



Universidad
Zaragoza

Trabajo Fin de Grado

Screaming for Progress: New Feminine Models,
Traditional Masculinity in Crisis and Homosexual
Undertones in Wes Craven's *Scream* (1996)

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2024

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1. Introduction

With just a *Scream*, the slasher genre was reborn. In 1996, Wes Craven along with screenwriter Kevin Williamson redefined yet again the genre when it was falling into oblivion (Rockoff, 290, 293). Taking the already well-known conventions of the genre such as the scream queen being chased by an armed psychokiller and exaggerating them to the point of parody, *Scream* manages to offer an innovative story when the genre seemed to have shown every possible story. It is thanks to the homage to previous horror movies and its attempt at breaking spectator's expectations by developing new rules that *Scream* obtains its relevance within the genre and marks a new departure point for the films that have followed.

Aimed principally at teenagers and horror movie fans, they are exactly the ones starring in this film. A psychokiller starts to terrorize Woodsboro's citizens a few nights before the death anniversary of Sidney Prescott's (Neve Campbell) mother. Sidney is the protagonist of the picture, and, as could be expected, the final girl, the sole survivor of a slasher film that defeats the killer. Yet, not only does she have to survive Ghostface's attempts to kill her, but also deal with her boyfriend Billy's (Skeet Ulrich) pressures to stop being a "sort of edited for television" couple, as Billy labels them. On top of it all, Sidney also has to put up with the impertinent Gale Weathers (Courtney Cox), dubbed in the film as a "cheesy tabloid journalist" with whom Sidney maintains a rivalry since her mother's death. Always at the scene of crime to be the first one reporting the newest events, Gale antagonizes Sidney by digging out the past trying to damage both Sidney and her mother's reputation.

The purpose of this BA dissertation is to analyze how *Scream* follows the majority of the genre conventions through Sidney's character while breaking the slasher codes, offering new rules by keeping Gale alive. Besides, the film uses these two female characters to show sorority among women in the 90s when the movement for women's rights "seemed to be at an impasse" (Becker, 21). On a not so bright side, *Scream* channels hidden homosexual desire through the villains of the story, Billy and Stu (Matthew Lillard), who die at the end of the

film. Subtle references to this clandestine relationship reflect the limited space that representations of LGBTQ+ realities could occupy in the motion picture industry of the time, despite some advances in the cultural context of the United States in the 1990s.

Following these observations, this BA thesis is organized in three sections. To begin with, a theoretical framework is provided to offer an insight into the social, cultural and political situation of the United States in the 90s. Within this context, I briefly consider the state and development of masculinity, feminism and queerness in this decade. After dealing with this social context, I offer an overview of the slasher genre to contextualize the changes *Scream* proposed and facilitate the genre analysis I aim to develop later. The next section offers close readings of the film. This dissertation intends to focus on four characters who depict the relevant themes mentioned previously. Making Sidney Prescott the starting point, she is the proper final girl who fits almost perfectly in the definition of the term, she will be pitied against Gale Weathers. Gale, the irritating tabloid journalist who unexpectedly survives, embodies the feminist values at the time: she has a job and she is economically and sexually independent from any man. The analysis section concludes by looking mainly at Billy (although Stu's role is also considered). Billy represents the crisis of masculinity of the 90s and the frustration of queerness having to be silenced instead of publicly discussed. In the last part of this dissertation, I aim to show the relevance of *Scream* within the genre and outside the screen by treating 90s social concerns such as advancements in feminism or the crisis of masculinity in a hopeful manner. In addition, I will draw attention to realities that were often not discussed, like the homosexual undertones in Billy and Stu's interactions.

2. Social and Cinematographic Context

The 1990s were especially rough for men, who saw themselves facing a crisis of masculinity by being caught up in “disempowered” positions amidst the growing corporate culture that “alienated and disenfranchised” them (Hunter, 72). The decade was also challenging for

many women, who had gained some rights and independence thanks to the movements of the late 60s and 70s, but were facing extreme criticism. Lastly, queer people did not fare much better. Carrying an often tragic and silenced history, they had often been forced to hide in the closet while being considered ill (Westrate and McLean, 228), and their situation was far from radically improving at the time.

2.1. “Say a Prayer for the Youth of America” – Gender and Sexuality in the US in the 1990s.

