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Queer tension : Le Teuer inside me.

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QUEER TENSION: *LE TEUER* INSIDE ME

By

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B.A., Centre College, 2004

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
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for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English
University of Louisville
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August 2010

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A Thesis Approved on

August 2, 2010

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Thesis Director

ABSTRACT

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The film *High Tension* (2005) is a complex and powerfully threatening portrait of queer monstrosity and negativity. Upon its release, the film's twist ending garnered widespread derision, but there is a mad method, so to speak, in its insistence on purposeful irreconcilability. This thesis aims to tease out the nuances of *High Tension*'s subversive twist. It examines the makeup and history of the slasher sub-genre of horror, as well as relevant criticism in the field, in order to locate *High Tension*'s specific contribution. The film presents an image of queer monstrosity that performs what Michael Moon calls *sexual disorientation*, as well as a profoundly queer disidentification. In its final scenes, the film portrays a vibrant and violent queer sexuality, one that threatens beyond the screen. *High Tension* figures the terrifying manifestation of queer negativity, proffering a radical threat to the social itself.

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Introduction

When the French film, *High Tension*, crossed the Atlantic into theaters in 2005, it never had much of a chance with American audiences. It was partially dubbed into English, the goriest scenes were shortened, and it was a foreign horror movie released in the middle of summer next to a slew of blockbusters. What few reviews it received were poor, focusing on the problems of dubbing, the terrible violence, and the nonsensical nature of the plot twist in the final reel. Audiences which were alienated by the initial dubbing were later shocked by the realistic violence perpetrated on a corpse, a family, and a small boy, and annoyed by the derivative aspects of a genre film. So great were the obstacles that when the twist finally came, it was met with nearly uniform derision and complete dismissal. It is then, perhaps, no surprise that *High Tension* has been largely ignored by the critical community.

Four years ago, I came upon the film after hearing of its rather ingenious scene of decapitation by credenza, and was not disappointed. The film, in its original form on DVD, is a precise and brutal thriller. The narrative follows a sadistic killer (*Le Teuer*) and a strong lesbian heroine (Marie) embroiled in a tense game of cat-and-mouse, he to abscond with her love interest (Alex) and she to rescue the damsel. In the twist, the killer and the heroine are revealed to be one and the same. The twist which had stopped so many viewers cold struck me as astonishingly willful. What had been seen as nonsensical plot holes and bad editing, I found to be the purposeful irreconcilability that dealt heavily

with sexuality, gender, love, and violence. For years I struggled to understand the reasons why irreconcilability was brilliant rather than simply inane, gathering friends for showings and meeting the same wall of dismissal that the film had upon its release. This Thesis is the culmination of such striving—an effort to elucidate the meaning of the film and the subversive possibilities contained therein.

In his study, *Imps of the Perverse: Gay Monsters in Film*, Michael William Saunders writes:

The idea of the monster derives from two fundamental etymological myths: that monsters are anomalous creatures that serve as signs indicating the consequences of deviating from the natural order (Look what happens when you do bad things!); and that monsters are marvelous, monumental manifestations of the power of God (Look what God can do!). (2)

The monster's fundamental purpose, as an image, "is to reveal the power and, more importantly, the *terror*, of divinity" (2). As such, it is intended to be seen, but "its nature as image is to discourage us, either through fear or through awe, from looking," or else we "endanger ourselves by presuming to look casually at what we are not meant to be able to bear" (2).

For Saunders, it is no surprise that the queer is figured as a deviation from the natural order, but he believes that images of the queer monster possess a "subversive potential" for appropriating power (17). Michael Moon writes that merely showing an audience "powerful images of ostensibly perverse desires and fantasies," disorients "our currently prevailing assumptions" about sexual orientation (our own and otherwise), "by bringing home to us the shapes of desires and fantasies that we ordinarily disavow as our

own” (46). In that they force us to “recognize at least liminally our own familiarity or ‘at-homeness’ with these desires, these images produce *unheimlich*—uncanny—effects” (746). Saunders believes that the “subversive potential” of queer monsters is realized because they “play havoc with the binary pairs of repulsion/desire and terror/fascination,” which demonstrates “the proximate nature of such terms” (17). Judith Halberstam takes that a step further in claiming that, insofar as the monster inspires “fear of and desire for” the monster, it also inspires “fear of and desire for the possibly latent perversity lurking within” the viewer (13). Through the disruption of such binaries, the monster is uncannily brought too close to home. And Halberstam writes that “the postmodern monster is no longer the hideous other storming the gates of the human citadel, he has already disrupted the careful geography of human self and demon other,” he is “already inside—the house, the body, the head, the skin, the nation” (162).

Donald Wildmon, founder and head of the American Family Association, conceives of the ultimate danger of “looking casually” at such a proximate monster: “Acceptance or indifference to the homosexual movement will result in society’s destruction by allowing civil order to be redefined and by plummeting ourselves, our children and grandchildren into an age of godlessness” (qtd. in Edelman 16). Before queers protest the homophobic rhetoric, promising to support the gods of social structure by marrying and keeping our perversions in the privacy of our own homes, Lee Edelman asks, “dare we pause for a moment to acknowledge that Mr. Wildmon might be right—or, more important, that he *ought to be* right: that queerness *should* and *must* redefine such notions as ‘civil order’” (Edelman 16)? Saunders believes that images of “homosexual monsters can give us a way of affirming gay identity and of defying the call

to assimilate altogether *invisibly* into mainstream society,” but might we not ask why we should “assimilate” at all, even if *visibly* (Saunders 19)? Might we not claim the monstrous and perverse sexualities, and the negativity ascribed us by people like Wildmon? Edelman writes that “rather than rejecting...this ascription of negativity to the queer, we might...do better to consider accepting and even embracing it” (4).

In *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, José Esteban Muñoz presents disidentification as a queer strategy that neither buckles “under the pressures of dominant ideology (identification, assimilation)” nor attempts “to break free of its inescapable sphere (counteridentification, utopianism):” it is a third option that works on and against that ideology, “a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within” (11). It is an intersectional strategy of resistance that insists on a critical hermeneutics of “sexuality, race, class, gender, and other identity differentials” (99). Muñoz formulates the performative shape of disidentification:

To disidentify is to read oneself and one’s own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to ‘connect’ with the disidentifying subject. It is not to pick and choose what one takes out of an identification. It is not to willfully evacuate the politically dubious or shameful components within an identificatory locus. Rather, it is the reworking of those energies that do not elide the “harmful” or contradictory components of any identity. (12)

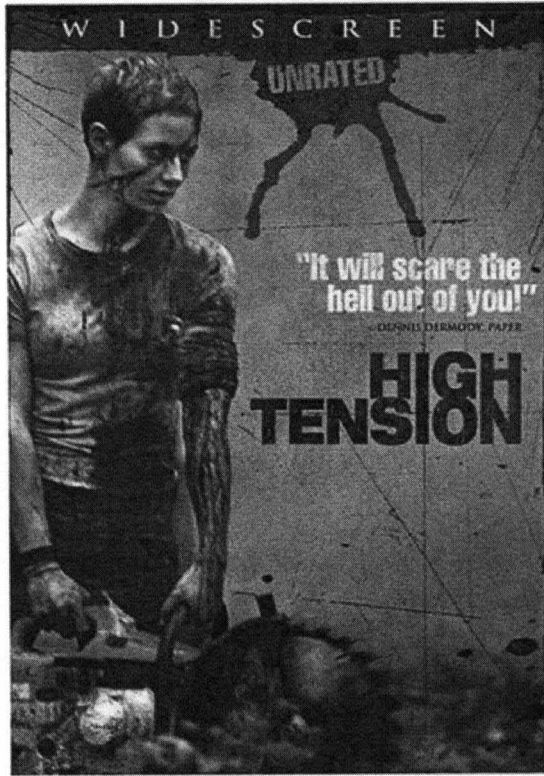
Disidentification is a political strategy which does not elide that which is perverse, toxic, or threatening about queer identity, but insists on them. It forces a critical hermeneutics not only on the binaries of attraction/repulsion, but on the binaries that are our governing

structures: male/female, heterosexual/homosexual, good/evil, hero/villain, normal/perverse, inner/outer, and self/other. Edelman claims that the “embrace of queer negativity” has no “positive social value; its value, instead, resides in its challenge to value as defined by the social, and thus in its radical challenge to the very value of the social itself” (6). Disidentification offers a strategy of resistance to the dominant ideology, a manner in which to claim queer negativity, a method to appropriate the subversive power of monstrosity, and a means by which to figure the radical threat to the social order.

In 1935's *Bride of Frankenstein*, the malignantly fey Dr. Pretorius stole to Frankenstein's room in the middle of the night. He praised Frankenstein's construction of the monster, and tempted him from his, as yet, unused bridal bed, out into the night to once again play non-reproductive creator, “without reckoning on God,” as the prologue to *Frankenstein* (1931) made clear. At the precipice of their “collaboration,” Dr. Pretorius raised his glass in a toast: “To a new world of gods and monsters!” While this new world might certainly be attractive—the hegemonic gods of the age mingling with their *visibly* assimilated monstrosities—might we not alter his toast to figure the powerful resistance that he himself envisioned: a world overrun by the “hideous progeny” of two men in an attic, fabulously sewing together pieces human, animal, and synthetic? Might we not dare to take up his queer vision: to disidentify, to claim that which is monstrous about us, to *be* the monsters Wildmon so feared, to figure as “marvelous, monumental manifestations of power” without reckoning on gods? To hell with the gods, here's to a world of monsters!

I propose that *High Tension* presents a monster, the likes of which has never been seen in the annals of film. The film is violently subversive, deeply queer, and monstrous

in every sense of the word. Although she wrote it with another film in mind, Halberstam's comment may serve us here: "the technology of monsters when channeled through a dangerous woman with a chain saw becomes a powerful and queer strategy for enabling and activating monstrosity as opposed to stamping it out" (143). *High Tension* offers a queer heroine that not only appropriates the "technology of monsters," but disidentifies completely, forcing the critical hermeneutics of a dangerous woman, a traditional heroine, and a psychotic lesbian channeled through a queer monster with a chain saw (Fig. 1). In this thesis, I will first consider the genre of film in which *High Tension* locates itself, and the constructions of the female therein, in order to understand the critical hermeneutics that such a disidentification could compel. Then I will reconstruct the film itself, so that its subversive potential can be best understood. Finally, I will show the profound effects of such subversion—the terrible threat to dominant conceptions that such a presentation of queer negativity launches.



I

On movie screens across the country in 1978, something strange occurred in a film which birthed, perhaps despite itself, a genre of horror that reveled in heavy breathing, gleaming blades, hulking stalkers, and so much flesh: the camera watched a couple on the couch, it walked in through the back door, it reached an arm into a drawer and pulled out a large knife, it walked up the stairs, it put on a mask, and it stabbed a nearly naked girl. *Halloween* was certainly not the first film to foreshorten the audience's perspective, using a camera that not only mimicked the spectatorial eye, but superseded it and provided locomotion and attendant appendages. The advertisements for *Lady in the Lake* (1947), filmed entirely from the first-person perspective, proclaimed to potential viewers, "You and Robert Montgomery solve a murder mystery together!" The rhetorical concept here is that by sharing the camera "eye" with the film's director and star, sharing the role of private dick, Philip Marlowe, the audience is allowed to "perform" the narrative. When the audience stops seeing stars and orients with the perspective of one, the spectator becomes a virtual member of the action. Of course, if the viewer does not feel particularly up to the task of being a shamus like Marlowe, the narrative is already complete and the viewer can simply follow along on a virtual ride. It is this last consideration that gives rise to such vehement derogation when the first-person perspective, which Carol J. Clover termed the *I-camera*, is utilized in the horror genre.

