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The paradox of cinematic sexualized violence as entertainment

Sexual violence is considered one of the most serious of crimes in our society and its potential to cause significant and long-lasting trauma to victims is acknowledged. However, it is also a central theme in various forms of leisure activity from art, exhibitions, theatre, magazines, music video, concerts, literature and true crime books to guided tours and theme park rides. It is also the subject of a highly successful genre in film making - the horror/slasher film which almost exclusively focuses on the 'serial killer'. The Saw franchise, for example, is a series of films described in some film reviews as 'torture porn' and has produced at least three number ones at the box office, with Saw V grossing $113 million worldwide (Box Office Mojo 2009), making it the highest-grossing horror franchise in history (Snider 2008). With its own dedicated and named ride and maze at Thorpe Park, an amusement theme park in London, UK, the commodification of sexualized violence is clearly popular and profitable.

This chapter considers what is often popularly represented as a paradox: female consumption and enjoyment of the slasher/horror film, which is principally dedicated to the violation and abuse of women in particular. However, this study is not situated within the framework of film theory, but a feminist concern with violence against women and the narrative conventions which rationalize it. My personal research interest in forensic narrative construction led to my exploring marital narratives in abusive relationships and the way some women can negotiate the meaning within these narratives to diminish the negative impact of the violence. Women use many strategies to deal with violence in their lives and I seek to explore how the conventions of the slasher/horror genre impact on the women and girls who view them, as they are more often than not the victims who are portrayed, and whether or how consumption is a process of negotiation.

The Freudian psychoanalytic position has argued that women may be inherently sexually masochistic, inferring enjoyment of abuse, and this position has entered the cultural imagination as a truth which is used to argue against the harms sexual violence both real and 'artistic', and explain why women would want engage with such films (Caplan 2005). In an interview in The Guardian, for "'"'H -'"· the psychologist Dr Glenn Wilson claims that horror film can facilitate sexual responsiveness in women, but inhibit it in men (Saner 2007). Feminist scholars have argued that this type of approach is an inadequate and prejudicial explanation for women's tolerance or acceptance of violence against them in any form as the inference is that women may enjoy rape or sexual assault (Barter 2009; Caplan 2005; Clover 1992; Dobash and Dobash 2002; Pinedo 1997). There is also an assumption by some writers that the fear created in slasher/horror films is temporary, reversible and suspended as soon as the film is over (Frayling 1986; Jenkins 1994; Pinedo 1997), and this represents the experience as some- what benign. Professor Joanne Cantor reports that horror films have the ability to induce long-term fear by creating an association between a stimulus, such as the shower scene in the film Psycho, and a natural fear response in a part of the brain called the amygdala. For example, after seeing Psycho many women feared showering for years afterwards (Macrae 2010).

Women's experience and consumption of sexualized violence in this form is complex and I do not pretend to explain it in this chapter; neither do I seek to argue that women do not or should not enjoy serial killer or slasher/horror films, as women are established to be great consumers of this type of entertainment (Harper 2004). What I do argue is that female fears prompted by cinematic images of sexualized fatal violence are overlaid with a lifetime of warnings from loved ones, educators, charities, official institutions and health workers, that women and girls should be particularly afraid of, and avoid, sexual assault; not forgetting the routines of feminine security etched on to their social practices or their experiences of domestic or other forms of violence and abuse. However, despite or even because of this, women may still negotiate meaning in these films

to their own advantage. Drawing from an analysis of sex and gender in slasher/horror films and data from focus group interviews with young women who self-identified as enjoying the genre, I argue that these films embody what is a real and tangible threat for young women and that consumption should not be considered a benign experience or a frivolous paraphilia. When placed in its wider social context the axiomatic narrative is revealed as both insidious and prejudicial, but it is precisely because of this that, far from being paradoxical, enjoyment of or engagement with the genre may be eminently logical for women.