Birdbrain’s song “Youth of America” (which is part of the film’s soundtrack) includes the line “Say a prayer for the youth of America”. As this line suggests, being a teenager, and adult, in the 90s in the US was somehow complicated. The period was full of changes, economically and politically. Leaving behind Reaganism, the Clinton administration promised to be an improvement, but the practice says otherwise (Serriane, xi). Reaganism triggered a counterblast to women’s advancements of the previous decades, so the 90s had to deal with the remnants of this backlash. Feminism sold the idea that women were better than ever after achieving equality, with greater opportunities in the labor market. However, as Faludi mentions, women “[had] never been more miserable” (1). Though they had gained some recognition in the capitalist world, these advances were ignored within the media and popular culture (Faludi, 126; Zeisler, 119). Language used in films and television to refer to women continued to be degrading for them and the liberal woman “empowered to claim sexual desire” was the villain of the story (Kimmel, 673). The immersion of women in the workplace also affected men, sending many of them into a period of crisis about what it meant to be a man in a society in which their role up until then had been to provide for the family. Some of the rules established that “real men” had to “exude an aura of manly daring and aggression” and “show no emotion” as they rely on “being emotionally inexpressive” (Kimmel, 674). Besides, in a society so fragile and full of men who could not prove their transformation from teenagehood

into adulthood, they focused their frustration and blame on women (Kimmel, 675, 677).

The end of the 90s was marked by “an unprecedented federal law denying marriage equality to same-sex couples and ““Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” (DADT) was fully implemented” (Serriane, 198). The DADT policy, affecting primarily army soldiers, prevented queer people from publicly disclosing their sexuality in order to keep their jobs. Originally conceived as helpful for the community, reality showed that discrimination increased. A discrimination that continued with the invisibilization of the AIDS pandemic which had begun in the 80s, marking the decade as one of “protest, panic and loss” (Westrate and McLean, 228). In the 90s the AIDS crisis was still present, but the emphasis now was on “treatment and prevention” for medical improvements which managed to convert this disease from devastating to non-threatening (Westrate and McLean, 228). A period marked by a conservative backlash for queer people, it is also the moment they enjoyed more visibility on television, but never as protagonists (Serriane, 168).

This BA thesis argues that *Scream* reacts to these different—but connected—realities of men, women and gays in the 1990s, bringing together related concerns about gender and sexuality as part of a story in which its characters embody critical attitudes towards social norms at the time. The film comments on, challenges, but also perpetuates these morals to offer a reflection of the time.

2.2. “Watch a Few Movies, Take a Few Notes”: The Slasher Genre

Halloween (Carpenter, 1978), *Friday 13th* (Cunningham, 1980) and *A Nightmare on Elm’s Street* (Craven, 1984) are some of the pillars on which the slasher is built, as they have contributed to shaping it (Rockoff, 65, 93). Defining the slasher as a horror subgenre is far more complicated, as Adam Rockoff found out when he was writing *Going to Pieces* (2002). Neither critics nor slasher movie producers are able to define the genre accurately (Rockoff, 14). For example, Clover defines it as “the immensely generative story of a psychokiller who

slashes to death a string of mostly female victims, one by one, until he is subdued or killed, usually by the one girl who has survived” (21). This explanation, though, does not illustrate completely what these films are about. Rockoff, on the other hand, articulates the problematic of the definition and the genre as well, as it “encompasses tough, problematic and fiercely individualistic” (14) films, which share some characteristics. Precisely, it is through the common elements in these films that a “workable, however malleable, definition of the slasher can be formed” (Rockoff, 14).

Unlike other films of the horror genre, the killer is not a simple and plain evil monster but a traumatized human. In most cases, gender is central, as most famous psychokillers are men, and even if their childhood has not been traumatizing, they are disturbed by sex (Clover, 28). Rockoff points to an asexual nature with an ambiguous identity (15), and to them not being common men but ones that “epitomize masculinity to ludicrous extremes” (15). Slashers begin their story in the past, depicting a crime that provokes a traumatic reaction in a character. That character tends to be the killer, thus, these stories show that killers are created by their past. But these slayers are psychopaths whose job is to kill, easy and quick. The deaths are not pleasant and they do not make their victims suffer physically, their mental suffering is enough for them. They do their job with “systematic precision, uncaring, emotionless and unmerciful” (Rockoff, 16). Though they are humans who die at the mercy of the final girl, there is something supernatural in them that revives them, allowing them to come back in the sequels for their revenge. These iconic killers need a weapon, but not all weapons are accepted. True to the name of the genre, the slasher is “defined by the method by which characters are killed” (Rockoff, 17). These psychokillers tend to go for a knife, “although any sharp metal object” (Clover, 31) can be used. However, guns are not allowed as they go against the pre-technological ethos of the slasher. This weapon becomes an extension of the killer and loyal companion that places the slayer in a position of power over the victim. The favorite victim of the slasher and the public is the final girl. The heroine that

screams and runs from the killer but survives to tell her story. Coined in 1992 by Carol J. Clover, the final girl, now a cornerstone of the slasher film, is the last girl standing to defeat the psychokiller. Having been the one who has suffered the most after watching all of her friends die in the most awful circumstances, she also suffers psychologically awaiting her moment. But that moment, however, never comes. When she faces death at the end, she is able to fight back the killer and even kill him (Clover, 35). She becomes paranoid and is smart and resourceful (Clover, 39). Hiding herself in tasteless oversize sweaters and long baggy jeans, she is countered by her female friends who dress in shorts and tops. As Clover puts it, she is “boyish” and not “fully feminine” (40), rejecting any type of sexual interaction with boys, which is what makes her survive.