While the viewer may certainly want to do his or her civic duty by solving murder mysteries, perhaps even falling a little in love in the meantime, the moral and ethical

dilemma becomes quite different when the viewer is ensnared in the act of murder itself. In *Psycho* (1960), the camera alternates views of Norman peeping through the hole with keyhole shots of Marion undressing—oscillating between Norman and the audience as each and both, voyeur. When the killer sneaks up on the shower, the camera rapidly blinks between shots of the killer from Marion’s perspective and shots of the knife stabbing her as if the arm were rooted to the shoulder of the camera itself, or of our shoulder. Hitchcock utilizes this perspective intermittently, but it is a precise camera technique rather than an organizing principle of perspective. In 1974, the Canadian film *Black Christmas*, something of a proto-Slasher, utilized the I-camera completely for the killer. Here the above tagline might be paraphrased as, “You and a Giggling Psychopath stalk and kill sorority girls together!” Such a tagline might have had quite an impact, but *Black Christmas* was not as widely released as *Halloween*. When *Halloween* took the I-camera, added a mask, and switched holidays and venues, the reception was massive.

Operating on the rhetoric of the vicarious camera, *Halloween*’s initial scene assimilates the viewer’s eyes and kills as a virtual proxy in the scene described above. Going all the way back to Aristotle, our understandings of drama have included some aspect of vicariousness. Characters on stage can depict our own emotions, or emotions that we are not able to experience in our daily lives, in a context that allows their somewhat free expression. Then, perhaps the I-camera shortens the distance from stage emotions, offering us the virtual ability to kill with impunity or, perhaps more deviously, forcing us to virtually kill. It is an extension of the move in horror cinema from the classic films of the *Dracula* (1931) type, which pits us with Van Helsing against the vampire, to films like *Psycho* which carries the narrative alongside the killer, as there is

no doubt that Norman Bates, in both roles, is the star of the show. The presentation of Norman is sympathetic, but there remains the distance between him and the audience. The I-camera attempts to bridge that distance, enlisting identification instead of sympathy. If this conception sounds overly simplistic, it is simply because it is: nestled within it is the elementary structure of phenomenological orientation organized visually and conceived liberally—that is, if we could only know Norman’s point of view, walk in his shoes, see through his eyes, we could understand him, see that our cores were human. As such, we could know his plight and share in his hopes, dreams, and murderous rage. What this conception of vicarious orientation misses is the accompanying and often simultaneous aspect of disorientation involved in the I-camera—that is, the use of the I-camera itself as a mask, demonstrated in *Halloween*’s opening scene.

Although Judith Myers refers to Michael being “around somewhere,” in the bushes under the window in this case, the audience who is ensnared in the I-camera has not seen him. When the I-camera opens the drawer and removes the large knife, the camera purposely slips out of focus, distorting the arm shown. After the stabbing, the I-camera moves out the front door to the sidewalk and the father lifts the clown mask off of the camera. The camera switches from the I-camera to a position across the street, a shot that reveals the killer be Michael Myers, six-year old. Going beyond the shock of seeing the knife stab firsthand, as it were, in *Psycho*, this adds the shock of recognition—“You and a small child murder a naked teenager together!”—the particular subversion of that revelation was largely lost, however. Strategically delaying disclosure of a villain’s identity is nothing new (as any Scooby-Doo mystery might demonstrate), but ensnaring

the audience's perspective with an unknown killer in the project of killing teenagers rankled that great arbiter of American taste, Roger Ebert.

Ebert's particular depiction of the use of the I-camera resonated in the public consciousness, and his deprecatory voice has since haunted discussion of the genre. Ebert's article, "Why Movie Audiences Aren't Safe Anymore" carried the subtitle: "A directing ploy invites viewers to participate—with sinister results." Ebert claimed that audiences for films that followed *Halloween's* lead, like *Friday the 13th* (1980) or *Prom Night* (1980), were cheering the unseen killers behind the I-camera. Ebert writes that "when the camera takes a point of view, the audience is being directed to adopt the same point of view" (55). Based upon this punning logic, Ebert applies our earlier tagline ("You and a Psychopath kill teenagers") quite literally. His description of *Prom Night* is emblematic: "innocent people are stalked and killed by a faceless, usually unseen, unknown killer" and the "visual strategy" "places that killer's center of consciousness in the audience" (56). In the traditional horror film there is an obvious character to attach murder to—a *murderer*, if you will. In this construction, even though depraved acts are shown onscreen, the audience is merely voyeuristic: "We are not implicated" (56). But when the killers are not onscreen, or are "shadowy non-characters," then the films are not studies of villains, but instead are "about the *acts* of the villains," and the "very acts of killing become the protagonist" (56). For Ebert, "the lust to kill and rape becomes the true subject," and the true objects would become what he and Gene Siskel refer to as "Women in Danger" (56).

In a 1980 special edition of Siskel and Ebert's television show *Sneak Preview*, Ebert coined "Women in Danger" as a genre depicting women as "helpless victims" and

“as sport to be stabbed:” “these films hate women” (Women in Danger). Siskel believed that these films were made as a “primordial response” to the “women’s movement in America,” “men saying, ‘get back in your place, women’” (Women in Danger). Women are portrayed as “independent, as sexual, and as enjoying life,” and the killer kills females—therefore, the killer quashes female sexuality (Women in Danger). Siskel and Ebert constructed the genre selectively, and subsequently applied their general points to anything resembling a Slasher. This so-called genre included *Friday the 13th* (1980), *Prom Night* (1980), *Silent Screams* (1980), *Terror Train* (1980), *Don’t Answer the Phone* (1980), *The Boogeyman* (1980), *The Howling* (1981), and *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978).

Halloween escapes Ebert’s criticism, though it uses the I-camera, both because it has “artistry” and because Michael Myers is a “character” that is seen onscreen, meaning that he was “given an identity, an appearance, and a consistent pattern of behavior” (Ebert 56). Myers’s identity is cemented for Ebert because we are shown “a traumatic childhood experience that warps him” (Ebert 56). This allows Myers to be a traditional villain, contained on the screen with his deeds, which are apparently explained by the opening scene. This might appear to be illogical or disingenuous, especially when one considers that Michael is most certainly the one doing the warping in this scene, but do not be fooled—it is, as shown in this trite contrast: “while it is true that...*Prom Night* and *Terror Train* supply a rudimentary explanation for the behavior of the killer, that is really just a perfunctory plot twitch” (56). Although there is at least one woman menaced in each of the “Women in Danger” films, the unifying principles of Ebert and Siskel’s derision, female victimization and the I-camera, are not uniformly present. *The Boogeyman* is a revenge ghost story perpetrated on the son and daughter of an ex-

girlfriend, and it seems that neither critic had actually seen *The Howling*—they described the complex werewolf film as “a movie where a woman goes on vacation and is tortured by the locals” (*Women in Danger*). *Prom Night* and *Terror Train* are typical Slashers, but the latter film has an entirely male body count, while *Friday the 13th* and *Silent Screams* have female killers. *I Spit on Your Grave* is particularly strange here, considering that it is halved between a vicious rape of a woman and her brutal revenge—the tagline read: “This Woman has just chopped, broken and burned five men beyond recognition...but no jury in America would ever convict her!” That tagline portrays a woman taking out vigilante justice in blood, which establishes punishment for the horrible act of rape as going entirely outside the law in a way which would be understandable by any jury of her peers. Although *I Spit on Your Grave* is the centerpiece of Ebert’s so-called “genre” (it was the film-going experience that incited him to write “Why Audiences Aren’t Safe Anymore”), this film never uses the I-camera. Ebert’s derision stems from a very different source.

In his review of David Lynch’s *Blue Velvet* (1986), the source begins to shimmer beneath the surface of Ebert’s indignation. He complains that Lynch horribly mistreated his actors, especially Isabella Rossellini, and when Siskel challenges him for pitying a willing participant, Ebert explodes with the following:

It’s not how Isabella Rossellini reacts to the fact that she’s standing nude and humiliated on the lawn of the police captain’s house with lots of people watching. It’s how I react, and that’s painful to me, to see a woman treated like that. And I need to know that if I’m feeling that pain, it’s for a

reason that the movie has other than to simply cause pain to her.

(Rev. of *Blue Velvet*)

Bound up in this response is Ebert's discomfort at identifying with such an abject image, his dislike of ambiguity, and his utterly patronizing pity. At the end of "Why Movie Audiences Aren't Safe Any More," Ebert laments that horror movies used to be a way "to exorcise our demons" in a diversionary manner (56). In these golden years of Ebert's conception, "terrible things were happening all right—but to victims who were safely up there on the screen," but "now the terrible things are happening to women" (56). That is not haphazardly taken out of context—Ebert actually draws a line between victims and women, even when he has described the genre as depicting "young women as sport to be stabbed" (*Women in Danger*). For Ebert the demons that we might exorcise have changed, now "the demons are the women on the screen" (56). Ebert's intent with this phrasing is to show that the active viewer, as the vicarious killer, now seeks to expunge women or, as Siskel put it, to "put them back in their place" ("*Women in Danger*"). Ebert referred to the "nonspecific male killing force" (I-camera), even in films where the killers were actually women (*Friday the 13th*, *Silent Screams*) (56). But remember, women are not the victims: "now the 'victim' is the poor, put-upon, traumatized male in the audience"—in other words, Ebert himself (56). Ebert is traumatized, not because women are actually in danger, but because he sees himself as implicitly complicit through this I-camera technique—it is the very specific killing force of Roger Ebert that will brook no ambiguity.

Ebert's campaign had a variable effect on the public, as noted both by filmmakers in *Going to Pieces: the Rise and Fall of the Slasher Film* (2006), and by Ebert himself.

When Siskel and Ebert were particularly offended by a film, they would end episodes of *Sneak Previews* by listing the names of those involved in production and distribution, going so far as to demand that audiences send letters to Betsy Palmer (Mrs. Voorhees), to chastise her for acting in *Friday the 13th* (Going to Pieces). Their tirades ultimately resulted in the film *Silent Night, Deadly Night* (1984) being pulled from theaters (Going to Pieces). However, when Siskel stood outside the United Artists Theatre, describing *I Spit on Your Grave* to potential customers, he was mortified at the responses. Ebert describes the scene:

One couple with their small children listened to his description and then said they were going in anyway. "I'd like to know more on the subject," the woman said, an eight-year old clutching her hand. (Ebert 55)

Ebert does not bother to comment on this, implying that, even if one might go so terribly far as to applaud open-mindedness, we must think of the children. Despite Ebert and Siskel, Slashers were quite popular (*Friday the 13th* pulled in forty million dollars), but their derogation hung a cloud over the genre. It would never really recover from being immediately labeled as anti-feminist, patriarchal, and misogynistically vicious. Even when feminist Amy Holden-Jones directed *Slumber Party Massacre* (1982), in which a group of girls band together to fight back against the killer who menaces them (culminating with an overt symbolic castration), her film was lumped with the other misogynistic slashers and, worse, she was accused of being a traitor to her sex (Going to Pieces). Not limited to public opinion, Ebert's distillation of his "genre" found favor in academic criticism.

