**Konjuring Killjoy Episode 5: Oh the Horror!**

Hi folks – as always, let’s start this episode with some administrative points, disclaimers, and hints at what’s coming up – but, NO SPOILERS!!

Well, maybe a few spoilers. This episode looks at the broader literature around the horror genre, and slasher films specifically. As Gen X, I was already intimately aware of some of the originals – *Carrie, Halloween, Friday the 13th, Nightmare on Elm Street, Sleepaway Camp –* I had to leave more than 1 sleepover early as a result of them! I am, however, no horror film expert.

No worries – there are many who are, and I cite several of them in this episode. Carol Clover’s 1992 *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* and Isabel Pinedo’s 1997 *Recreational terror: Women and the pleasures of horror film viewing* were particularly helpful for building a foundation around horror and make up a large portion of this episode.

When you hear this…. You will know that I am quoting directly and at length from Clover’s 1992 book. Yikes… that’s Scary stuff.

When you hear this… You will know that I am quoting Isabel Pinedo… A little more recreational, a little more pleasure!

And of course, when you hear this inspirational tune, you will be reminded that this is indeed a Feminist Killjoy truth, commitment, equation, etc… I just love that.

One thing I DON’T love, which I want to mention, is some of the gendered language used in this episode. Of course it’s gendered, when one of the most important concepts in horror film scholarship is the final GIRL.

I think I might be all over the map in my references to these characters – sometimes using she/her pronouns as in the original conceptions of the concept, and other times using they/them or even “we” – which feels more contemporary and inclusive.

The term itself – the “girl” part – gets under my skin in a few ways. First, it feels like an exonym – an identity placed on a person or group from the outside – rather than an autonym, which comes from the person or group themselves. Second, as an exonym, “girl” feels infantilizing, as if it is meant to diminish the full personhood of the character and keep them dependent on, and under the thumb of, the dominant, patriarchal order.

I’m recalling, though, a story Angela Davis tells about working with Miss Major, the Executive Director of the TGI Justice Project. According to Davis, “Miss Major says she prefers to be called Miss Major, not Ms. Major, because as a trans woman she is not yet liberated” (2016, p. 98). So perhaps sticking with “girl” is more appropriate and empowering than I had thought. On that note – let’s get to the episode…

[Konjuring Killjoy Intro Bumper]

Episode 5: Oh the Horror!

[SFX – screams, scares, breathing]

The blood curdling screams. Jump scares. That menacing asthmatic breathing. These well-known devices are both music to the ears of horror fans, and the death knells that signal impending doom for the unwitting victims on the screen

Horror, slasher films more specifically, has been largely written off by critics for not only being poorly made films, but also for being a completely debased genre, one that profits off of egregious violence against women.

Notably, in his 1980 review of the film, critic Gene Siskel called Friday the 13th director Sean S. Cunningham “one of the most despicable creatures ever to infest the movie business.” Almost impossibly, the review got worse, with Siskel concluding, “there is nothing to Friday the 13th other than its sickening attack scenes; remove them and you are left with an empty movie.”

Considering more contemporary feminist analysis of the genre – perhaps, my dear Siskel, that was, and still is, the point. It turns out that some of things that made these films so reviled by critics – the repetition of structure, the predictability, and the one-dimensional characters that lacked any sort of development – make horror films a favorite of fans, and productive sites for feminist phenomenologists.

Let’s take some time to lay a foundation of knowledge around horror films, and to see for ourselves how the feminist Killjoy can be brought to life through this genre that is (pre) occupied with death.

[SFX – moving into horror]

Horror films have several notable conventions they play on over and over again. Hence – the repetitious and predicable critique. Still, these structural components prime audiences for maximum viewing pleasure, and are more or less mandatory for a film to classify as “horror.” These five components are outlined by Carol Clover in her 1992 book, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film.*

Component one – The Killer [SFX – Clover cue]

Of course, there is a Killer. One whose rage often comes from some childhood or past trauma. “They are superhuman; their virtue indestructibility” (Clover, 1992, p. 30). They NEVER die.

