

Queering Gender and the Body in the American Possessed Slasher

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In memory of Tim, who shared his love of horror with me.

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Abstract

In my research, I outline the Possessed Slasher and approach possessed characters as Inhabited Vessels. I argue that Inhabited Vessels display experiences of euphoria and dysphoria as they confront differences in their new physical body, changes in societal perceptions of their gender, and understanding of their sexuality. Gendered shifts in possessed characters become amplified as they interact with themes of violence, penetration and threat within the Slasher. To make this argument I utilize existing franchises such as, *Child's Play* (1988-2024), *Evil Dead* (1981-2018), and *Night of the Demons* (1988-2009), and contemporary Neoslashers such as, *Freaky* (2020), and *You Might Be the Killer* (2018), with a particular focus Possessed Neoslashers. I analyse Inhabited Vessels as they portray differences in gender, bodies and sexuality. Predominant analyses of gender in possession and Slasher media often highlight an importance of genitals and sexualising penetration, transgression of gender norms for characters read from a cisnormative perspective, and assignation of gendered power. Existing analyses are influenced by binary cisnormativity that dictates how gendered bodies, particularly genitals, appear, and how these Inhabited Vessels ought to behave based on the presumption of cisgendered heterosexuality. I challenge existing tropes as found in possession narratives and Slashers by emphasising ideas of agency, power, and transformation. Queer and trans horror theory predominantly extrapolates on theories of monstrosity and Othering, focusing on the ostracisation of characters with queer and trans readings, who fail to align with societal norms. This creates a dependence on the Other and their perceived threat, something that becomes more nuanced as Inhabited Vessels often outwardly seem to align with the normative, wearing the skin of vessels that are often noted for their harmlessness. I present Inhabited Vessels as representative of trans and queer feelings of euphoria and dysphoria when reflecting on disconnected bodies, newly queered relationships, and external gendering.

Introduction

My research will consider Possessed Slashers as part of Schubart's¹ (2018) Survival Horror category, with a queer² and trans³ approach to gender expression and the body. Human Rights Campaign Foundation (HRC), in their study *The Epidemic of Violence Against the Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Community: 2023 Report*, identified 335 cases of transgender and gender non-conforming people dying due to fatal violence in the USA since 2013, 51% of which occurred within 2019-2023 (HRC notes that this number may be higher due to issues in reporting, misgendering and missing information). They further found that in reported cases, one in three victims were killed by a stranger. Whilst it cannot be stated with certainty that these individuals all lost their lives specifically because they were trans, these statistics are concerning and highlight the issue of safety for trans people. Noting this, I analyse the queerness and gender performance of killers and victims in narratives that are closely tied to violence and threat.

I will focus on American Survival Horror, due to the political climate for queer and trans people in post-Trump America. The Anti-Defamation League and Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) conducted a study, *Year in Review: Anti-LGBTQ+ Hate & Extremism Incidents, 2022 - 2023*, stating that there were 356 anti-LGBTQ+ hate incidents in the USA between June 2022 and April 2023, almost half of which (174) were associated with extremists. The Trevor Project (2021) stated that between 2020 and 2021 they saw an increase of 150% in contacts from LGBTQ youth in Texas seeking crisis support. They

¹ In this thesis, I refer to theorist by their last name only. (Except for theorists who have the same surname, in these instances I will use an initial for their first name.) This is further explained within my methodology.

² 'Queer' is used as an umbrella term for queer people without making a distinction about their specific sexuality. This term is inclusive as it includes more often overlooked members of the LGBTQIA+ community. (Stonewall, Accessed: 20/02/2024)

³ 'Trans' is used as an umbrella term to describe gender variance and those whose gender does not align comfortably with the sex they were assigned at birth. This includes, but is not limited to, transgender people, transexuals, non-binary and gender-nonconforming people. (Faye, 2021.)

cite the introduction of discriminatory legislation in Texas, such as Texas Senate Bill 14 which banned puberty blockers and hormone therapy for trans youth, as a contributor. In light of this legislation, HRC, citing over seventy-five anti-LGBTQ+ bills signed into law, declared a state of emergency for LGBTQ+ people within the USA for the first time.

Film theorists, such as Tudor (1997), Cherry (2009) and Waldron (2022), highlight that the horror genre reflects contextual societal fears and anxieties. The horror genre is a good field to better understand social contexts and what audiences are expected to find horrific or abject. Furthermore, Benshoff (1997, 2015) suggests that queer people often find representation in horror, identifying with the Other. Whilst many of these characters are not explicitly queer or have intended queer readings, queer audiences can identify with the plight of the ostracized and often misunderstood monster. Even if the filmmaker or author does not intend specific representation as a dominant reading, minorities often search for characters that can be read as representative.

The rhetoric surrounding anti-LGBTQ+ bills positions queer and trans people in a predatory role. For example, anti-LGBTQ+ lobbyists argue through the 'Bathroom Bill' that trans people, particularly transgender women, are unsafe to be allowed to enter 'women's spaces' (referring to women's bathrooms and women's changing rooms). Furthermore, anti-drag arguments position drag performers as groomers, and a threat to children. Whilst I strongly reject these baseless claims from anti-LGBTQ+ lobbyists, it is important to consider the impact of this rhetoric on queer and trans communities and the reputation of these communities. This perception of queer and trans people can have a direct impact on their safety. As established earlier, HRC found that one out of three fatal attacks were conducted by a stranger, suggesting that their attack is connected to an existing perception of the victim. It is key to challenge where these ideas are perpetuated in media, furthermore it is important to consider how tropes

perpetuated by characters such as Norman Bates, Buffalo Bill and Angela Baker might have an effect on perceptions of queer and trans people.

To approach this theme of threat, I utilise Schubart's suggested horror category of Survival Horror. Survival Horror media features horror narratives that display themes of predatory aggression. Survival Horror can include subgenres of horror such as the Slasher, the possession horror, zombie horror and creature features. Predatory aggression includes the critical role of the predator and the prey, and in this predatory aggression it is crucial to consider the role of the predator and the prey, and in this thesis, I demonstrate queer and trans positioning within both roles. In discussing the positioning of queer and trans people within these roles and the associated perception of threat, I aim to analyse ideology that is perpetuated or destabilised in these representations.

Neoslashers break the form of the Classical Slasher and flout conventions by inserting more contemporary values and criticism of existing genre tropes. For example, this shift in tone and tropes can be seen in the distinction between the Possessed Slasher *The Evil Dead* (1981) and the Possessed Neoslasher *Ash Vs Evil Dead* (2015-2018). Petridis (2019) suggests that the Neoslasher can only be found between 2000 and 2013, however, I suggest that Neoslashers can still be seen today. Therefore, I consider Neoslashers from as recently as 2024, noting the Neoslasher television series found in existing franchises. When I explore the Possessed Neoslasher, I am not distinguishing a distinct cycle of Possessed Slashers, instead I am referring to a Neoslasher that is also a Possessed Slasher. In combining the terms, I aim to highlight my case studies' role as both a product of developing film cycles and a subgenre of Slashers and possession narratives.

My analysis utilises a range of case studies, with a particular focus on the *Child's Play* franchise. Discussions of the *Child's Play* franchise will include *Child's Play* (1988), *Child's*

Play 2 (1990), *Child's Play 3* (1991), *Bride of Chucky* (1998), *Seed of Chucky* (2004), *Curse of Chucky* (2013), *Cult of Chucky* (2017), and *Chucky* (2021-2024). I will focus particular attention on *Seed of Chucky*, *Cult of Chucky* and *Chucky* as these Possessed Neoslashers strongly display themes of possession, transformation of the body and queering relationships. I also discuss the *Evil Dead* franchise (*The Evil Dead* (1981), *Evil Dead II* (1987), *Army of Darkness* (1993), *Evil Dead* (2013), *Ash vs Evil Dead* (2015-2018) and *Evil Dead Rise* (2023)) with a predominant focus on *Ash vs Evil Dead*. Lore from external media, such as games, comics or fictional books, will not be considered in the scope of this discussion, however filmmaker statements or comments found in media such as documentaries, autobiographies and interviews will be.

In my research, I analyse how gender is reframed in the Possessed Slasher when possession is approached as representative of trans and queer experiences of body dysmorphia, gender performance and social transition, and interpersonal relationships. I reframe the discussion of gender tropes in Slashers, highlighting the distinction of the Possessed Slasher and its differing conventions. Within these Possessed Slashers, I suggest representations of queer and trans experiences can be found. To explore this, I aim:

- To define the Possessed Slasher, problematising existing horror gender theory.
- To analyse representations of queer and trans people within the Possessed Slasher.
- To establish the interplay between Survival Horror's themes of predation and the portrayal of queer and trans bodies and lives.

I further expand on the existing approach to possessed characters, formulating a framework in which possessed characters can be deconstructed and considered in terms of identity, body and gender. Through this and the Possessed Slasher I examine themes of

violence and gender within a subgenre that hinges upon predatory threat. In this research, my objectives are:

1. To approach possessed characters in Possessed Slashers through the lens of queer and trans experiences.
2. To highlight distinct conventions of the Possessed Slasher, noting how this interacts with established gender horror theory.
3. To reframe existing approaches towards gender in the possessed figure.
4. To interrogate the positioning of possessed characters within predatory Survival Horror narratives.
5. To establish how possession transforms interpersonal relationships between characters as bodies and identities shift.
6. To interrogate transformation through supernatural technologies, emphasising parallels with medical transition and reproductive technologies.

I begin with a literature review, in which I establish existing theories surrounding genre, gendering, horror and difference and the body. First, I detail how genre can be assigned, noting existing discourse surrounding defining Slasher and Occult media. Following this, I examine gendering in horror, considering theory surrounding the intersection between gender and threat. I highlight theories surrounding the horror genre and representations of the non-normative, exploring theorists who note queer monsters within horror. I consider theory surrounding the body in horror, particularly affronts to the body, transformation and possession. In my methodology, I establish how I identify my case studies and my theoretical approach, noting theories discussed in my literature review.

Chapter One builds upon the literature review and methodology by discussing contextual connections between threat and the occult. I address the publicity of serial killing

and the sensationalised link to the occult, noting how these themes intertwine influencing Slashers, possession narratives and the Possessed Slasher. I interrogate Clover's portals, considering how the possessed may be reapproached to consider power and agency within the possessed figure. Pulling theory from my exploration of the occult and the Inhabited Vessels, I outline how these themes and conventions appear in Slashers, creating the Possessed Slasher subgenre. I utilise Clover's (1992) structure in approaching the occult and Slashers in media in *Men, Women and Chain Saws*, using their sectioned themes to highlight differences between the occult, Slashers and the Possessed Slasher.

Whilst Clover's research is a staple of gender horror theory, their theory features assumptions of the body based on gender. My research proposes that we ought to detach possession from the cisnormative assumptions of the body, rejecting the assumption that all women have vaginas. I also suggest different language to refer to the possessed, suggesting 'vessel' and 'Inhabited Vessel'. Where a 'portal' is a structure that is passed through, in this case allowing demons access to the earthly plane, the 'vessel' holds or stores something inside. A vessel, such as a cup, can be filled but also emptied. Contents can be mixed. The vessel may be stained by its contents or even become fused to its contents, changing it from its original form. It may be broken and even repaired, able to hold contents again. The image of the vessel is a more apt visual that allows a better representation of the fluidity and potential of possession. The possessor must live inside the vessel of the possessed, not simply passing through a portal, but existing as a united form, becoming the Inhabited Vessel. Here these characters can be viewed as a combined character (the Inhabited Vessel), as well as an amalgamation of two distinctive characters.

Chapter Two expands on the Possessed Slasher and the Inhabited Vessel, highlighting how agency and power in victims of possession could be reframed. Victims can become something more than human through supernatural technologies, gaining power both

supernatural and societal. Through different types of possession, such as fusion and fission, characters are granted agency within their possession. In this they may utilise possession to get revenge, to become powerful or break free from the enforced expectations of others.

Distancing the analysis of possession away from a perception that the possessed/possessor dynamic is always victim/evil, I highlight how possessors can (deservedly) reclaim a body allowing them to live once again and how the possessed can gain power over the forces possessing them.

I illustrate this through an analysis of *Hello Mary Lou: Prom Night II* (1987), the *Night of the Demons* Franchise (1988-2009) and *You Might be the Killer* (2018). Each film features a lead woman who is placed in the role of a victim; however, they utilise possession to become powerfully monstrous. I use this case study to exemplify how Inhabited Vessels in Possessed Slashers act in a manner distinct from the Classical Slasher roles of the killer, the final girl and the Occult possessed woman, whilst applying the conventions I highlight in the previous chapter. I particularly draw attention to how the presence of supernatural technologies, such as possession, gives characters freedom to break free from the structures and archetypes found in Slashers and possession narratives.

Having highlighted the malleability in possession when viewed as an Inhabited Vessel, I begin to deconstruct the Inhabited Vessel. In Chapter Three, I analyse gender performance in Inhabited Vessels as possessors find themselves in differently gendered vessels. These vessels are expected to dress and behave differently. Here the possessor interacts with their gender performance in a new way, attempting to figure out what elements of gender they find to be euphoric and dysphoric. I examine how Inhabited Vessels interact with gender in themselves, deciding on how to euphorically dress and act in their new body. I further this by considering how these Inhabited Vessels interact with their treatment from other characters who perceive them to be women. Here characters face attempts at gendered

subjugation from other characters, often utilising power afforded through supernatural technologies to utilise violence against these attempted oppressors. I analyse how these characters interact with the potential perpetuation of trans folk devils (Faye, 2021). This chapter details this through the case studies: *Freaky* and *Cult of Chucky*.

Chapter Four considers the role of the physical body, as possessors find themselves changed to a new vessel. These new vessels may have different genitals. They may not even be human. The supernatural is capable of creating life in the inanimate through possession, which creates a transbiological monster as things such as dolls, reflections and puppets grow organs, becoming capable of speaking, breathing and bleeding. In this creation of something new, I highlight how sexed characteristics manifest in newly animate bodies, noting how gender can inform the body as it becomes malleable. I further detail how swapping and transforming human bodies can be symbolic of transition, both surgical and hormonal.

I suggest that these technologies act as a powerful unnatural form of medical intervention. Bodies become more malleable, manifesting euphoric genitals or suturing to artificial wombs. These supernatural technologies allow characters to become euphoric and reproduce regardless of genitals, organs or even living bodies. This chapter pulls transbiology, the posthuman and kincoherence together to discuss trans Inhabited Vessels in the *Child's Play* franchise, particularly *Chucky* and *Ash vs Evil Dead*. I consider connections between transformations and bodily changes in the Inhabited Vessel and the idea of second puberty and finding a euphoric body. I further highlight how supernatural reproductive technologies allow queered reproduction, using supernatural assisted reproductive technologies to create new posthuman offspring that challenge gender and the body.

Chapter Five considers how possession can affect interpersonal relationships as characters become queered through possession of a new vessel. I explore how deception is

used in Inhabited Vessels, using their new vessels to lure their victim away from the group. I examine how these attempts to lure can involve deception and coercion. Bodily autonomy and consent are considered as characters engage in relationships and sex whilst possessed. I consider how the dynamic is altered when characters become aware of the possessor inside the vessel, in this they must see the possessor within the possessed, recognising a different person to the one externally presented.

This chapter analyses *Cult of Chucky* and *Freaky* to exemplify how possession can represent relationships as one partner's body changes. I exemplify how relationships that involve an Inhabited Vessel can become queered as identities, bodies and gender change in heterosexual couples. I advance this discussion through an analysis of relationships that form during possession. Whilst in Chapter Three and Four I discuss the tangible body (second skin) and gender performance (third skin), this chapter notes how these layers can become translucent to certain characters. These characters can look to the Inhabited Vessel and see their spirit (first layer), as it becomes visible to them. In this we see relationships symbolic of a trans partner in an established relationship and a trans partner entering a relationship.

In Chapter Six, I utilise the theories established in the previous chapters to consider the character(s) Glen/Glen & Glenda/GiGi, analysing their journey from *Seed of Chucky* to *Chucky* as they attempt to find euphoria. In the *Child's Play* franchise, Glen is split into two bodies (Glen and Glenda) due to their gender confusion however, they continue to feel incomplete and dysphoric until they are finally reunited again in one body becoming GiGi. GiGi finds euphoria as their expression and body are aligned. I consider it essential to understand the Inhabited Vessel and the Possessed Slasher in more detail, before delving into the deeper analysis considered with GiGi. This way GiGi's journey can also be considered in its entirety and uninterrupted. In GiGi's journey, each theme interacts with different stages of their transition, therefore considering their journey as a whole at the end of the thesis allows

each stage of their transition to be considered in its amalgam of multiple themes. This chapter also utilizes GiGi's transition to consider how Tiffany and Chucky develop, as their perspectives on gender and family change. Through interacting with their child's transition, the pair begin to embrace their own differences, ultimately ending up happier.

This chapter begins considering Glen, highlighting how gender is assigned and its connection to violence. I consider elements of the transbiological body as Tiffany and Chucky attempt to push Glen into a binary gender and by extension sexed body. Then I consider Glen and Glenda, focusing on how these characters interact with dysphoria in the new bodies, how they perform gender after their separation and the process of choosing your own body. Finally, I study GiGi, noting how elements of social and medical transition are facilitated through supernatural technologies wielded by a family embracing their difference.

Literature Review

Genre

The horror genre features many differing subgenres, with different conventions and narrative structures. Therefore, it is important to establish the predominant traits that unite them all. The definition of horror is a debated issue, as it is a genre that contains a variety of themes and genre conventions. Theorists, such as Wood (1978)⁴, Park (2018) and Schubart (2018), centralise the definition of the horror genre around the experience of fear as both a prevailing theme of stories that feature threat and a goal for filmmakers to evoke in the audience. I propose, alongside Maddrey (2004), Muir (2011) and Meeuf (2022), that the filmmaker's goal of striking fear is tied to social issues surrounding the release.

The role of fear can vary in horror, some horror aims for adjacent feelings such as discomfort, anxiety or trepidation. Other theorists, such as Waldron (2022), extrapolate that the fear portrayed within the horror genre is commonly a reflection of social anxieties within the context of the film's production and release. Schubart considers horror as a form of edgework, or mental play, a dark stage in which to interact with challenging emotions or difficult situations. In this, it is not simply to experience the suggestion of fear, but rather the active action of threat. The audience interacts with a threat, whether realistic or highly fictional, learning from their emotions and reactions. Aggression is central to the Slasher, possession narrative and Possessed Slashers. Aggression and violence are found in killers and possessors as they attack those around them. However, this aggression and violence can also be found in final girls and (sometimes possessed) protagonists, as they take up the role of an aggressor.

⁴ In *Robin Wood on the Horror Film: Collected Essays and Reviews* (2018).

In distinguishing genres, Tudor (2012) presents the idea of the ‘empiricist dilemma’ when discussing Kitses (1969) and Bazin’s (2005) ideas of defining the western film. Tudor emphasises the inherent issues with determining the characteristics that define a genre, as one must already have decided that a film is part of that genre. Should the identifying characteristics of a western be decided and then media that adheres to those characteristics be labelled as westerns or should the films be selected first then analysed? This issue can be likened to the well-known causality dilemma of “What came first, the chicken or the egg?” This question highlights an issue with assigning genre, particularly with the development of new genres and subgenres.

Tudor proposes the *a priori* method, the empiricist method and the social consensus. The *a priori* method builds upon Wittgenstein’s (1958) ideas of family resemblance, suggesting that media is watched with a particular pattern in mind. Whilst the narrative may not have to strictly adhere to every characteristic, essential elements are present to inform the viewer which genre/subgenre of media they are viewing. Petridis (2019) suggests that in terms of a Slasher, for example, we may expect narratives that focus on a killer of some kind, hunting and attacking a group of victims. Whilst elements may change, for example the number of killers as seen in *Scream* (1996), the film can still be identified as a Slasher.

However, changing or expanding certain elements, can change the subgenre classification. For example, if the killer is an animal or cryptid⁵ of some kind, this would adhere more to the definition of a Creature Feature. We could consider *Anaconda* (1997) and *The Descent* (2005) as examples. They feature a killer, the anaconda or the cave creatures, and a group of victims that are hunted and picked off one-by-one leaving final survivors to escape or defeat the creature(s), the defining difference being that the creature(s) lack the cognition of

⁵ Creatures with debated existence, for example: Big Foot, Mothman, The Jersey Devil.

the Slasher. Whilst they are also predatory, their violence is viewed as innate to their nature rather than choice.

Some theorists, such as Clover (1992, 2015), Dika (1987) and Rockoff (2002), have discussed what they consider to be essential elements of the Slasher film. Clover suggests that the Slasher subgenre should be considered in two phases, those predating *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) that display common elements with Slashers but are not considered Slashers and Slashers dating from 1974 to 1986, through which the format has evolved. Dika states that a Stalker/Slasher film can be identified by two parts. The first part is the ‘past event’, in which the killer faces some kind of traumatic experience, followed by present events in which the killer returns for revenge.

Rockoff builds on Clover’s suggested six key elements of the Slasher and Dika’s structuralist suggestions, arguing that there are in fact seven key elements. Whilst Clover’s key elements are predominantly tangible, such as the killer, the weapon and the final girl, some of Rockoff’s suggestions are more flexible. Rockoff approaches these elements with an idea that is not simply what is directly in the film but rather how it is presented or explained. For example, Rockoff highlights the subjective point of view as a key element, suggesting that it not just what is within the narrative that becomes a key expected element of the Slasher, but how the film is made. For example, use of point of view shots can be seen in the beginning of *Halloween* (1978), as we watch through Michael’s eyes as he kills his babysitter with a knife, and also in *The Evil Dead* (1981), as the camera is positioned as the force of evil in pursuit of victims to possess. Whilst these films use these POV shots for different overall effects, they both position the audience in the place of the killer. The use of these shots enforces the familial resemblance of two films with different settings and themes, allowing them to be defined as Slashers despite differences in some of Clover’s key elements.

Clover, Dika, and Rockoff acknowledge that in their attempts to highlight key elements of the Slasher, not all of their suggested elements must be present for a film to be considered a Slasher. I will not attempt to define the elements that a Slasher or occult film must have, however, I will assert trends in Possessed Slashers, utilising the key elements theorists highlight in Slashers and possession narratives, or occult cinema, to highlight differences. Furthermore, when examining the development of tropes and narrative elements in film cycles it is important to note the breaks to the form that facilitate changes in genres and subgenres. Jones (2024) discusses the Slasher subgenre and notes five major phases in the proto-slasher, production boom, supernatural slashers and sequels, postmodern slashers and subsequent slashers. They suggest that the supernatural slashers and sequels can be found between the mid-1980s and the early 1990s. However, I suggest that the supernatural slasher is not limited to this time period, instead these films are part of the Possessed Slasher subgenre, a subgenre that can be found beyond the early 1990s.

When gender is explored in horror, the Slasher and occult cinema are commonly discussed subgenres, due to the interaction between violence and power as women act out in aggression. Clover (1992) discusses both Slasher and occult horror as notable genres when discussing gender. They utilise the term 'occult horror' to refer to a vast group of different types of narratives, from that of the satanic possession, to the telekinetic, to films of supernatural contagion. Olsen and Reinhard (2016) in their discussion of possessed women suggest 'exorcism cinema' as a subcategory to the occult film proposed by Clover. In *Possessed Women, Haunted States: Cultural Tensions in Exorcism Cinema*, they frame their discussion of the possessed woman through a focus on the exorcism ritual and its role in depicting the battle between good and evil. This further highlights the complexity of genre, subgenre, and further subcategories. I may make reference to other types within occult horror when necessary, however, I will focus on possession narratives, in which an individual, a group, or an inanimate

object becomes possessed without the necessity that this possession be resolved through exorcism, if it is resolved at all. This thesis is focused on the process of possession and the subsequent manipulations of the body, identity and gender, rather than the act of removing the possessor.

Clover notes that when discussing occult horror, it can be difficult to assign an all-encompassing definition or model due to the previously noted variations in form. However, they do suggest that a key component is the interplay between two methods of explanation for the events within the narrative, that of 'white science' and 'black magic'. They refer to white science as the idea of western rational tradition, highlighting the role of commonly white doctors, suggesting the use of science to cure ailments, often the likes of possession, infection and curses. In contrast, Clover states that, black magic refers to a form of the occult, stating examples such as spiritualism, Satanism, Voodoo, and some variants of Roman Catholicism. Where white science uses the tools of therapy, drugs and surgery, black magic relies on that of the crucifix, séances and exorcisms.

They further note that the role of white science is often ascribed to white men, whereas black magic is more often presented by people of colour, children, and women. Whilst Clover's reference to black magic as the realm of the 'third-world peoples' (Clover's term) is rather reductive, they are trying to highlight that the world of black magic exists outside that of the white man's science. They further note that the few times black magic is presented by white male characters it is often from an educational perspective, that of a professor, researcher or a writer noting the beliefs of others in an academic nature.

Clover borrows these terms from *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (Davis, 1985) however I find these terms are not only outdated but unclear in their meaning. The term 'black magic' is commonly used to refer to both dark magic and satanism. Whilst magic or witchcraft was

considered independent from that of Christian religion, the persecution of women during Witch Trials during the 17th century added to the association between magic and satanism. Clover's discussion of the interplay of white science and black magic focuses on the failure of white science to solve issues of black magic however it does not address the interplay within those grouped together under the term 'black magic', such as the previously noted historical conflict between the concept of satanism, witchcraft and Catholicism. It is fair to assume that, to use some of Clover's examples, Catholics, Satanists and Vodouists may not appreciate being lumped together under the term 'black magic'.

Huckvale (2018), in *Movie Magik: The Occult in Film*, notes the importance of the distinction between religion and magic, noting that religion is predominantly based within a moral structure and maintaining a level of social order whereas magic is independent of established social structure, allowing an individual power without the intervention of a god or deity. They highlight the variation even in religious occult cinema, highlighting the difference in human intervention in *The Exorcist* (1973) versus *The Omen* (1976). Noting Huckvale's insistence on the distinction between religion and magic, I propose that they are often conflated within occult media. This is particularly an issue as the radical power of the supernatural in the Possessed Slasher sits at a distinction from normative social order. Occult horror films reflecting the magical or non-religious supernatural often still ascribe morality to the practitioners and victims of magic. From here on out in discussing the relationship between 'white science' and 'black magic' I will use the terms 'science' and 'supernatural technologies'. I utilise the term technologies, as I intend to emphasise in my research that the supernatural can be used to create, change and perform. It can act as a tool, shifting from the approach that supernatural technologies, such as possession, simply attack and consume the passive victim,

The monster (a demon, curse, or spirit) and the cure (an exorcism, magic, cleaning or rituals) are often both a product of supernatural magic, as science is proven to be useless, most commonly within the first half of the narrative. It is further important to note that ideas of science and supernatural magic are not always mutually exclusive. This can be seen in *The Exorcist: Believer* (2023), which rejects the battle between science and supernatural technologies originally seen in *The Exorcist* (1973). In *The Exorcist: Believer* the blending of science, Catholicism and Hoodoo are required to save the possessed victims. I suggest that science and supernatural technologies are inextricably linked in the changing malleable possessed body.

Olsen and Reinhard (2016) predominantly focus on exorcism cinema, but they also discuss Slasher horror. They note that there are correlations between Clover's final girl and the possessed woman. Just as male protagonists exorcise the possessed woman to subjugate her feminine sexuality in exorcism cinema, the virginal final girl subjugates her own sexuality in the Slasher film. The final girl takes on the role of both the possessed subjugated woman and the heroic priest. They distinguish between exorcism cinema and occult cinema, noting that presentations of demonic possession without the presence of an exorcism align more closely with that of the Slasher horror.

Clover (1992) highlights the use of Slasher media in discussing sexual attitudes and representation, suggesting that the almost compulsive formula of the Slasher allows for the extrapolation of trends. Some genres with seemingly rigid structures do allow the notation of trends, however this statement does not consider the contextual changes and cycles that lead to changes. Furthermore, it does not consider the fluidity of the Slasher when the supernatural is involved. Noting Clover's (1992) discussion of both the Slasher and the occult horror, and the connection between the two subgenres, Olsen and Reinhard suggest that the final girl of the

Slasher shares many similarities with the possessed woman in the possession (occult) horror. They suggest that both are transgressors of gender norms. I further this by troubling transgression of gender norms at the intersection of these two subgenres, in the Possessed Slasher. I consider how tropes of gender in the Slasher and Occult subgenres shift when the two are combined. Despite the noted similarities, I suggest that tropes in the Possessed Slasher are distinct from both the Slasher and the Possessed Slasher.

The line between the Slasher and the occult film can become blurred; to use Olsen and Reinhard's example, *The Evil Dead* (1981) portrays as many elements of occult possession as it does teen Slasher. As highlighted, it can be difficult to define or create a recipe for Slashers or possession narratives, and such is the case for the Possessed Slasher. However, there are trends and themes within the Possessed Slasher that sit at a distinction from the trends within the Slasher and the possession narrative. The power of the supernatural meets the agency of choosing and/or accepting possession, becoming something new and monstrous. The gender of these characters becomes distinct from the gender archetypes within the Slasher and the possession narrative, confronting societal structures differently.

My research offers consideration of aggression narratives (Schubart, 2018), as a form of organising horror subgenres, by theme (Survival Horror, Social Horror and Identity Horror). In Schubart's Social Horror, in which narratives surround the livelihood or social construction around monsters, the goal is to coexist (*The Vampire Diaries* (2009-2017))⁶. Whether the protagonists are creatures, such as vampire or werewolves, or human, they must learn to live with and exist with a threat. In Identity Horror the goal is focused on extraction, as this category focuses on invasion either of the home or the body (*Hostel* (2005), *Them* (2007)). Exorcism horror may be best assigned to the Identity Horror, as the prevailing goal is to extract the demon

⁶ Schubart's suggested examples.

from the body as opposed to a focus on surviving the actions of the demonic force as we might see in the Survival Horror. Stated simply: the Survival Horror is to outlive *it*, the Social Horror is to coexist with *it* and the Identity Horror is to get *it* out or get out of *it*.

Within Survival Horror, with the theme of predatory aggression, the goal or intent of the narrative is to outlive or outrun the predatory threat. The possession narrative and Slasher horror focus on the goal of survival, and often even when the predatory threat is defeated the threat returns in sequels. All the characters can attempt to do is ultimately outlive the threat and survive for as long as possible. Both subgenres place focus on the interplay between the survivor who takes up arms against a monstrous threat. In the Possessed Slasher the survivor is not the only victim of threat, the Inhabited Vessel find themselves threatened by those around them as they find themselves in new and (seemingly) vulnerable vessels.

In *Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film* (2001), Clover uses benchmark media as the main reference to time or context of the Slasher. They refer to post-1974 and post-1978 media, highlighting the importance of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) and *Halloween* (1978) on the Slasher genre. Whilst these films are certainly influential and arguably genre defining, I will not approach media from the perspective of pre- and post-benchmark films. T. Williams (2015) suggests that Clover's final girl in the 1970s is never entirely victorious as she is eventually saved by a man. They note examples such as Dr Loomis saving Laurie at the end of *Halloween* (1978). T. Williams suggests that it is not until after *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre Part 2* (1986) that heroines, or final girls, really victorious. This distinction highlights how historical contexts affect horror and T. Williams highlights that structural elements such as the final girl archetype are nuanced based on these contexts. As evidenced in this discussion, the benchmark film is subjective, and whilst individual films are

important considering the formation of a formula, my research will not use these benchmark films as defining parameters for film cycles.

Waldron (2022) notes that horror films can be used as a form of time capsule, as a reflection of social anxieties. Waldron approaches queerness in horror from the perspective of a historical timeline, contextualising notable periods of history in which the representation of queerness shifts. They analyse the horror genre, briefly touching on elements of subgenre media. I will approach media from the perspective of narrative, queerness, and transness first, noting history where relevant to the discussion of developing subgenres, cycles, and audience reception. Social history is notable when considering the development of the *Evil Dead* and *Child's Play* franchise, however this is not to imply that older media within the franchise will be considered as less queer or trans in reading.

I agree that contextual events are important when understanding the creation of horror media. The success of certain benchmark films highlights that these films tap into something that a large portion of society can relate to, a particular fear or anxiety. I further agree that when it comes to defining the Slasher and occult film the number of variations in these films can make it difficult to frame a simple definition. It can be as much about the differences between certain Slashers that indeed confirms them as a Slasher. I will use elements and narrative trends noted by theorists, particularly Clover and Creed (2015, 2023, 2022), to analyse films that are Slashers, possession films, and the intersection between the two. As a dominant theme in these subgenres is the act of predation, Survival Horror will be used as a method of categorizing and understanding case studies further.

Gendering

Discussing themes and expressions of predation is key to understanding the interplay of gender, power and fear. It is important to challenge assumptions about those who display

predatory aggression and the contrast between predator and prey within Slashers, possession narratives and the Possessed Slasher. This section will consider gender and aggression of the final girl, the monster and the horror spectator. Clover (1992, 2015) introduced the concept of the final girl. This final girl is pursued by an often-male presenting killer, her friends are picked off one by one leaving her the final protagonist to stand up against the killer and defeat them. She is set apart from the other characters as studious, watchful and virginal. Clover describes the final girl as 'boyish', not fully masculine or feminine in her gender expression. She is the human Other within her friendship group, before the monstrous Other enters their lives.

Clover further suggests that the final girl is likened to an adolescent boy, in that she is feminine enough to react to the horror around her in a gratifying way that is unapproved for adult men. However, she is not so feminine as to disturb societal gender norms. Firstly, the discussion of the final girl must be challenged in how she is perceived to exhibit masculinity. In Schubart's rejection of essentialism and insistence on the role of social constructivism, in which gender is entirely learned, they highlight an issue in Clover's description of the final girl's gender expression. What are the traits that are assigned masculine? If the final girl is aggressive in her fight against the killer or monster, does this equate to masculine behaviour? The traits that are assigned as masculine can differ from culture to time period to social group. There is subjectivity to the assignation of aggression or violence as masculine, furthermore it is problematic to imply that men are inherently more aggressive or violent.

Schubart discusses the experience of emotions within women with regard to horror, rejecting the neurosexist (Fine, 2010) presumption that men and women experience differing emotions biologically. Schubart cites Baron-Cohen (2003) as an example of the search for emotional differences between sexes. They note Baron-Cohen's suggestion that the female brain is predominantly hardwired to feel and express empathy, whereas the male brain is suited

to understanding and building systems. Schubart insists that men and women both experience aggression to the same degree, and furthermore, the levels to which people feel comfortable expressing that aggression is based on the gender dichotomy. In their discussion of violence performed by female characters Bogutskaya (2023) notes that women are not viewed as violent by nature. They suggest that when women commit murder or violence onscreen the audience requires a justification for these actions, such as desperation or revenge. Bogutskaya highlights the rape-revenge genre as a key example of this.

This discussion of discomfort with aggression from women and its associated gendering is very relevant when discussing the Possessed Slasher. In Slashers, aggression is significantly linked to survival. The final girl's aggression is not only viewed as masculine, both by theorists and audiences as later discussed, but also her aggression is justified as an act of desperation as she battles for her life after the death of her friends. Bogutskaya notes the influence of male serial killers in violent media, noting the number of variations of Ted Bundy present in media. However, they suggest that this is not the case with aggressive or violent women, whether due to the lesser-known minority of female serial killers to inspire these characters or simply viewers discomfort with female violence. This discomfort also appears in possession narratives as the violent possessed woman is abject (Creed, 2024), as she acts in a way socially considered unbecoming of a young woman.

Schubart, in their discussion of bioculturalism, suggests that there are meta-narratives, evolutionary stories that trace human development, that influence our view on gender. They specifically highlight the notion of the hunter/gatherer dichotomy and how it is assigned to men and women. It is a common misapprehension that during early human development, men were hunters and women gatherers. Men were more aggressive and stronger, whilst women were more passive and better suited to gathering food. Whilst this meta-narrative has been disproven,

Schubart notes that it still bolsters the construction of difference in gender, even if it is inaccurate. Myths and neurosexist conclusions like this impact the way in which the final girl is read. Arguably, it is gender constructions such as this that makes the final girl's gender a discussion at all. As this thesis will explore, this becomes troubled when considering the final family in *Possessed Slashers*, as violence becomes distributed.

Welsh (2010) studies the correlation between gender differences in Slasher horror, with a particular focus on trends in sexual activity and survival. The Slasher genre is generally regarded as commonly portraying scenes that subject women to violence. In response to this reputation, and the previous presumptions that women die more in Slashers, Cowan and O'Brien (1990) studied 40 American Slashers. Their research found that the proportion of female and male nonsurvivors was almost 50/50. However, the female characters that died tended to wear provocative clothing, were seen nude or undressing, or were presented as promiscuous. Welsh references Christie's (1986) advancements on the concept of the ideal victim, in which the victim must be perceived as legitimate. Welsh continues that the ideal victim in Slasher horror is the 'good girl'. The final girl is rewarded for conforming to the gender schema of the 'good girl', expressing her gender and sexuality in a way that is palatable and unchallenging.

So, if Clover is basing the expressions of gender within Slashers on the prevailing traditional gender roles of the contextual societal climate, then how is the final girl's expression read by audiences, particularly queer and trans audiences who likely have differing perspectives on gender expression? For example, Mackay (2021) discusses the gender expression of lesbians who identify as butch but not transgender, building upon Halberstam's (1998) ideas of 'female masculinity'. Mackay notes that whilst the term 'female masculinity' is not entirely seamless in a 'post-trans' landscape, it does highlight the presence of female-

bodied masculine individuals who do not identify as trans men. When considering the expression of masculinity within horror characters, it is important to consider, for example, the masculine-identifying female spectator and their potential reading of gender. Each spectator brings their individual perceptions of gender guidelines, some of which are shaped by social climate but others by life experience and identity.

Whilst there is complexity surrounding gender expression and perpetuated traditional gender norms, there is also a heteronormative and cisnormative presumption in Clover's discussion of the final girl. Her lack of hyper-femininity is considered anomalous, as she expresses gender traits traditionally assigned to masculinity. Her virginity, or lack of willingness to sleep with the men around her, is used to assign her as an outsider to the characters but also unthreatening to an audience. Furthermore, in instances in which the final girl is a man, statements upon their gender are extrapolated based on their feminine positioning as a final girl, as seen by Pugh (2007). Waldron discusses Clover's final girls, noting that the description of the final girl as both masculine and feminine could be read as a reflection of the queer or non-binary hero. I will extrapolate further on this discussion of final girls, final boys and, as Waldron suggests, final folks, noting how these figures interact with the final family. Waldron suggests 'final folks' as a term for the final figures who potentially reflect the queer or non-binary hero.

A key component of Clover's discussion of the final girl is the ability to identify. In her expression of both traditionally masculine and feminine traits the final girl is read as a woman to viewers who are women and a man to viewers who are men. This idea of cross-gender identification relies on the presupposition that women and men not only require a reflection of themselves to relate to character but that they themselves do not express elements of both femininity and masculinity. In the final family, there is often at least one man and one woman,

allowing at least two characters for identification. However, this is not to imply that viewers who are men automatically identify with the character who is a man, and vice versa. There has been some debate as to whether women are positioned to identify with horror in the first place.

L. Williams (2015) discusses the positioning of women in audiences and their identification, or lack thereof, with horror. L. Williams proposes that women have little to identify with in horror, as they are confronted with images of women experiencing violence and powerlessness. They suggest that the dominant male reading excludes women. Theorists, such as Schubart, would likely disagree, as they emphasise the relationship between women and horror. L. Williams bases their discussion of women in horror on Mulvey's (1999) theory of the male gaze. Burston and Richardson (2005) state that Mulvey's male gaze suggests that there is no space for women in mainstream media. The presumption that the audience for horror is cis het men has an impact both on the way in which media is created but also analysed. Labelling horror as a method for viewing the pain and suffering of women in fear for pleasure or titillation ignores the diversity of audiences. Schubart notes the connection between women and horror, noting Apter's (2007) assertion that there is no sex difference in excitement-seeking instinct.

Furthermore, the male gaze ought to be problematised as it is based in heteronormativity. Burston and Richardson (2005), discuss the common misuse of the male gaze theory, highlighting its use as a form of shorthand for voyeurism implicit in spectatorship and the objectification of women onscreen. They discuss Foucault's (1995) idea of the panopticon and the internalisation of the inspecting gaze. Burston and Richardson highlight that lesbian and gay representation and desire challenges Mulvey's framework. Not only does it consider the dynamics of sexual desire of the audience and the image, but how individuals identify with people of different identities. They note that Stacey (1987), in the discussion of

the gaze, fails to address the formation of desire through the interaction between desire and identification. De Lauretis (1985) argues that Stacey's approach desexualises the lesbian spectator, instead focusing on psychoanalytic narcissism. Burston and Richardson highlight the role of 'cultural competence' of the lesbian spectator, influencing their reading through experience and knowledge.

I question, when considering the perpetuation of gender norms within media, whether the final girl exhibits a mixture of masculinity and femininity or simply a lack of hyper-femininity expected from female victims in horror? When approaching gender as a binary, the two terms become antonymous, however when gender expression is approached from a more abstract perspective, the answer to the previous question becomes more complex. So, how is gender expressed by the other victims in the Slasher? The expression of the other victims is often used to contrast the final girl, highlighting her as an outsider to the extent that she does not perform the same way, but not so much that she does not have friends.

Bogutskaya, in *Unlikeable Female Characters* (2023), discusses the representation of women within media, particularly tropes of female characters that express themselves in a way that labels them unlikeable. They give examples of character types such as 'the bitch' and 'the angry woman', in which feminine characters act in a way that is considered masculine, failing to adhere to stereotypical gender norms. They note the unspoken rules of how women are expected to act and express themselves, bolstered by ideas of what is 'proper' or 'ladylike'. Bogutskaya notes the sentiment that women's gender expression is a balancing act of, for example, being smart but not outspoken, pretty but not vain, feminine but not too girly. Women that transgress too far in either direction, therefore become unlikeable. The final girl in her expression of both masculinity and femininity could be read as the likeable woman, she is an expression of femininity that is widely acceptable whilst still masculine enough to not become

unlikely. She does not challenge audiences by being unlikely, therefore she can more easily be aligned with.

Olsen and Reinhard (2016), noting Creed, highlight the similarities between Clover's final girl and the possessed woman. They suggest that they are both transgressors of gender norms and display a range of gendered behaviours and expressions. Sweet (2016) builds on Clover's work on the occult horror and the possession of the portal. Sweet suggests that possession narratives perpetuate traditional gender norms rather than subverting them. Like Clover, Sweet discusses *The Exorcist* (1973) as a case study for the gender dynamics in possession horror. They further the conversation surrounding the interaction between the possessed victim and the male protagonist. Clover highlights that Regan's possession is used as a narrative point to further the character of Father Karras. Whilst the film is focused on the exorcist, as noted in the title, the possession and Regan's suffering exist in the background of Karras' challenge with his faith and grief. It positions Regan simply as a portal, clearing the stage for the battle between Karras and Pazuzu.

In their discussion of *The Conjuring* (2013), Sweet notes that the female characters are victimised and attacked by the monster/demon without any form of provoking, whereas the male characters suffer only as a direct response to action as the exorcism begins. These women are positioned as passive, vulnerable, and submissive. This positioning may be utilised to be more jarring, as the actions of the possessor differ drastically to that of the passive and vulnerable woman. Sweet further notes that these characters are presented as existing within the body, but they are pushed aside and overpowered by the possessor. Whilst we see the similarities between the possessed and the final girl in their transgression of gender norms, they differ in their expressions of violence and aggression. The final girl is forced into expressing aggression as she is victimised by the killer, the possessed woman is pushed aside as the violent

possessor takes hold of the vessel and the killer is the embodiment of aggression. This difference provokes the question, what about the possessed figure in the Possessed Slasher? Here the final folk and the possessed figure may be combined, positioned at an intersection between the powerful and the powerless. These characters have the potential to be monstrosly powerful, taking up aggression with additional power of the supernatural.

Twitchell (1985) suggests that the monster is a product of misdirected sexual energy, or perhaps aggression, encoding patterns of acceptable sexuality (as noted by Gross (2001), Raymond (2003) and Walters (2003)). They state that the killer is identifiably male, with a rage that is rooted or expressed within relation to sex. However, how does this interact in the case of the cross-dressing or transgender killer trope prevalent within Slasher media since *Psycho* (1960)? Clover notes that in the rare instances in which the killer is female, to use their term, not only is the killer's motive not psychosexual but they reflect no gender confusion at all. This is an oversimplification of the killer, particularly in later film cycles. The trans killer does not neatly adhere to Clover's suggestions of the male and female killer. T. Williams (1996) suggests that Clover does not consider films that do not follow the formula they propose in enough depth, treating them as outliers. For example, in the case of Mrs Voorhees in *Friday the 13th* (1980), Clover mentions the film as an outlier but does not extrapolate on how this affects their theory of the male killer.

T. Williams (1996) argues that within Slasher horror, particularly 1980s horror, Clover fails to address the importance of the disillusionment of the family. As awareness of the failure of the idealised Reaganite family and abuse within the family increased during the 1980s, T. Williams suggests that questions of abuse and dysfunction in the family can be found in Slasher horror. They suggest that the horror killer is coded to reference the paternal figure of the dysfunctional family. Young, often adolescent, victims challenge the aggression of the killer,

in a way that young family members have had to interact with aggressive parental figures. Whilst Clover suggests that the progressive action of the Slasher genre was the expressions of gender and feminism, T. Williams presents the critique of the family as most progressive. Whilst the critique of the nuclear and Reaganite family is not entirely a discussion of gender or feminism, the subjects are clearly related. In debating the role of the aggressive paternal other, it would be negligent to not consider the gender dichotomy and toxic masculinity.

Harrington (2017) builds upon Clover's suggestion that traditional masculinity is unsuccessful in the Slasher, noting that non-traditional masculinity is not successful either. Harrington highlights the male virgin as an example of non-traditional masculinity; he is considered to be in a dangerous state of ignorance as he has not achieved manhood through heterosexual penetrative sex. Therefore, he is open to the attack of the killer as he has not asserted himself as a penetrator. In this, the male virgin and the final girl share in their gendering, their metaphorical adolescence positions them as victims of the patriarch. These archetypes should be considered in their difference both from each other and from the characters around them. Furthermore, if it is a lack of penetration that positions the character as open to attack, how does this interact with the victimhood of characters who are sexually active and often presented as sexually promiscuous?

Richardson and Smith (2022) note that there are two main tropes of trans representation in media, most of which feature trans women. They highlight the tropes of the pathetic and the predatory, noting the connection with trans-exclusionary radical feminism (TERF) ideology. The pathetic trans-woman character is easily identified as trans, she is considered non-passing and used as a source of comedy. The second trope is the predatory trans character, in contrast to the pathetic characters these representations are perceived as 'passing'. They are represented as a sexual threat to men and a threat to women by invading safe spaces. This ideology has

been perpetuated by TERFs, gender critical theorists and transphobic rhetoric surrounding legislation, such as the 'Bathroom Bill'. Richardson and Smith also highlight the influence of PSAs such as *Boys Beware: Homosexuals Are on the Prowl* (1961), perpetuating the ideology that homosexual men disguise themselves as women to trap or deceive heterosexual men into queer sex. The trans character is therefore positioned to be a sexual threat to both men and women. Keegan (2021) highlights that since the 1970s trans characters on screen feature four primary motifs, the first of which is the psychotic Slasher. The trans or cross-dressing killer contains elements of the pathetic and the predatory. When they are positioned as predatory, their transness hides them from suspicion from the other characters and the audience. Often the trans or cross-dressing killer is presented as pathetic upon their reveal, their failure to perform gender or their body utilised as spectacle. My research considers how this interacts with the possessed killer, particularly the cross-gender possessed killer, as they perform gender in a new body.

The role of gender cannot be ignored when considering the role of predation in horror, both of victims and aggressors. I suggest that the gendering of some characters and character archetypes in horror positions potential representation for spectators who experience gender differently than traditional gender norms dictate. We must consider not only how these characters are read by audiences, but by theorists as well, and how their gendering and potentially queered gender change the way we analyse them. The *Inhabited Vessel* has the potential to challenge how gender is considered as attackers and survivors perform gender and aggression in Possessed Slashers.

Horror and difference

To understand queerness and transness in horror is to understand the normative and non-normative. Horror media often features the struggle between normative and the non-

normative, and it is the difference between the two that often creates forms of horror or abjection. The threat of the monster often hinges on this difference. Neale (1980) and Halberstam (1995) note that horror is centrally concerned with difference. Halberstam notes that this is particularly important in the formation of monstrosity. Grant (2015) further suggests that the versatility and complexity of the horror genres allows for this ever shifting but ever-present discussion of difference. Perhaps this consistent presence of difference is rooted in the necessity of conflict within horror. This conflict facilitates violence and aggression, polarising characters to create opposing sides.

Within predator-prey interaction, the distinction must be formed between the monster and the victim, allowing a compelling narrative as the predator themselves become prey as we see in the case of the final girl or the exorcised woman. Benshoff (1997, 2015) discusses difference in terms of the monster, highlighting correlations between the monster and the homosexual. They note the othering of homosexuals within society and the othering of the monster within the narrative, allowing queer viewers to identify with the monster. However, this suggested alignment of the queer viewer and the monster must be considered both from a perspective of identification and implication.

Waldron (2022) notes the importance of representations of queer people within horror media, suggesting that the othering of queer people within horror can foster anti-gay attitudes leading to real world violence. Walters (2003) states that queer representation can lead to new forms of homophobia and re-invisibility. They further note that some more acceptable or 'good' representations allow audiences to accept and embrace images of queerness rather than realities of queerness. They agree with Gamson (2001), in that the representation of minorities can bring that minority into the forefront, leading to an increase in negative attention. Walters

highlights that much queer representation focuses on the goal of heterosexual acceptance and assimilation of queer people.

Wood (1978) notes that part of the appeal of horror for othered audiences is the fulfilment of the desire to view representations of ourselves fighting against the norms that oppress us. Whilst this explanation may provide a reason why queer people have a history of attachment to horror media, this attempt at catharsis may fall short because in the association between the queer viewer and the queer monster, the viewer sees the monster struggle against norms that they face, however often the monster is neutralised. Whilst the way in which the monster is treated at the end of the media varies, often depending on the subgenre, they are often defeated by the protagonist. Wood identifies whether a film can be categorised as progressive or reactionary based on the narrative, particularly the ending. They suggest that the happy ending reflects a reactionary triumph of normality over the monstrous, whereas a bleak ending reflects a more progressive critique of the normal through its inability to eradicate the monstrous.

Waldron notes the interplay between the queerness of the monster and the queerness of the final folk. Waldron states that both the monster and the final girl are prime character types for queer identification, but how does this affect the reading of horror when both are present? As the final girl defeats the monster through rejecting normative standards, she is returning normativity to the world through defeating the non-normative outsider. Waldron does not go into depth regarding the way in which these othered outliers interact with each other or the broader reading of queer catharsis. In the Possessed Slasher the final folk and the possessed monster are not always mutually exclusive. Elements of the supernatural can be used to defeat the monster, but equally final folks can become monstrous through possession.

I approach representation with the acknowledgement that queer representation is nuanced in how it is identified and expressed, in what these representations imply, and in how they interact with audiences. Gross discusses the representation of 'plain gay folks', suggesting that in this representation queer people will become normalized through social transformation. This theory, as highlighted by Raymond, builds on the assumption that normalization and 'plain gay folk' is the key to a positive image of queer people. Walters (2003) agrees that due to the lack of physiological signifiers, it is hard to represent queer people in a way that is not associated with action, expression, and stylization. Walters also argues that whilst the focus of other minority groups is the quality and impact of their representations, the queer community is more concerned with achieving any representation in the first place. However, the search for representation does not culminate in simply displaying queerness on screen. The representations must be considered for their reading, implications and impact on audiences.

Gregg and Villarejo (2021) suggest that queer cinema features one of three things: a visual culture identified as queer; a body of narrative, documentary or experimental work collated under the rubric of LGBTQ+ cinema; and a means of critically reading and evaluating media through a queer lens. Benshoff (1997, 2015) discusses the ways in which homosexuality and horror intersect, in which they propose four categories to organise queer media. The first category contains films that feature identifiable gay and lesbian characters. Benshoff does not detail how these characters are 'identifiable', whether verbally identified or visually identified through sexual activity or typification, however based on the other categories it is implied they are referring to characters confirmed either verbally or in queer action.

Bradshaw (2021) mentions the role of coming out within media and the historical association between silence and the closet. To expand on their highlighting of coming out, I would question in instances in which characters are queer, but their character does not entirely

centre around their sexuality, how should coming out be handled within the narrative context? Whilst queer characters should not be condensed to their sexuality, it is important to consider how queerness and transness effects the way you interact with society. For example, coming out is not a one-and-done experience, in fact many queer and trans people spend their lives coming out repeatedly as they interact with new people. Therefore, verbal confirmation of queerness can be achieved without condensing the character to the reveal of their sexuality, however, this representation entirely depends on how filmmakers handle the character and narrative.

Benshoff (1997) suggests that the predominant representation of the displaced homosexual in monsters portrays gay men, followed by lesbian figures who feature much less frequently. They further note that it is even rarer to find instances in which fears regarding 'androgyny' or 'transsexualism' are represented. This disproportion is not due to a lack of fear or othering of trans people, it is more likely due to the societal erasure of transness. Theorists, such as Waldron and Miller (2023), would also highlight that this may be a generalisation that does not consider tropes such as the cross-dressing or trans killer. I further suggest that reflections of transness can be found in the *Inhabited Vessel*, as identity, the body and gender become more fluid and changeable.

Benshoff also discusses the category of media that contains subtextual or connotative representation of gay or lesbian characters. These characters exist on the fringe of the text; their queerness is implied through typification and coding. In media that fits within this category it is key to consider how these characters can be read as queer. Dyer (1993) asserts that we can often recognise a character's queerness without explicit confirmation of their sexuality by using queer visual typification. Typification involves reading traits and attributes in others. Frequently occurring types help us form mental prototypes in our brains of what a person

belonging to a social group does and how they look and speak. Reading certain traits or types leads to the association with the other types attached to that mental prototype. These types are frequently more surface-level and visual.

The use of these types in media can both perpetuate and develop the viewer's mental prototype. This is especially important in instances in which the viewer has no real-world interaction with that group, relying on the media they consume to create and edit these prototypes. How much of this is harmful and merely antiquated stereotyping versus required sociological typification-led stereotyping? Whilst the term is often used to describe the latter, it is important to consider psychological formation of prototypes. Shapiro (1981) and Tuchman (1978) highlight the importance of media in perpetuating ideology. Certain media types, such as advertising, rely on reductions of groups to stereotypes, allowing the associated ideology to help create narrative. Sender (2004), in their writing on marketing towards the LGBTQ+ community, notes the importance of typification and stereotyping in the role of queer visibility. In advertising media, there is a reliance on these stereotypes in a concentrated form. Whether a television or magazine advert, the information presented is often limited. Therefore, the audience must make quick assessments of the characters and situations within the advertisement. Whilst Shapiro, Tuchman, and Sender focus their research on representations and stereotyping within advertising, this theory also applies to other media types.

