

Bring Out the “BUTCHER KNIVES”! Part Two

Written by Max Weinstein

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Continuing our interview with Vince Liaguno (begun [here](#)), editor of the slasher-film essay collection BUTCHER KNIVES & BODY COUNTS, begun here...

FANGORIA: One of the critical dogmas of the book is that slashers can be understood as, as you say, morality tales. When their fates befall them, they get what they deserve...

LIAGUNO: It's a joke that these films have always been taken on by the religious right and more conservative political parties of this country and others. If you think about it, there's no more republican movie than a slasher. It's basically saying, "Everything democrats and liberals believe in, you should be punished for." And yet the people that condemn them are these religious, conservative republican [types]. It boggles my mind.

FANG: Do you think these films should be aiming to provide that kind of "rooting" for death, or do you look towards more sympathetic protagonists as a viewer?

LIAGUNO: I always lean more toward a film where victims are portrayed as more sympathetic. You always want to care when someone dies. What makes the slasher audience so unique is that there's also another side that cheers, and they want to cheer and root for the killing. It's very participatory. It's not that we want to revel in the violence—we want to survive the violence. When I was 16 years old, I related to Jamie Lee Curtis' character [in HALLOWEEN]. She babysat, I babysat. She was gonna go to college, I was gonna go to college. It was scary going to college—I'm gonna leave my small town, where my house was familiar to me. Her journey was very participatory for me. One part of the audience wants to be sympathetic—"Oh my God, I can't believe they killed her off, I wanted her to survive."

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Then there's another, almost cynical side, that's rooting for the killer. “Yeah! Get them! They're assholes!” It's a big anti-bullying thing in a way. Who got in those movies? The jock, the cheerleader, popular people... Those were the ones who really got it. Occasionally the nerd got it, but it was mainly it was the average guy. The ones who got picked on in high school, the ones who wore glasses when someone else was wearing contacts, who was cooler, more attractive, whatever the case may be.

FANG: It's probably what the conservatives you mention might tend to deride—that we might root for the killer. Somehow seeing the jock or the cheerleader get killed makes us perverse...

LIAGUNO: Right, right.

FANG: Yet on the news we see politicians getting put in crosshairs; someone actually dies, and that so-called standard of morality doesn't apply.

LIAGUNO: The irony is so in your face. [The slasher] is really supporting conservative agendas. Especially in the '80s slashers. Who got it? The ones who were doing drugs, having sex, all the things that people were saying “Don't do that!” It should almost be a public service announcement [laughs], and they're the ones upset.

FANG: They also noticed that close marriage between sex and death, rooted as far back as Mario Bava's films. A lot of contributors to the book cite BAY OF BLOOD as the jump off point for FRIDAY THE 13TH, which has been widely established, but aside from their murder sequences, there's a difference in logic—one film is using that juxtaposition as its aesthetic, while the other seems to just say “SEX = DEATH.”

LIAGUNO: Right. Michael Potts, in his essay on DR. GIGGLES, [touches on] the whole connection between the heart and sex and life.

FANG: Is that aspect to blame why the franchise has been constantly deemed a “ripoff” of these other films?

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LIAGUNO: I don't think that “sex equals death” mentality kept up with the culture. That was prevalent at a time in this country when the AIDS crisis was going on, so that was a cinematic interpretation of reality. Sex did equal death for millions of people who died of AIDS in this country, and all over the world. And I think now because AIDS is not a death sentence anymore, now slashers don't really use it. We didn't cover this in the book, but *CHERRY FALLS*, they completely inverted the equation. If you had sex, you were gonna live, and it was the virgins who were gonna die. It threw it on its head, almost as a way of saying, ‘OK, AIDS is no longer a death sentence. AIDS is now a manageable disease. I'm not gonna minimize to the point of diabetes, but in that vein, you can take medication, you go withstand treatments and survive it. The equation hasn't played out as well because it hasn't kept up with [that] culture. The culture's gone back to promiscuity [being] OK, because we don't die from it anymore.

FANG: And the book looks at sexual identity through more than just one lens. Does your being a gay man inform your readings of slashers to any considerable degree?