The slasher/horror film

Depictions of female sexual death are part of our cultural landscape, a ubiquitous horror which is exemplified in the violence of the serial killer. Not only is the figure of the serial killer linked to fictional and fantastic characters such as Freddy Krueger from the popular A Nightmare on Elm Street franchise (Dir. Wes Craven 1984) or Hannibal Lecter in The Silence of the Lambs (Dir. Jonathan Demme 1991), he is also physically extant. Kevin Williamson, the writer of one of the most successful horror/slasher films ever, Scream (Dir. Wes Craven 1997), which grossed over $100 million at the box office, said his script was inspired by real- life serial killers such as Ted Bundy and Danny Rolling who exclusively targeted young women (Harper 2004). The highly successful Saw franchise has just seen the release of Saw VI (Dir. Kevin Greutert 2009), adding to a series described, as noted, in some film reviews as 'torture porn' because of the juxtaposing of sexual imagery with fatal sadistic violence. Perhaps the most enduring serial killer box- office draw, with an impressive merchandising and publication portfolio, is Jack the Ripper. This historically extant character has inspired an ongoing interest in his crimes spawning what Soothill (1993) and Cook (2009) describe as 'the Jack the Ripper Industry'. His instantly recognizable brand has infiltrated British and indeed international folklore to the extent that even police investigations have been influenced and led astray by the apparent veracity of the myths surrounding him, as argued by Nicole Ward Jouve in her analysis of the police investigation of the murders by Peter Sutcliffe, the so-called Yorkshire Ripper, in the 1980s in Bradford, UK (Ward Jouve 1988). The story of Jack the Ripper's crimes has an interesting political history and an enduring pseudo-scientific presence in the literature of criminality, both of which lend credibility to the heavily stylized construction of the discursive object that is the 'serial killer'. Jack the Ripper has appeared in so many factional and fictional representations of his crimes that he has become an intelligible link between real serial killers and the fictional demons of the slasher and horror genres.

The Jack the Ripper and Saw franchises, as well as films such as Scream and Nightmare on Elm Street, are part of the horror genre also fitting neatly into the subgenre that is the 'slasher' film, which focuses exclusively on the serial killer; that is, broadly speaking, an individual or individuals who kill a series of victims sequentially. It is a convention of serial killer and slasher film that the danger is sexualized and the victims will be mainly female - or at the very least, according to Clover (1992), it is females who will spend more screen time being terrorized, injured and killed. The gendered and misogynistic themes which dominate the narratives in these films are well documented (Caputi 1987; Clover 1992; Harper 2004; Haskell 1987; Monckton Smith 2010; Mulvey 1991; Pinedo 1997), but often the narratives go beyond mere misogyny and in Harper's words 'plunge headlong into cruelty against women' (Harper 2004: 17). It is interesting that Scream, which is a horror parody, does identify some of these conventions and holds them up for ridicule, but simultaneously fails to openly challenge some of the serial killer/slasher conventions which are included in its narrative, leaving it impossible to tell if they are ironic statements or not.

It is a problem that we fail to acknowledge more widely the conventionality of the dynamics in these films to consider how they might impact on women in particular. Frayling (1986: 175) argues of Jack

the Ripper films that 'they are frightening but only in the way that a nightmare is frightening. Everything is fine when you wake up', Pinedo (1997: 5) claims that these films are a simulation of horror like a 'roller coaster ride' and Jenkins (1994: 107) sees the fear as 'temporary and reversible'. However, what is missed in these assessments of cinematic sexualized violence is acknowledgement of the narrative as a fundamental part of a discursive construction of sexual murder whereby victimization is not shared across gender. Many considerations of the appeals or repulsions of horror film speak of the audience, and do not address the specific effects of the narratives on women in particular. It seems unlikely that both genders, outside the celluloid buffers of the East End/Ripper simulacrum, experience the (hetero)sexual symbolism ·and misogynistic violence similarly. Women cannot awake from consumption of such violence as if alighting from a fairground roller coaster - full of adrenaline but otherwise free from any pernicious effects.

The popular cultural belief which suggests that females enjoy violation, or the thought of it, owing to an inherent masochism (Caplan 2005) is deeply damaging but has enjoyed some authority through pseudo-scientific (mis)interpretation of Freudian psychology, and even found its way into the legal system and rape prosecutions (Forrester 1986). It has been suggested that this alleged masochism and desire to be dominated is discursively constructed and that, as Kaplan (2000: 126) argues, 'in practice this is rarely reflected in more than a tendency for women to be passive in sexual relations'. The more sinister interpretation is that women enjoy violence against them and even secretly desire to be raped. There are also the inevitable comparisons with female responses to real-life violence, and similar arguments have been presented to explain why women would remain with abusive or violent partners, or to try to minimize the harm of rape by feeding in to the rape myths. Larcombe (2005) and Clover (1992) argue that women's consumption of entertainment which appears to devalue or violate them is complex and cannot be reduced to simple identification with idealized characters in conventional plots. Clover suggests there are many layers of cross-identification, and Larcombe reminds us that we must consider the complex personhood of the female consumer. Others suggest enjoyment can be derived from the newer horror plots, which often depict stronger intelligent female protagonists who sometimes win in the end (Oliver and Sanders 2004). Some hold that women enjoy narratives of gendered abuse only because they fail to recognize the misogynistic themes - or even that some women are complicit with the sexist regime (Larcombe 2005). Given these arguments it is worth briefly discussing how the serial killer is constructed before considering how he may be received, and placing him in his social context.