As I have mentioned before, sex is a determinant factor in the survival of the final girl. Teenagers in these films find themselves amidst their sexual awakenings, something the slayer disapproves of. For Clover there is a gender motivation behind the deaths (34). In contrast, Rockoff cannot fathom filmmakers consciously deciding that women will suffer while men are killed in the blink of an eye (20). However, Clover notes that both men and women are killed as “sexual transgressors of both sexes are scheduled for early destruction” (Clover, 33). Deaths are personal, spectators get to identify with characters after knowing them to a certain extent. Yet, there is no personal connection between the slayer and the final girl. The killer just picks a girl to torture and starts his hunt. There are, however, some gender issues at the moment of showing said deaths. Once dead, men’s corpses, if shown, are framed from afar and in a way that is difficult to identify the man, whereas detailed, graphic images and close-ups tend to be reserved for women (Clover, 35; Benschhoff and Griffin, 289; Kirk, 142). The place where teenagers’ nightmares occur are locations typically associated with them (Rockoff, 23). No matter where the story is set, Rockoff also points at a feeling of isolation in the victims (23). This isolation serves to keep the characters away from the rest of society and therefore, away from potential sources of help. Additionally, this separation

works on a metaphorical level as well by removing teenagers from the adult world (Rockoff, 23).

Among the many films that influence the development of the slasher genre—including *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960) and *Peeping Tom* (Powell, 1960)—it is in 1978 that John Carpenter’s *Halloween* perfects or introduces most of the aforementioned elements, becoming, thus, the “blueprint for all slashers and the model against which all subsequent films are judged” (Rockoff, 93). *Scream*’s way to honor the genre, as well as *Halloween*, is by explaining its rules with *Halloween* playing in the background of a teen party amidst a curfew when a psychokiller is on the loose. The easy and successful formula of the slasher blossomed innumerable imitations and sequels after *Halloween*’s success until the mid-80s, quickly exploiting and exhausting the genre. By the 1990s, the slasher was at a low ebb. The options were limited to unending and unoriginal sequels which generally failed to engage with the situation and values of the time (Pagnoni Berns and Darowski, 10). Yet, Wes Craven, already established as a master of horror with hits such as *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977) or *A Nightmare on Elm’s Street* (1984), came back once again with *Scream* in 1996 to try and prevent the slasher from completely dying. Craven helped the genre resurge by changing the rules and opening the doors for new trends. In fact, since the release from this film, five other installments have followed and many other new stories have proliferated from this shift to the point that “there has not been another period of decline for it since then” (Pagnoni Berns and Darowski, 11). *Scream*, thus, consolidated the new wave of slasher in which rules do not apply as rigidly as in previous films. It is also remarkable as it comments and portrays the ethics of its time through its characters. Using Sidney as its core element, *Scream* continues the slasher rules and simultaneously offers new codes by keeping Gale alive, teaching a lesson on female sorority. The ones who do not make it at the end are Billy and Stu. Deviating from precursors that often revived the killer for future installments, *Scream* uses Billy and Stu to allude to the masculinity dilemma of the time in which old violent

representations were questioned and unaccepted at the end of the century. At the same time, through these two characters, the film indirectly alludes to hidden homosexual desire, in line with the sociopolitical context of the time.

3. Analysis

3.1. “Do You Like Scary Movies, Sidney?”: Towards a New Model of Final Girl

Killing the biggest teen film star at the moment (Drew Barrymore) within the first fifteen minutes is a bold move (Karlyn, 105; Rockoff, 293; Compra 80). In any case, Williamson wanted to honor *When a Stranger Calls* (Walton, 1979), breaking the audience presumptions by slashing the assumed female lead (Rockoff, 293). *Scream*'s real protagonist Sidney Prescott is presented after a detailed close-up of Casey's (Drew Barrymore) hanging corpse, proving Clover's aforementioned theories about the graphic depiction of women's corpses. Sidney is shot through a close-up of her face for the audience to get familiar with her. Sidney's framing is static to focus on her face, rather than having a slight tilt up from the phone to her face, as in Casey's case. In this section, I argue that Sidney is the original final girl as conveyed by the use of framing, clothes and background tragic story but also breaks some conventions of the genre to create a new feminine model for next generations.