Metz (1974), a pioneer in semiotics in cinema, argued that films communicate visually as an art form, almost like a language. Audiences examine a signifier and evaluate the denotative semiotics, what they literally see or hear, but all signifiers also carry connotative semiotics, information that is implied based on its presence or form. Semiotics are often utilised in the analysis of genre media, as certain codes and conventions allow audiences to read and understand the film or media they are viewing more easily. This reliance on visual storytelling

allows for the telling of more complex stories, settings and concepts as certain contextual issues do not need further explanation than a visual cue.

In some ways the stereotype could be argued to be acting as this visual cue. However, unlike the reading of a narrative situation, the stereotype is attached to a real-world individual and has an impact on an audience member's reading of the represented group. Furthermore, whilst media forms like advertising suffer from a limit of information (Sender, 2004), necessitating quick recognition of types, are they necessitated in a two-hour film or even a full TV series? When there is the opportunity to avoid relying heavily on stereotypes and connotations, there is an opportunity to represent people in a more nuanced manner.

Much like Gregg and Villarejo's (2021) suggestion of queer cinema as reading, Benshoff (1997) notes the category of queer media that a queer spectator would read as queer through an attuned ability to identify queerness. They note Doty's (1993) work in discussing queer readings and the queer spectator. Doty discusses queer reading, the process of viewing and reading an un-confirmed queer character as queer in a search for representation. When discussing gay connotation, Doty suggests that representations that are queer coded in a subtle way are within a closet of mass culture, that they are hidden from the non-queer viewer who does not search for the signifiers and typification ingrained into the queer community. Findlay (1994) highlights how we use these signifiers to identify the invisible queer identities, noting that 'gaydar' is in fact merely a keen literacy in reading cultural signs and signifiers of queerness. This logical assumption comes from the historical and cultural secrecy surrounding the queer community, in which queer people used signifiers and coding to identify each other.

Gross (2001) notes the contextual representation is often subtle to the point of being readily misunderstood by the 'innocent', highlighting the theory that those in the know understand the queer context, but those who do not look for it, do not see it. Gross is referring

to the differences in codes and signifiers as read by those within the queer community in comparison to codes used by cis het people. However, if these suggested signifiers are learned by individuals with exposure to queer people and community, it is likely that those who are isolated from or simply not exposed to queer culture, whether queer or not, would not be trained in reading these signifiers to the same degree. Furthermore, in a modern context, are these signifiers as ingrained within the queer community to the same degree now that some of the secrecy surrounding queerness in some countries is reduced? Have these signifiers simply shifted or evolved over time from interaction with an increasingly accepting social and political climate? Raymond (2003) notes the impact of context in Doty's writing, and the opportunities for seeing queer representation within mainstream media during the 1990s.

Evans (2007) highlights how, in most cases in which children are born into social, racial, or cultural minorities they are surrounded by family members that serve as role models and close physical representation of that culture. For queer youth it is not guaranteed that you will have a closely-related, openly-queer family member, meaning that their main source of queer representation often comes from media. Gross (2001) further refers to gay and lesbian identities as more isolated and invisible than other ethnic and cultural minorities. Both Evans and Gross might agree that when representing queer identities visual signifiers are key in making up for the visual factors that identify these other minorities. Representations can feed into stereotypes, with little flexibility in considering what a queer person looks like. The queer institution *GLAAD* issues reports assessing the representation in media, often in search for an increase in positive impactful representations of queer people. However, the perception of positive or negative representation can be very subjective.

Sender, whilst understanding that 'positive' queer stereotypes can lead to greater diversity in the mental image of the queer person, notes that even the 'positive' representations

can lead to negative outcomes and perceptions. Perhaps this is due to the ideation of queer representation as the representation of one type of person, in opposition to the non-queer individual. Whilst a representation may seem positive, it could propagate more negatively viewed stereotypes in terms of representing queer bodies and diversity. Through caricatured and stereotypically queer coded depiction, the media may have a significant impact on internalized homophobia by contributing to the teaching and perpetuation of negative qualities or stereotypes. Raymond, whilst discussing the development and increase in queer representations, highlights this increase in a very positive and almost final tone. However, an increase in queer representation does not always equate to positive queer representation.

Miller details the distancing of transgender people through transgender characters. They state that representations of transgender characters directly impact the viewer's understanding and perceptions of transgender people. Miller notes that as trans characters are critiqued on their gender performance, they are distanced from cis characters, highlighting the differences between them. This distancing of trans people feeds into the concept of normativity. Antinormativity posits that queer and trans people ought not to aim for integration within the normative. Johnson (2015) suggests the notion of queer ambivalence, highlighting the way in which queer people desire acceptance but also wish to reject the normativity that others them.

Theorists, such as Edelman (2004), Halberstam and Sedgwick (1975), highlight a distinction between queerness and the normative, positioning queerness as outside the heteronormative. Wiegman and Wilson (2015) suggest that such theorists approach norms as conceptually and politically limiting, suggesting that antinormativity projects a form of immobility onto normativity. They highlight Ewald's (1990) definition of a norm, in which norms act as a method of society communicating with itself. Ewald further suggests that normativity allows an individual to greater achieve individuality, however, the individual

cannot avoid what becomes the ‘common standard’. It is not the sum of a group enforcing restrictions upon the individual, Ewald suggests, but a form of measurement. In their defence of the norm, it seems the discussions of normativity and the product of normativity are muddled. As Ewald suggests, the norm is a standard, whether created or naturally occurring, that impacts those within society. However, the actions of social groups who buy into this idea of the norm, such as criminalisation of queerness, are what ought to be challenged. Theorists who discuss the impact of normativity on queer people are more commonly discussing the repercussions of normativity on those who do and do not adhere to the standard.

The Body

A lot of horror features some kind of affront on the body, or at least the fear of it. Even if there are no assaults on the body, there can be changes, whether they are physical, mental or both. Halberstam (1995) notes that skin can be the site of difference in the gothic. The discussion of skin and suturing allows a discussion of bodies that does not presume genitals. Due to the fluidity of spirits and bodies in possession media, there seems a clear connection between possession and trans experiences. This is not to perpetuate the ‘born in the wrong body’ ideology but highlight the potential for cinematic experimentation with transness and representation of a trans disconnect, or dysphoria, between mind and body.

Harrington organises their discussion through stages of life experienced by women: including puberty, loss of virginity, birth, motherhood and menopause. Whilst these life events can also be experienced by queer and trans people, it is important to highlight some of the cisnormative and heteronormative ideals that assign these stages as universal. It would be insufficient to discuss gender within horror and not discuss these elements, particularly puberty, virginity and birth/motherhood. Freeman (2010) introduced the concept of chrononormativity, a supposition that we all follow the same timeline in life. I aim to consider

some of Harrington's suggested life events with a rejection of chrononormativity, considering queer time (Halberstam, 2005), notably the often-repeated experience of puberty and virginity. As Harrington notes, when referencing Clover (1992), the role of virginity in the Slasher film ought to be problematised. They note that the repeated use of the special virginal hero (final girl) character links unfavourably to the fates of the other more sexually liberated women with more agency, drawing a distinction between the morality of virginity and the right to survival.

Harrington further notes the role of penetration when considering the virgin in horror, referencing Richardson's (1996) assessment that virginity is predominantly associated with intercourse involving the penis and vagina. They further state that those who are not heterosexual, and by extension cisgender, are viewed as virgins, relying on a life of sexual activity dismissed as foreplay. Blank (2007) notes the complexity of the concept of virginity, highlighting that the intangible concept is steeped in historical social influence. Much like Richardson, they note the role of heterosexuality in considering virginity, further discussing the implications and expectations of those labelled as virginal. Whilst some theorists, such as Clover and Harrington, note the 'physical' virginity of characters in horror with a focus on ideas of the body and penetration, when rejecting assumptions of the body virginity should be considered in a non-physical sense, as discussed by Blank.

Virginity, in discussing gender within horror, is not only used to characterise the final girl but also influences the reading of the possessed girl. This discussion is key when addressing Clover's (1992) 'portals' in occult cinema. Clover highlights the role of the throat and the 'mother throat' (the neck of the uterus or vagina) within possession narratives in occult film, noting that evil commonly enters the body through one of these openings. Referencing the folk belief that both sneezing and orgasming open the body to the devil, they suggest that this idea of openness is why so many victims of possession in horror media are women. This assessment

that the woman's body is more open to evil relies on an assumption of the body and genitalia. Clover highlights that even when a male body serves as the portal, the male character is often coded as feminine, rendering possession a 'female' experience.

Clover (1992) likens possession to impregnation, as the body holds evil within the body, either the stomach through the throat or the uterus through the vagina. The evil often enters through the transmission of fluids, such as vomiting into another's mouth, as seen in several *Evil Dead* films (*The Evil Dead* (1981), *Evil Dead* (2013) and *Evil Dead Rise* (2023)), or simply climbing inside through the mouth, as seen in *Ouija: Origin of Evil* (2016). Pugh (2007), in their discussion of the *Evil Dead Trilogy*, discusses the queering of Ash's body as he becomes possessed and births Evil Ash through a vaginal opening on his shoulder. This discussion highlights the gendering of birth and the shift in Ash's gender expression. However, they focus more on the queered body in relation to Ash's masculinity; they do not consider the trans reading. My research considers the gendering of birth and the pregnancy of the physical body as possession from a queered perspective, as supernatural technologies facilitate puberty and reproductivity.

Creed, in their discussion of the monstrous feminine, builds upon Kristeva's (1982) concept of abjection. Kristeva discusses the formation of abjection through transgressing the border, body, and mother-child relationship. Creed proposes seven archetypes of the monstrous feminine, several of which discuss the interplay between gender, birth, and the body. In discussing Survival Horror and gender, it is important to problematise where abjection is formed and how the spectator may find abjection in different elements of the narrative or characterisation. Considering Faye's (2021) trans folk devils and the monster, I outline abjection in the possessed trans monster. Furthermore, I propose to problematise the idea of

abjection surrounding the body. How does Creed's suggestion of abjection of the male body through actions associated with the female body interact with the trans or non-binary body?

In Miller's discussion of transgender characters in horror, they note the use of the transgender body as means of creating horror. One example is the forceful unmasking of the transgender character in which they are revealed as transgender, often through the exposure of their genitalia, as seen in *Sleepaway Camp* (1983). Waldron also notes the role of the trans body as a spectacle. They draw a connection between the camera's focus on the genitals of trans characters and anti-trans legislation. This ties into Creed's suggestion of the abject woman's body in horror; however, the abjection is rooted in differing biases. I aim to destabilise assumptions of the body when discussing queerness and gender in horror analysis. Furthermore, cases in which the body is abject present opportunities for the representation of gender dysphoria. Leung (2012) notes dysphoria in the supernaturally changing body. Theorists, such as MacDonald (2011), Kisner (2021), Schubart (2018), Gardner and Maclay (2024), discuss *Ginger Snaps* (2000), considering Ginger's werewolf transformation and queering of the body. Ginger experiences distress surrounding the symptoms as she changes. In her transformation she grows a tail that she desperately straps to her leg, horrified at the chest hair she grows, echoing experiences of pre-transition transgender puberty. As the body begins to change, it becomes more dysphoric, more abject.

In summary, I will consider the Inhabited Vessel within the Possessed Slasher, utilising the pre-existing theories considered in this literature review surrounding gender, threat and transformation in Slashers and possession narratives. Horror itself interacts with themes of threat and fear, and notably these themes are often considered in how they interact with difference, or the Other. In the Possessed Slasher the site of difference can be found in

both antagonists and protagonists as they interact with the potential of the supernatural, transforming bodies, confronting gender and facing new and powerful threats.

Methodology

In this thesis I will use textual analysis to discuss queerness and transness in *Inhabited Vessels*, discussing power and skin in forming non-normative bodies and rejections of heteronormativity and cisnormativity. I will use the a priori method when identifying horror media that can be categorised as a Possessed Slasher. These examples will be considered within its role within a horror film cycle (Nowell (2011), Petridis (2019)), as tropes and representations develop. This media aligns with Schubart's (2018) Survival horror category, which highlights the role of predation within narratives. I will approach case studies from the perspective of the Survival Horror narrative and will distinguish how the Possessed Slasher is distinct from the Slasher and the possession narrative in terms of gender.

As noted previously, a prevailing trend in horror is the attempt to cause fear. According to theorists, such as Wood (1978), Park (2018), and Schubart (2018), horror is ultimately defined by fear. Like Maddrey (2004), Muir (2011), and Meeuf (2022), I agree that the production of fear is related to contextual social anxieties and issues. Waldron (2022) further expands this, linking queerness in horror to societal and political attitudes to queerness during their production and release. My research explores prejudiced ideas of predation, threat, and deception regarding queer and trans communities. Horror media not only features predominant themes of predation, threat, and deception but also, in reflecting cultural anxieties, allows discussion of these themes in relation to societal and political perceptions of queer and trans communities.

When it comes to the formation of monstrosity, the Other, and antagonists within the gothic, these social and political values stand out as particularly noteworthy instances. Halberstam (1995) notes that monstrosity serves as a technology that both reflects and constructs social anxieties. They make the observation that as monsters are not conceived in a

void, they function as cultural artefacts that embody the anxieties and desires of the society in which they are situated, frequently concerning topics such as sexuality, gender, and race.

Considering the discourse around the queer Other and the monster (Wood (1978), Benshoff (1997, 2015), Lowenstein (2022)), it is common to find queer and trans-coded characters in the position of predators. As queer and trans characters are othered in horror media, for example, in the role of the archetypal trans killer, there is not only a suggestion that queer and trans individuals are Other but that they are dangerous. If audiences use horror as play, to learn and develop, as Schubart suggests, it is important to problematise how threat is portrayed. My research acknowledges that othering is not entirely negative and can be viewed as a form of resistance, particularly when considered in conjunction with ideas of antinormativity and radical monstrosity. As Halberstam notes, monstrosity (as often found in the Other) can be used to disrupt norms, highlighting critiques and discrepancies. Horror is a particularly pertinent genre to discuss this difference in monstrosity as despite the monstrous often taking the role of the antagonist, the monstrous often gains the most interest and sometimes affection of audiences.

As a queer cisgendered woman, I acknowledge that my experiences of marginalisation do not extend to all forms of queerness or to trans experience. Considering this, I aim to approach these subjects with sensitivity, respect and a commitment to research. In my discussion of transness, I aim to utilise the work of trans theorists and studies that include trans voices to acknowledge experiences I do not have direct experience with. As a woman I feel that I am able to reflect on societal enforcement of gender normativity, particularly as regarding appearance, demeanour and bodily agency, whilst still recognising my positional privilege. As an academic I feel that it is important to allow theoretical frameworks to evolve, especially when reconsidering established understandings of gender,

bodies, and identity. Therefore, I aim to create research that is inclusive and sensitive, through both my textual analysis and citation.

Identifying Case Studies

Tudor (2012) highlights the issue of categorising films within certain genres, titled the ‘empiricist dilemma’. This causality dilemma debates whether films are selected as belonging to a genre and then analysed for their characteristics or whether the characteristics of a genre are identified and then films are assigned subsequently. Tudor notes that the solution to this dilemma lies in either the a priori method or the social consensus. The a priori method relies on the concept of ‘family resemblance,’ in which there are not strict characteristics that a film must have but there is a set of essential traits, most of which must be present. Viewers watch the film with a particular pattern in mind; for example, as Petridis (2019) notes, when watching a Slasher film, one would expect the narrative to revolve around a killer chasing a group of victims. The social consensus method relies more on categorisation outside of the realm of the film itself, relying on film summaries, promotional data, interviews with creators, and audience categorisation.

I distinguish the Possessed Slasher as a subgenre of the Slasher that combines conventions of the Slasher and possession narratives. I utilise the a priori method of identifying the Slasher element of the Possessed Slasher. Similar to Petridis, I identify the Slasher through an overarching narrative in which a killer pursues a group of victims. In this they attack the victims often individually, sometimes in pairs. They may be attacked, killed, and/or they may join the possessed. To be a Possessed Slasher, these Slashers must contain possession, in which a character or collective takes control of a person or object. The method in which this possession occurs can vary; however, the possession must contain the transference of a soul/sentience. Franchises that initially produce Slashers may feature

Possessed Slashers as sequels, as killers supernaturally return. These films are considered on their own as Possessed Slashers, and the previous Slasher instalments are not viewed retrospectively as Possessed Slashers even as the lore of the franchise expands to include possession and the supernatural.

Whilst the Possessed Slasher is not affected by cycles in the same way as the Slasher, due to the comparatively smaller subgenre, cycles ought to be considered when discussing the gender and Slashers. Petridis also discussed film cycles, specifically regarding Slasher cinema. They suggest that there are three cycles in the Slasher genre: the Classical, the Self-Referential, and the Neoslasher. The Classical cycle (1974-1993) establishes the initial conventions of the genre, such as conservatism and the punishment of sexual and non-normative behaviours. The Self-Referential Slasher (1994-2000) is influenced by elements of the classical Slasher that have become part of popular culture. With an expected audience knowledge of the elements of the Slasher, the self-referential Slasher acts as a parody or pastiche of the Classical Slasher. Finally, the Neoslasher (2000-2013) will break the form of the Classical Slasher, flouting expected conventions. These Neoslashers redefine the subgenre through changes, challenging expectations. Whilst Petridis refers to Slashers specifically, this pattern of the original classic, pastiches, and then breaks to the form can be applied to many genres and subgenres.

The cycles of the horror genre are key when assessing the changes to the form of genre media and the societal changes that can influence it. Whilst classical genre media may reflect queerness in a particular way, this representation can adapt and become modernised in the neo-genre. In reaction to problematic depictions of social groups or the complete erasure of said groups, filmmakers who enjoy and/or grew up with the Classical cycle of a genre

produce neo-genre media fixing issues they find in the Classical cycle. Furthermore, theory surrounding classical media finds its way into popular culture and knowledge.

For example, the trope of people of colour characters dying first in horror media has been discussed in academic research and more widely in popular culture. Colemand and Harris (2023) in *The Black Guy Dies First*, highlight that the first instances of the trope can be found in *Spider Baby* (1967) and *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). The trailblazer hit in the Classical cycle sets that formula for the successful prospector cash-ins. As this trope became more widely known, self-referential media started to point it out and satirise it. In *Scary Movie 2* (2001), whilst stuck in a haunted house, three POC characters are grouped together by the other characters as they all split up. Brenda, Shorty, and Ray look at each other and begin to cry as Brenda sobs, ‘we gonna die y’all’⁷. In the Neoslasher cycle, *The Blackening* (2022), a group of POC friends stay at a cabin over the weekend and find themselves attacked by a killer. The marketing for the film features the tagline ‘They can’t kill us all first’.

I suggest that in ‘Neo’ horror media we similarly see a direct discussion of gender tropes and treatments of queerness and transness within previous instalments within this cycle. Therefore, I consider case studies that are both Possessed Slashers and Neoslashers, noting how these discussions of gender and queerness interact with the radical potential of the Inhabited Vessel in the Possessed Slasher. I consider established Possessed Slasher franchises, noting how Neoslasher instalments develop or continue themes that appear in earlier instalments. In this, I analyse how these themes are addressed and further highlighted as the franchise develops with the cycles of the Slasher genre.

Theorists have sought to define queer horror, distinguishing what horror media might be considered queer. Benshoff (1997) suggests that there are several ways in which

⁷ *Scary Movie 2* (2001)

homosexuality can intersect with horror. The first includes 'identifiably' gay or lesbian characters whilst the second includes films made by gay or lesbian filmmakers, even if no characters are identified as queer. The third features films that contain subtextual signifiers that connote queerness. Elliott-Smith (2016) builds upon this, designating queer horror as horror made by self-identifying gay, bisexual, queer or transgendered men and works that feature homoerotic or outright homosexual narratives with 'out' gay characters. Waldron (2022), in their discussion of horror cinema, notes the role of 'gay sensibility' in horror, in which subtextual clues and signs support a queer reading of a character.

Similarly, how do we define trans cinema? Does cinema that could be considered allegorical count as trans cinema without labelled trans characters? This issue becomes especially pertinent when examining trans cinema within a genre like horror. Richardson and Smith (2022) suggest that genre can eclipse trans identification and trans characters. They suggest trans characters can be used to present negative ideologies in keeping with the genre. However, trends in horror mirror elements of queerness and transness, as noted by theorists such as Wood, Benshoff, and Elliott-Smith. Much of this discourse focused on the role of othering; however, I suggest that there are more themes within horror that call to a queer and/or trans experience, such as transformation, body dysmorphia, and cross-gender possession.

Leung (2012) notes that there are three ways to recognise trans cinema. First, cinema that analyses structures of gender and sex through the punishment of trans figures. Horror depictions of the trans killer and the "bury your gays" trope illustrate this point. Secondly, cinema that offers alternate relationality external to structures of kinship and capital. Lastly, building upon Sullivan's (2006) work, cinema that reflects a transformation of the body. Gardner and Maclay (2024) note that trans people can be drawn to cinema that sits outside more common trans narratives, finding allegorical themes of transformation and dysphoria.

Transformation is an essential element of many horror narratives; the act of physically becoming something monstrous can be seen in the case of the zombie, werewolf, and vampire horror. The Slasher also incorporates an element of identity transformation, as the final girl transitions from a victim to a killer herself.

Themes of sex and gender, alternate structures of kinship and transformation, appear within the Possessed Slasher. Inhabited Vessels are afforded experiences of fluidity of gender and sex; whilst not always punished, these figures are approached in their experience of shifting gender identity and the potential queering of their sexuality. Families, both final and possessed, experience a connection that sits outside the normative kincoherent family. Finally, not only do bodies transform, becoming euphoric or dysphoric in their changing state, but identities transform as Inhabited Vessels find a euphoric identity, gender performance and/or body that differs from their original. Therefore, I suggest that whilst Possessed Slashers ought not to be assigned trans cinema as a blanket label however, I suggest many can be representative of trans cinema.

Theoretical Approach

Grant (2015) and Halberstam (1995) note that psychoanalysis, particularly Freudianism, has been one of the most common critical approaches to horror media. Through research it has become clear how prevalent psychoanalysis is within theoretical discussion of horror, particularly gender in horror. I aim to approach narratives from the perspective of challenging cisnormativity and heteronormativity; therefore, the Freudian or Lacanian view of sex and the body must be challenged. Furthermore, in analysing media, signs are essential in reflecting visual meaning, especially when considering genre media with a focus on tropes and themes. To identify queerness within media, audiences often rely on signs and signifiers, allowing connotation to extrapolate meaning and identification.

Freud's theory of castration anxiety and sexual development is based on a heteronormative and cisnormative presumption of the child and individual. As my research aims to reject assumptions of the body, it further complicates the application of castration anxiety and penis envy. Creed (2015, 2022) approaches the abject female body from the lens of Freudian castration anxiety and the vagina dentata. Harrington (2018) relates vagina dentata to a mode of feminine agency, in which the character does not centralise male pleasure or power. Burton and Richardson (2005) suggest that only psychoanalysis offers a model in which to question agency and desire. It allows the discussion of emotional or social contexts that disturb areas such as gender performance and that of gender identification. Halberstam (1995) suggests that there is an overuse of psychoanalysis in horror theory. They highlight that what Deleuze and Guattari (1983) refer to as the 'mommy-daddy-me triangle' is not as universal as it is perceived to be.

L. Williams (2015), much like Creed, proposes that the monster and the woman, particularly the mother, are aligned. L. Williams highlights castration anxiety as a root of the horror of the mother, suggesting that it is not her own mutilation but the power to mutilate the male. In their work, L. Williams builds upon concepts of the gaze, as discussed by Mulvey, and the concept of looking, as discussed by Metz (1974), both of whom took inspiration from Freud and Lacan. This exemplifies the nature in which psychoanalysis is built into the foundations of horror media analysis. Furthermore, elements of psychoanalysis are ingrained within queer theory, such as Edelman. I acknowledge that to entirely reject psychoanalysis is to find oneself with little horror or queer theory to build upon. Therefore, whilst I will not take a psychoanalytic approach, elements of Freudian and Lacanian theory will be discussed and problematised within relevant theoretical discussions.

I use Halberstam's (1995) theory of gothic and skin as a theoretical framework. Halberstam notes that skin becomes a metonym for humans in horror; in variations of skin,

such as colour, pallor, and shape, we find monstrosity. I approach the Inhabited Vessel from the perspective of layers of skin, allowing a discussion of gender performance, the formation of monstrosity, and the sutured body. These layers of skin contain: the first skin, that of the intangible spirit within the body; the second skin, the possessed body; and finally, the third skin, the layer created through gender performance. In discussing this layering, I will utilise Halberstam's interpretations of theories such as Sedgwick's live burial, J. Butler's bodies that matter, and Clover's final girl.

I reframe discussion of possession by rejecting Clover's presumptions of the body, removing the emphasis placed on the role of genitals in Slasher and occult horror. We cannot presume that all women have vaginas and all men have penises, as this is a cisnormative assumption. Therefore, it cannot be presumed that all women who are possessed have vaginas, and therefore the vagina is assigned undue importance in becoming possessed. This distracts from more complex discussions of power and gendered normative ideals of aggression, strength, and agency. To entirely avoid discussions of the body would neglect the importance of the body to trans identities. In approaching Inhabited Vessels in terms of skin and suturing, this allows a discussion of bodies without too much focus on the presence of specific genitalia.

I will use textual analysis to analyse *mise-en-scène* with a focus on costuming, character or monster design, and performance. This will be used to highlight elements of the character's gender performances, the formation of the non-normative body and monstrosity, and note where power is assigned in visual elements of Inhabited Vessels. As J. Butler's (1990, 1993, 2004) discussion of gender performance places importance on visual acts, such as applying makeup and selecting certain clothing, to performing gender, an analysis of these acts can highlight how the Inhabited Vessel is performing gender, both their own and that of

their vessel. Bornstein (2016) notes that fashion is a manifestation of identity, which becomes particularly interesting when it does not adhere to expected recognisable identity signifiers. I note J. Butler's challenge to norms of gender performance whilst also acknowledging Bornstein's suggestion of the liberating potential of gender expression. This is further explored within later case studies, as in some Inhabited Vessels an enforcement of normative gender performance is utilised by the possessor to maintain power and evade capture. However, in others the Inhabited Vessel displays the potential to experiment and experience non-normative gender differences.

Creature design will also be considered when analysing the Inhabited Vessel. As Halberstam notes, skin within the gothic is utilised to reflect difference and monstrosity. This difference can be seen as the first skin becomes tangible on the second skin, reflecting images of corruption, decay, and live burial. This difference can be seen on the skin specifically, such as discolouration or rotting, and in bodily physical changes to the body, such as growths or birthing, and metaphorical changes, such as sutured weapons as extensions of the body. As noted previously, themes of transformation and change are important in discussions of a trans reading of horror. It is the design of these changes that will be analysed, with particular focus on their interaction with ideas of euphoria and dysphoria in the body.

J. Butler (1990) challenges conceptions that gender is natural, suggesting that through performativity gender is produced by repetition of performed acts. They acknowledge in *Bodies That Matter* (1993), that performativity is not a singular act, distancing performance from the theatrical and the voluntary. They emphasise that performance and performativity highlight the creation of gender, without an innate presumption of gender. Prosser (1998) suggests that J. Butler fails to acknowledge the body and trans experiences of dysmorphia. Serrano (2007) argues that the presence of a subconscious sex, arguing that there is an innate sense of gender that is not only performative. In my deconstruction of the Inhabited Vessel, I

highlight the connection between gender and performativity, the body and internal identity. Gender can be constructed through performance in Inhabited Vessels, as they are understood by those around them through their gendered acts. Gender also becomes influenced by the body, as malleable bodies become euphoric or dysphoric. Similarly, gender is tied to the internal possessing spirit, who carries gender with them to new bodies.

Language, Terminology and Citation

In my analysis of non-horror, I discuss drag films, body swap and body transformation films. Whilst some of the drag films I discuss are labelled as such, some align more closely with trans narratives, as highlighted by Miller (2023). I use the term ‘drag/trans’ to refer to these narratives; however, I acknowledge that these terms are not synonymous, neither are the experiences. For this research these similar narratives are best considered in conjunction for both simplicity and compression. I am conscious to avoid direct conflation between drag and trans, noting criticisms of J. Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990) by theorists such as Stryker (1994) and Serrano (2007). I additionally use the term ‘drag’ and ‘trans’ together in acknowledgement of different terminology applied to these films, both within the narrative and by theorists.

When discussing an Inhabited Vessel, I will refer to them using a combination of the name of the possessor and the possessed. For example, in discussing *The Exorcist* (1974) and Pazuzu’s possession of Regan, the Inhabited Vessel would be referred to as Pazuzu-Regan. The possessor will appear first within this descriptor; this is to make clear that it is the possessor is in predominant control of the vessel. Furthermore, the possessor is the agent of initial change to the possessed; for example, it is the addition of Pazuzu that changes Regan to Pazuzu-Regan.

I aim to avoid an entirely Cartesian view of the possessor and the possessed when within the Inhabited Vessel. The possessor, once within the vessel, can no longer be considered as just the possessor. They exist within the body of the possessed, experiencing the world through that body whilst also being perceived by characters and wider society as the possessed. This difference is key when discussing the vessels who, as they often do, exist within a marginalised group. Therefore, even if the first skin of the possessed is entirely silenced, their body influences the possessor in how they interact with the world around them. In some cases, within the possession, the possessed breaks into the forefront, controlling their body again. However, I suggest that there is still a distinction between the currently possessed and the character before and after possession. For example, Regan without Pazuzu's presence is different from Regan with Pazuzu present within the second skin. Therefore, I will use a Regan-Regan structure to highlight that the possessed is in control but still within an Inhabited Vessel.

I concluded that despite this importance of combination in the Inhabited Vessel, the possessor and the possessed must still maintain some separation. Whilst both are changed by the possession, they often display misaligned goals and morals. Furthermore, to ignore the antagonism between the characters is to ignore the key theme of rejection and purging found in possession narratives, as resolved by the exorcism. Descriptors such as portmanteau name, ('Pazugan'), a forward slash, ('Pazuzu/Regan'), and an 'x' ('Pazuzu x Regan'), were considered, however they failed to convey the intended reading. Firstly, all three are commonly used within fandom communities to refer to romantic relationships, for example, 'Spirk', 'Spock/Kirk,' and 'Spock x Kirk'. I would like to avoid any implications of romance between the average possessor and possessed dynamic. The use of name combinations could imply too much of a singular character of the Inhabited Vessel, pulling focus away from the agency and presence of the individual characters. Similarly, as the combination of names

creates an image of one figure, a forward slash may imply an image of one figure spread across two beings.

When referring to the Inhabited Vessel, I will use pronouns used within the film to refer to specific characters. However, when referring to the Inhabited Vessel, unless this

is also directly addressed with the narrative, I will use they/them pronouns. In cases of demonic possession, unless stipulated otherwise through naming and pronouns, how might we assign gender to a genderless demon? I suggest that 'they/them' is the most apt way to describe the Inhabited Vessel, unless directly addressed, as in essence they are often a new creation. A fusion or hybrid of two separate entities, combined into something posthuman and situated outside of a gender binary. It is unnecessary to assign or presume gendered pronouns to characters that actively challenge and destabilise gendered norms.

In my research I will refer to all theorists with the pronouns 'they/them'. In alignment with themes of transformation and change within my research, I not only wish to avoid presumptions of gender from names, but I also intend not to propagate a viewpoint that gender is an unchangeable permanent label. In this, my work can be both more inclusive and maintain more longevity, as a theorist may change their pronouns and not be referred to as their previous dysphoric pronouns. I acknowledge that in referring to all theorists by 'they/them', a pronoun choice that is not entirely devoid of gender, I may not be using their desired pronouns. However, as each individual's relationship with gender is inherently personal, I feel that the use of 'they/them' is a way to consciously avoid the enforcement of a binary 'he/him' and 'she/her' standard whilst avoiding the use of dysphoric pronouns. It is my personal belief, as is evident by my research topic, that academia should be inclusive to all gender identities and that misgendering ought to be avoided. In this thesis I will also not refer to theorists' first names, with the exception of first initials when theorists have the same last

name, to avoid potentially deadnaming theorists should their names change. When referring to figures in an historical context I will use full names for clarity.

Theorists such as Ahmed (2017), Mott and Cockayne (2017) and Rivers (2021) discuss citational politics, challenging how we as academics cite within our work, highlighting a need for awareness as to who and how we cite. Ahmed notes, for example, that they do not cite white men (referring to white men as an institution), suggesting that “citations can be feminist bricks” (:16). Rivers notes that citation follows a perpetuated pattern, creating a system that favours heavily cited theorists. Whilst my research does not challenge citational politics within who I reference, I break from the established format in which we use gendered pronouns and first names within in-text referencing. Mott and Cockayne utilise conscientious engagement, highlighting that within their list of references they use the full name of each theorist, in part to avoid masking the gender of authors. Whilst I take an opposing approach in my in-text referencing, it is also with the goal of conscientious engagement.

I also wish to acknowledge that theory does not exist within a vacuum. The gender of a theorist may well be relevant to their work, such as influencing their perspective or access to resources. I do not hold the opinion that one’s gender is disconnected from their work, but I suggest it is not necessarily more relevant than factors such as ethnicity, class or life experience. However, the use of gendered pronouns and names (in which readers may often assume gender) essentially forefronts a theorist’s gender. Again, this is not intended to mask gender, as feared by Mott and Cockayne. I wish to highlight that not only is our reference to gender potentially unnecessary, but it can cause unwanted harm to theorists who experience changes in their gender identity.

To conclude, I will use textual analysis to investigate queerness and transness in *Inhabited Vessels*, emphasising power and skin in the formation of non-normative bodies and rejecting heteronormativity and cisnormativity. Survival horror subgenres like *Possessed* and *Slashers* have a deep gender theory background and share thematic and generic characteristics with queerness and transness. Anti-trans and anti-queer rhetoric in American politics and classical *Slashers* often aligns trans people, queer people and those with gender differences, with predation. Noting theorists, such as Clover, Halberstam and J. Butler, I will approach victims and aggressors from a perspective of gender and queerness.

Chapter One: Reimagining Possession: Slashers, Possession and Possessed Slashers

The Possessed Slasher is a hybrid genre of the Slasher and possession horror subgenres. This hybridisation creates a distinct set of conventions that intermingle key elements of both subgenres. Whilst some films featuring these conventions may be assigned genres such as Slasher, Splatter, or Occult, I suggest that the most accurate way to define them is the Possessed Slasher. These films, or series, feature some form of possession as the possessed killer attacks their victims, killing and/or infecting them. Possessed Slashers often feature more than one killer as multiple possessions can occur and often feature multiple survivors. This deviates from the classic Slasher's battle between killer and final girl. These possessed killers display gender differences, utilising their newfound power to dictate their own future. Where the possessed woman in occult or possession narratives is often helpless and can only be saved by a male authority figure, possessed killers in Possessed Slashers have more agency, determining their own role within the narrative.

This chapter begins by contextualising historical interactions between audience fears and Slasher and Occult media. This context allows a deeper understanding of the perception of threat from both the natural and supernatural killer. Next, I challenge Clover's theories on occult media, reframing portals using their tropes of 'the female story', 'the male story', and 'shifting ground'. Then I outline trends in Possessed Slashers utilising Petridis' slasher cycles. This exemplifies the connection between popular Slasher trends and their impact on the Possessed Slasher. Mirroring the subcategories used in *Her Body, Himself* in *Men, Women and Chainsaws* (1992:21-64), I will use Clover's predominant tropes of the Slasher as subcategories to establish tropes in Possessed Slashers. This section will highlight where possession narratives disrupt traditional slasher tropes, such as final girls, killers, and terrible places.

Threat: Serial Killers and the Occult in Media

Horror movies reflect contextual fears of audiences (Tudor (1997), Cherry (2009), and Waldron (2022)). Cohen, in *Speaking of Monsters: A Teratology Anthology*, notes that “the monster’s body is a cultural body” (2012:15) acting as a literal zeitgeist, a time ghost. The possessed monster is influenced by contextual fears surrounding predatory threat and the occult, impacting the possessors, possessed and Inhabited Vessels. As Muir highlights, “to scare an audience, a filmmaker must *understand* the audience” (Muir, 2011:3). In light of this, this chapter will contextualise the relationship between the occult, society, and media. It is important to consider the impact of social issues and anxieties to establish the intricacies of occult horror. This context allows a more robust discussion of Clover’s (1992, 2015) theories around gender in occult horror.

As Thorndyke notes in *Satan in the Celluloid* (2024), ‘occult’ can be a difficult term as the meaning has changed over time. They highlight that the term is generally used to refer “to the study of things that fall outside of science or religion” (Thorndyke, 2024:1), noting “anything from astrology to alchemy to paganism to devil worship”. During the history of the occult, highlighting the influences of Christianity in the Late Middle Ages and the *Malleus Maleficarum/Hammer of Witches*⁸. They note that as technology and theology advanced, religious cynicism increased during the Age of Enlightenment. Nevertheless, spiritualism and séances to contact the dead became popular in the following Victorian era due to a cultural fascination with death. The study of the supernatural became more established, inspiring literature such as the *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (Stevenson, 1886) and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Wilde, 1891). Universal Pictures saw success in the 1930s with portrayals of gothic literature, such as *Dracula* (1931) and *The Mummy* (1932). Portrayals of

⁸ Kramer (1486) - Institoris (2007) in bibliography.

Haitian Voodoo, or Vodou, often taking more inspiration from Western ideas of the occult than actual Vodou, became prevalent with the release of media like *White Zombie* (1932).

The social climate in the 1960s through to the 1980s is particularly important to understand when considering the perception of the occult, its influence on media and vice versa. During the hippie movement there was a cultural shift with a disillusionment of Christianity and a resurgence in popularity of Aleister Crowley's writing; hippies began to experiment with the occult. Anton Lavey founded the Church of Satan, suggesting that Satan ought to be viewed as a metaphor for man rather than a deity. Satanism grew in popularity with young people in the 1960s, influencing a counterculture that rejected more rigid structures of organised mainstream religions and oppressive normative societal values. This interest in Satan was concerning to those who were religious, nurturing a fear of Satan's influence on the youth.

As the 1967 summer of love came to an end, pimps took further control 'free love', drugs became harder, and rates of venereal disease rose (Thorndyke). During this time, mystics became particularly exploitative. This climate fostered the formation of the Manson family. Charles Manson, insistent that there was an upcoming race war and fearing the Black Panther movement, led a cult of followers to commit violent murders in an attempt to implicate the Black Panther movement. In 1969, three members of the Manson family murdered five victims in Los Angeles, including pregnant actor Sharon Tate, the wife of Roman Polanski. Due to the recent success of Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) and the highly publicised case, rumours spread that the Manson family's attack had a satanic angle, drawing connections to the film's plot. Whilst this proved false as the Manson family was captured, it influenced the growing fear of the occult in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As Thorndyke notes, "suddenly the spiritual experimentations of the counterculture were laced with danger" (2024:22).

Themes of cults, the occult, and satanic possession began to replace the monsters, such as vampires, found in literature and media from previous decades. This is when novels like *The Possession of Joel Dulaney* (1972) and *The Exorcist* (1971) were released. Blatty's *The Exorcist* remained on the bestseller list for fifty-two weeks; during suggestions that middle-class households were performing black masses. The release of the 1973 film was plagued with rumours of women miscarrying during screenings and vomit bags being handed out by movie theatres. This sensationalism helped bolster *The Exorcist* in its notoriety, becoming a template for many possession cash-ins to come. Whilst some may not have seen the film, images of green vomit and heads spinning 360 degrees are strongly established images in popular culture.

As fear of the occult became sensationalised, so too did reports of serial murders. As Fritsch (2020) highlights, in 1970s America an increase of serial killing can be connected to a variety of factors, including but not limited to "the nation's vast expanses of open land, [and] societal changes brought on by the Vietnam war" (Fritsch, 2020:xi). The development of interstate highways and the ability for anonymous mobility, rising populations resulting in more hitchhikers and runaways, and limitations in forensics and law enforcement contributed to an increase in serial killings. During this time, the media began to latch onto the concept of "serial murder", a term popularised by FBI investigator, Robert Ressler. Killers like Ted Bundy, Edmund Kemper and John Wayne Gacy appeared in sensationalised media coverage. Not only did the 1970s see an increase reported in serial killing but awareness spread through an ability to categorise and identify serial killing and increased media coverage.

The 1980s saw the solidification of the 'satanic panic'. Murderers, such as Stephen Hurd, claimed to be devil worshippers. Serial killer Richard Ramirez used satanic symbols at crime scenes, sometimes making his victims pray to Satan. Thorndyke notes that some believed that the presence of satanism and the occult in popular culture within the 1960s and

1970s was not merely a fad but a sign that society was under the influence of a satanic cult. Soon claims of 'Satanic Ritual Abuse' appeared in the news, covering the book *Michelle Remembers* (Smith and Pazder, 1980) and the case of the McMartin Preschool Abuse Trial (1987-1990). Groups became particularly concerned about the influence of satanism on children and young people, leading to the demonisation of things like *Dungeons and Dragons* and music artists such as *Kiss* and *Ozzy Osbourne*. The Parents Music Resource Center, founded by the 'Washington Wives', alleged that some bands were influencing youth to commit suicide through subliminal messaging, allegedly hidden in their music. They alleged that backmasking was used, in which satanic messages can be found by playing the record in reverse.

The association between cults and satanism intensified in the 1980s as stories spread of young people being compelled to act violently by satanic messaging. This period also saw several adaptations of Stephen King's works. Whilst King's work does not tend to have explicit depictions of the Judeo-Christian devil or satanism, there are often elements of otherworldly power or deities that go against natural order. A cult led by a leader who serves a folk deity influencing children to kill all the adults in their town in *Children of the Corn* (1984). Family members are resurrected from death changed, enacting evil and violent acts on friends and family in *Pet Sematary* (1989). An alien creature, akin to a demon or poltergeist, torments children in the 1990 miniseries *It*. Inanimate objects, such as cars and vehicles (*Christine* (1983), *Maximum Overdrive* (1986)), along with beloved pets and children (*Children of the Corn*, *Cujo* (1983), *Pet Sematary*) become supernaturally corrupted, acting violently towards those around them.

The Slasher became the predominant horror trend in the 1980s. Olsen and Reinhard note that the exorcism genre experienced a decline in the 1980s; however, possession narratives could still be found in the Possessed Slasher. Films depicting infectious possession

echoed the anxieties surrounding the satanic influence on teens. This can be seen in films like *Night of the Demons* and *The Evil Dead*, as groups of teens experience possession and violence. In *The Evil Dead* (1981), the group sit around a mysterious record, unknowingly listening to the words that release Kandarian demons. The words on the record corrupt the college students, mirroring how groups like the Washington Wives feared backmasking and subliminal messaging in records might. In *Night of the Demons* (1988), the teens choose to experiment with a past life séance, unwittingly leading to their gradual possession. This possession is spread infectiously as each teen victim is recruited, creating a small, violent demonic cult.

Statistics on serial killing decreased towards the 1990s. This has been associated with factors including heightened awareness of hitchhiking dangers, advancements in forensic technology that complicate getting away with multiple murders over extended periods, and enhanced police communication and database systems. The 1990s saw a cycle of Self-Referential Slashers that favoured the human killer, deviating from the Classical Slasher structure. This may result from the general public having sufficient time to comprehend the notion of serial killing, allowing the disassociation of killer representations from the supernatural. The killer may simply be a mentally ill tailor, as in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991); friends and classmates, as in *Scream* (1996) and *Urban Legend* (1998); or a vengeful father, as in *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997).

Possession films that were released during this time tended to be sequels to previous successes, such as the *Child's Play* franchise, *The Exorcist* franchise, and the *Amityville* franchise. New representations of the occult still appeared in the late 1990s; however, they were not Possessed Slashers. Films like *Stigmata* (1999), *The Ninth Gate* (1999), and *End of Days* (1999) showcased this. Occult themes also appeared in children's TV series, such as *Goosebumps* (1995-1998), *Are You Afraid of the Dark?* (1992-1996) and *Eerie, Indiana*

(1991-1993); detective series, such as *The X-Files* (1993-2002) and *Millennium* (1996-1998); and anthology series like *Tales from the Crypt* (1989-1996).

Found footage films influenced a resurgence of occult themes in media. Olsen and Reinhard note that is due to the oversaturation of the formula and coding of horror films. Audiences were looking for something new, something that felt real. *The Blair Witch Project* was released at the 1999 Sundance Film Festival at midnight. Advertising for the film was predominantly online, with fake news reports and missing posters for the characters. *The Blair Witch Project* benefitted from this association with the supernatural caught on camera, much like *The Exorcist* of which some critics credit the success to audiences believing that the film was real or at least portrayed real events (Olsen and Reinhard, 2016). The found footage genre added a level of realism to possession and occult horror that had been missing as the market became oversaturated in the 1970s. Films like *Paranormal Activity* (2007), *[Rec]* (2007) and *The Possession of Michael King* (2014) felt like real footage that had been discovered and shared with the public.

As noted earlier, the 1990s generally saw a decrease in the popularity of Possessed Slashers due to the popularity of the more natural serial killer. Those that were released often displayed changes, most of which were tonal. *Army of Darkness* came out in 1992, the third instalment of the *Evil Dead* franchise, with a much more comedic tone than its predecessors. Similarly, whilst the *Child's Play* franchise released more classic sequels, *Child's Play 2* (1990) and *Child's Play 3* (1991), in the early 90s, this was later followed by *Bride of Chucky* (1998), which took a more tongue-in-cheek tone. *Night of the Demons 2* (1994) and *Night of the Demons 3* (1997) both attempted to evolve from the Classical Slasher influence found in the first film, attempting a more contemporary narrative.

In September 2001, the social climate in the USA changed as New York City experienced coordinated terror attacks. Olsen and Reinhard note a resurgence of exorcism films post 9/11, suggesting that they function as an allegory for terrorism. They note that there have been 127 exorcism films since 1927 (as of 2017), and 82 of them were released after 9/11. They highlight this correlation as narratives depict an individual that is invaded by a force that destabilised the status quo, striking terror in the possessed and those around them. The body becomes a site of terrorism. However, a man with societally assigned power and importance (priest or president) subdues the threat, expunging evil, and restoring order. This equally applies to the possession narrative; however, the possession narrative does not always display this triumph over evil.

The PATRIOT Act (2001) altered the relationship between the American public, law enforcement and the government, leading to an increase in paranoia. Schmeink (2016) notes the increase in horror films featuring invasion. This includes alien invasion films like *War of the Worlds* (2005) and *Cloverfield* (2008) and zombie films such as *Dawn of the Dead* (2004) and *Resident Evil* (2002). The possession narrative also highlights themes of invasion, as well as displacement. This theme of invasion may have influenced the revival of established Possessed Slashers franchises through remakes, premakes and sequels (Mee, 2022). This can be seen in *Night of the Demons* (2009) and *Evil Dead* (2013).

Muir highlights the role of technology in 1990s horror, as dial-up internet became accessible in the home and computer technology developed. They also note the role of the fear of the Y2K bug, as many feared that upon the dawn of the millennium there would be a form of apocalyptic technological event. They highlight examples such as *Ghost in the Machine* (1993) and *Brainscan* (1994). They explore the way technology brings the horror into the white suburban home, with a device that has access to the worldwide web. The occult

interacts with technology in different ways based on the fears surrounding several types of technology, often using the occult as a method to highlight real dangers.

Ringu (1998) and the American remake *The Ring* (2002), features a cursed VHS tape containing the spirit of Samara. Seven days after watching the VHS the viewer will die, visited by her spirit. This form of haunted tech object narrative has continued, developing to feature other technology. This can be seen in *Shutter* (2004), in which a haunted camera enacts revenge on those who appear in photos taken by the camera. In the film *Countdown* (2019), an app informs you how long you have left to live; if the characters do anything to avoid their deaths, they are visited by a demon who kills them on time. This film ties to the fear of technology, of apps knowing more than us, and the dangers of not reading terms and conditions.

Sometimes technology is used as a platform for a spirit to enact revenge on others; this can be seen in the haunted group video calls in *Unfriended* (2014) and *Host* (2020). These spirits not only torment their victims but also compel them to die, often through suicide. In the 2010s there became an increased awareness of the dangers of cyberbullying and cybersuicide (Hinduja and Patchin, 2010). *Unfriended* features cyberbullying explicitly; however, there is a clear link between the fear of cybersuicide and the deaths of characters directly linked to an attack via their computer and social media. Films surrounding the dangers of the internet, through the lens of the occult, play into fears of children and teens being left to surf the internet. Examples range from *Friend Request* (2016), highlighting stranger danger on the internet, to films surrounding *Creepypasta* and internet folklore such as *Slender Man* (2018).

The 2010s and 2020s saw nostalgia remakes, reboots, premakes (Mee, 2022) and requals (Jones, 2024), many of which changed characters or plot lines in an attempt to

modernise whilst still cashing in on nostalgia. These included Slashers such as *Halloween* (2018), *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2022) and *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (2025) and possession narratives such as *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (2010), *The Exorcist: Believer* (2023), *Pet Sematary* (2019) and *Pet Sematary: Bloodlines* (2023). In terms of Possessed Slashers, there was a 2009 remake of *Night of the Demons* (2009). *Evil Dead* (2013) acted as a loose remake or soft reboot, as the concept of a group of young people finding the Necronomicon in a cabin and becoming possessed stayed consistent; however, the characters were different. Similarly, *Child's Play* (2019) was remade; however, Chucky is no longer possessed by a serial killer, but instead by a dysfunctional AI robot.

Established horror franchises produced spinoff television series such as *Bates Motel* (2013-2017), *Hannibal* (2013-15), *Clarice* (2021), *From Dusk Til Dawn: The Series* (2014-2016), and *IT: Welcome to Derry* (2025-). These series approach established characters with a new focus, often acting as a deeper character analysis in a way that expands lore, providing explanations for events of the franchise. This can be seen in Possession narratives such as in *The Exorcist* (2016-2018) and Possessed Slashers *Ash vs Evil Dead* (2015-2018) and *Chucky* (2021-2024). The genre conventions of the Slasher, Possession narrative, and Possessed Slasher are intermingled with the conventions of the television drama, as plots become more ingrained with interpersonal relationships, violence, and suspense.

In establishing contextual anxieties surrounding the occult and the real-world threat of violence from killers, trends in representing these anxieties become highlighted. This allows a deeper understanding of the relationship between violence, the occult and media. The Possessed Slasher is created through the interplay of these factors. The Slasher killer, monstrous through the threat of murder, like serial killers, and the occult or possessed, monstrous through the threat of corruption. This fear of, and association of, supernatural cults and killers, create the possessed killer. Next, I will explore these possessed figures in more

detail, highlighting different types of possession and their interaction with Clover's occult theory.

Possession: Agency, Victimhood and the Inhabited Vessel

This section will start with a brief overview of different types of possession narratives.

Special emphasis will be placed on the differences within the different categories of possessors, vessels, and Inhabited Vessels. Then I will discuss Clover's observations of occult media and possession that appear within *Opening Up (Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, 1992:65-113) utilising Clover's categories (The Female Story, The Male Story⁹ and Shifting Grounds). I will particularly focus on portals (or Inhabited Vessels), agency and victimhood. Elements of this analysis will appear within the subsection 'Possessed Slashers', allowing me to approach these films with an acknowledgement of trends within both Occult and Slasher media.

I suggest possession is a subcategory of occult cinema, much like Olsen and Reinhard assign exorcism cinema as a subcategory. Within this there are a variety of different forms of possession. Within Catholicism there are two different types of exorcism: major and minor. A minor exorcism can be found in ceremonies such as baptisms, in which the infant is brought into the gates, exorcising anything unholy as they enter the protection of Christ. Notes on major exorcism can be found in the *Roman Ritual* Section 11, containing the rite of major exorcism and the characteristics of demonic possession. It notes that those who are possessed begin speaking in tongues or a language unknown to the individual, retain knowledge that they could not know, have a strong aversion or aggression surrounding holy symbols (such as crosses and holy water) and display some form of unnatural strength.

⁹ 'The Female Story' and 'The Male Story' are considered together in my research.

In portrayals of demonic or satanic possession in media, characters often display at least one, often more, of these characteristics. There are often also demonstrations of some kind of telekinetic power and a form of sexual aggression or overt sexuality. Whilst *The Exorcist* (1973) is not the first or only example of demonic possession in media, the extreme popularity of the film has influenced possession horror media since. Thorndyke notes that following the release of *The Exorcist*, attempted cash-ins were predominantly focused on the “titillating potential of possessed young women tearing their clothes off and performing vulgar and blasphemous acts” (2024:157).

Some demonic possessions will name the demon, such as Eshu in *Abby* (1974) or Pazuzu in *The Exorcist*. The demon’s existing folklore is often not relevant to the narrative besides bolstering that they are, for example, a trickster or a destructive deity of some kind. However, in naming the demonic entity, the possessor is often assigned a gender. Much like interpellative performative statements are used on newborns to assign gender (J. Butler, 1993), gender is assigned upon the reveal of the possessor’s identity. It is an unspoken signal of “it’s a boy” or “it’s a girl”. For example, Father Merrin warns Father Karras as they prepare to attempt to exorcise Pazuzu-Regan, stating: “He is a liar, the demon is a liar. He will lie to confuse us”. Before this, Pazuzu-Regan, when not referred to as she/her, is called ‘it’ by Karl and ‘that thing’ by Chris.

When demonic possessors are unnamed, the gender of the possessor is not rigidly, or often, assigned. This creates less of a binary gender distinction between possessor and the possessed. In this the demons themselves can be read as gender non-binary or genderless. This influences how their gender expression and sexuality are read once they enter a gendered body. These possessors often do not have a distinctive difference or backstory; they are often a collective or hive-mind. Examples of unnamed demons can be found in the demons in the *Night of the Demons* franchise (1988-2009) and *Demons* (1985), the deadites

in the *Evil Dead* franchise (1981-2018) and the infected zombie-like possessed in *[Rec]* (2007) and *Quarantine* (2008).

Another type of named possession involves the possession by a spirit or ghost. This type of possession in horror shares similar tropes with that of the demonic possession, however, there can also be variations. In these ghost possession narratives, the deceased character is important in understanding the possession and the behaviour of the possessed. For example, in *J.D. 's Revenge* (1976), Isaac is possessed by the spirit of a murdered gangster, becoming violent and sexually aggressive, and beginning to speak like a 1940s gangster. In some cases, ghosts who possess exist due to unfinished business or revenge, as seen in *Hello Mary Lou: Prom Night II* (1987). Others become possessed by ghosts with malicious intent, often serial killers in life, such as the *Child's Play* franchise (1988-2024), *Shocker* (1989) and *Ripper* (1985).

