

Repulsive Reactions: Transgender Abjection in *Sleepaway Camp*

Writer Robert Hiltzik's 1983 slasher film, *Sleepaway Camp*, follows a typical slasher story narrative about a group of teenagers at a summer camp. As the film progresses, an unknown slasher murders campers in increasingly brutal and violent ways, culminating in a shocking reveal of the murderer's true identity. Following in the footsteps of contemporary films like *Friday the 13th*, the slasher is revealed to be Angela Baker, a transgender teenager. After a traumatic boating accident results in the loss of her father and sibling, she is sent to live with extended family. However, the film does not show which sibling dies in the accident. It is assumed by the audience that the brother dies while the sister, Angela, lives. It is not until the final shot of the film where the audience realizes that the sister was the one who died and that the brother was sent to live with an aunt who raised the child in a forced transgender identity¹. During the film's reveal of the slasher, the last camera shot freezes on Angela's naked body while animalistic noises come from her mouth. It is a scene that is filmed solely to shock, repulse, and instill fear in the audience.

Horror films that rose to cultural prominence in the 1970s and 1980s did not shy away from violence and gore in their goal to provoke a reaction from moviegoers. *Sleepaway Camp* follows those same rules of horror as its contemporaries. However, it is in the final scene where the filmmakers go a step further in literally exposing the main character as a transgender villain. In filming and exploiting bodies in this way, filmmakers hope to provoke a range of responses from their audiences. Scholar Jack Halberstam explains the motivation behind the use of this film technique when he argues that horror "exercises power" in tandem with "[inciting] pleasure

Coupled with the character portrayal of the aunt as an over-bearing woman who says she already has a son, Angela never displays any type of agency in the scenes with her aunt and cousin. With Angela's quiet demeanor, it is assumed by the audience that the aunt forced Angela through transitioning.

and/or disgust” (Halberstam 17). The resulting horror in this film comes from the violation of gender norms. This can provide evidence of motivation of the use of gender abjection. Julia Kristeva’s concept of abjection can explain the reasoning for this type of response that horror films prompt.

Abjection can be easily applied to this film, especially in audiences’ reactions to the last scene. In *Approaching Abjection*, Kristeva explains abjection as “not then an absence of health or cleanliness which makes something abject, but that which perturbs an identity, a system, an order; that which does not respect limits, places or rules. It is the between, the ambiguous, the mixed” (Kristeva 127). Abjection deals with the reaction to what exists in a state that is not definite. The reactions include a feeling of disgust that stems from fear of the in-between. This film exposes the cultural belief that identities that do not fit into gender normativity fall into this in-between category, causing a societal ‘Othering’. In *Sleepaway Camp*, the audience assumes Angela is a cisgender female because they have not been given any reason to believe otherwise. The film plays into society’s assumptions regarding gender and their fears when someone does not match up to those assumptions. When what is assumed or believed does not match up with the reality, it leads to the repulsion and horror that makes up the bulk of this film’s climax. It is precisely that social horror Hiltzik relied on for the film to succeed culturally in the 1980s. By combining the protagonist with the antagonist and subsequently queering that character, the filmmakers made a conscious effort to elicit a specific type of adjective audience reception. The assumption for horror films at that time was that no one went into their first viewing of a horror movie with the prediction that the slasher was feminine-presenting, let alone transgender.

Just before the film freezes on the final frame of Angela’s naked body, another character yells, “She’s a boy!” (*Sleepaway Camp*). The last line of dialogue that the audience is left with

does not have to do with the film's premise of an unknown slasher at a summer camp. Instead, the plot twist relies solely upon the revelation of Angela's transgender identity. Her body becomes the shocking spectacle. The camera freezes on this frame, forcing the audience to reconcile with not only the transgender plot twist but to grapple with Angela's physicality. To an audience in the 1980s, Angela's body represents a visual representation of the in-between. In this scene, her body does not fit into the female/male gender binary. It is not easily placed into one heteronormative category or another. To have the film linger on this final scene for several, long seconds hopes to prompt a horror-like abjection response. Coupled with the transgender tableau, eerie music plays through the speakers in a way that only furthers the social commentary that transgender people are monsters and murderers.

