

# Survival 101: An Evolutionary Perspective on the Appeal of Slasher Films

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## 1. Introduction

With the release of movies such as *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th* in the late 1970s and early 80s, the slasher film genre established itself as a hugely popular (Clasen and Platts 2019, 36) yet largely criticized form of entertainment. With some scholars viewing the genre as misogynistic and homophobic (Rieser 2007), and others arguing that it pushes a conservative agenda that punishes sexually active young women (summarized by Clasen and Platts 2019, 27-28), it may seem rather strange that the slasher has managed to draw in large audiences across more than five decades. In this article, I examine the appeal of the slasher film through an evolutionary lens and argue that the popularity of this horror sub-genre can be explained through its ability to create immersive and highly effective threat scenarios that exploit evolved psychological defense mechanisms in human cognition and allow audiences to practice and sharpen survival strategies. Thus, within this framework, the main argument behind why the slasher film genre has managed to grab and hold the attention of audiences across decades is due to its evolutionarily beneficial functions. To support this argument, I will begin by outlining an evolutionary theoretical framework that explains the overall appeal of horror entertainment through studies on recreational fear, threat simulation, and morbid curiosity. Through this lens, I will then analyze John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978), chosen as a case study due to its influential role in kicking off the wave of slasher films (Clasen 2017, 125) and establishing many of the genre's defining conventions (Clasen and Platts 2019). Finally, I will discuss how the findings of my analysis illustrate the broader appeal of the slasher genre as a whole and help explain the genre's sustained popularity independent of the American socio-cultural context and shifting priorities within the film industry.

Before moving on to theory, however, it is necessary to outline the core conventions of the slasher film genre. While several cycles have been identified within this movie type, spanning from 1978 up to the present day, it generally follows the same basic scenario (Clasen and Platts 2019, 26). The slasher film is typically set within a safe, familiar environment such as the suburbs, and the character list comprises a group of semi-hedonistic teens starring opposite a knife-wielding killer (Clasen and Platts 2019, 25). This killer is often male and either "kept off-screen or masked for the greater part of the film" (Dika 1987, 88), which adds a layer of mystery and uncertainty to the entire ordeal. Throughout the narrative, the

antagonist spends a great deal of time stalking his oblivious young victims, who often engage in some form of recreational activity ranging from casual sex to simply joking around, before he goes on a killing spree (Clasen and Platts 2019, 25). Central to the narrative, however, is that one of the main protagonists, famously referred to as “The Final Girl” (Clover 1987, 201), will distinguish themselves from this group of teen-victims by realizing the threat and emerging as the sole survivor, who manages to confront and fight off the killer (Dika 1987, 87-88).

## 2. Theory

### 2.1 Recreational fear and horror as a threat simulation

Emerging evolutionary research on the concept of recreational fear has provided an alternative, more positive perspective on the appeal of the slasher film than the aforementioned conservative or misogynistic claims. Recreational fear is an umbrella term that can be defined as “behaviors where people voluntarily seek out activities that elicit negative emotions and expect to derive pleasure from such emotions” (Clasen 2023, 36). And while this phenomenon covers a wide range of activities such as extreme sports, riding in rollercoasters, driving too fast, or listening to true-crime podcasts, this article will solely focus on engagement with horror entertainment and the slasher sub-genre.

From an evolutionary perspective, negative emotions evolved to keep us safe from harm by making us hyper-vigilant and averse to any signs of danger (Clasen 2023, 1), and the most common negative emotions produced by horror media are fear and anxiety, and sometimes disgust. Humans share a set of common fears, or so-called “universal triggers”, that stem from our time as hunted prey (Clasen 2017, 35). These include the fear of carnivorous or venomous animals, hostile members of our own species, invisible pathogens such as bacteria or viruses, social exclusion, or dangerous landscapes such as tall cliffs (Clasen 2017, 25). Additionally, since humans have proven to be one of the most prevalent dangers across human evolutionary history, we have evolved a tendency to over-infer homicidal intent in others (Clasen and Platts 2019, 32). This, in turn, means that human or human-like antagonists are particularly effective at exploiting defense mechanisms in the “fear system” of the brain, which is deeply rooted in evolution (Clasen and Platts 2019, 32). Triggering this system will typically activate hyper-vigilance or a fight or flight response, which often leaves us with sweaty palms, raised stress levels, an accelerated heartbeat, and a general feeling of discomfort (Clasen 2018, 357).

