ben Pace) and Todd (Britain Spellings). The troupe intends to document Leslie Vernon (Nathan Baesel), an aspiring serial killer who uses slasher film conventions to plan his murders. Leslie claims that he was the boy from a local urban legend before being killed by the people of his city, but that he somehow survived the attack. The documentation of the killer's personality takes place mainly through the interviews with Taylor, where Leslie reveals his plans. At the same time, with the help of the TV crew, the audience watches the killer trying to prepare the house where, allegedly, the murders of the teenage victims will occur. Finally, although the filmic text strives to maintain realism, the story takes place in a universe where legendary fictional slasher icons, such as Freddy Krueger, Jason Voorhees and Michael Myers, exist in real life.

*Behind the Mask* is a rare example of a slasher film that incorporates first-person narrative and mockumentary norms. In this film, we see the acts of a killer through the stripping and deconstruction of a myth surrounding his name. We observe his actions not from the point of view of the victims, but through the point of view of the crew that documents the killer's motives and personality traits. The story is composed of elements reminiscent of the classical cycle of the slasher: a killer terrorizes and chases a group of teenagers, a girl intended as a Final Girl and a character representing incarnate good, Doctor Halloran (Robert Englund), trying to prevent the murders. However, the narrative of this story has postmodern influences that coexist harmoniously with the slasher conventions established in the new millennium.

Even if the film belongs to a period when the neo-slasher cycle made its appearance, it has a strong influence from the postmodern trend of the previous decade. *Behind the Mask* uses the subgenre's self-referential legacy of the 1990s and incorporates it in the new narrative forms that have been explored in the 21st century, which brings a more 'explained' violence. This film is an homage to the slasher film that reproduces classical conventions in order to mock them by bringing a comedic aspect to the surface of the narrative. For example, the reproduction of the element of the Final Girl



as a virginal archetype is a clear tribute to the classical conventions, but the hyperconscious killer that knows the norms of the convention and tries to interpret it for his own benefit gives a parodic aspect to the narrative. The predictability that follows the subgenre since the 1980s is used and incorporated into the narrative, while hyperconscious characters that know the classical formula and are trying to change it.

The film oscillates between mockumentary norms and classical filming, with the former being the biggest part of the narrative. This style is characterized by first-person narration, filming with hand-held cameras, and interaction of the actors with the camera and, by extension, with the viewer. The narrative primarily consists of first-person features but does not completely exclude the third-person narration, with some scenes being shot in such a way that they look like pieces of a 'regular' film of the subgenre. This part of *Behind the Mask* consists of third-person narrative, steady shots, and preservation of the invisible fourth wall, without the characters speaking to the viewers.

The first and second act of the narrative is mostly based on mockumentary features, with only a few scenes being a third-person narrative. An example of a third-person narrative is the librarian's murder executed in order to scare and terrify the Final Girl, "preparing" her for the final attack. Another example is Leslie's description of the planned incidents and future murders. Nevertheless, the narrative of the first and second acts is primarily first-person, and the mockumentary techniques are constantly being used. At some moments, even the camera operator speaks with the fictional characters.

Based on this interaction of the main characters with the audience, the narrative creates a comic relief that diminishes the tension of the action. Even if the main genre of the film is horror, the methods that the narrative uses to develop the action contradict with the creation of a possible feeling of terror to the audience. *Behind the Mask* is a parody of its own subgenre that creates a peculiar interplay between its narrative and the audience.

The third act, however, differs, as it adopts an entirely third-person narrative. While Leslie lets the crew leave unharmed, they ultimately decide to stop him. The story justifies this change; as the cooperation between the killer and the TV crew stops, the cameras are gone, and the characters decide to stay and help the potential victims. Taylor attempts to use the knowledge they extracted from the interviews against Leslie and team up with the remaining teens, but Leslie's resourcefulness allows him to adapt to the new conditions. The absence of found footage techniques and the progress of the action helps the narrative to embrace the horror elements of the film and step aside for a moment from the humorous components of the previous acts. The first two acts are preparing the audience and giving to them all the knowledge needed regarding the subgenre, while the third act uses this information to conclude the story. Taylor realizes that, as a virgin herself, she was Leslie's intended Final Survivor all along.



After all, the spectators witnessed the demystification of the killer through the crew's, and more specifically, Taylor's point of view.

Leslie continues killing the potential victims one-by-one until only Taylor remains. Taylor faces Leslie and defeats him by crushing his head in an apple press and then burning down a shed with his body inside. Of course, the film's end credits return to the true identity of the narrative, as we see closed-circuit camera footage of the morgue where Leslie's burnt corpse has been transferred. The audience sees Leslie, still alive and attacking the coroner, which also fulfills another classical convention of the subgenre. In the classical slasher films, the killer never truly dies but continues to haunt his potential victims. So, the film uses this classical convention to mock it by using mockumentary techniques. Even in the end credits of film, there is one last moment where the narrative mocks the conventions of the subgenre by using its parodic identity.

The film structure contributes to a demystification of the killer that the viewers are witnessing it through a documentary-style narration. An example of this demystification of the killer is when Leslie presents various gadgets and mechanisms that he has put in the home where the victims will be, such as a remote control which, at the touch of a button, turns off the electric power. We see the human side of the killer, learn his backstory, and try to understand the ways that he kills. In an interview that is part of the film, Leslie stresses that TV coverage will focus on "how he does it" and not on "why he does it", as this question would never been asked to Michael from *Halloween* or *Friday the 13th's* Jason. Of course, following the pattern of the neo-slasher cycle, the narrative deals with the backstory of Leslie and tries to create a multilayered character with motives and goals.

Finally, the film is trying to find out the causes of the creation of evil, while we learn the backstory of Leslie, as we observe him in his everyday life and see him laugh, joke or even cry. The killer is a three-dimensional character, something unique for the subgenre in which it belongs, especially to the classical cycle which *Behind the Mask* mocks. This is also supported by the appearance of Eugene (Scott Wilson), a mentor and a retired killer. We see him in family moments with his wife, behaving to Leslie as if he were his son as they barbeque together. All these scenes help to further understand the human side of the killer.

## CONCLUSION

Slasher film is a horror subgenre that has existed for more than four decades. During this timeframe, the narrative conventions have adapted to the circumstances of each period and the subgenre can be divided into three film cycles. *Behind the Mask* was created in a period where neo-slashers trying to justify the creation of evil were thriving, but its narrative was highly influenced by the previous cycle that contained self-referential elements. In other words, the narrative of the film is based on



postmodern norms that promote the notion of parody - a parody that does not just stop in the representation of the killer but extends to the general code of storytelling.

This narrative approach is achieved through the interactions between cinematic footage and mockumentary techniques. Based on an innovative structure that is mostly using first-person narrative, the myth of the killer unfolds and reveals new aspects to the audience, while it mocks the subgenre itself by making fun of the standardized classical conventions of the 1970s and 1980s. The film obeys to the cycle to which it belongs by creating a justified evil, while it pays an homage to the self-referential slashers by teasing and parodying the classical conventions.

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