Bearing the trauma of her mother's death, Sidney has to overcome the consequences arising from it, such as being distant (physically and emotionally) from her boyfriend and accepting that her mother, apart from being her mother, was also a “person in her own right” who should be allowed to make mistakes and to have desires of any kind (Karlyn, 109). The fact that Sidney has a boyfriend breaks the genre's rule in which the final girl rejects any type of interaction other than friendship with the opposite gender. To make matters worse, Billy, the boyfriend, is also the slayer. This couple diverts from the convention that the final girl and the psychokiller are unknown to each other. As a matter of fact, this will be the prime motivation to punish Sidney for her mother's mistakes which affected Billy personally.

Coinciding with the grieving process and true to her nature as the final girl, Sidney hides herself in oversized sweatshirts and long jeans. Her color palette goes from flavorless, generic grays to blues and variations of this color—alluding to her sadness—in pastel tones to portray Sidney as an innocent young woman. At the same time, her choice of colors presents her as someone who is far from willingly wanting to be the center of attention. As the story progresses, so does Sidney's character in her healing journey. This is shown, again, through her clothing, with less oversized shirts in favor of ones that fit more closely to her figure. Additionally, Sidney's outfits diverge from those of Tatum's (Rose McGowan), her best friend. She is presented with a pastel yellow tight crop top and a plaid short skirt, signaling her nature as a carefree teenager.

The fabula presents Sidney as the character who suffers the most. She has been mourning her mother's absence before the syuzhet begins. Casey and her boyfriend's deaths trigger Sidney's uneasiness as they are similar in terms of brutality and they are close to the anniversary of her mother's passing. Her pain will go *in crescendo* as the story develops and she is continuously chased by Ghostface trying to kill her. Still, she manages to escape him at every opportunity. In his killing spree, Ghostface leaves a trail of victims that at first seem arbitrary, but soon enough, all of them can be related to Sidney, who discovers most of them, increasing Ghostface's psychological abuse upon her. Ghostface, or rather, Billy (along with Stu) is punishing Sidney for her mother's mistakes. Maureen Prescott (Lynn McRee) had an affair with Billy's father, ending up with Billy's mother abandoning the family. As Karlyn notes, only the woman is blamed for the affair whereas Billy's father is exempt from any responsibility on the matter (108). Billy's "obsession with his mother" makes him unable to process the idea of her abandoning him (Karlyn, 108). Her main objective was to punish her husband, but in doing so, she also leaves Billy lonely and traumatized. This drives him to "punish all mothers and potential mothers" (Karlyn, 108).

As the main character and the one whose story is followed (Clover, x), Sidney is

privileged in terms of framing as she is often shot in close-ups. Not only is she shot in this way but she also seems to grant others access to them. Everyone surrounding her benefits from being shot in a close-up. The use of close-ups, especially on Sidney, allows the audience to empathize with her and appreciate the pain she is put through. Her close-ups, supported by high-key lighting that do not produce shadows over her, contrast with those of Billy. When it comes to Billy, the close-ups tend to be slightly low-angle and with low-key lighting that produces hard shadows. This dark contrast implies that Billy is not as innocent as Sidney, as he is hiding something. This divergence in terms of framing corroborates Menkes' claims about how male actors "get to have 3D lighting with shadow and depth" (*Brainwashed*, 15:57-15:59). Sidney's power over close-ups is highlighted when compared to Gale and how she is depicted. Gale, being the antagonist and rival, barely receives close-ups. The closest framing she gets are medium close-ups, with her shoulders in frame, which allow us to see her face but not to empathize with her to a large extent. This way, Sidney's narrative is reinforced and the audience and characters' dislike over Gale is justified. However, this established rule is broken once and Gale receives a close-up when Sidney tries to apologize for punching her in the face the day before. Yet, the conversation evolves into Sidney realizing that what she thought about her mother and her killer may not be the truth and that she has sent an innocent man to prison. This becomes a turning point for Sidney as she accepts the nature of her mother and also embraces her own mistakes.

Sidney's journey towards acceptance of who her mother was culminates when she is emotionally able to open up to Billy and trust him with her most inner fears about "turn[ing] out just like her". By this moment, it seems that Sidney has also forgotten her doubts about Billy being the possible killer. Sidney has been in control of her own sexuality (Karlyn, 103) and after that confession she chooses to have sex with Billy. Faithful to the 90s context in which women were fighting for their own choices in their sexuality at their own times, Sidney represents the woman of the 90s who decides when and where to lose her virginity

without the need to be killed afterwards (Karlyn, 105). Breaking the principle that, in order to survive, the final girl has to avoid sexual intercourse, *Scream* refuses to perpetuate that idea (Karlyn, 90).