In some instances, named ghosts can become demons, and here the line between ghost and demon is blurred. In some instances, they act as a specific identity in that they have a backstory and desires for revenge; however, they can also feature the malevolence of a demon. This is seen in the case of Ghoul Marcus in *Ouija: Origin of Evil* (2016). Marcus and his family are captured and placed within a concentration camp, experimented on by Nazi scientist 'The Devil's Doctor'. After the end of the war, Marcus is recaptured by the Devil's Doctor so that he can continue his experiments in his basement. The tortured ghosts of Marcus and the others are taken by dark forces from the other side, merging into a malevolent spirit, Ghoul Marcus. This can also be seen in characters like Bathsheba (*The Conjuring*, 2013) and The Black Bride/Parker Crane (*Insidious*, 2010 and *Insidious: Chapter 2*, 2013).

I suggest that to better discuss the interaction between the possessor and possessed, they can be viewed as an amalgam, the Inhabited Vessel. As noted within my methodology, I

seek to avoid a binary view of the possessor and possessed. The possessor, and sometimes the possessed, transforms upon experiencing life within the vessel. They perceive the world via the body of the possessed and are regarded as the possessed by both characters and society. I approach the Inhabited Vessel as a monster with layered skin. This facilitates an exploration of gender performance, the construction of monstrosity, and the sutured body. These layers of skin comprise of: the first skin, representing the intangible spirit(s) within the body; the second skin, denoting the possessed body; and the third skin, which is formed through gender performance. Prosser (1998) highlights the connection between skin and transsexuality, noting Anzieu's suggestion that "to be oneself is first of all to have a skin of one's own and, secondly, to use it as a space in which one can experience sensations" (1989:51). Not only do possessors desire a (tangible) skin to live inside but find themselves forming a gendered skin as they are gendered by themselves and others.

The conventions of the Inhabited Vessel can often vary, as each piece of media has different supernatural lore. For example, is the possessed's first skin still present inside the second skin? Are they able to retake control of their body whilst the possessor is still inside them? How sutured is the possessor to the second skin, and can they exist on a physical plane without it? I suggest that the best way to analyse this is to apply categories to the Inhabited Vessel using Carroll's symbolic figures. Carroll discusses the biology of fantastic beings, particularly gothic figures. They note two predominant symbolic figures: fusion and fission. They note that in fusion 'conflicting themes are yoked together in one, spatio-temporally unified figure', whilst in fission "conflicting themes are distributed - over space or time - among more than one figure" (2012:23). They note monsters, such as Dracula, as monsters of fusion, as they exist as a construction that transgresses borders, as a unified creature displaying conflicting themes such as living/dead.

They note fission includes figures such as doppelgangers, alter egos and werewolves. These separate entities are tied together in monstrosity, for example, the man versus the wolf inside. They distinguish two types of fission: spatial fission and temporal fission to distinguish forms of multiplicity. Carroll utilises examples such as *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Wilde, 1890) and *Warning Shadows* (1923) as examples of spatial fission. Spatial fission is concerned with the process of multiplication of self, dividing into as many as one or more new ‘facets’, cloning something that is often repressed or ignored by the original character. Gray is a character of spatial fission as he is divided between himself and the painting, both monstrous. Whilst spatial fission is concerned with the “conflict over space through the creation of doubles”; temporal fission is “often marked by shapeshifting” as “character[s] can be divided in time as well as multiplied in space” (:25). They highlight examples such as *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (Stevenson, 1886) and changeling films (such as werewolves, cat people, gorgons). In this the figure of temporal fission shares one body; even if that body changes, the site of origin is shared. In these narratives characters often have no control over their other form, often not remembering their actions.

The Inhabited Vessel can be viewed through the structure of fusion, spatial fission and temporal fission. Fusion possession aligns with the possessor that possesses the inanimate or non-living vessel. These Inhabited Vessels exist as a transgression of the boundary of life and death, as they fuse to create something undead or monstrous. There is no lingering possessed first skin within the vessel, either due to death or the lack of one to begin with in the inanimate object. These figures can create something posthuman and monstrous, challenging binary norms of gender and bodies as skin becomes malleable. For example, this can be seen in Chucky in doll form. His first skin sutures itself unchallenged by the empty rubber vessel of the Good Guy doll. He becomes increasingly fused as his body becomes more human, growing organs inside a doll body.

Spatial fission possession includes two similar but distinct types of Inhabited Vessel. One is instances of soul-splitting, possession in which an Inhabited Vessel's skin is sliced into pieces and divided to create new Inhabited Vessels. In this the soul may be split, effectively cloning the spirit. This can be seen in *Chucky* season one (2021), as Chucky begins to form an army of other Chuckys, all created from Good Guy dolls and a division of Chucky's soul through voodoo. However, the second skin may also be stretched and/or torn, as seen with Evil Ash in *Army of Darkness* (1992). Secondly, it includes instances of infectious possession by unnamed hive-style possessors. This can be seen in *[Rec]* and the *Evil Dead* franchise. In these instances, it is not strictly a single possessor, or first skin, that is divided. It is instead a mass of possessors, all within the same group or intention, splitting a possessor or place that contains several spirits held within one, dividing individual possessors out into vessels.

Temporal fission, in its interaction with shape shifting and repression, denotes possession in which more than one first skin exists within the second skin often with one possessor is able to take over control at a time. For example, in *Cult of Chucky* (2017), whilst Chucky in his doll form displays fusion, when he inhabits Nica, it becomes an instance of temporal fission. Whilst Chucky is in control of the second skin, Nica's soul still exists within their body. When triggered, Chucky becomes repressed, and Nica regains control of her body. When Nica regains control over her body, as her first, second and third skins align, the presence of Chucky's first skin will not allow the suture to close and heal. Possessed figures of temporal fission display Halberstam's (1995) view of Sedgwick's (1975) live burial through parasitism. Halberstam suggests that "live burial is the entanglement of self and other within monstrosity and the parasitical relationship between the two. The one is always buried in the other" (:20). The spirit of the possessed is repressed within layers of skin, hidden from those who interact with the Inhabited Vessel and sometimes the possessor themselves. The

relationship also fringes on the parasitical, as the possessed spirit is still present within the body, in comparison to figures of spatial fission who often inhabit the empty vessel.

There are many kinds of possession stories, with different forms of possession and supernatural lore. Distinguishing particular trends and categories within possession evidences how expansive the pool of possession narratives is whilst highlighting how different figures reflect different levels of suturing. This allows me to highlight the nuances within certain Inhabited Vessels. For example, noting journeys between types of figures, such as fission or fusion, highlights a distinction in agency. When an Inhabited Vessel transforms from a monster of temporal fission to fusion, what facilitates this transformation, and how does it relate to gender? To further understand gender and the Inhabited Vessel, I suggest negotiating Clover's writing on the occult in cinema is necessary.

The Female Story

Clover refers to the possessed as 'portals', suggesting that they form a gateway for evil. They place emphasis on the role of openings in the body, chiefly the vagina and the throat, in forming this gateway. They connect this to the conclusion that 'portals' are "almost invariably women" (1992 :71). In reading the possessed as a simple gateway, this sidelines the possessed, emphasising an importance on the possessor and the authoritarian man (often a priest, exorcist, medium etc.) and their battle for the sides of good and evil. Not only do I question Clover's assertion that the possessed are almost invariably women, but I reject any extrapolation that possessed men are gendered feminine simply by being entered by a spirit. Vessels are varied, possessors are varied, and the act of possession does not assign gender. Therefore, when understanding the gender of the Inhabited Vessel they ought to be viewed through their gendered layers of skin and signs of suturing and tearing, euphoria and dysphoria.

Clover states that satanic possession is gendered feminine, even in instances in which the portal is not a woman. They note that this is the case even in instances in which the portal is non-human, providing the example of the car in *Christine* (1983), based on the eponymous Stephen King novel. It is implied in the novel that Christine's malevolence is tied to Roland LeBay using the car as a vessel and conduit to possess Arnie. However, the 1983 film suggests that Christine was created monstrous on the assembly line. In both, whether the car is a creature of fusion or fission possession, Christine is referred to as she/her. Vehicles are generally referred to with she/her pronouns and are named after women, such as the *Renault Clio*, *Mercedes-Benz*, *The Lotus Elise*. It is suggested that this comes from the maritime tradition of naming ships after women. Therefore, it is important to note that Christine's gender does not exist in a vacuum and that her gender is externally assigned. In this, inanimate objects with no gender have gender applied to them.

Whilst *Christine* may be the most famous possessed automobile, Clover neglects to mention other possessed cars with differing gender assignation. Whilst the alien-possessed Caterpillar D9G bulldozer in *Killdozer!* (1974) is called she/her and 'sweetheart', the satanically possessed car in *The Car* (1977) is always addressed as he/him. Since Clover's writing, possessed vehicles have continued to display a variety of gendered possessors. In *Route 666* of *Supernatural* (S1 E13, The WB), a truck is possessed by the spirit of a man. In *Ghostbusters: Afterlife* (2021), The Possessor, a non-gendered spirit, possesses the Ectomobile. *Maximum Overdrive* (1986) and *Trucks* (1997) are not highlighted here due to the sentience of the machines, rather than possession. The thin line between possession and consciousness complicates addressing the possessed car. I highlight these examples of possessed vehicles to highlight oversights in Clover's suggestion that even possessed vehicles are feminine.

In Possessed Slashers with infectious spatial fission, the first victims of possession are often women who spread the infection to the others. This can be seen in the case of Cheryl (*The Evil Dead*, 1981), Mia (*Evil Dead*, 2013), and Ellie (*Evil Dead Rise*, 2023) in the *Evil Dead* franchise. In *Evil Dead II* (1987), the first seen deadite is Linda, who spreads the Kandarian spirit's infection to Ash. It is later revealed that the first to become possessed is Henrietta Knowby, wife of the man researching the Necronomicon. In *Army of Darkness* (1992), the initial deadites encountered are two female deadites in the pit and a witch-like deadite in the throne room.

In *Night of the Demons*, Suzanne is first possessed. She spreads the possession to Angela, who becomes the leader of the other demonic Inhabited Vessels. In the sequel, whilst Angela is the Inhabited Vessel who spread possession at Hull House, Shirley unknowingly brings the possessing demon to Saint Rita's Academy. This can also be seen in *Shocker*, as Pinker's spirit first possesses a doctor as she oversees his execution. These examples align with Creed's description of the Possessed Woman, who is both a victim and a monster, often exhibiting aggressive, vulgar, and hypersexual traits. The pattern of the initial possessed woman deviates from the traditional occult/exorcism narrative as she spreads her monstrosity. She is rarely cured; she and her companions must be defeated and destroyed. However, much like the classic Slasher killer, the threat persists after the final battle. Just when it appears that the final folks have defeated evil, it escapes to attack again in the sequel.

Similarly, in *[Rec]* (2007) and the American remake *Quarantine* (2008), the first Inhabited Vessel we see is an elderly woman, Conchita/Ms Espinoza. In *[Rec]*, a young woman named Tristana is revealed as the Inhabited Vessel responsible for bringing the infectious possession to the building. A young Tristana is sexually assaulted whilst living in a convent, later using supernatural powers to attack the nuns caring for her. This leaves her in

the care of Vatican Priest, Father Albelda. The infectious demonic possession spreads as Father Albelda uses science to study her. He concludes that the only way to cure her possession is to kill her; not only does he fail to kill her but his experimentations on her spreads the infectious possession to the other inhabitants of the apartment building.

However, in *Quarantine*, the original possessed character is an unnamed man, referred to as The Thin Man. Here the infection is explained as a military biological weapon, a mutated strain of rabies named the Armageddon Virus. It is revealed through newspaper clippings and notes that a member of a doomsday cult stole the virus, with an implication that this member is now The Thin Man. When the origin of the virus is tied to religion (*[REC]*), the first possessed is a young woman, fulfilling the role of the possessed victim. When the origin of the virus is tied to military bio-weaponry and terrorism (*Quarantine*), the first possessed is a male cult member, potentially a scientist himself based on the scientific equipment in the apartment.

Although both films feature an initially possessed woman, in Conchita and Ms Espinoza, the root of the infection is gendered differently. This may initially seem to be in line with Clover's discussion of 'black magic' and 'white science' (1992:66-70). Here Clover suggests that the representatives of 'white science' "are nearly always white males, typically doctors, and its tools are surgery, drugs, psychotherapy..." whereas in 'black magic' representatives are "first and foremost women" (:66). They further state that in exceptional cases women in 'white science' are often more masculine, "pants-wearing, title-bearing" (:66), and when men are in 'black magic' they are often adult white male writers or teachers.

Both The Thin Man and Father Albelda become victims of their own attempts to control the infection. Both characters fail Clover's male story, failing to control the environment and return to normality through emotional development. Father Albelda is

instructed that he must perform a ritual on Tristana to expel the demon. He attempts to poison her; however, he fails, and she is set loose within the darkened apartment. His body is found in *[Rec] 2* (2009) inside the attic, seemingly uninfected. In *Quarantine* it is implied that The Thin Man is the one who stole the virus from the military lab, becoming infected himself with the virus. Father Albelda adheres to the archetype of the exorcising Priest found in Clover's Occult media. He is tasked with experimenting on her with a plan to cure the demonic infection. However, this character is not centred in a way that draws attention to the male story; in fact, he is not even seen in the first film.

The possession in *[Rec]* is distinct to the rabies-like infection in *Quarantine*, affecting the representation of archetypes and gendering. In *Quarantine*, the roles of Father Albelda and Tristana are combined into one, creating The Thin Man. He becomes a victim of his own biochemical terrorism, whether intentionally or not. The focus on disease in comparison to demonic possession aligns *Quarantine* more with the zombie genre, whereas the religious demonic possession in *[Rec]* solidifies its position as a Possessed Slasher. Here the priest, aided by a combination of science and supernatural technologies, cannot cure or exorcise the demon. All he is able to do is hide as the possession spreads. Tristana and the demon refuse to be subjugated by the priest, his emotional journey is so insignificant he is not even seen.

Commonly in Occult narratives when women unleash demonic forces, through the use of Ouija boards or possessed objects, they themselves become possessed. In Possessed Slashers, men can be the cause of the spread of the original possession, in some cases taking a misguided academic approach as seen with Mr Knowby in the *Evil Dead* franchise and Father Albelda in *[Rec]* and The Thin Man in *Quarantine*. Often in the *Evil Dead* franchise the Necronomicon is unearthed and read by men (Ash (multiple times) and Eric) or the tapes are played aloud by men (Ash (multiple times) and Danny). In these instances, they are rarely the first to become possessed, however these men often later experience possession and

death. They do not fill the role of the saviour or priest, often failing to combat the demonic forces. When they do, it is the combination of supernatural technologies and science, men and women, masculinity and femininity that are required to save the possessed.

Clover suggests that ‘if action cinema mourns the passing of the “real man”, horror in general urges it along, and occult films go so far as to imagine a new revised edition’ (1992:99). The male story encompasses a focus on the emotional development of a man through the possession of a woman. Only when he addresses his own emotional issues is he able to save the innocent young girl from her violent possessor. Clover used Father Karras, from *The Exorcist*, and his guilt surrounding his mother as an example. Meeuf (2022) suggests that whilst the possession media that Clover discusses hinge on an ability to accept feminisation and spirituality, in the 2010s spirituality is tied to remasculinisation and the reaffirmation of the patriarch. They note *Insidious* (2010), as Josh is initially powerless to save his family from the demons haunting them or cure Dalton's comatose state. He becomes patriarch again after he regains the supernatural powers his mother and Elise took away in childhood. In this Josh is positioned in the role of the male story as he enters an emotional journey to save Dalton from possession. Instead of an exorcism, Josh enters *The Further* to retrieve his spirit.

However, I suggest that there is not a female/male story in this. The role of the priest or saviour becomes a group effort, in which each character experiences their own emotional journey. Spiritual medium Elise guides Josh to *The Further*, whilst his family and Elise's technicians watch on. Elise instructs the others on how to save Josh and Dalton, instructing Rene to call to Josh guiding his spirit, whilst Tucker and Specs use their flashlights to help. Here the teams use a combination of supernatural technologies, science and emotional connection to save the pair. This group saviour dynamic can also be seen in *The Conjuring*

franchise, as Ed and Lorraine Warren work with families to assist with cases of the demonic and/or possession.

I suggest it may be reductive to view these films with the presumption of the solo male story, as sometimes a group or final family is required to save the possessed. There are men, women, mediums, scientists, friends and neighbours. Whilst some possession narratives display a need for a patriarchal figure to return to normativity, others require community, reflecting a distinction between concepts of the controlling patriarch and the mindset that 'it takes a village'. This can be seen in *The Exorcist* (1973) and *The Exorcist: Believer* (2023). Where Father Karras and Father Merrin conduct a catholic exorcism in *The Exorcist*, a group of friends, family and professionals conduct an interdenominational exorcism in conjunction with scientific medical equipment in *The Exorcist: Believer*. A nurse, a rootwork healer, a Baptist pastor, Pentecostal Preacher and a Catholic priest assist the parents of the victims of possession. Some battle their relationship with faith. Others negotiate selfishness and selflessness as instructed to choose which possessed child will survive. Others tackle their emotions surrounding reproductive choices they have made, such as abortion. These emotional journeys are not assigned more importance or attached to a specific gender, failing the male story but creating the family story.

Ultimately, whilst the model of the possessed woman and order-restoring priest exists, I suggest that not only is it not the predominant occurrence in possession narratives but even less so in the Possessed Slasher. In the Possessed Slasher the saviour story is often combined with that of the final survivor(s). In stories in which the possessed are undefeated, these survivors are rarely able to save the others around them regardless of their emotional vulnerability. In cases in which the possessor is, albeit temporarily, defeated, survivors do often display some form of emotional journey; however, I would not assign this to only

survivors who are men. Men and women often equally learn to show fear and bravery, to listen and to trust one another and to commit necessary violence.

Shifting Grounds

Clover notes that within the female story, the possessed woman follows an ABA story structure. She is changed from her 'original' state (A) and becomes colonised by her possessor, becoming him (B). She is then saved through exorcism, returning to herself (A), often unable to remember her experience when possessed. The male story in occult media follows an ABC structure. He is a figure of authority, often spiritual, but he is impacted by an inability to confront his emotions (A). The possessor exploits the male figure's repressed emotional weakness whilst he battles a demonic force to save the possessed woman. This forces him to confront his emotions (B). Through confronting his emotions and defeating the possessor, he is a changed man (C). For Clover, as the possessed woman is exorcised, she returns to herself (A); however, this does not consider those who stay possessed and 'portals' that are changed by possession.

In many cases the Inhabited Vessel in the Possessed Slasher follows an AB structure, becoming something new through possession. This can be seen in both fusion and spatial fission in *Night of the Demons* (1988). The possessing demons can walk the earth on Halloween night. Fusion-possessed Angela embraces her possession and becoming queen of the demons. She changes from just Angela (A) to a fused or sutured Inhabited Vessel, becoming Angela Queen of the Demons (B). In terms of the other victims, each possession is spread through violence, leading to the vessel's death. Demons possess the non-living bodies of the teens, eventually forgoing their vessels and returning to hell when the sun rises. These characters transform from themselves (A) to a possessed vessel (B), their final state before Halloween night ends.

The combination of the ABA-ABC dynamic is reliant on a form of exorcism that rarely appears within the Possessed Slasher. There is rarely one character whose sole mission is to free one possessed character. When exorcism does occur, it is performed by groups, inexperienced survivors or a minor point in a larger plot. In some cases, particularly those of temporal fission, Inhabited Vessels display an ABC structure even when the characters regain control of their original body. Clover's ABA structure relies on the possessed character's ultimate return to normal, something that can only happen if the possessed loses all memory or evidence of possession. I suggest it is more common for the possessed to experience an emotional and sometimes physical change through their experience, should they be released from the possessor. For example, in *Chucky*, Chucky is exorcised from Nica's body. Nica is not only mentally and emotionally changed after her experience of the possession, but her body is changed, as she now has quadruple amputations of her limbs. She swears revenge, her previous reticence for violence is lost as she becomes focused on destroying Tiffany and Chucky.

Clover's ABA and ABC structure are rarely present within the Possessed Slasher; however, I suggest that AB and ABC structures are often seen. Furthermore, there is considerably less emphasis on the interplay between the ABA-ABC relationship. This ABA-ABC relationship is connected to the construction of the distinct female and male story. The Possessed Slasher rarely simply displays one possessed character and one attempted heroic priest. Due to the intermingling of Slasher conventions, the goal is often focused on survival and escape, with the occasional exorcism included for narrative purposes. These exorcisms are more commonly seen as part of larger narratives, particularly seen in some Neoslasher series.

The Occult in media has always been linked to the concept of threat. Threat to one's life, lifestyle and societal order. The threat of the occult or demonic possessor is not simply

the threat of violence but the threat of change and disruption. Both the Slasher and possession narratives feature a threat that lurks in the shadows, on its way to corrupt or destroy. This threat may be a serial killer, it may be the devil. Either way, it is positioned with the power to alter normalcy. Both Slashers and possession narratives focus on the resilient force of the one(s) who combat this disruption, be it the final girl or a priest. However, threat can be problematised when the two genre conventions combine, blurring the lines between killer and saviour, protagonist and antagonist, and human and monstrous.

As noted earlier, establishing the history of occult and possession narratives in media allows a better understanding of trends within the genre. I will utilise this context when considering the Possessed Slasher and the implications of filmmaker choices based on the social context, anxieties and trends. Building on Clover's discussion of the victims of possession, or portals, noting trends in the gendering of the possessed, and gendered Slasher conventions, particularly final girls, the next section will note the complexities with Clover's assertions when interacting with the Possessed Slasher.

Possessed Slashers

Some theorists approach the Slasher genre from the perspective of cycles (Petridis 2019, West 2018). The genre conventions of Slashers are often linked to the date of release, as conventions develop through market saturation, cash-ins and reinvention. In analysing genre conventions, I acknowledge how these cycles interact with the Possessed Slasher. Possessed Slashers experience boosts and decreases in popularity based on the desires of audiences within each cycle. Using Petridis' (2019) Slasher cycle analysis, I will discuss the conventions of each cycle and how they interact with the Possessed Slasher. I acknowledge that the Possessed Slasher itself is not a saturated enough genre to have its own cycles, and similarly this is the case with possession narratives. However, Slasher cycles do influence the discussion of the Possessed Slasher.

According to Petridis (:47-66), the Classical Slasher (1974-1993) is characterised by a Slasher killer who is a mysterious and frequently disguised killer who targets middle-class adolescents who are punished for their perceived moral transgressions. The final survivor, who is often a young woman or teen, confronts the murderer to return to normalcy. In many cases, the perpetrator of the crime has some sort of connection to the victim or the community. Whether it is a connection to a certain location or a particular disdain for teenagers, babysitters, or camp counsellors, their history is what makes them who they are.

The Possessed Slasher within the Classical cycle features killers in disguise. In some cases, they wear other characters' bodies or skins, or wearable objects such as masks, to disguise their identity and intent. The victims are often still young and middle-class, sometimes groups of friends, sometimes families. There is always at least one survivor; however, these survivors often come as a pair or small group. The possessing force is often connected to a place or an item, where they are accidentally released or awoken. Within this cycle are the first three instalments of the *Evil Dead* (1981, 1987, 1992) and *Child's Play* (1988, 1990, 1991) franchises and sequels such as *Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge* (1985), *Jason Goes to Hell: The Final Friday* (1993) and *Hello Mary Lou: Prom Night II* (1987). There are also films such as *The Ripper* (1985), *Shocker* (1989) and *Trick or Treat* (1986).

The Self-Referential Slasher (1994-2000) (:67-88) often features characters cognisant of horror tropes, discussing and subverting the rules of the genre. The narrative further shifts towards a whodunit style structure, in which the mystery of the killer becomes more of a mystery to be solved. Finally, the final survivor develops, allowing them to transgress some morals, such as drinking or partying. Final folks and final families in the Possessed Slasher

often rebel against the Reaganite family values¹⁰ that defined morality in the Classical Slasher. In light of this, the final survivors in the Possessed Slasher of the Self-Referential Slasher period tend not to display behaviour that is more morally objectionable than is seen within the Classical period.

The Possessed Slasher is less popular during the popularity of the whodunit-style structure. The Possessed Slasher often requires the audience to be aware of the possession, which can limit the ability to create a mystery around the killer. This cycle mostly contains sequels and franchise instalments, often involving a tonal change. *Night of the Demons 2* (1994) and *Night of the Demons 3* (1997) both feature an organised authority figure who attempts to police, investigate and save the possessed teens. *Night of the Demons 3* particularly focuses on teens running after they think they have killed a cop at a gas station. This cycle also features *Bride of Chucky* (1998), the first film in the *Child's Play* franchise to focus on Chucky and his family, instead of the previous structure in which Chucky pursues Andy.

The Neoslasher (2000-2013) (:89-129) features a deeper exploration of the killer, represented as less one-dimensional than the Classical killer. There is an increase in the level of violence that is on screen in the Neoslasher. This cycle also includes a trend of remakes and reboots, which reapproach Classical killers with motifs that are more contemporary and updated. As noted earlier, Petridis suggests 2013 as the end of the Neoslasher cycle, citing the increase in focus on television productions. Taking into account both film and television, I propose that the Neoslasher cycle persists to the present day.

¹⁰ Referring to Former President Ronald Reagan's emphasis on the family as the cornerstone of American society, pushing the home as a source of imposed morality and values.

The Possessed Neoslasher uses possession to further explore the killer, challenging the possessor and the possessed. Vessels force the possessor to experience difference in terms of gender, sexuality and societal perception. But in kind, the possessor can force the vessel to consider their relationship with violence, morals and power. In terms of violence, the Possessed Slasher has always displayed graphic violence towards both victims and the possessed. The Possessed Neoslasher cycle features several remakes, including *Evil Dead* (2013), *Child's Play* (2019) and *Night of the Demons* (2009), and reboots, such as *Evil Dead Rise* (2023) and *Curse of Chucky* (2013). Others in the cycle feature a reapproach to the Possessed Slasher inserting conventions from other genres, as seen in *[Rec]* (2007), *Ouija: Origin of Evil* (2016) and *Freaky* (2020), and reframing the killer in *You Might Be the Killer* (2018).

The Possessed Slasher is linked to developing tropes, even though it does not fully adhere to the trends within Slasher cycles. Possessed Slashers are predominantly seen in the Classical and Neoslasher cycles, as the narrative structure can struggle to align with the popular whodunit structure of the Self-Referential cycle. Clover's (1992) investigation of the Slasher genre exclusively discusses films within the Classical Slasher cycle. In the following analysis, I will discuss Clover's tropes in Possessed Slashers, spanning from 1981 to 2023. Whilst these films are not all within the Classical cycle timescale, many conventions of the Possessed Slasher first arrive within this Classical cycle.

Having expounded the interaction between Slasher cycles and the Possessed Slasher, it is equally important to establish the conventions of the Possessed Slasher. The presence of possession does not simply affect the supernatural ability of the killer but disrupts ideas such as the final girl, violence and victimhood. Clover in *Her Body, Himself* (Men, Women, and Chain Saws, 1992:21-64) approaches the Slasher from eight tropes: 'the male killer', 'the female killer', 'the terrible place', 'weapons', 'victims', 'the final girl', 'shock', and 'the

body'. In this chapter, I will approach the Possessed Slasher through five tropes, echoing Clover's proposed tropes. In Possessed Slashers, killers and victims often cross over, as possessed killers can often begin as victims. Therefore, I will begin with 'killers and victims'. This is followed by an explanation of the tropes: 'terrible place', 'weapons', 'final folks and families', 'shock' and 'body'. The Possessed Slasher rarely features a single final girl, as highlighted by Clover in Slashers. Survivors are often mixed-gender pairs or groups that rely on each other to defeat the killer; therefore, they are considered together as final folks and final families.

Killers and Victims

Clover notes trends in Slasher killers (:26-30) and victims (:32-35), highlighting that the killer is most often male. He has a history of childhood issues, gender confusion, and/or he is sexually disturbed. In the instances in which the killer is a woman, her reasons for killing differ from her male counterparts. She does not display gender confusion or psychosexual aggression; her anger stems not from her childhood but from a specific moment of her adult life in which she is abandoned, cheated on or assaulted by a man. In both cases, these issues are often tied to how they select their victims. The killer targets those with similarities to those they feel wronged them, such as camp counsellors in *Friday the 13th* (1980) and babysitters in *Halloween* (1978).

The Possessed Slasher features a force that stalks and kills victims, much like the Slasher killer; however, the killer in the Possessed Slasher is often initially metaphysical, a spirit or force of some kind needing a physical body. This search for a vessel means that the killer does not always fit into the Classical Slasher killer type. The killer could be anybody or anything. They can wear any face, any clothing, any inanimate shell. The line between victim and killer becomes blurred as victims, whether by choice or not, become killers. Jones, in

distinguishing the Slasher, suggest that “the killer is either human or a supernatural version of a once-extant human” (2024:4). They further note that these killers are distinct from the archetypal monster, noting aliens, werewolves and demons, however I suggest that whilst the Possessed Slasher killer is often once-extant human they are often demonic.

In some instances, the once human killers become spirits able to possess vessels to continue their killing spree. In *Jason Goes to Hell: The Final Friday* (1993), Jason's death transforms him into a possessing spirit. He possesses different vessels in his pursuit to be reborn so he can continue targeting teen campers. In *Child's Play*, serial killer Charles Lee Ray possesses a Good Guy doll. In his new doll form, he continues to kill both for fun and for revenge. In *Shocker* (1989), Pinker becomes an electrical spirit, possessing different vessels to get revenge on those who contributed to his imprisonment and death sentence. In these narratives, the possessing spirit is the ghost of a Slasher-style killer. They uphold the characteristics of a Slasher killer; however, their newly acquired supernatural ability enables them to evade death and persist in their slashing.

In these narratives, these possessing spirits are attached to objects, allowing transference into their first vessels, such as Jason's heart, Chucky's Good Guy doll, and Pinker's electrical charge from the electric chair. Whilst Mary Lou, from *Hello Mary Lou: Prom Night II* (1987), is not established as a serial killer in her life, she also returns as a vengeful spirit seeking revenge and violence. Her spirit is tied to her prom queen crown and cape, transferring her spirit into Vicki. In *You Might Be the Killer* (2018), a mask is created from a demonic evil tree, containing the possessing spirit of the tree along with the spirit of the woodcarver it first compelled to go on a killing spree. It is not explained why this malevolent tree compels vessels to kill; however, it targets those who trespass on the surrounding land.

In others, such as the *Evil Dead* and the *Night of the Demons* franchises, demons and evil forces possess vessels to slash their friends and/or possess victims to create a hive-style Slasher killer. In these narratives, the possessed, or killed, victims are often both men and women, sexual transgressors and virgins, graphic deaths and offscreen kills. Like the Classical Slasher killer, the Possessed Slasher presents an unrelenting force that pursues and murders its victim. Some Possessed killers have developing goals, in that their initial goal is to have a physical body; from there, the possessed killer attacks, kills and/or infects victims. Their power is often tied to their physical vessel, and they need releasing from whatever is used to contain them. Unlike the Classical Slasher killer and his victims, the possessed killer has a form of symbiotic relationship with their victims, unable to return to earth or attack without them. The victims of the possessed killer must confront not only the threat posed by the killer but also the existence of the supernatural. These supernatural rules, which initially lead them to lose hope, often allow them to escape. All they must do is cross the running water, make it to morning, stay awake, or destroy the heart.

Terrible Place

Clover suggests another notable element of the Slasher film is the terrible place (:30-31). This place is often a house or tunnel. It initially seems a safe haven but ultimately does not protect the victims, as the killer becomes trapped inside with them. The same walls that protected them now imprison them in a confined space with the killer. Both Slashers and possession narratives often display the home as a terrible place, a seemingly protected place ultimately imprisoning characters in with the killer or the possessed. These detected possessed figures reside in freezing bedrooms, bound to the headboard, whilst the undetected walk amongst other members of the household, mimicking normalcy. In the Possessed Slasher, the terrible place serves as both a deceptive protector and the site of monstrosity. The possession narrative is often facilitated by a point of release of a demonic force or spirit. As noted earlier

in the discussion of possession narratives, it is often the haunted house and/or possessed object that leads to the unwitting release of a possessor. The terrible place becomes layered as different spaces hold more supernatural power or spirituality, and the seeming safety shifts based on the possessor and the method of possession.

In *The Evil Dead*, for example, the surrounding woods act as a terrible place. At first the woods are a retreat for the college students, away from the city. However, when the Kandarian demon is released, the woods and trees become possessed, and said trees attack victims and destroy their means of escape. A further layer of the terrible place is the Knowby Cabin, a space that feels safe until the deadites attack. The cellar is even more terrible, housing the Necronomicon and the tape that releases the evil upon them. When Cheryl is first possessed, the cellar is used as an improvised prison cell that is initially believed to keep the infectious possession contained. The role of the cellar as a site of monstrosity is emphasised in *Evil Dead II* as the deadite Henrietta is buried there, attacking Ash and devouring Jake as she pulls him inside.

Similarly, in *Night of the Demons*, there are layers of terrible places. Judy and Rodger must escape the gates of Hull House, crossing over a stream, as the demons cannot cross running water. The house itself seems initially safe enough for a Halloween party, despite rumours of murders that have taken place there. Deep inside the house are the crematorium chamber and the retort, which contains the possessing demon. Often in Possessed Slashers the majority of the narrative is set within the layered terrible place, aligning more with Slashers that tie their killing to a location, such as *Friday the 13th* and *Sleepaway Camp*. This also aligns with the haunted house trope within possession and occult narratives. These terrible places, as Clover suggests, house both the evil and the protagonists as they battle for dominance. In some Possessed Slashers the victims' seemingly safe space is invaded by the

possessed killer, and often victims also invade sites where the possessing spirit or killer lives or is imprisoned.

Clover notes that commonly the victim will lock herself (Clover's gendering) in a space, such as a closet or car, and wait for the killer. The killer breaks in using a handheld weapon. The camera is positioned from inside as the weapon begins to break through, and the killer is revealed. This can be seen in *Night of the Demons*, as Judy and Roger are cornered in the crematorium. However, instead of the killer breaking in with a weapon, Angela, potentially aided by the house, begins to pull the pins from the hinges on Judy and Roger's side of the door. In the Possessed Slasher, the killer does not always require the brute force of the Slasher killer to enter, using their supernatural powers to infiltrate.

The Inhabited Vessel killer often uses disguise to breach the layers of safety within the terrible place. The evil is given entry by others, believing them to be their friend, lover, sibling, etc. In *The Evil Dead*, Cheryl is pulled into the house by Ash as she runs from the woods, believing he is helping his sister; he brings the first deadite into the house. In *Jason Goes to Hell: The Final Friday*, Jason-Randy enters the Vorhees house, where Duke and Jessica are attempting to protect her baby from Jason. Holding the dagger that is needed to kill Jason, Jessica does not immediately attack Jason-Randy, unsure of who Jason has possessed. Jason's disguise within Randy's body allows him entry to the room and access to the baby. As noted earlier, the innocuous-seeming children's toy, antique crown, mask or television set also creates a breach of safety, transforming a safe place into a terrible one.

In possession narratives, a character's own body can act as a terrible place; whereas characters are initially secure in the knowledge that they are in control of their own bodies, the possessor infiltrates. Their bodies, or second skin, begin to display differences, often in a way that is abject to the possessed and/or those around them. This can be seen in films like

The Exorcist, as the words ‘help me’ appear on Pazuzu-Regan's skin as if Regan is trapped within her skin. In exorcism media, the body must serve as a temporary terrible space, allowing the spirit of the possessed character to be reached and retrieved. In expelling the demonic spirit, the body shifts from a terrible place that traps them to a comfortable one, as they are once again in control. In Possessed Slashers, the presence of the possessed character’s spirit is often dependent on the individual spiritual lore. However, its presence is not tied to an external exorcist. It is the characters themselves that grapple against the spirits fighting for dominance.

This can be seen several times in the *Evil Dead* franchise. In *Evil Dead: Rise* (2023), after her possession, Ellie projectile vomits white liquid all over the floor. She begs, “don’t let it take my babies” as she collapses on the floor. This is the last time she displays control over her body, horrified by her actions and aware of the threat to her children. Mila, in *Evil Dead* (2013), insists that there is something wrong with the house and that she needs to leave. As her friends are helping her with drug withdrawal, they ignore her concerns. After her attack in the woods, she states that there is something in the woods that is now inside with them. When she looks at herself in the mirror, she sees a deadite staring back at her as the mirror reveals the demonic spirit beneath her skin.

Abjection of the body or vessel can also be seen in *Child’s Play*. Whilst Charles’ possession of the Good Guy doll was willing and intentional, he becomes horrified to learn that his doll body is becoming more humanoid, tying him to the vessel. His doll body becomes abject as he rushes to possess another body. Pinker in *Shocker* is similarly disconcerted to realise that the bodies he possesses begin to deteriorate during his possession. His abjection stems from his desire to be alive, each vessel becoming a temporary, deteriorating, terrible place. The terrible place, in the Possessed Slasher, is a layered site that houses the possessor. Outer layers include grounds, buildings, and cellars, whilst the

innermost layer is often an object, like a book, doll, or worm. It is the interaction with the victims that leads the innermost layer of the terrible place to shift to that of the body.

Weapons

Clover notes the role of the weapon in the Slasher film (:31-32). They highlight the closeness and tactility of the weapon. This weapon can take many forms, from the classic knife, hammer, or axe to the more creative hot poker, hypodermic needle, or cord. Slashers often display a mixture of deaths with the killer's primary weapon and resourceful kills. For example, in *Halloween*, Michael Myers' preferred weapon is a kitchen knife, and he proceeds to kill his victims either through stabbing or strangulation. In *Halloween II* (1981) Alice is stabbed with a knife; however, other characters are stabbed with syringes, boiled and drowned in a hot tub. Despite Michael's association with a kitchen knife, sequels use creative kills to intrigue audiences. Within possession narratives, the possessed is often supernaturally powerful, utilising telekinesis and supernaturally assisted strength to subdue their victims. They may physically attack; however, if subdued, they are still a threat, able to use powers to manipulate reality and puppet inanimate objects.

The Possessed Slasher killer still often kills in an intimate way, using handheld weapons, such as knives, nails, chainsaws, and household tools, as well as teeth and supernatural strength. Like the archetypal Slasher killer, they often attack their victims individually and kill them in a graphic manner. Those who experience infectious possession, instead of being killed, are also often attacked in a personal and intimate way individually. They are penetrated, vomited on, kissed and mutilated. Their possession is often incurable, as the possessing spirits take over their bodies. In some cases, characters become possessed through their minds; in others, it is their bodies that are the site of invasion by the possessor through attack, torn skin, and infiltration.

Both the Slasher and possession narratives feature a threat, particularly to the individual who ventures somewhere alone. The handheld weapons of the Slasher killer often require that the victim be alone or in a very small group. The closeness of the murder leaves the killer vulnerable to attack from others. In possession narratives, some form of isolation often facilitates the possession of the Inhabited Vessel. For example, Regan's loneliness and isolation lead her to engage with Captain Howdy in *The Exorcist*. In the Possessed Slasher, the character who ventures off alone becomes vulnerable to possession. This can be seen in the possession of Cheryl (*The Evil Dead*, 1981), Ash (*Army of Darkness*), Mila (*Evil Dead*, 2013) and Ellie (*Evil Dead: Rise*). In *Ouija* and *Ouija: Origin of Evil*, both Deb and Doris' possessions are tied to their use of the Ouija board alone, making them vulnerable to malevolent spirits. In these cases, the weapons the demonic spirits use to attack are tree branches, glass shards and Ouija boards. These weapons come in contact with the body, facilitating possession.

Final Folks and Families

Clover in their discussion of the final girl (:35-41) suggests that Slashers often contain a woman who must confront the killer. This character survives the Slasher's attack, where her friends are killed off. This survivor is often boyish and virginal. She stares death in the face, using intelligence and bravery to either survive long enough to be rescued or kill the killer. In the Possessed Slasher, the Slasher final girl trope persists; however, they are more accurately described as final folks, and the gender of the final survivor can vary, particularly if they are Inhabited Vessels. Where the Slasher often features one final survivor, the possession narrative commonly ends with multiple survivors who have seemingly vanquished evil, banishing the malevolent spirit. Families clutch their exorcised family member, whilst the saviour either watches on or lies dead through sacrifice. In the Possessed Slasher, more

characters survive at the end of the narrative than would be typical of a slasher; however, more characters die than might be expected of the occult or possession narrative.

These final folks are often a pair, a man and woman, sometimes platonic, sometimes romantic. In *Night of the Demons*, Judy and Rodger survive Angela and the other demons' attacks. They help each other with threatening situations and come through for each other. Judy supports Rodger when he loses his will to fight; Rodger returns from safety to pull her up over the wall to safety. Judy is feminine presenting, dressed as Alice from Disney's *Alice in Wonderland*. Although it is not confirmed if she is a virgin, she does reject Jay's advances and is affronted that he thinks she slept with Sal after going on one date with him previously. She is afraid, but she is also resourceful and determined. Rodger is more masculine presenting; but at points he is paralysed by fear and the first to try to escape the house; however, when Judy's life is at risk, he returns to help her.

In terms of identification with the final girl, Possessed Slashers often feature final folks and final families. In Rodger and Judy's battle against Angela and the other demons, who does the audience aligns with, and does it have to be just one of them? It is the combination of what these characters collectively reflect that audiences can align with, regardless of their gender. Fearful audiences will align with Judy and Rodger at differing points in the narrative, but also with their strength and tenacity when it arises. The pair of survivors can also be seen in Vicki and Craig (*Hello Mary Lou: Prom Night II*), Vince and Holly (*Night of the Demons 3*) and Jesse and Lisa (*Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge*). Some are friends, some are couples, but all come together to challenge the threat of the possessed killer, unable to succeed without each other.

Some Possessed Slashers contain a final family, in which a group of survivors become united through formed kinship. These characters are connected through protection: protection

of each other and sometimes protection of the world, should the supernatural killer be unchecked or escape. These families avoid the traditional nuclear family; however, they often feature at least one patriarch and/or matriarch that guides them. Some final families are entirely chosen, often meeting through roles in a school or job. This can be seen in *Child's Play 3*, in which Andy, Desilva and Tyler meet in military school, and *Night of the Demons 2*, with Sister Gloria, Bibi, Melissa and Johnny, who meet through a religious boarding school. In these films, the place in which the characters meet is the site in which they battle the possessed killer. In *Ash vs Evil Dead*, Ash, Pablo and Kelly all work together at Value Stop; however, they leave their place of work after S1E1, 'El Jefe'. Circumstance causes these families to meet, but it is their confrontation with the supernatural threat that enforces their emotional bonds.

Some final families have more traditional family bonds through blood and adoption. This can be seen in *Child's Play*, as single mother Karen and her son Andy face the possessed Chucky doll with the help of Detective Mike Norris. The pair attempt to protect Andy from Chucky's violence, taking parental roles. Similarly, in *Jason Goes to Hell: The Final Friday* Steven and Jessica battle against Jason, protecting their daughter Stephanie. It is established that these characters are no longer in a relationship, as Jessica dates Robert, and they do not get back together within the narrative. The protection of a child can also be seen in *Child's Play 2*, as Andy's foster sister Kyle helps fight Chucky, and in *Evil Dead: Rise*, as Beth protects her niece Kassie from her deadite family.

Clover aligns the final girl with an adolescent boy, able to act emotionally in a way that is considered unacceptable for adult men, but not so feminine as to obstruct male competence. This becomes troubled when considering the masculine final folk and the mixed-gender final family. If we assign expressions of fear as a feminine trait and resourcefulness and violence as a masculine one, then the masculine final folk are as

feminine as the feminine final folk are masculine. If the final girl is a non-binary stand-in for men and women audiences, then so too is the final boy. Both Jesse (*Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge*) and Ash (the *Evil Dead* franchise) have been referred to as 'final boys', by Haynes (2021), Bailey (2019) and Scales (2013). These characters exhibit fear in response to a supernatural threat, which leads them to experience violence. Whilst they are resourceful and display defensive violence, they must also grapple with emotions such as grief, fear, and anxiety. Possession, at times, renders them unable to see reality or control their bodies, leading them to feel helpless and out of control.

Shock

Clover discusses the role of shock within the Slasher film (:41-42). They note that Slasher films feature a combination of silent stalking and outright gore on screen. The killer stalks the unknowing victim in a way that the audience is aware of. This can be seen in POV shots and wide shots showing the killer standing menacingly in the distance, behind their victim. These moments are often followed by graphic onscreen violence in which victims are often killed in a hands-on creative manner. These tropes are present in the Possessed Slasher; however, they are expanded by the supernatural elements of the possessor. Whilst the stalking Slasher killer is often unknown and unseen by the Slasher victim, the Possessed Slasher killer hides in plain sight. The audience is aware of the possession and the threat; however, the victim is not on guard, believing they are safe with a familiar person. The following violence is facilitated by the Inhabited Vessels' supernatural abilities, such as supernatural strength, telekinesis and manipulating reality.

In possession narratives it is common for the possessed to become possessed through some form of isolated interaction with the dead. For example, this may be a bored child with a Ouija board or a spirit entering the dreams of sleeping child or teen. In the Possessed

Slasher the possessed is often alone or vulnerable to the source of possession. Following their possession, characters often isolate other victims to attack or infect them. In the Slasher, the audience knows that no character is alone. We know that when a character goes out alone to check out a noise, they will be in close proximity to the killer, stalked closely before their death. In a possession narrative, the audience is often aware a character is possessed before the characters within the narrative. In knowing they are watching a possession film, audiences know that as soon as a character begins behaving oddly, there is an additional presence in the room. In the Possessed Slasher characters often go off or hide unknowingly with Inhabited Vessels. This combines the tension of the stalking killer with the tension of knowing the character feels misguided safety. This can be seen in *Night of the Demons* as Suzanne draws Stooze away to possess him, leaving Sal with Angela, who is also possessed.

The graphic violence displayed in the Possessed Slasher can be amplified as supernatural abilities allow possessed killers to manipulate reality and the laws of physics. Some possessed killers can manipulate the world around them, as seen in *Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge*, as victims are boiled in a flaming swimming pool. Mary Lou-Vicki, in *Hello Mary Lou: Prom Night II*, crushes Monica inside the locker she is hiding in, using her telekinetic power to squash the metal lockers together. Often, Possessed Slashers display the supernatural strength of the Classical Slasher killer; however, these characters do not require the large, broad frame to support the brute strength. Small women and even dolls are able to overpower those much bigger than them, able to throw, stab or choke them.

Whilst it seems like the final folks have successfully defeated the evil force, much like the Slasher and the possessed narrative, there is often a final shot that confirms that there is still potential for it to return. The final folks and final families battle for survival but ultimately cannot defeat the supernatural evil. It is bigger than them, tied to hell and otherworldly beings. Even if the protagonist defeats the specific demon or spirit they face, the knowledge

of their supernatural existence outweighs their minor defeat. They may win this specific battle, but as seen in sequels, they cannot win the war.

Body

In Clover's discussion of the body in the Slasher (42-44), they note that the killer is most often "recognizably human and distinctly male" (1993:42) looking in physicality. This can be seen in killers like Michael Meyers, Jason and Leatherface, all of whom are broad and tall with great physical strength. Clover compares this to the victims: "mostly women, often sexually free and always young and beautiful" (:42). They further discuss the experience of identification, stating that audience members who are men can struggle in terms of finding men to identify with. Most characters, such as police officers, fathers, and sheriffs, live long enough to display incompetence before death. They suggest the killer is equally undesirable, as they are "commonly masked, fat, deformed, or dressed as a woman. Or "he" is a woman" (:44). Therefore, men identify with the boyish final girl. In possession narratives, audiences may find alignment with the male story, as he acts as a hero to save the, often vulnerable, possessed. In the Possessed Slasher, as bodies become more fluid and survivors more varied, audiences may align with killers and survivors. Final families include brave and emotional men and women. Possessed killers can present masculine, feminine or both.

As noted earlier, it is most common for the first possessed character to be a woman. In the case of infectious possession, this first infected woman often then spreads the infection to victims of varying gender. In *Evil Dead*, there are three possessed women and one possessed man. In *Night of the Demons*, there are four possessed women and four possessed men. In *Shocker*, Pinker possesses five men, two women and a little girl on a bicycle. These varying vessels create a killer who wears many faces. The killer does not have a distinctly male appearance and is not always particularly intimidating. Often these characters have deep,

more masculine sounding voices; however, this is also likely associated with the trope of the masculine sounding possessed woman rather than an influence of mostly non-verbal silent Slasher killers.

The possessed killer is often the recurring character that appears in sequels, a recognisable figure that audiences become attached to. In terms of identification, audiences become less aligned with protagonists as the possessed killer continues their spree. For example, in the *Night of the Demons* franchise, Angela is the only recurring character. Audiences do not watch to see how new protagonists will defeat Angela but to see how Angela will kill and infect a new group of protagonists. Similarly, in the *Child's Play* franchise, Chucky essentially becomes the antagonistic protagonist as audiences align with him. This is further exemplified as the franchise begins to shift away from protagonists, focusing heavily on Chucky's issues and his family. Whilst Clover suggests that audiences do not align with the Slasher killer due to their undesirable difference, I suggest that it is the possessed killer's supernatural difference that makes them more appealing to align with. Their possession presents a fluctuating gender presentation that allows alignment from anyone in an audience.

This is what distinguishes the Possessed Slasher from the Slasher and the possession narrative that solidifies it as a particularly interesting subgenre when considering gender, identity and threat. The plurality of victims, violence and the threat of the killer from the Slasher is intermingled with the supernatural power, otherworldly threat and mixing of identities of the possession narrative. The possessed figure is free to roam, to kill, to infest. The killer is all the more powerful, disguised as friends to lull into a false sense of security. Utilising Clover's theory about Slashers and occult cinema, I have highlighted the differences within the Possessed Slasher, signposting where Clover's Slasher and Occult theories fail to align with the Possessed Slasher. This establishes the Inhabited Vessel framework and

possession becomes more complex, allowing a further extrapolation of themes such as identity, agency and power. When the possessed become more than a conduit for the possessor, and are viewed as part of a whole, gender and identity become problematised as they become a whole new being or amalgam of beings.

Utilising Clover's format of analysis has also allowed me to establish the Possessed Slasher subgenre as distinct from the Slasher and the possession narrative. Whilst the Possessed Slasher contains elements of both the Slasher and the possession narrative, the amalgamation of these conventions creates a new subject in which gender and the body are more malleable. Final girls are replaced with final families, victims become killers and the gender of the Inhabited Vessel becomes more fluid. Not only does the presence of supernatural technologies in Possessed Slashers allow roles to change, such as victims becoming killers, but in many instances these figures are presented with moments of agency. In this they might choose possession. They might choose to change their position within the narrative. They may choose to become more powerful. In this lies some of the potential in the Inhabited Vessel and the Possessed Slasher. In the next chapter I will extrapolate further on agency within these characters, as they choose difference, considering how victims can choose power, becoming monstrous.

Chapter Two: Agency of the Inhabited Vessel

In this chapter, I consider the Inhabited Vessel and the Possessed Slasher together to both exemplify their connection and begin to highlight the difference in the way gender interacts with character archetypes and roles within these narratives. The Possessed Slasher exhibits tropes of Slashers and possession narratives. In this the role of the possessed, the killer and the victim become fluid. This chapter will examine the interplay of agency and victimisation in Possessed Slashers, analysing how victims might assert power and transform into monsters of their own choosing. The Possessed Slasher often facilitates a type of agency that can be found missing in Slashers and possession narratives as characters apply their power and monstrosity to their own goals. This agency is bolstered by a character's access to power, both societal and supernatural. With their newfound power these Inhabited Vessels can make choices pertaining to their roles as killers, victims, and final folks; this allows them control over their own survival.

These victims are often subjugated by a patriarchal society, misogyny and gendered archetypes. I begin by demonstrating the journey from subjugated victim to supernaturally powerful possessor in *Hello Mary Lou: Prom Night II* (1987) (referred to as '*Hello Mary Lou*'). Here gendered power dynamics shift as supernatural technologies assist Mary Lou as she not only seeks revenge on her murderer but subsequently takes his societal position as she takes control of his body. Then I analyse Angela's fusion possession in the *Night of the Demons* franchise (1988-2009). Where Mary Lou's actions are a result of her previous victimhood, Angela's agency comes at the moment of her possession. She embraces the devil, gaining the power of the supernatural and maintaining control over her body in comparison to the other possession victims. Finally, I highlight a character who chooses their possession in Jamie in *You Might Be the Killer* (2018), as she utilises the power of the haunted mask to become a powerful killer.

Clover notes that “where the slasher concerns itself, through the figure of the final girl, with the rezoning of the feminine into territories traditionally occupied by the masculine, the occult concerns itself, through the figure of the male-in-crisis, with a shift in the opposite direction” (1992:107). They suggest that the Slasher is concerned with rezoning the feminine whilst the Occult narrative is concerned with rezoning the masculine. In the Slasher, women are able to take up phalluses in the weapons that they use to defend themselves against the penetrating killer, where the Occult narrative is concerned with ideas of pregnancy, passageways and conception as an otherworldly force entering the body. In this, men may “find themselves burdened or blessed” (:107) with a signifier of reproduction.

Clover suggests that most possession victims are women, and those who are not become feminine in their possession as something enters their body. They connect the throat and mother throat (vagina) as gateways that allow the possessing spirit to enter the body, or portal. However, I suggest that the common possession of women is tied more to perceptions of societal and institutional power rather than genitalia (though this is not to suggest that the vagina is not used as a point of entry in some possession narratives). As Creed notes, the possessed woman becomes monstrous as she begins to act in a more masculine manner, displaying aggression and vulgarity that is considered unacceptable, particularly of young women. Young women and children, such as Regan (*The Exorcist*, 1973), Carole-Anne (*Poltergeist*, 1982), Janet (*Conjuring 2*, 2016) and Doris (*Ouija: Origin of Evil*, 2016), feel particularly monstrous as someone with little societal power becomes more powerful than those around them, leaving patriarchal figures seemingly unable to subdue them.

In exorcism narratives, the possessed woman is often possessed by a named masculine demon, using her second skin as a disguise, hiding their power until opportune moments of torment or aggression. She becomes capable of great strength, telekinesis and sometimes the power to infect others. Within the Possessed Slasher the Inhabited Vessel often

displays this supernatural power, inflicting it on several victims. Retaliation and revenge are frequently the driving forces behind such attacks by named possessors. In unnamed possessors, the goal is often to kill and infect as many other characters as possible. Victims often perceive these possessed women as lacking both physical and societal power, which allows the Inhabited Vessel to kill and/or spread their infection more effectively, having been discounted as a threat.