Component two – Locale [SFX – Clover cue]

The killing and general horror take place in a Locale – “not home, [but] at a terrible place.”

The place is made terrible by the terrible people who populate it and the terrible things that they do there. In these films, the killer returns to the “terrible place” where they experienced their past trauma, to reenact that violence on a new Victim. (We’ll hear about that, or those victims, later…)

Component three – Weapons [SFX – Clover cue]

There are Weapons. Lots of Weapons. Some actual weapons, like knives; others improvised tools like chainsaws, pitchforks; and still others more fantastical like a razor claw glove or cotton candy laser gun. Regardless of the form they take, they tend to either actually be phallic, or are made so, by how they are wielded by the killer. I am thinking of how in Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2 – yes, there is always a sequel! – Leatherface points his chainsaw at his female victim’s crotch in a grotesque sexual simulation.

Component four – Victims [SFX – Clover cue]

And the Victims. Male and female in relatively equal numbers yet, shown very differently on the screen. Men, boys are done away with quickly without much pre- or post-death bodily representation. Conversely, the camera drinks in the bodies of women, girls - lingering languidly on the good parts – booties, boobs – zooming in closely not only on their sexualized parts, but also on their fear, terror – thus sexualizing these hideous emotions.

Component five - Shock [SFX – Clover cue]

Horror films, and slashers in particular, have both benefitted from, and contributed to, the “perfection of special effects [that] has made it possible to show maiming and dismemberment in extraordinarily credible detail” (Clover, 1992, p. 41). Heads squashed, eyes popped out and/or penetrated with needles in close-up, faces flayed – horror intentionally cultivates outrageous excess (Clover, p. 41).

Ah, yes, the camp of camp! In *Skin Shows,* Jack Halberstam (1995) ties contemporary horror genres to the gothic through the rhetorical device of the pun, when the same word “express[es] many different meanings which then play off, against, and through each other” (p. 178). In the gothic, puns lighten the dark moments and provide a bit of humorous relief among the terror. Like camp, puns work at the surface, and obscure a depth relation. The feminist phenomenologist, however, is not scared to pull back the surface skin and reveal what is festering underneath.

What lies underneath points to how horror films operate. Isabel Pinedo’s foundational 1997 book *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing* outlines several defining characteristics of postmodern horror.

Characteristic one: horror constitutes a violent disruption of the everyday world [SFX Pinedo Cue]

Unlike Clover, who contended that the violent and grisly killing in horror films occur in a “terrible place,” distinct from the safety of “home,” Pinedo argues that in postmodern horror, the terrible place is situated within and actually emerges as, idyllic settings that bring to mind visions of the American dream. The picket fences of suburbia, the wholesome nature of the summer camp – violence is an everyday threat that is unremitting and happens everywhere.

Characteristic two: Horror transgresses and violates boundaries [SFX Pinedo Cue]

Nothing is what it seems to be, in postmodern horror. Boundaries between fantasy/reality; good/evil; normal/abnormal are blurred. “Safety exists in the ‘normal’” (Lizardi, 2010, p. 117) and when the normal is actually the abnormal – there is no safe place to hide from the killer.

In real life, there are lots of “abnormal” things that are perceived as “normal” – patriarchy is one that is most relevant here, and perhaps too, the “master abnormality” upon which other abnormalities – like racism, homo- and transphobia – rest. The normal is, of course, normative – it is hegemonic, universal, and, as such deemed natural. This makes fighting it so difficult. In her 2016 book *Freedom is a Constant Struggle,* Angela Davis advises that “we [must] learn how to think and act and struggle against that which is ideologically constituted as ‘normal’” (p. 100).

She implores us to use feminist methodologies “that urge us to think about things together that appear to be separate, and to disaggregate things that appear to naturally belong together” (p. 104). Sounds to me like a job for a feminist phenomenologist.