In her essay, “When the Woman Looks,” Linda Williams wrote that “we must be deeply indebted to Ebert for identifying and condemning the onslaught of these offensive films (and for doing so on public television)” (Williams 32). Williams’s essay examines the larger horror genre, finding affinity between women and monsters in their representation of the threat of “nonphallic sexuality” (24). Drawing from Stephen Heath’s work on the male gaze, Williams retains the psychoanalytic claim that “if the woman looks, the spectacle provokes, castration is in the air” (22). Williams takes Laura Mulvey’s claim that there only two types of male gaze, in cinema, to master this threat of castration: “a sadistic voyeurism which punishes or endangers the woman...and fetishistic overvaluation” (22). It is no surprise that Williams sides firmly with Ebert in castigating the I-camera—by this logic, simply by watching, the male is already punishing the woman, or turning her into a fantasy. The I-camera only extends his reach and virtual potency and, since it is normally attacking instead of peeping, the sadism reigns supreme. Williams accepts Ebert’s dubious claim that the “demons” that we exorcise “are the women on the screen,” and believed that he had not gone far enough (Ebert 56). Ebert’s “non-specific male killing force” vacates the traditional position of the monster which, according to Williams, forces the woman victim into its place: “she *is* the monster, her mutilated body is the only visible horror” (Williams 31). This narrowly defines film rhetoric as silent and tyrannical—since the audience’s only consciousness is what is onscreen, the monster must be there.

Films like *Cat People* (1942) and *The Thing from another World* (1951) kept their monsters out of the frame for as long as possible, their creators believing that the tension of leaving the monsters only in the imagination was paramount, and these films ratchet

real terror. Without this technique, *The Thing from another World* would turn into a silly alien film, considering that the vampiric vegetable monster looks like a stalk of asparagus for the fifteen seconds that it is actually shown, and we would never have the amazing pool scene from *Cat People*. Bob Clark, who directed the first real slasher implementation of the I-camera (*Black Christmas*), spoke of the desire to “play [his] killer as a subliminal character” (*Going to Pieces*). Clark wanted to involve the audience more directly in his film, and this I-camera provided a spectacular vantage. Like Mark’s weaponized camera with the sharpened tripod in *Peeping Tom* (1960), Clark’s I-camera occupies the linking point: “you are as closely identified with the effect of the murder as you can possibly be...both with the killer and those he stalks” (*Going to Pieces*). Ebert did not mind this point of identification in *Halloween*, because he believed the film was more “artistic” in its rendering of Michael Myers as a character, unlike the films he derides. However, Williams believes that this cannot “exonerate them from the charge of gratuitously punishing their female heroines,” because the “real issue...is that the *women* in these films are nonexistent fantasies” (Williams 32). For Williams, after Ebert, lack of characterization gives rise to a male fantasy wherein a “non-specific male killing force” attacks non-specific women on the screen. It does not exorcise these “demons,” it sadistically punishes them, “only to demonstrate how monstrous” they really are (Williams 32).

Perhaps Linda Williams did not watch many Slashers but, nevertheless, she missed the girl “who did not die: the survivor,” or, as Carol J. Clover would call her, the “Final Girl” (Clover 82). Ebert almost grasps this toward the end of his “Women in Danger” special, when he tries to explain how *Halloween* is exempt from his category—

he shows the scene toward the end where Laurie Strode hides in a closet and, because the camera is in the closet with her, Ebert grants that audience sympathies are on her side. This closet scene is pivotal and, for all Ebert's scorn, *Friday the 13th* mirrors this scene almost exactly, when Alice Hardy hides in the pantry from that killer. Provisionally granting Ebert's basic tenet, that "point of view = identification," Clover notes that, although we are linked with the killer early on, there is a shift "underwritten by story line as well as camera position," in not only *Halloween* but the vast slasher genre:

By the end, point of view is hers: we are in the closet with her, watching with her eyes the knife blade stab through the door; in the room with her as the killer breaks through the window and grabs at her; in the car with her as the killer stabs through the convertible top; and so on. (91)

Against Williams's claims of women lacking characterization, Clover finds that the Final Girl is "introduced at the beginning and is the only character to be developed in any psychological detail" (90). Where Ebert's I-camera kept him trained on demons, Laurie, Alice, and their resilient sisters prompted Clover's attempt to lift the genre out from under the considerable weight of Roger Ebert in her seminal essay, "Her Body, Himself."

Having broken free of the killer camera, Clover is able to study the genre with a more generous scope. Clover offers a typology of the genre, finding that it resembles folkloric tradition. It features "the free exchange of themes and motifs, the archetypal characters and situations, the accumulation of sequels, remakes, imitations"—as variations without any real original, individual films are renditions of clichés (70). She utilizes James B. Twitchell's "ethnological approach:" "you search for what is stable and repeated; you neglect what is 'artistic' and 'original'" (70). This is a vast improvement

over Ebert's slapdash "Women in Danger," in that Clover examines films based upon the presence of generic elements in the slasher's "cinematic formula with a twenty-six-year history," at the time of her writing (75). Clover first locates the formula in *Psycho*: "The killer is the psychotic product of a sick family but still recognizably human; the victim is a beautiful, sexually active woman; the location is not-home, at a Terrible Place; the weapon is something other than a gun" (72). *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* closely mirrors this, featuring Leatherface and his "sick family," a group of teenagers, the horribly decadent house in backwoods Texas that the group stumbles upon accidentally, and, of course, the chainsaw. In a pertinent variation, *Halloween* features the Terrible Places that are the houses in which the girls baby-sit. The terror of the unknown Bates Motel gives way to Camp Crystal Lake in *Friday the 13th*, the high school after hours in *Prom Night*, the hospital in *Halloween II* (1981), or the *House on Sorority Row* (1983). This terror is the intrusion upon slightly "not-home" havens, places where parents send their children.

Like Michael Myers's knife, silent weapons in these films are important elements in plots predicated on stealth, which guns would disrupt. Victims sometimes try to use them, "but like telephones, elevators, doorbells, and car engines, guns fail in the squeeze" (Clover 79). Considering chainsaws and power drills, silence is not the only issue, it is the powerful proximity of such weapons: "knives and needles, like teeth, beaks, fangs, and claws, are personal, extensions of the body that bring attacker and attacked into primitive, animalistic embrace" (79). That primeval clash is at the fierce core of the slasher: "unmediated by otherworldly fantasy, cover plot, bestial transformations, or civilized routine, slasher films present us in startlingly direct terms with a world in which

male and female are at desperate odds” (68). Both Ebert and Williams granted this point, but they only scratched its surface.

At first glance, the slasher’s battle of the sexes is the offensive onslaught of a killer, “recognizably human and distinctly male,” whose “fury is unmistakably sexual” and whose victims are typically women, “often sexually free and always young and beautiful” (Clover 88). And if audiences identify with film characters only along gender lines, we would end up with the offensive conclusion that the slasher film “authorizes impulses toward sexual violence in males and encourages impulses toward victimization in females” (89). In other words, we would end up with Ebert’s “Women in Danger” and “vicarious sex criminals” (Women in Danger). To be sure, male viewers looking for identificatory characters of the virtuous variety find the supply quite scarce: male friends of the girls are generally minor and “tend to die early,” authority figures like policemen and fathers “appear only long enough to demonstrate risible incomprehension and incompetence,” while last-ditch heroes and “would-be rescuers are not infrequently blown away for their efforts” (89). Of course there is the killer, but, as Ebert rightly saw, the killer is barely visible for the majority of the film. And when the male viewer finally does see him, he “hardly invites immediate or conscious empathy,” in that he is “commonly masked, fat, deformed, or dressed as a woman” (Clover 90). Here, we find the problems of Ebert’s strict gender identification—the male viewer can only be the sadistic killer, or be the victimized “poor, put-upon, traumatized male in the audience” (56). Whether it is the camera or his gender that restrains him from identifying with the female victims on the screen, it is, most certainly, the latter that impedes identification with the female victim-hero.

Clover returns to the oral tradition, finding in fairy tales a fluidity that allows cross-gender identification:

Our primary and acknowledged identification may be with the victim, the adumbration of our infantile fears and desires, our memory sense of ourselves as tiny and vulnerable in the face of the enormous Other; but the Other is also finally another part of ourself, the projection of our repressed infantile rage and desire (our blind drive to annihilate those toward whom we feel anger, to force satisfaction from those who stimulate us...) that we have had in the name of civilization to repudiate. We are both Red Riding Hood *and* the Wolf. (71)

This is precisely the fluid potential that Bob Clark earlier recognized in using the I-camera for *Black Christmas*, but did not achieve it. It did not have a Final Girl. Red Riding Hood is not just a tale for wayward little girls, or wolfish boys—Michael Myers and Laurie Strode function for both, constituting a “cinematic play of pronoun functions” (71). If the first part of the film wallows in its killer’s exploits, the latter portion closely follows the young woman “whom we see scream, stagger, fall, rise, and scream again” (82). Trapped by the camera, neither Williams nor Ebert could see the particularly empowering images of women “who not only fight back but do so with ferocity and even kill the killer on their own.” Laurie stabs Michael Myers (84). With the camera and narrative shifts, identification with this figure is not always exclusive, but “it adds up” and “in the closing sequence it is very close to absolute:” “when she downs the killer, we are triumphant” (90).

For Clover, this offers the (male) viewer a classic storyline of ‘tale and epic:’ with the Final Girl, the slasher becomes a “hero plot, revolving around the main character’s struggle with and eventual triumph over evil” (87). And, as tales and epics go, it is perhaps unsurprising that the slasher’s hero and villain retain something of the Yin and Yang of nemesism, forming an intimate binary like Arthur and Mordred, Sherlock Holmes and Professor Moriarty, or, perhaps, Batman and the Joker. Yet, if we factor in her sex, it becomes a bit more complex—Arthur and Morgan le Fay, or Batman and Catwoman. This latter binary, fraught with sex, is first depicted in *Halloween*.

As Laurie Strode walks up to the porch at the old Myers house, the camera moves inside the house to watch her through the window. As she puts the keys under the mat, the outline of a head and shoulder slide into the frame, watching her. The camera moves out to the sidewalk, watching her walk away, and again the shoulder slides into the frame. As Laurie walks away, she is singing to herself, as Michael Myers appears behind her, “I wish I had you all alone, just the two of us.” Michael is a pure stalker. The first image of the blank white face occurs as Michael stands outside her classroom, where the class is discussing *Destiny*. After the siren invitation, Michael pursues Laurie as an object of desire. Indeed, his trajectory in attacking Laurie takes the shape of a teenage coital ritual. As Lynda and Bob (the third and fourth victims, and the film’s only coital couple) had started at the front door, then moved to fondling on the couch, and then up to the parents’ bedroom for sex, so too does Michael follow Laurie to the door, grab at her on the couch, and then take the party upstairs. Responding to critics claims of punishing female sexuality, *Halloween*’s director, John Carpenter, responded that they had it backward: “the one girl who is the most sexually uptight just keeps stabbing this guy with a long

knife”—Laurie triumphs “not because she’s a virgin, but because all that repressed energy starts coming out” (qtd. in Clover 94). For Carpenter, the equalizer that allows the Final Girl to stand against the killer is their shared “sexual repression” (qtd. in Clover 94). The relationship becomes a violently sexual tête-à-tête, a highly erotic dance. However, Clover believes that their link goes beyond the sexual and into shared gender qualities, for, in the slasher world, “male and female are at desperate odds,” but “masculinity and femininity are more states of mind than body” (68).