Within the Slasher, the final girl gains power by either defeating the killer or surviving long enough to be saved. Her potential for power is tied to her gender-neutral, tomboy gender performance, allowing her to avoid pitfalls stereotypically associated with both the hypermasculine and the hyperfeminine. Her power solidifies in her (temporary) defeat of the killer. However, a significant portion of the final girl's role hinges on her reluctance to violate enforced morals, or fight. Whilst she often makes the choice to fight back for the sake of survival, her role is predetermined in the moment she turns down a beer or worries about her homework. The Possessed Slasher provides certain characters more agency, allowing them to decide their role within the narrative, equipping a victim with the potential to become a killer.

Characters who would normally simply be considered victims are given supernatural power that provides them the ability to choose to become a final survivor or a killer. These Inhabited Vessels use physical powers such as supernatural strength, telekinesis and infection to attack their victims, whilst also utilising manipulation, threat and telepathy to assert dominance. These Inhabited Vessels can reject the roles initially assigned to them, be it the role of a vengeful victim to be subdued, an infected victim to be consumed or a final folk restricted by an enforced valuation system.

This section will begin by considering *Hello Mary Lou*. The film begins with a scene set during a 1957 school prom. As Mary Lou is announced prom queen, she is accidentally

immolated by her spurned recent ex-boyfriend Billy, as he tries to stink bomb her crowning. Thirty years later, high school student Vicki searches for a prom dress in the school's prop room, having been denied a dress by her overprotective mother. She discovers Mary Lou's crown and cape, accidentally releasing Mary Lou's spirit. Vicki becomes possessed by Mary Lou, killing several students and Mary Lou's old fling Bud, who is now a priest. The death of her victims catches the attention of the school principal and her ex-boyfriend and murderer, Billy.

Mary Lou-Vicki begins to behave differently, dressing in poodle skirts and using 1950s slang as the school prepares for the prom. She becomes competitive with her friends and possessive of her boyfriend Craig, Billy's son. After supernaturally rigging the results, Mary Lou-Vicki is announced prom queen; however, she is quickly shot onstage by Billy, who has figured out that she is Mary Lou returned. The undead body of Mary Lou breaks out of Vicki's stomach. She pursues Craig to the prop room, planning to kill him in revenge for Billy's actions.

Billy enters the prop room holding her crown, having determined that if she is finally crowned, she can be at peace. Hoping this will save his son, Billy crowns Mary Lou's undead form and they kiss. In a fast POV shot, much like *Evil Dead*, the camera tracks through the prom and to Mary Lou's tombstone as it explodes. However, as Billy drives Vicki and Craig home, it is revealed that the spirit of Mary Lou has possessed Billy. Much like the ending of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), the pair scream as the possessed, or supernaturally altered, car drives off into the distance sporting the license plate 'MARYLU2-'.

As noted in Chapter One, Clover suggests that the male protagonist regains power by using a possessed woman's body as a site for emotional growth, noting "behind the female "cover" is always the story of a man in crisis, and that crisis is what the occult film... [is]

about” (1992:65). His exorcism or saving of the possessed woman allows him to reassert his dominance over her and, by extension, the emotions that allow him to undermine himself. If this film was regarded through this lens, it may seem to adhere to Clover’s suggested structure of a woman’s possession as a ‘cover’ to the story of a man, or in this case men, in crisis. Billy’s crisis is seemingly guilt for killing Mary Lou, a secret that he has kept since 1957.

Whilst in Clover’s occult narratives, the masculine priest or authority figure is often dealing with their own separate issue, the cause of Vicki’s possession is directly linked to Billy. Mary Lou uses Vicki’s body to torment him, killing students, their shared acquaintance, Bud, and targeting Billy’s son. To exorcise Vicki, he must put Mary Lou to rest, willing her to no longer walk the Earth threatening order. In giving her the crown and a kiss, Billy mollifies Mary Lou, leading her to release Vicki. If approached from the perspective of Billy’s emotional journey, it seems that Billy has resolved his guilt and believes that Mary Lou can rest in peace as prom queen with the love of her life. She is finally at peace, having won back her boyfriend.

At the prom in 1957 it is established that Mary Lou is not in love with Billy at all, nor does this emotional reunion align with her character. Bored by Billy, she sneaks away to make out with Bud. When he asks why she even dates Billy, she replies, “Cause he treats me right, and his daddy’s rich. Rich enough to make Billy cool”¹¹. She is openly disinterested in Billy, immediately ignoring his request for her to stay at the table as he gets them drinks, her smile dropping as soon as he walks away. Mary Lou delights in her subversion of societal morals, doing what she wants when she wants.

¹¹ *Hello Mary Lou: Prom Night II* (1987)

She is often seen humming or playing the song *Mary Lou*¹², relishing in a song that describes a woman named Mary Lou, who takes from the men around her. The song states, “She took my diamond ring. She took my watch and chain. She took the keys to my Cadillac car. Jumped in my kitty and she drove afar” (*Mary Lou*, Ronnie Hawkins). She displays glee in the description of her namesake who transgresses morals, manipulating the men around her to give her their possessions, down to their last ‘two dollar bill’. Mary Lou’s joy in transgressing religious and gendered morals is further highlighted in the opening scene in which she visits a confession booth. In a close up shot she stares through the mesh screen occasionally dropping her eyes. Initially it seems that she feels some remorse for her actions. However, it is quickly revealed that she is looking down to write her phone number on the booth.

“Mary Lou: I’ve disobeyed my parents. Many times. I’ve taken the Lord’s name in vain. Many times. I’ve had sinful relations with boys at my school. Many boys. Many times.

Priest: My child, these are great sins. You must prepare yourself for the consequences.

Mary Lou: Father, there’s one more thing.

Priest: What is it, my poor child?

Mary Lou: I loved every minute of it.

[Written in lipstick on the confessional booth - ‘For a good time call Mary Lou 5886558’]”

(*Hello Mary Lou: Prom Night II*, 1987)

¹² The song was originally recorded by Young Jessie in 1954, however the 1959 Ronnie Hawkins version is played in the film.

She delights in tormenting the priest whilst pretending to confess to her sins. Instead of repentance, she is openly proud of her sins, having loved “every minute of it”. The priest admonishes her for her ‘great sins’, warning of the religious consequences of her actions. This could be read as foreshadowing that Mary Lou will face consequences for her moral transgressions. She laughs, unconcerned about his warning, as she heads to prom.

When Billy catches Mary Lou and Bud, Mary Lou brushes it off, stating that they were not doing anything. Billy’s objection to his girlfriend/fiancée (it is not clarified if the ring he gifts is an engagement ring or simply a gift) cheating on him is that she is going further sexually with Bud than him, stating: “we’ve been petting for a year, and you never went this far!”¹³ He does not display any emotional betrayal. Instead, he is angered that she was willing to be sexual with others but not him, implying that he feels entitled to her body. He is not emotionally betrayed by Mary Lou and Bud’s actions as much as he is angered as he regards Mary Lou as his possession. Bud seems not to be blamed by Billy as the pair are still in contact when Mary Lou returns.

Whilst Mary Lou's actions with Bud do lead to her breakup with Billy, it is unjust to blame her for her own death. By placing the onus on Mary Lou’s promiscuous behaviour, it assigns blame to the victim. This disregards Billy’s agency in his own decision to seek revenge on her. He did not intend to kill her with the poorly made stink bomb, but he is not seen to display much remorse. He is unprosecuted, with himself and Bud being the only ones who know of his fault in her death. Furthermore, he works at the scene of the crime thirty years later. He also repeatedly tries to erase Mary Lou, burning a class photo with her in it to sever any link between them.

¹³ *Hello Mary Lou: Prom Night II* (1987)



Fig.2.1 - *Hello Mary Lou: Prom Night II* (1987) - Mary Lou and Billy dance at homecoming together.

After Mary Lou's gravestone explodes, the pair can be seen dancing at their prom; with her cape and crown, the pair gaze at each other lovingly. There is a red gel over the screen that borders between romantic and deadly (Fig.2.1), as her classmates clap and cheer. I suggest that the scene in which the pair dance together at the prom is a further manipulation from Mary Lou, an attempt to convince him that he has been successful as she invades his body. This romantic image of the pair dancing together does not seem to align with Mary Lou's character or her desires. As much as she desired to be prom queen, it was not her only goal. She states to Billy in his office: "I was ready for the world. I could have been anything"¹⁴, commiserating her lost potential as her life was cut short.

Her choice to target Billy and Craig is not motivated by a desire for Billy, but anger and revenge. She would not be set to rest by slow dancing with her murderer. Here Billy guesses as to what will put her spirit at peace, determining that a moment to be crowned prom

¹⁴ *Hello Mary Lou: Prom Night II* (1987)

queen and to be held in his arms is a worthy trade for her new life, let alone her supernatural ability. To resolve his violent betrayal, all she needs are jewels, a nice dress and a man on her arm, like a *proper* 1950s wife. The intimate close up displays Billy's idealised desires. In his mind, this is an image of how the night ought to have gone if she had not slept with Bud or been outspoken about her disinterest in Billy. She smiles at him silently, holding her tongue in a way that does not align with her dominant and transgressive personality.

Interpreting this scene as the culmination of Mary Lou and Billy's story in a romantic reunion disregards Mary Lou's agency and power. I propose that this film portrays a woman's quest for empowerment and a life free from male dominance. She had always desired power, something denied to her as a young woman in 1957. She freely admits that her attraction to Billy stems from his capacity to support her. She is looking for power that she cannot easily gain on her own, as her access to well-paid work and financial freedom is limited due to gender discrimination. In death she becomes supernaturally powerful, with a power that the men around her cannot take away. She tricks Billy in the same way she did throughout life, telling him what he wants to hear and showing him what he wants to see.

In an earlier scene, Mary Lou-Vicki also uses this new power against a predatory teacher. During science class Mr Craven leans over her, sliding a hand down her back from her shoulder to grope her. Mary Lou-Vicki glares at him as he walks away. From across the room she lights a Bunsen burner, causing a burst of flame that burns his genitals. She refuses to allow the teacher to take advantage of her. Mary Lou-Vicki also uses her new powers against her domineering religious mother. Vicki is powerless within her home, as her mother enforced both religious and financial control over her and her father. Her mother attempts to tell her that she cannot leave, calling her a Jezebel who must repent, resulting in Mary Lou-Vicki using telekinesis to throw her through the glass panes of the front door.

In Mary Lou's possession of Vicki, Mary Lou gradually psychologically manipulates Vicki until she is able to pull her to the other side. Mary Lou scratches 'help me' into the other side of the classroom chalkboard, drawing Vicki close. She is pulled into the chalkboard that becomes a black whirlpool, and is dragged under the water. It is in this water that Vicki's skin becomes torn, as her first skin is entirely removed from her body. Mary Lou-Vicki steps out of the chest in the prop room that held her crown, her new body wet from the whirlpool. At Vicki's death by gunshot, Mary Lou, in her own body is able to tear from said body, her burned corpse now healing as she finally lives again. When Vicki is released, during Billy's kiss with Mary Lou, Craig finds Vicki in the chest, also wet as if she had been in the black whirlpool the whole time.

At the end, whilst Vicki is freed from her possession, Mary Lou is not defeated. Billy puts Vicki and Craig into his car under the guise of taking them home after the ordeal at the prom. The doors lock, and the radio begins to play Mary Lou's signature song. The ring Billy gifted to her at the 1957 prom now appears on Mary Lou-Billy's finger. Turning in the driver's seat, they state, "hey kids, they're playing our song"¹⁵. Mary Lou has taken possession of Billy's body, eyes glowing blue, mirroring her striking blue eyes. Much like Bud had warned, she possesses the body of her killer, using it to free her from the hellish underworld of the dead. Billy's first skin now resides in the darkness of the chest in the prop room, torn from his body as Mary Lou sutures herself to his second skin and the world of the living. She successfully achieves much of what the song suggests, Billy's ring and his car, driving it off into the distance. Though she does not stop at inanimate objects, she also takes his body, his agency and his lineage as she kidnaps his son. His body not only allows her to live, but allows her to experience privilege often denied to her as a woman in the 1950s.

¹⁵ *Hello Mary Lou: Prom Night II* (1987)

In *Prom Night III: The Last Kiss* (1989) Mary Lou returns in some ways; however, it is not a continuation of the narrative or character in *Hello Mary Lou*. The film begins with Mary Lou's previously destroyed gravestone, the camera dipping under the sod. She and several young women are chained, dancing on the burning floor of hell. She escapes, and returns to the school, killing a janitor who recognises her. She begins a relationship with Alex, a student at the school, subsequently becoming obsessed with him and killing for him. For example, Alex flunks a test that affects his plans to go to medical school. To help him, Mary Lou kills the teacher, supernaturally altering his test results. In *Prom Night III: The Last Kiss*, it is stated that Mary Lou died in a fire on prom night, and there is no mention of Billy or the events of *Hello Mary Lou*.

The ghost of Mary Lou does not possess any characters in this film, instead her spirit is essentially corporeally able to transform herself and manipulate reality around her. Instead of searching for power, Mary Lou in *Prom Night III: The Last Kiss* is entirely focused on Alex, killing those who limit him and those who stand between them. She targets his girlfriend Sarah and his friend Shane with whom he has a queer coded relationship.¹⁶ Her goals are entirely focussed on finding a man to enter hell with her and become her prom king, in contrast to Mary Lou in *Hello Mary Lou* who desires to exist in the world of living, utilising her power to situate herself in position of control. As *Prom Night III: The Last Kiss* does not follow the events of *Hello Mary Lou*, I suggest that it might be more aptly viewed as an entirely separate story that happens to feature a deceased prom queen with the same name.

Hello Mary Lou displays the agency of a young woman and her postmortem possessing spirit as she must grapple with societal pressures and attempts to subjugate her.

¹⁶ Shane is repeatedly positioned in competition with Sarah for Alex's time, as Alex capriciously flips between conflicting summer travel plans with each of them. Once demonic Shane attempts to kill Sarah, noting jealously that now she won't be travelling with Alex. When Alex first confesses to Shane about Mary Lou, Shane suggests that they run away together and 'just disappear'.

Mary Lou's spirit is unable to rest due to her outrage that her life was cut short by a man who felt entitled to her and her body. In this, her role shifts from that of a victim of Billy's jealousy to a possessing killer as she becomes fused to Billy's body. In *Night of the Demons* (1988), Angela also becomes a killer, embracing the possessing demon that infects her. Whilst *Hello Mary Lou* adheres to the vengeful spirit-possessed killer, *Night of the Demons* features an infectious possession of an unspecified demon. Where Mary Lou's attacks are personal and motivated by retribution, Angela's goal is to spread the demonic possession to as many as she can, with the purpose of claiming their souls for hell.

In *Night of the Demons*, goth Angela hosts a party at the abandoned crematorium Hull House. She and her close friend Suzanne meet their other friends at the house. The group decide to engage in a past life séance in which they stare into a mirror in the hope of seeing themselves in a previous life. Helen sees a demon and a glimpse of her fate. As Suzanne applies her lipstick, the demon emerges from the basement crematorium and possesses her. As the group divides to explore the house and find private places for sex, Suzanne kisses Angela, infecting her with possession. Soon this possession spreads amongst all but Judy and Rodger, who escape the house and climb the wall towards running water, a barrier the demons cannot cross. Rodger, having scaled the wall, returns to help Judy as her demonic friends grab at her feet. The pair walk home in silence as the sun rises.

Whilst Suzanne is the first of the group to become possessed, Angela quickly becomes the leader of the group. Suzanne struggles with her possession, distraught that her demonic features affect her beauty. She behaves oddly, drawing lipstick all over her face and insisting Jay stop looking at her. She is so incensed by her paranoia that Jay is staring at her that she pushes her thumbs into his eyes and kills him. Angela, however, embraces the initial stages of her possession. Suzanne appears fixated on men and her reflection, whereas Angela demonstrates deep spirituality and knowledge about possession. She identifies that the house

is possessed by demonic spirits of pure evil but despite this, does not choose to leave with Rodger and Helen, who are disconcerted by the potential possession of the house and borrow her car to leave.

Left alone with Sal, after Suzanne's kiss, Angela removes her veil and overskirt. At Sal's questioning Angela presses her hands together in a prayer pose and states "blessed be the sinners, for the day of atonement is at hand"¹⁷. This statement subverts Judaeo-Christian ideas of Divine Order. It is not the righteous who are blessed on their day of atonement (judgement) but the sinners. Aligning with possession tropes, this statement could be a mockery of traditional religion, twisting sacred language, yet this statement could also be viewed as a form of warning or prophecy, aligning with Slasher rules on morality. The sinning teens who steal, fornicate and party will be judged and damned by demonic forces. However, I suggest that this statement celebrates the sinner. On Halloween, a night referenced in the narrative as the night that the spirit can walk the Earth again, the demon within Hull House is released. On this spiritual day, the souls of the teens are judged and sacrificed to hell. The blasphemous inversion promises damnation over salvation, with each infected soul to be drawn into hell at the break of day.

Gasping and moaning, Angela falls to the floor, fire blazing as she crawls towards the fireplace. The boombox suddenly plays *Stigmata Martyr* by Bauhaus and Angela begins to dance in a trad goth style, reaching her arms out in flourishes, as seen in Fig.2.2 and 2.3. She uses telekinesis to turn the party strobe lights back on, despite the lack of electricity. The scene becomes frenzied with the lights strobing as she jumps and twirls. Quick cuts cut between pirouettes and ballet leaps as Angela becomes more joyous and entranced in her dancing. She either does not notice or simply does not care as Sal backs out of the room.

¹⁷ *Night of the Demons* (1988)



Fig.2.2 - *Night of the Demons* (1988) - Angela dances in front of the fire in Hull House.



Fig.2.3 - *Night of the Demons* (1988) - Angela twirls by the fire in Hull House.

Initially Sal shows signs of attraction towards Angela, licking his lips as she lifts her skirt and moans; however, he begins to appear uncomfortable as her dance becomes more manic. When Stooze returns Sal tries to warn him not to go near Angela: “hey, careful, man,

she's actin' really fuckin' weird"¹⁸. Her dance is not a plan to seduce Sal but a dance for the Devil in her own witches' sabbath. As the dance becomes more frenzied, she no longer looks at Sal; instead, she looks down towards the floor, as if seeing something beyond it. The low angle shot captures her shadow thrown against the ceiling as the fire blazes beside her (Fig.2.3), as if she is being watched from hell as she performs. As her dance comes to an end, Stooge comes to dance with her, pulling her into his arms. She asks him to kiss her, but when he does, she grasps his hair and bites him. He pulls away covered in blood as she bares bloody fangs and spits his tongue onto the floor. This ends her sabbath in a blasphemous Eucharist, drinking the blood and biting the body of her first victim.



Fig.2.4 - *Night of the Demons* (1988) - Angela and Suzanne steal party supplies.

In this film, the characters' party costumes convey the personalities and fates of the characters. Suzanne's costume is not clearly identifiable; however, it is revealing and carefully colour coordinated. She wants to be involved in the holiday, but she will not wear a costume that would compromise her looks. It is established that she is obsessed with her

¹⁸ *Night of the Demons* (1988)

appearance, constantly looking at herself in her pocket mirror and searching for validation from the men around her. Judy dresses as Alice from *Alice in Wonderland*, highlighting both her characterisation as an innocent ‘good girl’, by dressing as a children’s character, and her journey into a terrible supernatural wonderland. Angela dons a black lace top and a black satin overskirt, creating a black ball gown or wedding dress. She has a fluffy tulle veil attached to a tiara adorned with a snake and a crow's foot. With trad goth makeup and crucifix jewellery, she embodies the essence of a gothic bride. Unknowingly she has dressed for her wedding, a wedding with the devil.

A spiritual character, Angela is not distracted by sex or vanity in the same way the other victims are. She spends much of the party discussing spirits and possession, suggesting the group conduct a séance. Most of the teens do not believe in the supernatural, disregarding any fears as they pair off for sex. Rodger and Helen believe in the spirits, frightened they decide to try and leave. Whilst Angela believes that pure evil possesses the house, she stays, seemingly at ease. When Suzanne appears out of control in her transformation, horrified as her face begins to change, Angela embraces this new demonic presence in her body. She does not allow the first skin of the demon to solely inhabit her second skin. She sutures her soul (or first skin) to the demons, becoming one of them completely. Director Brian Trenchard-Smith describes Angela as the “Queen of the demons” in a DVD commentary for *Night of the Demons 2*¹⁹. Angela’s new status is further confirmed in the sequel, as Terri tells the story of Hull House, stating:

“Terri: They say it's because she descended into hell, body and soul. And now she’s Satan’s favourite. Sitting on his lap.

¹⁹ *Night of the Demons 2* (Collector's Edition) Blu-Ray, (2023)

Shirley: She's probably sitting on his *big spike* right now."

(*Night of the Demons 2*, 1994)

In the opening scene of *Night of the Demons 2*, two missionaries arrive at Hull House on Halloween. Upon entering the house, Angela greets them, offering cake. The tiered wedding cake is decorated with black and white icing (Fig.2.5). The top is decorated with small blood-red sweets, and the bride and groom painted to resemble Angela and Satan. It is this union with Satan that leads her to descend into hell, in both body and soul. Terri states that the bodies of the others were found, whereas Angela's was missing. The other possessed characters were figures of spatial fission, as a mass of demonic possessors to take up residence in empty shells. As the sun begins to rise, the possessing demons return to hell, abandoning their vessels to become no-longer-animate corpses. Whereas Angela is a figure of fusion as her soul and the demon's suture within and to her body. Her body becomes supernaturally joined, meaning that her body is not left behind as an empty vessel and instead travels to hell with her. Angela returns to Hull House every Halloween, killing those who come close, even sending cards to her family. She maintains her bodily autonomy, becoming monstrous.



Fig.2.5 - *Night of the Demons 2* (1994) - Angela's cake.

The 2009 remake further highlights Angela's agency in the *Night of the Demons* films between 1988-1997, through the omission of key elements that alter Angela's role within the narrative and her relationship with monstrosity. In the 2009 film, Angela is established as a woman who will chase other girls' boyfriends. She displays a fixation on proving herself more desirable than the other women around her, placing herself in competition for attention. She is not spiritual and does not display any concern for upsetting the spirits or the possessed house. As the group finds skeletons in the basement of the haunted Broussard House, Angela tries to steal a gold tooth from one of the skeletons, cutting her finger on its teeth. She is the first possessed, filling the role of the first to spread possession. She first spreads this to Dex, Lilly's ex-boyfriend, kissing him gratuitously during spin the bottle much to Lilly's chagrin.

At the beginning of the party, '09 Angela addresses the guests by telling the story of Evangeline Broussard (who she refers to as 'this bitch'), a woman who held a party at the house resulting in the disappearance of the guest. It is later revealed that Evangeline was tricked by a group of seven demons into hosting a séance. Six of these demons possessed her

guests, leading Evangeline to kill herself so that the demons could not possess her as she was no longer a living body. In this changed lore, Angela is not Queen of the Demons, she is instead one of the seven demons, a figure of spatial fission as the collective possesses six party guests. In this film, the final pair (Judy and Rodger) is replaced with a final girl (Maddie). Maddie tricks the demons by pretending to kill herself like Evangeline, defeating the demons as they fail to take the seventh member to complete their group. Not only is Angela not distinct from the other demons but her lack of fusion stops her from ever returning body and soul to her role as Queen of the Demons.



Fig.2.6 - *Night of the Demons* (2009) - Angela seductively dances around Suzanne.

In the 2009 remake, Angela's dance undergoes a notable change. Angela pulls Suzanne into an empty room, leaving her beside a drinks table as she begins to dance in the middle of the room; the round room is decorated with light curtains and a large, boarded window. She begins to dance in the centre of the room, maintaining eye contact with Suzanne as Suzanne looks at her with a considering expression. She beckons Suzanne towards her, and they begin to dance together, Angela circling her as she writhes her body (Fig.2.6). Whilst '88

Angela's dance mimics a witch's sabbath as she dances for an unseen audience, '09 Angela dances specifically to seduce Suzanne. The frenzied spin and roaring fire are replaced with body rolls and wandering hands, with the scene drawing parallels to images of a nightclub, rather than a late-night sabbath for the devil. In this, the motivation of her dance is no longer tied to her agency or autonomy of her body, it is reduced to seduction. Where '88 Angela ignores Sal, '09 Angela is laser focused on Suzanne.

The pair kiss but Suzanne pulls away, trying to tell Angela that she is drunk and that she wants to stop. Angela then attacks, ripping off her face and tearing the skin from one of Suzanne's breasts. '88 Angela's first attack is on Stooge. Stooge is a rude and antagonistic character who aggressively shouts at Helen, repeatedly calling her a "bitch". He also calls Suzanne a "dizzy bitch" when he cannot find her in the bathroom. His pig-nosed costume is mirrored by his rude and sexist behaviour; amplified as the other guests refer to him as "a pig". Angela uses her new possessor's power to tear his tongue from his mouth, silencing him. '09 Angela's first attack (note that this is distinct from her first transmission of the possession, in which she kisses Dex) is on her friend Suzanne. She tears at her face and breast, designed to disfigure, as though she is still in competition with the women around her. Where '88 Angela's attack was targeted against a man who often aggressively subjugated the women around him, particularly the timid Helen, '09 Angela's attack is more malicious and mindless in its violence, targeting her friend's genitals.

'09 Angela's self-worth is bolstered by attention from those around her, particularly the men. Whereas '88 Angela sutures to her demon, becoming powerful, '09 Angela simply becomes one of the infected demons rather than the appointed Queen of the demons. '88 Suzanne is infected by a gust of wind that enters her mouth as she puts on her lipstick; she spreads this to Angela with a kiss. She does not experience any violence, sexual or otherwise, from the other characters, particularly not her close friend Angela. The 2009 film frames both

Angela and Suzanne more as victims, altering their agency and increasing the violence they experience. I suggest that this could be an attempt to create a film that aligns more with the Self-Referential style, however instead of challenging and developing tropes, it regresses. Much of this ties to the changes made to Angela's character and Judy/Maddie (the final survivors) as these characters become brash and disrespectful to the spirits within the home.

Night of the Demons (1988) features a victim turned possessed killer in which Angela distinguishes herself from the other victims, embracing her possession and becoming Queen of the Demons. The 2018 Neoslasher, *You Might Be the Killer*, also shows a victim embracing the role of the possessed killer, however, it is the final girl who makes that decision. This film features a direct discussion surrounding the rules of the Classical Slasher, noting the role of the final girl and the killer. This Possessed Slasher facilitates a conversation about tropes of the Slasher whilst utilising possession to reframe the agency of final girls and killers. Both 88' Angela and Jamie (*You Might Be the Killer*) elect to take ownership of the new supernatural power afforded to them through their possession and whilst Angela embraces the possession she unknowingly ingests, Jamie actively chooses to become possessed.

The film begins at Camp Clear Vista, where counsellors are preparing for the arrival of the children later in the season. Around a fire they share the legend of a wooden-masked killer who was driven to kill by an evil power. The group go in search of the mask; Sam finds it and is pressured to put it on by another counsellor. Sam panics as a killer is unleashed on the group, prompting him to call his friend Chuck for advice. Chuck, a comic bookshop worker, uses Classical Slasher tropes and structure to guide him. The pair come to realise that it is Sam who is the possessed killer, unable to remember his actions whilst wearing the mask. Heeding Chuck's advice, Sam attempts to disrupt the Slasher structure.

He insists to the two other surviving counsellors, Imani and Jamie, that as long as they both survive, so will he, as there will be no single final girl to kill him as the masked killer. However, the pair begin to argue over Sam and Chuck's description of the final girl. Jamie soon kills Imani with a shovel, telling Chuck over the phone that she *had* to act first. Sam, in an attempt to save his life, suggests that they rebury the mask where they found it in the hope that it will break the curse that keeps possessing him. Sam stays well back, keeping his distance from the mask as Jamie digs the hole. About to bury it, she stares down at the mask in her hand before putting it on; she stabs Sam. Having completed the required Slasher spree of murders, the mask falls off. Jamie picks it up, taking it with her as she walks off towards the sunrise.

This film challenges purity and violence through the possessed mask. The characters subvert and follow Classical Slasher rules to confront their own and others' self-perceptions. Sam and Jamie are the most apprehensive and reserved until the Slasher structure presents them with a change agent. Sam resists the mask's power, objecting to its violence to the point of bleeding and banging his head against the floor. However, Jamie chooses the mask, either aligning with the violence of the mask or valuing the power of the mask over the abjection of violence. When Sam is the killer, he is a figure of temporal fission. In an action of live burial his spirit is buried whilst the masculine aggressive killer possesses his body, leading him to become the Classical Slasher killer. However, Jamie becomes a figure of fusion as she chooses to take up the role of the killer, becoming the thing Chuck and Sam dismissed her capable of being.

Chuck highlights to Sam that the biggest threat to his survival is Jamie. He initially rejects this, noting that she is sweet and gentle; however, Chuck points out that it is this that makes her the biggest threat, stating "haven't you learnt anything from the thousands of hours

we've spent watching horror movies? If you're the killer, Jamie's your final girl"²⁰. To help Sam, Chuck consults an old book (Fig.2.7). This book details that the girl who can defeat, or best, the madman in the mask has always been the 'seemingly defenceless young girl'. This has been the case "worldwide, over the last two centuries". Despite her anxious expression, the young girl conceals a machete behind her back. She is aware of her perceived defencelessness, utilising it to hide her ability to defend herself. In this film the final girl becomes the threat, an aggressor who does not wait until she is cornered to attack.

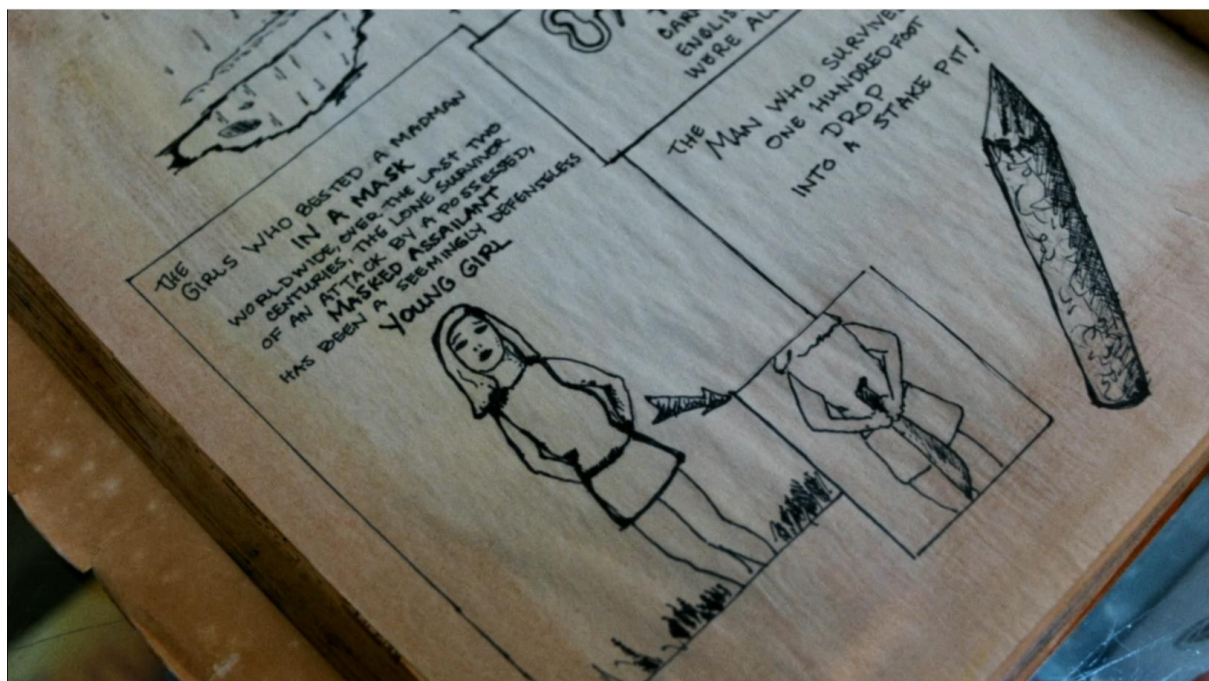


Fig.2.7 - *You Might Be the Killer* (2018) - Chuck's book noting the power of the "seemingly defenceless young girl" against the "madman in a mask".

In terms of violence, Jamie is the only one who kills without the mask's influence. Sam shows deep regret for his violent actions when possessed by the killer, though Jamie is remorseless in her actions towards Imani and quickly becomes emotionally ready to kill Sam. The evil force in the mask speaks to the pair differently. When tempting Jamie, it simply says, 'put it on'; however, its temptation of Sam is more emotionally charged. Amongst commands

²⁰ *You Might Be the Killer* (2018)

to “kill” are statements like “Sam”, “I need you”, and “stay with me”. Sam has displayed a desire for more connection with those around him, heartbroken that Imani describes their relationship as a summer fling rather than something more meaningful. The command to kill, which Sam finds objectionable, is combined with phrases that emphasise his importance to the evil force. Jamie, having already displayed violence, is not approached with emotion, simply encouragement to do what she already desires to do.

In an earlier scene, Sam asks Chuck how he can survive, whilst doing what he can to keep as many of the counsellors alive as possible. She informs him that “only one person walks out of here alive, and that’s the most pure person”²¹. However, Chuck is incorrect. Jamie leaves the camp having taken up the mantle of the killer by choice twice. Once when she kills Imani and again when she stabs Sam whilst wearing the mask. Killing Sam was not tied to survival as she would have survived with him if the mask had been buried. When the mask falls to the ground, she returns to pick it up, leaving with it. It is established that if she reburied it, its curse would end. However, she chooses to wield the evil power that is trapped in the wooden mask. She is not the final girl who defeats the killer; she is, in fact, the killer herself. All the counsellors have been killed; the ritual the final girl is destined to disrupt is completed.

Whilst she is assigned the power of the final girl by Chuck and Sam, she rejects this role, taking on the power of the killer instead. Where Sam cuts and rips the skin of the mask, attempting to unburden himself from its control, Jamie sutures the power to her skin, making her second skin even more powerful. In her choice to become the killer, she eliminates Sam, eradicating any chance of him becoming the final girl in her story. She repeatedly destroys the potential of the final family; however, this may be due to the insistence that there can only

²¹ *You Might Be the Killer* (2018)

be one final girl/person, as Chuck states that “in situations like this in the paranormal or when there’s a lunatic on the loose or whatever, there’s usually a pure and innocent girl... the final girl that saves the day”²². Both the book and Chuck refer to the final girl in the case of the possessed or paranormal. I suggest that it is the enforcement of the ‘rules’ of the Slasher that leads to this film not adhering to the conventions of survivors in the Possessed Slasher.

Within the structure of the Possessed Slasher, Sam, Imani and Jamie ought to survive together. However, it is Chuck’s insistence on enforcing a value system on the characters based on subjective opinions that limits them. Chuck states to Jamie and Imani that, based on Sam’s description, Jamie must be the final girl as she is pure. Her insistence that Imani cannot possibly survive leads Imani and Jamie to argue as Imani tries to challenge the role Chuck has assigned her. Her insistence on this Slasher structure leads the pair to fight, with Imani believing she is in imminent danger.

“Imani: I know I’m more equipped to kill Sam than little miss perfect over here.

Chuck (phone): Ok, this isn’t a logic problem, Imani. No matter how strong or smart you think you are, no matter how determined, you just can’t outplay this. There’s just no way that you’re that pure soul that survives at the end of the day. I’m sorry. You just aren’t.

Imani: Yeah? Well, there’s more to purity than meets the eye, and I know she’s not this perfect image she shows everybody. Do you party?

Jamie: Why?

Imani: Drugs, alcohol, caffeine even?

²² *You Might Be the Killer* (2018)

Jamie: No.

Chuck (phone): Just face it, Imani.

Imani: You're not a virgin, are you?

Jamie: That's personal.

Imani: Yeah, so? It's life and death, baby. And it's down to me and you. So, are you a virgin?!

Jamie: Yes!"

(You Might Be the Killer, 2018)

In this scene the two women face off, turning the battle for survival into a battle between each other. Imani becomes defensive when Chuck tells them that only Jamie will survive. She highlights her own capability, having successfully evaded the killer already by pretending to be dead, and announces her readiness to defend herself against Sam or the masked killer. Chuck insists that no matter how smart, strong or determined she thinks she is, she is not pure enough to ultimately defeat the masked killer. Chuck views her as impure, primarily because she is not a virgin, and in turn misguides Imani as she devalues her strength and mental fortitude.

This argument between Imani, Jamie and Chuck calls to issues of infighting and horizontal oppression within feminism, as patriarchal standards of the virgin/whore dichotomy, gender norms and intersectionality fuel their debate over survival. They begin to turn on each other, challenging each other's value, instead of uniting to defeat the killer or dismantle the Slasher's narrative structure that enforces deadly valuations of their purity or power. Chuck takes up the role of the patriarchy, pushing a valuation system that marginalises

them based on their sexuality and virginity. This distanced structure subjugates and antagonises them, distracting them from their potential agency.

In terms of Clover's traits of the final girl, both Imani and Jamie predominantly adhere to the description. Both are brunette women with unisex names; they are intelligent and resourceful and display traditionally masculine assigned traits such as physical strength. Both know the killer, however, Imani has a romantic history with Sam, as they once dated. Whilst Jamie states she is a virgin, it is implied that Imani is not; however, she is not seen to engage in any sexual activity at the camp. Imani is seen drinking a beer, whereas Jamie says that she does not drink. As noted by Jones (2024), Jamie aligns more with the traditional final girl, whereas Imani reflects the more contemporary final girl. Here the final girl of the Classical cycle and the final girl of the Self-Referential and Neoslashers cycle stand in contrast. Ultimately, to Chuck, Imani's perceived power renders her powerless, whilst Jamie's perceived lack of power grants her power within the rules of the Slasher genre.



Fig.2.8 - *You Might Be the Killer* (2018)- Imani (Left) and Jamie (Right) trap Sam in the storage cabin believing him to be the killer.

Whilst the narrative contains the supernatural effects of the possessing mask, nothing suggests that the stages of the Slasher narrative are supernaturally predetermined or enforced, as seen in *Final Girls* (2015). Without Chuck's intervention, Imani, Jamie, and Sam could become a final family, working together to destroy or at least rebury the mask. However, she insists that Jamie is the final girl, adhering to her mental image of the “seemingly defenceless young girl”, a mental image formed entirely from Sam’s description of her. She enforces the structures that place more value in Jamie as a ‘good girl’, whilst simultaneously devaluing and shaming Imani. Instead of encouraging the pair to unite against a male aggressor who is trying to violently subjugate them, Chuck verbally subjugates and divides them.

Both characters are angered by the roles assigned to them, particularly as these roles are defined by ideas of purity and virginity. Blank (2007) discusses virginity, noting that some cultures assign virginity as valuable. Blank argues that virginity is subjective. Defined by what terminates it, virginity is attached to the heteronormative and cisnormative presumption that penetration with a penis ends virginity; Blank also notes gender differences in how virginity is viewed between men and women. They highlight the prevalence of the social idea that losing virginity ‘makes’ a man or woman. Where Clover’s final girl is defined by the presence of her virginity, the victims are equally defined by their lack of virginity. This structure places importance on the subjective and heteronormative idea of virginity. Imani rejects the insistence that sex has fundamentally changed her, discounting her from survival. Despite their confrontation, like Imani, Jamie also displays a refusal for society (Chuck) to insist that a lack of sex defines her. To challenge this, she rejects the role of final girl, and instead becomes the killer, suturing the mask to her own skin. This act serves as both a reflection of her own potential and an opportunity to change the role that she has been assigned based on her heteronormative cisnormative purity, as a (presumably) vaginal virgin.



Fig.2.8 - *You Might Be the Killer* (2018) - Jamie picks up the wooden mask.

Sipos (2010) suggests that masks anonymise, depersonalise and dehumanise. However, R. Butler argues that in Canadian slashers masks are used to “reflect the motives, traumas, and the inner workings of their antagonists” (2017:212). They act as “aesthetic clues to reveal their murderous motives and darkest desires” (:212). The mask in *You Might Be the Killer* is made of the wood of a supernaturally evil tree. There are no features other than a pair of round eyes (Fig.2.8). The shadowed eyeholes hide the killer’s eye shape, eye colour and emotion. This mask takes the role of both the anonymiser and the revealing desire. The mask hides the identity of the killer from both the counsellors and the audience when Sam wears it. In the mask, like a mirror, Jamie sees her own potential. Not only is she granted supernatural strength but the mask anonymises her. The genderless mask hides her gender and the sweet, gentle nature assigned to her, all of which are elements that led to others deciding her actions for her, in this the mask reinstates her autonomy. If she can hide these elements, she can avoid others enforcing these roles on her.

Mary Lou, (88') Angela and Jamie are each positioned in the role of the victim. Mary Lou is murdered; a demon attempts to take Angela's body and Jamie's life is threatened by the presence of the Slasher killer. It is the intervention of supernatural technologies with these characters' force of will that creates a distinctive, often fused, monstrous figure. Notable victims and possessors in *Possessed Slashers* exert power and become monsters of their own choosing. When presented with an agent of change, the revelation of and presence of supernatural possession, these characters are given the opportunity to choose their role. These *Inhabited Vessels* might choose to be killers or survivors. These supernatural powers boost a character's agency. In this these characters also have to negotiate their feelings surrounding violence, utilising violence for revenge, for agency and for power.

Having considered the act of choosing and embracing possession, I suggest that it is next important to explore how possessors interact with their new bodies and new identities. For example, whilst *Hello Mary Lou* ends before Mary Lou-Billy can be fully explored, how would Mary Lou gender this new body? In her possession of Vicki, she changed the way she dressed and spoke, so would she act similarly for Billy? Would we have seen Billy in a poodle skirt, just as Mary Lou-Vicki and Mary Lou herself wore? Whilst the gendering of Mary Lou-Billy is not explored further, in Chapter Three I explore gender performance in the possessed further, noting other characters with *Possessed Slashers* that are confronted by not only their own gender performance but how others read their gender.

Chapter Three: Gender Performance

To further explore the complexity of the Inhabited Vessel, I begin by deconstructing layers of skin, considering the second and third layer in further detail. In this chapter, I elaborate on the third layer of skin (gender performance), highlighting its association with identity and violence. Breaking away from the exorcism-focused structure of possession allows an examination of the living reality of the Inhabited Vessels. The Inhabited Vessel, as distinguished from Clover's portals, should be considered from the perspective of layering, in circumstances of both tearing or incongruity of those layers as well as the suturing or fusing. As possessors find themselves in a new body, they must interact with a new body and a potential new external gender performance that may be euphoric or dysphoric. This highlights ideas of agency as possessors choose vessels, choosing how to live, how to dress, how to survive.

Clover compares Dorothy's skirt in *Tootsie* (1982) to Stretch's chain saw in *Texas Chainsaw Massacre Part 2* (1986), noting them both as "a figuration of what she *does* and what she *seems*, as opposed to what she *is*" (1992:58). Whilst this construction risks collapsing performance into performativity, the stylised gendered actions of these characters expose the performativity of gender. These identities are constructed through the repetition of social gender norms. Michael specifically utilises the fact that Dorothy is understood by others through repeated acts that align with dominant gender conventions. This displays gender as an effect of repeated action rather than a distinct predetermined state. Clover's suggested 'performance' of gender in both Dorothy and Stretch does not sit outside performativity, instead making the processes through which gender itself is produced visible. I expand on both these gender figurations as they appear within the Possessed Slasher, as

Inhabited Vessels, both figurately and literally, find themselves in skirts whilst holding chainsaws.

I suggest that, when considering gender performance (J. Butler (1990, 1993, 2004)) in possession, much can be learnt from non-horror media. The experience of bodily difference and performing gender can be seen in both drag/trans and body swap narratives, both of which tend to be found in the comedy genre. Much like possession narratives, body swap narratives depict a spiritual and bodily change that the character must confront and decide whether to resolve. I use tropes and conventions found in drag/trans and body swap narratives to contextualise onscreen representations of gendered possession and performance of gender and sexuality, noting similarities found within cross-gender horror possession narratives. I further note that there are reflections of trans experiences that can be found in drag/trans and body swap narratives in learning gender performance as an adult and misalignment with the body.

In the drag/trans narrative, the character must convincingly use tools to perform gender. Both body swap and possession narratives feature similar subversions of gender performance whilst also featuring a displacement of the first skin into a different second skin. The Inhabited Vessel must face their gender performance when in a new body, attempting to align their gender performance to their own identity, suturing their first and third skin where they can. I explore gender in its connection to violence and subjugation as possessing killers interact with an image of softness or vulnerability. This is analysed through *Freaky* (2020), as The Butcher finds himself interacting with gender as he faces new gendered threat and subjugation, negotiating his relationship between violence and vulnerability. I further consider the choice of violence and power through possession in the *Child's Play* franchise, with a particular focus on *Cult of Chucky* (2017).

Gender Performance: Body Swapping

Drag/trans narratives include both media that contains cis/het characters disguising themselves as another gender as well as media in which queer characters are seen to perform as another. Whilst Miller (2023) refers to films such as *Mrs Doubtfire* (1993) as a trans comedy, I suggest that *Mrs Doubtfire* is more aligned with a drag narrative. This is potentially all the more confusing as some films use the term ‘drag’ to refer to narratives that more closely align to characters with trans identities. This can be seen in media such as *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar* (1995) (referred to as ‘*To Wong Foo*’ from here on) and *Kinky Boots* (2005), in which these characters are mostly, if not exclusively, seen in ‘drag’ and referred to by the drag persona. Whilst the distinction between the drag and trans narrative is unnecessary when considering tropes and narrative as a whole, I may distinguish particular distinct thematic differences in places.

I also analyse tropes in body swap narratives. A body swap narrative involves the spirits of two individuals becoming switched into each other’s bodies. This narrative first appeared in the novel *Vice Versa: A Lesson to Fathers* (1882) (this was later adapted into the film *Vice Versa* in 1948 and again in 1988). This narrative style was further popularised by the book *Freaky Friday* (1972) and film adaptations *Freaky Friday* (1976; 1995; 2003; 2018). In some cases, films can be situated between the drag/trans narrative and the body swap genre as the body transforms magically without swapping with another body; this can be seen in films such as *Willy/Milly* (1986), *Switch* (1991) and *Sam* (2017). Whilst I do not aim to distinguish between the body swap and what we might call the body transformation narrative, much like the drag and trans narrative, I may note differences when relevant to my analysis.

In the body swap or drag/trans comedy, men often embody femininity or ‘womanhood’, justifying their actions through some form of argued necessity. As Miller

(2023) notes, these cisgender characters will have a reason for their performance, whether it is financial, to win back his family, to solve a case, or, in the case of the body swap and possession, some fantastical magic beyond their full control. At the end of the narrative, this character can shed his persona and performance; therefore, the character can uphold the normative. Garber refers to this as a 'progress narrative', highlighting that this pattern implies that "cross-dressing can be "fun" or "functional" so long as it occupies a liminal space and a temporary time period" (1997:70).

In Miller's discourse on the trans, or drag, character in comedy, a significant portion of the humour stems from the man's struggle to perform or embody cisnormative femininity. Miller's theory acknowledges essentialist views of gender, highlighting that these characters tie to the transphobic criticisms of trans women and a claimed inability to perform gender successfully. This aligns with one of Richardson and Smith's (2022) two main tropes of trans representation: the pathetic trans trope. They suggest that this figure can be easily identified as the gender they were assigned at birth, as they fail to conform to images of cisnormativity. This ideology is perpetuated by anti-trans rhetoric, such as Greer's (2009) statement that trans women appear as a 'ghastly parody' of women.

Drag/trans narratives focus on the conflict of performing gender, often hinging on the naturalised normative gendered differences. These narratives poke fun at gender stereotypes, but in a way that naturalizes them. Whilst these characters struggle with elements of feminine performance, often as a source of comedy, it is rarer that they fail to perform makeup or hair styling. This thesis is interested in the interaction between the Inhabited Vessel and constructivist ideas of gender, in which gender performance is entirely socially constructed and therefore learnable, and essentialism, in which the body is tied to gender expression. Having noted the cisgender man performing transness, how does this manifest when their

physical body changes as well? There is a commonality between the drag/trans narratives and the Inhabited Vessel. Often, the Inhabited Vessel will perform a character, where gender performance is an integral part of the role, in order to disguise their possession. I suggest that it is only certain elements of feminine gender performance that these characters perform unsuccessfully, a trope that is amplified within cross-gender possession in horror. In more drag/trans performances - which Miller discusses as 'transgender comedy'²³ - the cisgender man undergoes a makeover to 'pass' as a woman. This can be seen in films like *Some Like it Hot* (1959), *Mrs. Doubtfire*, and *Tootsie*.

In both *Mrs. Doubtfire* and *White Chicks* (2004), the characters contact professionals to help them disguise themselves visually. These teams experiment with creating a woman in a certain image. In *Mrs. Doubtfire* they are attempting to create a nanny figure that both the children and Miranda will adore, deciding what level of femininity adheres to their image of a homemaker. In *White Chicks*, during the transformation montage, the only dialogue present refers to deciding that they need to make larger prosthetic breasts. Both highlight a focus on representing a particular image of femininity to adhere to what the cisgender men consider desirable, based on their goal. I acknowledge that these characters have slightly different goals in creating their disguise, where Daniel is creating a character, Kevin and Marcus are attempting to recreate existing people. However, both transformation scenes focus on creating an image of a woman that adheres to their goal. Kevin's disguise as Tiffany would not be given away by slightly smaller breasts, however the size of her breasts is linked to a stereotype of a rich valley girl socialite.

Agustina (2013), in their discussion of *Mrs Doubtfire*, utilises Woodhouse's (1989) seven observable features of gender. These seven features are: clothing, hairstyle, facial

²³ 'Ridicule in Transgender Comedies' in *Distancing Representations in Transgender Film* (Miller. 2023:53-85)

features, body shape, mannerisms, voice and gestures. Agustina suggests that each of these features is used in forming the character of Mrs Doubtfire, each changed as they experiment with different characters. They suggest that when one of these fails the gender of the character cannot be read as intended, leading to a reveal. The example they use is the removal of Mrs Doubtfire's latex face mask that reveals Daniel beneath. Whilst I agree that each of these features are often used in some way to create a risk that the character will be found out, it is the reveal of the body that truly unveils the character's identity. In *White Chicks* the characters often accidentally use their real voices. For example, after the group are targeted by the Vanderpump sisters, Marcus (as Tiffany) shouts "Ey yo! You do that again I'ma bust... [changes voice] bust out in tears"²⁴. His change in voice is not enough to reveal him to not be Tiffany.

Whilst the observable features of gender as suggested by Woodhouse seem rather outdated, several of these features are used as tools to create their disguise. I would suggest that it would be more accurate to describe the features of gender performance under three general categories. The first is styling, which includes Woodhouse's suggestion of clothing and hairstyle but also considers makeup, accessories, and nails. The second is demeanour, in which we see features such as mannerisms, voice and gestures. Finally, there is the body. The degree to which the body is altered varies between narratives; however, it is also often used to reveal identity. J. Butler (1990) suggests that drag reveals that imitative structure of gender performance. Styling and demeanour encompass performative tools that the characters can utilise, whereas the body takes a background role until it is required to affirm sex.

Some Like It Hot glazes over how the pair learn to perform styling and demeanour to create their disguise, whereas *Tootsie* highlights Michael's process of creating Dorothy on his

²⁴ *White Chicks*, (2004)

own. We see him learn how to do his makeup, with inspiration photos on his mirrors, paint his nails, and style his hair and wig. We see him experimenting with clothing and assessing physical motions, such as the way he walks. This formation of their feminine persona is framed as the creation of a character; however, it also echoes the process of learning feminine gender performance. In these films, the cross-dressing character has some kind of confidant who knows their secret. These characters help them perform gender, often by governing their gender expression. Much like Foucault's (1995) panopticon, they self-govern, and at the point in which they either fail to perform the gender to match their disguise or they seem to enjoy themselves too much, their confidant takes up the role of governor. J. Butler suggests that these films can also take up the role of governing gender within society. This can be seen in crossdressing narratives with characters like Jeff (*Tootsie*), Buddy (*Just One of the Guys* (1985)), Stephanie (*Willy/Milly*) and Paul (*She's the Man* (2006)) as well as body swap/trans narratives like Margo (*Switch*), Woody and Nell (*It's a Boy Girl Thing* (2006)).

J. Butler suggests that *Tootsie* is an example of regulatory fiction, film narratives in which the subversion of gender performance is used to ultimately reinforce the norms it subverts. The characters, as Miller notes, are pushed into situations that require a subversion of gender, in Michael's case he is an actor in need of work. However, they maintain their cis identity throughout, reassuring audiences that they are still normative. In this J. Butler suggests that this subversion loses its challenging quality. Whilst these characters return to more cisnormative presentation, I argue that their subversion is not entirely undermined. At the end of *Tootsie*, Julie asks to borrow a yellow dress, Michael is reluctant before acquiescing, stating "You got to give it back. It's my favourite". When Julie confesses that she misses Dorothy, Michael replies that "You don't have to, she's right here. She misses you". In this there is an ambiguity about the presence of Dorothy within Michael's life, as he

keeps his favourite clothing, treating it with care as it still holds value to him. He continues to use feminine pronouns when referring to both himself and Dorothy.

It is the journey through subversion that changes the drag/trans character in these films, they become more non-normative after their experience and reveal. This may make them a better father, a better husband, a better brother or simply a better friend. It is a rejection of toxic masculinity and an acceptance of sensitivity. Elements of their subverted character stays with them. It may be through performative tools, like Michael's yellow dress, or a continuation of the character, such as Mrs Doubtfire. However, it can also be through relationships, whether romantic as seen with Osgood and Daphne in *Some Like it Hot*, or platonic with Kevin, Marcus, Tori, Karen and Lisa as they excitedly plan a shopping trip at the end of *White Chicks*. I appreciate that these characters deviate from their subverted gender at the end of the film, but I suggest that to state this as a full return to regulated gender normativity is to misunderstand the gendering of these characters. To utilise Clover's occult structures, as discussed in Chapter One, these narratives always display an ABC structure, as the character (A) is always changed by their experience as (B).

Body swaps feature a possessor of some form attempting, and often failing, to perform gender. The stakes are often low, as those who are switched must try and live as the other long enough for them to figure out how to switch back. In the Possessed Slasher, the Inhabited Vessel often must perform gender in a way that avoids suspicion whilst also attacking and killing. By nature, Survival Horror features a modulation with violence through threat and predation. The victim often has to confront their position and relationship with violence as they are pursued by a predator. In Slashers, this predator is the killer. The final girl must reassess her current relationship with violence to be able to defeat them and survive. In the possessed narrative, the possessed displays new violent behaviour as they are

compelled by the possessor. In the Possessed Slasher the interaction with violence is distributed amongst Inhabited Vessels and final families.

Like the body swap/trans narrative comedy, the Inhabited Vessel must decide how to express themselves through clothing and make-up, therefore, the third skin should be viewed from the perspective of aesthetic expression as well as actions. Slasher killers use clothing and masks to disguise themselves; notably, when gender difference is displayed the transfem monster is created. In possession narratives, disguise is essential to allow possession to take hold, often featuring possessors growing strength or control the longer they go unchecked. In some cases, visual gender expressions of the possessed are maintained as a form of disguise. Examples include franchises such as *Evil Dead* and *Night of the Demons*. In other instances, clothing can signpost a difference in the character. This can be seen through the possession of Mary Lou-Vicki (*Hello Mary Lou*), The Butcher-Millie (*Freaky*) and Chucky-Nica (*Chucky*).