Constructing the serial killer

The serial killer narrative is not simply about madmen 'killing'; it has a significant investment in heteronormativity and is very narrowly defined. When making meaning of the serial killer's violence, intelligible links are made between rape, mutilation and death within a dominant discourse of sexual murder (Monckton Smith 20 10). The serial killer, broadly speaking, acts on deviant sexual urges in an orgasmic rage and in acts analogous to rape. He is apparently satiated after killing but tension soon builds again leading to another sexualized death. David Schmid (2005: 79) argues that this dominant discourse has constructed an 'extremely limited and distorted image of what serial murder is, who commits it, who is victimized, how they are victimized and why they are victimized'. The narrative of serial killing now offered in popular media is based on interpretation of the crimes of killers such as Jack the Ripper and, as Walkowitz (1992: 3) notes, ‘presents a far more stabilized account than media coverage offered at the time'.

Similar to Foucault's description of the emergence of the 'homosexual' or the ‘criminal' as a 'type' (Foucault 1998), the serial killer, personified in Jack the Ripper, became a 'type'; the characterization and definition of him coming from powerful agencies such as the FBI (Mlligen 2006; Schmid

2005; Vronsky 2004) who had their own political agenda. For example, Milligen (2006: 102) claims that the FBI studies used to name and define the serial killer in the late 1970s were based on a specific type of sex crime which updated 'Jack the Ripper for late twentieth century America', promoting a right-wing political morality. The links to heteronormativity are especially clear here because prevailing liberal attitudes to sexuality, especially female or non-standard sexuality, were held to blame for his emergence (Schmid 2005). The political motivations of the FBI in constructing a new domestic enemy in the form of the serial killer are well explicated (Milligen 2006; Schmid 2005; Vronsky 2004) and are relevant in considering the way the narrative has evolved as a moral tale. The threat is highly stylized and drenched in heterosexual meaning and female sexuality is represented as a fragile, dangerous entity in need of control. This has powerful historical antecedents. The gendered characteristics of serial killing translate very well across genres and can be observed in police, news and fictional narratives (Monckton Smith 2010). The 'story' of a serial killing in this sense, and succinctly put, offers 'an awful warning of what happen(s) when the natural order of things is broken' (Emsley 2005: 96).

Narrative conventions in slasher/horror films

The popular slasher/serial killer narrative, which I will focus on, despite some ostensible diversity, is remarkably stable and reliant on dominant gendered subjectivities which polarize men and women. The films in my sample were all, without exception, highly sexualized and the victims were consistently young and attractive. The violence against them was often directly linked to sexual lust with both the rage of the killer and the terror of the victim represented as passionate or even orgasmic. Harper (2004) suggests that the makers of slasher films rely on images of sex and death to tell their stories with a growing concentration on female nudity rather than graphic bloodshed to create spectacle; a feature which he suggests is easier to get past censors than gore and cheaper than special effects. Harper further claims that because of this an increasing number of female roles in these films are given to 'sub playboy, silicone enhanced starlets' (ibid.: 22). Cowan and O'Brien found that female victims in slasher films were significantly more likely than males to be shown as promiscuous, in revealing clothing, as naked, as undressing and/or as using sexual language and engaging in sexual activity (cited in Oliver and Sanders 2004). They conclude that the message conveyed in these films is as pernicious as the message conveyed in pornography: that violence can be fun for women. The ease with which slasher films are able to mix up sex in the form of pornographic images, and death in the form of serial killing, is testament to the way the narrative makes meaning of violence against women. The violence, the motivations and the responses are made coherent through the medium of gender; it is the intelligible link between offender and victim. Clover's (1992) study of gender in the modem horror film suggests that victimization, though shared to some extent, is different. She claims that men die because of things they have done, but women die because they are women. Women are victimized because of an inherent essence - their very being provokes the actions of the offender. In contrast, males have to actively do something to become victims; they have no Inherent power to provoke action. It is this process which more effectively genders, rather than a simple body count of women to men. The motivations written for the violence are the true gendering process; women die because of their sex. In this way sexual danger supplants simple physical peril and threats to life. Physical danger becomes sexual danger and for women sexual threats are the real threats to their lives.

