

Psychoanalytic Theory within *Halloween*

Sigmund Freud once argued that the repression of trauma will lead to an inevitable rise to the surface. Alienation and sexual deviance can prompt all sorts of unhinged behaviors later in life. There is no better example of a film that mirrors these ideas than John Carpenter's 1978 horror classic, *Halloween*. In *Halloween*, repressed killer Michael Myers returns home after escaping confinement to unleash horror on the small town of Haddonfield, Illinois for one special night, the Halloween of 1978. His seemingly unclear motives and his ruthless murders, particularly the slashing of several sexually active teenagers, have made many theorists and even the filmmakers themselves describe him as the physical embodiment of pure evil. In psychoanalytic theory, unconscious desires, fantasies, and the structure of the mind influence cinematic narratives and how films impact the viewer. Robin Wood writes in "An Introduction to the American horror film" about how the horror film genre often externalizes repressed social and sexual anxieties, though the ways in which this is showcased are often unconventional when compared to other genres of film. Horror films are commonly gory, violent, and gruesome, leading some audiences to turn away. In the essay, "The Terror of Pleasure", writer Tania Modleski elaborates on the ways in which female spectators actively engage and connect with onscreen characters of the genre. Spectatorship and identification are likewise depicted in Christian Metz's expanded work, "Identification, mirror". These publications relate not only to psychoanalytic theory, but the outline of the film as well. *Halloween* dramatizes the repression of sexual desire, constructs its monster as the embodiment of ultimate and unconscious fear, and engages female and general spectators through both identification and ambivalence, revealing ideological contradictions within American culture.

The key point of Freud's approach to psychoanalytic theory is that whatever is psychologically repressed eventually returns, but in altered symbolic form. In "An Introduction to the American horror film", Wood draws on Freud's concepts to argue that American horror films function as expressions of repressed cultural anxieties. Anxieties about what, though? Well, answers may vary. Wood believes that horror is a conservative genre in form, but potentially

radical in content, because it brings to the surface what society actively suppresses. The “others” - those who deviate from capitalism, patriarchy, and whatever other mainstream system in place - are often excluded. This includes children, who adults often overlook as beings with mature senses of self and ideas, and instead oppress them just as they oppress themselves (Wood 200). The opening scene of *Halloween* is gripping. It is presented from the point of view of an ambiguous character, as he secretly spies into the bedroom of a teen couple, moments before intimacy. When the pair call it a night, the teen boy goes home, leaving us to watch our focal character head for the kitchen, where he reaches for a carving knife, walks straight to the teen girl's room, and stabs her to death. Soon after, it is revealed that this perspective is that of six year old Michael Myers, who just murdered his older sister. Fifteen years later, he makes his return to the town of Haddonfield, having escaped asylum, allowing him to wreak havoc on his community once more. Sexual repression is a huge theme in psychoanalytics and Freudian theses. Myers is exposed to sexuality by his sister at the age of six. That is a pretty early time in a child's development to be privy to sexuality in general, and even more traumatizing to witness it happen to a sibling. The way he acts out is certainly radical, to say the least. Perhaps it is a combination of innate evil and developed trauma. Either way, he wants other people to suffer the consequences. Not only does he murder his sister after she has sex, he murders other sexually active teenagers when he returns fifteen years later.

Michael Myers, with just his silent presence, functions as a symbol of patriarchal control. He is a relentless, brutal force that seeks to restore order through violence. One of Wood's key points is about something he refers to as “surplus repression”. He defines the concept of surplus repression as “the process whereby people are conditioned from earliest infancy to take on predetermined roles... [making us] into monogamous heterosexual bourgeois patriarchal capitalists” (Wood 197). Myers exhibits this to a tee. He is a reactionary figure, whose return signals a backlash against the perceived breakdown of traditional family and even gender roles, through his violent murders. Wood argues that the “others” who are typically repressed often belong to outlier ethnic groups (Wood 200). Myers, while not being explicitly ethnic, somewhat takes on this identity through his appearance. When he kills, he is completely covered up from head to toe. During his 1978 killing spree, he wears a mask the entire time, which conceals and even represses his identity and individuality. Even when he killed his sister in 1963, he wore a