It may seem paradoxical, then, that humans should voluntarily choose to consume slashers, a sub-genre specifically designed to elicit this type of negative emotional response, with the expectation of deriving pleasure from said response (Clasen 2018, 356). However, studies on recreational fear offer the explanation that horror, slasher films included, may serve as a form of evolutionarily beneficial threat

simulation and that the pleasure derived from being frightened is linked to the fact that we are improving our own chances of survival (Clasen, Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, and Johnson, 2020). When a slasher film frightens us, it elicits genuine negative emotions within a safe and controlled environment, which allows the audience to learn about danger and their own emotional response to it risk-free (Clasen and Platts 2019, 31). Cognitive research suggests that the reason why fiction is able to produce such genuine emotions is that humans simulate what others are experiencing in order to understand what is happening to them. For instance, one study showed that if we watch a video of someone using a tool, then the motor cortex for our own hand will also activate, as if we are holding the tool ourselves (Hari et al. 1998). Similarly, it may be this same mechanism working when we watch a slasher film, allowing us to project ourselves into a fictional universe and feel through and for the characters as they face lethal danger. And one of the main adaptive benefits gained from this projection or simulation is the opportunity to practice regulating negative emotions, which may increase resilience in the viewer. The reasoning behind why we may become more resilient as a result of repeatedly engaging with horror media and feeling scared is that our brain is able to suppress expected input. This is supported by a study which found that people who watched contagion films reported lower levels of stress during the COVID-19 pandemic, suggesting that engagement with this type of media may have prepared them better for the real-life scenario (Scrivner et al. 2021). Thus, the appeal of slasher films can be explained through the sub-genre's ability to provide a form of emotional and cognitive play or training, which satisfies "an adaptive need for vicarious experience with threat scenarios" (Clasen 2018, 355).

Crucial to the success of horror entertainment as both enjoyable and evolutionarily beneficial, however, is the so-called "sweet spot of fear". According to cognitive research on the pleasure derived from engaging with horror media, it seems that enjoyment has an inverted U-shaped relationship with fear, suggesting the existence of an optimal level of fear where maximum enjoyment is reached (Andersen et al. 2020, 1507). This means that all horror media has to walk a fine balance between not scaring us enough and losing the audience to boredom or potentially scaring us too much. If the experience gets too intense, the viewer may become overwhelmed and struggle to learn anything, which prevents the threat scenario from being enjoyable. Furthermore, it seems that humans are more drawn to horror media that features threatening stimuli which they perceive to be plausible (Clasen, Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, and Johnson 2018, 2). This corresponds with the suggestion that horror consumption and enjoyment are closely linked to the experience being evolutionary beneficial. It is much more advantageous to learn about a danger that we believe we may encounter than one we find unrealistic. Thus, engagement with horror media offers more than just a risk-free opportunity to practice emotional regulation, as the

audience is also able to learn about danger and how to survive a potential real-life encounter, even if these adaptive benefits primarily function at an underlying evolutionary level.

## **2.2 Morbid curiosity**

This aspect of horror entertainment as a source of information about real-life danger leads us to the adaptive phenomenon of morbid curiosity, which further helps explain the evolutionary appeal of slasher films and why humans voluntarily seek out violent stories of psychotic killers. According to Scrivner (2021, 1), morbid curiosity can be defined as a drive to gather information about dangerous phenomena. In his study on the psychology of morbid curiosity, Scrivner (2021, 3) identifies the following four factors that all reflect evolutionarily relevant threats: The Minds of Dangerous People factor, The Paranormal Danger factor, The Interpersonal Violence factor, and The Body Violation factor. In other words, morbid curiosity refers to a heightened interest in understanding the minds of killers, an interest in understanding magic or ghosts, an interest in seeing motives for violent acts, and an interest in understanding what the body is capable of and what happens to it when it is damaged (Scrivner 2021, 3). While Scrivner (2021, 8) found that there are individual differences in how morbidly curious people are, all humans seem biased towards threat-related information, which spreads more frequently and more reliably than positive or neutral information (Scrivner and Clasen 2022). In the following analysis, I will focus on how the slasher film exploits the interest of the minds and motivations of dangerous people, as the danger represented in this sub-genre's threat scenario is a murderous conspecific. By utilizing this type of threat, slashers tap into the adaptive urge within the audience that wants to understand the mind of the knife-wielding killer, since this information may prove useful in surviving or, better yet, avoiding a similar real-life scenario.

Thus, the phenomena of recreational fear and morbid curiosity provide an evolutionary framework for understanding the appeal of the slasher film. Recreational fear frames this sub-genre as a form of threat simulation that allows for evolutionary beneficial emotional and cognitive training, which helps explain the pleasure derived from engagement. Morbid curiosity further accounts for the appeal by highlighting a human interest in the minds of dangerous people, which sustains viewer interest throughout the narrative.

