

“I Will Survive”: *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2003) and the Emergence of the Postmodern Final Girl

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The slasher is a horror subgenre whose formulaic narrative revolves around a group of young people chased by a monstrous (disfigured or masked) psychopath. In the end, the so-called final girl must fight this killer to restore order.

Now, having reached the twenty-first century, many final girls have evolved into empowered figures such as Erin Harson ¹ (Shari Vinson) in *You're Next* (2013), Grace Le Domas (Samara Weaving) in *Ready or Not* (2019), or the charismatic Maxine Minx (Mia Goth) in *X* (2022). Against this background, it's time to revisit a film that paved the way for the emergence of the postmodern final girl, who displays autonomy and strength needed to defeat the villain and to leave the lethal adventure with a sense of accomplishment. To contribute to this project, this essay offers a reflection on Erin (Jessica Biel),

the protagonist of Marcus Nispel's 2003 version of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, which rehearses the classic slasher conventions while updating the postmodern final girl.

TCM (2003) engages with the classic slasher formula as it follows Erin, her boyfriend Kemper (Eric Balfour), Pepper (Erica Leerhseen), Morgan (Jonathan Tucker), and Andy (Mike Vogel), all of whom are returning from a trip to Mexico to buy marijuana, and are now heading to a Lynyrd Skynyrd concert. While on the road trip, they pick up a young, traumatized, female hitchhiker. Once inside the van, she ominously warns them that they are driving in the wrong direction. Eventually, she commits suicide by shooting herself in the mouth. Following this shocking episode, the group of friends stop to contact the police. While waiting for the authorities to arrive, they explore the surrounding rural area and come across Leatherface's dysfunctional family. Then, one by one, Erin's friends are taken and killed by the monstrous masked villain, leaving her, in the end, as the group's sole survivor.

The final girl is a term coined by Carol J. Clover, and she elaborates her description of the trope in her seminal *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. Clover notes the "intelligent, watchful, level-headed" final girl who contrasts to her under-developed friends.² A feminist reading of the final girl is complicated by her ambiguous gender status — "her masculine interests, her inevitable sexual reluctance . . . , her apartness from other girls, sometimes her name."³

Nevertheless, Nispel's postmodern final girl shows an evolution of the trope. Rather than operating as a figure onto which male viewers can project their anxieties, Erin is endowed with self-awareness and self-consciousness, refusing passivity by adopting the "active investigating gaze normally reserved for males"⁴ and displaying a high level of self-control so as to not scream at the first jump scare. She is level headed as she searches for logical ways to do away with the monstrous creature that pursues her and her friends. As a result, Erin contradicts Clover's assertion that the final girl cannot be deemed "by any measure the slasher film's hero."⁵

Nispel also complicates the stereotype of the final girl as the asexual, boyish "girl next door." Erin wears little makeup and does not engage in open displays of sexual activity on screen, even though she has a long-term boyfriend, Kemper. However, she is clearly coded as feminine by wearing her hair long and dressing her curvaceous body revealingly. This combination of signifiers points toward a more flexible and comprehensive understanding of gender roles than those found in the original wave of 1970s and 1980s final girls. For example, at one point we see Erin filing her nails (a detail that hints

at her femininity) while, in another, she is shown connecting the wires to switch on a car ignition (displaying mechanical knowledge associated with masculinity).

This combination of gendered signifiers contradicts Clover's notion that the final girl's masculinity makes her a "congenial double for the adolescent male."⁶ Instead, the film strengthens her role as a clever and resourceful character. The implicit argument here supports Barbara Creed's criticism of Clover's reading of the final girl as male surrogate. As Creed notes, "because the heroine is represented as resourceful, intelligent and dangerous it does not follow that she should be seen as a pseudo man."⁷ In this light, it is noteworthy that Erin does not need to revoke her femininity to assume an active role. Instead, we should read Erin's "masculine" behaviour, such as wearing a cowboy hat, as subversions of conventional masculinity, as she forges a path in which gender roles are not fixed, but fluid and interchangeable. Erin's androgynous name also not only pays tribute to the slasher tradition, but also paves the way for a double identification.