The editing of the scene in which Sidney and Billy are about to have sex while a group of teenagers are watching *Halloween* in a different room is especially relevant to show how *Scream* diverges from the established rules by establishing a comparison between both films. As the teenagers are watching the film, they comment on it unaware of the rules. At this point, Randy (Jamie Kennedy), the film geek of the group, exasperated by their ignorance, especially after seeing the police incompetence, explains the principles of the slasher genre for the spectators of both *Halloween* and *Scream*. By means of a medium shot, the film shows both Randy and what he is seeing on the TV set. Randy explains the rules while illustrating them with *Halloween* playing by his side. As he mentions a rule, the next image shown is a medium long shot of the teenagers reacting to what he is saying, disagreeing with his theories, either because they do not meet their expectations or because they find them quite restrictive. Once Randy has explained the principles, he continues commenting on the film supported by examples and adds that there is an “obligatory tit shot”. *Scream* cuts to Sidney taking off her t-shirt and then cuts again to the male teenagers cheering. This editing effect makes it seem as if they were reacting to Sidney and not the film. Diverting from Randy’s explanation of the rules, *Scream* does not have a “tit shot” as, when it was about to have one, Billy has moved to be in front of Sidney, creating a moment of intimacy in which the audience has no place. Further, Karlyn adds that this step Sidney has taken is “the beginning of her real power as an adult woman” (105-106). However, Clover stated that “postcoital death, above all when the circumstances are illicit, is a staple of the genre” (34). Thus, Ghostface has to punish the couple attacking them as “sexual transgressors of both sexes are scheduled for early destruction” (33). Ghostface’s ambush is unexpected, nonetheless. Up until then, every time Ghostface attacks somebody a Dutch angle on the

character who is about to die foreshadows that something is about to happen. Yet, after Sidney and Billy's love consummation that canted shot never arrives and it is Sidney the one who warns Billy of the imminent assault hoping he reacts and fights for his survival. He does nothing except dying in a quite exaggerated and fake way that, rather than elicit sympathy or pity, provokes laughter and rejection in the spectators.

3.2. "Has a Cheesy Tabloid Journalist Ever [Survived a Psychokiller]?: Gale Weathers, The Unexpected Final Girl

Her antagonistic nature and annoying attitude make Gale Weathers an unlikeable character at first sight. According to the aforesaid principles, Gale was never intended to survive nor to be attacked directly, and yet she manages to defeat Billy and help Sidney along her way. As a supporting character, she is there to highlight and contrast Sidney's attributes and role. I have previously mentioned that she is barely shot on a close-up except once, marking a shift in Sidney's life. Further, she never receives a Dutch angle advancing that she is going to be attacked. Indeed, she never fights Ghostface when he is in disguise, although she confronts Billy twice in an attempt to stop him. Her secondary role is marked from the first moment she is introduced. Gale is depicted as part of the background as the camera moves in a crane shot from a medium long shot establishing the place where the action is set, Woodsboro High School, to an extreme long shot that shows how the media has invaded the surroundings of the school. Though Gale appears from afar, the colors of her suit, vivid, saturated and bright, make her stand out. From that crane shot, the camera descends to street level and wanders about as if looking for Sidney while closing the frame to show her in a medium close-up as she walks among journalists to try and see what is happening. After a few steps, Sidney reacts to something and immediately a pan closing in to a medium long shot depicts Gale reporting the news, followed by a medium close-up of Sidney who seems surprised to see so many reporters on the high school grounds. Shifting the focus from Sidney to Gale advances

the tense relationship between the two of them. At the same time, after Sidney's last close-up there is an expectation of seeing Gale from a closer distance to get familiar with her. Yet, the sustained distance between spectators and Gale reinforce the idea that she is not intended to be a final girl, therefore there is no need to meet her from a closer distance.

Even though Gale has been presented in the distance, the colors of her suit catch the attention of the spectators. Opposing the idea of the final girl, who "should show signs of boyishness" (Clover, 60), Gale Weathers wears designer suits from Moschino and Versace, creating a style icon in and out of the screen (Lodi). These outfits help her stand out as an example of femininity and a model of woman for Sidney once her mother is gone. Gale, then, represents the adult woman who has stepped outside "Girl World"—"a liminal time and space between childhood and adulthood where girls rule" (Karlyn, 78). She now has to navigate and make space for herself in a "social order still largely defined by patriarchy and capitalism" (Karlyn, 80). Gale embodies the new woman of the 90s accessing better job positions far from the idea of the woman whose only purpose is to marry a man and have a family (Yarrow, 86, 89). An ambitious and driven journalist, Gale wants to make history by winning the Pulitzer for covering sensationalist stories. Her determination does not free her from criticism, especially from men, as exemplified by her workmate Kenny, who, at some point calls her "bitch goddess" as she continues to ask him to do unethical actions for the sake of being the first to report the breaking news. Moreover, Gale's fashion style challenged some prejudices about women's clothing at the time. Analyzing the public judgment of the image of Prosecutor Marcia Clark whilst doing her job in one of the best known trials of the 90s, scholar Kathleen Hall Jamieson has claimed that "women who are considered feminine will be judged incompetent, and women who are competent, unfeminine" (in Yarrow, 79).