In my data it was clear that in many films murder and mutilation of women are conflated with rape. The female subjects who endure sexualized deaths are separated from male subjects, who die quicker, more functional deaths. The sexualized murder of women is clearly a stimulant for some: the film director Dario Argento states: 'I like women especially beautiful ones. If they have a good face and figure, I would much prefer to watch them being murdered than an ugly girl or man'; and Schoell, a film historian, notes, 'Other filmmakers figured that the only thing better than one

beautiful woman being gruesomely murdered was a whole series of beautiful women being gruesomely murdered' (cited in Clover 1992: 32). Not only do these self-appointed avengers of public morals- as serial killers are often represented -principally target women, according to the definition of serial murder and the narrative conventions of serial killer film, it is in an orgasmic rage: the death of the sexualized victim a metaphor for extreme heterosexual tensions.

Given the strong links to heterosexual practice, female engagement with these narratives will be complex and situated within their lived experience of heterosexuality. Women absorb the same beliefs about themselves as others do about them, so the ways that females negotiate those beliefs in their own interest may be limited. Research into domestic violence has suggested that the violence women endure is sometimes interpreted as a sign of love or passion and the abused female renegotiates its meaning, though not its physical/psychological effects (Borochowitz and Eisikovitz 2002). This linking of love, passion and violence was found to be especially common in teenage dating relationships in which violence or aggression had occurred (Barter 2009), suggesting that women in abusive relationships are negotiating the abuse in their own interests, rewriting it in some cases to represent passion, and to empower rather than disempower themselves. The implication here is that women are accepting that the violence and the threat are not going away, but are a stable part of female life to be dealt with rather than removed; an inevitable threat.

Method and sample

I have deliberately drawn from focus group interviews with teenage girls who self-Identified as being consumers of slasher films; my choice was for two reasons. First, teenage or young girls are often the victims of choice in these films; second, recent research into abusive teenage dating relationships shows a worrying trend for tolerance of male violence, setting in place the potential for lifelong acceptance of abuse (Borochowitz and Eisikovitz 2002). Because slasher/serial killer films frequently include fantastical killers who are more surreal than real, the genre is not always taken seriously as a forum for exploring female reception of male violence. For example, Schlesinger and colleagues rejected such films as Friday the 13th (Dir. Sean S. Cunningham 1980) in their study of women viewing violence, claiming that in the pilot study women 'had not taken them seriously' and that they were 'only intended for teenagers' (Schlesinger et a!. 1992: 19-20). It is precisely because these films are sometimes intended for, and enjoyed by, teenagers that they are the focus in this chapter. Teenage girls are the highest-risk group for sexual victimization and domestic abuse. Most are specifically excluded, however, from the official ACPO (Association of Chief Police Officers) definition of domestic violence, which recognizes victims only over the age of 18; consequently they can become invisible as victims in their own right. These young women also form part of the next generation of adult women and, given the UK government's declaration that a primary rather than tertiary 'after the event' strategy is to be used in combating violence against women (Hansard 2010: 163) - which means educating and changing perceptions in young people the experiences and perceptions of young women to violence directed against them are particularly relevant, irrespective of genre.

Data were drawn from two sources. First, I drew from an analysis of the gendered aspects of Jack the Ripper films (Monckton Smith 2010) and a similar analysis of slasher films. All slasher films in the sample were suggested by focus group participants. The way the films 'tell' the story was a particular focus; this being the narrative conventions employed. Using the tenets of Foucauldian discourse analysis as a framework for exploring the way that realities are constructed, the film narratives were deconstructed and the commonalities across films identified. In its very simplest terms, discourse, in a Foucauldian sense, is a framework for a way of talking, a way of acting and a way of knowing about something. Different discourses are produced over time, and sexual murder will be constructed

differently within different discourses. However, some are more dominant than others and it is the dominant way of 'knowing' about sexual murder represented in slasher/horror film which is the focus for this chapter.