Clover writes that, although the killer’s “phallic purpose...is unmistakable [sic],” with his thrusting long knives into young women, the killer’s “masculinity is severely qualified: he ranges from the virginal or sexually inert to the transvestite or transsexual, is spiritually divided (‘the mother half of his mind’), or even equipped with vulva and vagina” (92). Like Williams’s classic monsters, the slasher killers represent the “power and potency of a *non-phallic* sexuality” (92). The femininity of Clover’s Final Girl is likewise compromised: “her smartness, gravity, competence in mechanical and other practical matter, and sexual reluctance set her apart the other girls” (86). She is “boyish, in a word” (86). Based upon Clover’s folk tradition, “those who save themselves are male, and those who are saved by others are female” (103). Heroines may undergo “agonizing trials” but they must be “saved by someone else,” like the driver who spirits Sally Hardesty out of the teeth of Leatherface’s chainsaw at the end of *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (103). A hero, however, “rises to the occasion and defeats the adversary with his own wit and hands:” therefore, when the Final Girl “becomes her own savior, she becomes a hero” (103). Clover’s best example of this is this is the final scene from *Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* (1986), in which the Final Girl, Stretch, escapes from the Sawyer

family's labyrinth and scrambles up a fake mountain pursued by a killer, Chop Top. She finds a chainsaw of her own, slashes Chop Top's abdomen open and tosses him off the cliff. Clover praises the progressive "willingness of one immensely popular genre to re-represent the hero as an anatomical female" (104).

The male viewer is thus offered a shorter bridge to an identificatory outlet. He may submit to what Clover calls being *feminized*: "the Final Girl is the designated victim, the incorporation of the audience, the slashing, ripping, and tearing of whose body will cause us to flinch and scream out in our seats" (103). But the viewer's masculinity must be "recuperated" and, where *Psycho* and others accomplish this by bringing in late "representatives of the masculine order," the slasher does it "by regendering the woman" (103). In the end, the male viewer is "masculinized" by the figure through which he was earlier "feminized" (103). Thus, in the final clash, where the killer's "incipient femininity is...completed (castration)," the Final Girl's "incipient masculinity is...realized (phallicization)" (95). Where Leatherface's chainsaw had been the phallic weapon in the first *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, Stretch takes up the same weapon to symbolically castrate Chop Top. As the final scene of the first film ended with Leatherface swinging the chainsaw in a wild and violent expression of frustration (the heroine having just escaped), the sequel showed Stretch doing the exact same chainsaw dance after successfully expelling her attacker with her newfound phallus. Stretch's dance reminds us that she has acquitted herself "like a man," while being anatomically female (Clover 102). The grand result of this is a "loosening of the categories, or at least of the equation of sex=gender" (106). If Clover escaped the "non-specific male killing force," she could

not escape the non-specific male viewer, and her theory capitulates to that figure in ways that undercut her progressive potential.

Isabel Cristina Pinedo challenges Clover's claim that "smartness, gravity, competence, and the ability to fight are only prerogatives of the masculine" (Pinedo 82). For Clover, the Final Girl phallicizes herself when "she stops screaming, looks at the killer, and reaches for the knife (scalpel, gun, machete, hanger, knitting needle, chainsaw)" (Clover 93). In "[addressing] the killer on his own terms," she ascends to masculinity (93). Pinedo describes the Final Girl's activity a bit differently:

Not only does she fashion weapons, the surviving female runs, screams, cries out for help, dodges blows, negotiates, and fights back with anything at her disposal. In other words, she employs the range of strategies which sociologists Pauline Bart and Patricia O'Brien (1984) argue are most effective in avoiding rape. (77)

These are methods of active self-defense, which are known for their effective deployment by women—they are not male appropriations. Clover's reading is grounded in a heteronormative psychoanalytic model of sexual difference: "what varies is the active (masculine) or passive (feminine) character of heterosexual desire" (Pinedo 83). In this discourse, "active desire and aggression" can only be masculine, so "feminine agency is an oxymoron" (82). Aggression and violence can only be gendered male: the Final Girl becomes a "boy in drag," and Clover "resituates female viewers who identify with the (for once) female agent of violence as male-identified" (83).

In order to elucidate just what Clover has lost, we must return to Camp Crystal Lake. In her "ethnological approach," Clover bowls over *Friday the 13th*'s female killer

as “something of an anomaly” that was “not sustained in the sequels” (77). Pinedo associates this particular “female psychotic” with what Barbara Creed considers the castrating figure of the abject “monstrous-feminine” (80). Creed’s psychoanalytic approach is based upon Freud’s interpretation of the myth of Medusa, where “Medusa’s head takes the place of a representation of the female genitals” (qtd. in Creed 36). Thus, the narrative of sexual difference presents “female sexuality as a difference which is grounded in monstrosity and which invokes castration anxiety in the male spectator” (Creed 36). Women are not only terrifying to men because men perceive them as castrated, but because they are also perceived to be “castrating” (Pinedo 80). Creed believed that the classic horror film offered a “purification of the abject,” the “monstrous-feminine” in this case, in that it “brings about a confrontation with the abject...in order, finally, to eject the abject and redraw the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman” (Creed 46). This is the image of so many “happy endings” in horror: *Psycho* presented the abject in the gender-halved Norman Bates in order to “eject” him and place him firmly in the boundaries of prison or the asylum. Castration anxiety is scarily evoked, and then the male problem is solved by the purge of the abject. The slasher film, however, “works to keep castration anxiety alive in male viewers through the dual characterization of woman as castrated victim and castrating heroine” (Pinedo 80). This moves beyond the heroine, for in *Friday the 13th*, there is nothing but castration anxiety: despite Ebert’s insistence on the “non-specific male killing force,” all violence in the film is perpetrated by women. If Mrs. Voorhees turns her victims into castration images, she herself is quite distinctly beheaded like Medusa, but at the hands of Alice Hardy.

Pinedo rightly notes that “the specter of the lesbian” lurks within both the “female psychotic” and the “boy in drag,” which opens onto the manifold soothing of the male ego (82). The Final Girl becomes a woman who is “not really a woman,” and Lynda Hart finds that the lesbian has historically been that repository category. In her study, *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression*, Hart traces representations of the lesbian from the eighteenth-century “female invert,” whose “*aggressiveness* was what marked her as deviant and therefore dangerous, *not* her object choice” (Hart 9, author’s emphasis). She references George Chauncey Jr. in noting an older definition of the female homosexual even as “a woman who ‘often wants to possess the male and not to be possessed by him,’ or a woman for whom ‘orgasm is often only possible in the superior position’” (qtd. in Hart 10). The danger of this particular threat is within any woman who would dare usurp the male prerogative, but aggression allows the construction of the lesbian as a precautionary “body” maintained “*outside* the category of women” (Hart 25). Hart quotes Jeffner Allen at length:

The heterosexual virtue that dictates what is a woman also prescribes *what is violence*. Violence is defended as the right to limit life and take life that is exercised by men, for men and against women. A woman, by definition, is not violent, and if violent, a female is not a woman. (qtd. in Hart 142)

The female who would use violence is then, as Christine Coffmann notes, pathologized. In Lacan’s presentation of psychosis, Coffmann finds that “either one accept paternal law and ‘sexual difference’ or be intelligible only as mad” (4). She is a particular and, thus, isolable figure, rather than a widespread threat among all women. And, as isolable, she is, much like Creed’s monsters of classic horror, expellable.

The male viewer cannot but be stroked by these conceptions. Clover's "phallicization" of the Final Girl and the "castration" of the killer functions even in *Friday the 13th*, where Alice and Mrs. Voorhees replay Perseus and Medusa. When the threat of the female psychotic rears its head, the heteronormative matrix lops it off with the "boy in drag's" newly held phallus. The killer is "a non-specific male killing force," even if he is a she; the Final Girl is really a boy, or a lesbian, who is "not even an aberration of femininity, but rather a man, albeit problematically in a woman's body" (Hart 30). And even if, daresay, a woman were to kill, were to wield violence like Mrs. Voorhees, the castrating "monstrous-feminine" is purged in mythic fashion. No worries lads.

If we are to finally break from the dominant discourse's vernacular of heteronormativity, with *High Tension*, we must ask the purpose, what the stakes are. For Pinedo's female audience, she marks the potential for feminist discourse: "consider how the genre violates the taboo against women wielding violence," how it "supplies excessive narrative justification" for the Final Girl "to commit and the audience to enjoy the violence," and how it sets it in her "capable hands" as she becomes "a powerful source of identification and pleasure for female viewers" (84). If the male viewer's terror of female violence brings up castration anxiety even in the hands of the "masculinized" Final Girl, what fresh horror could a truly "monstrous-feminine," a monstrous queer incite in an audience comfortably couched in heteronormativity? *High Tension* offers just such a terrifying possibility.

We can begin to see the potential, with a review of the press materials prior to its release—that is, the film trailer and posters. Trailers are, of course, teasers intended to

excite the viewer into seeing the film and, as such, tend to present images and sequences of the film that are both simple to understand and emblematic of the film. There are certainly exceptions to this standard, but *High Tension*'s trailer functions in precisely this capacity. It begins with a short-haired blonde and a long-haired brunette driving to the latter's old farmhouse in the country, to the sounds of a plaintive piano. The blonde is introduced to the father as Marie, and is shown settling into the upper story guest room. Then a van pulls up and a man, his face hidden under a baseball cap, rings the doorbell. Marie looks out her window in time to see the man slash the father's face as he opens the door. The piano speeds up a bit and sequences are shorter: Marie is scared; she wipes traces of herself from the guest room; the Killer looks around the seemingly unused guest room; she is hiding under the bed; the Killer leaves. Then the piano speeds up more: Marie grabs a knife; she hides in the open back of his van ready to attack. The piano becomes feverish and it is only flashed images now: the Killer shuts the van door on her; an axe swings; a car flips; Marie is shown wide-eyed and terrified; the brunette runs, in nightclothes covered in blood; a small boy crawls among tall grass. The last image is the most poignant: Marie is standing, cut and bloodied, holding a ferociously-toothed giant circular saw. The tropes here are blatant—the faceless Killer and the Final Girl who would kill him. She is scared, she hides, then she arms herself, and then she *really* arms herself. This is a slasher trailer *par excellence*, in that it presents the central conflict of the genre so clearly in its Killer and Final Girl. The powerful Final Girl image is carried into interesting extremes when we compare the press posters with others of the genre.

We may compare the first *High Tension* (Fig. 2) poster with a predecessor. The female in the *Prom Night* poster (Fig. 3) is not only dangling upside down, limp and

helpless, but she is completely contained by the killer's weapon: a jagged sliver of mirror, reflecting the viewer in the position of the helpless young woman. It is a threat of complete mastery, the shadowy killer's eyes staring at mere victims. The *High Tension* poster subverts this conception. It is not a masked killer that daringly stares out at the viewer, but the daunting and buff heroine, her shirt stained with her own battle wounds, brandishing a brutal post wrapped with barbed wire, from which the blood of her enemies drips onto the poster itself. With close-cropped hair, lean face and muscle, an offset stance accentuating her hips, shoulders back, breasts forward, with the forward leg preparing a step for another strike: she is a potent and audacious image of the Final girl's strength and power.