The interaction between gender expression, bodies and violence is a theme that appears in both Slashers, possession narratives and therefore in the Possessed Slasher. In considering the Inhabited Vessel and potential for trans reading, it is important to consider the role of the transfem monster found in Slashers. The gender identity of characters such as Norman Bates (*Psycho*, 1960) and Angela (*Sleepaway Camp*, 1983) is hidden from audiences, to later reveal that these characters have been ‘disguised’ as women. Miller notes that in the transgender comedy - in this instance, body swap/trans narratives are also relevant - the narrative uses the gender differences to poke fun at an inability to perform gender ‘successfully’. In the Possessed Slasher, Inhabited Vessels are able to ‘disguise’ themselves in a vessel within the narrative, whilst audiences know of their gendered difference.

For example, in *Sleepaway Camp* a young boy is forced to live as a girl; the film links the killer’s tendency for violence and murder to gender confusion and being forced to live as

a gender that you do not align with. In the case of *Sleepaway Camp*, Peter is sent to live with their aunt, who often talks to herself, after their father is killed. She insists that she could not have another boy, especially since her husband left, so in adopting Peter, he will instead become Angela. It is implied that this is forced upon Angela, causing her to become angered when she experiences gender differences and attempts a romantic relationship with Paul (in *Sleepaway Camp II: Unhappy Campers* (1988), it is briefly explained that Angela has fully medically transitioned). McLawhorn suggests that “*Sleepaway Camp* capitalizes on the unease felt by society regarding non-cisnormative identities” (2022:48), as Angela is repeatedly distinguished from the other characters around her.

Schmid highlights how discussions of serial murder focus on searching for the earliest sign of difference, often in childhood. These narratives focus on searching for a cause of difference, turning the image of the killer from the normal or normative appearance to the abnormal. Schmid further notes that “mainstream America” pays almost obsessive attention to homosexual, or queer, serial killers, perpetuating an inaccurate link between homosexuality and violence. These narratives use the idea of the non-normative, in this case queerness, to create a distinction between the safety of the normative and the threat of difference, or the Other. Therefore, it is important to consider whether the gender expression of Inhabited Vessels in Possessed Slashers perpetuates the association of gender incongruity or difference with threat.

All Inhabited Vessels, regardless of gender and body, display violence. The degree to which they do so is often modulated by who is in control of the vessel and their existing relationship with violence. These Inhabited Vessels inflict violence in the form of attacking, killing and sexual acts. Within possession narratives, when women are vessels for a named man possessor, the violence is directed both outwards and inwards. A classic example within possession narratives is *The Exorcist*. Pazuzu-Regan acts violently, killing Burke Dennings

and Father Merrin and attacking Chris with furniture. She sexually assaults Chris, pushing her face into their crotch, and the psychiatrist by grasping his genitals. This violence is also inflicted on their own second skin as they masturbate with a crucifix. In the Possessed Slasher, possessed women often do not display violence inwards or self-mutilation. This could be due to a broader sense of self for the Inhabited Vessel, as the goal of the possessor is more often to live within the body rather than destroy it. Whilst the possessed often stop being active victims at the point of possession, they inflict more violence on others than the Possessed Woman of other possession narratives.

In possession narratives in which men possess other men, violence is often heightened. In *J.D.'s Revenge* (1976) Isaac is possessed by the spirit of a gangster who seeks revenge for his murder. In his possession he becomes violent, sexually aggressive and begins speaking in the style of a 1940s gangster. In *Insidious: Chapter 2* (2010), Josh is possessed by the spirit of Parker Crane, a serial killer. He becomes aggressive towards his wife attempting to strangle her. In the Possessed Slasher men possessed by other men they often display heightened violence regardless of their previous display of aggression. Nervous and quiet men become just as violent as the aggressive and crude. This facilitates a more nuanced discussion of violence as violence is pushed onto men and women through possession, often causing them to use that aggression against their peers.

The considerably rarer woman possessor in possession narratives often displays violence that is tied to a threat to children. This can be seen in *The Conjuring* (2013) as Carolyn becomes possessed by Bathsheba, a witch who sacrificed her children to the devil. Bathsheba attempts to compel Carolyn to kill her children. Similarly, in *The Conjuring: The Devil Made Me Do It* (2021), occultist Isla must complete her sacrifice to a demonic spirit by killing a child and his teenage sister. Attempted infanticide can also be seen in depictions of La Llorona (*The Curse of La Llorona*, 2019) and *The Woman in Black* (2012). Within the

Possessed Slasher there is less of a distinction between the victims of vessels possessed by men or women possessors. Whilst victims are often young people, they are often peers of the Inhabited Vessel. Children are more often targeted for their potential as a vessel, as seen in media such as the *Child's Play* franchise and *Shocker* (1989).

I acknowledge that there are some possessors that are labelled as men based on traits associated with certain genders. As noted previously, I suggest that the unnamed spirit within the Inhabited Vessel should not be assigned a gender purely based on factors such as a deep voice and violence. For example, in *Night of the Demons* Angela's voice becomes deeper as she becomes possessed, she becomes physically strong and aggressive. Whilst these traits may be assigned masculine, that does not mean that the possessor is male. Creed notes that the Possessed Woman displays a level of masculinity that is considered unacceptable by normative gender roles, however they are still within the remit of the feminine. I suggest that when demons are not assigned a gender within the narrative, they should not be assigned a binary gender. Unnamed Inhabited Vessels are approached as non-binary, as to assign the possessor as male based on these factors is to assign these traits to binary gender norms.

In drag/trans and body swap narratives, characters often attempt to disguise their internal gender, performing in a way to avoid detection by others. In this they learn gender, often through a confidant. The Inhabited Vessel in the Possessed Slasher can be isolated in their attempt to perform the gender of their vessel. The experience of performing gender can become even more personal as these characters deal with their relationship to threat. Possessors who may have felt societal power or safety must experience society's treatment of another gender. This can position the possessor at an advantage, as they are no longer viewed as a threat, and they then experience threat from others who attempt to subjugate them. In the following section I consider this and gendered relationships with violence through *Freaky* (2020) and *Cult of Chucky* (2017).

Relationships with Gender and Violence: *Freaky* (2020) and *Cult of Chucky* (2017)

As noted previously, gender in possession can be analysed from the perspective of layers of skin. Gender performance is the third and final layer, creating a lens through which the first layers are perceived by both themselves and other characters. Possessors are required to confront their new position within society so that they can tackle attempts by others to subordinate them. As the possessor enters a vessel of another gender, this section uses a study of *Freaky* (2020) and *Cult of Chucky* (2017) to illustrate how Inhabited Vessels in Possessed Slashers negotiate gender expression and violence. This section focuses on how the possessors handle others through violence and view themselves as their gender performance shifts in different vessels.

Negotiations of gender and violence can be seen in the body swap/possession Neoslasher horror comedy *Freaky*.²⁵ The Butcher is a local legend in Blissfield, a notorious killer who slashes teenage victims whilst wearing a mask. He attacks Millie at her school as she waits for her mother to pick her up. The Butcher stabs her with an ancient dagger, La Dola, that he found during a previous murder. Millie and The Butcher both escape as her police officer sister, Char, intercepts them. The pair both return home and go to sleep, only to wake up in each other's bodies the next morning. They have twenty-four hours to switch back, or the swap becomes permanent.

Millie wants to return to her body, but The Butcher sees this new body as an opportunity. This second layer of skin, the body of a teenage girl, not only allows him access to the teens he has been targeting but also allows him to evade capture. However, in this body he must perform gender that aligns with gender norms so as not to draw too much attention to

²⁵ This film directly addresses pronouns to be used when referring to these inhabited vessels. Therefore, The Butcher-Millie will be referred to as he/him and Millie-The Butcher will be referred to as she/her.

himself as non-normative. This leads to him trying to find an amalgamation of gender expression that he does not find personally too objectionable or dysphoric, adhering to gender norms and utilising gender norms to manipulate others' perceptions of him. Writer and Director Chris Landon stated in a scene breakdown for *Fandango* that "The Butcher is now using this body that he is in to play a role, to play a sort of innocent victim" (*Fandango All Access*, 2020).

Costuming is used to create a distinction between Millie and The Butcher-Millie, however, Millie-The Butcher continues to wear the same clothes throughout. Before the body swap, or possession, Millie dresses in a cardigan and dress, as seen in Fig.3.1. She wears a t-shirt and thick tights underneath the dress to cover any exposed skin. This could be to reflect her insecurity in herself, attempting to hide as much of herself from the outside world, or it could reflect her desire for comfort and warmth contrasting her to the violence of the Butcher. Her outfit is reminiscent of Laurie's clothing in the beginning of *Halloween* (1978). Both wear long cardigans, muted floral print dresses/skirts, and thick, neutral-coloured tights. Like Laurie, Millie also opts for muted, natural-looking makeup, including mascara and a nude lip colour. Much like when we see Laurie, this is the final girl before she experiences the events that mould her into that final girl. She is likeable, friendly, and generally inoffensive but still an outsider to social norms. In this case, it is not her virginity that distinguishes her; it is her grief and her fear.



Fig.3.1 - *Freaky* (2020) - Millie walking to meet Josh and Nyla.



Fig.3.2 - *Freaky* (2020) - The Butcher-Millie luring Booker into a haunted house.

When The Butcher-Millie has to get ready for school, he looks through her closet, disgusted by the knitwear available to him. He searches the house for something else to wear, finding his way into Char's closet. In there he finds more masculine-aligning clothes, choosing a red leather jacket, jeans, and boots, as seen in Fig.3.2. Whilst attempting to blend in with the students at the school, The Butcher can only allow himself to alter his third skin to a certain degree before he rejects it. He cannot bring himself to perform gender the same way Millie has been, refusing that which is soft, warm, and flowy. Despite his attempt to disguise himself, he finds her performance dysphoric. Instead, he settles for sturdy, firm fabrics.

Whilst Millie cultivates a passive, soft shell in the hopes of avoiding bullies at her school, The Butcher cultivates a harder shell that not only protects but also attracts attention. As Millie-The Butcher highlights, “this is clearly not me. Have you ever seen me dressed like that? I mean, I kind of like a lot of what he’s doing with it”²⁶.

Similarly, Millie’s makeup changes as The Butcher takes over. The Butcher-Millie wears eyeliner, mascara, and a red lip. The lip colour extends the red hue of the jacket, thereby escalating the danger signal. He wears their hair up in a ponytail, fringe pulled back and pinned out of their face. Whilst the hairstyling choice could be dismissed as simply practical, it is the change in makeup that echoes tropes highlighted in drag/trans and body swap narratives. As seen with Woody-Nell in *It’s a Boy Girl Thing*, this character, who performs hypermasculinity as a typical Slasher killer, is seen to instantly be able to perform learnt gendered acts. The ability to do makeup is a learnt skill, particularly wearing bold-coloured lipsticks. It could be argued that makeup is entirely a learned skill, unrelated to the body or muscle memory of the possessor. This reflects the conflict between ideas of gender constructivism and essentialism. I suggest that if the possessor is in control of the vessel, the distinct layer of the body does not have control. This means that decisions of gender performance in the Inhabited Vessel can be attributed to the possessor.

Where the archetypal trans killer wears the skin of their victims, whether literally like Buffalo Bill and Leatherface or metaphorically like Norman Bates, the possessed trans killer wears the skin of their vessel. Visuals that are inextricably tied to threat, associated with serial killer Ed Gein (Gardner and Maclay, 2024), become supernaturally executed and increase the potential for the ultimate disguised trans killer. The Butcher is a Classical Slasher killer archetype. He is a large, intimidating figure with a mask who attacks and kills teens using

²⁶ *Freaky*, (2020)

melee weapons and making creative use of his surroundings to kill his victims. Landon noted that they drew inspiration for The Butcher from Slasher killers such as Jason Vorhees and Michael Myers, describing him as 'that classic silent killing machine' (*Fandango All Access*, 2020). Whilst The Butcher himself is not an example of the trans killer trope, once he wakes up in Millie's body, this acts like a disguise. The Butcher's desire to remain in Millie's body is evident, as it not only enhances his access to his victims but also deviates from his police sketch.

When The Butcher-Millie enters the school, he convinces Ryler that he will tell her all about the attack on Millie from the night before. Believing that The Butcher-Millie is Millie and is about to give her the scoop on The Butcher, Ryler follows The Butcher-Millie into the women's changing room. He looks around curiously as she begins to ask him about what happened and if Millie experienced any kind of sexual assault from the killer. At this moment The Butcher-Millie reaches out and touches Ryler's hair. This moment highlights the moment that The Butcher fully realises just how much power he has in Millie's body. This body, or skin, allows him to get close to teens without the perception of threat. Whilst the characters around him do not know who he really is, the audience is aware that he is in disguise. The threat of the trans killer ties to the transmisogynistic idea of the threat of trans women and cis men pretending to be trans to enter women's spaces.

Moral panics form around spurious claims that allowing trans women to enter the bathroom or changing room that align with their gender identity will increase sexual assault or somehow sanction these assaults. As Faye (2021) notes, when media discusses the transgender issue, it is not issues that face transgender individuals (such as homelessness, sexual assault and bullying.) that are discussed. Instead, trans rights are brought to the forefront to be debated, often forming issues where there are none. Faye notes Goode and Ben-Yehuda's (2009) five characteristics of the moral panic. First 'concern' is expressed

about a group, speculating that their behaviour might have a negative effect on society.

‘Hostility’ is directed to this group, creating a folk devil. A ‘consensus’ is made that the folk devil is to blame for crimes and/or societal problems, leading to ‘disproportionality’ as action taken against the folk devil outweighs the threat posed by the group. Finally, ‘volatility’ as moral panics fade out of discussion as a new panic appears. Faye adds that “the creation of folk devils relies on predictions about the group’s behaviour” (2021:37).

These folk devils are perpetuated by representations on screen. The role of Buffalo Bill has been discussed by many theorists for its connection to transphobia (such as Halberstam (1995), Waldron (2021), Miller (2023), Gardner and Maclay (2024)). Trans activist Richards stated in an interview with Gilchrist for *The Advocate* that “trans people are only murderers or victims. It creates this binary where in which you’re defined by violence either way” (2021). Richards also played a trans character, Julia, in the spinoff series *Clarice* (2021), highlighting how (in narrative) the media coverage of Buffalo Bill affected trans people. They state to Clarice that “Buffalo Bill was clearly a monster, a killer, and [...] they got labelled transsexual. And whether it’s true or not that word was even in the headline, every story, every gruesome tabloid photo right next to “murderer”, “maniac”, “psycho skins women, driven mad by transsexual desire”. They continue that “overnight, suddenly, every story on everyone’s minds was that transsexuals were monsters”²⁷. In this as Julia highlights the in-narrative folk devil created by the media coverage of Gumb’s case, so too does Richards highlight the real-world folk devil perpetuated by *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991).

This threatening trans folk devil can be seen within American politics today, for example the discussion around the ‘Bathroom Bill’. As noted previously many examples of the trans killer trope rely on deception. This deceit is used to disguise the killer from both

²⁷ *Clarice*, S1E09, *Silence Is Purgatory*, (2021)

characters and the audience, revealing their identity at the end of the narrative as a form of plot twist, aligning with Miller's transphobic gaze. Gardner and Maclay note that these reveals not only treat trans bodies as a twist but also creates an assumption that bodes outside the cisnormative are "subject for questioning, scrutiny, and disposability" (2024:133). This deception can be specifically used for the audience, for example Norman Bates in *Psycho* (1960). We see the silhouette of the killer, believing that the killer is an old woman, we do not see that this is Norman in disguise until a shocking reveal at the end of the film. However, the deception can be aimed at both the audience and characters in the narrative, as seen with Angela in *Sleepaway Camp* (1983).

I further analyse whether the *Inhabited Vessel* builds upon this theme of deception and disguise, positioning the trans woman as predatory in spaces designed for women. The trans folk devil perpetuates an image of the threatening or dangerous trans woman. Richardson and Smith (2022) note the prevalent tropes of the predatory trans woman in media. Perceptions of the trans woman as predatory, as influenced by trans killers in media, led to the formation of a moral panic surrounding spaces such as bathrooms and changing rooms. This moral panic only perpetuates the perception of threat. This can be seen in *The Butcher-Millie's* invasion of the women's changing room. Ryler views Millie as unthreatening and agrees to enter a space alone with her. However, it seems that this film may be conscious of this implication of the invasion of space. Whilst *The Butcher* predominantly kills using some form of penetrative weapon, including knives, spears and broken bottles, the murder of Ryler is one of the most hands-off killings of the film. *The Butcher* traps Ryler in a cryotherapy chamber, fiddling with the settings to freeze her to death.

I reject Clover's theory of inherent psychosexuality in Slasher killing that suggests that the penetration of a weapon is a metaphor for sexual aggression. Ryler is not penetrated by *The Butcher-Millie*, her skin remains untormented until Millie-*The Butcher* finds her. Her frozen

body crashes to the floor, breaking into pieces, but no wound is created by hand. I suggest that this is perhaps a conscious decision to avoid the direct display of aggression, violence or even rough hand contact in this space. The film's awareness of bathroom politics is further fore-fronted as Millie-The Butcher, Josh and Nyla go to the men's bathroom to discuss how Millie and The Butcher's bodies became switched. As they squabble, Josh points out to Nyla that this is the boy's room, suggesting she shouldn't be there. Nyla retorts that "She's [Millie] got a dick in her hand and you're wearing Chanel No.5, think we're past labels"²⁸. Millie's friends openly reject strict gender or sex policing in these sex-segregated spaces. Nyla highlights their differences in traditional gender norms and cisnormativity, implying that policing these differences is a waste of time.

The Butcher-Millie's kills throughout the film are tied to gendered experience. Miller (2023) suggests that Angela's kills, in *Sleepaway Camp*, are influenced by characters enforcing cisnormativity on her character. They note that this enforcement of cisnormativity includes the norm of others attempting to control, and by extension subordinate, women. It is the other characters' ideas of gender that she must resist. For example, they highlight the cook who attempts to sexually assault Angela, noting that it is his idea of her position as a woman that allows him to attempt to control and assault her. The Butcher-Millie kills Ryler, teacher Mr Bernardi, football players Tobin, Brett, Squi and Phil. Millie is bullied by each of these characters, and each uses gender normativity to attempt to subjugate her.

When Brett gropes The Butcher-Millie, he responds: "your touch makes this pussy drier than sandpaper, you fucking monkey. I can't wait to kill you"²⁹. Brett's masculinity feels challenged as he reaffirms to himself and the other football players, "she fucking wants

²⁸ *Freaky*, (2020)

²⁹ *Freaky*, (2020)

me”³⁰. Brett, Tobin and Squi later attempt to rape The Butcher-Millie, luring him away from the party. Brett points out that there were three of them and that The Butcher-Millie has “three holes”. In response The Butcher slices Squi’s throat with a broken bottle before attacking Brett and Tobin with a chainsaw, a Slasher classic. He beheads Tobin and slices Brett’s crotch with a chainsaw; utilising Miller’s theory of kills influenced by enforced cisnormativity, The Butcher-Millie resists their attempts at control, lashing out in violent penetration. The Butcher-Millie uses weapons to align their bodies more closely to his now, each body featuring a new ‘hole’ or orifice, whether at the neck or the crotch. A broken bottle, a chainsaw and a meat hook become an extension of the body. Whilst the murders of his other victims, Ryler and Mr Bernardi, were conducted more indirectly by machine, the football players are killed closely using these handheld extensions.

It is common in body swap or trans/drag narratives to see men disguised as women tackling issues that women face with more confrontation than other women. (This is not to imply that men don’t also face sexual assault, domestic violence or slut shaming.) This can be seen in films like *Tootsie*, in which Dorothy speaks with an authority that is undesired by the men on set, facing sexually aggressive men. Dorothy is positioned as an admirable and outspoken woman, often referred to as masculine, that the women around her desire to be more like. This can also be seen in cases in which the trans body can accomplish physical aggression. In *To Wong Foo* (1995) for example, Carol Ann is being abused by her husband, Vigil. Vida, who has become close to Carol Ann, decides that she has had enough and decides to intervene. Whilst Carol Ann cowers in fear over Vigil hurting her, Vida, knowing she is physically stronger than him, proceeds to beat Vigil and throws him out of the house.

³⁰ *Freaky*, (2020)

Similarly, in *It's a Boy Girl Thing*, Woody-Nell attacks a student who told the school that that he had slept with Nell, physically intimidating him to take it back.

It could be argued that this is a sexist trope that suggests that men, or those who have presented as men, can solve women's issues better than women. However, I suggest that this is more a reflection of the nuance of trans understanding of gender and experiences of 'womanhood' and 'manhood'. Gender critical theorists, such as Greer (2009) and Stock (2021), argue that trans women can never have the true experience of 'womanhood' as they have experienced male privilege for a portion of their lives, due to their assignment as male at birth. In many of these body swap and trans/drag narratives, it is framed as the desired outcome that the characters learn from their experience as another gender. Michael, *Tootsie*, becomes a better partner, Daniel, *Mrs Doubtfire*, becomes a better father, both becoming better actors with more successful careers. As Michael states, "I was better man with you as a woman, than I ever was with a woman as a man"³¹. Viola, *She's the Man* (2006), is able to better connect with Duke and is allowed to play on the soccer team. Both Nell and Woody in *It's a Boy Girl Thing*, become less judgemental and fall in love as they now understand each other's gender experiences.

In the horror body swap we see Millie and The Butcher contrasting traditional gender norms in their gender expression and performance. Millie-The Butcher, conditioned by those around her to be timid, is timid even when in the large and intimidating form of The Butcher, all who see her are afraid of her. When situations to use violence or dominance occur, she is trepidatious. Whilst The Butcher-Millie acts out against those who attempt to subjugate him. This adheres to Creed's possessed woman archetype, as Millie becomes possessed by the serial killer, she begins to act in a way considered objectionable of women as she becomes

³¹ *Tootsie*, (1982)

confrontational, aggressive and resistant to subjugation. By the end of the film, once returned to her own body Millie must confront her own position and power.

At the end of the film Millie confronts The Butcher on two separate occasions, once whilst their bodies are swapped and once when they are returned to their own bodies. Both scenes align with the Possessed Slasher's final family. At The Butcher-Millie's confrontation, The Butcher-Millie must escape Millie-The Butcher and her friends, waiting out the twenty-four-hour window to swap so that he can stay in her body. As Millie-The Butcher attempts to chase him whilst injured, Nyla and Josh run past her, jumping onto The Butcher-Millie to hold him down. (Fig.3.3) Then at the end of the film Millie is attacked by The Butcher, who escaped after he was presumed dead. He attacks Millie in her home, but her sister and mother intervene to try and protect her. Char fearlessly raises a gun to him (although he has already removed the bullets) and her mother hits him over the head with a bottle. They are both subdued as The Butcher taunts Millie for her weakness, but the three attack again, finally killing him. (Fig.3.4)



Fig.3.3 - *Freaky* (2020) - Josh (left), Millie-The Butcher (middle) and Nyla (right) hold down The Butcher-Millie as he is stabbed with the La Dola.



Fig.3.4 - *Freaky* (2020) - Millie's mother (left), Millie (middle) and Char (right) stand over the dead body of The Butcher.

In each scene Millie and her final family, a chosen family and a biological family, battle the killer representing an aggressive man who tries to subdue and subjugate them. The chosen family friendship contains a camp gay man, a woman of colour and, I argue, a trans woman, Millie-The Butcher's trans journey is discussed further in Chapter Five. Each one faces threat and devaluation by the toxic hypermasculine figure; in uniting against The Butcher-Millie they are able to take up power to render him powerless. With Millie's biological family, her mother is shown to suffer from alcoholism related to the death of her husband, leading her to fail to show up for her daughter. Char attempts to take on a protective role in the family but failed to defeat The Butcher previously. Millie repeatedly attempts to negotiate others' expectations of her whilst struggling with feelings of inadequacy and anxiety. In uniting to defeat The Butcher, they reject his attempts to exert his power over them, as he repeatedly devalues them, viewing them as weak. In each shot the final family are positioned over him, refusing to let him exercise his control or power over them (Fig.3.3 and Fig.3.4). Their role as a final family is what makes them able to defeat the patriarchal killer, this decentres the focus from the sole final girl to the power that unity can afford them.

Nica acts as a final girl in *Curse of Chucky* (2013), as she attempts to kill Chucky to save her life. She steals Chucky's knife and uses it to stab him. However, Chucky is not killed; instead, Nica is determined to be criminally insane and is convicted of Chucky's murders. Here she fails to ultimately defeat her attacker, but she escapes with her life. In *Cult of Chucky* (2017), Chucky possesses Nica's body, utilising her vessel to return to a human form. Much like The Butcher-Millie, Chucky lashes out at men who exercise power over Nica, particularly through sexual assault. Initially he encourages Nica to take up a weapon against her abuser, but he ultimately performs revenge on her behalf when he possesses her body. Where The Butcher-Millie violently responded to those who attempted to subjugate who they thought was Millie simply because he rejected their power, Chucky becomes involved in Nica's assault on a more personal level as he views from the sidelines.

In the Harrogate Mental Facility, Nica is preyed upon by Dr. Foley, who hypnotizes and sexually assaults her. Chucky, in doll form, attacks the doctor, hitting him with a glass bottle before encouraging Nica to kill him. She admits that she does want to kill the doctor but falls into a deep hypnotic dream before either can act. Later the doctor begins to kiss her feet before putting shiny red heels on her (Fig.3.7). She insists that he will be killed, and she will tell everyone what he has been doing to her, but he tells her that no one will listen to her. Once again, the doctor is hit with a bottle by Chucky. Chucky possesses her body, standing from her wheelchair. Much like the power of Damballa allows Chucky to move the inanimate limbs of a doll, he is able to use Nica's legs despite her disability. Chucky-Nica stands as the doctor comes to, reversing their positions as Chucky-Nica looks down at him. They state, "This is for Nica"³², before repeatedly kicking Dr Foley's face with the heel of the shoes.

³² *Cult of Chucky*, (2017)

Throughout *Cult of Chucky*, red is used to signify Chucky and his influence, highlighting that Chucky is in control of the vessel. There is particular emphasis on red shoes. The Good Guy dolls are equipped with wears red sneakers; these can be seen throughout the franchise. We also see several of Chucky's vessels wearing red shoes. Where in some cases the first skin of the possessor appears on the second skin, altering the body, I suggest that this is an example of the first skin appearing on their third skin. We are reminded of Chucky's red sneakers before we begin to see them appearing on his vessels.

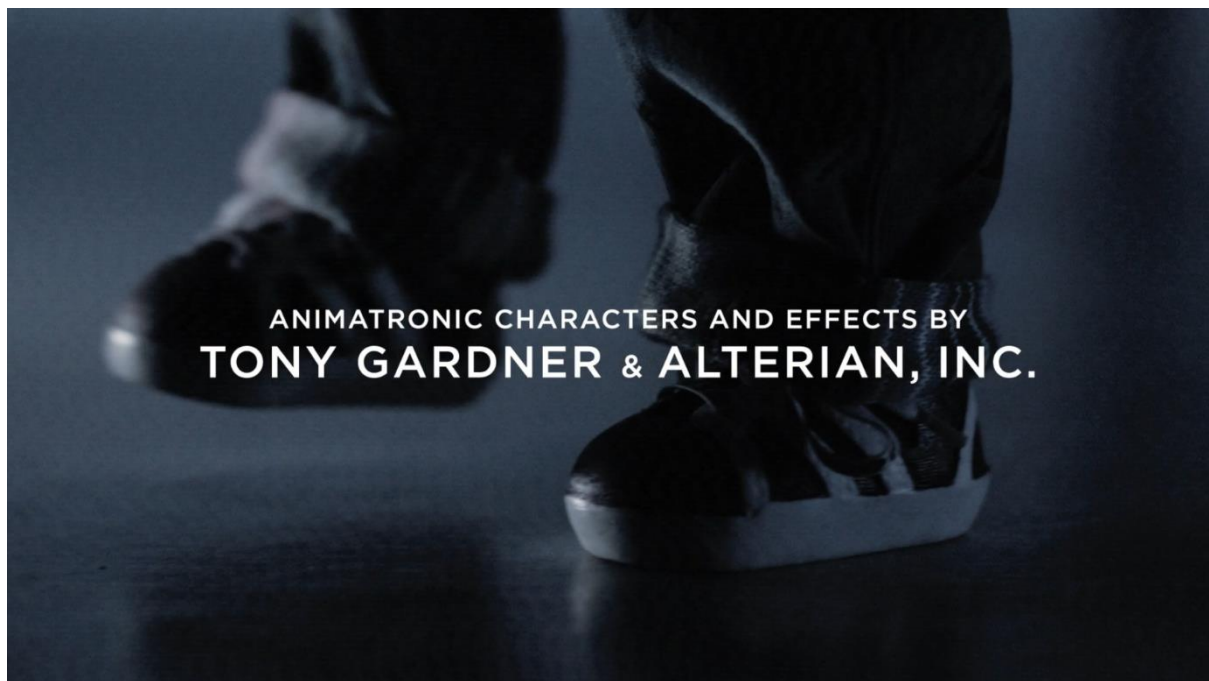


Fig.3.5 - *Cult of Chucky* (2017) - Chucky stalks his victim in the title sequence.



Fig.3.6 - *Cult of Chucky* (2017) - Chucky stalks his victim as lighting flashes.

In the title sequence we are reminded of these shoes with an extreme close-up. The grey, desaturated sequence displayed images and paperwork of Chucky's attack and Nica's prosecution and institutionalisation. The shots including Chucky emphasise the Good Guy colours, such as the blue of Chucky's eyes, his rainbow sleeves, his orange hair and his red sneakers, whilst the rest of the image remains in a grey desaturated tone. The blood on a knife is saturated, whilst the knife and surroundings remain grey. This can be seen in the lighting flash on Chucky's feet in Fig.3.5 and 3.6. This sequence reminds the audience of signs of Chucky's presence. These signs are repeated; for example, one character, who believes the Chucky doll is her baby, clings to his shoe as a reminder of him. In foreshadowing to the later scene in which Dr Foley presents Nica with her own red shoes, Chucky's shoes appear from where he is hidden behind the curtain, waiting to intervene (Fig.3.7).



Fig.3.7 - *Cult of Chucky* (2017) - Chucky hides behind the curtain, his shoes visible as Dr. Foley hypothesizes and assaults Nica.

In both assault scenes Nica is controlled by the doctor who abuses his position of power and her disability, and in both scenes Chucky interjects. He uses a glass bottle to knock him out, shifting the power balance as he presents Nica with a weapon. In the first scene her hypnosis forces her to tell the truth; in this she admits that she does want to kill the doctor. In the second scene she is drugged to incapacitate her; however, she is not mentally altered. She insists that she is not a killer and will not kill him, despite her earlier confession that she wanted to. She refuses to use her power as a final girl on the doctor. The power of the final girl is unlocked by the killer, as the Slasher attacks and kills those around her, she must defend herself. In defending herself, she becomes an aggressor. Whilst other final girls maintain elements of their aggression, often to come back to fight the Slasher in sequels and

reboots, such as Sally³³ and Laurie³⁴, Nica rejects her aggression. She does not view her previous violence as a positive trait, unlike Chucky.

In Chucky's first interception of Dr Foley's assault on Nica, he states, "And they call me sick? This guy is diabolical. I mean, what a piece of work!"³⁵. He outwardly rejects the doctor's sexual assault towards Nica. Chucky-Nica enacts rape revenge on the doctor on behalf of Nica. Halberstam (1995) notes that whilst some theorists, like Clover, link violence with sex, often violence is simply an expression of violence. They resist the reading that violence in horror is used as a metaphor for sex; instead, they suggest that sex is a metaphor for violence. Following Halberstam's suggestion, Chucky-Nica's penetration of the doctor in crushing his face with the heels is not the return of sexual assault. Chucky's admonishment of Dr Foley's sexual aggression aligns with Halberstam's suggestion of violence as violence, enacting aggression and revenge. It is not the penetration of the weapon; in the case of Chucky-Nica and The Butcher-Millie, it's the destruction of part of the body used to control, abuse or subjugate them. Throughout his interaction with Nica, Dr Foley consistently gaslights, manipulates and hypnotises. The sexual contact we directly see is kissing, both of her mouth and her feet. It is the doctor's head that is entirely destroyed; in this, his mind and his mouth are rendered unusable as weapons.

Returning to Chucky's human possession, red shoes are used to highlight bodies that he possesses. Fig.3.8 shows a shot of Alice's shoes as she appears in Nica's dream; this version of Alice is possessed by Chucky, as we see at the end of *Curse of Chucky*. Chucky mentions that he had enjoyed possessing Alice as he found that people saw her as an innocent girl. He notes: "people trust cute little girls like they trust cute little dolls"³⁶. However, the

³³ *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, (2022)

³⁴ *Halloween Kills*, (2021)

³⁵ *Cult of Chucky*, (2017)

³⁶ *Cult of Chucky*, (2017)

fragility of her vessel is highlighted too as she dies when a victim fights back. Whilst Chucky from *Child's Play* to *Seed of Chucky* attempts to possess boys and men's bodies, in *Curse of Chucky* and *Cult of Chucky* he possesses girls' and womens' bodies.



Fig.3.8 - *Cult of Chucky* (2017) - Alice appears in Nica's dream wearing sparkly red pumps.



Fig.3.9 - *Cult of Chucky* (2017) - Chucky-Nica exits Harrogate Mental Hospital wearing shiny red heels.

Halberstam suggests that “skin in slasher films represents the blurred boundary between representation and the real” (1995:156). The skin is torn, with some sutured to create something new and some wounds stay open. These wounds uncover psychic wounds that cannot always be sutured, and I argue may not deserve to be. In the case of Dr. Foley, and the football players in *Freaky*, these wounds are left open and exposed. Whilst both The Butcher and Chucky often use violence against victims, they become victims (whether through threat or by alignment through possession). In these instances, they use violence to remove power from those attempting to subjugate them. As Halberstam notes in the case of Stretch in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* (1974), the weapon becomes sutured to the body, rendering “a queer body of violence and power, a monstrous body that has blades, makes noise, and refuses to splatter” (1995:160). Chucky-Nica alters Nica’s body, he creates an extension of her body, in both using her disabled legs and the heels. The doctor clearly displays some form of foot fetish and his focus on her feet allows him to emphasise his power over her. He

moves, or manipulates, parts of her body that are paralysed, that she cannot use herself to fight against him. Chucky instates power into the place that the doctor used to highlight his perception of her powerlessness.

Much like Dorothy in her time in Oz, garnished with ruby slippers, Chucky's spirit enters a world of technicolour as he is finally human again. However, as we learn in the *Chucky* series, humanity is not all it is cracked up to be. Much like Dorothy realises the deception of the wizard, Chucky realises the drawbacks of living in a human body in comparison to the plasticity of a posthuman doll body. Alice is not physically strong enough to fight against victims, but Chucky views Nica as a stronger alternative. However, Tiffany, in *Chucky*, decides that she prefers Nica to Chucky. So, she amputates her arms and legs, removing Chucky-Nica's ability to attack or wear red shoes again. It is only the sight of blood that can change who is in control of their vessel.

Nica's mutilated human body keeps him restricted, whereas his doll body is malleable. Arms and legs are easily replaceable. As seen in *Bride of Chucky*, Chucky can be reassembled and sutured; replacement arms and eyes easily attach to help form his posthuman body. For many years Chucky has been attempting to return to a human body, consistently failing when the target is a boy or man. Clover might suggest that it is down to the presence of a vagina that Chucky's possession of Alice and Nica is more successful. However, as previously mentioned, I would like to disrupt assumptions of the body, particularly genitals. Instead, Chucky's successful human possession could be attached to the desire for power over others and a desire to kill.

Like The Butcher-Millie, Chucky-Alice utilises gender norms to allow him to avoid suspicion. We see The Butcher-Millie simper and scream to manipulate those who do not know what he is capable of. Chucky notes that people implicitly trust 'cute little girls'. When

it comes to visual gender performance, we see Chucky adhering to traditional gender performance when in these vessels. For example, Alice is seen in *Curse of Chucky* wearing sneakers, however the shoes worn in his possession of her are glittery pumps matched with a dress (Fig.3.8). Similarly, Chucky-Nica is seen wearing lingerie in *Chucky*. These performances of gender may seem cisgendered on the surface as the second and third layers of skin seem to align; the presence of Chucky in the Inhabited Vessel creates a transed figure.

In this chapter I have examined the role of gender expression within the Inhabited Vessel, with a particular focus on the interplay between gender and violence. These characters not only examine their own gender performance but they must experience gender norms impacting their societal position. These characters are faced with new forms of attempted subordination and sexism as they are viewed as women by others. However, these characters utilise their relationship with violence to find their own justice, rejecting gendered subjugation. Furthermore, these characters are inescapably influenced by the archetypal trans killer, a trope ingrained in Slasher cinema and impacting social perceptions of trans people, as exemplified in *Clarice*. These characters are seemingly created with a conscientious understanding of the negative repercussions of the trans killer trope, instead building Inhabited Vessels who utilise violence to reject the enforcement of gendered power dynamics.

Whilst gender performance is negotiated by the Inhabited Vessel, the body also plays a prominent role in self-image. Chucky experiments with gender performance in Nica and Alice's bodies, however ultimately, he misses a more euphoric body, having grown attached to his plasticity. Each member of the Ray family eventually returns to their doll form, as they no longer are, or never were in the case of GiGi, human. Second skins are malleable, to varying degrees, through supernatural technologies. In the following chapter, I will expand on this further through my discussion of supernatural technologies and the body. Having analysed the third skin of the Inhabited Vessel, I will next explore the second skin.

Chapter Four: *Transgressive Bodies and Transbiology*

Possession hinges on the changing of bodies; moving from one vessel to another, possessors find themselves in a whole new form. As analysed in Chapter Three, when spirits possess new vessels they experience differences in their gender, both in their performance and the way they are perceived by others. Similarly, as spirits move to different vessels, they experience a different, potentially euphoric or dysphoric, body. This body may have different genitals or even no genitals at all. I begin again by presenting some key trends within body swap/transformation narratives as characters confront their new bodies, mirroring the way possessors adjust to new vessels, as they experience new genitals, puberty-like experiences and new kinds of reproductivity. As Sullivan (2006) suggests in their discussion of transmogrification, bodies experience change, becoming strange and crossing boundaries. In the process of (un)becoming, we both form and unform ourselves in body and identity. I suggest that supernatural technologies facilitate this (un)becoming, conducting surgical body modification through supernatural magic.

Gardner and Maclay in their discussion of trans-allegorical images in body horror note horror films that “focus on the monstrous transformation of the body as a means of metamorphosizing the experience and process of gender dysphoria” (2024:177). They suggest that in body horror “the human body can become abstract and mutable, employed for the purpose of surrealism, philosophical interrogation, or probing the depths of new genders and sexualities” and that “this allows trans people to reclaim the notion of monstrosity and recast it as a vector of potentiality and newness rather than something which must be destroyed for the status quo or gender binaries to be reinforced” (2024:177-178). This echoes Halberstam’s suggestion that “the queer tendency of horror film [...] lies in its ability to reconfigure gender not simply through inversion but by literally creating new categories” (1995:139). Bodies become malleable as through supernatural technologies and so does

gender. I suggest that we find these ‘abstract and mutable’ or malleable bodies in the Possessed Slasher as supernatural technologies change bodies (or vessels), tear and suture skin and create something new in the transbiological and posthuman.

Organic bodies may shift and grow. Changing. Developing. Transitioning. Even inanimate bodies become transbiological, newly presented with gender and reproductivity. How does the previously inanimate Inhabited Vessel manifest gender and genitals upon coming to life? I explore this further, highlighting how the supernatural can cause the body to align with their first skin. I utilise *Child's Play* franchise to analyse this, situating the process of finding and choosing a euphoric body through supernatural technologies. Building upon the malleable body and supernatural technologies, I examine supernatural reproductive technologies. I utilise *Ash vs Evil Dead* (2015-2018) as a case study to exemplify how these supernatural technologies assist in becoming reproductive, regardless of gender and/or genitals. I further examine how gender affects the body in posthuman offspring, noting the enforcement of societal norms.

The body swap/transformation narrative equally portrays the importance and irrelevance of the body. Characters come to learn more about gender experiences, becoming more aware of others whilst also experiencing something outside the cisgendered. Through this journey it is often the character's realisation that should they be ‘stuck like this’, their life would still be valuable and capable of happiness that facilitates their euphoric body. It's Woody and Nell's agreement that if this is their life now, they are happy that they're each other, that swaps them back to their original bodies (*It's a Boy Girl Thing*, 2006). It is Sam's (*Sam*, 2017) realisation that women are valuable in both life and business that leads them to be presented with the opportunity to become a man again (however, they do not take this opportunity). Willy realises that it can also be hard to grow up as a boy, especially when you're attracted to men, that grants them their wish to return to being Milly (*Willy/Milly*,

1986). First, they must learn that it is possible to be themselves in a body they do not align with; then they are presented the opportunity to change their body to align with how they internally identify.

Prosser highlights “a trope of transexual representation, [when] the split of the mirror captures the definitive splitting of the transsexual subject, freezes it, frames it schematically in narrative” (1998:103). Mirrors are often used in the body swap/transformation narrative as this is the first moment a character is confronted by their image. Often, they are confronted by their body first. This may be through interaction with their genitals when going to the toilet, as seen in *The Hot Chick* (2002), *Sam, Switch* (1991), or even through a morning erection, as seen in *It’s a Boy Girl Thing*. Some characters wake up and quickly notice a difference, grasping at their genitals and/or new breasts, as seen in *Willy/Milly* and *It’s a Boy Girl Thing*. Characters look down their pyjama bottoms or find themselves in the wrong position to use the toilet before making their way to a mirror. Here we often see a shot of a mirror as the character stares in shock, revealing their new body.

The men who find themselves with the body of a woman are often conflicted between dismay at the swap and attraction to their own bodies. In films like *Switch*, *It’s a Boy Girl Thing* and *Freaky* (2020), these characters grasp their breasts when they first realise their body has changed. As they stare into the mirror, touching their breasts confirms that their body is real. Even in *White Chicks* (2004), despite not being a body swap, Marcus is horrified when his hands cup the silicone breasts placed on his body. In *Switch*, Steve/Amanda³⁷ is repeatedly distracted by their body, cupping their breasts and ogling themselves in their underwear in the mirror.

³⁷ This character is referred to as Steve/Amanda instead of Steve-Amanda as they are not separate entities. Steve is transformed into a woman, still Steve but going by the name of Amanda to explain their sudden change in body.

Where women's bodies are swapped, they are often horrified, without any distracted attraction to their new bodies. These women often have to remain defensive of their original body, unable to trust it in the hands of a man who sexualises it. This can be seen in the 2002 live-action *Scooby-Doo* as the gang's spirits attempt to return to their bodies. Fred's spirit accidentally finds its way into Daphne's body. They excitedly point out, "Hey, I can look at myself naked!"³⁸, looking down their dress. When Daphne's spirit in Fred's body finds them, Daphne-Fred insists that Fred-Daphne stop touching their body, as it is her body, stating "get your hands off me!"³⁹. In *It's a Boy Girl Thing*, Nell-Woody is worried about her body as Woody-Nell informs her that he's going to lose her virginity. Later she is devastated thinking the virginity she was saving for someone special has been thrown away.

Whilst aroused or simply excited by the presence of breasts, these characters are also horrified by the loss of their penis. In *Switch*, Steve/Amanda is first transformed into a woman as they are standing in front of the toilet. They pull their trousers down only to grasp at nothing, screaming so loudly their neighbours call security. Similarly, in *Sam*, Sam discovers their lack of a penis standing in front of the toilet. In *It's a Boy Girl Thing*, Woody-Nell is horrified that his 'dick' has been replaced with 'bush', the voiceover of his thoughts insists that "this must be a dream, a very, very bad 'I lost my dick' kind of dream"⁴⁰. These, often misogynistic, characters place importance in the presence of their penis, as something that makes them - in their eyes - distinct from the women around them that they mistreat. For body swapped women, the penis is often devalued, Millie-The Butcher laughs as she refers to

³⁸ *Scooby-Doo*, (2002)

³⁹ *Scooby-Doo*, (2002)

⁴⁰ *It's a Boy Girl Thing*, (2006)

it as a “floppy anteater”⁴¹ and Jessica-Clive confronts a man critically stating: “you think you’re so cool ‘cause you can pee with your penis”⁴².

The loss of the penis initially might be simply assigned as a representation of castration anxiety; however, it can also be read as a disconnection between the tangible and intangible genitals of the shifting body. These characters grasp for genitals that aren’t there, feeling that they ought to be. Similarly, women who find themselves body swapped with men still treat their body as though breasts are present. For example, Millie-The Butcher (*Freaky*) is seen with a towel wrapped about her chest after showering, covering where her breasts once were. Nell-Woody holds their hands over their chest, covering phantom breasts. Here the first skin of the possessor (or original spirit in a transformed body) sits intangibly on the body. Penises and breasts, whilst not visible to others, feel present to the swapped or transformed figure.

This can be read as symbolic of trans phantoms. As discussed by theorists, such as Langer et al. (2023) and Straayer (2020), some trans people experience phantom genitalia in a similar way to aplastic phantom sensation or phantom limbs. In this, a trans man may feel a presence of a penis or a trans woman a vagina before surgical intervention. These characters who mentally identify as men, experience shock as their bodies seem to contrast the gender that they feel they are. In searching for their penis, they are searching for their own trans phantoms, a penis they feel mentally but cannot hold physically. Similarly, phantom breasts are covered, irrelevant to their physical presence on the body. Characters negotiate what they feel is missing whilst also negotiating what is there. This places them in a position in which

⁴¹ *Freaky*, (2020)

⁴² *The Hot Chick*, (2002)

they must assess their newly formed body. Here their first skin fails to become tangible on their second skin, seen only by themselves (and later trusted companions).

Some of the experiences of waking up to a new body mirror experiences in puberty, a supernaturally sped up and intensified experience of changes that are hormonal and physical. Characters are confronted by new body hair, a new body shape, changing voices and responsive and reproductive genitals. In *It's a Boy Girl Thing*, Nell-Woody deals with morning erections. In *Sam*, Sam experiences their first period, screaming from the bathroom at the sight of blood. Similarly, Amanda mentions cramps and periods in *Switch*. In *Freaky*, as Millie-The Butcher wakes up in The Butcher's body, she first notices her deeper voice, asking "why does my voice sound like that?"⁴³.

For trans individuals, many experience a euphoric and dysphoric puberty, if puberty blockers are not utilised. For some, during their first puberty they experience the formation of a dysphoric body as bodies become more 'masculine' or 'feminine'. The adult, or post-puberty teen, experience of a puberty-like period could also be read as symbolic of second puberty. As individuals begin gender-affirming hormone therapy (GAHT), their bodies begin to change. An estrogenic second puberty, through the use of feminizing GAHT, can contain characteristics such as breast growth (Patel et al., 2021), decreased or lighter body hair (Tang et al., 2023), reduced muscle mass (Harper et al., 2021, Cheung et al., 2024) and fat redistribution (Yun et al., 2021), genital changes. An androgenic second puberty, through masculinising GAHT, can contain vocal changes (Cler et al., 2021), increased body hair (Tang et al., 2023), increased muscle mass (Cheung et al., 2024), genital changes⁴⁴.

⁴³ *Freaky*, (2020)

⁴⁴ That are different from the changes during the estrogenic second puberty.

Zhikhareva⁴⁵ notes that this is not a literal puberty, however they understand the relation of bodily changes as influenced by the introduction of hormones. They highlight that using the terminology of ‘puberty’ can be considered infantilising and assign emotional instability to trans people. My use of the term is in no way intended to imply infantilisation or emotional instability but to highlight the manner in which the introduction of hormones creates bodily changes and note the potential in representation of adult experiences of the transitioning body. The magical, or supernatural, facilitates this adult, or teen, transition overnight, presenting characters with a new body. These characters may find their body dysphoric and/or euphoric in places as they adjust to their new sexed body. Through possession in *Possessed Slashers*, I suggest that themes of second puberty, trans phantoms and adjustment to a new body can be seen in the radical monstrous body.

Euphoria, Dysphoria and Changing Bodies in Horror

One of Clarke’s laws of technological advancements stated that ‘any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic’ (Clarke, 1973:39). In this statement they highlight that as technology and science develop, ideas that were considered so impossible only the supernatural could explain them, become possible. They highlight the limitless potential in advancing technology and the human relationship with ideas of the humanly possible and impossible. In the world of the possessed, I suggest that magic becomes indistinguishable from technology, particularly technologies of the self, the body and reproduction. In the *Possessed Slasher*, the supernatural performs similar feats to science but with heightened speed and sometimes efficacy. Where a trans individual may experience years of transitioning, with multiple surgeries, drugs and, unfortunately, time, through possession and/or transformation a body can change in an instant.

⁴⁵ ‘DR Z PHD Gender Specialist | Transgender Adults’ *Do Hormones = Transition Second Puberty?* (2019)

Stryker states that “the transexual body is an unnatural body. It is a product of medical science. It is a technological construction. It is flesh torn apart and sewn back together again in a shape other than that in which it was born” (1994:238). I explore how the trans body takes form when it is a supernatural technological construction, where suturing merges tangible and intangible skins to form a euphoric body. Long surgical procedures become replaced with exorcisms or soul transference. In some instances, characters stand around a prone body, words are spoken, daggers are used to tear skin and bodies are transformed. To use a case study from Chapter Three, the La Dola dagger stands in for a surgical scalpel as Millie is able to enter her euphoric body. When asked how her wound feels, as The Butcher is carted away, she responds that it is the “best pain I’ve ever felt”. The pain of the wound is confirmation that she is in her euphoric body; the stitches physically suture each layer of skin together as the gender of her first and third skin aligns with her desired body.

Halberstam notes “the power of the neo-splatter film, [and] its ability to dismantle not only the so-called real world of men and women and repro-heteronormativity but also its peculiar talent for imagining true alternatives in the queer social relations and counter-publics that the films imagine and call into being” (2008:275). I suggest that this is particularly the case in the Possessed Slasher, as possession spreads and creates the malleable possessed body. Human bodies may transform, but the transbiological Inhabited Vessel becomes something entirely new. It is this new creation that sits at a point of radical monstrosity, performing gender and bodily transition in a way that aligns with Creed’s (2022) radical monstrosity. In the combination of these supernatural technologies and the threat of the Slasher, these characters and their reproductive bodies challenge sexed bodies, kincoherence and reproductive futurism.

In the transbiological we seen the intermingling of organic and inorganic matter, creating something no longer entirely organic, for example a cyborg. The transbiological sits

outside the natural as it is constructed. As Franklin notes transbiology is “a biology that is not only born and bred, or born and made, but *made and born*” (2006:171). In the construction and subsequent birth of the transbiological, does the cyborg have gender? Haraway states that “the cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world” (1991:150), the transbiological sits outside the norm and by extension gender normativity. In this, supernatural technologies may alter the human, transforming (or transitioning) them to something new. Their gender, sexed body and reproductivity are challenged as they transform into the euphoric or dysphoric. Supernatural technologies may interact with the inanimate or inhuman to make and birth a new creature. These beings with no existing gender, sexed body or reproductivity become living; therefore, their manifestations of each of these elements could be seen as a purposeful choice aided by the supernatural. This transbiological creature or cyborg begets the posthuman, a monster that is queered in their existence. As Halberstam and Livingston note, the “posthuman body is a technology ...a deadly body, a techno-body; it is as we shall see a queer body” (1995:3).

Possession uses supernatural technologies to blur the lines between life and death and animate and inanimate to create these beings. In cases in which an object has never been alive, it may be a temporarily living creature during possession or may simply be an inanimate object with a spiritual puppeteer. For example, Possessor in *Ghostbusters: Frozen Empire* (2024) is a ghost that “can occupy any inanimate matter it wants”⁴⁶. These items include a bin bag, vacuum cleaner, cup, car and stone lion statue. However, life can be created from the inanimate, either through the fusion of the spirit or the possession to the item or through the reproduction of the new living creature.

⁴⁶ *Ghostbusters: Frozen Empire*, (2024)

Çengel highlights that, in terms of biology, “it is generally agreed that organisms that possess the following seven characteristics are animate or living beings and thus possess life: the ability to respire, grow, excrete, reproduce, metabolize, move, and be responsive to the environment” (2023:2). Whilst they note that not all living beings display all of these seven characteristics, this is an interesting place to begin to answer whether the inanimate Inhabited Vessel is living. To use Possessor as an example, when it inhabits the bin bag it is able to move and react to stimuli; however, it does not perform any of the other characteristics of living. Similarly, the demons in *Night of the Demons* (1988) are able to move and react to stimuli despite possessing deceased bodies. These transbiological figures become something new, and with that they present potential for queered bodies and reproduction.

In *Bride of Chucky* (1998) and the three *Child's Play* films before it, becoming human is linked to achieving the normative. In *Child's Play* (1988), Chucky aims to transfer his soul into a human body so that he can continue to live his life as a human. He is so focused on returning to what he understands as the normal way to live and the correct body to have that he allows this to stop him from accepting his difference. It is not until *Seed of Chucky* that Chucky begins to look inward and question if the pursuit of a human body is limiting his happiness. He and Tiffany pursue the human bodies of Jade and Jesse to conform to the normative version of humanity. They cannot appreciate that in their doll form they are able to become a coupled and reproductive pair who can create a family. Their heterosexual, but not entirely cis, relationship manifests genitals and reproduction, influenced by their desire for family. Inanimate objects do not have a sexed body or gender, so gendering is either assigned by outside influences or by the possessor.

Whilst dolls do have a human-like appearance, in comparison to a car, for example, in terms of genitals, they are an often-sealed shell. Some have vague mounds to represent genitals, but they are an abstraction open to interpretation. For Tiffany and Chucky, their

second skin is rubber that grows to become a more organic, living skin. The longer they stay in doll form, the more human they become, leaving them in a rush to return to human form so that they aren't forced to stay in doll form. Their desire to become human is tied to two main factors: fear of vulnerability and an ingrained desire to return to the normative. Their desire to become human changes throughout the series as the things they feared become a benefit. The Good Guy doll and Wedding Belle dolls do not come with their own genitals, or reproductive organs. Their organs grow within a hollow rubber shell. From their hearts to their reproductive organs.