Another way that Nispel's version of *TCM* contests misogynist slasher conventions is in its depictions of on-screen deaths. In traditional slasher films, "male death is swifter, more distanced, and more likely to occur offscreen or to be obscured, whereas female death is extended, occurs at close range and in graphic detail."⁸ In the 2003 version of *TCM*, this formula is reversed, as most of the bodies tortured or mutilated on the screen are Erin's male friends. Contrastingly, Pepper, Andy's recent girlfriend, is immediately killed with Leatherface's chainsaw, the darkness working as a sort of veil that obscures gory details.

Additionally, the passiveness and objectification Laura Mulvey connects with female "to be look-at-ness" is, in Nispel's film, displaced and projected onto the male characters.⁹ Ominous symbols, such as skinned cow heads protruding from a barrel or dolls eerily hanging from tree branches, foreshadow scenes in which male victims are skinned and hanged in Leatherface's underground "workshop of filthy creation."¹⁰ Not only are male victims more gruesomely killed than females, but men are more frequently depicted screaming, trembling, and cowering.¹¹ This is particularly evident in Kemper's and Andy's case. As such, this contests the belief that the slasher is a subgenre whose visual discourse is "explicitly about the destruction of women."¹² In another example of this reversal, Morgan, another of the men in the group, is forced to emulate the death of the female hitchhiker. Here, the sadistic Sheriff Hoyt (R. Lee Ermey) compels Morgan to put the gun inside his mouth, an act which humiliates and traumatises him, especially in the context of Sheriff Hoyt's clear pleasure in the scene.

Indeed, the final girl has been afforded significant agency in this *TCM* version. Regardless of the screaming and trembling (coded as feminine behaviour in slashers by Carol Clover), Erin exhibits other attributes, such as resourcefulness, problem-solving skills, and cold-blooded reasoning — all qualities that set her apart from her female predecessors in the *TCM* franchises.

There is an emblematic scene in which Leatherface is seen chasing after Andy, one of Erin's male companions and, while he runs, he must go through several bed sheets hanging from a clothing line. Even though Andy is male, in this particular scene he seems to replicate the image of Sally Hardesty (Marilyn Burns), the female protagonist of Hooper's *TCM*, and her anxious gestures, while she is seen frantically running away through the woods. Metaphorically, Leatherface's grappling with the line of sheets-as-veils ¹³ marks his search for identity as well as his disavowal of his potential identification with the feminine. In this light, we can see Leatherface's famous chainsaw as a phallic symbol disguising his figurative lack. Near the end of the film, Erin de-phallicizes Leatherface by cutting the arm with which he holds the chainsaw, thus opening space for this feminine identification. In Hooper's film, this identification is reified in the final scene, when Leatherface appears wearing a female mask while chasing after Sally.

In another thematically rich moment, Erin hides herself inside one of the many cow carcasses hung from hooks. This is a doubling of the veils-as-sheets scene, but with a significant distinction: here, femininity is equated with fleshy, dead meat. It is only by "fusing" with meat that she manages to escape the killer's grasp. This allegorical image equates femininity not only with materiality and death, but also alludes to her lethal potential. This scene echoes the moment in *TCM* (1974) in which Leatherface hangs Pam (Teri McMinn) from a thick hook, as if she were butchered meat. Nispel's film reclaims this image, making Erin's identification with meat agential rather than a mark of helpless victimhood.

Nispel's film also explores feminine fears of entrapment by marriage and domesticity. The Sawyer's gothic domicile evokes Clover's concept of the "terrible place," which the author claims is "most often a house or tunnel, in which the victims find themselves in a venerable element of horror . . . [W]hat makes these houses terrible is not only their Victorian decrepitude, but the terrible families — murderous, incestuous, cannibalistic- that occupy them." ¹⁴ The "terrible house" inhabited by a dysfunctional family provides a cautionary tale for women about the perils inherent in domesticity.

Domestic violence lurks in the "terrible place," as is illustrated when Leatherface wears the face of Erin's boyfriend as a mask. At one point, we see him handling the chainsaw and looking directly at Erin. Symbolically, he is the partner of Erin who, trapped in the house and deprived of autonomy, must evade his violence. On the other hand, this exchange of looks strengthens the empathic connection that links the monster to Erin, as they share an otherness and marginality even as they battle to the death.