### 3. Analysis of *Halloween* (1978)

#### 3.1 Triggering fear: The super-scary male monster

Set in the fictional small town of Haddonfield, Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978) tells the story of the six-year-old Michael Myers who murders his older sister on Halloween night in 1963, armed with a kitchen knife, a mask, and no apparent motive. Fifteen years later, he escapes from the mental institution where he has been imprisoned since the murder and returns to his hometown to pick up where he left off. Yet again, he arms himself with a mask and a knife, ready to stalk and kill a new group of unsuspecting young teens. However, in true slasher film style, one of his intended victims, Laurie Strode, manages to fight back and survive this maniacal killer. And even though Myers ultimately proves unkillable - surviving stabbings, gunshot wounds, and a fall from a second-story window - he withdraws and leaves Laurie to fight another day.

In the opening scene of *Halloween*, the film instantly sets the stage for a threat scenario by alerting the audience to an evil presence and triggering hyper-vigilance. As this scene is shot with a slow-moving handheld camera, the viewer is transported into the optical point-of-view of somebody silently creeping up to the front door of a typical suburban house (Carpenter 1978, 02:43-03:06). Slasher films often use this technique to suggest the presence of an undetected agent while withholding this agent's identity from the audience. This fosters suspense and hyper-vigilance, which activates defence mechanisms in the audience, preparing them for danger (Clasen 2017, 130). Crucial to the production of suspense is that this point of view does not grant access into the mind of the agent, meaning no insights are given as to who this might be, or what they intend to do. That leaves the audience to decipher the intention of the unknown agent through other cues. And the slow approaching movement of the camera encroaching on this suburban symbol of safety, combined with the striking lack of sound, creates an unnerving atmosphere that mimics the dynamics of a predator sneaking up on its prey – effectively suggesting evil intent. And as the camera lurks around the side of the house to peek through a window (Carpenter 1978, 03:07-03:16), this notion is confirmed. Inside, a TV is playing, and two enamoured teens, unaware of the imminent danger, are making their way to the upstairs bedroom (Carpenter 1978, 03:25-03:33). The camera-slash-stalker then proceeds to enter through a side door, and a startling high-pitched non-diegetic sound combined with the image of the stalker's hand reaching for a kitchen knife solidifies that we are dealing with someone malicious (Carpenter 1978, 03:48-04:24).

In the following scenes, this is then revealed to be the genre-typical male, knife-wielding killer (Carpenter 1978, 06:09-06:53). As previously mentioned, by featuring a human or human-like antagonist, slasher films specifically exploit the evolved fear of hostile conspecifics in their audience, which produces fear and anxiety. As exemplified by numerous well-known slasher villains such as Freddy Krueger, Jason

Vorhees, Ghostface, Jigsaw, and *Halloween's* very own Michael Myers, the conspecific threat in this type of film is also often male (Clasen and Platts 2019, 32). One possible explanation for this phenomenon is that a male threat more effectively targets the fear of conspecific violence since males are the more plausible aggressor (Clasen and Platts 2019, 32). This, however, does not mean that the slasher film exclusively confines its male predator to realistic character traits that mirror an actual real-life killer. In fact, slashers seem to do quite the opposite, employing a number of different strategies in order to exaggerate the danger and intensify the threat scenario. And while all horror media must walk a fine balance between not scaring the audience enough while also not scaring them too much (Andersen et al. 2020, 1507), a successfully immersive threat scenario does depend on the film's ability to elicit a sufficiently strong negative emotional response.

One of the strategies used by slashers to intensify the fear factor of the male conspecific is to apply supernatural stimuli. The horror genre will often use exaggerated versions of an evolved fear to increase the salience of a threat and prompt a stronger behavioral response (Clasen 2017, 35). In the case of *Halloween*, this means that Myers is transformed into a supercharged, super-evil killing machine. During the film, we learn that Myers cannot be killed. This theory is tested multiple times, most notably during Laurie's varying attempts at stabbing him with a knitting needle (Carpenter 1978, 01:20:30), a metal hanger (Carpenter 1978, 01:24:22) and Myers's own knife (Carpenter 1978, 01:24:33), and when Dr. Loomis shoots him several times in the chest, which causes Myers to fall out of a second-story window (Carpenter 1978, 01:27:06-01:27:23). Yet, where a character bound by the constraints of human biology would have suffered life-threatening injuries from either one of these attacks, Myers fantastically remains unharmed. And while this trait would have been comforting in a protagonist, it only adds to the terror evoked by the antagonist. Additionally, Myers's strength also surpasses the limits of human biology. This is particularly evident in the murder of Bob, the boyfriend of Laurie's friend Lynda. While searching for beer inside a darkly lit kitchen, Bob is brutally attacked by Myers and pushed up against a wall (Carpenter 1978, 01:04:46-01:06:00). Here, Myers exhibits superhuman strength by lifting Bob by the throat with one hand, effectively strangling him, and in one forceful motion stabbing a knife through Bob's chest with the other hand. As Myers then lets go of his dying victim, Bob stays in the air, astoundingly held in place by the murder weapon (Carpenter 1978, 01:06:06). Thus, with just one swift motion, Myers's immense strength is revealed to carry enough force to simultaneously stab through a human chest and embed a knife solidly into a wall. By portraying Myers as both unstoppable and overwhelmingly strong, the film amplifies the immediate fear triggered by a conspecific threat.