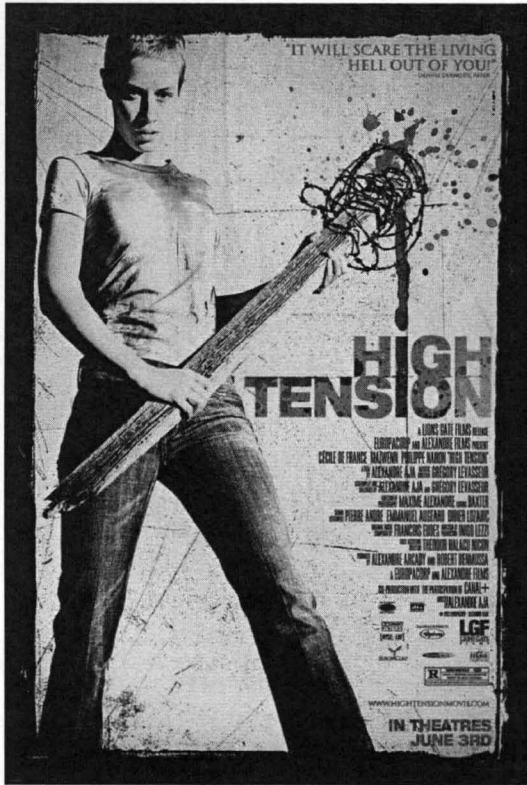
The second *High Tension* poster (Fig. 4) offers a very different presentation of the same character. She sits alone, on a damp floor, in a kind of nowhere space. Curled into a sitting fetal position, barefoot and pants-less, she is cowering and showing quite a bit of leg. This is nothing new for Slashers—nubile flesh has always been the choicest victim. However, the image is two-fold. Holding the kitchen knife between her knees, it echoes Michael Myers's phallic weapon in *Halloween*. Her hands are not flexed on the weapon, no white-knuckled grip of fear.

In a half-darkened and half-lit liminal space, on a ground moistened but firm, she sits, waiting. Her nude legs and feet offer a sensual view of her feminine body, an erotic vulnerability. But the knife held between her legs presents, by its hermeneutic relation to *Halloween*, a resonant image of murderous masculinity. In the middle of nowhere, she sits—divided, by the lighting, into a palely-white half and a half made up of fiery orange and night-black. Her stare off-frame is more focused than in Fig. 2, daring something to

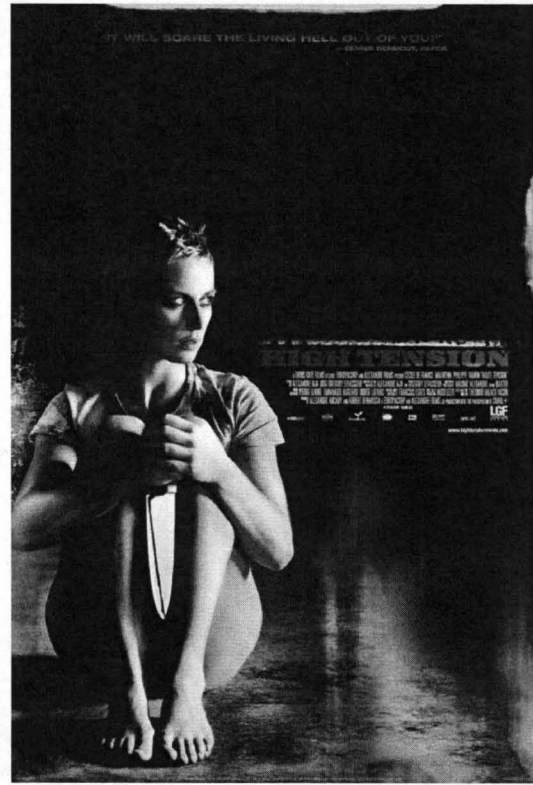
arise, desiring something, be it enemy or lover. With her pants off and a knife in her hands, she's quite prepared for sex or battle, and all that falls in between. Her brazen stare and demeanor of patient calm, tucked in the fetal position, depicts not the terrified reversion to the comfort of the womb, but rather the quietly ticking bomb of something strange and monstrous waiting to be born. It is a conflicting image, set on a liminal stage, depicting the webbed intersection of gender, desire, vulnerability, and homicide. It does not simply straddle binaries, it mounts them, disorienting the viewer and foreshadowing the queerness to come.

In light of this monstrosity, we can refigure the first poster against a more recent example of slasher imagery. In the so-called genre "reboots" of recent years, like *Friday the 13th* (2009), filmmakers have taken the iconic images of their killers and granted them mythic stature (Fig. 5). Jason stands alone in a dark forest, with his weapon held firmly at the ready, while the text neatly welcomes the viewer to Crystal Lake. The chromatic coloration presents Jason as some dormant totem waiting to be reborn in murderous life. There is something rather sterile about the image and, in light of the rather bad film itself, something not terribly frightening—the old terrible gods having become Tiki lawn ornaments. In figure 2, however, the heroine approximates the mythic stance, but imbues it with blood, as it were. There is a ferocity in it that threatens to step off the poster and bash the viewer across the face. The adamant power in this image is that of monstrosity—whatever she is, she embodies violence and her captivating stare is aimed directly at you.

2



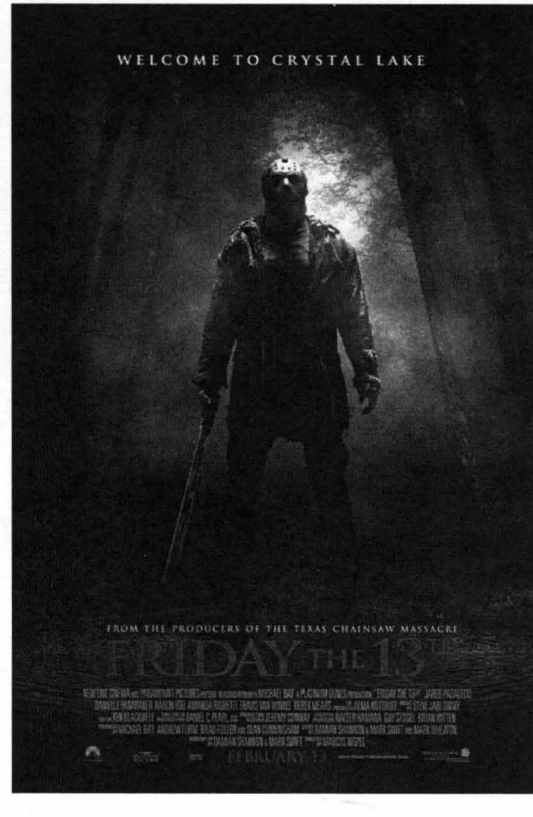
4



3



5



II

As soon as *High Tension* begins, it is obvious that there is something quite different about our heroine. In a hospital room somewhere in Southern France, the camera pans slowly over the feet, the hands, around to the wounds stitched, stapled, and sutured on her back, up to her head, the close-cropped hair signaling that this is the girl from the posters, as she whispers over and over “I won’t let anyone come between us anymore.” As a camera lens appears in front of her, she asks in a tired but unwavering voice “Are they recording?” Horribly scarred but unafraid, she has not only lasted this far but, by her chant, has apparently somehow protected an intimate relationship. When the frame moves to her running, wounded and barefoot through a dark forest, calling up images of abductees and rape victims, she becomes lodged firmly in the mind as an archetypal survivor—she is signaled as the Final Girl mere moments into the film. The printed scroll that runs across the back of her shirt, seen in the woods, even reads *Audaces Solum*, “Only the Brave.”

The scene shifts to a car ride, where our heroine is waking up (the previous scene having been a dream). She is seen for the first time in proper lighting, and the image is that of a stereotypical lesbian: asymmetrical and multiple earrings, a buff muscle profile, a very strong jaw, and dyed-blond frosted hair in the close-cropped fashion of Joan of Arc—her firm form mitigated by large doe-like eyes and a soft voice. Her compatriot, Alex, has long black hair, a wide smile, and ice-blue eyes. The dynamic between the two is playful, but with obvious undertones, as Marie chastises Alex for leaving her alone at a

party while she ran off with some guy. The two volley playful curses, and sing together at the top of their lungs a bubbling Italian pop song, "Sarà perché ti amo" by Ricchi e Poveri, which translates as "It's because I love you." Following after this scene of pleasant sexual tension between friends, is the equally pleasant, almost pastoral image of Alex's family waiting for her to arrive at their rustic country home. The mother is hanging up clean white laundry on a clothesline, while little six-year old Tom, dressed in a cowboy costume complete with fake pistol and badge, romps among the tall grass with the family dog. He and his mother even playfully argue about bath-time.

Immediately juxtaposed with these twin scenes of congenial gaiety, the audience is presented with the figure referred to only as *Le Teuer*, "The Killer," in the credits. Out amongst the cornfields surrounding the house, an old rusty van is rocking. The driver, face covered by a low baseball cap, appears to be receiving fellatio below the steering wheel, as he grunts in piggish peals of pleasure. With a sigh of completion, he holds his arm out the window and drops a bloody female head onto the ground. An image at first unsettling becomes depraved: not only is this figure instantly known as a killer and a rapist but he is also a necrophiliac that defiles the dead face of his victim. Further, although this might not be immediately noticeable, the head on the ground does not have her mouth open, as it were, to receive a penis. It is conceivable that *Le Teuer* locked up on his way out, but the head is not used with the limits of an ordered orifice, like a mouth for fellatio, but rather as a sexual receptacle to be used in whatever manner he wishes: a killer with complete control over his victim literally skull-fucks her until he is satiated, long after she has expired. *Le Teuer* proffers an image of the heterosexual killer as a consummate sexual and homicidal sadist.

The scene shifts back to a tender moment in the car, as Marie watches a sleeping Alex while a woman on the radio is singing accompaniment for her gaze: “I can’t see you face to face/ but someday you’ll be with me I know.” The closeted Marie cannot show her real desire for Alex, but there is hope. They arrive at the Alex’s farmhouse, where her father is introduced to Marie, remarking that it is nice to see her in person, rather than just the photo of her and Alex over the fireplace, for Marie is “part of the furniture.” Alex explains that the family has only lived in the house for a few months, and Marie asks if they “had any problems with the neighbors.” Alex responds, “You mean the Rednecks? Yeah. They thought my parents were hippies here to make goat cheese, but things are fine now.” In a house four kilometers off the main road, in sparsely populated Southern France, this is an isolated scene much like that in *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, complete with the threat of “Rednecks”—yet, at the same time, it is not one of Clover’s “Terrible Places” but Alex’s own home.

After, the relationship between the two girls is fleshed out. Alex is chasing after a man, but needs to “work on [her] ass.” Marie quietly attempts to flirt, “if you do salsa, I’ll go with you.” Alex avoids an answer, instead posing the heterosexual demand: whether Marie is “finally going to take the plunge,” or else suffer the ignominious fate of ending up alone. Marie is defensive, “I’m not a slut like you,” but Alex insists that she is just “too scared.” To escape, Marie steps out to smoke. Looking up at the house shortly thereafter, she finds a clear view of Alex, naked and beautiful in the shower. After going up to the guest room, tucked away in the attic, Marie begins to masturbate. If the homosexual tones alienate heterosexual viewers, the cute, charming, soft-spoken, and quite closeted Marie is obviously our closest point of identification. And it is not

homosexual intercourse, but quiet unrequited love, and she even keeps all of her clothes on. Immediately, as if called by some homophobic Bat-signal of lesbian desire, *Le Teuer*, perhaps one of those “Rednecks,” appears on the dirt drive. The camera slinks around the house to catalogue the unsuspecting targets: father at work in the office, mother in bed, little brother Tom sleeping in his cowboy outfit, Alex sleeping with earplugs in, and Marie, seemingly bringing the van ever closer as her movements become more feverishly pleasurable. At the moment of orgasm, the doorbell rings.