clown mask and costume. One could argue that he kills sexual teenagers because they destroy the fabric of his concept of American ideals- people who wait until marriage to be intimate and idealize having a family or a white picket fence. Through this physical concealment, he not only conveys his internalized issues, he even allows his body to transform into a vessel that embodies pure evil and patriarchal control. By returning to the suburban neighborhood of Haddonfield, he disrupts the illusion of family and coherence. He brings violence to the forefront of this social fabric and the way patriarchal control exists under the mirage of normalcy.

One of the most striking factors about the film is that the one person Michael Myers can never seem to kill is Laurie Strode. Likewise, he is unable to die himself, despite being stabbed and shot several times. Myers' fascination with Strode is crucial to the film yet not explicitly made clear (in some sequels she is canonized as his half brother, yet that is not relevant here). Their connection is almost cosmic, and they are strongly drawn to each other. Oftentimes, Laurie seems to be the only one who can *see* Myers, even when he's in plain sight of her peers. Since Myers is a figure of pure repression, then, according to Woods framework, he cannot be permanently destroyed because he is not just a man, but the embodiment of all that bourgeois American society refuses to confront: death, sexual desire, and violence. His unkillable nature mirrors Laurie Strode's inability to die. However, while Myers embodies the "return of the repressed", Strode takes on a different role- that of the final girl- the first one, in fact. According to Wood, horror often displaces cultural contradictions onto a monstrous figure that is beyond human, but it also locates the resolution in a return to "normalcy"- which Laurie is expected to embody (Wood 216). Nonetheless, she doesn't triumph without her fair share of cuts and bruises. Strode finishes the film traumatized, beaten, and abused. Not only that, but there is no certainty that Myers is defeated because he disappears in the last scene after being shot out of a window. Both characters are trapped in an endless cycle- with Myers being this unstoppable force of repression, and Strode emerging as the damaged product of it. They don't just act as characters, they embody psychoanalytic tropes.

What can we make of Laurie Strode's role as arguably the most significant female protagonist in horror? Tania Modleski's "*The Terror of Pleasure*" is instrumental in understanding the complexity of female spectatorship in *Halloween*. Often times, as Wood even mentions, the horror genre is misunderstood as being a vehicle for misogynistic pleasure.

Medleski seeks to dismantle this narrative. She believes that the female spectator is not simply passive, and they don't merely accept the dominant male perspective in film (Medleski 163). The protagonist of *Halloween* is a strong, intuitive young girl with whom the audience identifies. Medleski writes how female spectators may identify with both monster and victim, or subject vs object. However, they still appreciate a female character who rejects the patriarchy; in other words, someone who outright rejects everything that is represented through Michael Myers (Medleski 163). Laurie Strode is that character. Distinct from many horror films of the time and even now, Strode doesn't rely on a male to protect her. Not only does she protect herself, she protects the lives of the two children she is babysitting. Modleski argues that this identification is central in the film's appeal to female viewers (Medleski 164). She even goes as far to cite the importance of fear as well. Modleski contends that horror films do not merely victimize women, but can provide "a masochistic pleasure in submitting to fear" while simultaneously offering a position of agency and resilience. The duality of the strength vs fear enables the viewer to resonate with Laurie Strode and see themselves as survivors who can defend themselves.

Medleski elaborates a bit on this juxtaposition by referring to it as a "site of ambivalence", where traditional gender roles are both reinforced and subtly resisted (Medleski 163). The film appears to follow a conservative framework in which sexually active young women are punished, while the virginal Laurie Strode survives- a pattern that reflects dominant patriarchal ideologies. However, Modleski argues that horror "both affirms and denies female fears and fantasies," creating space for women viewers to engage with these contradictions. Laurie demonstrates this ambivalence; she initially embodies the concept of passive femininity because she is presented as reserved, sexually- and is more on the shy side. But by the conclusion of the film, her character endures a transformation difficult to confront without being placed in such a life and death scenario. She becomes courageous and strong, yet there is still a sense of incompleteness due to the ambiguity of Myers' fate at the close of the film. Laurie Strode's character represents the duality of woman and femininity, revealing the constraints placed onto women by society as well as women's capability to exhibit resistance. The female spectator connects to her resilience while simultaneously relating to her internal lingering trepidations.

