

KILLING THE SAD FAT GUY AND THE PREGNANT LADY: UNCOMFORTABLE DEATH IN *FRIDAY THE 13TH PART III – 3D*

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Co-creator and director, Sean S. Cunningham, describes *Friday the 13th* (1980) as “a roller-coaster ride, a funhouse sort of thing.”^[i] It is artificial, visceral fun that spikes adrenalin, provides thrills, but doesn’t aspire to much in the way of intellectual engagement or emotional connection (beyond terror and horror) with characters or story. The success of the first film drove the development of the sequel.

In *Friday the 13th Part 2* (1981), director Steve Miner decided to embellish slightly without veering too far from the formula of the original. According to Miner, along with the other creators, he attempted to “improve upon some of the character and dialogue flaws [of *Friday the 13th*]. We attempted to make the characters a little more realistic. We *did* avoid ‘strip monopoly.’”^[ii] *Part 2* saw further success, so inevitably the producers began work on *Friday the 13th Part III 3-D*. “With the *Friday the 13th* films,” Miner declared, “we had always made a conscious decision to make the same movie over again, only each one would be slightly different. And I had always been intrigued with the concept of 3-D.”^[iii] Miner, however, toyed with more changes than merely the use of 3-D: “I spent a lot of time developing a number of different storylines and approaches that would be a breakaway from the other films. Finally, we all decided that it would have been a mistake. We have a certain audience that enjoyed *Friday the 13th* – and we owe them the best possible film that they will enjoy; suspense and scares within the format we’d already established.”^[iv]

The resulting film met with further phenomenal success. According to J. A. Kerswell, “The most successful slasher film of 1982, *Friday the 13th Part III* grossed a massive \$36 million

domestically. In the first three days of release alone, it grossed something over \$9 million, beating the same weekend total of Spielberg's *ET*, that summer's box office champ." [v] Even as they emphasize its sameness to its predecessors, however, the makers of *Part III*, as well as the critics, have failed to acknowledge the significant innovation of the film in regard to character.

The characters in slasher films have long been given short shrift. Film scholar Vera Dika has written of *Friday the 13th Part 2* that the "characters have a palpably plastic, unreal quality that adds to the general theme of their expendability. The viewer is thus further engaged in the gaming process of the film, one that promises enjoyment through the viewing of attractive bodies and reduces the pain of guilt and fear in likewise viewing the wound." [vi] Apart from the clear effort at pathos with the character of Mark, the counsellor who lost the use of his legs in a motorcycle accident but is determined to play sports again one day, I have no real quarrel with Dika's analysis here. (Although the fact that Mark is handsome and guaranteed to get laid before his murder undercuts some of his pathos.) Miner grants the characters in *Part III* extensive sympathy, however, and this recurs in Danny Steinmann's *Friday the 13th Part V: A New Beginning* (1985), about which I have written elsewhere. [vii] Although *Part III* does not explore character pathos to the truly uncomfortable depths that the later film does, it still manages to develop characters fully enough that their deaths are more unpleasant, difficult, and challenging than in the previous *Friday the 13th* movies. Interestingly, Ian Conrich identifies humour as a key source of engagement within both *III* and *V*: "the humour that can be discerned in *Friday the 13th Part III*, and which is first made explicit with *Friday the 13th Part V*, exhibits a similar effect to the Grand Guignol performances with their 'hot and cold showers', in that horror is designed in combination with comedy." [viii] While this may be true, I would not consider the "hot and cold showers" in these films their most fascinating structural and emotional contributions.

While many characters in *Part III* are not developed and function simply as objects of humour and aggression, as Conrich claims, three characters are developed in ways that encourage emotional engagement. Furthermore, these characters are designed around archetypes introduced in the earlier films of the franchise, which heightens the fact of their greater richness. The three characters are Shelly (Larry Zerner), the sexless, friendly (if annoying) prankster, Chris (Dana Kimmell), the Final Girl, and Debbie (Tracie Savage), the girl in a relationship. Neither of the previous sexually inactive jokesters, Ned (Mark Nelson) in *Friday the 13th* and Ted (Stu Charno) in *Part 2*, are as sad and self-pitying as Shelly in *Part III*. When Chris wonders why Shelly is in the van while the others have gone to the lake, Shelly tells her, "Well, they said they were going skinny dipping and, uh, I'm not skinny enough." This acts simultaneously as a moment of humour but also one of pathos. Shelly jokes about his weight, but he appears both sad and disappointed.

