

Amelia Wichowicz, M.A.

Slasher: Transformations of the Subgenre in American Cinema

The Doctoral Advisor: dr hab. Iwona Kolasińska-Pasterczyk

Abstract

Slasher film is a subgenre of horror film that developed in American cinema. It is characterized by its distinctive plot, in which a psychopathic killer, using sharp tools (a knife, a machete, a chainsaw, a hook, etc.), kills in a brutal and bloody manner a group of teenagers staying in an isolated place, e.g. at a house on the outskirts of the city, at a summer camp or at school. The subject of this study are selected slasher films, made in the United States of America (and a few in Canada) between 1974 and 2014, and – as a context of research – American and European horror films that do not belong to the subgenre but had a significant impact on its development. The purpose of this dissertation, which is oriented to enclose the whole phenomenon, is the analysis of evolution and transformations of the slasher film in American cinema. This dissertation represents the field of genre studies – it depicts variations and changes in a formula of the slasher film.

The first chapter presents different concepts in film genre studies, mostly Anglo-Saxon, which constitute a theoretical paradigm and a source of inspiration to study the slasher film as the subgenre of the horror genre. Thus, for example, polemical orientation towards studies, which adopted methodologies: structuralism (in Vera Dika's works), feminism and gender (in works of Carol J. Clover and Vera Dika), psychoanalysis (in numerous studies). Thus, in particular, the reference to the trend of cultural film genre studies, inspired by Charles (Rick) Altman. Two perspectives were adopted in this study of the slasher film: synchronic (inspired by a structural approach aimed at capturing the distinctive features) and diachronic (allowing to locate the subgenre in the context of the historical process).

The second chapter presents a definition of the slasher film as autonomous subgenre of the horror film and defines its characteristics: types of film characters (a murderer – a *bogeyman*, a *final girl*, teenage victims), plot functions, time and place of action, individual conventions, visual solutions (including “subjective point of view” – POV), aesthetics.

The third chapter presents the genesis of the slasher movie. In chronological order it shows cultural phenomenons that had an impact on the slasher's formula: French theatre Grand Guignol (1897-1962), selected horror movies from 1920s, 1930s and 1940s (including horrors from the Universal Pictures and the Hammer Films Productions), *The Night of the Hunter* (1955, Ch. Laughton), *Psycho* (1960, A. Hitchcock) and *Peeping Tom* (1960, M. Powell), gore movies (including horrors by H. G. Lewis), Italian *giallo*, films called "American Gothic" (*The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* [1974, T. Hooper]), a preslasher *Black Christmas* (1974, B. Clark).

The fourth chapter refers to "the Golden Age" of the slasher film (1978-1984), when it reached mature form and dominated American horror film. This chapter contains analysis of five slasher films: *Halloween* (1978, J. Carpenter), *Friday the 13th* (1980, S. S. Cunningham), *Prom Night* (1980, P. Lynch), *The Sleepaway Camp* (1983, R. Hiltzick), *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984 W. Craven). They are the best examples of the subgenre, which present different kinds of slasher formula. Many of them initiated film series (e.g. *Halloween*, *Friday the 13th*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*). The chapter describes "a sequelisation" in the slasher film subgenre.

The fifth chapter presents a postmodern turn in the slasher film history and in the evolution of its formula. A harbinger of change was *Student Bodies* (1981, M. Ritchie, M. Rose), a parody of teen horrors (including the slasher film) made in "the Golden Age". Then, postmodern tendencies appeared in *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* (1994, W. Craven). The breakthrough for the subgenre came along with *Scream* (1996, W. Craven) and its sequels. It brought not only a change in the formula of the slasher film, but it also began a renaissance of the subgenre in American cinema.

The sixth chapter presents contemporary slasher films. There are three paths in the development and the transformation of the formula: the first one is related to remakes and reboots – new versions of slasher films from "the Golden Age"; the second one with new slasher films, which are often influenced by postmodernism; and the third one associated with nostalgia in contemporary American cinema, manifesting itself in the longing for the cinema of the 80s.

Amelie Wichowicz