Characteristic three: Horror throws into question the validity of rationality [SFX Pinedo Cue]

Add one more boundary to list of those violated – rationality/irrationality. In horror generally, logic collapses. Nothing makes sense; things that seemed impossible or surreal, are very real-ly happening. While “evil lurks in what we cannot see… we [also] cannot trust what we do see” (Pinedo, 1997, p. 74).

Perhaps equally applicable to horror film victims and feminist killjoys living in the real world, Keisner (2008) advises that we must “step into the unexplainable reality and accept it as a possibility” if we are to survive (p. 417). We might also employ Marquis Bey’s practice of being radical, where radical is “an imaginative speculation about how we might be, where we might end up, what might exist, and what might be possible” (p. 12). I believe this practice ties deeply to Angela Davis’ encouragement to learn new tactics for countering naturalized systems of oppression.

Characteristic four: Postmodern horror repudiates narrative closure [SFX Pinedo Cue]

One thing we know for sure about horror films, and we’ve already talked about with Clover’s component of the killer – killers never die, and as such, the terror is never over. While the film comes to an end, it is an open ending, one that threatens or promises (depending on your feelings around horror films!) a “new unleashing.”

From a business perspective – this never-ending keeps a never-ending flow of ticket sales as the monster (re) emerges for a Part 2, Part 3, Part 10… Socially, the unresolved violence reflects too closely the unresolved violence that we face on a daily basis in real life. This keeps us constantly on our toes, and toeing the lines of normative behaviors so as to manufacture some semblance of safety by not poking the beast.

However we read it, this lack of closure leaves horror film audiences with a “deep sense of hopelessness” (Becker, 2006, p.58). As a feminist, I know that feeling all too well! As Paula Abdul sang – we take two steps forward, we take two steps back. [SFX – Opposites Attract]

We’ve had victories and have made progress, still much of the time I feel we are standing in the same place, fighting the same issues. “Freedom is [INDEED] a Constant Struggle” (Davis, 2016).

Characteristic five: Horror produces a bounded experience of fear [SFX Pinedo Cue]

Pinedo argues that horror creates what she calls “recreational terror” through a “simulation of danger” (p. 5) that allows us to master feelings that are too threatening in real life (p. 5). These films allow us to express “culturally repressed feelings such as terror and rage” (p. 41) and leave the theater relieved – it was just a movie. We are safe. Or are we?

I’m particularly interested in the “pun” or double meaning of recreational. Recreational – something we do for enjoyment, for fun. But what about adding a dash, re-creational? The films re-create everyday terrors of catcalls, rape, and domestic violence that women experience in real life. They are scary because they are relatable and tap into the universal fears of female bodied and female presenting people. Even though we have released our terror and rage against the screen, the real-world practices of these “threats” go on and on.

In addition to the mandatory components and characteristics we’ve already discussed, there is one last thing that seems definitional to the horror genre – the Final Girl. Described by Carol Clover in *Men, Women, and Chainsaws,* the final girl remains one of the most written about and influential constructions in feminist horror film critique.

[SFX: Clover Cue]

“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. She is the one who encounters the mutilated bodies of her friends and perceives the full extent of the preceding horror and of her own peril; who is chased, cornered, wounded; whom we see scream, stagger, fall, rise, and scream again. She is abject terror personified. If her friends knew they were about to die only seconds before the event, the Final Girl lives with the knowledge for long minutes or hours. She alone looks death in the face, but she alone also finds the strength either to stay the killer long enough to be rescued or to kill him herself” (Clover, 1992, p. 35)

Clover emphasizes how the final girl’s gender impacts her reading and role as a “female victimhero.” Duh – the Final Girl is a girl! But really… not *properly* a girl. That is, she is “boyish… not fully feminine” (p. 40). By constructing the final girl as a “de-girled being” (Halberstam, 1995, p. 143) the filmmakers attribute her strength to her boyishness, her masculinity, thus allowing the vanquishing of evil to be brought back into the normative patriarchal symbolic order.