Besides his superhuman physique, the exaggerated threat posed by Myers also includes a fantastic ability to remain unseen and unheard as he stalks his victims. Throughout the film, multiple camera shots

place him in the foreground of the frame, quite literally allowing the audience to look over his shoulder as he stalks his unsuspecting victims placed in the middle- or background of the frame. The striking lack of awareness displayed by the protagonists in these scenes supports the notion that Myers becomes almost invisible during his murderous pursuits. This is exemplified as Myers spies on Lynda and Bob, while the two are inside a darkly lit bedroom. Here, Myers's shadow is cast across the two teens just seconds after they are seen lying on their backs, looking around the room, which logically should have alerted them to his presence (Carpenter 1978, 01:03:14-01:03:35). Another instance of his apparent invisible abilities is when Myers stalks the young Tommy, whom Laurie babysits. Here, a shot from within Myers's stolen car shows him driving next to the kid walking along the sidewalk (Carpenter 1978, 18:46). Regardless of how absentminded Tommy might be, it seems highly unrealistic that the unreasonably slow-moving car cruising right next to him would go undetected. Yet Tommy seems utterly unaware of Myers's presence.

Furthermore, the cinematography suggests that Myers is even able to hide from the viewer. For instance, in the scene where Laurie and her friends, soon-to-be victims Annie and Lynda, are walking home after school, Myers passes by them in his car. Here, he briefly stops as a quiet, ominous response to Annie's "Hey jerk, speed kills!" (Carpenter 1978, 22:06-22:11), yet the audience does see him drive off. Thus, the logical conclusion would be that Myers is gone from the scene. Regardless, as the girls continue walking home, the viewer watches their backs retreat through a handheld wide shot (Carpenter 1978, 23:10-23:22). And since the very first scene of the film established the handheld shot as indicative of Myers's optical point-of-view, it prompts the audience to suspect that he is somehow still watching the girls. Yet here, he is even invisible to the audience, indicating that he is an omnipresent threat. This corresponds with a larger pattern within slasher films where the audience is constantly engaged in a virtual guessing-game of "Where is the killer?" "When will he strike?" (Dika 1987, 88), which continually works to produce fear and anxiety in the audience and keeps the viewer engaged.

A final way in which *Halloween* supercharges its antagonist is by exaggerating the extent of his evil. With the brutal murder of his own kin at the beginning of the film, the slasher immediately stresses the depth of Myers's depravity by signaling that not even familial solidarity can stand in the way of his psychotic urges. Adding to this characterization of Myers as something subhuman, completely devoid of humanity, is the fact that he is said to have killed and eaten a dog while hiding during his return to Haddonfield (Carpenter 1978, 37:17- 37:46). And while this admittedly is not the same as killing his own sister, a human being, it does emphasize how corrupted he is by evil. Of all the ways in which he could have gotten food – significantly less disturbing examples include stealing or dumpster diving – he chose to go after 'man's best friend', a symbol of happiness and innocence. The audience never actually see the

evidence of this crime, but the ominous comment made by Myers's psychologist Dr. Loomis leaves little room for interpretation: "He got hungry" (Carpenter 1978, 37:31). By letting the viewer imagine the horrifying image of a dead, presumably half-eaten dog for themselves, the film leaves a powerful impression that installs both outrage and terror in the audience. This emotional response is mirrored in the reaction of the disbelieving local sheriff who objects "Come on [...] A man wouldn't do that" (Carpenter 1978, 37:39), to which Dr. Loomis responds: "This isn't a man" (Carpenter 1978, 37:42). Combined with Dr. Loomis's tendency to refer to Myers as "it" (Carpenter 1978, 08:41), and his condemning assessment: "I met this six-year-old child with this blank, pale, emotionless face and the blackest eyes. The devil's eyes. [...] I realized that what was living behind that boy's eyes was purely and simply evil" (Carpenter 1978, 39:21-39:47), Myers is fully established as evil incarnate. By labelling him as such, he far surpasses any real-life hostile conspecific, since pure evil does not really exist (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen 2016). Yet since this evil is based on a real evolutionarily relevant danger, this exaggeration merely adds to the production of fear and anxiety in the audience.