LIAGUNO: Gays identify with the sense of isolation the characters in slasher films face. In something like *Happy Birthday to Me*, one can see an allegorical parallel between the mental isolation Melissa Sue Anderson's heroine faces as she struggles to trust her conflicting memories of a past trauma amidst the carnage of her friends and the mental isolation LGBT individuals face as they grapple with the incongruence of conflicting societal views, religious beliefs, and familial attitudes regarding their homosexuality.

Slashers also serve as an outlet for the societal fears gays face in their everyday lives. For LGBT men and women who've chosen to embrace their sexual orientation, navigating in a world fraught with prejudice, discrimination, and the threat of physical harm from gay bashings, the characters in slasher films provide a conduit through which those fears can be examined on a subconscious level. The characters who hesitantly stumble around the unfamiliar turf of their unseen enemy in the modern slasher yarn represent us as the LGBT members of society who must also circumspectly traverse the dangers of life in a dissimilar heterosexual world.

There's also an interesting metaphorical comparison that can be drawn between the transformation of the Final Girl and the coming out process. In the beginning of the slasher film, the heroine usually presents as weak, timid, uncertain of how to navigate through the situation she finds herself in; for gays, this uncertainty is the same in the coming out process. As the film progresses, the heroine transforms; she toughens and becomes confident in her abilities to overcome the malevolence stalking her. LGBT people, too, transform during the coming out

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process; they develop a thicker skin. They summon the courage to confront the unseen enemy of homophobia waiting for them around every darkened corner. On a more superficial level, the Final Girl also represents great appeal for the gay male community, coinciding with our long-standing predilection for strong female characters in the arts. The Final Girl is our slasher-film fag hag.

Then, the idea of sexual repression and its devastating and dangerous effects in both the slasher film and in queer culture. We'll save the whole overbearing mother-thing for an entirely different discussion! The suppression of natural sexual urges results in the creation of a demented serial killer; in queer culture, we call the denial of sexual orientation a closet case. Just think about how many cinematic victims would have been spared if Jason Voorhees and Michael Myers had acted upon those teenage urges in their sleeping bags at Boy Scout camp...

FANG: Something like TEXAS CHAINSAW is probably the most often cited slasher template which we can look at as “text”; it's a film that holds up underneath all of the critical lenses that are detailed in the first section of BUTCHER KNIVES & BODY COUNTS. Is it possible to take formal analysis to a genre that's so rooted in chaos, disorder, mayhem?

LIAGUNO: I think that's why the book works. It works because it hasn't been done before. There are certainly groundbreaking works that have chronicled the slasher genre, and put historical context to it, but as far as analyzing it specifically, no book has done that. The question of “Was there really that much forethought put into these films?” Or was it just, “How much boobs can we show, and how much slaughter?” What would be the theoretical analysis of these films be? [You might say] theoretical analysis? These films are garbage! But I think that's why the book works, is because you're watching saying “Holy shit! I'm looking at this film in such a different way,” and it really works. No matter what the end product is, films are made by people, and people not superficial by nature. There is someone's baggage and mentality and intellect going into this film. Eventually, and it may take 30 years, but to dissect parts of a movie like CURTAINS and HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO ME, you could do it.

FANG: It's about time someone did. There is an inherent contradiction there, though. We're formally analyzing something chaotic in nature. It can get tricky trying to make something out of an effect or aspect of a film that's maybe inadvertently achieved...

LIAGUNO: With a lot of these films, I don't think “intention” was ever there. In many cases it

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wasn't, but by the default of being created by people—with political views, and cultural context, and intellect and baggage—it's all in there. Is there more maligned genre than the slasher [laughs]? I don't know...

FANG: You could argue.

LIAGUNO: You could argue. But something that's fashioned by the hands of people, you're always going to have that ability to go in there and dig. [The book] defied my expectations, tenfold. All these essays, you're going “Oh my God! Damn, that is right on...” It's there. It's logical, it's supported, it's there. You may have to dig a little bit for it, and someone may not have dug the dirt that buried the time capsule, but you're gonna find some shit under there.

TO BE CONTINUED