These organs manifest based on the character's gender identification. Their first skin begins to manipulate the inanimate second skin of their dolls. The power of Damballa affirms their gender, exemplifying a euphoric supernatural puberty. As Tiffany and Chucky grow within their rubber shell, they become posthuman and transbiological. In their puberty-like manifestation of genitals, they become reproductive. In *Bride of Chucky*, when consummating their marriage Tiffany asks Chucky if he "has a rubber" to which Chucky replies that he is made of rubber, rejecting her concerns. At the end of the film a baby doll, Glen, is birthed from Tiffany as she dies. Halberstam (2011) notes their creation of a child is an act of unnatural reproduction. Where Tiffany and Chucky became humanoid dolls through possession, literally growing into their bodies, Glen is born in doll form, creating an entirely new creature who challenges boundaries of human/inhuman, boy/girl and reproductive/nonreproductive. Here supernatural technologies aid the realisation of the euphoric sexed body and allow a radical reproduction of a trans monster.

Halberstam suggests that "becoming human in this film [*Bride of Chucky*] is explicitly linked to becoming heterosexual, becoming coupled, becoming adult and becoming reproductive" (Halberstam, 2007:41). The *Child's Play* franchise repeatedly focuses on the trope of finding a body. Characters simultaneously grow into their vessels whilst in the

pursuit of the human form; however, ultimately, their desire for the human form is tied to an attempt to adhere to the normative. As Halberstam notes, the human is linked to the idea of becoming someone or something else. Becoming a reproductive heterosexual adult couple, and later a kincoherent family. I suggest that this desire for the human is an attempt to perform to an image each character has internalised. This pursuit and realisation of transbiological potential allows a reading of the pursuit of a euphoric body.

Whilst Tiffany and Chucky experience puberty as their euphoric genitals grow in their rubber form, Glen experiences dysphoria. In *Chucky* (2021-2024) Glen is now in a human body, having had their first skin torn in an attempt to fix their gender confusion in *Seed of Chucky*. In S2E4, ‘*Death on Denial*’, Glen tries to help Nica escape Tiffany, as she has amputated her arms and legs in an attempt to protect herself from the spirit of Chucky inside Nica. Nica grunts in discomfort, stating that her finger itches despite her arm amputation. She explains that “sometimes it’s like I can still feel things, like my brain hasn’t caught up to my body or something”. Glen responds, “Sometimes I feel like that too. Like something’s missing inside”⁴⁷, tapping their chest. As Nica describes her phantom limbs, Glen describes their phantom unsexed posthuman body. Glen displays their dysphoria of their Inhabited Vessel, with a divided soul and a human body. Their phantom body part is not specifically their genitals but the resolution of two layers of their skin, the first and the second. They feel the phantom half of their spirit displaced from their body, inhabiting Glenda. They also feel their phantom body, unsettled and dysphoric in their human form.

⁴⁷ *Chucky*, S2E4 ‘*Death on Denial*’, (2022)



Fig.4.1 - *Cult of Chucky* (2017) - Chucky-Nica grabs their breasts after possession.

When Chucky enters Nica's body, he is initially happy, particularly as he is attracted to Nica's body. The first time Chucky enters Nica's body, they grasp their breasts with a grin (Fig.4.1). Chucky-Nica looks down at Dr Foley, stating, "there's definitely perks to being supernaturally possessed"⁴⁸. Following this statement, they approach the doctor and crush his face "for Nica". As noted in Chapter Three, Chucky-Nica enacts the violence that Nica avoids, refusing to allow herself to become violent again after her time as a final girl in *Curse of Chucky*. Here Chucky displays the common trope of possessors grabbing the breasts of their possessor. He sees the presence of breasts as a perk, aroused by their own body. This contrasts with Chucky's following actions as they enact revenge on Dr Foley for sexually assaulting Nica, as he gropes Nica's body.

However, by season two of *Chucky*, Chucky wants to leave the flesh of a human body. A deal is struck between Dr Mizter, who is working for Chucky, and Kyle who is trying to

⁴⁸ *Cult of Chucky*, (2017)

free Nica. They agree that they will use Good Chucky, the final doll left from Chucky's army, as a vessel for the Chucky currently possessing Nica, referred to as Chucky Prime. Dr Mizter notes: "I think we've all seen how messy things get when Chucky tries to occupy a human body. Plastic is much more resilient than flesh"⁴⁹. The exorcism is successful, and Chucky Prime is placed in Good Chucky's doll body, however Andy shoots Chucky. They do not realise that Chucky has possessed Dr Mizter's body before the attack and escapes in her body. When Chucky-Dr Mizter gets to Dr Mizter's office they pull a Good Guy doll from a safe and transfer back to doll form. At the end of season three, Chucky-Jake states: "in my experience human possession has been kinda a mixed bag. Oh, I just want to be me again"⁵⁰, referring to his doll form.

Despite Chucky's desire to possess a human body through much of the franchise, Chucky actively desires to become a posthuman doll. Through Chucky's possession of his doll form, his first skin has become rubber, much like Glen and Glenda's divided first skin. Whilst he may not have been born rubber like Glen, he has grown to become rubber. Therefore, for his layers of skin to truly suture, his supernatural rubber first skin belongs in a malleable rubber body. Whilst supernatural technologies give Chucky the power to apply malleability to the human, it is not enough.

Before the loss of her limbs, Nica is disabled through spinal paralysis. Whilst in the womb, her spine is nicked by the end of Chucky's knife as he kills her mother. When possessed by Chucky, her body becomes capable of walking again, supernaturally powered in the same manner as the inanimate doll body. During this possession, if Nica becomes in control of the body, she will collapse to the floor, no longer able to walk. Supernatural technologies allow the manipulation of the body through possession, but the body is malleable enough for

⁴⁹ *Chucky*, S2E7, 'Goin' to the Chapel', (2022)

⁵⁰ *Chucky*, S3E8, 'Final Destination', (2024)

Chucky. His euphoric body grants him more freedom than any human form, and ultimately it connects him to his equally transbiological family.

Supernatural technologies have the potential to allow Inhabited Vessels to choose their body. This body may be a body cisnormatively assigned to men/women, it may be inanimate, or it may grow from parts and/or grow its own parts, but all become something more than human. In this development, much like puberty and transition, these bodies can become reproductive. However, the reproduction does not follow rigid structures or reproductivity. The creation, gestation and birth of monstrous and often posthuman offspring can be chosen or assigned regardless of gender and body.

Ash vs Evil Dead and the Transbiological Womb

Having considered the role of possession and transbiology as a process of *becoming*, I will now consider their influence on *creating*. Whilst I reject the notion of possession as a form of pregnancy, it is true that possession allows for a display of reproductive themes. As Clover notes, in possession, fluids often enter the body, changing its state. However, in Clover's ABA story approach and possessed portals, the possessing entity enters the portal and is then expelled. Regan (A) is simply Regan before and after her possession, only showing difference whilst she is possessed (B). As previously highlighted, I approach the Inhabited Vessel with a more AB or ABC structure. In terms of reproductivity and possession, an ABA structure might align with a non-pregnant person to pregnant to non-pregnant structure. In expelling their child or demon, they return to their original state. However, due to the fluidity of the Inhabited Vessel this can become more complex, as the body may not be living, the body itself may not become pregnant, or an original state may never be returned to.

As the supernatural facilitates a fluidity and temporality of bodies in Possessed Slashers, reproduction can become delinked from the feminine whilst still acting in a radical

manner. In this, the non-human or post-human is created through supernatural technologies. Possession helps create a malleable body, allowing bodies to create, gestate and birth regardless of gender. These malleable bodies use supernatural technologies in ways that echo scientific technologies that use elements of the transbiological to aid and enact reproduction. Supernatural wombs reflect experiences of surrogacy, ectogenesis, heterologous fertilisation,⁵¹ and womb transplantation. Kristić suggests that “cyber-feminism advises a symbiosis between the (wo)man and the machine that could serve to broaden the field of the human” (2015:49). In the *Inhabited Vessel*, the machine is replaced by the supernatural, broadening the field of the human and inhuman as experiences of fertilisation, gestation and birth become universally accessible.

Creed suggests that “horror films that depict monstrous births play on the inside/outside distinction in order to point out the inherently monstrous nature of the womb” (2024:79). Supernatural reproductive technologies further the interplay between inside and outside as reproduction intermingles the external and internal, the natural and unnatural. Wombs may be inside one’s own body, displaced in another or in the realm of the animated inanimate. The roles of the monstrous womb and the monstrous creatrix develop and intermingle. Monstrous children are created whilst wombs are displaced or non-existent. Creation can become divided, creating first-party, third-party and fourth-party reproduction. These figures inhabit the realm of radical monstrosity discussed by Creed (2022), and their challenge to repro-normativity challenges ideals of kincoherence.

The birth of the monstrous child, or creature, from the monstrous parent could be viewed as reproduction in queer negativity. Not only do they challenge the image of the symbolic Child of heteronormative futurity, but they are also often born in the desire to

⁵¹ Also referred to as assisted reproductive technology (ART).

disrupt society. (Edelman, 2004) Halberstam notes that the “Chucky series refuses Edelman’s flat rejection of the child as a place of resistance and it builds its hope, very differently, around the body of the unsexed and ambiguously gendered child” (2012:146)⁵². I suggest that this can also be seen in the *Evil Dead* franchise through the birth of the Demon Spawn and Evil Ash III. Where the *Child’s Play* franchise utilises posthuman reproductive bodies and artificial insemination, the *Evil Dead* franchise furthers this through supernatural reproductive technologies mirroring artificial wombs, artificial semen and uterus transplantation.

The forces of Evil and the Necronomicon have repeatedly facilitated reproduction regardless of the body in the *Evil Dead* franchise. Pugh (2007) discusses queerness and masculinity in the *Evil Dead* trilogy through the disjunction between body and self in *Army of Darkness* (1992). They begin by noting the role of the mirror within the *Evil Dead* trilogy. They highlight the mirror that turns into a pool of water in *Evil Dead* (1981) and the mirror in which Ash’s reflection argues with him before strangling him in *Evil Dead II* (1987). Finally, they note the role of the small mirror shard reflections of Ash in *Army of Darkness* that attack him. These now tangible reflections attack him in a way that Pugh suggests mirrors sodomy before impregnating him as he is forced to swallow one of them. Soon an eye forms on his shoulder; that Pugh describes as “a vagina-like cavity” (2007:132), see Fig.4.2. From his shoulder Evil Ash is grown and birthed (Fig.4.3).

⁵² Halberstam’s use of the term ‘Chucky series’ is in reference to the *Child’s Play* franchise, not the *Chucky* TV series.

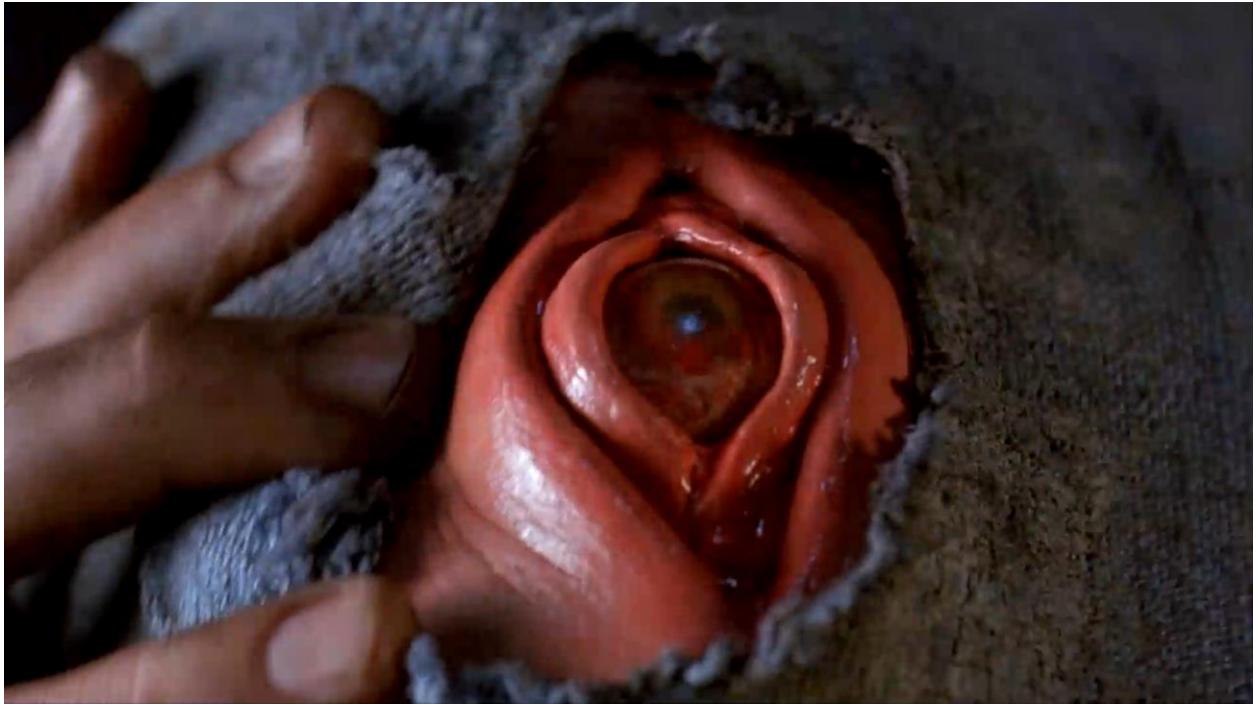


Fig.4.2 - *Army of Darkness* (1992) - Evil Ash begins to grow on Ash's shoulder.



Fig.4.3 - *Army of Darkness* (1992) - Ash runs outside and howls at the moon as Evil Ash rapidly grows from his shoulder.

Pugh suggests that “Ash’s troubled masculinity queerly exposes the tenuous link between a male body and masculinity” (:134). I suggest that regardless of Ash’s masculinity

or sexed ‘male’ body, the supernatural allows him to become reproductive; however, his reproduction is symbolic of Evil’s power to create tangible flesh and blood through possession. In classic possession narratives the intangible spirit, or first skin, requires a vessel, or second skin, to become solid and tangible. It is their possession of the vessel that allows them to remain physical. In the *Evil Dead* franchise, the possessor is able to become flesh and blood through possession. Possession becomes reproductive as it holds the ability to create, albeit monstrous, life. Ash, thinking he has defeated Evil Ash, states: “a man’s body is his own personal property. Don’t let anybody try and take that away from him”⁵³, and he is correct. Ash’s body is still whole and intact; his possession facilitated Evil Ash’s ability to have his own body, meaning he was not required as a vessel.

This ability to create living flesh does not always require a human form, as seen in the creation of Evil Ash. In the *Evil Dead* franchise, the inanimate are often granted a form of life or agency through possession. In *Evil Dead II*, when a chair breaks under Ash, objects around him begin to laugh. A taxidermy stag head, a lamp, books, and sofa cushions guffaw in unison. When Ash looks at himself in the mirror, his reflection gains a form of life as it reaches out and grabs him. In *Army of Darkness*, Ash breaks a mirror. Staring down at the shards below, several small reflections stare back up at him. When he turns his back, the small Ashs from the shards jump out and attack him. These reflections gain physical humanoid forms, able to laugh, bleed and die.

This continues in *Ash vs Evil Dead*. In the first episode Ash is attacked by a toy doll, Little Lori. Now demonically possessed, she grows teeth, angrily shouting “Little Lori hates you!”⁵⁴. She explodes in a splatter of blood and guts when killed by Pablo with a shovel. It is not shown whether she grew organs or genitals, to the extent Chucky does, but her moulded

⁵³ *Army of Darkness*, (1992)

⁵⁴ *Ash vs Evil Dead*, S1E1, ‘*El Jefe*’, (2015)

smile turns into a mobile mouth, with sharp teeth that bite and a tongue to create speech. Her moulded plastic eyes begin to blink and blood flows through her body. Similarly, a felt puppet, called Ashy Slashy, is shown to be filled with blood. The puppet is able to attach itself to someone's hand (or stump in Ash's case), becoming supernaturally sutured to the human body. He is able to grow teeth that tear flesh, and the blades of his fabric chainsaw sound as real as a metal one.

It is not just humanoid objects like dolls that become flesh and blood. In *Booth Three*, a magazine becomes possessed. The image of the model holding her breast is suddenly able to look back, shouting, "what are you looking at asshole?" and "objectifying motherfucker"⁵⁵. The magazine grows a human hand and arm, reaching out from the page. She shouts from the image in the magazine as she uses her supernaturally strong hand to strangle Ash and later uses it to drag her magazine body across the floor. Through possession all of these objects display some level of humanity, whether it is experiencing simple humour, becoming flesh and blood or growing (at least part of) a human body. It is the supernatural power of Evil and the Necronomicon that forms this metaphorical and tangible flesh and blood, turning the inanimate non-human into the posthuman.

The Necronomicon Ex-Mortis, or the Book of the Dead, is a mystical textbook detailing Evil, such as demons, spells and the chosen one. Reading from the book awakens Evil, bringing it to our realm to corrupt, attack and swallow souls. The conduit of Evil is bound in human flesh and written in blood by the Dark One, Ruby. The book exists at an intersection between the human and inanimate. Literally made out of parts of the human body, this supernatural conduit assists in the creation of the posthuman. In viewing supernatural technologies as a stand-in of scientific technologies, the book functions as a

⁵⁵ *Ash vs Evil Dead*, S3E2, 'Booth Three', (2018)

collection of medical knowledge. Due to its human qualities, it is also able to perform as malleable genetic material as a supernatural reproductive technology. I will analyse this further through scenes in *Ash vs Evil Dead* that portray themes of supernatural assisted reproductive technology and their queer potential.

In *Ash vs Evil Dead*, the Necronomicon acts as a symbolic figure or item for the supernatural acting in place of the medical. It is directly involved in the reproduction of all of Ruby's offspring. Latex gloves and medical textbooks are replaced with bound human skin and spells inked in blood. It supports the surrogacy, facilitates ectogenesis and finally creates IVG and successful UTx. Squier in *Posthuman Bodies* (1995) notes that examples of reproductive technologies (images of an extrauterine foetus, a surrogate mother and a pregnant man) mark "a point at which... reproductive technologies are producing the posthuman" (:113). In the Possessed Slasher supernatural technologies mirror these reproductive technologies, forming supernatural reproductive technologies, facilitating the birth of the posthuman. Transgressing lines between the natural and unnatural in the supernatural. The malleability of the (once) inanimate possessed allows disruption of gender and the sexed body facilitates the potential for reproduction. These malleable forms can become the reproductive sexed body or act as parts of the body, transitioning, creating or transplanting to make reproduction and gestation available to anyone. This can be seen in other figures such as Chucky and Tiffany as they become reproductive rubber figures.

The first example of possession as reproductive technology can be seen as Necronomicon-Pablo acts as a surrogate for Ruby and Baal. In the episode *The Dark One* (S1 E10), Pablo becomes possessed by the Necronomicon after Ruby tricks Ash into cutting off the face on the front cover. The cover flies toward Pablo becoming sutured to his face. Together they become a figure of temporal fission as Pablo is still present within the body. Later Ash finds Ruby and Necronomicon-Pablo in the basement. A sack begins to protrude

from their mouth, as seen in Fig.4.4. Ruby draws on a new page of the book with a dagger, using Pablo's blood as she recites a spell. The sack grows in size and a worm-like creature falls from their mouth (Fig.4.5). The creature wriggles and quickly grows to the form of a genderless child with shadowed sockets for eyes, becoming her Demonic Spawn.



Fig.4.4 - *Ash vs Evil Dead* S1E10 'The Dark One' (2015) - Necronomicon-Pablo births Ruby and Baal's Demon Spawn from their mouth.



Fig.4.5 - *Ash vs Evil Dead* S1E10 'The Dark One' (2015) - The Demonic Spawn grows in a worm-like sack as Necronomicon-Pablo and Ruby watch.

These creatures are born again in season two, however, a surrogate is not used. In season two of *Ash Vs Evil Dead*, Ash, distraught that his friend Pablo has been killed by Baal, is tricked into returning to the 1980s in an attempt to change history so that Pablo can return to life. Ash, Kelly and Ruby are soon confronted by 80's Ruby, who kills Ruby. The pair bring Pablo back to life, although it is soon revealed that Baal was hiding in Pablo's body as he tears Pablo's skin from his face. Ash wakes up to find Baal and 80's Ruby stood over the Necronomicon, Ruby holds it as the mouth of the flesh-bound book stretches and births (Fig.4.6) the same sack that were birthed from Necronomicon-Pablo's mouth (Fig.4.4 and Fig.4.5).



Fig.4.6 - *Ash vs Evil Dead*, S2E10 'Second Coming' (2016) - A Demonic Spawn celebrates as Ruby holds the Necronomicon, birthing their sibling through the book's mouth.

Here the site of the womb has changed. Where the Necronomicon possessed Pablo, creating a human surrogate for the demonic spawn, the Necronomicon births without attachment to a body (Fig.4.6). In an act of ectogenesis⁵⁶ the book performs an extracorporeal pregnancy,⁵⁷ becoming an artificial womb and birthing orifice. Where Necronomicon-Pablo acts as surrogate for Baal and Ruby in season one, in season two the book itself acts as an artificial womb. The surrogacy forms fourth-party reproduction, with a gestating body in Pablo, an artificial womb in the Necronomicon, and two individuals donating DNA in Ruby and Baal⁵⁸. The reproduction in season two acts as a third-party reproduction. In this a donating body is no longer required.

⁵⁶ In which an organism is grown in an artificial environment.

⁵⁷ The development of a foetus outside the mother's body.

⁵⁸ I do not assign specifics such as the sperm and egg as I approach these characters without presumptions of their reproductive organs.

In this, they move away from issues of surrogacy noted by Lewis (2019). Lewis notes that mainstream commercial surrogacy industries have an exploitative nature, often with a class and wealth divide between the surrogate and the adoptive family. They further note that this exploitation is predominantly tied to upholding the nuclear family and biological essentialism. There are several distinctions between Pablo, Ruby and Baal, such as human/demonic and Hispanic/Caucasian, however I suggest that the most prudent in this discussion is the divide in power. Ruby as a Dark One and Baal as a powerful demon, the pair have abilities that allow them to manipulate the world around them, to survive and perform feats of strength that the human struggle to compete with. However, it is also this power that grants them the ability to pursue supernatural reproductive technologies that move away from surrogacy.



Fig.4.7 - *Ash vs Evil Dead*, S2E10 'Second Coming' (2016) - The Demonic Spawn are born.

Fig.4.7 frames Ruby in a way that symbolises her power as a Dark One. The antlers of the taxidermy stag head behind her appear to protrude from her head like horns, the flame burning behind her as she looks down at her children. The spawn in the centre looks up at her,

calling her ‘mama’. The demonic mother and father both stand viewing the birth, equally avoiding the pain, risk and vulnerability of birth. Despite the similarity of their positioning the composition of the scene emphasises Ruby’s power, utilising the supernatural power of the Necronomicon to rapidly gestate and birth their offspring, creating living matter from the pages of the book. Here she stands as a manifestation of disrupted repro-heteronormativity, a woman liberated from biological oppression or burden of pregnancy through ectogenesis, as discussed by Firestone (1970)⁵⁹. Whilst escaping biological bodily reproduction may initially seem to sit in contrast to the reproductive power of Creed’s Archaic Mother and Creatrix, these supernatural technologies facilitate the monstrous creation of the radical monstrous posthuman figure. Ruby is not required to perform nine months of gestation and birth, instead she utilises supernatural technologies to create.

This displacement of gestation and birth could be linked to the monstrous power of the supernatural, allowing possession of an inanimate object to perform the painful and dangerous act of birth. However, it may not be the only motivator for supernatural ectogenesis. The use of Necronomicon as a womb and birthing orifice removes the necessity for certain genitals. In this, they can reproduce regardless of what genitals they have. They are not required to have testes, ovaries, a uterus, genitalia or even hormones. Much like queer and trans people who utilize reproductive technologies to reproduce, they are able to create children together regardless of their bodies. However, not all queer and trans people desire for their reproduction to be displaced from the body, nor do all require two ‘genetically donating’ parties. This can be seen in the creation, gestation and birth of Evil Ash III.

In S3E2 of *Ash vs Evil Dead, Booth Three*, Ruby devises a plan to rule by creating a new chosen one (Evil Ash III). In this, once Ash and his daughter are dead, the new chosen

⁵⁹In: *The dialectic of sex: the case for feminist revolution*. (2015)

one will be under her control. She cuts her hand, smearing the blood over the image of Ash in the Necronomicon, and ingests the blood. Immediately she falls back, something pushes against the skin of her stomach from the inside. Later, she is seen driving angrily telling the creature to wait until she reaches the roadside. Her stomach begins to tear, and the interior of the car windows become covered in blood. Two hitchhikers, Eric and Natalie, see her car run off the road and decide to investigate. Eric finds a seemingly dead Ruby in the front seat, with her chest torn open with a long tube running from her stomach to the back seat. In the footwell of the backseat he finds what he believes is a human baby.

The baby's face quickly changes. Its brow is extremely furrowed over its black eyes with a large mouth filled with sharp teeth. The baby attacks Eric, tearing at his throat. Blood pulses through the tube connecting Evil Ash III to Ruby and she wakes with black eyes. She bites the tube to tear the connection, walking out of the car with her chest still open. She holds the baby, noting aloud that whilst he may look like Ash, Evil Ash III will be nothing like him. She abducts Natalie and takes Eric's body. In a later scene Ruby is seen keeping Natalie alive for food and feeding the baby pieces of Eric.

Unlike in *The Dark One* and *Second Coming*, in which the book is used for the birth of Ruby and Baal's children, Ruby uses the book to create a new child. The fluid created in the book combines traits of herself and Ash, creating a hybrid of a Dark One and the chosen one. Whilst the name and appearance of Evil Ash III may imply that Ash is the father or that he is a clone of Ash, it is important to distinguish that he is created from a literal drawing of the saviour. The image in the Necronomicon acts as a symbol of Ash and his impact on the powers of Evil drawn by Ruby herself. She uses his drawn image on the page to dictate how her child will look and his role, whilst creating him herself through her own blood. Ash even suggests that Ruby went to 'Kandarian Kinkos' for Evil Ash III, referencing the copying and printing service.

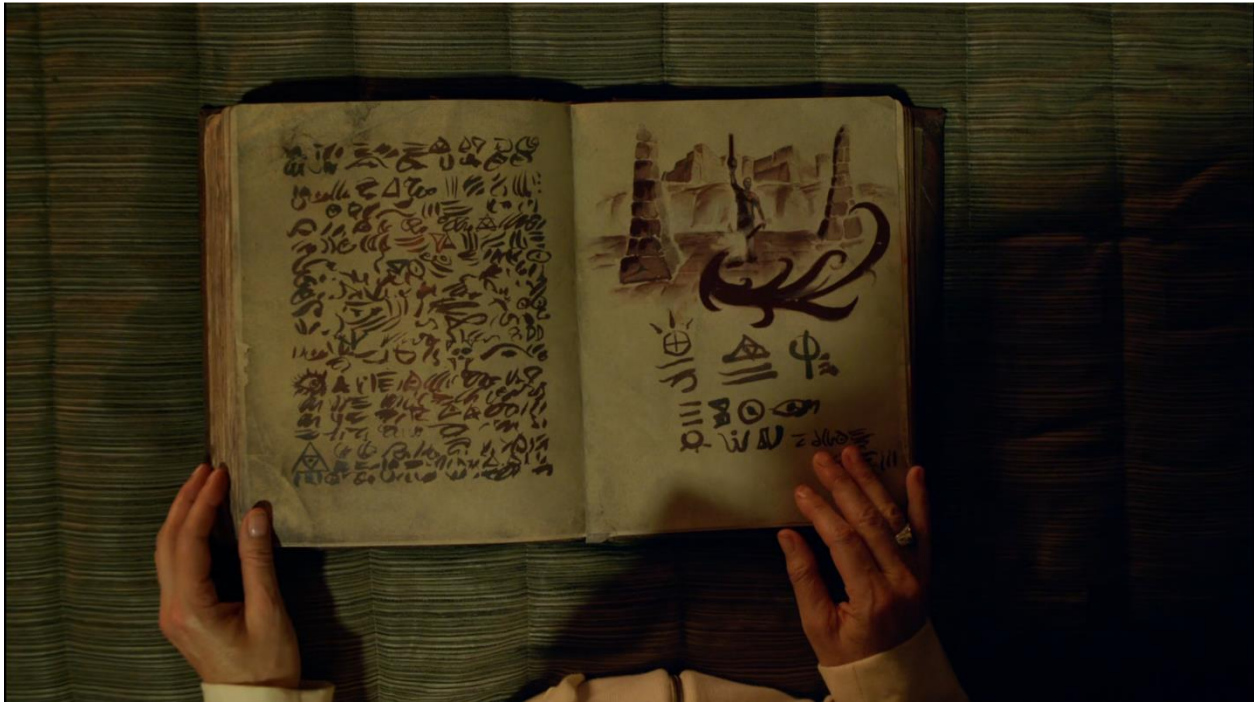


Fig.4.8 - *Ash vs Evil Dead*, S3E2 'Booth Three' (2018) - Ruby opens the Necronomicon to the pages about the 'Chosen One' (Ash).

Much like someone selecting a sperm donor, she selects visual traits she desires for her offspring. The pages (Fig.4.8) act as a donor profile, with an image of the donor and details of their life. This image shows the image of the genetic profile that will influence the image of the offspring. Here traits like hair colour, eye colour and height are noted, allowing the selection of the desired child. Ruby looks to these visual elements with a desire that Evil Ash III will look like Ash but also wishes for him to be nothing like Ash, never meeting him. Whilst these pages parallel the experiences of those choosing a sperm donor, it is important to distinguish the role of the Necronomicon and the image of Ash in comparison to Ash himself as a sperm donor.

Within the same episode Ash visits the Elk Grove sperm bank in search of information, a place he frequently visits to donate. Whilst there, Ruby sends deadites to "destroy his seed". She plans to destroy his donations, daughter Brandy and Ash, leaving Evil

Ash III as a controllable chosen one, no longer standing in her way. This scene highlights that Ash's sperm has been available at the sperm bank, easily accessible if Ruby desired to create a child that is both her and Ash's. Instead, she creates her offspring in his image, not wanting to recreate Ash himself or anything too much like him. As she states: "you may be born from the image of that idiot Ash, but you'll be nothing like him"⁶⁰. He is literally born from the image.

I suggest that this bloody fluid created by Ruby during the spell acts as supernatural in-vitro gametes (IVG), or artificial sperm, allowing Ruby to reproduce alone. The book, standing in for science, allows her to develop this supernatural IVG, engineering her ideal offspring who will help her achieve her goal. In the birth of her Demonic Spawn, Ruby is not seen to birth or carry their offspring, and instead uses the book to birth them. This establishes the Necronomicon as capable of acting as a womb and a site gestation. In the case of Evil Ash III, Ruby carries the hybrid; however, she is not seen to perform sexual intercourse or a vaginal birth. In this, I suggest that it is possible to read Ruby as potentially having a penis or no genitals at all as we cannot determine her genitals. The gestation of Evil Ash III is supernaturally rapid however she does not display a rounded pregnant stomach of any kind. Instead, hands push at the skin of her stomach before tearing free.

Here again, the Necronomicon facilitates reproduction, regardless of the presence of genitals and reproductive organs. Ruby states: "my little creature was born out of the Book of the Dead"⁶¹. Despite the child's presence and birth from her body, I suggest that the role of the Necronomicon, as a supernatural reproductive technology, is to create a supernatural suturing of a temporary site of gestation in which the creature can form. I suggest that this could be linked to uterus transplantation (UTx) in trans parents. UTx is currently used as a

⁶⁰ *Ash vs Evil Dead*, S3E2, 'Booth Three', (2018)

⁶¹ *Ash vs Evil Dead*, S3E2, 'Booth Three', (2018)

surgical method of transplanting a donated uterus into the body of cisgender women with absolute uterine factor infertility (AUFI). Theorists, such as Jones et al. (2018, 2021), Moorkerjee and Kwan (2019) and Richards et al. (2023), discuss the application of UTx on transgender women, allowing them to gestate and give birth to children, with Richards et al. suggesting that the first UTx for a transgender woman is anticipated within the next few years. Currently the UTx is a temporary grafted transplant, due to issues such as risk of rejection, and removed surgically, each baby born through caesarean section.

Richards et al. note challenges of transgender UTx, such as pelvis shape, issues with neovaginal anastomosis and vascular differences, however, they present an optimistic tone. In terms of ethical considerations, they note the potential issue that the transplant is temporary, meaning that an individual's euphoric reproductive body cannot be maintained and any further reproduction would require medical intervention and surgery. They also note that the transgender UTx creates the potential for fourth party reproduction. In this there could be a separate sperm donor, uterus donor, egg donor and gestational party. Jones et al. (2021) conducted a study amongst 182 transgender women to determine their perspectives of UTx and euphoria. Their findings state that 99% (180/182) of participants believe that UTx would lead to greater happiness in trans women. Furthermore, 94% (171/182) agreed or strongly agreed that "the ability to gestate would enhance their feelings of femininity" (:7). Distinct from her creation and birth of the Demon Spawn, Evil Ash III is sutured to her body. Here she opts for gestation within the body over surrogacy or artificially extracorporeal gestation.



Fig.4.9 - *Ash vs Evil Dead*, S3E2 'Booth Three' (2018) - Ruby is discovered in the car seat with her chest torn open.

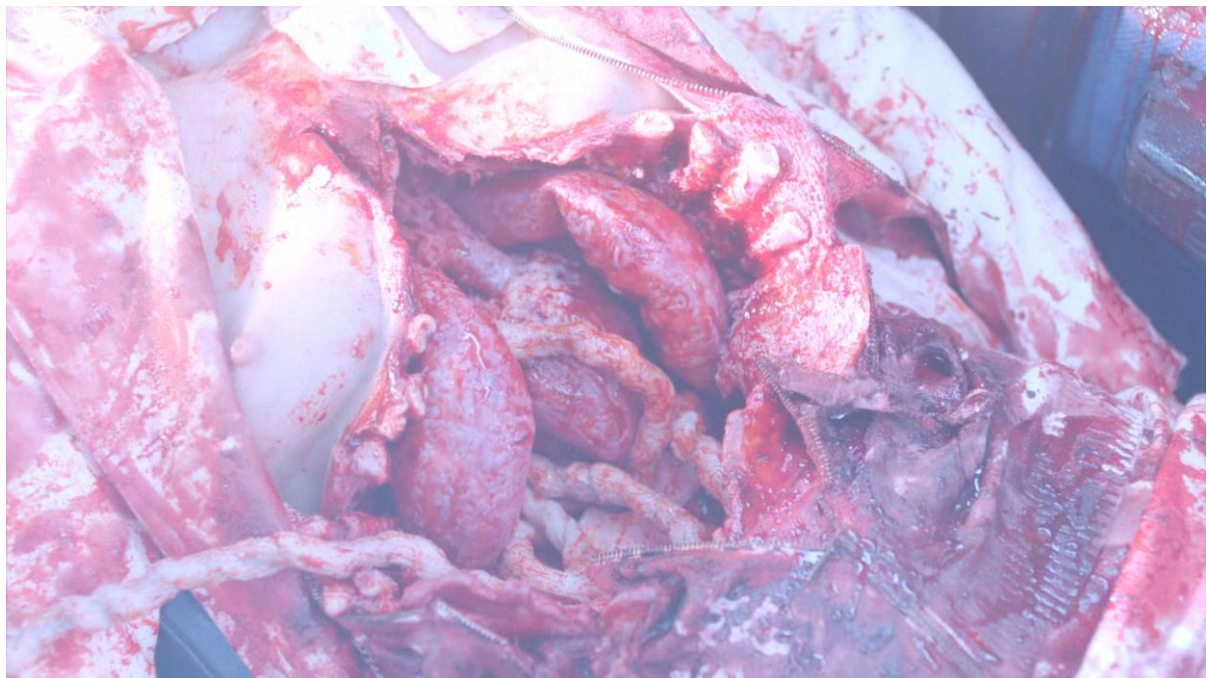


Fig.4.10 - *Ash vs Evil Dead*, S3E2 'Booth Three' (2018) - Lightning flashes on a close up of Ruby's chest and a long winding tube.

The demonic child tears itself from its mother in a bloody birth. However, this birth echoes one of surgical intervention. As seen in Fig.4.9 and Fig.4.10, the chest and abdomen are spread open as though held open by medical tools. Her all-white outfit emphasises her position as both doctor and patient as she artificially creates and carries the child. Here Evil Ash III is birthed through monstrous surgical intervention as Ruby is splayed open. The baby's demonic attack on Eric ends a surge of blood back through the umbilical-like tube that connects them, reviving Ruby. This tube acts as an IV, restoring blood to the body that is lost through the surgical monstrous birth. Here supernatural technologies assist in the creation, gestation and birth of Evil Ash III, allowing the body to become a site of each of these elements through choice.

Murphy (2015) discusses the bioethics of assisted gestation through the work of philosopher, Sparrow (2008). Sparrow notes how developing technologies that realise assisted gestation in infertile cisgender women, also realise potential for male pregnancy and male-to-female transexuals (Sparrow's term.). They discuss the role of the state and state funding towards male and trans pregnancy, suggesting that gestation is not a right for these individuals. They suggest that the state ought not to fund assisted gestation for these individuals, as it might for women suffering from infertility. However, Murphy argues that Sparrow treats transgender women - for moral intents and purposes - as men. They also note that when trans women are viewed as women, assisted gestation can be viewed as a right as it plays a key role in expressing and consolidating a female identity.

They further state that Sparrow's conclusions rely on a normative core institution in which sexed bodies perform reproduction in a sex-typical way. They argue that it is not clear why elements, such as anatomy, sex markers or genetics, should alone define state responsibility for assistance. They conclude that new technologies open up new possibilities, possibilities with the potential to disrupt the role/title of mother, the way pregnancy is viewed

and state and societal perspectives on the right to gestation. Unlike the state discussed by Sparrow and Murphy, evil is not concerned with anatomy, sex markers or genetics in reproduction. Therefore, the supernatural will always assist in the gestation and creation of the monstrous child.

Ruby's offspring are monstrous in their form but also monstrous in their threat. The Demonic Spawn and Evil Ash III are intended to facilitate Ruby's destruction of humanity. Here she becomes a reproductive threat to the futurity. In Edelman's (2004) discussion of reproductive futurism - in which society is built around the figure of the symbolic child and mandatory reproduction is ingrained within society - they suggest that those that reject reproduction, both of children and metaphorical reproduction, are labelled sinthomosexual. Edelman suggests that there is a "prevalence of male sinthomosexuals [that] reflects, no doubt, a gender bias that continues to view women as "naturally" bound more closely to sociality, reproduction and domesticating emotions" (Edelman, 2004:165). They further state that whilst examples of female sinthomosexuals exist, many are driven by an intense emotional obsession.

Lemker (2022) agrees that the female sinthomosexual is more challenging to discuss due to societal interpretations of the link between women and reproduction and argues against the assignation of emotional obsession as an explanation for their motivations. They suggest that, just like male sinthomosexuals, some female sinthomosexuals reject reproduction and take up the role of the death drive. Ruti (2017) highlights that Edelman's sinthomosexual requires a level of societal security and privilege that leads women to be economically and socially more difficult to conduct such a lifestyle. Lemker furthers this argument, suggesting "existing as a woman in a patriarchal society may not destroy a character's ability to act as sinthomosexual but it will impact the opportunity and the form of that act" (:7).

Ruby could be read as the sinthomosexual woman⁶² or even the sinthomosexual creatrix. Ruby takes up the role of the death drive as she creates creatures of destruction, with the desire to eradicate the symbolic child in her destruction of humanity. She utilizes the supernatural reproductive technologies to queerly produce tools of destruction in her offspring. She subverts reproduction in a way that no longer guarantees the future, instead her reproduction is what is intended to destroy all future reproduction. Here the seemingly oppositional positions of the sinthomosexual's rejection of reproduction and the creatrix's unbridled motherhood combine to position supernatural reproduction as a site of anti-futurity. Supernatural technologies afford her the security and privilege Ruti and Lemker discuss whilst also allowing her negotiated emotional connection to reproduction. She desires destruction not through intense emotional obsession such as jealousy, but for desire of power and monstrosity as she wants to "rip the skies open until they bleed and the flood to wash away humanity and the earth to burn so that the flames touch the heavens"⁶³.

Despite her potential role as a form of sinthomosexual creatrix, Ruby experiences pressures of toxic gender norms and kincoherence. Whilst the reproduction and birth of the Demon Spawn sits outside of the normative, their family adheres to a mother/father/children structural relationship. In the events of *Second Coming*, 80's Ruby becomes disenfranchised by the gender roles that are assigned to them by their kincoherence. Ash goads Baal into a fist fight, without the use of demonic powers, challenging his masculinity as a patriarch. If Baal is defeated, their family will be banished from the realm. Baal takes the deal, harshly demanding to Ruby that she seal their agreement with the Necronomicon. As the pair begins to fight, she watches with disgust, calling them "slaves to pride"⁶⁴. She returns to the

⁶² I use the term 'sinthomosexual woman' rather than 'female sinthomosexual' as I wish to distinguish that I am concerned with those who identify as women, rather than those who are assigned female based on physiology.

⁶³ *Ash vs Evil Dead*, S2E10, *Second Coming*, (2016)

⁶⁴ *Ash vs Evil Dead*, S2E10, '*Second Coming*', (2016)

Necronomicon, altering the deal as she refuses to “risk everything for a contest of egos”⁶⁵.

Whilst it is not specified how exactly she alters the deal, it is honoured, which comes as a shock to Baal, and she and the book return in season three.

She and Kelly, both suggested to be stronger than Baal and Ash respectively, watch as Baal and Ash’s egos lead them to easily barter the lives of the women and children in their lives. It is this refusal to be subjugated that leads 80’s Ruby to betray Baal, allowing his earthly gendered toxicity to destroy him and the children that she fears will follow their father’s footsteps. Her next offspring is created asexually, rejecting the presence of the kincoherent paternal figure. She rejects the potential for a masculine figure to enforce dominance over her and her offspring. This does not mean, however, that Ruby is positioned as entirely oppositional to normativity. She may reject kincoherence but she can be seen to enforce an image onto Evil Ash III to fit in amongst gendered humans.

The transbiological begets the posthuman, as the offspring of these figures display gender that distinguishes them from the realm of the human. As J. Butler suggests “those abject beings who do not appear properly gendered: it is their very humanness that comes into question” (1993:8). Halberstam further states that “improperly or inadequately gendered bodies represent the limits of the human and they present a monstrous arrangement of skin, flesh, asocial, mores, pleasures, dangers and wounds” (1995:141). In *Possessed Slashers*, such as the *Evil Dead* and the *Child’s Play* franchise, offspring have the potential to reflect the posthuman as their transbiological or radical bodies interact with their performance and embodiment of gender. However, parents often attempt to negotiate with their offspring, often enforcing a binary on their bodies and gender. For Ruby’s offspring, each is affected by these pressures. This can be seen in the *Demonic Spawn*; the genderless beings, entirely unable to

⁶⁵ *Ash vs Evil Dead*, S2E10, ‘*Second Coming*’, (2016)

blend, are ultimately destroyed by their mother, first by their disruption of her matriarchal power and then by the hubris of patriarchal masculine assertion. Similarly, Evil Ash III experiences Ruby's enforcement of normativity as they are instructed how to look and behave.

When Evil Ash III leaves their womb-like cocoon, they are finally born in the image of Ash that we have seen in the series. However, as they are born in the image of the chosen one from the Necronomicon and not the human genetics of Ash himself, they are not born with two hands. They raise their left hand to reveal a fully transbiological fleshy chainsaw instead of a newly born hand or an absence of a hand (Fig.4.11). Ash, previously born with two hands, cuts off one of his hands in *Evil Dead II*, affixes a chainsaw to his arm and becomes the image seen in the Necronomicon. Ruby instructs Evil Ash III that his organic chainsaw must be cut off as it is the only visual element that distinguishes him from the real Ash.



Fig.4.11 - *Ash Vs Evil Dead*, S3E7 'Twist and Shout' (2018) - Evil Ash III looks at his organic chainsaw.

It is not just the body that distinguishes Evil Ash III from Ash, but their behaviour. Whilst Ash is brash, sexist and hypermasculine, Evil Ash III is more reserved, showing obedience and respect to Ruby. Evil Ash III attacks teens for their transgressions, such as smoking weed, wearing the wrong shoes for the dress code and not having an invite, all of which are something Ash would certainly flagrantly do. Where Ash swears, Evil Ash III says things like “good gravy”. The main distinction between the pair is Evil Ash III’s monstrosity, as he kills humans and eats their flesh. They perform as Ash in an attempt to deceive Brandy, but their true nature is monstrous, hungry and uninfluenced by toxic masculinity.

Ruby instructs Evil Ash III to cut off their organic chainsaw hand with a hacksaw, noting that it is a signifier that they are not Ash. They do not successfully pass as the masculine figure. They must slice away his difference to go to the school dance, where Evil Ash III and Ruby can manipulate Brandy into killing her father, Ash. Whilst Evil Ash III’s body does not conform to the normative human form they clearly exist outside the realm of the human, however, the hacksaw moulds them closer to the image of the masculine archetypal paternal figure. The pressure from their mother to conform is emphasised as they get ready for their first high school dance. As they begin to saw their flesh they turn to Ruby in pain:

“Evil Ash III: This hurts, Mother, is that normal?”

Ruby: It’ll scab over.

Evil Ash III: Make it stop.

Ruby: When you’re done, I want you to get dressed. The dance is about to start.

Evil Ash III: Yes, Mother.”

(Ash Vs Evil Dead, S3E7, Twist and Shout, 2018)

Evil Ash III informs Ruby that tearing the skin of their posthuman body is painful but she assures them that they will heal. To her they will heal to properly conform to the image of Ash, removing their extra fleshy appendage that differentiates them from the binary humans of Elk Grove, Michigan. The difference of their body when they are born for the second time requires surgical intervention of the hacksaw to fit the image of Ash that Ruby enforces. Much like Ruby's assessment of Evil Ash III's physical body, parents and medical professionals assess the genitals of intersex children to determine which binary sex they most closely resemble, often resorting to surgical intervention to validate this determination.

Paechter notes that in the case of intersex children, 'implicit assumptions about best interests in current majority treatment protocols are focused on a belief in the importance of a child having a definite assigned gender and a body that matches it as well as possible' (Paechter, 2021). Noting Dickens (2018) they highlight that parents and practitioners who make these decisions do so based on two assumptions. The first is that a child's gender identity will match the one assigned to them at birth. The second is that it is in the best interest of the child to match their body to perceptions of sex and gender. Newbould (2017) suggests that many parents make decisions about their child's gender identity and body whilst in shock following the birth of their intersex child. This is further problematized as parents can struggle to distinguish between what is in best interest for the child and the perceptions of the parents and family.

In a later scene, Evil Ash III comes across two teens smoking marijuana in the stairwell. They admonish the teens for their use of a gateway drug before attacking them with a new metal chainsaw arm. They state: "You know what they say. Spare the saw, spoil the child"⁶⁶. This is a reference to the saying 'spare the rod, spoil the child', a shortened

⁶⁶ *Ash vs Evil Dead*, S3E7, 'Twist and Shout', (2018)

paraphrasing of the biblical proverb 13:24 ‘whoever spares the rod hates their children, but the one who loves their children is careful to discipline them’. It is debated as to whether ‘the rod’ specifically orders the use of corporal punishment however, the sentiment of the saying suggests that children require discipline or they will be spoiled and non-functioning members of society.

Whilst the statement of ‘sparing the saw’ is made by Evil Ash III to the smoking teens, I suggest that the saying is symptomatic of the loss of their organic saw. To spare their organic saw, is to spoil or ruin their potential to go unnoticed by others, and in Ruby’s mind unable to fulfil the role she has predetermined they will take. To spare their inhuman body and gender is to allow them to exist on the fringes of the human, unable to successfully integrate with the human. Despite the pain of the procedure, their mother forces them to mutilate themselves to fit into the expected model of the masculine, human chosen one, so that they can go to the dance and blend in.

Through the introduction of supernatural technologies that second layer of the Inhabited Vessel can become altered. This change may come from the possession itself, as faces change upon possession in media such as the *Evil Dead* or *Night of the Demons* franchises, or be a further supernatural influence, such as Damballa’s ability to affect mortality in the *Child’s Play* franchise. It is this malleability of the skin (or body) that highlights the monstrous difference of the possessed. In this chapter, I have established the potential of the posthuman body in the Possessed Slasher. Possession of human and inhuman forms allows the skin to become malleable allowing transformation and transition. These figures are capable of becoming reproductive regardless of genitals, allowing reproduction to become displaced and delinked with the gender and the body. The malleable body becomes capable of making and taking life. Skin may suture, but it also may fuse, shift and reform.

As highlighted in this chapter, through possession bodies can transform or change quickly, in a way that can be symbolic of transitioning trans individuals. As these Inhabited Vessels find their identities, gender performance and bodies changing, how might this impact their relationship with other characters? I briefly noted how family and chosen family relationships interact with the possessed in Chapter Three. Characters who have relationships with possessors are able to look through layers of skin, seeing the first layer reflected upon the second and third. Those in romantic relationships with the possessor or possessed may find themselves in a relationship that becomes queered, echoing experiences of those who have romantic partners who have or currently are experiencing transition. In the next chapter, I will consider how these transformations interact with the relationship between these characters and their romantic partners, noting how the heterosexual can become queered and disrupt kincoherence.

Chapter Five: Relationships and Sexuality

As gender and the body shift through possession, relationships with Inhabited Vessels can become queered as certain Inhabited Vessels become distanced from cis/het identities.

Through my discussion of agency, gender performance and bodies I briefly touch on how other characters interact with the Inhabited Vessel, I further this discussion through a discussion of romantic relationships, considering how changes of gender and the body affects feelings and external perceptions of queerness. The Inhabited Vessel must not only interact with internal and external perceptions of gender but they must experience the internal and external perceptions of their relationships and sexuality. This could be seen if a woman becomes possessed by a masculine possessor, then has a relationship or a sexual experience with a woman. Is this a queer or heterosexual interaction? Perhaps both? Furthermore, how does the Inhabited Vessel perceive this relationship in comparison to their partner?

Relationships and sexuality can highlight how layers of skin can be sutured or sit uncomfortably. The connection between these layers of skin can reflect relationships that change through a change of gender and the body.

I begin by outlining tropes of changing bodies and identities in non-horror media. Through the analysis of relationships themes within drag/trans narrative and body swap/transformation media, I establish trends of anxiety, internalised homophobia and attraction in narratives that portray a gender change or transition. Romantic interest characters become challenged by feelings of attraction and love for characters that do not seem to align with their sexuality, negotiating anxiety as they experience queer attraction. The drag/trans characters experience othering as their heterosexual desire appears queer to those around them, pushing them to live an experience of live burial. Whilst romantic relationships are less integral to the plot of the Possessed Slasher, characters who engage in relationships or sex also experience similar themes of disconnection and new queerness.

I suggest that these relationships can display interpersonal experiences of trans people, as characters interact with gender and bodily differences whilst maintaining and forming relationships. Sex in the Possessed Slasher can be seen to combine the hypersexual possessed of possession narratives with the sex=death trope of the Slasher. I consider how the interaction between sex, victimhood and the gendered Inhabited Vessel interacts with ideas of threat, folk devils and deception. Characters who are in established relationships find themselves confronted with a different body and different gender expression. This is explored through *Cult of Chucky* (2017) and *Chucky* (2021-2024). Characters can also form relationships whilst in dysphoric bodies, as analysed in *Freaky* (2020). Where layers of skin can become visible on others, such as the facial scarring on Pazuzu-Regan during possession, the possessor's first skin becomes visible on their second and third skin to those they have close relationships with. Here, it is not just the physical body that becomes malleable but metaphorically visually penetrable.

Queering Relationships: 'Are we queer?'

When vessels transform - whether this is in the metaphorical sense in drag/trans narratives or the physical in body swaps, body transformation and possession - characters have to confront their sexuality and relationships as they navigate borders of gender and sexuality. Characters battle experiences of queer live burial, homophobia (internal and external) and queer anxiety, hence the question: Are we queer? I begin by noting tropes within drag/trans and body swap/transformation narratives; in these narratives characters struggle with bodily changes that impact their connections with others. By examining the relationship dynamics in these genres, I will explore how shifts in identity influence areas such as romance, intimacy, sexual coercion in possession films. Additionally, I will discuss examples of romantic or sexual relationships that form whilst the possession is active and reestablished relationships that are

placed into a state of change through possession considering the case studies: *Freaky* (2020), *Cult of Chucky* (2017) and *Chucky* (2021-2024).

There are two predominant relationship tropes in drag/trans narratives. The first is the relationship between the love interest of the drag/trans character and the character in disguise. These characters enter a homosocial relationship with a deep emotional connection. The second is the mistaken relationship that forms between an outsider and the drag/trans character. This relationship often naturalises their disguise however they are not romantically interested in this character. These tropes likely have roots in the two predominant romance plots in *Twelfth Night*. The first reflecting ideas of Orsino's queer desire for Cesario (Viola in disguise) and her love for him in return. The second is Olivia's unknowingly queer desire for Cesario (Viola). However, the appearance of these relationships in the films I am about to discuss are filled with queer anxiety, homophobia and shifting relationships.

Some love interests begin to struggle with their sexuality as they form a deep connection within the homosocial relationship. In *Tootsie* (1982), Julie confides in Dorothy that since meeting them, she had never felt lonelier, suggesting "It's as though I want something that I just can't have"⁶⁷. She is struggling with her feelings for Dorothy, as she has unknowingly fallen in love with Michael. It is presented as a battle with her heterosexuality that is ultimately solidified when Dorothy is revealed to be Michael. It is suggested that she falls in love with Michael through the layers of skin, whilst believing him to be Dorothy. When Dorothy leans in to kiss Julie she panics, jumping away and stating: "I'm just not well adjusted enough, I mean, I'm sure I've got the same impulses, I mean obviously I had the same impulse"⁶⁸.

⁶⁷ *Tootsie*, (1982)

⁶⁸ *Tootsie*, (1982)

Despite being sexually confused she cannot bring herself to enter any kind of queer relationship with Dorothy, despite her feelings for her. This is resolved when she enters a relationship with Michael, stating that she misses Dorothy. The love interest often displays internalised homophobia as they reject anything they deem too queer between them. This can be seen in *She's The Man* (2006) as Duke quickly pushes Sebastian away when he deems their faces too close together. The issue is that the characters must seem perfect for one and other, connecting in a way they wouldn't have if they had presented as themselves, i.e. one would have used the other for sex or never been interested in them in the first place. Whilst the film cannot lean too fully into queerness as it nullifies the climactic reveal and resolution of heterosexuality, the romance features an unavoidable implication of queerness.

In *Just One of the Guys* (1985) Terry - disguised as a boy to find a good story for the school newspaper - becomes close friends with Rick. At prom the pair dance together, leaving their dates to dance to the side trying to get involved. Kevin, Terry's boyfriend appears, stating who he is and accusing her of loving someone else. Rick quickly says "thanks but no thanks"⁶⁹, before she pulls him somewhere private to explain. He reveals that he knows Terry is gay and is seemingly ok with it, but not with a romantic relationship between them. When she reveals she's a girl he is angry at the betrayal. She kisses him in front of everyone at prom, he quickly informs the crowd: "It's alright, he has tits"⁷⁰. In this he dispels any perception of queerness between them. At the end of the film Rick has seemingly ditched his previous love interest and seeks (the now feminine presenting) Terry out, suggesting they go dancing Friday night.