Second, a focus group was put together consisting of 11 girls between the ages of 14 and 16 of varied ethnicity who self-identified as enjoying the genre, and who regularly meet for the specific purpose of watching slasher films. I wanted to explore with them why they watch this type of film in particular and what aspects they identified as particularly compelling. Their comments were analysed, again using the tenets of Foucauldian discourse, to identify how they interpret the danger and the horror presented. A smaller and more informal group of four male viewers was put together to compare some of the more dominant themes which arose from the female group discussion to allow a gendered comparison on those themes only. Some of the key differences are referred to briefly, the main focus being the female interpretation and reception of the themes.

Female consumption of cinematic sexualized danger

We began the focus group discussions by talking about the horror films which the participants had heard of and watched. Largely it was films from the slasher genre that the girls had watched, and especially horror/slasher films that were receiving extensive media hype, such as Paranormal Activity (Dir. Oren Peli 2007). When asked which 'killers' they remembered most clearly, all participants named characters that were similar in appearance to ordinary people. In particular the character Jigsaw from the Saw franchise was chosen by all the girls as a particularly memorable and frightening character. When asked what he looked like, comments such as 'just an old man' or 'well sort of ordinary' dominated. When pushed to suggest why they remembered him in particular they stated that it was precisely because he was so ordinary that they were frightened of, and so remembered, him. In a similar conversation with male horror viewers when asked what kind of things frightened them most in horror films, after expressing that they did not feel frightened as much as 'thrilled' or 'alarmed', most males agreed that it was films in which a realistic threat occurred, as in Arachnophobia (Dir. Frank Marshalll990) or Jaws (Dir. Steven Spielberg 1975), that raised most fear. They did not necessarily consider the fantastical serial killer a real threat. It has been suggested in previous research that men show less arousal and fear than women when viewing slasher films and that perceived realism is important in generating suspense (Oliver and Sanders 2004). Horror films play a role in allowing fears to be faced; Boyanovsky and colleagues found that, during the week following a well-publicized murder of a female student at the University of Wisconsin, attendance of female students on campus for the violent movie In Cold Blood rose by 89 per cent (cited in Oliver and Sanders 2004: 249). They argue that individuals will show a preference for a stimulus situation which reflects a real-life fear. It is probable that the threat of the serial killer is more real for women and girls than for heterosexual males.

All female participants agreed that they would watch horror films only if they were with someone else, believing that the best way to watch such films was in a group of close female friends. They said that part of the enjoyment was the shared feelings and the camaraderie; it was a 'safe kind of scared'. Participants also stated that they would consider watching horror with a boyfriend on a date but mainly because the horror format was less embarrassing than a romance format, which may include scenes of consensual sexual activity, and the awkwardness that may initiate. Oliver and Sanders (2004) report that horror films are a popular dating activity, and the girls also stated that one of the reasons for viewing horror on a date would be to encourage some non-sexual physical closeness such as cuddling which would occur if they appeared frightened. In some part then, the display of fear to encourage physical closeness is a tactic to control the date where conventional assertiveness is discouraged in females.

When it came to discussing the particular appeal of slasher films, all the participants agreed that one of the reasons for watching them was to gain credibility with peers:

I can brag at school that I have managed to watch a film that is really gory or scary. .
You can tell everyone that you were brave enough to watch it.
The worse the film is the more you look like you're really strong.
I like to let the boys know that I watched a really bad horror film.

From these data it appeared that the girls did not enjoy the films as much as endure them for the kudos they could then claim. The experience, from this perspective, is a form of empowerment and the more films watched the more empowered the watcher.

Watching the films makes me brave and makes me feel better about myself.
I don't want to be seen as weak so I watch them.

Here the girls were expressing a wish to distance themselves from perceived feminine weakness and confronting their fears to feel better about themselves. This suggests not comfort with, or enjoyment of, fear or violation, but a desire to demonstrate strength and so boost self-esteem.

When asked which parts of the films they felt were the most scary, as opposed to gory or revolting, the following comments were made:

It's really scary when you can't see what's going on, like when you know something is there but you can't see it.
Like when they look in a mirror and they see something in the mirror that wasn't there before, and when they tum round it's gone.