What follows is one of the most intense bloodbaths in the genre, made more so by its ferocity. *Le Teuer* wields not a knife, not a machete, not a chainsaw, but a straight-razor. He decapitates the father with a cabinet, slices deep into the mother’s throat and carves off her hand. Amid the spraying blood, the only sounds emanating from him are the squeak of his leather boots, the heavy breathing, and the scraping metal sound as he wipes his razor off on his coveralls. Marie, successfully eluding him in the nearly pristine guest room, maneuvers silently around the house trying to surreptitiously call the police. Of course the killer cut the phone lines, but this is not a girl who simply hides, many times she is merely a hair’s breadth from the killer, and she must watch in horror from the closet as the mother is carved up. *Le Teuer* cuts deep into her throat with his razor, from ear to ear, leaving her another mouth that gasps and bleeds thick black blood. He slips in on Alex, still earplugged, and chains her, while the camera stays with Marie. Both she and we can only cringe at the horrible and unexplained noises (many viewers simply assume that Alex is raped here). *Le Teuer* then follows little Tom, shouting for his mother as he crawls through the cornfield. And as a shotgun blasts, muzzle flash lights the night sky, and we are given to understand that he has shot the poor boy.

Alex is his victim, his abductee, his object of desire and abject use. *Le Teuer* devastatingly isolates his object. The realism of the gore coupled with the unbearable tension of the pacing is pushed over the top by the calm, silent, workmanlike viciousness of the killer. More than all of the gruesome realism, *Le Teuer* kills a child, in what a *New York Times* review called “a decadent and unnecessary flourish” (Dargis). What these killings, including the child’s, achieve is that Alex is cut off from all normal means of protection. Her earplugs indicate the complete security in her most vulnerable time of sleep. A family house, tucked safely into the country, can be assaulted. The paternal protection is overrun, the mother is brutally killed and dismembered, and the brother costume-playing at being a hero is hunted down and shot while crawling like an infant.

Le Teuer puts Alex, bound and gagged, in the back of the van, while our heroine ran into the kitchen for a weapon (knife), and slipped silently into the truck, waiting for her moment to shine. Before leaving, *Le Teuer* takes a small trophy—passing over the photo of Marie and Alex on the fireplace, he chooses a photo of a birthday party, cuts Alex’s face out, and takes it to his van. He does not notice Marie in the back, and we see why as he kisses Alex’s cutout photo and attaches it to his rearview mirror, which is filled with ten or so photos of other girls. If disgust at the murders shown was lacking, the exponential increase of victims surely helps.

The van shortly stops at a gas station, and Marie escapes from the back to again call the Police. She avoids *Le Teuer* in sneaking into the station and attempting to get help from the lone attendant, but the killer is close behind her and she must hide. The attendant tries to distract *Le Teuer*, but the killer notices something is amiss and brutally axes him in the chest. In a harrowing scene, Marie must hide in bathroom stall while *Le*

Teuer searches the station, but again, he does not find her. She breathes a sigh of relief, but *Le Teuer* leaves the gas station with Alex. Marie finally succeeds in calling the Police, but as she does not know where she is, they are utterly ineffectual. With no help coming, Marie takes the dead man's car in pursuit.

This is the turning point where Marie moves into the highest echelon of Carol Clover's Final Girl. Clover wrote that, at the moment the Final Girl "becomes her own savior, she becomes a hero" (103). Thus, she described the slasher's plot as a "hero plot, revolving around the main character's struggle with and eventual triumph over evil" (87). But Clover's Final Girls, like Laurie Strode and Stretch, survived until their fight with evil, defeated it, and lived to tell the tale. Marie has survived thus far in the film by her wit and stealth, but at the moment that she becomes more than "her own savior" and bravely sets off to save the object of her love, she and takes on the mantle of the mythic White Knight. *Audaces Solum*, indeed—printed in a scroll across the back of her shirt, like a credo on a coat of arms, or motto on a battle flag. The clerk's car is, fittingly, a Ford Mustang, and she even takes the shiny chrome pistol from under the counter. Audience sympathies might have sat elsewhere in the beginning, her sexuality might have deterred, but her selfless act is chivalric valor. Audience identification with Clover's "anatomical female" hero, has been usurped and orientation lies with the lesbian on a knight's quest to save a beloved damsel from a horrific ogre (104). If that liberal fantasy is too airy, it sits right on top of the gritty drive of a vengeful vigilante. Viewers shocked at the brutality, angry for the murder of the precious child, sickened with the thought of beautiful Alex in the hands of this perverse sadist—to cheer Marie is to root for love,

fantasy, and justice all at once. The viewer already knows that she survives, and it is a race through a darkened forest toward a ferocious clash.

Le Teuer has apparently known about Marie all along, having taken the bullets from her gun, and he forces Marie's car off the road. After a terrible crash, Marie is bleeding heavily from her bicep, face, and scalp, while picking up the resilient limp (a trope that at least goes back to *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*). The two descend upon a dilapidated greenhouse, and if the previous offenses were not enough, the audience now has its heroine knocked from her horse. The brazen female image from Fig. 1 arrives in all her glory, complete with the barbed post, a weapon showing equal parts resourcefulness, bravery, and medieval Mace. *Le Teuer* initially outsmarts her, choking her to the ground with the plastic walls of the greenhouse. As she shudders to regain breath, he traces the razor blade over the navel and ear piercings, highlighting the lesbian symbols. He lewdly inserts his filthy fingers in her mouth, making the same noises he had earlier when chaining up Alex off-camera, and begs the unspoken question of our lesbian heroine: "What do you want from Alex? She turn you on? She turns me on." Marie reverses the positions by knocking him in the temple with a rock.

Swinging her barbed club, Marie grunts and screams, smashing his face and spraying blood across the plastic as he falls on his back, with the plastic falling to cover his face. She straddles his lap, bringing down the wooden post again and again, growing louder, more feverish. The editing here is extremely fast and sharp, exactly like that in the shower scene from *Psycho*. Marie's noises rise in pitch as she pounds his face into a meaty pulp in a plastic bag. Her hips rise and fall, swinging her weapon with force and momentum. She puts the club down, lifting the plastic on his face like the most gruesome

of wedding veils, listening for breath. He gets hands on her throat but she tightens the plastic on his neck, forcing the life out of him in squeals of rage. When *Le Teuer*'s hand falls lifeless, Marie tilts her head back, shaking, and lets out a sound that is victory yell and orgasmic apogee.

As Clover wrote, our identification with the Final Girl “in the closing sequence it is very close to absolute:” “when she downs the killer, we are triumphant” (90). In this scene, Marie is an epitomic heroine, and not just for Clover's hobbled Final Girl. There is absolutely no question that *High Tension* has, up to this point, supplied “excessive narrative justification” for Pinedo's taboo-breaking female heroine “to commit” and for “the audience to enjoy the violence” (84). *High Tension* sets *Le Teuer* as so diametrically opposed to love, the family, civilization, and life as we know it. As Wesley Morris wrote in a review for *The Boston Globe*, “You just want justice, and once Marie gets her hand on a piece of wood wrapped in barbed wire, the movie is talking to the sick freak in some of us” (Morris). Marie's is the victory of good over evil, the just smiting of the wicked, a dragon slain, a love saved—“another kind of love but a love like [ours] nonetheless” (Edelman 16). If the Final Girl offers “a powerful source of identification and pleasure for” Pinedo's “female viewers,” Marie is also a butch, closeted lesbian Galahad, finally opening the door for good, clean, politically correct lesbian identification (Pinedo 84). In *High Tension*, we have a film showing the commitment, through sickness and health, torture and slaughter, that a lesbian is capable of proving for her partner. Her mettle tested in the very fires of masculine passion, the lesbian white knight rises, dripping in the blood of her enemies, to take both her seat at the round table and the hand of the king's daughter.

A very liberal pat on the back for anyone who got this far in the film, but in the words of one reviewer, “to see this movie all the way to the end, you're going to need a miner's helmet” (Thomson). In an audacious affront, *High Tension* pounds a barbed post into all that is logical, coherent, and intelligible. The bumbling Gendarme, making their first and only appearance in the film (a *deus ex machina* in both the conventional and subversive sense of that pronoun), find the gas station with the dead man and play back the security footage showing Marie, herself, axing the attendant, tilting her head back in ecstasy and staring provocatively into the security camera.

As Marie goes to collect her bride, the viewer is given a moment's breath to consider the implications of such a revelation. As she unchains Alex, who resists violently, yelling “You murderer, you murdered my family!” Marie is shown, in quick bright flashbacks, grinning as she knocked off daddy's head, hunched like a succubus over mommy as she carved her up, and holding a shotgun barrel about four inches from tiny Tom and firing. Marie and Alex argue about the obvious for a few moments—giving the audience a moment to collect their bearings and work out the ramifications of the twist before starting up again.

III

As I mentioned in the opening section, Michael Moon writes that merely showing an audience “powerful images of ostensibly perverse desires and fantasies [disorients] our currently prevailing assumptions” about sexual orientation (our own and otherwise), “by bringing home to us the shapes of desires and fantasies that we ordinarily disavow as our own” (746). Forcing us to “recognize at least liminally our own familiarity or ‘at-homeness’ with these desires,” the images engender uncanny effects (746). In delaying the twist so long, *High Tension* allows Marie to bloom in front of the audience in the nearest “at-homeness” possible for foreign desires. But ripping the fantasy out at the roots at the shared moment of triumph creates the wreckage of conceptions and audience orientation that Moon calls “sexual disorientation,”

which denotes the position of reader- or viewer-subjects at least temporarily dislocated from what they consider their ‘home’ sexual orientation and ‘disorientingly’ circulated through a number of different positions on the wheel of ‘perversions,’ positions which render moot or irrelevant our current basic ‘orienting’ distinction, homo/heterosexual.

(746)

While audiences might have allied themselves with the lesbian protagonist, shared her perspective insofar as she resembled the good and conventional heterosexual hero(ine), violently combining her with the sexually perverse, heterosexual family murderer dislocates the viewer-subject not just in terms of that single binary, but in ideological,

political, and sexual orientations. In presenting *Le Teuer* and Marie as so utterly opposed, as ogre and white knight, the film even disrupts the most entrenched conceptions of heroism and villainy. Marie presents chivalry as homosexual, while *Le Teuer* is relatively unsurprising in his evil, being male and heterosexual. However, the depths of depravity featured in this evil serve to solidify the dichotomy of his darkness and her light.

Violently tearing the white knight from the pedestal and slinging her into the depths of monstrosity shatters conceptions of either, as the very light and the very dark inhabit the same body. The viewer is circulated through orientation with the heroine, with the child-killer, with the gay lover, and with the skull-fucker. On top of that, whatever liberal humanist position could have been occupied around the time that the viewer oriented with the triumphant white knight rather becomes guilt—subversion of self-congratulatory stances on inclusion and acceptance of others that act just like one’s fantasmatic images.

Viewers who had found a kindred heroine, who had welcomed her, who had exulted at her triumph, caught a blow from that barbed post. Most viewers and reviewers simply rejected the film’s twist. Wesley Morris was content to simply write it off as “narratively dumb” (Morris). In his emphatically “thumbs down” review of *High Tension*, Roger Ebert said, “the movie doesn’t work because it’s impossible. It’s just one scene after another that’s impossible, and the movie doesn’t even try to explain how these things could happen. So it means that they’re just messing with us, and *I don’t like to be messed with*” (my emphasis). Disoriented, guilty, victimized—Roger Ebert rejects the film’s last reel wholesale. Ebert’s motivations have always needed some parsing out, but let us take him at his word for a moment. What if *High Tension* were to end here, at the end of the line for linear narrative?

We would be left with a portrait of lesbians as the murderous and inhuman monsters that prey on rural families and children. In short, we would have a wholly traditional depiction of a particular type of the “monstrous-feminine”—that is, the “psychotic lesbian.” Conventional psychoanalysis would allow us to conceive *Le Teuer* as the metaphorical representation of Marie’s desire. The instance of *Le Teuer* and the disembodied head was sandwiched in between Marie singing “I love you” in Italian pop and watching Alex sleep. It becomes then a gruesome fantasy of object use—the head on the ground even has dark hair and bright blue eyes like Alex. The country song as Marie stares at her becomes disturbingly ironic: “someday you’ll be with me” is visually represented as the fantasy of skull-fucking. As Marie watches Alex in the shower, the Norman Bates gaze is reconstituted: the lustful eye coupled with murderous intent. *Le Teuer*’s approach, simultaneous with Marie’s masturbation, would present a manifestation of her latent desire.