Apart from her sense of fashion, Gale is also noticeable for being an adult in a world of teenagers. A genre designed specifically for adolescents, the few adults who appear are outsmarted by the youth (Karlyn, 104; Rockoff, 23). Within these adults, Gale manages to be

at the crime scene before anyone else, eager to report the news and to demonstrate that she is not like her peers. As an adult, she is allowed to enjoy her sexuality without being punished with death for it. As Karlyn notes, a woman's sexuality is her "most dangerous power" (103), Gale knows it and makes use of it, and Sidney will eventually learn it as well. Karlyn further adds that lacking this knowledge is what makes it possible for the final girl to "kill the killer" (103). Yet, *Scream* proves otherwise. Precisely, both of them survive after joining forces and helping each other. Shattering the genre convention that the final girl should trust male figures surrounding her, her male friends and family are "suspicious, silly or weak" (Karlyn,107), therefore unable to save the protagonist. Moreover, Clover states that "the ones who save themselves are male" (59), but there is an instance in which Gale subverts this idea and saves Dewey (David Arquette), Tatum's brother and Deputy Sheriff. She not only saves Dewey, but also Sidney as she shoots Billy first. The film proposes the idea of female sorority as a means of survival in spite of their differences and dislike towards the other (Karlyn, 109), and the result is a success as Gale and Sidney make it out alive from Stu's house.

To defeat the killer, their strength is not enough and Gale and Sidney use a weapon that contradicts the pre-technological spirit of the slasher. Dewey's gun is a determinant element to end with the killer and the old values regarding the position of women that he prefers. The first murder of the syuzhet, that of Casey, is an intent of the film to "kill of a certain model of femininity—dumb, passive, dependent, victimized [...]" (Karlyn, 105). She dies in the garden, though still within the surroundings of her house, after trying to fight Ghostface with a kitchen knife. Being alone at home and then using that specific knife, Casey embodies the old-fashioned values that presupposed that women had to remain at home to be the perfect housewives. Casey dies alone as *Scream* rejects these principles in favor of a womanhood that supports and helps other women. With Billy supposedly dead as he has been stabbed by Ghostface, Sidney has to defend herself from a psychokiller whose identity is still unknown while her friends blame each other. To do so, she takes Dewey's gun offering a

twist in the established ideas about the genre. Moreover, Gale will be the first one pointing it to Billy and unsuccessfully shooting with it. Billy, still faithful to the primitive weapon convention, kicks Gale out of the house while she is holding the gun. Yet, she comes back again to finish what she started and is the first one to successfully fire the gun and hit Billy on the shoulder without killing him, which is Sidney's responsibility. As the final girl and after her emotional journey, Sidney manages to shoot Billy one last time. The technological connotations of the gun mean an acceptance of progress that, together with the teamwork between Sidney and Gale independently of their aversion, fit in the standards of the 90s woman who wants to be independent and thrive professionally.

3.3. “The Official Term Is ‘Psycho’” – Masculinity in Crisis and Homosexual Undertones in Billy and Stu's Interactions

To counter these new models of final girl, Williamson and Craven needed to create a psychokiller capable of going beyond the screen to enter the popular imaginary, and that is how Ghostface was born. Precisely the killer is what attracts more enthusiasts to slasher films and not knowing their identity until the end allows the viewer to guess and bet on who the murderer is. Usually, the final girl and the attempted murderer do not know each other as she is haphazardly chosen. However, as previously mentioned, *Scream's* killer is the heroine's boyfriend Billy. The killer, hence, is someone from “[Sidney's] close circle of friends” (Trencansky in Compora, 82), so the film continues diverging from genre conventions. Since he is introduced, Billy starts to leave signs about his involvement in the sudden deaths in Woodsboro. While having a conversation with Sidney in which he starts to subtly pressure her about having sexual relations, Billy turns on Sidney's record player to play Gus Black's song “Don't Fear the Reaper”. Through the song, in a diegetic form, he is admitting that he is the slayer while asking Sidney to obviate this small detail about him. To fully differ from its predecessors, Billy does not act alone but has Stu, his staunch friend, by his side. Although

Billy denies having a motive at first and then proves having one, Stu confesses to Sidney on the phone not having one. Instead, Stu recognizes helping Billy in this killing rampage because of “peer pressure”, which implies having an excuse to spend time with Billy. In this part, I explain how some of the interactions between Billy and Stu have homosexual undertones which the film expresses through the use of props, acting, framing and setting. Taking the sociopolitical context of the 90s into account, this section suggests that Billy and Stu may be hiding their homosexual desires while they also try to decide the type of man they want to be.