Applying supernormal stimuli to the villain, however, is not the only way in which the slasher film creates a scary monster. According to Clasen (2017, 48), horror monsters are also often equipped with contagion cues, which trigger disgust and aversion in the audience. As mentioned, Myers mostly hides behind a pale, emotionless mask, and his face is only briefly revealed at the end of the film as he fights Laurie. Here, we see that the left side of his face hangs in an unnatural way (Carpenter 1978, 01:27:03), but it could be argued that this revelation works less as a horrifying surprise and more as a final confirmation of an already suspected facial disfigurement. Myers's blank mask triggers curiosity in the audience and effectively invites the viewer to imagine what he might look like. And within the world of visual media, filmmakers often depict bad guys with some sort of scarring or other facial disfigurement (Wagner et al. 2025, 2). This convention arguably creates an expectation in the audience that on-screen evil must bear a visual cue that mirrors the villain's inner corruption. Thus, it follows that *Halloween's* audience may be expected to imagine Myers as similarly disfigured. If so, it may then be argued that *Halloween* is able to trigger feelings of disgust in the audience. From an evolutionary perspective, facial disfigurement activates an innate disease avoidance system motivated by feelings of disgust (Ryan et al. 2012, 639). Driven by human affective adaptations for pathogen avoidance (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen 2016, 115) and the principle of 'better safe than sorry', this system does not differentiate between actual signs of disease and merely "disease-like" signs (Ryan et al. 2012, 639). Any slight indication of possible contagion will elicit feelings of disgust and make us averse to the source. Thus, the mere imagined notion that Myers is hiding some facial deformity or other conventionalised marker of evil behind his mask may be enough to produce disgust in the viewer without the slasher film ever really having to show the

disfigurement on-screen. Myers, then, is effective as a scary monster both because he represents an ancient threat that humans have evolved to fear and because his appearance exploits conventions that possibly produce feelings of disgust and aversion in the viewer.

To summarize, *Halloween* constructs Myers as a scary monster by exploiting the fear of hostile conspecifics and systematically exaggerating the danger posed by such a figure. Through point-of-view cinematography, narrative withholding, and repeated cues of stalking, the film establishes a persistent threat scenario that keeps the viewer in a state of hyper-vigilance. The production of fear is further intensified by the depiction of Myers as a supercharged predator who is physically invulnerable, extremely strong, omnipresent, and devoid of humanity. Additionally, by framing Myers as “pure evil” rather than a psychologically intelligible human being, the film removes any possibility of empathy or negotiation, which further amplifies the perceived danger. Finally, Myers’s masked face and implied disfigurement mobilize disgust alongside fear, activating evolved pathogen-avoidance mechanisms that increase audience aversion. Combined, these strategies create a particularly effective horror monster that allows *Halloween* to manipulate deeply rooted evolutionary threat responses in order to both terrify the audience and grip their attention.

### **3.2: Effective immersion and emotional investment: The likable victim**

In order to create a successful threat scenario, slashers need more than just a scary antagonist. The strength of a horror film also lies in its ability to depict likable characters with whom the audience can connect, as this is crucial for fostering immersion and audience engagement (Clasen 2017, 125). Referencing Stephen King’s “There is no horror without love” (qtd. in Taylor 2025, 13:54-14:05), Clasen argues that it is necessary to create a form of sympathetic bond between the viewer and the on-screen victims; otherwise, the audience will not care if characters live or die. And if they do not care, they will not feel any genuine emotion, effectively halting any evolutionary beneficial emotional or cognitive training.

In *Halloween*, the young Laurie Strode features as the genre-typical female protagonist, and the film quickly establishes her as a bright, likable character. She does well in school, helps out her dad by dropping off a house key further down the street, and is kind to the young Tommy, whom she occasionally babysits (Carpenter 1978). According to co-writer Debra Hill, the creators of *Halloween* took great care to depict relatable and realistic characters whom the audience could “see themselves” in (qtd. in Gershon 2019). And while some studies suggest that people tend to relate more easily to a character of their own gender (Hoffner 2020), positive character traits such as intelligence and kindness arguably appeal to everybody. This relatability effectively decreases the psychological distance between the audience and the film. As a

result, the slasher creates a more deeply immersive threat scenario, since the connection between the viewer and the protagonist creates real emotion, regardless of the knowledge that we are simply watching actors play pretend.

Having created an emotional connection, the slasher then employs different cinematographic and narrative techniques that exploit this bond and further the production of genuine negative emotions in the audience. One way in which this is done is through asymmetric narration. As previously mentioned, the film heavily features over-the-shoulder camera shots that alert the audience to the presence of Myers, while simultaneously showing us the unaware protagonist in the middle- or background. This strategy is often used by slashers, as it powerfully depicts the vulnerability of the potential victim, since, from an evolutionary perspective, ignorance of danger significantly reduces chances of survival (Clasen 2017, 128). An example of this type of shot from *Halloween* is seen when Laurie goes to drop off the key to the old, abandoned Myers house. Here, the audience watches from inside the house through a window in the front door, as Laurie crouches down and places the key under the door mat (Carpenter 1978, 14:04). As Laurie then retreats, Myers steps into the foreground of the frame, positioning the back of his head at the bottom right corner (Carpenter 1978, 14:08). Thus, the audience is both made aware that Laurie is in danger, and that she herself is unaware of this, which works to produce empathetic anxiety in the emotionally invested viewer. This, in turn, fosters audience engagement, and examples where viewers have attempted to warn fictional characters by shouting out instructions (Clasen and Platts 2019, 34) highlight how effective this strategy is for creating an immersive threat scenario.