Writing an unknown killer in a slasher film entices the audience to try to figure out who they are. The slasher reveal that doubles as the film's climax was not a new technique to *Sleepaway Camp*. Other films of the same time period utilize the same method. *Friday the 13th*, which *Sleepaway Camp* has often been compared to, is one of these films. The revelation that the *Friday the 13th* slasher was not Jason in a hockey mask but his mother all along invites a gender-switch storytelling tactic used to shock audiences. It surprised moviegoers who may have expected to see a cisgender man as the movie's killer. However, *Sleepaway Camp* goes past the gender-switch technique. The reveal does not solely include a character of another gender but one who is transgender. Robert Hiltzik's character reveal follows a pattern among transgender characters in film.

Another scholar in the field, Juanjo Bermudez de Castro critiques this type of storytelling technique in his own analysis of transgender identities in American television. They call this type of cisgender presentation as "cheating. . . that is supposed to create fear in the audience" and

that by removing the articles of clothing, it “is presented as the right thing to do to solve ‘the mystery’” (de Castro). The film is dependent on this revelation of Angela’s physicality. Her body is exposed as soon as the audience finds out she is the killer. While *Sleepaway Camp* does not present Angela’s trans identity as a mystery in the beginning of the film, the climax presents a retrospective look at Angela’s character that would inevitably prompt a second viewing for audiences in order to go back and see if any hints were dropped concerning Angela’s gender. During that second viewing, audiences would be exposed to a prolonged abjection given that they know how the film ends. They go into a second viewing of the movie with the knowledge of Angela’s gender and expectation to re-solve “the mystery” as de Castro points out. It makes audiences re-live the transgender abjection, a repetition of a social response that has been cultivated over time. Evidence of these gender abjection reactions show up in film critics’ reviews.

Calling it “offensive” and “sleazy”, Keith Roysdon, a staff writer at the *Muncie Evening Press* in Indiana wrote that “the final moment of the movie features a gender-switching surprise that explains the sick stuff we’ve seen before. This ‘twist ending’ reveals more about the twisted minds behind the camera than the mind of the murderer” (Roysdon 21). Roysdon’s reaction soon after the film’s release falls within the definition of abjection. Using words like “sick” and “twisted”, words commonly found in the horror movie genre, show that the writer and filmmakers achieved their goal of stimulating feelings of repulsion. The prolonged exposure of Angela’s genitalia for a horror audience met their need for a reaction, and that the abject is where the film’s final horror comes from.

While perhaps Hiltzik did not think of gender abjection while making this film, it is telling that he chose to write a transgender slasher in a time when slasher films were popular. Horror films often expose our own social and cultural fears. In inciting feelings of terror and adrenaline,

this is how they are successful at the box office. In order to have a plot twist ending that would leave people talking about the film long after its release, Hiltzik included a transgender character reveal. The very idea that not only a young woman would be a killer, but a transgender woman, reveals the social fear that Hiltzik hoped to capitalize on. He knew how the film would be received and that audience-goers would be shocked at Angela's identity. It is in these horror films where the true fears of society are revealed. Society's transphobia is put on display.

Screenwriter Robert Hiltzik took advantage of social fears about those were not cisgender and manipulated their representation to form a transgender villain. If Hiltzik did not include the exposure of Angela as a transgender villain but a cisgendered one, would that provide enough of a plot twist that contributes to its place as a movie with a shocking ending in horror movie culture? Relying on audience's reactions to the last scene shows that Hiltzik and the filmmakers proved Kristeva's theory of abjection. The discomfort shown in reviews such as Roysdon's film review show the unease that exists at large with identities that do not fall into neat socially-constructed heteronormative categories.

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