These responses were given far more clarity when conversation turned to their real-life experiences of fear. All the participants agreed that they felt being watched by something invisible or hidden was part of their psychological landscape:

I am always frightened that there is something there watching me, something I can't see.
When I'm looking in the mirror I am always worried that someone is watching me, like when I'm putting on my make-up you think you might see them in the mirror.
I have to close my wardrobe at night because I always have this feeling that there is something in there watching me.
I hate going anywhere all alone because I always think that someone is watching me.

These comments were spontaneous and all the girls agreed that they felt surveil- led in their day-to-day lives; not simply in a sense that they were policed, but that the surveillance was malevolent and of their physicality rather than just their behaviour. It was a feeling that was part of their everyday routines and rituals, part of their lived experience and is an aspect of horror film articulated in Laura Mulvey's (1991) influential essay which stresses the dominance of the voyeuristic male perspective. In this sense the films present the real menace for these young women for they begin to unravel the feelings of a silent invisible presence that stalks them. The spectre has a form and it is gendered. This is not a nightmare that is awoken from; the sexualized threat is omnipresent. Conversely the male group expressed no fear or even suggestion that they were surveilled and when prompted all denied that they ever felt watched. When the girls were asked whether the films had prompted the feeling of surveillance, it was stated that the fear was already there before watching the films, and that it was the realization that they all shared the s me fears that was important. However, it was also suggested that the feeling of being watched became more 'real' after watching the films.

The girls were then asked why they would choose to watch a film which played on such real fears and the answer was unequivocal. It was a way of confronting and practicing the fear in a controlled and supportive way, but also and perhaps more importantly, a confirmation that their own personal everyday fears were shared by others, an affirmation of their paranoia as normal:

It's good watching the way everyone else is scared too, we are all scared together.
You can check out your mates' reactions.
I can see I'm not the only one who is scared, it's all of us, we're all the same.

The girls all agreed that there was a feeling of camaraderie, of all facing the same common enemy who scared them all in the same way. It appeared that the feeling of surveillance or 'stalking' was a dominant theme but this had not been necessarily expressed or acknowledged among the group before. It was the focus group discussion which appeared to encourage acknowledgement of the feeling. The girls all seemed to take comfort from the fact that all of them felt stalked or watched and that because of this it gave the feeling less power. Also, when the stalking fear is revealed to be a fantastical serial killer within the films, it is thus somewhat disarmed. However, when the films represent what is in fact a real serial killer, such as the Jack the Ripper films in which women are specifically targeted and surveilled, then this may be entirely different. In summary, it appeared that the girls primarily watched these films as a form of empowerment and exploration. Their everyday gendered fears were temporarily counterbalanced by the extremes of the fantastical killers, their bravery in facing the stalking threat acknowledged and, importantly, their paranoia normalized.

Discussion

The narrative conventions in slasher films are closely related to the practice of hetero/sexuality and rely on gendered subjectivities to tell their stories. In this sense women are stereotypically represented as watched, sexualized, masochistic and weaker than men. They are the natural target or focus for sexual abuse –their relationship with the male killer representing extreme heterosexual tensions and serving as a warning to constrain female sexuality. This narrative convention was clearly part of the lived experience of my focus group participants, who expressed a desire to demonstrate strength and build self-esteem.

The demonstration of strength that they spoke of was clearly tied to their lived experience of feeling a stalking surveillance of their physicality. This aspect to slasher and serial killer films is often explicitly played out and female victims are frequently followed by a voyeuristic camera, as in Peeping Tom (Dir. Michael Powell 1960), which exemplifies the technique. These themes cannot be separated [rom the routine scrutiny of the female body which women experience every day in media images and critique, in stories of hidden cameras, stalkers or pornography, in warnings not to be alone at night in case of waiting strangers or strange followers. Mulvey's (1991) suggestion that women exist only to be looked at gives some clarity to the context of the participants' fear. The conventionality of the sexualized danger in serial killer film translates very well the kind of dangers women perceive to be stalking them. However, acknowledging, sharing and facing that fear, and being seen to face that fear, may be more liberating for women than debilitating. To claim that consumption of these films has no pernicious effects is to fail to recognize that the female consumer is facing a real-life threat which is being vividly reinforced, and to interpret enjoyment of the genre as paradoxical or even masochistic is to disregard the power of sexual threats to women. The young women in the focus groups recognized, even at 15 years, the burdensome omnipresence of their sexuality. It is not the female consumer's enjoyment or engagement with slasher/serial killer films that is paradoxical, but the absurdity of the suggestion that it could be.