The reveal and resolution are key to the romantic subplot of the drag/trans film. Whilst some, like Julie, Rick and Duke are angry at the deception, they find that they are

⁶⁹ *Just One of the Guys*, (1985)

⁷⁰ *Just One of the Guys*, (1985)

ultimately happier that their interest in the other is now heterosexual. They are relieved not to be either struggling with their feelings, like Julie⁷¹ and Duke⁷², or that their conclusions, such as cheating, are incorrect, like Shaunice⁷³. In this the love interest concludes that it is their personality that they fell in love with and now that the disguised characters' gender aligns with the love interest's sexuality, all is resolved. However, I suggest that despite the resolution of heterosexuality, there is still an inherent queerness to this relationship.

As noted earlier, the formation of relationships is the second dominant trans theme found in drag/trans films. The drag/trans character meets the individual hiding their internal gender identity, disguised in a way that is dysphoric. They form a relationship, often on the surface a seemingly homosocial relationship that has deeper undercurrents of queerness and confusion over sexuality. The love interest forms a deep connection with the drag/trans character, believing them to be the gender that they reflect on third skin. Finally, when the drag/trans character is revealed, or comes out, as their internal (first skin) gender, the characters continue their relationship in a way that is euphoric for both of them.

The drag/trans character is able to show their first skin on their third skin, whilst still maintaining the deep emotional connection they formed. Similarly, the love interest is no longer confused by their attraction as the drag/trans character aligns with their sexuality. This could be a reflection of pre-transition and post-transition relationships. The love interest is confused as the drag/trans character presents as a different gender, but their true identity becomes visible on their skin through their deeper connection. Without realising, the love interest falls in love with the drag/trans character's true, euphoric, gender, their heart acting in alignment with their sexuality.

⁷¹ *Tootsie*, (1982)

⁷² *She's The Man*, (2006)

⁷³ *White Chicks*, (2004)

In the case of the mistaken relationship or interest, the treatment of the reveal is treated very differently based on the gender of the characters. In *Tootsie*, Les, who was romantically interested in Dorothy, tells Michael after the reveal that “the only reason you're still living is because I never kissed you”⁷⁴. He then interrogates Michael to determine if he's queer, asking if he likes girls. There is an implication that Les will react violently to Michael's potential queerness, fearing what a queer kiss might imply about him. Similarly, there is a fear of implied queerness in *Kinky Boots* (2005), *White Chicks* (2004) and *To Wong Foo* (1995).

In *Kinky Boots*, Lola flirts with Don in response to his sexual harassment, revealing that she is a man to humiliate him in front of the other workers. In *White Chicks*, when Agent Gomez discovers Agent Harper sniffing the Wilson twin's underwear, he states “Wow, you really are disgusting”⁷⁵. However, this is not in reference to the invasion of the Wilson's privacy but that they have just figured out that the underwear has been worn by men. Finally, in *To Wong Foo*, Sheriff Dollard realises Vida has a penis as he attempts to sexually assault her. From then on, the Sheriff hunts the three of them down, spurred on by hatred of them and hatred that he found Vida attractive.

In *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* (1994), after kissing Lt. Einhorn, Ace vomits, extensively brushes his teeth, burns his clothes and sobs in the shower after he realises that she used to be a man. This reaction caricatures Fergus' reaction to Dil's body in *The Crying Game* (1992). These reactions are rooted in an ingrained transphobia and homophobia. Miller (2023) notes the role of disgust and the transphobic gaze when these characters are revealed to be trans. They suggest that disgust is used to naturalise cisnormative identities, creating distance from the transgender threat. As McLawhorn (2022) notes these repulsive reactions,

⁷⁴ *Tootsie*, (1982)

⁷⁵ *White Chicks*, (2004)

highlighting that “*Sleepaway Camp* capitalizes on the unease felt by society regarding non-cisnormative identities” (:48). Not only as the non-cisnormative body treated as repulsive through the transphobic gaze but it is seen as a reflection on those who are attracted to these characters. An issue with these characters is, that much like some real individuals, they view trans women as men, therefore their internalised homophobia is triggered as they view their attraction or sexual contact with these women as homosexual.

Issues of hegemonic hypermasculinity and internalised homophobia also appear when women disguised as men display traits labelled feminine, such as being emotional, showing an awareness of women’s struggles and stereotypical feminine knowledge. This ever-present caution is alleviated somewhat by the drag/trans character’s romantic interaction with women. Status is acquired through pursuit of a pretty girl, allowing them into the hyper masculine inner-circle. In *She’s The Man*, Viola plans to join Duke’s group of friends as Sebastian, she gets her friends to each approach her as Sebastian, to make him seem like a ladies’ man. Her friends approach her individually, bemoaning that they’d had a great night with Sebastian, and he hadn’t called them yet. Whilst Viola’s initial attempt at masculinity did not appeal to Duke and his friends, Duke’s crush (Olivia) shows interest in Sebastian. She likes Sebastian’s interest in sales at the mall, emotional vulnerability and ‘delicate’ features.

Both loosely based on *Twelfth Night* (Shakespeare, 1602), *Just One of the Guys* and *She’s The Man* feature a character who is infatuated with the drag/trans character who is unburdened by the queer anxiety that the main love interest displays. This character plays the role of Olivia (*Twelfth Night*), who becomes infatuated with Cesario (Viola). Believing she is marrying Cesario, she marries Viola’s twin brother Sebastian. Upon the revelation that Cesario is Viola, Olivia is still pleased with her marriage to Sebastian, despite having been in love with Viola in disguise. In the inspired films, the character in the position of Olivia within the narrative, Olivia and Sandy, both immediately begin dating the brother of the drag/trans

character. In these instances, in which the mistaken relationship is a woman, they are shocked but not angry, soon dating the closest male counterpart to the drag/trans character. This further perpetuates the trope of the heterosexual solution to queer feelings. However, instead of battling queer feelings, then being reassured their interest is heterosexual, these characters come to realise that their seemingly heterosexual interest is queer. This revelation is quickly neutralised as they are presented a heterosexual option that is considered *similar enough*.

Anxiety around queerness also appears in body swap or transformation narratives, in which a character's sexed body suddenly supernaturally changes. Much like the trans narrative, in the body swap the swapped character either has to defend their sexuality or find a way to disguise their formerly heterosexual attraction, so they do not appear queer. Sandercock (2022) discusses the queer coding of characters in body-swap narratives. They note this in *The Hot Chick* (2002), as Jessica-Clive attempts to convince a male drinks vendor for a free drink, flirting as she had in her own body. The vendor attacks Jessica-Clive, responding to a seemingly queer flirtation with violence. The film was further labelled by *ChildCare Action Project* (CAP) as 'homosexually charged' (CAP, 2002), as an outwardly male character (Clive) exhibited femininity and flirted with men. There is often an avoidance of reflecting that could be construed as queer, as this can affect the reception of the film. This can be seen in the CAP response to a film that displayed a male body with a possessor with feminine gender performance.

In *It's a Boy Girl Thing* (2006), Woody-Nell informs Nell that he is going to make her lose her bodily (penis-in-vagina) virginity as revenge for her breaking up with his girlfriend in his body. He leaves with a guy to his trailer but finds his advances uncomfortable. He exclaims in voice over "Oh my god, what was I thinking, this is so gay!" adding "he's going

to make me his bitch”⁷⁶. Despite their body, or second skin, Woody-Nell still views himself as a man. In seeing himself as a man, he determines that their sex would be gay even though to an observer it would appear heterosexual.

Woody-Nell later admits to Nell-Woody that her bodily virginity is still intact and he “couldn’t go through with it”⁷⁷. He does not explain that this is more to do with the implication that it makes him queer than the un-consenting use of her body. He displays his homophobia, fearing that engaging sexually with another man will make him subordinate, or “his bitch”. Theorists, such as Bersani (1987), have noted this association between gay sex, particularly penetration, and loss of power or subordination. Woody-Nell is focussed on the implication that queered sex will have on his perception of self and how he might be viewed by others. This scene also emphasises issues of consent. Nell does not consent to the potential sex and the sexual partner doesn’t know that Woody inhabits Nell’s body.

In transformation stories, the transformed character’s identity is often tied to their homosocial relationship with their male friends. Much like Terry and Rick, and Viola/Sebastian and Duke, this desire is solved by these characters secretly being women, or having the potential to become or stay women. In *Willy/Milly* (1986), Milly becomes a boy after wishing on a star. Going to a new school, as Willy, they become friends with Alfie. Later, Alfie informs Willy that they can’t spend time together as he has come to the conclusion that due to some “unnatural” thoughts he’s been having (about the two of them) he is a “faggot”⁷⁸. Their relationship is repaired when Willy wishes to return to being a girl, becoming Milly again. The pair then date. Transformation is used to assure their romantic

⁷⁶ *It’s a Boy Girl Thing*, (2006)

⁷⁷ *It’s a Boy Girl Thing*, (2006)

⁷⁸ *Willy/Milly*, (1986)

interest that their new attraction is not queer but heterosexual. However, these narratives could be read as a reflection of romantic relationships forming whilst pre-transition.

In some transformation narratives, there is a focus on established relationships before transformation that blur the line between homosocial and homosexual. In *Sam* (2017), Sam has a very close relationship with long-time friend, Doc. Sam states that Doc is the only one he trusts medically with his 'junk', noting he's the only man with a gynaecologist. He also repeatedly shows jealousy towards Doc's fiancée, openly intensely hating her. Doc is shown to have issues performing in the bedroom with his fiancée, distracted by thoughts of Sam. Sam is cursed to become a woman by mystical spirit due to his hatred toward women. The pair start to display feelings for each other, eventually dating. Sam, when finally presented with the option to become a man again, chooses to stay a woman, a choice that is portrayed as choosing to be with Doc. Similarly, in *Switch* (1991) Steve, now Amanda, ends up marrying and having a child with Steve's best friend Walter. In the *Hot Chick* (2002), April confesses her love for Jessica-Clive, stating that it is meant to be now that her best friend has become a man.

Drag/trans and body swap/transformation narratives commonly feature relationships that are contingent on deception. Whilst drag characters rarely go further than a kiss in their relationships, body swap/transformation characters are able to perform sex. Prater and Kendal (2024) discuss the role of coercive rape and consent within body swap narratives. They note the issue of the possessor using the body of the possessed to have sexual interaction without their consent, as seen in *Wonder Woman: 1984* (2020), in which Diana's love interest Steve's consciousness is placed into the body of an unnamed man. They also note the coercion of the partner who believes they are engaging with the person who usually inhabits that body. They discuss this in the *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer* series (1997-2002, S4E15 'Who are you?' and S4E16 'This Years' Girl'), as Riley, Buffy's boyfriend, consents to sleep with Buffy, however,

unbeknownst to him Faith has used a talisman to swap bodies with Buffy. Prater and Kendal highlight the harm of these as examples as these characters are unable to truly consent.

In Chapter Three, I debated the image of the predatory trans folk devil and the contribution to moral panic in the *Inhabited Vessel*. Another notable folk devil is that of the deceptive trans folk devil. Sharpe (2025) discusses ideas of ‘deceptive sex’ and sexual fraud, noting the threat of prosecution of rape or sexual offences for trans people, particularly trans men, who do not disclose or lie about their gender history to a sexual partner. They note that since 2012 there have been at least ten prosecutions of LGBTQ people for gender deception, nine of which involve AFAB (Sharpe’s term) defendants and cis het women.

Miller discusses deception within transgender film, noting particularly the influence of the transphobic gaze and disgust in *The Crying Game* and *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*. They note a transphobic societal perception that transness and deception are inherently linked. They note that “anyone who exists outside of the binary is positioned as inherently deceptive, by nature of the fact that they do not announce their identities constantly” (2023:114). This deception leads to reveal, often through the image of the body, triggering disgust in cis het characters who found the trans character attractive. They further note that a key element of transphobia is influenced “not just [by] the fear of transgender people as different but the fact that a cisgender person may find a transgender person attractive” (2023:136-137). This can be seen in Les’ reaction in *Tootsie*, angered by his attraction to Dorothy and suggesting that had they even kissed he would have killed Michael.

It is important to consider these factors when discussing relationships and sexual activity with *Inhabited Vessels*, as themes of threat and deception appear alongside characters that display possessed gender differences. Unless characters that the *Inhabited Vessel* engages with romantically or sexually are informed that the vessel is possessed and who the possessor

really is, the presence of coercion cannot be removed. However, I would like to note that this coercion aligns more with the issue of not engaging with the specific character, rather than perpetuating the deceptive trans folk devil.

Within Slasher and possession narratives, *Inhabited Vessels* frequently display complex relationships regarding consent, identity, and sexuality. These relationships are shaped by their own shifting perception of self and by how others interpret their layers of skin. In some previous analysis, sexual and romantic attraction of possessed individuals has been approached with a more distinct view on the possessor and the possessed separately. For example, the sexual actions of the possessed become perverse expressions of the possessed desires or the sexual actions are viewed as the possessor's method of tormenting loved ones and spectators. These displays of hypersexuality are a common trope within possession narratives, particularly after the popularity of *The Exorcist*.

Creed (2024) discusses Regan's sexual aggression, highlighting the influence of puberty and forming 'the castrating woman'. They note that after Regan's possession, her relationship with her mother becomes "perverse and crudely sexual" (Creed, 2024:39). Pazuzu-Regan's possession is made more monstrous by her sexual assault of her mother. They push Chris' face into Regan's crotch, shouting "Lick me! Lick me!"⁷⁹. Whilst Creed suggests that this reflects Regan's desire to keep her mother to herself, refusing another father figure, and entering an almost lesbian relationship with her, Scahill (2010) suggests that the scene is used to create the maximum perversity, display several taboos such as religious desecration, lesbianism, and incest. Lesbianism is often used to enhance the monstrosity of the monstrous whilst also hypersexualising the characters.

⁷⁹ *The Exorcist*, (1973)

Creed argues that the devil within Regan may be female, discussing the figure of the witch. They note that the actress who performed the voice for Pazuzu, Mercedes McCambridge, should not be viewed as performing the voice of a “male devil as spoken by a young girl” but instead that of “a female devil”. (Creed, 2023:39) They also note that “her voice changes - as is customary for pubescent boys - becoming deep and guttural, giving her gender an ambiguous character” (:39). Whilst I agree that the character becomes ambiguous through possession, as is typical of the Inhabited Vessel, as noted previously I use pronouns to determine the gender of the separate possessed and possessor. Therefore, in my analysis Pazuzu is a demonic entity who is labelled as a man. I wish to highlight that features such as genitalia of the Pazuzu statue and voice tone do not determine this decision as I believe it is important to distinguish cisnormative presumptions of physical sexed signifiers signifying gender. I note this to highlight that queer desire may still be present even if this is not read as an instance of a ‘female devil’ and incestuous lesbian desire.

When Pazuzu-Regan shouts “fuck me, fuck me”⁸⁰ at the doctors sent to help her, is this the request of Regan’s pre-pubescent desires, the demon’s attempt to demoralize those trying to help Regan or the demon’s desire himself? When Pazuzu-Regan is hypnotised by the psychiatrist he asks the person inside Regan to come forward, at this moment Pazuzu appears. Regan’s second skin betrays Pazuzu’s presence beneath, as his face becomes visible on hers. In response to the psychiatrist’s questions Pazuzu-Regan reaches out and grasps the psychiatrist’s genitals with a growl. Although it is the hand of a young woman grasping, it is actually the demon who reaches for his genitals.

In exorcism narratives, the demonic force within the Inhabited Vessel often makes overt references to sex when someone is trying to help the possessed. Pazuzu-Regan shouts at

⁸⁰ *The Exorcist*, (1973)

Merrin to “Stick your cock up her ass! You mother fucking, worthless cocksucker!”⁸¹; similarly in *The Rite* (2011), Baal-Rosaria encourages Michael to rape her as he assists Father Lucas as he tried to determine the demon’s name. In *The Last Exorcism* (2010), Abalam-Nell offers Cotton Marcus oral sex as he attempts to exorcise her. As the demon’s first skin lives within the second skin of the possessed, when the possessor encourages the exorcist to engage sexually with their second skin, they are encouraging the exorcist to engage sexually with them. In the male presenting demon’s insistence that these men engage in sexual activity with the possessed, they are also asking them to engage sexually with the demon themselves. Therefore, the overt sexuality of the Inhabited Vessel is both queer and heterosexual at the same time.

The possessor's request for sex through the body of the possessed presents a challenge in viewing relationships and sex when considering the possessed and possessor together as a united Inhabited Vessel. This appears with the consent and potential coercion of those who do not know that the possessed is no longer themselves. The issue of consent is particularly pertinent in cases of temporal fission. In figures of fusion, the possessed and possessor combine to become something new and monstrous, however, the figure of temporal fission always has the potential to return to the separate and distinct figures of the possessed and the possessor. Depending on the supernatural lore, the souls of the possessed may essentially sleep as the possessor is in control, in others they may experience their actions without control over their body. This highlights that no matter the relationships of the possessor to one they engage in sexual activity with, there is always a lack of consent from the possessed vessel. In figures of fusion layers of skin are sutured or fused creating a figure that forms an

⁸¹ *The Exorcist*, (1973)

intrinsic ownership of their body. So long as there is disconnection between the first and second skin of an Inhabited Vessel, consent is an issue.

Within the Possessed Slasher the Inhabited Vessel is often an antagonist, meaning that their sexual interaction may be unavoidably tied to violence, deception and infection. This alters the interaction with coercion as the possessed figure is placed in an inherently predatory role. As noted previously, the possessed killer in the Possessed Slasher often uses the illusion of safety to stalk victims, hiding in plain sight instead of the shadows like the Classical Slasher killer. These possessed killers often lure victims away to get them alone to spread possession or kill, sometimes using sex as an enticement.

This can be seen in *Night of the Demons* (1988), as Jay, having been rejected by Judy, comes across Suzanne. Upon seeing him she opens her top to reveal her breasts. The pair begin to have sex but half-way through Suzanne becomes angered and presses her fingers into his eyes, killing him and making his body an available vessel for a demon. Similarly, in *Night of the Demons 3* (1997), the possessed Abbie seduces crush Vince. This sex also ends in an attack; however, Vince's girlfriend Lois is the target when she catches them. Both Jay and Vince believe that they are having sex with an acquaintance, but they are actually copulating with a demon. Characters like Suzanne and Abbie use deception to hide their predatory nature, lulling others into a false sense of security.

Both issues of consent and coercion are negotiated in *Ghostbusters* (1984) and *Ghostbusters: Afterlife* (2021). Zuul (The Gatekeeper) and Vinz Clortho (The Keymaster), referred to as The Terror Dogs and minions of the demigod Gozer, possess human bodies and perform a ritual to open a gateway for Gozer to enter the earthly plane. In this ritual they must have sex, in the human bodies, before returning to their Terror Dog form. Whilst they are not explicitly shown engaging in intercourse, it is heavily implied in *Ghostbusters* as

Zuul-Dana leads Peter to the bedroom thinking he is The Keymaster. In a later scene the possessed pair are on a bed-like platform looking dishevelled. In *Ghostbusters: Afterlife* sexual action is confirmed in dialogue as Phoebe and Podcast note that Zuul and Vinz Clortho need to unite ‘formally’, concluding that this means ‘at least third base’⁸².

In both instances, the possessed are not in control of their bodies and upon ‘waking up’ are confused by their surroundings. In *Ghostbusters*, neither Dana nor Louis have any recollection of their time as The Terror Dogs however, in *Ghostbuster: Afterlife* Callie and Gary remember their actions during possession. Bashfully the pair address their possessed sex, Gary states “I mean, before we became dogs and opened the gates of hell, I think that maybe we... uh...”. To which Callie responds “Yeah. Yeah, I think so too. But then we saved the world, so...”⁸³.

The use of ‘we’ in this discussion is notable as they were not in control of their bodies and did not make a choice to engage sexually. As Zuul-Callie states when approached by her kids: “There is no Mom, there is only Zuul”⁸⁴ repeating Dana’s statement in *Ghostbusters*: “There is no Dana, only Zuul!”⁸⁵. If Zuul-Callie’s statement is correct then neither Callie nor Gary would know what had happened, their souls no longer present within their vessel. If their souls were present and aware during the act, would it be accurate to suggest that it was ‘something *we* did’ rather than ‘something *they* did’ through our bodies? This question highlights the role of agency within the Inhabited Vessel, particularly those that are not figures of fusion. Callie and Gary seem to accept the actions as their own, perhaps due to their desire for each other.

⁸² *Ghostbusters: Afterlife*, (2021)

⁸³ *Ghostbusters: Afterlife*, (2021)

⁸⁴ *Ghostbusters: Afterlife*, (2021)

⁸⁵ *Ghostbusters*, (1984)

The pair become possessed shortly after going on their first date. As Podcast states to Phoebe: “I think [Gary] Grooberson’s trying to bone your mom”⁸⁶. The pair are seen in an established relationship in *Ghostbusters: The Frozen Empire*, to the point in which Callie’s daughter calls Gary ‘dad’. In viewing the possessor and possessed as one during possession, this could be viewed as a fusion of similar feelings of the possessor and the possessed. Gary and Callie are attracted to each other in a very human way whilst Zuul and Vinz Clortho are attracted to each other in an animalistic demonic way. Perhaps it is this shared desire for their partner, whether it is someone they are dating or their bonded Terror Dog, that sutures their first skins in a way that allows them presence and memory of their intimacy. Although, this is not to imply that their relationship automatically implies consent in sexual activity.

Case studies like Callie and Gary highlight the malleability of agency and the unavoidable association with issues of consent found in the Inhabited Vessel. Considering this, I will consider two relationships in which partners are aware of their romantic partner’s possession and changed body: Chucky-Nica and Tiffany-Jennifer in *Chucky* (2021-2024) and Millie-The Butcher and Booker in *Freaky* (2020). Both display gender changes in the Inhabited Vessel that must interact with the character’s relationships. In these relationships, communication is used to assuage any themes of disgust or deception, allowing informed characters to enter or continue relationships with the Inhabited Vessel. These characters negotiate their feelings surrounding gender, their body, and violence. I further suggest that these relationships can be read as symbolic of relationships that become queer through transition and relationships that begin pre-transition or in the early stages of social transition.

⁸⁶ *Ghostbusters: Afterlife*, (2021)

Skin That Queers: *Cult of Chucky* (2017), *Chucky* (2021-2024) and *Freaky* (2020)

When the gender of the possessor and the possessed differ, a romantic or sexual relationship begins to exist at an intersection between heterosexual and queer. Inhabited Vessels and their partners display negotiations of queerness, as the gender and sexuality of both the possessor and the possessed become intermingled. In my research, these narratives are investigated in terms of how the possession of a body can disrupt personal identity, desire, and agency, frequently resulting in tensions between an Inhabited Vessel's internal understanding and external assumptions regarding sexuality. First, I will discuss the relationship between Tiffany and Chucky within the Child's Play franchise, with a particular focus on Chucky's possession of Nica as a vessel. Then I will discuss the relationship between Booker and Millie and how it forms whilst Millie is situated in a dysphoric body.

The relationship between Tiffany and Charles Lee Ray is first referred to in *Bride of Chucky*, however it is noted that they were in a relationship before the events of *Child's Play*. In *Bride of Chucky* Tiffany brings Chucky back from his dismemberment at the end of *Child's Play 3*. Chucky kills Tiffany and moves her spirit into a Wedding Belle doll, produced by the same creator as the Good Guy Dolls. The pair later get married, and Tiffany becomes pregnant. In *Seed of Chucky* the pair are brought back to their doll form by their child, and kidnap Jennifer Tilly to allow Tiffany to return to a human body. Chucky decides to stay in doll form and is defeated as Tiffany and their child possess human bodies. The pursuit of a human body is a consistent trend within the *Child's Play* franchise, however until *Curse of Chucky*, these potential vessels always aligned with the Chucky's gender.



Fig.5.1 - *Cult of Chucky* (2017) - Chucky-Nica kisses Tiffany as they are reunited.

In *Cult of Chucky*, Chucky-Nica escapes Harrogate Mental Facility, walking out of the front door to meet Tiffany-Jennifer. She waits by the car, greeting them with a kiss (Fig.5.1). Chucky-Nica states “so, this is different” to which Tiffany-Jennifer responds, “I don’t know, works for me”⁸⁷. In this scene the pair are reunited in human form for the first time, both seeming to have achieved the desired human normative body. Here they have become human but do not fully adhere to Halberstam’s suggestion of humanity and heterosexuality. They state that in *Bride of Chucky*, “becoming human in this film is explicitly linked to becoming heterosexual, becoming coupled, becoming adult and becoming reproductive” (Halberstam, 2017:41). In terms of the relationship between Tiffany and Chucky, their non-human forms represent something non-normative. As much as the doll couple may become heterosexual, coupled, adult and reproductive, they still fail to align with the normative, unable to fit in

⁸⁷ *Cult of Chucky*, (2017)

with society. Through this inability they idealise the idea of becoming human again to fit into both their own and society's image of a normative couple or family.

In this scene, the pair are reunited in human form for the first time since before Charles' death in *Child's Play* (1988). Much like their interaction when one, or both, are in doll form, they differ bodily from their original human forms. Their emotional relationship is untethered to the body that the other inhabits. Chucky's attraction to Tiffany does not change whether her skin is rubber or human, similarly Tiffany's attraction does not change. The close up (Fig.5.1) shows Tiffany's hand around the back of Chucky-Nica's neck, showing that she is an active party in their kiss. She pulls Chucky-Nica towards her, making it clear that she is still attracted to and feels emotionally connected to Chucky in this body.

In Waldron's (2022) discussion of this scene, they suggest that Chucky's possession of a woman does not signify a transgender experience, stating that is highlights Mancini's goal for "a new life for Chucky with a partner who does not care whether he was in a male-or-female-presenting body" (Waldron, 2022:159). However, I argue that portraying characters who continue relationships with an Inhabited Vessel during a bodily change, whether to gender, the sexed body or transbiological, can signify trans experience in relationships. As noted, earlier drag/trans narratives and body swaps portray the struggle of those who fall in love whilst identifying differently to the gender they perform and those who experience queer desire. Horror, in its supernatural potential, allows the portrayal of narratives in which relationships that maintain despite, or because of, bodily and gendered changes. Chucky and Tiffany experience bodily changes from human to doll to human. Each time looking different, with different bodies that work differently. I suggest that this can signify trans experiences as bodies and gender changes within established relationships.

Halberstam (2017), in their discussion of *Bride of Chucky*, explores Tiffany and Chucky as a demonic butch-femme couple. They note J. Butler's discussion of Freud and Lacan's reading of the phallus. Halberstam rejects the notion that the phallus refers to a specific body part but also will not accept the presence of the phallus on a non-male body. Halberstam highlights J. Butler's lesbian phallus as a site of disruption, in which the lesbian phallus challenges masculinity and sexual agency. The lesbian phallus can be represented through a physical object or through symbolic power in a relationship. Halberstam suggests that Chucky represents a lesbian phallus as his phallic capacity is constantly delinked from his penis and his masculinity is located within his arm, the body part required to complete his reassembly.

Chucky represents an alternative masculinity for Tiffany, as she chooses him over other examples of masculinity, such as Damien. Halberstam suggests that this is challenged only when Chucky begins to act misogynistically and misunderstands his relational phallic power as natural. The potential of the human bodies of Jesse and Jade influence Chucky and Tiffany to forget their plasticity and begin to display male narcissism and female castration. I suggest that their plasticity places their bodies in the realm of the posthuman, as the power of Damballa allows them to become something both human and nonhuman. These posthuman bodies position them and their relationship outside the realm of the normative, and as Halberstam notes it is the temptation of humanity that leads them to forget their plasticity and their freedom from societal expectations of toxic masculinity and femininity.

Tiffany and Chucky's relationship has been detached from the normative cishet relationship since Charles' death. Their relationship suffers when elements of cishet norms begin to appear within their relationship. As Halberstam notes, in *Bride of Chucky* their relationship displays difference in both the body and gendered power dynamics. I suggest that Nica's body is yet another non-normative body, like the Good Guy doll, through which

Chucky and Tiffany interact with and come to accept difference. Their emotional bond throughout their habitation of different vessels could be seen as related to the experiences of couples in established relationships in which one partner comes out as trans during their relationship. The labelling of their relationship keeps shifting throughout the franchise, where they once were a cishet human couple, they became a transbiological posthuman plastic couple, now they are in a queered human relationship.

Porter (2022), in their research into cisgendered heterosexual partners of trans individuals, notes the way in which a partner's trans identity affects both their relationship and their own sense of self. They note that "...spouses in heterosexual marriages have believed their spouse to be cisgender and heterosexual for as many years as they had known each other... [and] a partner's gender identity change would result in a lot of questions about their partner, their relationship, and themselves" (Porter, 2022:44-45). As Chucky experiences changes through the *Child's Play* franchise, in terms of body, gender, sexuality and relationships, Tiffany also experiences change. Not only must she negotiate her relationship with Chucky as he changes vessels in a search for his euphoric vessel, she also must find her own euphoric vessel. She must come to accept difference, avoiding the normative ideal of family in her head, accepting a non-normative doll form.

Porter further notes that partners "are often forced by societal norms to consider and label their own sexual orientation, especially if they decide to remain in the relationship" (Porter, 2022:45). For example, if a cishet woman's spouse comes out as a transgender woman and they continue their relationship, then she is now confronted with negotiating how she and others label her sexuality, considering whether she could be considered, for example, bisexual, demisexual, or still heterosexual. When Glen and Glenda discover Nica-Nica in Tiffany-Jennifer's home and she explains their relationship, the pair focus on two different

labels. Glen gasps: “Mom’s a murderer?” Glenda, however, asks: “Mom’s a lesbian?”⁸⁸

Whilst the pair do not know that Chucky’s spirit is inside Nica, they quickly assign labels to their perception of Tiffany-Jennifer’s relationship with Nica-Nica/Chucky-Nica. In general, Chucky and Tiffany avoid labelling their relationship, it does not change when they inhabit different vessels. Their queer sex as Chucky inhabits a woman’s body is just as queer as the sex they have in doll form. Furthermore, in this body Chucky begins to experiment with his sexuality, engaging sexually with men with Tiffany.

Through season one of the *Chucky* series, the pair continue to date. Over time Tiffany begins to believe she has fallen in love with Nica over Chucky, noting to Glen and Glenda that “Nica is my girlfriend and sometimes your father”⁸⁹. The vessel of Nica’s body contains two identities: Chucky-Nica and Nica-Nica. These two identities are assigned different roles within the family. They are considered a father and an external romantic partner to a relationship. Much like trans parents in established relationships, their role or labelling changes from father to mother, mother to father or mother/father to non-binary parent. The dual role of father and girlfriend also highlights the experience of the partner as their spouse begins to transition. They are in a relationship both with the person they have an established relationship with whilst also newly dating the elements of that spouse that are newly formed as they realise their euphoric identity. In this they experience a combination of an established relationship and a new relationship that is shifting and evolving.

⁸⁸ *Chucky*, S2E4, ‘Death on Denial’, (2022)

⁸⁹ *Chucky*, S2E5, ‘Doll On Doll’, (2022)



Fig.5.2 – *Chucky*, S1E5 ‘*Little Little Lies*’ (2021) - Chucky-Nica and Tiffany-Jennifer ‘put on a show’ for a victim.

Chucky-Nica and Tiffany-Jennifer are seen engaging in sex, which for the couple is intrinsically linked to murder. The pair roll around on the bed together kissing in lingerie whilst one of their victims watches from where he is tied to a chair. Tiffany-Jennifer complains that their victim is not enjoying their show, deciding she’s hungry. Chucky-Nica agrees, stating “he does look kinda yummy” before blowing a kiss at him. Tiffany-Jennifer responds: “I’m thrilled you’ve expanded your pallet, Chucky”⁹⁰. However, the pair quickly devolve into an argument as the Chucky criticises Tiffany’s eating habits. Tiffany confirms that Chucky-Nica had sex with men in S1E8, *An Affair to Dismember*, noting that Nica’s body got him a lot of ‘dick’ as well as ‘tail’.

This angled shot positions Chucky-Nica and Tiffany-Jennifer higher than their victims. In their position of power, they look down at the object of their sexual and murderous desire (Fig.5.2). Just as Tiffany experiments with her desire for sex with a woman, Chucky experiments with men. In a human form for the first time since 1986, Chucky takes

⁹⁰ *Chucky* S1E5 ‘*Little Little Lies*’ (2021)

the opportunity to explore sex with men but does so in a way that can be read by others as heterosexual. This could be read as unrelated to the body he inhabits, or this could be read as a body containing memory of sexuality. Nica is seen in *Cult of Chucky* having sex with Malcolm, displaying her attraction to men. However, when possessed by Chucky, Nica's spinal injury no longer affects her, meaning they are able to walk. If Chucky is not affected by the physical body, it is more likely that he is taking the opportunity to experiment through his own volition.

Issues of coercion do not appear between Tiffany and Chucky as they both know that they are not inhabiting their original bodies, knowing that they are not engaging with Tilly or Nica, however consent issues appear with the vessels. Nica and Tilly cannot consent to their bodies being used to engage in sex. Chucky-Nica is a temporal fission figure as her first skin is situated behind Chucky's as he controls her body. At the sight of blood, Nica can be triggered to the forefront, unaware of the actions of her body in Chucky's control. It is revealed in season two that Tiffany placed Tilly's soul within Tiffany's original doll body, so her soul is entirely detached from her human body. Despite the lack of Tilly's soul, Tiffany-Jennifer fails to become a sutured figure of fusion as she continues to reject her doll body. Human forms cannot be delinked from the issues of consent highlighted by Prater and Kendal, as their relationship through human vessels requires coercive rape. However, this is not an issue in their posthuman doll forms, as they merge with the rubber, creating their own body to give consent with. The couple cannot settle into a non-toxic relationship until they accept their monstrous forms, no longer attempting to be someone else. Whilst their relationship becomes queered in their human forms (Nica and Jennifer Tilly), ultimately, they need to explore their identities further to find their ultimate euphoric bodies.

The relationships between Chucky-Nica and Tiffany-Jennifer is symbolic of a trans individual(s) within an established relationship, however I suggest that the relationship

between Millie-The Butcher and Booker in *Freaky* can be symbolic of new relationships that form whilst an individual is experiencing transness, particularly if that person is in a dysphoric body. Millie's journey can be read as symbolic of experiences some trans people face. Much of Millie's journey is tied to self-acceptance and self-assurance in the face of adversity. In the beginning, Millie is reserved, keeping secrets from her family and hiding her true feelings from her mother, particularly about the homecoming dance and her desire to go to college. After being confronted by the realisation that she is in the wrong body, she seeks out her friends to reveal herself to them. Her friends are initially surprised and full of questions but quickly accept her as the same person they had been friends with already, only her body is dysphoric.

This scene functions as both a reveal of the magical influence of the La Dola and a coming out scene. They initially struggle to recognise their friend, becoming fearful of what Millie's situation represents. It is only after a discussion that they can see through the dysphoric difference of Millie's body to realise that she is still emotionally and mentally the same person. Millie-The Butcher battles The Butcher-Millie, fighting for the body that she aligns with, confident that it is the body she belongs in. In stabbing The Butcher-Millie with the La Dola dagger Millie surgically opens her euphoric body, allowing her access to the body that aligns with her gender. Once she has her desired body, Millie is changed, she does not keep her feelings or desires secret, taking charge of her life and finding a way to align her inner strength with her body.

In Miller's transphobic gaze, the trans character must always be revealed, often through an exploitative image exposing the character's body. They cannot be allowed to keep their transness private from the gaze of the viewer. In *Freaky* we see a reveal of transness as Millie-The Butcher must convince her friends of who she is despite her male body. They initially run, frightened of who they perceive to be The Blissfield Butcher. Once Josh and

Nyla are subdued, she performs a dance she does as the school mascot. After asking her questions, about her favourite movie, favourite candy, and her crush, these questions confirm to them that she is the same person they have been friends with just in a body that does not align with her identity. This is the opposite of the live burial seen in some of the previous examples of *Inhabited Vessels*. This is the live exhumation. Josh, Nyla, Booker and Millie-The Butcher all openly discuss this difference. The impermanence of her body is an obstacle that is shared. Her friends Google information of achieving transition, defending and protecting her against those persecuting her and house her as she cannot go home.

Millie later reveals herself to the boy that she has a crush on (Booker), insisting that she understands that it is a lot to take in at once. Coming out in stages, first to her closest inner circle, sure that she can trust them, then to her romantic interest. Once Booker is onboard, he refers to The Butcher-Mille as ‘she’, to which Nyla quickly reprimands him for his use of incorrect pronouns. This discussion of pronouns solidifies the way that the group view Millie-The Butcher and The Butcher-Millie as their first skin, seeing through their other layers. Pulice-Farrow et al. (2019), in studying the role of microaffirmations within romantic relationships including transgender individuals, found that some participants “saw language microaffirmations taking place in the beginning stages of a relationship, or during disclosure of a transgender status” (:16). In this scene we see Booker taking on affirming language as their relationship begins to blossom. Booker knows that Millie has a crush on him and plans to reveal his feelings for her, therefore his use of affirming language is tied to his investment in Millie and their potential relationship.

This reflects an experience that some trans teens can experience. They come out, or exhumate their first skin, to their friends. In this, their friends support their trans friend in their social transition, assuring the correct pronouns are used and emotionally supporting them as they begin to align their body with their gender identity. These friends inform new people to

their group of the correct pronouns, as seen with Nyla's admonishment of Booker. This support can help hide their transness from their family, becoming trusted confidants. In *Freaky*, Nyla and Josh help hide Millie-The Butcher from her mother and sister. She must literally be hidden from her family to hide her presence in a dysphoric body. These friends support the individual's trans identity, affirming them through microaffirmations.

Affirmations and microaffirmations can also come from romantic partners, as seen in the development of Booker and Millie's relationship.

In an angled mid shot, Booker and Millie-The Butcher sit alone in Josh's car (Fig.5.3 and 5.4), as Nyla attempts to retrieve the La Dola dagger that can return Millie and The Butcher to their bodies. Booker asks to come sit in the back with Millie-The Butcher, insisting that he was 'so far away' in the front seat of the small vehicle. Booker confesses that he liked the poem she had written him and that he had hoped it was from her as he has also had a crush on her for quite a long time. When Booker describes Millie's poem as beautiful the initially static shot begins to push in, closing in to become more intimate as it is revealed that Booker returns her affection. The angle of the camera levels the pair, despite The Butcher being much taller and larger than Booker (Fig.5.4.). In this levelling Millie-The Butcher is positioned in relation to Booker in a way that aligns more with her euphoric body. The camera creates a distortion of reality to allow her first skin to show. This also positions us as the audience to see through to Millie's first skin, deemphasising the characteristics of The Butcher.



Fig.5.3 - *Freaky* (2020) - Brooker and Millie-The Butcher are left in the car whilst Nyla tries to retrieve the dagger to return Millie to her body.



Fig.5.4. - *Freaky* (2020) - Millie-The Butcher and Booker as they find the murdered jocks.

Booker continues his confession:

“Booker: Millie, I’ve liked you since day one.

Millie-The Butcher: You don’t have to say that.

Booker: I know I don’t, that’s why I did. [pause] How weird is it that I kind of feel like kissing you right now? [Leans in]

Millie-The Butcher: Technically, you’d be kissing a mass murderer with yellow teeth.

Booker: You're still Millie to me.

[They kiss.]

Millie-The Butcher: Maybe we should wait for when my hands not bigger than your whole face.

Booker: Yeah, no, no it's ok. It's whenever you want. I'm not going anywhere."

(*Freaky*, 2020)



Fig.5.5 - *Freaky* (2020) - Booker and Millie-The Butcher kiss.

As noted earlier, in the drag/trans narrative, a relationship often forms whilst the disguised character appears as another gender. These characters most often meet for the first time in disguise, they form a deep emotional bond as their relationship toes the line between homosocial and queer. The love interest character often begins to question their sexuality or show discomfort with their sexual confusion as they find themselves deeply bonded with someone they believe to be of the same gender. When the drag/trans character is revealed, the love interest feels betrayed before ultimately reuniting with the drag/trans character to form a heterosexual relationship. In body swap/transformation narratives, characters who form romantic relationships often choose the body that aligns with a heterosexual relationship with

the other character. These relationships often stem from a previous homosocial relationship. These romantic relationships cannot be fully formed until heteronormativity is enforced.

In *Freaky*, the body swap reveal is not met with betrayal in the same way as the drag/trans narrative, due to the lack of autonomy in the magic of the La Dola. However, the reveal is still met with shock and particularly fear as The Blissfield Butcher is an infamous threat. Booker and Millie's relationship does adhere in some ways to the drag/trans and love interest structure. They still form a relationship after the reveal of Millie's identity, however, their relationship forms before Millie returns to her euphoric body. The drag/trans narrative often relies on a physical reveal of some kind, like breasts in *Just One of the Guys* and *She's The Man* or removing wigs and masks like *Mrs Doubtfire* and *White Chicks*. With an Inhabited Vessel the reveal of the second skin cannot fully reveal their identity. Instead, the reveal is on the display of the first skin. They must reveal knowledge or a contrasting personality to finally prove that they are not aligned with the body they are in. Booker immediately notices differences in Millie's behaviour, as The Butcher controls her body, attempting to check if she is okay. It is her recitation of her poem that solidifies her presence in The Butcher's body, eradicating his fear.

In *The Hot Chick*, Jessica-Clive expresses disgust and abjection towards Clive's body. Some of this abjection focuses on Clive's body hair. Physical attributes like body hair are aligned with gendered beauty standards. The traits that Millie-The Butcher highlights are traits that don't adhere to cisnormative beauty standards and gender norms for women. The physical traits that Millie highlights about The Butcher with discontent, such as voice, broadness of shoulder, height, and hand size, are common traits that some trans women find to be dysphoric due to the common association with masculinity. Here, she feels dysphoria, rejecting the body that she is in for its manifestation of something that she cannot align with. Whilst she admits that elements of her new body do make her feel powerful, Booker quickly

reminds her that her strength comes from her mind and her heart, both of which are representative of her first skin. Despite her body image, he views her as a woman, as Millie.

The issues that Millie-The Butcher highlights focus on the physical elements of The Butcher's body that differ from her own. Each physical element highlights where her first skin fails to become visible. She sees these as visual signifiers of The Butcher's first skin appearing on the skin that she inhabits. It is not just the abjection of his body as a man but abjection of his body's facilitation of violence. It is the size of The Butcher that helps create this intimidating figure, he looms over his victims at six foot five. His large hands are used to subdue, attack and harm. His teeth are yellowed as he lives on the fringes of society, sleeping on a mattress in an abandoned warehouse decorated with mutilated clothing dummies and shards of glass. This abjection is furthered as these physical attributes interact with Booker, highlighting her capacity to dominate in this body.

The pair do not discuss Millie-The Butcher's genitalia or that the body she inhabits would be viewed by others as male, in a way that suggests it is not an issue for them. Millie-The Butcher suggests that her current second skin is simply a technicality. A technicality that can be rectified by the slicing of skin with the La Dola. Here supernatural magic quickly performs what medical science works slowly to perform. The supernatural surgical swap of Millie and The Butcher allows her to inhabit her desired body. Booker's assurance that no matter Millie's external body she is still Millie to him suggests that he does not view this kiss as a kiss between two men but a heterosexual one. Booker sees through her second skin to her first. This reverses the tangibility and visibility of the first and second skin. Booker affirms Millie's identity, assuring her that he sees her as the woman she is.

Affirmations and microaffirmations support people who are experiencing dysphoria, providing reminders of their identity from others. Pulice-Farrow et al. (2019) studied the role

of microaffirmations within romantic relationships involving trans people, finding that 97.3% of participants noted that their partner has affirmed them and their gender in some way. They discovered seven themes of gender-based microaffirmations, most notable to this discussion are partners affirming gender(less) presentation, helping their trans partner process their identity and using affirming language.

Booker affirms Millie-The Butcher's gender presentation, noting that she is "still Millie to me"⁹¹. As romantic partners help the trans individual process their identity, they help their partner negotiate their identity, discussing issues and dysphoria and providing verbal reassurance. Booker helps Millie process her identity through helping her find the La Dola dagger and helping avoid the police. In this, he helps her navigate surgical solutions to her body whilst helping navigate the law and avoid subjugation. He also helps her emotionally process her feelings towards herself as they discuss her strength. Finally, Booker uses affirming language to refer to Millie-The Butcher, using she/her pronouns and her name. I suggest that affirming body language should also be considered within this discussion.



Fig.5.6 - *Freaky* (2020) - Booker and Millie-The Butcher in the back seat.

⁹¹ *Freaky* (2020)

Booker's body language is much the same as he would use if he was kissing Millie in her own body, wrapping an arm around Millie-The Butcher, gently tapping her nose and placing a closed hand on their chest. Booker's hand is closed when placed on Millie-The Butcher's chest, instead of open, over the area that would have contained her breasts (Fig.5.6). This shows that Millie's first skin is visible to Booker, as he sees a woman with breasts as aligning with her euphoric body. Phantom breasts are present for both of them. Some trans people who date before social or medical transition, whether it is a new partner or a pre-established relationship, have to confront the discontinuity between their outward gender expression and/or body and their internal gender with their partner. Moran (2012) notes the difficulties of a dysphoric body within relationships, noting that the dysphoric body affects intimacy within relationships, particularly when there is similarity between the cis partner's body and the trans partner's dysphoric body. It was noted that in cases of physical intimacy some participants found their cis partner's treatment of their body as though it is their euphoric body, in terms of language and touch, helped with this discomfort.

For Millie, her skin becomes sutured as her layers of skin realign, in her euphoric body the skin torn by the La Dola is sutured. Riggle et al. (2011) state that one in six participants highlighted the importance of positive interpersonal relationships when family and friends accept their sex or gender expression. In terms of Booker and Millie, their relationship develops as more honesty is shared between them. Saving Booker and informing him of the body swap strengthened their relationship and ultimately led to their romantic relationship. Similarly, "respondents indicated that their relationships strengthened as they informed their spouses...about their transgender identity" (Riggle et al., 2011:151). This honesty to those around her also impacts themes of coercion, as Booker is fully aware of who he is kissing. Mille-The Butcher reminds him that 'technically' he is about to kiss the Blissfield Butcher, even if Booker disagrees with that assessment. Much of Millie's journey

focuses on her ability to be honest about what she wants and who she is in the face of others. This pertains to several areas such as her college plans, her feelings for Booker and her gender expression. In her journey to achieve her body, she must grow emotionally, display strength and bravery whilst utilising the supportive allies she has available.

Possession narratives within horror facilitate an analysis of queer and trans identities through fluidity of the body, the spirit and the skin. Tropes within body swap and drag/trans narratives highlight how a dysphoric second skin can lead to issues with regard to the character's sense of self and sense of sexual identity. This reshapes the way they approach intimacy within new or established relationships. In horror, issues of consent, agency and identity complicate relationships, leading *Inhabited Vessels* and their romantic interests to question romance, sexual relationships, and sexual coercion. I have highlighted differences in how relationships and sexuality can interact with queerness as bodies and identities shift, demonstrating how layers of skin can be sutured or sit uncomfortably with one and other.

Having deconstructed some of the layers of the *Inhabited Vessel* and further exemplified patterns within the *Possessed Slasher*, I will now culminate my established framework in a discussion of the *Child's Play* Franchise. As previously established, posthuman offspring can look to their parents to help them determine gender, supernatural technologies can be utilised to assist in helping to push the child towards the normative. Layers of skin may be misaligned through possession, leading possessors to be confronted with a decision of their body. It is through agency that characters can come to choose and through gender performance that they might display their desired gender. Through the malleable body they may select genitalia and perhaps confront the transbiological. Through relationships they are influenced by the efforts of loved ones, but ultimately their relationships are most successful when their transition is embraced and supported. Each of

these elements, as I have established, is relevant to the Inhabited Vessel in the Possessed Slasher, but also each echoes elements of trans experiences.

Chapter Six: The *Child's Play* Franchise and Embracing Difference

This chapter considers how the Ray family interacts with difference, learning to understand and accept it in others, before turning that reflection inwards and considering their own difference. Chucky, Tiffany and GiGi each choose to return to doll form, finding euphoria in their difference and ultimately uniting more as a monstrous family as they embrace difference. As *Seed of Chucky* (2004) producer Sienga notes "Chucky has gone from just being technically a horror monster, which he was in the first movies, to being a character whose life we've become involved with...he goes from being a single man, to a married man, to a family man. With...always that perverted twist on tradition" (Fangoria, 2004:26). The *Child's Play* franchise repeatedly returns to the family. Final families must battle killer dolls whilst already facing adversity as they sit outside the kincoherent nuclear family. However, I suggest that struggle is not only experienced by protagonist families, in fact the franchise shifts focus onto the Ray family. Instead of battling knife-wielding killer dolls, the Ray family battle toxic gender norms, dysphoria and the pressure to conform to their image of the perfect family.

In *Child's Play* (1988), Karen is a working single mother in the city, trying to juggle working to provide for her son whilst being present. She is unable to save up for the Good Guy doll for Andy which leads her to unknowingly buy the haunted doll from a street peddler who stole it from the scene of Charles Lee Ray's death. Andy and Karen battle Chucky with the help of Detective Norris. In *Child's Play 2* (1990), Andy is entered into the foster care system and meets his foster sister Kyle at the Simpson household. Here the Simpsons refuse to believe and fail to protect the pair, sending Andy away. It is Kyle that protects Andy and helps him defeat Chucky, becoming an adopted final family. In *Child's Play 3* (1991), after years in foster homes Andy is sent to Kent Military School, he forms a military final family with Tyler and De Silva, other students at the school.

In *Bride of Chucky* (1998), the fourth film in the *Child's Play* franchise, the format begins to change as much more focus is placed on Chucky, his previous life as Charles Lee Ray, and his relationship with Tiffany. No longer facing Andy and his final family, Chucky is brought back to life (in doll form) by Tiffany, who he kills before placing her soul in a doll as well. The pair kidnap a couple - Jesse and Jade - with the plan to transfer their souls into their bodies. The pair defeat Tiffany and Chucky and escape as a final family and final pair. It is in *Seed of Chucky* that the final family transitions from Chucky's victims to the Ray family. The final survivors of *Seed of Chucky* are Tiffany, in Jennifer Tilly's body, Glen, in the Glen and Glenda twin human bodies, and Chucky, who's malleable doll body survives appearing as a dismembered arm at the end of the film. It is established that Chucky can return from the inanimate rubber body parts of the doll. In *Child's Play 2*, he is revived as his doll body is reassembled. In *Child's Play 3*, he is revived by his blood contaminating the molten plastic on the Good Guy production line. In *Bride of Chucky*, Tiffany sews parts of the Chucky doll together with spare parts.

In *Curse of Chucky* (2013), Nica, Chucky and Alice survive. Nica takes the role of the more traditional final girl as the narrative focuses on a more Slasher structure, emphasising the conflict between Nica and Chucky. However, by *Cult of Chucky* (2017) we return to the final family as Chucky inhabits Nica's body, escaping with Tiffany split into her Jennifer Tilly human form and her doll form. The *Chucky* series positions two families against each other throughout the seasons as the two sides battle to defeat the other. At the end of season three this conflict is finally resolved, establishing the final family. In S3E8 '*Final Destination*', Chucky and Tiffany are returned to their doll form escaping with Caroline, whilst Jake, Devon and Lexy are turned into marionettes to entertain mad doll maker, Wendel Wilkins, the creator of the Good Guy doll. As Nica discovers them, she is attacked by Wendell. The final family is finally chosen and it is Chucky, Tiffany, Caroline and GiGi, a

family of monstrous posthuman figures. I acknowledge that Caroline is still human, however, she is positioned as monstrous alongside the Ray family as she has become attuned to Damballa.

The Ray family is central to the *Child's Play* franchise; however, it took time to form the final family seen in S3E8 '*Final Destination*'. Chucky, Tiffany and GiGi each have to experience personal journeys with their gender, their bodies and their life as killers. I have discussed the negotiation of Chucky's gender and body in Chapter Three and Chapter Four, along with the relationship between him and Tiffany in Chapter Five, however I have not delved into the discussion of GiGi until this chapter. In this chapter I will discuss the three iterations of GiGi's⁹² character as symbols of transition, noting how this character(s) tackles an assignation of gender and violence, taking up the choice of their own body and how they find euphoria through this. I suggest that in supporting choice of gender identity, through processes like transition, euphoria can be found. This can be seen in GiGi's transition but also can be seen in Chucky and Tiffany as they choose the transbiological, ultimately all becoming more euphoric. This discussion will be repeatedly linked to how this transition affects the connection and closeness between the members of the family, as parents hinder and assist GiGi's transition to their euphoric form.

⁹² Glen. Glen and Glenda. GiGi.

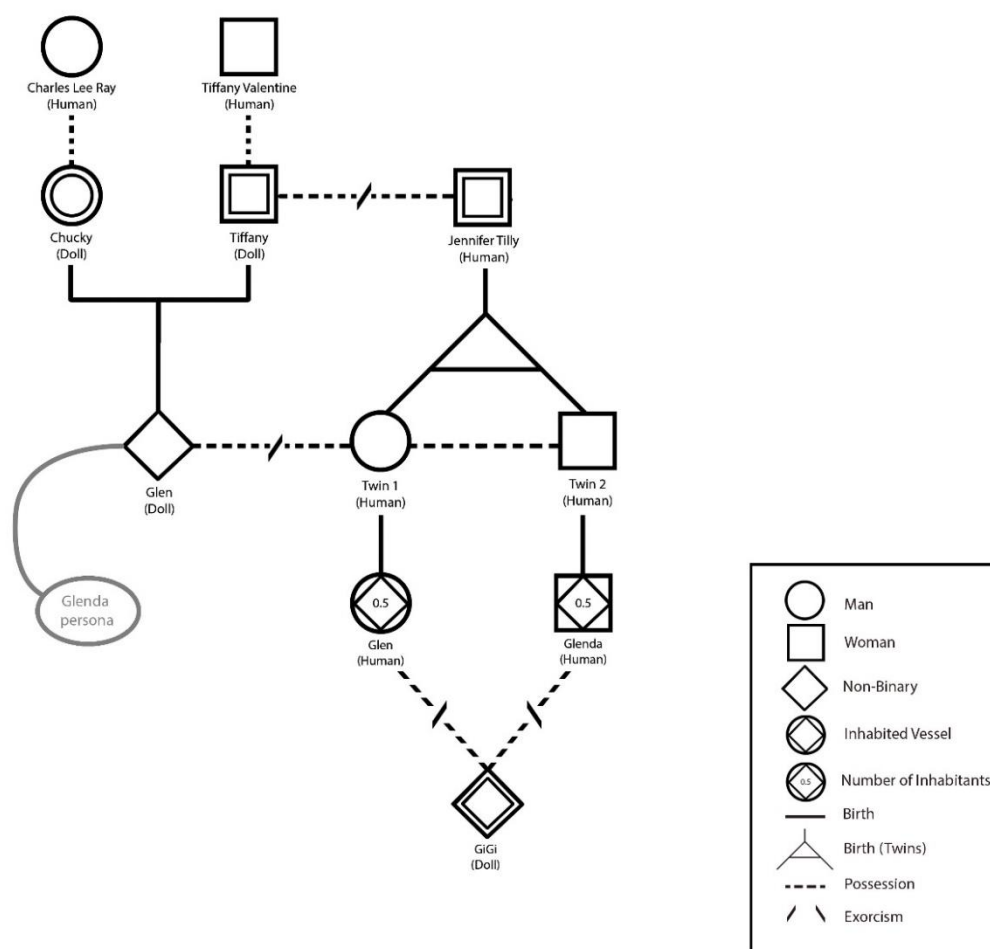


Fig.6.1 - Diagram of possession, tracking the journey of GiGi.