Another way in which slashers are able to manipulate the bond between the viewer and the on-screen victims is through reaction shots of the characters screaming for their lives. According to de Gelder et. al. (2004), humans evolved to mirror the emotional state of others, suggesting that somebody else's fearful facial expression is enough to trigger our own evolved defense mechanisms. This phenomenon is also referred to as emotional contagion (Clasen 2017, 49). Additionally, Hess and Fischer (2014, 45) argue that the social relational context influences how likely we are to mirror somebody else's emotions, noting that we are less likely to do so if the person is a stranger or someone we dislike. Thus, a close-up shot of the relatable and likable Laurie as she screams out in terror is particularly effective for eliciting genuine negative emotions in the audience. This is exemplified during the scene where Laurie goes to find her friends and discovers that they have all been killed. Here, the camera switches between showing us the dead bodies as they are revealed one by one and focusing on Laurie's horrified reaction to this nightmare scenario (Carpenter 1978, 01:16:04-01:16:46). By subconsciously mirroring Laurie, we get to feel through her and experience the petrifying notion that not only have her friends been killed,

but she may be next. Thus, although we know Myers is still in the house, we also get to feel Laurie's uncertainty about whether he is still there and her horror as she realizes the danger she is in.

In summary, the immersive power of the slasher film does not stem from the supercharged killer alone, but rather from a combination of this evolved threat and the sub-genre's ability to align the viewer with the on-screen victims and create emotional contagion. When viewers relate to these victims and feel their vulnerability through techniques like asymmetric narration and close-up reaction shots, genuine fear is more effectively elicited. This emotional involvement keeps the audience engaged and is crucial for the function of slasher films as a form of risk-free emotional and cognitive training.

### 3.3 Morbid curiosity and the appealing lack of information

Besides immersing the audience in an evolutionarily potent threat simulation that offers emotional training, slashers also engage the audience through morbid curiosity. With their maniacal killers, slashers particularly appeal to an evolutionarily beneficial interest in the minds of dangerous people. Research on the evolutionary psychology of homicide suggests that people are more often driven by intelligible reasons than by psychopathology when they kill others (Buss 2005). Thus, when engaging in a threat-simulating slasher, we may be particularly drawn in by the appeal of understanding what drives a hostile conspecific, as this may help us understand how to avoid falling victim to a similar real-life threat.

On the surface, it may then seem counterintuitive that *Halloween* offers absolutely no insight into Myers's mind or tries to explain his motivations. In fact, it does the exact opposite by attributing his psychotic urges to an otherworldly, unexplainable evil. However, this lack of information may paradoxically be said to draw in the audience even more effectively than if Myers's emotions and motivations were laid bare. Prompted by the urge to understand this danger, the audience is forced to over-analyze any other little detail that might reveal some insight into his mind. Myers never speaks, and the only sound we ever hear from him is some heavy, ominous breathing that lets us know when he is nearby. Logically, this would then prompt us to turn to take a closer look at his face, as a way of inferring what he might be thinking and what his motivations might be, since facial expressions may allow humans to infer the content of others' minds (Clasen 2017, 130). However, this is obstructed by the emotionless, pale mask that Myers hides behind. This creates a barrier that protects Myers's mind and emotional state from curious eyes searching for any clue that may grant some kind of insight. Additionally, this barrier is further emphasized by Dr. Loomis's assessment that Myers's face is equally as blank and emotionless underneath the mask (Carpenter 1978, 39:21-39:47), effectively leaving the audience with no chance of ever inferring anything from this particular conspecific's face. Yet rather than discouraging the audience,

this lack of insight may be argued to entice the viewer by redirecting their morbid curiosity towards any other signs or gestures from Myers that may allow psychological access.