At his most vulnerable, Ted from *Part 2* is merely drunk, so there is little equivalence with Shelly in terms of the viewer's potential emotional connection. However, we are given a similar moment of pathos with Ned in the first film. Immediately prior to Ned's murder we see him forlornly looking on as Jack (Kevin Bacon) and Marcie (Jeannine Taylor) share a romantic moment by the lake. The difference here is that Ned's moment of sadness is shown through a personal, undeveloped emotional engagement that is only implied. In other words, Ned isn't self-effacing as a character but expresses a fleeting moment of sadness and loneliness that appears in contrast to the rest of his character development. Shelly, on the other hand, continuously reinforces through both overt dialogue and performance his sadness and abjection.

A few moments later we see Chris "discovering" Shelly with a hatchet in his head, only to find out that it is one of Shelly's pranks. Chris expresses anger at him, which we later find out is rooted in her earlier traumatic experience at the same cabin. At the time, however, Shelly seems wholly unaware. Their friends excuse his actions because Shelly "doesn't know any better," while others let him know that he's being an asshole. We see Shelly

sympathetically trying to explain himself and apologise, and ultimately abandoned, shocked, and saddened by the impact his prank had on Chris.



In glorious 3D: Shelly (Larry Zerner) (L) expresses surprise and sadness at the anger his prank has caused, while Rick (Paul Kratka) (R) tries to maintain order

The final indignity for Shelly comes after his genuine expression of feelings for Vera (Catherine Parks), when he makes himself entirely emotionally vulnerable to her. This expression is

immediately, but kindly rejected. Vera even offers to discuss it later (arguably going farther than strictly necessary) out of consideration and sensitivity. Shelly meekly says “Sure, we’ll talk,” and once Vera leaves the room, mutters “Bitch.” This certainly undermines any sympathy we may have for him, but the impotence of the expression also reinforces both how pathetic he is, as well as his self-pity.

Shelly’s death is sudden, but the weight of his character development, not seen before in the series (even in the Final Girls [\[ix\]](#)), makes this film altogether different. In fact, Chris is also the first Final Girl to have an in-depth backstory. For *Friday the 13th’s* Alice (Adrienne King), we merely know that there is some romantic tension with Steve Christy (Peter Brouwer), or, perhaps more likely, that she is the object of uncomfortable predatory behaviour by him. Alice is considering leaving early to go “back to California to straighten something out,” which is all the information we get about the subject. Ginny (Amy Steel) from *Part 2* is a fairly flat character– quirky and with a pre-established romantic relationship with Paul (John Furey) and a convenient Psychology degree.

Part III’s Chris on the other hand has an entire flashback dedicated to her early trauma. We know through the flashback that she was attacked by Jason–an attack that hinted at the possibility of rape–the last time she visited the house in the woods her family owns where

the bulk of the film takes place. This prior event provides a sufficient arc to explain Chris's complete breakdown at the end of the film, and again provides enough characterisation to create more emotional engagement with her than with either of her analogues from the previous films in the series.

Furthermore, *Part III* gives us Debbie (Traci Savage), a character similar to Marcie from *Friday the 13th*, and Sandra (Marta Kober) from *Part 2*. These are all young women who are sexually active within a monogamous heterosexual couple. Debbie's

principal difference, however, is that she is pregnant. We find this out early in the film when Chris is asked how far it is to the lake, and she responds while pointedly looking at Debbie "We would've been there already if *some people* didn't have to go to the bathroom every five minutes." Debbie engages with the joke and replies, "That's what happens when you're pregnant."