Creed wrote that “viewing the horror film signifies a desire not only for perverse pleasure,” confrontation with the object, “but also a desire, having taken pleasure in perversity, to throw up, throw out, eject the object (from the safety of the spectator’s seat)” (40). Judith Halberstam claimed that such an economy was only possible by fixing the site of perverse pleasure “in an obviously and literally foreign body” (13). As we noted in an earlier section, the lesbian would figure just such a foreign body. Rather than sexual object choice, any aggression, always figured as masculine, “marked her as deviant and therefore dangerous” (Hart 9, author’s emphasis). The threat of female aggression is, thus, ruled out from the category of “women,” and fixed in the body of the lesbian, since “a woman, by definition, is not violent, and if violent, a female is not a

woman” (qtd. in Hart 142). But the psychotic lesbian, that is, a female who would wield violence *and* desire women, figures the “ultimate violation of the social instinct, murder, and the perversion of the sexual instinct, same-sex desire” (Hart 30). Thus, Ebert’s “poor, put-upon, traumatized male in the audience” must resist *High Tension*’s twist, or suffer the consequences of staring too long at the Medusa that figures not just castration anxiety but also the dissolution of the heteronormative social structure. If *High Tension* will not eject its own abject monster, Ebert most certainly will.

But Ebert is right, it *is* absolutely impossible to conceive of the presented plot with only one character where Marie and *Le Teuer* had earlier been two. There are technical problems with skull-fucking as a genital female. There is a photo of Marie on the fireplace to which both Alex and her father refer. The knife that ends up in the back of the van with Alex has no way of making it there without Marie. Even the security monitor that shows Marie killing the gas station attendant had earlier shown *Le Teuer*. We have only yet spoken of the reflexive reconstitution of the film along the lines of its twist. It is only a matter of a few moments before viewers have a chance to say “impossible,” before the potentially dangerous elements are recontextualized in the great sea of normativity. Thankfully, *High Tension* will have none of that.

IV

Immediately following on its twist, the film provides a vicious shift: as Alex plants the kitchen knife in Marie, it is *Le Teuer* who removes it. He takes out an impossibly vicious rotary saw, a brick-saw with a large-toothed blade that could not possibly cut brick—it is specifically engineered for gruesome death. In a chase through the woods, Marie and *Le Teuer* alternate as the pursuer of Alex. He/She grunts, yells, laughs, and taunts Alex: “You can’t escape from me, bitch! I’ll take care of you!” A car stops to help the fleeing girl, and she climbs into the backseat, but the engine stalls, and *Le Teuer* leaps onto the hood, sawing through the windshield, and shredding the driver’s chest while Alex screams uncontrollably. *Le Teuer* then saws through the back window, sticks his head in, and mimics Alex’s screams with a piggish, giggling glee. This moves into a realm of pitch-black comedy. As Alex escapes from the car, taking a crowbar, she catches a piece of glass in her Achilles tendon, and is reduced to sliding backward down the road, away from *Le Teuer*. Brandishing the ferocious spinning saw, in one of the supremely intersectional statements of the film, he says, “You drive a woman crazy. You little slut.” The embodied masculine murderer speaks of himself as a woman, with “slut” connoting an object of frequent male sexual use, not entirely unlike the disembodied orifice he had earlier skull-fucked. “Driving a woman crazy” might also be a bit of an understatement. This is the exact same tone of voice he had earlier used over the fallen Marie, in the greenhouse, reminding the viewer, “What do you want from Alex?”

Performed in boisterous black comedy, this is a complete parody sequence on identity, genre, the seriousness of hemoglobin, and the nature of desire.

By shifting back and forth from *Le Teuer* to Marie, over and over again, the viewer is forced to reconcile the spatial impossibility of two bodies inhabiting the same space. It is a disruptive disidentification far beyond the possibilities of reality. *High Tension* images its heroine and villain as one and the same in a parodic sequence of disidentification—Marie is in a terrifying embodied drag, performing black comedy in the flesh of *Le Teuer*, and he in hers, forcing a critical hermeneutics of both at once. If we recall from the opening section, Muñoz conceives the strategy of disidentification as follows:

To disidentify is to read oneself and one's own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to "connect" with the disidentifying subject. It is not to pick and choose what one takes out of an identification. It is not to willfully evacuate the politically dubious or shameful components within an identificatory locus. Rather, it is the reworking of those energies that do not elide the "harmful" or contradictory components of any identity. (12)

Drag is a method of disidentification, reading oneself in a gender with which one is not "coded" in connection. Simple drag does not always get at the political possibilities of disidentification: for instance, while drag in which a male drags as female and "passes" affirms the slippage in identity, there is another, more salient type. Muñoz calls this "terroristic drag" (100).

High Tension's Marie figures just such a *terroristic drag*. It is not only gender that is performed but conceptions of sexual orientation, ideology, and desire. The identity differentials that intersect in Marie are as follows: serial killer, heterosexual, homosexual, lesbian, lover, psychotic lesbian, white knight, child-killer, rapist, necrophiliac, and, lastly, destroyer of family. Of the brighter aspects, Marie offers a shining progression, moving beyond what Clover praised in the slasher genre, the willingness to "re-represent the hero as an anatomical female," beyond Pinedo's rehabilitation of that hero as a heroine, and into the politically correct acceptance of that heroine if she were to want women (Clover 104). On the other hand, *High Tension* uses ferocious "representational strategies" in "conjuring the nation's most dangerous citizens"—that is, Marie is in "terrorist drag" (Muñoz 108). This is disidentification with a vengeance.

Eschewing what Saunders earlier referred to as "the call to assimilate altogether *invisibly* into mainstream society," to promote positive images of homosexuals so that society might grant them entrance (indeed, the film all the way up to the twist brutally toys with this possibility), *High Tension* presents a figure of disidentification that does not deny that which is toxic in queerness—rather, it insists on monstrosity (Saunders 19). There is first the serial killer, that monster that can appear in any area, choosing victims as they fit his or her fancy, and kidnapping or killing them with any level of guile. The serial killer is such a great object of fear because he or she has mobility, is intelligent, and is insatiable—the term *bloodlust* is particularly fitting. But how far from the homophobic portrait of homosexuality are these attributes? The manner in which homosexuals "convert" heterosexuals, entice them with insatiable eroticism, seduce them with

sexuality that has no responsibility for procreation—how far off is murder from such stigma?

Coupling the lesbian with the serial killer presents the figure of the lesbian psychotic, who figures the dissolution of the social structure. Coffmann writes that the psychotic lesbian is “the screen onto which are projected the paranoias of those concerned with maintaining the illusion of their own psychical stability” (5). The queer monster figures a disidentificatory subject that is the dominant ideology’s “greatest threat” (5). Insofar as she murderously violates the social instinct, and perversely breaches heteronormativity, she represents the “sneaking suspicion that subjectivity, and indeed civilization itself, might be less stable and more dependent on what it claims to be its primitive roots than one would like to believe” (5). The “instincts” upon which the social is based are figured as brittle by the psychotic lesbian—the primitive rage and narcissistic love of the same that have been sublimated in the name of society might explode forth should they be so stirred (5).

Muñoz emphasizes that terroristic drag “stirs up desires” (100). It creates “an uneasiness in desire, which works to confound and subvert the social fabric” (Muñoz 100). Based on the way in which identification can bring about such an uneasiness, *High Tension* terroristically performs not only a sexual disorientation, but the subversive effect of subjective vertigo. Isabel Pinedo writes, “when identification with the agent of violence, especially the monster, becomes too conflictual, the whole setup precludes the construction of recreational terror and teeters the viewer into the realm of terror” (85).

We must redouble slightly in considering the structure of identification in the horror genre, backward to the preoccupation with the I-camera. Roger Ebert considered

the first-person perspective of the I-camera to be a domineering technique which forces viewer identification along phenomenological lines—“when the camera takes a point of view, the audience is being directed to adopt the same point of view” (Ebert 55). Clover resists such a dominating intention by referring to the shots in *Jaws* (1975) and *The Birds* (1963) that present I-camera attacks from the perspective of the shark and the birds, respectively, which suggests that either “the viewer’s identificatory powers are unbelievably elastic” or that point-of-view shots can simply be formal constructions (Clover 90). However, there is an important element involved in the I-camera, and identificatory viewing itself that Slavoj Žižek notes in another closely related Hitchcock scene—the murder of the private detective, Arbogast, in *Psycho*. As Arbogast climbs the stairs, the camera moves to a high objective shot, but as the killer approaches the detective, the camera shifts from its perch and presents an I-camera shot that swoops toward Arbogast and attacks him, then follows the falling man down the stairs. At this point in the film, the killer’s identity is unknown, and Žižek says:

This murderer is for us an unfathomable monster. We don’t know who he is but, because we are forced to assume the murderer’s position, in a way, we don’t know who we are—as if we discover a terrifying dimension of ourselves. (*Pervert’s Guide to Cinema*)

That “terrifying dimension” is opened and accessed in *High Tension*, albeit through a nuanced camera technique.

Throughout the film, the camera functions on what I would like to call an *affective* logic. Whether or not the I-camera tyrannically imposes identification with the shared point of view, the technique is, nonetheless, anything but subtle. *High Tension*,

however, utilizes a camera technique that mimics the psychic state of the character shown. When Marie runs around the house, the camera is frantic and jerky. When *Le Teuer* climbs the stairs to the guest room, the camera is absolutely steady, moving right along with the killer's pace. As Marie watches *Le Teuer* chop up the mother, the camera averts its gaze from the scene, opting instead to look away to the clothes in the closet. The camera trembles as Marie hides in the gas station, shakily peers around corners in the green house, and rises and falls with ferocity as Marie beats *Le Teuer* with her post. When the parody sequence occurs, the camera positively bounds along with the composite killer, romping gleefully through the woods. As *Le Teuer*'s saw cuts shallow wounds across the driver's chest, there is a moment of pure schlock where the blood actually sprays all over the camera and into Alex's mouth as she is screaming—which causes her to swallow, and scream more. This is a method of identificatory camerawork that insinuates rather than imposes identification. It presents us with a “terrifying dimension of ourselves”—if the I-camera forces us to do the will of the murderer, the affective camera whispers that we should think his thoughts.

In Clover's conception, “male and female are at desperate odds” in the world of the slasher, but “masculinity and femininity are more states of mind than body” (68). The world of *High Tension* presents binaries of all sorts “at desperate odds,” but importantly, it presents them more as “states of mind” than particular bodies. In her rehash of the identificatory structures of oral tradition, Clover writes that we might identify with the victim, calling up the “sense of ourselves as tiny and vulnerable in the face of the enormous Other,” but that that “Other is also finally a part of ourself” (71). The Other represents “our repressed infantile rage and desire”—that is, “our blind drive to annihilate

those toward whom we feel anger, to force satisfaction from those who stimulate us, to wrench food for ourselves if only by actually devouring those who feed us,” drives that “we have had in the name of civilization to repudiate” (71).