Regarding the slasher film's resolution, Clover contends, "The moment at which the Final Girl is effectively phallicized is the moment that the plot halts and horror ceases. Day breaks, and the community returns to its normal order." ¹⁵ Similarly, Vera Dika notes that "If the killer is dead or subdued, the heroine loses her ability to drive the narrative forward. With the death of the killer the film ends. One of the last images...is often that of the heroine, trapped within the confines of the frame and returned to her position as object." ¹⁶

Nispel's film diverges from this trend as Erin achieves final agency. In our last glimpse of her, Erin drives away from Leatherface's territory, her hands on the steering wheel, evincing full control of her destiny. In this subversive version of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, the final girl does not leave alone; she manages to rescue a kidnapped baby from Leatherface's house and takes the child with her in her final escape from that rural nightmare. Pamela Craig and Martin Fradley deem this final scene as a "deeply conservative" example of "reactionary gender politics" that adheres to traditional family values ingrained in the post-9/11 American society. ¹⁷ Convergent to this view, and in the light of Lee Edelman's critique of a societal "reproductive futurism...aiming at reproducing and reiterating the 'absolute privilege of heteronormativity,'" Erin's rescue of the child is a mark of the film's conservatism. ¹⁸ However, in *TCM*'s context, the fact that Erin saves the baby girl can also be read through feminist lenses to the extent that the baby — with its futuristic possibilities — can point towards the emergence of a more independent generation of women.

Moreover, Erin's association with the child does not equate to her participation in a conventional heteronormative family. Instead of abandoning the female baby to unknowable trauma, Erin becomes a powerful, protective "final mother." In this regard, the update of "final girl" to "heroic girl," a term suggested by Simon Bacon, can be aptly applied to Erin, who actively risks her life and protects her friends throughout the film. ¹⁹ By the end of the film, Erin is a strong contrast to the original *TCM*'s final girl. Our final glimpse of Sally is as a newborn child whose innocence has been lost — crying,

screaming, covered in blood. Erin, on the other hand, drives herself away with an aura of calm composure.

Over time, slashers have creatively evolved to intertextually engage with the final girl, subverting and developing traditional tropes. As Sotiris Petridis observes, "The subgenre's conventions and formula have changed over time and have evolved, while the circumstances of each historical period influence these changes." ²⁰ In this light, Nispel's film embraces a female-centred narrative in which the final girl is affirmed as a feminine character and not only as "a male in disguise" or a masculine projection.

Near the end of the film, Erin manages to evade Leatherface's workshop, climbing the stairs from the basement and emerging outside through a trapdoor, which, in symbolic terms, can be read as the birth canal. Symbolically, she has undergone a violent rite of passage meant to prepare her for the forthcoming responsibilities intrinsic to adult life. As Dika observes, "The stalker film usually enacts the heroine's growth from childhood into an awareness of the harsh realities of adulthood." ²¹ While this is a standard element of the slasher, it is emphasized in *TCM* 2003, marking the transition from final girl to "heroic girl." ²²

Thus, the final girl not only endures, she reinvents herself. Emerging from the "symbolic wound epitomized by the carnage that is left behind by the killer," Nispel's heroine is reborn into new possibilities. She is not only a girl who will live under the shadow of trauma, but has gained new strengths, such as cunning, resilience, and resourcefulness. Erin's cowboy hat predicts her final status as a battered hero riding into a hopeful dawn.

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References

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3. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, 80.
4. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, 80.
5. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, 79.
6. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, 82.
7. Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993), 127.
8. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, 75.
9. Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989), 19.
10. Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus* (repr., London: Penguin Books, 1985), 53.
11. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, 82.
12. Christopher Sharret, and Barry Keith Grant (eds.), *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2004), 254.
13. These metaphorical veils are also present in *TCM* (1974), in the form of skins and rags, located inside Leatherface's derelict house.
14. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, 30.
15. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, 82.
16. Vera Dika, "The Stalker Film, 1978-1981," in *American Horrors: Essays on the Modern American Horror Film*, ed. Gregory A. Walker (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 95.
17. Pamela Craig and Martin Fradley, "Teenage Traumata: Youth, Affective Politics, and the Contemporary American Horror Film," in *American Horror Film: The Genre at the Turn of the Millennium*, ed. Steffen Hantke (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 82.
18. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 2.
19. Simon Bacon, *Heroic Girls as Figures of Resistance and Futurity in Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2024).
20. Sotiris Petridis, *The Anatomy of the Slasher Film: A Theoretical Analysis* (Jefferson, NC: MC Farland Company, Inc, 2019), 6.
21. Dika, 96.
22. Bacon, 4.