To offer something new, Williamson and Craven’s killers in *Scream* show a different sexuality from that of previous ones who, as Rockoff comments, tend to be asexual (15) but, in any case, are disturbed by sex (Clover, 28). Although *Scream* does not explicitly present Billy and Stu as involved with one another in a romantic or sexual way, the film invites to develop such a reading through the aforementioned elements. Cinema has a history of hiding LGBTQ+ characters. As the documentary *The Celluloid Closet* shows, homosexuality, if presented, tends to appear in oblique and subtle ways, reflecting real life (33:13-33:18). Homosexuals have traditionally been depicted negatively and without hope. The few characters onscreen were punished with death and with the passing of time, their role from victims shifted to assailants (*The Celluloid Closet*, 57:30-57:33, 1:13:07-1:13:09). *Scream* contributes to this trend by providing an indirect reference to homosexuality through its killers, thus, having “visibility at any cost”, which to some is enough (*The Celluloid Closet*, 9:42-9:44). Added to the long history of LGBTQ+ invisibility onscreen, the 90s saw the rise of the DADT policy, as mentioned earlier. In *Scream*, there are hints throughout the story that point at Billy and Stu’s possible homosexuality in a context in which they would have probably been expected to hide their desires. Although costume designer Cynthia Bergstrom had in mind another style for Billy, Ulrich’s casting changed her ideas and opted for a “sort of hunky and classical” style (Lodi). Billy’s style also fits within that of grunge, especially the

boots that he wears whether as a teenager or as a psychokiller. These boots are also similar to the ones used by the police, and they are used to misguide the audience regarding who the killer might be. In addition, Billy's characterization reminds of James Dean (figures 1 and 2), whose premature death has resulted in him becoming a "legend rooted on the image we have made of him" (*James Dean*, 4:57-4:58). De Angelis notes that it is his unexpected passing that "secures his ability to emerge perpetually [...] as a figure whose ambiguity and rebellion extend to the realm of sexuality" (7). This fact fueled the later revolutions for sexual freedom that ended with Dean established as a "gay icon" in the 70s (DeAngelis, 8). Billy's same wardrobe as Dean seems to draw a parallel to the same ambiguity in terms of sexuality and rebellious spirit.

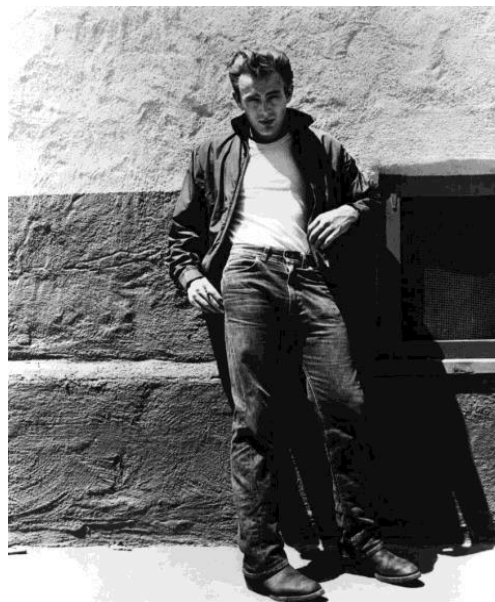


Figure 1: James Dean in one of his iconic outfits including a white T-shirt, jeans and boots (John Kobal Foundation).



Figure 2: Billy in a similar fashion to that of James Dean with a white T-shirt, jeans and lacing his boots.

Scream gradually builds up Stu's homosocial interest in Billy and part of his sadistic nature. From explicitly explaining how to gut someone and alerting Billy as their psychokiller identity may be uncovered, to talking about Billy and his feelings when he is not around, Stu shows an interest in Billy that seems to go beyond friendship. It is at the local video store where Randy works that Stu's attitude towards his male friends starts to get to its maximum expression. There, Randy and Stu are having a conversation about Billy's possible involvement in the killings in which Stu blindly defends Billy and Randy calls Stu "little lap dog". Further, after Billy joins the conversation, and through medium close-ups and shots/reaction shots, Stu leans on Randy's shoulders, plays with his ear lobe and invades Randy's personal space (figure 3). This scene is ambiguous as Stu is playing with Randy but looking at Billy while doing so. Back at his house, and once most of the teenagers have left, Stu is free to lean on Billy from behind (figure 4), as he previously did with Randy, while they threaten Sidney. The privacy of the house lets Stu stay behind Billy and go a step further to hug Billy's waist as the movement of Stu's arms invite to infer when shown in a medium close-up. The intimacy of this place is conveyed by closing the shot. The medium close-ups of the video store that showed Billy, Randy and Stu interacting transform into close-ups that depict Billy and Stu's faces and expressions, especially Stu's way of looking at Billy. As their

intention is to kill Sidney, they do not seem to have a problem with her knowing their plan and also noticing their more open display of desire.



Figure 3: Close-up of Stu leaning on Randy but looking at Billy.



Figure 4: Close-up of Stu hugging Billy from behind at his house.