Sigmund Freud questioned the Christian imperative to “love one’s neighbor,” because the neighbor is, for most people, “not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity to work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and kill him” (qtd. in Edelman 84). In imagining these drives as aspects of the same personality, *High Tension* implies that it is not merely our ability to identify with the characters, but that, indeed, “we *are* both Red Riding Hood *and* the Wolf,” and the affective camera tells us that we have been both all along (Clover 71, my emphasis). *High Tension* presents them as copresent—that is, the desire to kill and the desire to fuck an object haunt each other, as epitomized by the completely dual-statement, “I’ll take care of you!” Pursuit of the object of desire is here depicted as the same, no matter the intent once it is attained, and we are all monsters.

High Tension then takes on an aspect of terror that moves beyond the image of a powerful monster, figuring instead a more sinister threat. *Le Teuer* swings the saw back and forth. Alex cannot walk, her pajamas are sopping with blood, she is shivering uncontrollably, her bright blue eyes looking out of a blood soaked face, terrified and crying. *Le Teuer* asks, “You don’t love me, do you?” With a horrifying saw inches from her face, she protests, “Yes I do love you.” To show the complete abjection of Alex is disturbing and disgusting. Reduced to doing or saying whatever she could to merely stay

alive, all that is left is to painfully watch a young girl as an image of utter devastation. *Le Teuer* sets down the saw, and Marie leans in for the kiss. She passionately presses her lips against Alex's tightly-closed mouth, as the latter girl resists, tightening her face while tears stream bloody rivulets (Fig. 6).

But, something remarkable happens (Fig. 7-9). Alex does something that is unintelligible. She opens her mouth. In an instance where Marie is perfectly happy to just rub her lips over Alex's face, Alex opens her mouth and uses her tongue. The saw is already sitting on the ground, Alex's crowbar is ready to hand, and Marie's eyes are closed—there is absolutely no need for Alex to do this. For eight seconds, blood, tears, sex, and murder mingle in a passionate kiss. Marie, the queer lesbian, necrophiliac, abductor, child-murderer, home-wrecker, and monstrous abjector of the object of her desire, is shown as performing an elaborate seduction—one that tantalizingly seems to be accepted.

Alex then shoves the crowbar into Marie (Fig. 10-13). At first, the impulse is to refigure the film. Alex has the androgynous name; the killer is an unbelievably deviant monster; Alex certainly has narrative justification to wield violence; do we reconstitute her as a Final Girl in the final moments? Do we see the monster vanquished—drawn in and cut down? It would certainly ease the queer tension that Marie presents. Yet, notice the position of the crowbar (Fig. 11, 14). Marie is completely distracted and Alex could have dealt the death blow—heart, throat, or even the stomach. Instead, she put one cleanly through the right shoulder. Marie's eyes go wide and, where her noises were loudly orgasmic in the slaying of *Le Teuer*, here she cannot scream, cannot moan. Her breath and her noises are stuck in her throat—she issues an almost primal noise that is not

pain, exactly, nor pleasure, but something that mixes the two and moves beyond: what can only be described as *ecstasy*. For twenty-five seconds, they look into each other's faces (Fig. 12-13). When Marie finally can speak, she offers a pledge of faithfulness, "Nobody will ever come between us, ever again." Alex subtly shakes her head side to side. Marie's smile depicts the rapture of a love requited (Fig. 13).

Alex not only gives herself over to the kiss, she answers Marie's seduction in kind. Where Marie had simply set out to get her object of desire (extremely) alone and was seemingly pleased with what little physical contact an unreciprocated kiss allows, Alex kisses with tongue and provides an ecstasy beyond the masturbatory orgasm in which Marie had earlier pounded her other self with a wooden post. Alex opens herself to Marie's extreme advances, and she offers the penetrative sexual congress of the crowbar. It is a union that figures not only the destruction of the family, the myths about good and evil, and the singularity of identity and bodily space—it is the terrifying manifestation of mutually negating desire. This is the queer threat that Edelman envisioned:

The embrace of queer negativity, then, can have no justification if justification requires it to reinforce some positive social value; its value, instead, resides in its challenge to value as defined by the social, and thus in its radical challenge to the very value of the social itself. (6)

A world where queer monsters might roam through our back-alleys and pick off the dregs of society is certainly worrisome to for the dominant social order—curfews might be installed. A world where the queer monster might attack the homestead and decimate a family figures another threat, but one that is external and barricadable. *High Tension*, however, presents the queer monster and the supreme terroristic threat of queer

negativity: that not only might our families, our societies, and our structures be broken, disrupted, razed, but that we might like it. For twenty-five seconds, the camera lingers upon the tenderly terrifying image of Marie lovingly stroking Alex's hair while promising that no one will ever separate their violent union (Fig. 14): "Nobody will ever come between us, ever again."

6



7



8



9



10



11



12



13



14



V

At the very end of the film, the opening hospital scene is refigured. The angles are wider so that the audience can see that Marie has been handcuffed to the bed. Her room is fitted with a one-way mirror. While Marie repeats her mantra, Alex appears outside the mirror asking someone off-screen, “She can’t see me right?”

Judith Halberstam writes of the logic of parasitism, in which the parasite “represents a bad or pathological sexuality, non-reproductive sexuality, a sexuality that exhausts and wastes and exists prior to and outside of the marriage contract” (17). It is sexuality that preys on the family, that offers no future, no good, nothing but negativity. The queer monster as parasite must be, as most parasites, cut off, removed, pulled out, disembedded, passed, thrown up, or thrown out. As abject, it “threatens life,” and must be excluded “from the place of the living subject, propelled away from the body and deposited on the other side of an imaginary border which separates the self from that which threatens the self” (Creed 37).

At first glance, this scene seems to figure the completed circle of that imaginary boundary—forming something of a set of Russian nesting dolls. Her handcuffs signal the police, patriarchal enforcement, and her hospital gown, the medical establishment: she is marginalized and pathologized, forcibly locked in an institution. Further, the monstrosity is figured as locked within Marie’s particular body and, as the film has apparently been a tale which Marie has told, the entire threat may very well be locked within her mind as

well. Layered on top of all this, the narrative itself seems to complete the circle: even in a story so fraught with an insistence on irreconcilability and queerness, the narrative structure of the frame story serves to alleviate the immediacy of such monstrosity by removing it to the safer distance of a tale within a tale. While the film featured the terrifying horror of queer negativity, the establishment, on the level of plot as well as structure, has always had her firmly in custody.

But the logic of parasitism presents a particular danger: “what you eat will eat you” (Halberstam 159). In the horror film, “the audience precisely worries that what it consumes will later consume it, what it watches will later manifest as a lurking peeping Tom...what it watches die will later rise again to stalk,” and what it locks away will break free of its cage (159). Although this abject monster seems to be contained, the seams show through. Her confinement signals both the police and the medical establishment, but it conveys the full force of neither. She is handcuffed, but is not in a prison cell. She is in a hospital gown on a bed, with a wheelchair and other medical amenities nearby, but it is not an asylum. Were it such an asylum, one would expect something more humane or more suitable for containment—padded leather straps or the like—something other than handcuffing a patient to the side of her bed. The one-way mirror indicates that the room was designed with the purpose of surreptitious observation, but the necessity of her handcuffs indicates its design as insufficient for incarceration. All of this serves to represent the fragility of her captivity.

Yet, there is a fissure that reaches deeper to the heart of the matter. Figure 15 shows a scar that creases Marie’s face. This injury is anomalous. While the stapled and stitched wounds shown on her back in the earlier hospital scene match the wounds she

suffered in the film's narrative, this scar was not present throughout the film. In fact, the only precedent for this wound was a sequence immediately following the opening hospital scene, Marie fleeing through the woods (Fig. 16). Within the narrative, this scene is presented as a dream from which Marie wakes up, finding herself in the car with Alex. Her dream is an replica of the scene where *Le Teuer*/Marie chases Alex through the woods, but with a crucial difference—Marie is the one being pursued in the dream. Waking up in the car, she explains the dream to Alex: “I was hurt, and I was being followed by somebody and...the more I ran, the more I could sense him coming closer.” Alex asks who the guy was, to which Marie responds, “It wasn't a guy. It was me. That's the weirdest part. It was me running after me.” When this scene is merely a dream, it serves as foreshadowing for the remainder of the film. But when we finally find Marie in the hospital with the mark of herself as victim, the film threatens to unravel.

While irreconcilability of Marie as heroine, murderess, and seductress is queerly problematic, the scar of victimization presents a new multiplicity of meaning. Do we read the narrative as misreported by Marie, as the product of a mind disturbed by trauma? Is *Le Teuer* real and Marie's incorporation into him only her misrecognized guilt? Or is the narrative real, a depiction of the cycle of violence wherein victim becomes victimizer? Must we offer our pity to the manifold monstrosity of Marie? All of these possibilities, as well as those presented by the narrative itself, are bound up in Marie—possibly in her mind, but certainly within her body. But the scar is “the wound that has been barely covered over,” and as such, it “represents the place where the inside threatens to show through” (Halberstam 155). The scar also represents the fragile suture of the narrative structure. The circle of the frame narrative attempts to close on Marie's incarceration.

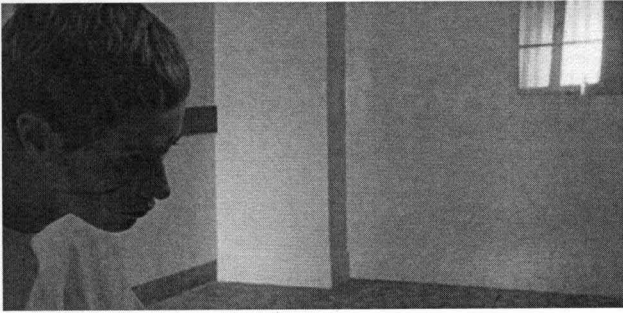
Whatever queerness may be represented in the film's plot is seemingly contained by this structure—but the scar introduces a fissure that disrupts the levels of the film's narrative. It forces a critical hermeneutics of incongruous and irreconcilable differentiations. If the hospital is real (which is presupposed by removing to the frame narrative), then the dream too may be reality. But introducing that element of narrative uncertainty calls the differentiations themselves into question: if the dream might be reality, then reality might be dream, or neither, or both. The multifarious meanings that the narrative attempts to tie into a cohesive bundle of expellable abjection are represented in that scar. It is both the mark of their suture and the seam that threatens to burst.

High Tension finally figures the radical threat of such a seam. Alex silently presses her open palm to the glass, like a lover visiting a prisoner (Fig. 17). Marie grins and looks up toward the mirror, and Alex beyond (Fig. 18). If the narrative closed off the abject image of queer negativity represented by Marie and Alex's kiss and crowbar sex, then the longingly pressed hand rekindles that linkage. Further, Marie's preternatural sense of Alex on the other side of the glass both adds an uncanny strength to that bond and figures Marie's extreme power. She can see beyond the one-way mirror, her power reaches beyond her imprisonment.

In the final image of *High Tension*, Marie lunges to the length of her handcuffs toward the screen, grinning from ear to ear in maniacal pleasure (Fig. 19). Alex is shocked, and her hand pulls back a bit. The handcuffs appear feeble; the scar on her face insists on the irreconcilability of her monstrosity; and her incarceration in the narrative structure is insufficient. On the level of metaphor, the one-way mirror might easily stand for the movie screen—her threatening through it would metaphorically figure a threat

beyond the screen and into reality. But *High Tension* threatens viscerally. The camera itself is situated behind the one-way mirror and when Marie lunges, she does so directly at the audience, and even the camera jerks away from the monster in the room. Marie, and all of the queerness she represents, threatens beyond narrative, beyond the film itself. The seams bulge into the very space of the viewing audience. *High Tension* figures the terrifying threat of its own rupture—the explosive spew of queerness and negativity into our reality. And what would that look like? Considering *High Tension*, it might have something to do with a crowbar.

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