The *Friday the 13th* series may repetitively reconfigure its source material, as numerous critics have pointed out, but this does not necessarily mean that the franchise simply lazily rehashes the same story. As I have argued elsewhere,^[x] the *Friday the 13th* films have no single formative point: they do not consistently build stories and aesthetics upon those of the first film but instead undergo consistent formation and *reformation*. But even as the films capitalise on both predictability and unpredictability, the murder of Debbie seems especially transgressive. Intriguingly, we encounter conflicting political orientations in the way Debbie's story develops. The *Friday the 13th* films, famously according to Robin Wood (2003), embody the reactionary politics of Reagan's America. But considering the US Right's view of the sacredness of unborn life, the murder of an unborn child in Debbie's



Also in glorious 3D: Chris (Dana Kimmell) (R) is led away from the crime scene by State Trooper #2 (Terry Ballard) (L) in hysterics, having a complete mental breakdown and again provides enough characterisation to create more emotional engagement with her than with either of her analogues from the previous films in the series.

murder seems in shockingly bad taste with no real moral impetus (as there is with the general perception of the other murders here – don't drink, do drugs, or have premarital sex). The US Right has traditionally taken a disapproving stance toward young mothers who are not married. However, the vocal defence of unborn life is one commonly held position of the US Right. Wood's interpretation of these films creates an equivalence between punitive murder in fiction as a response to, or as an iteration of disapproval toward behaviours transgressing reactionary boundaries. As a result, Debbie's murder would sit uneasily with any political position, both on the far Right (in the murder of the unborn child) as well as on the Left (in the murder of the unmarried mother).

The complicated politics of Debbie's murder, then, don't easily align with the perceived simple pleasures of slasher set pieces. We do not merely witness the predictable murder of a promiscuous, attractive, nearly naked young woman. Her death inevitably comes with the death of her (potential) child – as well as the death of a mother who cares enough not to drink or do drugs throughout. As a result, Debbie's death is deeply uncomfortable for a wide range of viewers across the political spectrum, thus imbuing this particular murder with a much deeper emotional resonance than the typical disposability of characters allows.

Kerswell has suggested that filmmakers considered even further dark developments for *Friday the 13th Part III 3-D*, although his tonal analysis of the film differs from mine: "An alternative ending, in which Jason whacks off Chris's head with a machete, was seemingly shot but has yet to surface. *Friday the 13th Part III* is still very entertaining, although it is a perfect example of how, by 1982, the slasher was taking itself increasingly less seriously and was content to veer ever closer to camp."^[xi] Ending a film with the decapitation of a Final Girl who has a visible trauma of a potentially darker sort than usual reads to me as more deeply unpleasant than anything the series has given us so far.

Although the depths *Friday the 13th Part V: A New Beginning* sinks to are more unpleasant, complex, and uneasy than anything else in the series, *Part III* certainly dips its toe into this

murky and dangerous water. In analysing Jason as a monster, along with the nihilistic implications of the *Friday the 13th* films, Jonathan Lake Crane suggests that these films work through eliciting minimal sympathy with the murdered characters: “the human body, our most precious sac, achieves a pittance of worth only when it is reduced to a weeping pile of scattered exuviate.”^[xii] It is important to realise, however, that we are, on occasion, given characters who are fully enough developed to make their resultant death unpleasant and sad. And we see that some of these “precious sacs” have worth prior to having their insides introduced to the outside.

Notes:

^[i] Qtd. in Martin 1979, 16. Although this appears in a contemporary interview prior to the release of the first film, Cunningham still describes the film this way. See Wood 2015.

^[ii] Qtd. in Burns, 14.

^[iii] Qtd. in Bracke, 74.

^[iv] Qtd. in Martin 1982, 54.

^[v] Kerswell, 122.

^[vi] Dika, 78.

^[vii] See Clayton 2015.

^[viii] Conrich, 182.

^[ix] This is in reference to the term coined by Carol J. Clover (1992), one which I hope I do not need to explain in depth here.

^[x] See Clayton 2013 and 2020.

^[xi] Kerswell, 122.

^[xii] Crane, 141.

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