Fig.6.1 details the journey of possession for GiGi. First Charles Lee Ray and Tiffany Valentine possess inanimate doll bodies. When in doll form, they create a doll child (Glen). Tiffany possesses Jennifer Tilly's body, dividing Glen's soul and placing them into the bodies of human twin babies birthed from Tilly through supernatural reproductive technologies. Glen and Glenda grow up to be non-binary each with half their soul. When Glen and Glenda's half-souls are returned together in one (doll) body, they choose to go by the name GiGi. This diagram helps to highlight the distinction between Glen, Glen and Glenda and GiGi. This character(s) will be referred to by the form they take at the time. For example, they will be referred to as Glen when discussing *Seed of Chucky*. There is a separate Glenda persona in grey, this is to distinguish how this Glenda is not a split personality that is placed

into the Glenda human form, instead it is a persona created by Glen to try and resolve their gender confusion and conform to their parent's enforced gender roles.

Glen: Assigning Gender and Violence

Glen first meets Chucky and Tiffany, in the prop room of the (in narrative) film 'Chucky Goes Psycho'. In this meeting Chucky and Tiffany soon begin to assign gender to Glen, who does not know what gender they are. They come to different conclusions, mostly influenced by the gender of the child they would prefer to have. Chucky laughs at Glen for wetting themselves at the sight of murder, Tiffany admonishes him, stating "she just had an accident". To which Chucky replies, "you mean *he* had an accident."⁹³ The pair turn to look at Glen, who is equally unsure.



Fig.6.2 - *Seed of Chucky* (2004) - Chucky and Tiffany pull down Glen's trousers to determine their gender.

They pull down their trousers to reveal the absence of genitals, as seen in Fig.6.2. Much like most dolls, Glen had no genitalia. However, like their parents, they are both born or produced through the power of Damballa so the pair are shocked by what they find. This

⁹³ *Seed of Chucky*, (2004)

suggests that Glen has unknowingly manifested their sexed body, as a non-binary individual they have subconsciously chosen to forgo genitals at all. Whilst it could be argued that Glen simply has typical doll genitalia, Glen is not a manufactured doll. They exist solely as a result of Damballa's magic, reproduced from two living dolls. Furthermore, Tiffany and Chucky's shock at Glen's genitals highlights their difference from their own bodies. Glen looks to their parents to identify their gender and tell them how it is they are meant to perform it. There is a moment of silence before Tiffany speaks.

"Tiffany: See, what did I tell you? A beautiful little girl.

Chucky: What, are you blind? That's my boy!... Yeah, he just hasn't had his growth spurt yet. Don't worry about it, son, you're a late bloomer, that's all. And its high time that you had a real name. Let's see... I'm gonna call you Glen.

Tiffany: Glen? What kind of name is that for a girl? Don't listen to him, Honey, from now on your name is Glenda."

(*Seed of Chucky*, 2004)

In *Bodies that Matter* (1993), J. Butler discusses the role of interpellative performative statements. They suggest that language is used to assign gender and begin the process of gendering from an early age. They highlight the use of phrases like "it's a boy" or "it's a girl" at birth or ultrasounds. These statements are declarative and performative. It is not simply a constative utterance of what they see but a performative utterance that assigns sex and gender to the child or foetus. Here Tiffany and Chucky are using what seem like constative descriptions of what they see to infer Glen's gender, creating performative statements. They both use their own cisnormative lens to view Glen's body in a way that adheres to the gender they want them to be. Waldron, in discussing *Seed of Chucky*, notes that

it “points out the absurdity of choosing a child’s gender, and how parents’ expectations and desires get in the way of the child’s” (Waldron, 2022:145).

Much like parents of intersex children, they discover that their child has not manifested the genitals they expected (Newbould (2017), Dickens (2018) and Paechter, (2021)). For intersex children, their genitals are assessed by parents and medical professionals to determine which binary sexed body they most appear to adhere to, altering the body to conform to that image. Here Tiffany and Chucky are confronted with a body that does not adhere to the more binary sexed bodies they are accustomed to. They assess Glen’s genitalia, both viewing something different from a body that does not display a penis or vagina. Tiffany sees a lack of a penis, so decides that Glen must have a vagina, allowing her to assign their gender and sex as female. Chucky sees a penis that is not fully formed, without a ‘growth spurt’, so assigns them a male sex and gender.

Theorists such as Newbould (2017), Dickens (2018), and Paechter, (2021), debate the ethics of assigning gender and surgical intervention in intersex children. They note issues with a lack of consent from the child. The child may experience gender dysphoria from the wrong assignment of gender. They also may find that their body is irreversibly changed by medical intervention, leading to a more complex process to achieve a euphoric body, sometimes these individuals are treated as trans despite having been born with more euphoric genitals or means of hormone production. I suggest that in the *Child’s Play* universe, with the established power of Damballa manifesting genitals into and onto non-sexed bodies, assigning gender goes hand in hand with surgical, or supernatural, intervention performed on genitals.

Much like parents who are faced with a child not easily classifiable binary genitals, Tiffany and Chucky are faced with a typically doll-like lack of genitals (Fig.6.2). Chucky’s

suggestion that Glen hasn't had a growth spurt likely aligns with his own experience in the Good Guy doll body. For him, in his initial possession of the doll as a vessel, before his body began to grow more human, he would have likely had the same genitals as Glen. As his body grew a heart and lungs, he also grew a penis. In assigning Glen's gender, it is presumed that their doll body will grow to form the genitals that match that gender. As they both push a gender identity on Glen, they are equally pushing manifested genitals onto them as well.



Fig.6.3 - *Seed of Chucky* (2004) - Chucky and Tiffany are shocked by what they find.

Tiffany and Chucky are initially shocked, staring open-mouthed as they fail to find what they assume will reveal Glen's gender, see Fig.6.3. As the pair have both manifested their genitals to adhere with their gender perception, they are shocked to be confronted with a lack of genitals. Positioned in the background of the shot stands a special effects model of Frankenstein's monster, in the likeness of Boris Karloff's portrayal in the 1931 *Frankenstein*. Halberstam (1995), in discussing skin and the gothic, highlights the story of Frankenstein, noting that "the architecture of fear in this story is replaced by physiology, the landscape of fear is replaced by sutured skin..." (Halberstam, 1995:28-29). Stryker states "I find a deep affinity between myself as a transexual woman and the monster in Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein". Like the monster, I am too often perceived as less than fully human due to

my embodiment” (1994:238). In this scene, fear or confusion is focused on Glen’s physiology and their difference, not only not human but distinct from their doll parents with their lack of genitals.

Frankenstein’s monster is created from suturing dead bodies together to form an inanimate humanoid form. Victor Frankenstein uses technology to bring to life the transbiological creature. The inanimate body of the doll shares similarities with that of the inanimate corpse. In *Bride of Chucky*, Tiffany reassembles the Chucky doll before using voodoo to bring Chucky’s spirit back into the vessel. She must source spare parts of other, disassembled, Good Guy dolls to create a complete vessel. McNeil and Mullins (2022) note the reminiscence of this scene to *Frankenstein*. Here we see the creation of a living body from something inanimate or non-living. An unnatural creation of life, despite the manifestation of human organs, the living doll becomes a posthuman monster. It is this non-natural element that leads Chucky and Tiffany to search for human forms, afraid that they will be ‘stuck’ as transbiological monsters forever.

Halberstam notes that “the monster mixes humanity with physical deformity, a desire for community with an irreducible foreignness, great physical strength with femininity” (Halberstam, 1995:44). Glen shares a similarity with this monster as they display physical difference, a desire for community and a combination of femininity and masculinity. Whilst initially Glen’s body appears the same as Tiffany and Chucky’s, in that it is a humanoid living-doll, there is a discovery of difference as they examine their genitals. Their body does not adhere to the replicated sexed body of their parents, that manifest as rubber becomes more human. Whilst it initially seems that Glen’s body has not manifested their genitals yet, their lack of genitals is actually a manifestation in itself.

As with many Inhabited Vessels, the second skin, or in this case rubber, of the vessel begins to shift, or transition, over time to display the first skin. Glen is born in doll form, growing from a baby to a child. At the beginning of *Seed of Chucky*, Glen's skins are all in alignment. Their body is non-gendered, their clothes are gender ambiguous, and they seem to not have considered if they are a boy or a girl. When Tiffany and Chucky first debate if Glen is a boy or a girl, they simply state "don't look at me", feeling unable to answer. It is when their parents begin to influence them that their gender confusion and skin misalignment begins to manifest. Glen looks wildly between the pair as they argue over their gender and sex. This later leads to a display of madness as Glen tries to please both of them, creating the Glenda persona. The gender binary is being pushed upon them by parents who have adhered to these ideas of gender and sex themselves. Much like trans and queer youth, their confusion doesn't come from within as much as it comes from influence by society and parents.

When Glen asks if they can be both a boy and a girl. Tiffany begins to say "some people..." but Chucky quickly cuts her off, rejecting the idea. Chucky has a mental image of a serial killing son and tries to make Glen fit that image. Halberstam notes that "in refusing to be either Glen or Glenda and insisting on being both, Chucky and Tiffany's kid focuses our attention on the horrific effects of heteronormativity and turns attention away from the monstrosity of the ambiguously gendered body" (Halberstam, 2012:148). Confused by their parents pushing them in different directions, Glen appears as Glenda. Glenda is dressed in the same bridal dress as Tiffany with a blonde wig and murders Joan. They cry: "You proud of me now, Daddy?"⁹⁴. Whilst Chucky is proud of the violence, they do not present as the son he desired, Tiffany is both horrified by their feminine presentation and their violence. Even when Glen attempts to adhere to the image of both the daughter and the son their parents

⁹⁴ *Seed of Chucky* (2004)

have pushed upon them, they are still othered, unable to fully integrate to the image of the ideal family.

One of the issues that leads to Glen's inability to integrate into the family is Chucky and Tiffany's idealised ideas of what family is. Chucky forms connections through violence. This can be seen in his relationship with Tiffany, as the pair connect through killing their victims together. He treats killing as a form of family tradition or hobby that he must pass down to his 'son', pushing him to assert dominance through violence despite his sensitivity and protests. For Chucky, murder parallels traditional father-son hobbies such as hunting, in which violence can be pushed onto sensitive children. Here Chucky aims to pass (his own) traditional hobby/vocation to his first-born son, unable to imagine doing so with a daughter or a non-binary child. Mancini notes that "Certainly, as a gay man, I had a very contentious relationship with my father that I would say is reflected, in a satirical, parodying way, in Chucky's relationship with Glen" (Fangoria, 2005:31). Chucky is attempting to mould Glen to adhere to his mental prototype of a man, ignoring or rejecting anything that suggests this is not how Glen wishes to be.

Chucky's view of Glen is tied to Chucky's expectation that his 'son' will be an extension or reproduction of himself. Lewis (2022) notes fantastical ideas that "every human being is in her cosmically pre-destined place in a perfectly symmetrical genealogical grid", as "each person in the family inherits an economic vocation" (2022:17). They use the card game *Happy Families* to highlight this idea, in which cards depict one of four members of different families themed by their vocation. Mr Bones, the butcher, belongs with Mrs Bones, Master Bones and Miss Bones, each depicted with signs of the business, such as bones, cuts of meat and knives. The wife and children are tied to the patriarch and his job, described as the butcher's wife, son or daughter. Here Chucky attempts to manifest this ideal of family as he pushes his chosen career, as a serial killer, onto Glen. He views Glen as 'Master Ray, the

serial killer's son', expecting Glen to naturally show interest or skill in killing and violence. Glen not only fails to reflect this skill but fails to conform to the binary of the son or daughter within the nuclear (happy) family.

For Tiffany, she idolises Martha Stewart, mentioning her in both *Bride of Chucky* and *Seed of Chucky*. She puts a version of femininity as a homemaker on a pedestal, attempting to recreate it despite her inner violence. She is often seen making food for people, such as cookies and Swedish meatballs. In *Seed of Chucky*, Tiffany watches on the news that Stewart has been sentenced to death, a reference to the real felonies Stewart faced. McNeill and Mullins suggest that this has an impact on Tiffany's perception of herself as "Tiffany is still trying to be perfect based on how she perceives her idol to be perfect, which rings hollow" (McNeill and Mullins, 2022:304). She herself is a criminal, attempting to put forward this homemaker character.

McNeill and Mullins also suggest that in this film each family member goes through a personal journey in which they must overcome some kind of insecurity to achieve self-acceptance. They state that for Glen this is learning to be themselves and not trying to adhere to the expectations of others. For Tiffany she must determine that she can be a good parent without suppressing who she really is. And for Chucky, he must admit that he enjoys being a killer doll and no longer chasing a human form. Whilst I agree to some extent, these journeys are more complex, often not fully resolved until the television series, *Chucky*.

Whilst Chucky states: "I have everything I want: a beautiful wife, a multi-talented kid. This is who I am, Tiff. This is me"⁹⁵. He ultimately undermines this as he cannot accept that Tiffany is not ready to reject a chance at normativity. He reacts violently to Tiffany and Glen's attempts to become human and kills Tiffany before Glen kills him in anger. This is

⁹⁵ *Seed of Chucky*, (2004)

simply the beginning of Chucky's journey of self-discovery as he begins to experiment with accepting difference. This is the first time in five films that he has considered that perhaps he does not want to become human again. He must go on to experiment with his gender, his sexuality and his relationships to fully reach the end of his journey of self-acceptance.

Tiffany attempts to be a good mother despite her propensity for violence. She is certainly nurturing, as she states to Glen: "Glenda, Glen, whatever. I'm so proud of you. No matter what happens, we'll deal with it together as a family"⁹⁶. However, her acceptance of Glen is undermined by her misguided attempt to resolve their gender issues by splitting them into two different bodies. Repeatedly her taste for violence has driven a wedge between her and Glen, and Glenda, in the *Chucky* series. She lies to them about who she is, claiming to be Jennifer Tilly, and who they are. It is not until the end of *Chucky* season two that she is a good mother whilst accepting who she is as Tiffany, not Jennifer, and fully accepting GiGi.

Whilst it seems that by the end of *Seed of Chucky* Glen is learning not to adhere to the expectations of others, their soul is still split into two bodies that align more with society's expectations. It is revealed that Jennifer birthed twins and that Tiffany has possessed her body. Glen's soul, or first skin, is cut in half, creating Glen and Glenda. Glen is quiet, sensitive and thoughtful whereas Glenda is aggressive, destructive and out of control. Whilst the gender expression of the two children contrasts with stereotypical gender norms of young boys and girls, societal gender norms are still enforced upon them. Glen states at the end of the film; "I know I'm not alone. I know I'm not a freak"⁹⁷. However, it is not until *Chucky* that they fully learn who they are, what they are and that they are allowed to make an informed choice.

⁹⁶ *Seed of Chucky*, (2004)

⁹⁷ *Seed of Chucky*, (2004)

In Tiffany's attempt to alleviate Glen's struggle with their gender identity, she splits them into two sexed bodies. The sexed 'male body' is assigned Glen, and the 'female body' Glenda. Here we see a misinformed attempt to help, hinged on a misunderstanding of non-binary individuals. She still applies a gender normative view, resolving that instead of there being multiple varied genders, there is a binary. The non-binary individual's gender identity is not resolved when it is placed into one of the two binary gender ideals, even if it is divided into both. This further displays Tiffany's inability to accept difference. Whilst Chucky was ready to embrace his difference, viewing it as something that he likes about himself, Tiffany is still attempting to adhere to her image of a kincoherent human family. In *Seed of Chucky* becoming human is still linked to "becoming heterosexual... becoming adult and becoming reproductive" (Halberstam, 2007:41), normative and cis.

Glen and Glenda: Choosing Your Own Body



Fig.6.3 – *Chucky*, S2E4 'Death on Denial' (2022) - Glenda (centre) and Glen (right) listen to Tiffany's speech.

In *Chucky* season two, Glen and Glenda are reintroduced as young adults. They are both non-binary, using they/them pronouns. Both Glen and Glenda are played by non-binary actor Lachlan Watson. Although an attempt was made to resolve Glen's (doll) gender confusion by dividing them into 'a boy' and 'a girl', these characters still manifested non-binary identities. This highlights the failure of an attempt to mould them into binary categories that do not fit them. The pair do not know anything about their past as dolls or who their father is. They both believe that Tiffany-Jennifer is Jennifer Tilly, as she took over the film star's identity when she possessed her. They both mention dreams of killing someone, with a man's voice encouraging them to do it. They also mention dating the same person in a polyamorous relationship that unbeknownst to them is actually monogamous as they are a division of one spirit. Not only has their division into a 'female body' and 'male body' in *Seed of Chucky* not affected their gender but it has not changed their sexuality. No matter what vessels they have been placed into, their identity persists.

We first see the pair in S2E4, '*Death on Denial*', as they visit Tiffany. They state that they are worried about her recent reclusive behaviour and bring Jennifer's friends to a party at the house. This is a ruse so that they can save Nica from her imprisonment. Tiffany-Jennifer hires a security guard, Sal, to guard the room with Nica in, but insists he pretend to be a butler for the dinner party. He snorts at Glenda and Glen whilst clearing plates from the dinner table. Glenda confronts him to which he asks, "what are you two even supposed to be?". He states, "you look like a boy; he looks like a girl"⁹⁸. Sal enforces the image that Glen and Glenda were originally intended to conform to, applying rigid gender norms and criticising them for not achieving the image of 'boy' and 'girl'.

⁹⁸ *Chucky*, S2E4, '*Death on Denial*', (2022)

When Glenda informs him that they are both non-binary and use they/them pronouns, Sal complains about the changing of they/them pronouns to refer to a single person rather than plural. The party guests come to Glen and Glenda's defence, telling him to join the 21st century and that language evolves. Meg Tilly, who believes Tiffany-Jennifer is her sister Jennifer, refers to the pair as her 'niblings', noting it as a non-gendered term for a sibling's child. In this scene the filmmakers are not only making it clear how Glen and Glenda identify and what pronouns they use but also highlighting a rejection of arguments against this. Sal encompasses those who reject non-binary people and they/them pronouns, using the other party guest's comments they highlight a rejection of this rhetoric.

Glen and Glenda often coordinate to some degree in their outfits, most often through colour. This is to continually emphasise their role as two parts of the same person. In Fig.6.3 Glen is wearing a short sleeve t-shirt over a black long sleeve t-shirt, unknowingly mirroring the clothing of their doll form. It seems that remnants of their past life seep into their life from their subconscious. Similarly, Glenda's short hair is reminiscent of the Glen doll. In *Seed of Chucky*, the Glen doll has no eyebrows but the doll Glenda has eyebrows drawn on as part of their makeup. Here Glen is also seen to have shaved their eyebrows whilst Glenda has filled theirs. Unbeknownst to them, hidden elements of their first skin are manifesting as their third skin.

Glen's clothing is loose and often made of softer fabrics. Their hair is long and is always un-styled. But they still have elements of sharpness in their gender presentation, with long pointed sharp nails. Glen, in *Seed of Chucky*, is sensitive and trusting. Glenda on the other hand is wearing a metallic purple mini-skirt and a studded leather jacket. Their clothes are tight, lacking the softness of Glen's clothing. Glenda is shown as confident and self-assured and their relationship towards criminal behaviour is more gleeful. When Nica insists

that she is wanted by the police but innocent, Glenda grins and winks, stating “sure you are”, later pulling a knife from their boot.

Initially this seems to adhere to the perception that the Glen (doll) personality and the Glenda (doll) personality are two different realised identities, or two separate first skins. However, I argue that the actions of Glen (doll) and Glenda (doll) should be read as the actions of the same person. Glen’s experimentation with the role of Glenda is their attempt to adhere to the image that his parents wanted. Tiffany wanted a girl, Chucky wanted a killer, so they combined them. With this reading, the characters of Glen and Glenda become more complex as they are both manifestations of the same incomplete soul.

Whilst Glen is presented to be sensitive and trusting, they are also brave and confrontational at times. Much like Glen (doll), they are afraid but able to act when they need to, especially when family is involved. Glenda, whilst assertive and confident is also sensitive when they are trying to learn more about their father and who they are. They are two halves of a single soul; however, they are not the masculine and the feminine but a combination of both. When Glen and Glenda each separately confess that they feel incomplete, it is not that they are missing one side of the gender binary. When they finally come back together as a sutured soul, they continue to be non-binary.

As noted in Chapter Four, Glen discusses the dysphoria whilst talking to Nica-Nica, highlighting the phantom of their euphoric combined doll form. Later Glenda notes that neither of them has ever felt whole. They feel dysphoric in a way that they cannot identify, unwittingly expressing their discomfort with their torn first skin. When Tiffany gifts Glen their doll form they have an instant reaction, stating “it’s me.” In this interpellative performative statement they identify their euphoric body, instantly recognising themselves. This scene acts as a moment of self-realisation, as they identify with the image of their

euphoria. Just as trans people come to conclusions on their euphoric selves and bodies before undergoing medical intervention such as hormones and surgery, they must realise what their euphoric body looks like. Shortly after, Glen is in the hospital after taking a bullet for Tiffany. Glenda decides that they wish to die and for Tiffany to reunite their souls back into their doll body.

Glen and Glenda's decision to leave their human bodies and return to doll form reflects a rejection of the normativity in the pursuit of happiness and euphoria. Tiffany attempted to provide them happiness through moulding them to fit into normative image of gender and bodies, however, in this moulding their skin becomes torn in a way that is uncomfortable and dysphoric. In rejecting being human, they are rejecting "becoming heterosexual, becoming coupled, becoming adult and becoming reproductive" (Halberstam 2017:41). In S2E4 '*Death on Denial*', Glenda quickly rejects Tiffany's enquiry as to if they are pregnant, discomfited by the suggestion, feeling dysphoria both towards their current genitals and their reproductivity. They return to their genital-less non-reproductive doll form. Their doll form has the potential to become reproductive, as seen with Tiffany and Chucky, however, their body manifests non-reproductivity. Here, they reject reproductive futurism.

After the death of their human forms, Tiffany sutures their first skin, returning them to their euphoric doll body. This is a display of her support for them, utilising supernatural technologies to help them transition. Andrzejewski et al. (2021) conducted a study with transgender youth and parents, examining support provided during transition. They note four important domains of social support: emotional, instrumental, appraisal and informational. Emotional support includes expressions of love, empathy towards mental illness and emotional support through coming out. Instrumental support includes financial support, assisting access to healthcare and assisting social and legal transitioning. Appraisal includes

providing feedback, motivation, encouragement and use of chosen names and pronouns.

Finally, informational support involves giving advice to help guide their child.

Throughout *Chucky*, Tiffany exhibits elements of each domain of gender-specific support and in doing so she also finds acceptance of herself. Whilst it is established in *Seed of Chucky* that Tiffany loves her child, she is unable to truly provide emotional support whilst splitting Glen and Glenda and hiding their identity. When she presents them with their doll form, she exhibits emotional support, reflecting empathy to their dysphoria, and appraisal and informational support as she encourages them to be themselves. The most significant support she provides is instrumental as she facilitates their transition.

In S2E8 '*Chucky Actually*', Glen is being treated in hospital, lying in a coma. Glenda informs Tiffany-Jennifer over the phone that the doctor has estimated that Glen has a matter of days before they die.

“Glenda: I can’t lose Glen, Mom. If they die, I die too.

Tiffany-Jennifer: I know, Sweetface. I know.

Glenda: Then you know what we have to do.

Tiffany-Jennifer: Yes.

Glenda: And you’re ok with that?

Tiffany-Jennifer: Why do you think I saved it all these years?”

(*Chucky*, S2E8, *Chucky Actually*, 2022)

This scene, in combination with the scene in which Tiffany-Jennifer presents Glen with the doll, acts as a ‘coming out’ scene. It is not clarified whether Glenda’s statement that they will also die is a technical result of half their soul dying or if it more of a statement of

their emotional inability to live without each other. With either interpretation the sentiment is clear, they belong together. Glenda asks their mother if she is okay with their transition, knowing that they cannot live on without changing. Whilst they felt dysphoria from being split into two beings, they cannot imagine losing the other part of themselves, knowing they will never be euphorically complete. This is a statement that they refuse to live an even more dysphoric life.

Glenda does not ask for Glen's soul to be joined to theirs in their existing body, as they do not wish to suture only their first skin but also their second skin. Glenda affirms that her mother is not only ok with their merging but also with their decision to return to their transbiological doll body. Despite dividing their soul, Tiffany-Jennifer held onto their doll form, hiding it from them in the hopes they would find euphoria in their human bodies. Where Tiffany is the one to perform the spell that divides and possesses their bodies in *Seed of Chucky*, in her acceptance of her child, she is the one to transition them. Significantly both of these spells take place within a hospital.

Tiffany disguises herself as a doctor and sneaks into the hospital. Glenda meets her there with a suitcase containing their doll body and the book *Voodoo for Dummies*. Tiffany kills Glen and Glenda, using the power of Damballa to suture their skin. Their old identities must die to allow for rebirth as one. In Fig.6.4 Glen and Glenda can be seen together in the hospital bed, pressed close as if in preparation for the suturing. Despite Tiffany's penchant for violence, and her willingness to use it on those she loves, like Chucky and Nica, her children show no sign of violence. Glen is unplugged from the machines supporting them, dying in their sleep, whilst Glenda lies dead next to them in a position that suggests they had time to get comfortable before dying.



Fig.6.4 – *Chucky*, S2E8 ‘*Chucky Actually*’ (2022)- Glenda (left) and Glen (right) are discovered dead in Glen’s hospital bed.

Their dysphoria is left behind in the hospital bed, as they leave the hospital in a body that finally feels euphoric. Much like trans people when they enter hospital for gender reassignment surgery, the last time they see their dysphoric body is in a hospital bed, before falling asleep under anaesthetic, or for Glen and Glenda sleeping in death. Tiffany-Jennifer acts as a doctor, dressed in scrubs, she uses supernatural technologies at a site of medical science. As noted in Chapter One and Chapter Four, within Possessed Slashers supernatural technologies allows or speeds up the realisation of gender and the body. Here Tiffany-Jennifer provides instrumental support as she provides them with access to supernatural healthcare. This is the last time that Glen and Glenda are seen.

GiGi: Finding Euphoria

Once reunited in their sutured form, GiGi is euphoric. The dysphoria that Glen discussed, of something missing inside is resolved through transformation, or transition, into a form that aligns better with their first skin. In a motel, Tiffany-Jennifer excitedly gives their doll form a makeover. When they look in the mirror, as seen in Fig.6.5, they gasp stating, “I love it. I love

me”⁹⁹. Tiffany-Jennifer beams seeing her child express joy in a way unseen in their original form or in their human form. Tiffany-Jennifer asks them what she should call them now. They think, declaring that they would like to be called GiGi. She smiles, stating that she loves it and begins to use it immediately to refer to them. Not only are Glen and Glenda’s bodies dead but so are their names. She displays appraisal as she encourages and uses their chosen name and pronouns.

She asks what they ought to do next, “Shall we go online and shop for little, tiny shoes? Or we could scare the shit out of that little brat in room 304 down the hall?”¹⁰⁰ Here we see Tiffany no longer pretending to be someone she isn’t, whether that’s Martha Stewart or her idealised version of Jennifer Tilly. She is openly manic and a little mean in a way that breaks her away from the gendered homemaker image she tried to mould herself into. In her honesty with herself and GiGi, their bond is instantly stronger. Seeing GiGi become their authentic self empowers her to become her authentic self too.

In this scene, she helps GiGi find their euphoric gender presentation in this new body. She is doing what she ought to have done from the beginning but could not. At that point, she couldn’t break out of the enforced roles of gender, sex and normativity that coloured the way she viewed the world. She helps them realise their true self, whilst learning herself how to support her child. This can be seen gradually as she uses they/them pronouns for Glen and Glenda at their request and when she presents them with their doll form. This culminates in the scene in which GiGi is formed, Tiffany-Jennifer helping them identify their style, name, even their voice. This relates to experiences of trans people and their supportive parents, as they develop their euphoric identity.

⁹⁹ *Chucky*, S2E8, ‘*Chucky Actually*’, (2022)

¹⁰⁰ *Chucky*, S2E8, ‘*Chucky Actually*’, (2022)

As Tiffany-Jennifer helps them make over their doll form, she provides more instrumental support as instrumental support also includes “help with makeup, clothing, jewellery, and hair” (Andrzejewski et al., 2021:78). She does GiGi’s makeup, buys their clothes and shoes, helping them form their visual identity in a way that reflects euphoric gender performance. Tiffany-Jennifer helps to resolve each layer of GiGi’s skin, creating a euphoric identity. She sutures their first layer in uniting their soul and their second layer as they possess the doll body. Finally, she helps them suture their third skin in helping them find their gender performance.



Fig.6.5 – *Chucky*, S2E8 ‘*Chucky Actually*’ (2022) - Tiffany watches as GiGi sees the makeover she gave them.



Fig.6.6 - *Seed of Chucky* (2004) - Glen/Glenda sees themselves in the mirror.

Fig.6.5 parallels a shot from *Seed of Chucky* (Fig.6.6), bringing their journey full circle. In this scene the Glenda persona is revealed. Glen, feeling pressured by Chucky and Tiffany's conflicting gendering, attempts to perform in a way that pleases them both, creating the Glenda persona. In this they attempt to look just like their mother, copying Tiffany's dress and hair, and maniacally murdering victims in a way that adheres to Chucky's violent family tradition. They speak differently, cackling and fussing over the wrinkles in their dress, stating "congratulations, you both win". Tiffany gasps and asks Chucky, "what did you do to him?". This is the first time Tiffany uses he/him pronouns to refer to Glen, having insisted that Glen is a girl throughout. Shocked and unhappy with the Glenda persona, Tiffany slaps them, insisting they wake up. Glen blinks in shock, asking "mum?", contrasting to the manic way Glenda had called her "mummy". Glen turns to look at themselves in the mirror, gasping at their appearance. They cry, asking Tiffany, "what am I?"¹⁰¹.

¹⁰¹ *Seed of Chucky* (2004)

In the *Seed of Chucky* scene, Glen is confused and vulnerable, looking to their parents to explain their difference. Their reflection is a confrontation that hurts them, revealing their layers of skin. The confrontation of these layers is upsetting as each layer highlights a mismatch. Their third layer, the outward gender expression, is dysphoric as they attempt to adhere to a hyper feminine presentation, losing both the masculine side of their gender expression and their sense of self as they model themselves after Tiffany. They cannot understand their second skin, as they look to their parents who cannot determine whether their body is male or female. Finally, they can see their first layer that they cannot make sense of, they do not know how to understand or express their inner self. They ask, “what am I?”, knowing they are different but unable to understand or verbalise what they are.

When GiGi looks into the hand mirror with their mother once again in *Chucky*, Fig.6.5, they experience joy rather than fear and confusion. GiGi has found an expression that feels euphoric and establishes their individuality separate from the original visions of their parents in *Seed of Chucky*. Where they couldn't recognise themselves in the mirror before, they see their true self in the mirror now. Where Tiffany was previously aghast by Glenda's appearance and mannerism, she is seen in shot smiling as GiGi sees themselves in the mirror. She is able to see that this is a euphoric expression of her child. In Fig.6.6 Glen/Glenda stands alone, the close up only showing their face in the mirror and the edge of their wig. Their reflection floats in space, ungrounded and separated from their body, signifying the way this is a persona created by the pressures of their parents. In Fig.6.5, however, the wider shot contains the reflection of GiGi's face, their body and their smiling mother. This reflection of

themselves is more grounded within the shot, no longer alone or lost, their reflection is surrounded by support and warm tones.



Fig.6.7 – *Chucky*, S2E8 ‘*Chucky Actually*’ (2022) - GiGi tells Tiffany they want to go travelling.

GiGi informs Tiffany-Jennifer that they want to go travelling, they want to go to England to get back to their roots. Whilst Tiffany-Jennifer is disappointed that GiGi will be leaving, she has relinquished her control. In the past the decisions she has made on GiGi’s behalf have made things more difficult, often taking away their agency and autonomy. She asks to take them to the post office (the preferred version of transport for the dolls) and GiGi smiles and kisses her hand. In the background (Fig.6.7), hangs a painting of birds not yet in flight. GiGi is not only literally flying away to England, but they are leaving the nest as a finally fully realised individual, or doll. They are no longer held back by society’s perceptions of gender and body, or their parents’ attempts to help them fit in.

This is the final time GiGi is seen in the series. In this scene they finally complete their personal journey as suggested by McNeill and Mullins. Not only do they make personal discoveries as they become their authentic euphoric self in doll form, but they also plan to learn more about themselves. Furthermore, the expectations of those around them have changed as they experience family using correct pronouns and defending their gender identity. For Tiffany, she is being a supportive parent in assisting GiGi in their transformation, or transition, in their doll form. She is finally honest with her child/children and listens to their desires, whilst no longer pretending to be someone other than herself. In S2E5 '*Doll on Doll*', she finally tells Glen about their doll and that she is Tiffany not Jennifer, she states "I was trying to be somebody I wasn't, and I did the same thing to you kids also"¹⁰².

Chucky, despite being murderous and sadistic, displays more paternal affection for his children over time, particularly with regard to their identity and independence. In *Seed of Chucky*, Chucky attempts to control who Glen will be, both in personality and identity. He pushes the tradition, or lifestyle, of being a killer onto Glen. He insists that Glen is a boy and ought to be raised masculine despite their questions about their gender. However, in *Chucky* he respects their pronouns. In S1E2, '*Give Me Something Good to Eat*', Chucky tells Jake, who is suffering abuse from his homophobic father, "I have a queer kid". Jake initially seems surprised and asks, "and you're cool with it?" to which Chucky replies, "I'm not a monster, Jake"¹⁰³. Chucky's values begin to shift as he grows older and more connected to his family. Despite his monstrosity, he distinguishes himself from another type of monster. He labels Jake's father as monstrous, his indignant response highlighting his development as he rejects having any issue with his child's queerness. This may also act as a comment from Mancini labelling homophobia as even more monstrous than a possessed doll.

¹⁰² *Chucky*, S2E5, '*Doll on Doll*', (2022)

¹⁰³ *Chucky*, S1E2, '*Give Me Something Good to Eat*', (2021)

In the final episode of *Chucky*, Tiffany reunites with Chucky in the Wilkins Mansion.

“Chucky: You heard from GiGi?

Tiffany: Not for a couple of months, have you?

Chucky: [shakes head] I miss them.

Tiffany: Oh, Chucky. Don’t you wish we could be a real family again?”

(*Chucky*, S3E8, ‘*Final Destination*’, 2024)

Here we see a key difference in both Chucky and Tiffany. Tiffany’s image of a real family is no longer the human family that she desired in *Seed of Chucky*. She now sees the positivity in their families’ doll forms. Chucky is emotionally vulnerable, confessing that he misses their child. At Tiffany’s wish to be real family Chucky presents her with a Wedding Belle doll, asking her to remarry him. The first time they married they were both in doll form, but not by choice. In *Bride of Chucky*, Tiffany agrees to help Chucky return to human form before the pair have an argument. In response, Chucky kills Tiffany, putting her in the Wedding Belle doll. They later marry after killing a pair of honeymooners and stealing the ring. In the *Chucky* proposal she is presented with the doll whilst she is still human. Chucky is happy in his doll form, and he is now asking if she will not only remarry him but join him in doll form. She takes a moment to think before excitedly saying yes and that she is ready. She has agency in her decision to possess a chosen vessel, choosing possession of the posthuman malleable doll body.

Here we see a further fruition of Tiffany and Chucky’s personal journeys that McNeill and Mullins (2022) suggested. Tiffany is no longer suppressing any aspect of who she is, and that includes the part of her that has lived and enjoyed life as a doll. She is embracing the version of Tiffany that she feels is her true self, completely shedding the last of Jennifer Tilly.

Chucky, having experienced death when Damballa briefly abandons him and his time as a spirit, he is finally appreciative of his body. He is happy for the life that he has and the opportunities his doll form has afforded him to be a notorious killer doll. In their resolution each family member embraces difference, distancing themselves from the heteronormative and cisnormative ideals that ultimately made them unhappy. They accept their difference from the norm.

The series ends with Chucky and Tiffany in the backseat of their red 1960 Pontiac Parisienne, the car they acquired by killing the seller in 1987. Caroline, an adoptive daughter of sorts, drives them away from the mansion as the pair kiss in the backseat, seen in Fig.6.8. The pair are isolated in the shot, surrounded by the dark leather of the seats and the streetlights behind them. The rearview window shows what they leave behind as they drive towards a life together, returned to doll form, a murderous family. The framing of the front seat creates an image of the pair lying in bed, the front seat creating the image of a duvet pulled up to their shoulders. Here they consummate their marriage and their new forms as they are once again dolls together.



Fig.6.8 – *Chucky*, S3E8 ‘*Final Destination*’ - Caroline drives Tiffany and Chucky away.

Alright by Supergrass plays on the radio. The 1995 Monkees-esque Britpop song is a light-hearted song about teenage life. This song has appeared in several films (*Clueless* (1995), *(500) Days of Summer* (2009), *Astroboy* (2009)) often at the end, as the struggle of the narrative has been resolved, and the characters are at peace with each other. The song lyrics state, “See our friends. See the sights. Feel alright”. Perhaps they plan to visit GiGi whilst on their travels in England. They will see their child, see the sights and feel alright as a real family again. The lyrics ask “Are we like you? I can’t be sure... we are strange, in our worlds”. The song mirrors Tiffany and Chucky’s acceptance of difference, both as killers and as dolls. Are we like you? No, but that is a good thing. Through the possession the pair become something new, that stands uncomfortably in distinction from the norm. Their relationship with GiGi becomes reciprocal in its ability to influence self-acceptance. In assisting GiGi with their transition the pair are presented with a question as to whether they are living as their true selves. Through this, they all accept difference, becoming a better family and a more loving couple.

Throughout this chapter I have highlighted how supernatural technologies influence euphoric and dysphoric bodies and identities. It is the supernatural manifestation of Glen’s body that situates them in the realm of the posthuman, with no knowledge of how they *ought* to perform gender or how their body *ought* to look. Through possession, parents enforce the same normative systems that influenced them when they were human and still plague them as transbiological living dolls. The intricacies of the Inhabited Vessel allow an exploration of the character as their gender; their body and their relationships shift as they embrace difference. The Possessed Slasher situates not only the Inhabited Vessel but the relationship between gender and violence, as Glen/GiGi views both gender and violence in a different way to their parents. These fluid bodies, steeped in cisnormativity and murderous tradition negotiate identity in a way that parallels negotiations of identity in trans and queer individuals.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have established through my articulation of the Possessed Slasher and the Inhabited Vessel that supernatural technologies facilitate transformation in a manner that queers gender and sexuality. Archetypes such as the possessed woman, the final girl and the killer become much more complex in terms of gender, agency and power as possession allows agency in their role and power within the narrative. Supernatural technologies allow a malleability that enables the Inhabited Vessel to not only negotiate their gender but to alter their bodies in a manner that can become euphoric. Several characters have the agency to choose. They are able to choose their body, genitals and reproductivity. The framework I have proposed through which to understand the Inhabited Vessel encapsulates the expansive potential in reading possessed figures when considered with more complexity than a simple possessor/possessed binary.

In Chapter One I established the Inhabited Vessel, formulating a framework that expands the scope of analysing possession in media. My research reframes the existing approach to possession stemming from Clover's portals. I rejected Clover's approach to not only prevent sidelining the possessed in the occult narrative but to highlight how the possessed form a new version of the characters that have been combined into one. In facilitation this fluidity, the Inhabited Vessel can be more closely considered as representative of those who experience discomfort in their body, gender expression and/or sexuality. As bodies are swapped or transformed, possessors must confront their new body and determine if they feel like they can euphorically exist within the form. In this they are confronted by gender performance as they must consider how they wish to express themselves, whilst other characters place their own expectations upon them.

I have approached the possessed from a multilayered perspective, utilising layers of skin to highlight the complexity of identity, bodies and gender in the act of possession. The

Inhabited Vessel can be deconstructed into three layers of skin, the first layer (spirit), the second layer (the body) and the third layer (gender performance). This allows an analysis of how gender and bodies conflict, align and manifest as spirits move fluidly to new vessels. It considers how Inhabited Vessels interact with each of these themes, manifesting them on or in their new form. This moves away from a presumption that certain bodies deliver certain gender performances, as possessors choose their gender expression. This disrupts Clover's assertions of tropes in occult media, integrating Halberstam's skin in the gothic. Skins become torn and sutured as they align euphorically, dysphorically or even become divided.

Next, I defined the Possessed Slasher, highlighting how the combination of Slasher tropes and possession, or occult, narratives create a distinct subgenre that does not entirely adhere to Slasher or possession narrative conventions. I acknowledged the differences in conventions as these two subgenres combine, for example highlighting a distinct difference in the role of the final girl. When the 'final girls' are no longer one woman, or even one person, the gendering of that character deviates from Clover's standard masculine final girl. The final figure is often replaced with a final pair, often a man and woman, or a final family of three or more. In this, the gendering becomes distributed between multiple characters; however, this is not to suggest that these characters conform to a stereotypical gender divide. The characteristics of the final girl are split amongst characters in the final family, disrupting associations with stereotypical gendered characteristics.

Having highlighted the trend of the final family, I acknowledge that there is potential for this to be studied further particularly in opposition to concepts of the patriarchal force of the killer, the Slasher, and the priest of possession narratives. Furthermore, the final family could be approached in its relation to alignment. Clover's suggestion that audiences, both men and women, align with the final girl due to her gendering and the failed gendering of other victims and the monstrous killer, is likely disrupted as the final girl becomes the final

family. Would audiences align with the final figure that matches their gender identity? Would they align more with traits displayed by the characters, or perhaps all characters at once? This may be further complicated as final families become monstrous final families, as seen in the *Child's Play* franchise.

I have argued that in the Possessed Slasher, the possessed killer could be anyone or anything. This steps away from the large intimidating Classical Slasher killer whilst also increasing the threat level of the possessed found in the possession/occult narrative. The possessed are not simply confined to their bedroom. They can move freely. As I have highlighted, they integrate amongst close friends and family, using a false sense of security to grant them access to their victims. With the possessed killer, a little girl is just as likely to attempt to crush you with a JCB (*Shocker*, 1989), as a children's toy is to push you out of a window (*Child's Play*, 1988), or as your friend is to tear your tongue from your face (*Night of the Demons*, 1988). Threat comes from the potential that anyone or anything could be or become, a killer. Although it is beyond the scope of this thesis, it would be interesting to consider how this interacts with tropes in the Self-Referential Slasher, with the often-human familiar killer, perhaps considering if the Possessed Slasher and the Self-Referential Slasher display similar structures but place the audience in different positions of knowledge as to who poses threat.

Having established the structure of the Possessed Slasher and outlined the Inhabited Vessel framework, in Chapter Two I highlighted a distinction within the Possessed Slasher, as the roles of victim and killer become less rigidly separate through possession. In viewing the possessed as an Inhabited Vessel, characters who might be assigned more strictly as victims in the Slasher become monstrously powerful as they experience possession. Viewing the possessor as something or someone that can combine with the possessed, as opposed to simply a puppeteer, highlights how characters gain more agency and power through fusion,

selection of vessels and the choice to become possessed. Victims can become killers in a manner distinct from the final girl as supernatural technologies imbue them with otherworldly power that may be used for good or evil. Where the final girl takes up violence to stop the killer, the Possessed Slasher allows victims and final girls to become the monstrous powerful killer, enacting revenge, embracing their difference and rejecting subjugation.

Having discussed the intricacies of agency through supernatural technologies and the Inhabited Vessel in the Possessed Slasher, I broke down the Inhabited Vessel in further detail. In Chapter Three, I approached the Inhabited Vessel from the third and final layer of skin: gender performance. In this I highlighted how gender expression is complicated as characters find themselves within a new body. Possessors are confronted with new gender expressions that they must choose whether to embrace, edit or reject. I highlighted how this can be representative of determining gender expression through transition. I also highlighted how gender performance expands beyond clothing choices to how other characters view and interact with the Inhabited Vessel. Characters face new positions with a patriarchal society, finding themselves in new positions of subjugation and threat as they are viewed through a gendered lens. This sudden interaction with threat is furthered as the possessor is often a violent or threatening presence, suddenly finding themselves victims of misogyny.

These character journeys would not culminate in the way they do if not for the presence of threat and violence, as these possessed figures find themselves in the position of the killer, the victim and sometimes both. Whilst the transformation, or transition, of the possessed is an integral part of the Possessed Slasher, the key theme is that of threat. As part-Slasher, much of the narrative of the Possessed Slasher focuses on predation as killers hunt and kill their victims. As I have outlined, the reflection on threat in combination with the presentation of trans and queer individuals does not imply threat from trans or queer people themselves. I discuss themes of threat in conjunction with queer theory due to the link

between threat and queer and trans individuals as both victims of attack and victims of stereotypical labelling as predatory. As I have negotiated in my work these queer and/or trans aligning Inhabited Vessels are inexorably linked to threat by those who demonise them, whilst also attempting to avoid threat to themselves.

Having challenged perception of gender expression in the possessed through the third layer of skin of the Inhabited Vessel, I next explored the second skin, the body. Through supernatural technologies, such as possession, characters must confront the difference in their bodies. This difference can range from new genitals, new reproductivity, or even birth into existence from the inanimate. I demonstrate how possession and the transbiological can enact with speed a transition to a euphoric body. Genitals manifest. Reproductivity can be selective and asexual. This journey of transformation can parallel trans experiences as bodies begin to shift, transforming from dysphoric to euphoric. Supernatural reproductive technologies parallel queered reproduction through assisted reproductive technologies, allowing anyone reproduction and gestation regardless of gender or genitals.

Whilst I have considered the potential of the supernaturally transbiological in its potential to change sex markers and reproductivity to align with the first skin, the Inhabited Vessel could be built upon in future research from a perspective of disability and ableism. I focus on the manifestation of gender and genitals as bodies experience supernatural technologies, however I suggest that how other body parts function and form during supernatural technologies may be of interest to theorists with interest in disability representation. This may be particularly relevant to Inhabited Vessels in the *Child's Play* franchise as it could be interesting to further challenge how exactly the bodies become more human, but also as disabled bodies such as Nica's regain the ability to walk through supernatural technologies.

As supernatural technologies become attached to changes, these changes struggle to become delinked from monstrosity in horror. However, much like many other theorists (Creed, Benshoff, Waldron, Elliott-Smith), I align with an approach to the monstrous from a more radical and freeing perspective. To be monstrous is to sit outside of the norm, to become the Other, and in this something new is created. Characters can gain perspective on their societal privilege as they live wearing the skin of another. Children can choose genitals that align with their gender from birth. Children can be born regardless of the sexed body, gender or relationship status. The inanimate can become living, breathing and thinking. It is often these monsters that are key to the representation of those who feel that they do not fit into the norm. It is these characters that are beloved to fanbases and audiences. We do not watch for the struggling priest; we watch for the demonically possessed powerful young girl. We watch for the monster.

Having highlighted how the skin of the Inhabited Vessel can be read as representative of trans and queer individuals, I established how changes through supernatural technologies can interact with sexuality and romantic relationships as partners interact with changing identities and bodies. This separation of the three layers of skin also allows a nuanced critique of relationships, allowing a display of relationships in which bodies may not fit identities and gender expression. These relationships may appear differently externally, perhaps seeming at first glance as a cisgendered queer or heterosexual relationship when in fact one character aligns more with the representation of a trans individual. In this, romantic partners become able to see through layers of skin, and phantom bodies become invisible yet tangible. However, romantic partners are not the only ones to see through layers of skin in the Inhabited Vessel. Friends, confidants and even enemies interact with a name, pronouns and identity that may differ from the body they see before them.

Whilst I discussed the interaction between consent and deception in the context of the Inhabited Vessel, this is certainly an area that could be explored further. Where a possessed individual would be viewed as puppet through an approach aligning with Clover's portals, many who discuss sex in the possessed still seem to read this through the body of the possessed, creating a conflict as the possessor is in control but the sexual acts are viewed as a sexual act conducted by the possessed. Through the Inhabited Vessel sex and sexuality become more complex, particularly as possession types such as fusion and fission play a role in agency. If this topic is further explored, I suggest that whilst consent is likely tied to ideas of agency and fusion, the concept becomes problematised through autonomy of the body. Does the body remember? Can the possessor truly 'own' the body?

Having detailed the complexities within the Inhabited Vessel and the Possessed Slasher, I pulled analysis from each chapter together to focus on the case study of GiGi in the *Child's Play* franchise. In this the Inhabited Vessel is considered in detail, noting gender performance, bodies and relationships, whilst noting themes of predation and violence within Possessed Slashers. I utilised this case study as a basis to interrogate each theme that appears through Chapter One to Five concurrently. These themes often inform each other. For example, considering the Inhabited Vessel's gender performance allows a better understanding of the nuance of a relationship with an Inhabited Vessel. I considered GiGi's journey a particularly relevant case study as they experience both gender and body euphoria and dysphoria as their bodies are altered through supernatural technologies, first through the influence of their parents, then through their own choice. I further expanded my discussion of relationships with Inhabited Vessels to expand to familial relationships, noting that despite the theme of threat and violence within the Possessed Slasher, family can be a prevailing theme.

I have utilised a range of media case studies to evidence the complexity and potential within the Possessed Slasher subgenre and the Inhabited Vessel framework. Throughout this research my predominant case studies have been *Freaky* (2020), the *Child's Play* franchise (1988-2024), with a particular focus on *Cult of Chucky* (2017) and the *Chucky* series (2021-2024), and *Ash vs Evil Dead* (2015-2018). Each are Neo-Possessed Slashers, aligning with many conventions that appear in the NeoSlasher in the Slasher genre. Each utilizes established themes to develop interesting Inhabited Vessel that must interact with gender, violence and a changing body. *Cult of Chucky* and *Chucky* develop established characters and conventions established by the *Child's Play* franchise, building upon difference, as seen in the Ray family's view of their posthuman bodies and GiGi's transition caused by the division of their soul in *Seed of Chucky*.

Similarly, *Ash vs Evil Dead* builds upon the established narrative of the *Evil Dead* franchise, as bodies become demonically altered and the Necronomicon facilitates the previously deemed impossible. Whilst *Freaky* is distinct from the others as it is not a late instalment of a franchise developed since the 1980s, *Freaky* is still beholden to long established conventions. Combining conventions of the body swap genre and the Classical Slasher, it is just as beholden to lore as *Chucky* and *Ash vs Evil Dead*. Using these case studies has allowed a deeper consideration of the development of possession and gender within the subgenre.

In my research I have focused on American media, considering the socio-political climate in America and the tropes established through American Slashers and Possession narratives. I suggest that the Possessed Slasher could be expanded upon by identifying global case studies, noting whether the tropes of these case studies align or contrast with the tropes I have established here. I briefly touch on this in my discussion of *[REC]* (2007) and the American remake *Quarantine* (2008), as I note differences within the lore of the respective

supernatural technologies. It would be interesting to note if religion plays a deeper or different role in more global case studies and whether that impacts the gender dynamics within character archetypes and narrative structures. Similarly, it would be interesting to expand on the *Inhabited Vessel* in more global cinema. Whilst I connect the American drag/trans narrative to possession, these tropes may be reflected differently in case studies with different tropes within cross-dressing media.

In my thesis, I begin several chapters with an analysis of wider drag/trans narratives and body swap/transformation narratives, such as *Tootsie* (1982), *White Chicks* (2004) and *Just One of the Guys* (1985), establishing narrative structures and genre conventions. Whilst these narratives do differ from horror, I suggest that these narratives are helpful in understanding possession from a perspective of gendering and the body as these narratives often focus entirely on these themes. As spirits change bodies, or even as characters assume false identities, they must interact with learning gender, learning how those around them perceive them and how their bodies are different. Inherently tied to trans and queer experiences these characters tackle new gender performance, conflicts of queer or queer-seeming attraction and grapple with new bodies. When approaching the *Inhabited Vessel* in the Possessed Slasher from a perspective of gender, bodies and relationships and their inherent queer and/or trans potential, I approached a form of narrative in the drag/trans and body swap/transformation narrative that considers possession with clear interaction with gender, bodies and relationships.

I brought forward these themes to horror, considering where and how this might change when integrated with threat. I have asked, how might these characters interact with both others and their own identity as the stakes shift? When driving goals shift from being able to continue a job or hobby you love to life or death? From successfully parenting your child to predatory threat? Interestingly, I found that killers faced similar conflicts, whilst

interacting with new bodies, they attempt to continue being killers, something that is viewed often as a combination of a hobby, vocation and identity. They may also use supernatural technologies such as possession and reproductive technologies to facilitate lives for their children. Despite the distinction between the romcom or family comedy structure of many of these wider drag/trans films in comparison to the blood and monstrosity of the Possessed Slasher, many themes can be carried over.

Through my analysis of the Possessed Slasher and the Inhabited Vessel I have created a framework of understanding in which possession can be approached, allowing an analysis of how gender can interact with threat, the body and interpersonal relationships. This research utilises this framework to facilitate a more nuanced understanding of possession as a malleable and multifaceted experience, stepping away from sidelined ‘portals’. Possession can be understood through its potential to reflect the realization of identity whilst examining the process of becoming and being your euphoric self. Whilst this euphoric self may be monstrous, it is radically monstrous, challenging norms and expectations that cisnormativity and heteronormativity place upon gender, bodies and identities.

In the world of the Possessed Slasher, there is so much potential. Gender can be experimented with, or entirely optional. Anyone can become powerful. All bodies can become malleable. If you are experiencing dysphoria all that is needed are magic words or a magic item and you may just welcome euphoria in the blink of an eye. Through this media, audiences interact with changing bodies, changing identities and changing relationships in a supernatural manner, potentially naturalising real-world transitions. Ultimately through my research I forefront a new approach to possession through both the Inhabited Vessel framework and the tropes of the Possessed Slasher genre, highlighting how this approach facilitates discussions of gender and queerness.

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