During the scene where Myers kills Bob, it even seems that the film is actively toying with the audience, exploiting their curiosity as a way of keeping them hooked as they work overtime to gather any sliver of information. Here, as Bob's dead body hangs impaled on the kitchen wall, the camera zooms out and shows us Myers as he calmly stands facing his victim. Seemingly untouched and unfazed by the violent murder he just committed on an innocent young teen, Myers starts to tilt his head curiously from side to side (Carpenter 1978, 01:06:13-01:06:25). This recognizable motion makes Myers look puzzled, and it produces a wave of questions that all attempt to find an answer for this horrific attack and the underlying motivation. Evolutionary horror scholar Mathias Clasen offers the immediate interpretation that this scene shows us how, to Myers, "other people are fleshbags that either move or they don't. When stabbed, they stop moving. When strangled, they stop moving." (Clasen 2017, 131). However, such an explanation is unsatisfactory for an audience attempting to gather information about the hostile conspecific, as it offers no insights into how one might avoid becoming a similarly unmoving "fleshbag". Instead, this scene motivates the viewer to find some other, more complex reason for Myers's actions, which further engages the audience and keeps them hooked throughout the film.

This notion is supported by the existence of numerous online forums and scholarly articles that all attempt to explain Myers's behavior and lethal urges (Johannesen 2024, 73). Some critics have attempted to explain Myers's actions as the result of sexual repression (Wood 2018, 106) or as an expression of incestuous urges, highlighting the symbolic importance of the phallically shaped weapon (Hutchings 2004, 74). Others argue that Myers should simply be understood as "a raging sociopath, possibly prompted to attack his sister because she pursues selfish pleasure rather than looking after him while their parents are away" (Clasen 2017, 132). And while this lack of consensus fails to offer any real answer for Myers's behavior, it shows that even after exiting the movie theatre or shutting off the TV at home, *Halloween's* audience remains hooked by the plethora of unanswered questions prompted by Myers's unexplained lethal urges.

### 3.4: What then do we learn?

If *Halloween* fails to teach us anything realistic or useful about the minds of dangerous conspecifics, does that then mean that it fails to teach us anything at all? The simple answer is no. However, instead of teaching us about the minds of dangerous people, the film mainly prepares us for how to deal with this type of danger if we ever encounter it in real life. According to Carpenter himself, *Halloween* is supposed to serve as a reminder that: “you can survive the night . . . being aware of the possibility of evil is an important thing in life . . . the world can be bad and dark and dangerous, but with a little luck and awareness you can survive” (qtd. in Clasen 2017, 134). Thus, in addition to letting us practice how to cope with strong negative emotions, the film serves as a guidebook, literally showing us how to act if we want to survive. This is mainly shown through the actions taken by Laurie, and as suggested by Carpenter, the main lesson the film tries to teach is that hyper-vigilance is crucial to survival. Laurie’s friends let themselves get distracted by their boyfriends, and they even ridicule her as she tries to warn them that someone or something dangerous is lurking nearby (Carpenter 1978, 24:30-24:55). As a result, they die. Laurie, on the other hand, pays close attention to her surroundings and is rewarded for this vigilance by being the last teen standing when the film ends. Thus, the message is clear: stay alert and trust your instincts.

In addition to this, the film also teaches us to be resourceful and creative. During the last part of the film, where Laurie fights Myers multiple times, the audience learns alongside Laurie, as she gets better at defending herself. Her first act of stabbing Myers with a knitting needle instantly indicates that creativity is key (Carpenter 1978, 01:20:30), as Laurie is able to save herself from an armed aggressor even with no actual weapon at hand. The importance of ingenuity is then further stressed as the quick-thinking Laurie fashions a weapon out of a metal hanger (Carpenter 1978, 01:24:10-01:24:22). Furthermore, this scene also shows the importance of staying calm. Only someone able to keep a clear mind, someone who has not given in to sheer and utter panic, would be able to look at this everyday unassuming object and think: “this is a match for a knife the size of my forearm”. This example of emotional resilience further ties in with the argument that the slasher film offers emotional and cognitive training. Besides creating a threat scenario that allows the audience to experience and regulate strong negative emotions for themselves, the film explicitly highlights the importance of this practice by depicting a character whose survival partially comes down to her ability to cope with her own negative emotional response.

This, however, does not mean that Laurie’s survival techniques are flawless, and even she fails to stay hyper-vigilant at crucial times. After her first attempt at killing Myers, where she stabs him in the neck, she mistakenly assumes that he is dead and runs upstairs to rescue the two kids whom she is babysitting (Carpenter 1978, 01:22:10-01:22:25). As we then see Myers appear at the top of the staircase,

ready to attack Laurie once again (Carpenter 1978, 01:22:43), the audience is alerted to the fact that Myers's may be superhumanly difficult to kill. However, Laurie does not seem to learn this lesson. Again, they fight, and again she stabs him, and again she turns her back to his unmoving body, leaving herself vulnerable to yet another attack from Myers (Carpenter 1978, 01:24:22-01:26:03). Here, it may seem puzzling that Laurie does not learn from her initial mistake but instead continues to let down her guard, assuming that Myers is dead. However, since the audience of slasher films is granted the luxury of safely learning from both the protagonists' successful and failed survival strategies, this scene is yet another way in which the film is able to stress the importance of hyper-vigilance. And this combination of both showing what to do and what not to do is arguably the most effective way for the film to make its message clear.