There is more to say about the ways in which the viewer can identify with the film. Christian Metz argues in the essay "Identification, mirror", that cinematic identification begins

not with characters, but with the camera itself (Metz 43). In *Halloween*, the viewer is repeatedly aligned with the gaze of both the victim, and the killer. The entire opening scene is shot entirely from Myers' point of view as a child. Immediately viewers are forced into a disturbing position of identification through the use of the camera, unwillingly made complicit in the murder of Myers sister, Judith. As Metz argues, this "primary identification" with the camera gives the spectator a sense of mastery, but also implicates them in the film's violence (Metz 45). Part of the reason the opening scene is so frightening is because the viewer is put in the shoes of a killer, which is not a role they would want to connect with or relate to. We even see through his lens when he places the clown mask on his head. The scene does not reveal Myers' identity until after the murder of his sister, when his parents come home and unmask him- leaving the viewer to be disturbed, and now immersed into the gaze of Michael Myers, blurring the lines between observer and perpetrator. This illustrates Metz's idea that the spectator's unconscious participation in cinema is shaped by an illusion of presence and visual control, even if the control is in alignment with the antagonist of the story.

In addition, another factor that comes into play here is Myers' identity, or really, his lack thereof. There are only two occasions where Myers' face is shown on screen: once in the opening scene when he is six, and again in the scene where Laurie actually pulls the mask off his face. These decisions are of course deliberate. The first reveal was necessary because it revealed Myers as the killer we had just stepped into the shoes of, and also elicits shock that he is just a young child. The second is symbolic in that it strengthens the dynamic and unbreakable connection between Strode and Myers; she is the only one to see through him, and she is the only one to "break" him, metaphorically speaking. In this moment, Laurie pulls back the velvet rope; she uncovers not just Michael Myers, but the idea of him and all he represents. She utterly confronts him, face to face, and thus confronts all fears and all sources of evil. Even in the quick second his face is lit on screen, he almost appears to be in a state of shock that Laurie was able to shatter his illusion. It's worth noting that even in the controversial sequels, this is the only time his adult face is shown lit from the front, perhaps indicating that that moment was the last instant where his last shred of humanity would emerge, and going forward he would become entirely beyond human.

On the other hand, the audience also gets to resonate with Laurie Strode, and arguably more so. It is interesting the way John Carpenter shifts the gaze from one character to another, yet balances the two so the audience gets a sort of taste for both sides of the good vs evil spectrum. This supports Metz's claim that *secondary identification* can only emerge *after* the audience first identifies with the camera (Metz 51). Laurie functions as the "ideal-ego" in Lacanian terms- a figure with whom viewers are encouraged to empathize with via close-ups, emotional cues, and her increasingly perceptive point of view (Metz 51-52). The "ideal-ego" character is the ultimate vision of purity; the character with whom the audience ultimately attributes their perception, and recognizes as the story's protagonist. As Laurie begins to notice the strange occurrences around her, like seeing Myers outside her classroom window, or behind her laundry line, the camera begins to align more with her gaze, inviting viewers to share her confusion and fear. She is the only character who seems to be able to find or see Myers, while others either can't see him coming (i.e. her classmates) or actively seek to locate him, but constantly fail (Loomis and the other law enforcers). The film continually cuts between Laurie's fearful reactions and Myers' stalking perspective, creating a fragmented experience for the viewer who is a part of both perspectives.

In conclusion, psychoanalytic theory heavily ties into John Carpenter's *Halloween*. From the destiny of the repressed to find their way home, or the spectatorship from both female and general audiences alike, the film unfolds the attributes of psychoanalytic theory and in the process creates a perfect horror movie that has much to offer beneath the surface.

Works Cited

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