Nevertheless, they first need to stab each other to show signs of resistance and self-defense. The knife, the chosen weapon true to its genre's rules, is a phallic symbol, as most weapons in these films are (Griffin and Benshoff, 289). Clover stated that "all phallic symbols are not equal" (32), and that is why Dewey's gun is not valid for Billy and Stu's purpose and they reject it. Stabbing each other consists in the "physical act of the knife penetrating the flesh" (Rockoff, 20). This action serves as a metaphor for their desire, as the social conventions of their time seem to prevent the film from showing more open references

to homosexuality. The suburban house, then, stands as a metaphor for a closet in which gay people may show their real selves more easily but in which they must remain hidden in the end, as they do not make it out alive. As Daniel Compora notes, suburbs have often been presented as safe havens and idyllic places (73). Yet, in slasher films, they turn into ideal places for horror (Compore, 81). In this sense, *Scream* relies on the suburban neighborhood in a similar way to previous films, but in this case reworking patterns of gender and, to a certain extent, sexuality. At the same time, the film cannot avoid falling into the trap of depicting gay characters as psychopaths.

The knife has a double function allowing Billy and Stu to demonstrate their hidden desire for the other but also it helps them to give vent to their frustration and aggressiveness in a decade in which the traditional meaning of what it meant to be a man was at stake. Manhood and violence have always gone hand in hand and wars were the perfect scenario to become a man (Kimmel, 678). Male adolescents in the 90s had no war to showcase their manhood, hence the need to find other ways of performing “a rite of passage” from youth to adulthood, which must be public and evaluated by other men (Kimmel, 675). Notwithstanding this, Karlyn argues that adult masculinity can be proven in psychotic ways (102) and slasher films are the perfect example of this, as the “cinematic attacks upon women are indicative of male frustration and rage” (Griffin and Benschhoff, 289). Withal, “society has viewed gay men as not “real men”” (Kimmel, 681) and people who should not show emotions (Kimmel, 674). Billy, hence, finds himself at a crossroads regarding his masculinity and his role in society. Sean Griffin and Harry Benschhoff note that “males are conditioned by ideology and cultural standards” (257). Billy chooses to follow the violent and aggressive path of proving his masculinity by massacring Woodsboro citizens to take revenge on Sidney and her mother, instead of dealing with his feelings about his mother’s abandonment. In spite of advances in women’s sexual freedom to claim desire which contrasted with the perspective of many men who saw sexual intercourse as an establishment of sexuality (Kimmel,

679-680), Billy manages to have sex with Sidney to prove his masculinity. Regardless of having declared that they had no motive for perpetrating this killing rampage, Billy and Stu's fixed ideals on a vicious manhood seem to justify their actions as they are victims of their context and its pressures.

4. Conclusion

Billy and Stu's deaths at Sidney's hands, with Gale's help, prove that the conventional masculinity based on brutality has no space in the new millennium nor is it compatible with the new final girl model *Scream* proposes. By using two different women who survive and "provide suggestive models for reimagining the use of female power to change our cultural narratives" (Karlyn, 101), the film is reverting the tragic and painful background needed for women to end the story alive, especially through Gale's figure. Sidney's final shot at Billy proves her successful emotional journey while reclaiming "her place [...] as a new kind of female protagonist" (Karlyn, 106). Despite their animosity and diverging ambitions, Sidney and Gale find a common ground to work together for survival, setting the example for female sorority for the audience, especially girls and women, to follow. On the other hand, within the context of the 90s and the invisibility and lack of rights for the LGBTQ+ community, Billy and Stu's deaths are framed within the "bury your gays trope", perpetuating the idea that gay characters do not deserve a happy ending but tragedy (Henderson, 2). Yet, in the sequels Ghostface is back to continue what Billy and Stu started while they remain dead, in contrast with many slashers, as the traditional masculine values they represent do not fit in with the progress that *Scream* defends.

Scream's success is reflected in the Ghostface mask, which has become a popular Halloween costume (Rockoff, 295). Inspired by Edvard Munch's painting *The Scream* (1893), the mask captures "the angst of its own historical times" (Karlyn, 107)—a time characterized by an unease with the established role of women, traditional masculinity and

rejected homosexuality. Its relevance stems from the homage and acknowledgement of the previous films and rules while breaking the conventions to prove how the genre can move on and progress reflecting the social and political advances of its time without dying in the process. *Scream*, then, lays the groundwork of departing from the norm that later slashers also follow. Halina Reijn's 2023 slasher *Bodies Bodies Bodies* shows a group of young rich people isolated in a mansion amidst a hurricane alarm and a seemingly harmless game ends up with most of them hunted and slayed by a killer. Almost three decades later, this film engages with similar concerns, reflecting on women's progress, new masculinity models and the visibility of queer relationships. *Bodies Bodies Bodies* follows in the footsteps of *Scream* and goes a step further, taking advantage of the advancements of the twenty-first century.

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