#### **4. Discussion**

As illustrated by my analysis of Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978), the sustained popularity of slasher films can be explained through the sub-genre's ability to target evolved mechanisms in human psychology. The appeal of this film genre primarily lies in its ability to evoke negative emotions through immersion into a dangerous fictional universe, and slashers encourage this through perspective-taking with likeable protagonists who are victimized by terrifying human or human-like killers (Clasen and Platts 2019, 36). And although it is highly unlikely that the viewer will ever encounter this type of threat in real life, the archetypal male killer is still perceived as plausible since all humans evolved to fear hostile conspecifics. Adding to this perceived plausibility is the fact that slasher films are often set in a familiar suburban environment and feature a relatable protagonist. As a result, the slasher genre is highly effective in fostering emotional contagion and triggering the human "fear system", which prompts the audience to perceive the film as engaging and relevant (Clasen and Platts 2019, 36).

Slasher films also balance the negative emotional response produced in the audience, without overwhelming the viewer with stimuli that are too intense or frightening. Although the optimal level of fear varies between individuals, the popularity of the genre suggests that slashers are particularly good at creating the right circumstances for an effective threat simulation that stays within the "sweet spot of fear". Besides triggering fear through a conspecific threat, slashers often attribute their killers with superhuman abilities. This exaggeration works to sustain a strong fear response and audience engagement throughout the entire narrative. At the same time, limited on-screen violence and largely implied disgust cues keep the experience from ever growing too intense. This lack of violence and gore has been attributed to filmmakers' interest in appealing to a young female audience (Nowell 2011, 121), yet the

slasher film's ability to moderate the intensity of the experience while still maintaining a persistent threat appeals across all ages and genders.

A final way in which slasher films succeed in drawing in a large audience is by exploiting morbid curiosity about the minds and motives of dangerous conspecifics. This feature of human cognition allows slashers to entice viewers interested in the human antagonist as a source of evolutionarily beneficial information. Due to the shadowy nature of this genre-typical antagonist (Dika 1987, 88), however, slashers do not offer any such psychological insight. Yet, instead of discouraging the audience, this only promotes audience engagement as viewers are left with endless room for interpretation. Potentially, this allows for more frequent rewatching, which would further help explain the sustained popularity of slasher films.

The success of this film type cannot exclusively be attributed to the evolutionary appeal of an effective threat scenario, as other factors, such as marketing strategies and historical context, admittedly also play an important role in establishing the popularity of a film type. For instance, early slasher films specifically targeted a young female audience by prioritizing low on-screen violence, relatable female protagonists, and depictions of romantic and platonic relationships (Nowell 2011, 121). This strategy assumed that twelve- to twenty-year-olds made up around half of US theatre goers and that young women mainly influenced film choice in dating contexts (Nowell 2011, 121). It has also been argued that early slasher films became popular because they reflected a "large-scale shift in values in American culture" (Clasen and Platts 2019, 24) and tapped into "political, economic and cultural anxieties" (Clasen and Platts 2019, 24). However, such explanations do not fully account for why slasher films have managed to stay hugely popular across decades of societal change and shifting interests within the film industry. Thus, the evolutionary framework provided in this article offers the most comprehensive account of the success of slasher films and their sustained popularity.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has argued that the appeal of the slasher film lies in the genre's ability to exploit evolved psychological mechanisms within human cognition, thereby efficiently hooking and keeping our attention. The exaggerated ancestral danger portrayed by the slasher villain is crucial for triggering defense mechanisms in the "fear system" of the brain and arousing a negative emotional response. Additionally, the likable nature of the protagonist, combined with cinematographic techniques such as asymmetric narration and close-up reaction shots, aligns the viewer with the on-screen victims and creates emotional contagion, which makes for a deeply immersive threat scenario. Thereby, the slasher film offers an evolutionary beneficial threat simulation, and through its ability to moderate the intensity of the

experience, the genre is able to appeal to a wide audience, regardless of individual differences in the “sweet spot of fear”. Consequently, as illustrated by my analysis of *Halloween* (Carpenter 1978), slasher movies provide ample opportunity for the audience to practice both emotional regulation and sharpen their survival strategies through vicarious learning. Finally, the slasher genre also effectively provokes a human curiosity concerning the minds of dangerous people and exploits this feature by denying psychological access to the antagonist. Rather than discouraging engagement, this strategic lack of information sustains audience engagement by inviting interpretation, speculation, and repeated viewing, thereby further reinforcing the genre’s appeal. Thus, the slasher film has managed to remain popular for over five decades because of its ability to exploit evolved defense mechanisms deeply rooted in our ancestral history as hunted prey.

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