The question of is she or isn’t she – the final girl being a feminist that is, has been thoroughly rehearsed in the literature. While some read her as feminist, Clover (1992) shuts that down herself, with this oft-repeated quote:

“To applaud the Final Girl as a feminist development… is, in light of her figurative meaning, a particularly grotesque expression of wishful thinking” (p. 53). [SFX Clover Cue]

While the Final Girl is not the feminist development some have hoped for and dreamed of, I can still see many points of similarity between the Final Girl and our feminist killjoy. In many ways the Final Girl acts as, and is read for, being a killjoy.

The Final Girl is both rational and emotional. She “survey[s] the visible evidence” in the terrible place and begins to put two and two together. She notices and realizes.

Killjoy Equation: Noticing = the feminist Killjoy’s hammer. [SFX Killjoy Cue]

She is an affect alien – “overreacting” as her “friends” would put it, to every branch snap or windblown noise. She takes things too seriously and refuses to relax.

Killjoy Equations: Oversensitive = Sensitive to What is Not Over; Affect Alien = Alienated by how you are affected [SFX Killjoy Cue]

By calling out the threats she perceives the Final Girl is branded as “nuts” or “crazy” (Trecansky, 2001, P. 69)

Killjoy Truth: To expose a problem is to pose a problem [SFX Killjoy Cue]

Kyle Christensen (2011) reads the Final Girl’s actions as “Feminist methods,” which although oddly worded, would make Angela Davis proud.

The first feminist method is to “Become Paranoid.” Yes. It sounds weird to call this a feminist method but, it does seem pretty similar to what we do as Feminist Killjoys. As we just heard, and intimately know by the Killjoy Equation:

Rolling Eyes = Feminist Pedagogy [SFX Killjoy Cue)

We overreact; we take things too seriously; when things are not funny we will not laugh; we can’t/won’t get over things that aren’t over; we “make” problems where others see none. In other words we are paranoid, and paranoid = crazy.

Paranoia, in these slasher films, while a trait that helps the final girl stay alive, is also dismissed, much like Feminist Killjoy behaviors are in the real world. To be paranoid is to be off target, making too much of things. Countless times in these movies female characters are laughed at for questioning a noise or for noticing something out of place. Male characters even play up this “hysteria” by pranking and “scaring” the female characters, reinforcing gender norms. Male masculinity becomes even more strongly tethered to bravery and level-headedness while female femininity even more tied to weakness and excitability.

The other Final Girl practice that Christensen reads as a feminist method is her use of her mind and willpower to destroy the “monster.” While the Final Girl must become as vicious as her attackers (Clover, 1992, p. 123), it takes more than grit and monstrosity to dispatch the evil.

To be successful, she must alter her own perceptions of reality in order to subvert the dominating social structure, which she had previously believed in and obeyed, but which has also produced the monster she is now struggling to defeat (Trecansky, 2001). She needs to figure out what makes the monster tick and turn them in on themselves. Similarly, feminist killjoys need to figure out what makes patriarchy tick – we’ve got a pretty good start on this; and figure out a way to turn patriarchy in on itself (which is where the feminist struggle is real!).

Step one is our Feminist Phenomenology project – through which, as the Final Girl does with the monster – we make patriarchy visible, showing that it is abnormal, rather than normal.

Step two is defeating patriarchy and transforming society. That second step is indeed a doozy. Let’s see if we can use a little horror film logic to describe how we might accomplish this feat…

Consider Nancy’s turning her back on Freddy Krueger and refusing to participate in his sick dream in Nightmare on Elm Street 2, or simply refusing to click yes when asked, “Do you want to watch?” on the website that titles the film, feardotcom. In both instances the “monster” and “killing” is stopped by removing our physical and emotional capital.

Because we watch, because we participate in it, we keep patriarchy alive. If we “stop feeding into it” we can overthrow it. We stop feeding into it by becoming feminist killjoys and living feminist lives in which we do not contribute to, and actively fight against, marginalization and oppression. Since these horrors – marginalization and oppression – are definitional to patriarchy, if we take them away, obliterate them through a complete feminist transformation, we will have killed patriarchy once and for all. No new unleashing. No sequels.

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