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### Reviewing the Freaks & Psychos Podcast and Its Discussion of Disability in Slashers

The “other” is a concept which causes discomfort in most people, and the horror genre is no stranger to that idea. The genre utilizes that which is unknown or uncanny to intended viewers to make sense of their fictional and formulaic story. The “other” can simply be that which is not understood and can vary from monsters and the inhumane to human beings themselves. This is why marginalized people, specifically members of the disabled community, are so relevant when analyzing a genre which utilizes their perceived “otherness” to achieve a formulaic and entertaining plot. In their discussion of the sub genre, AnDread, host of *Freaks & Psychos: The Disability in Horror Podcast*, and his friends analyze films and ideas in this episode, examining the prevalence and validity of disability’s portrayal in slasher films.

According to AnDread the slasher film can be defined as, “a killer picking off unsuspecting victims one by one, usually young, attractive teens or twenty-something’s, indulging in sex and drugs,” (“Disability in Slashers” 00:11:00). Through the duration of the podcast he clearly refers to the predictability slashers can be characterized by. Reiterating the aforementioned description, the repetitive structural aspects of the genre are clarified for the audience. Similar to junk food, or so describes the podcast, the slasher has almost no intellectual nutritional value like other horror films might. What makes them so attractive and equally repulsive to some is the prevalent nudity, glorified violence and gore. But at the same time, this

'lightness' and common structure provides a safe space for audience members to explore and confront ideas like mortality, sexuality, and even ableism. In other words, AnDread and his peers Matthew Connolly and Joshua Anderson do not deny the fact that these films contain problematic ideas and tropes, but rather ask audience members not to dismiss the complex capabilities these films have as far as what they can affect in the viewer, ("Disability in Slashers").

Disability is one of the many tools utilized by slasher filmmakers to generate the necessary discomfort the genre demands. AnDread introduces this idea to the audience through the concept of the "demonic cripple". In the existing ableist society, one such example of this is the notion that outward perceived "otherness" is an indicator of one's moral failings; a symbol of their penance. The idea fuels misconceptions which associate mental illness and disability with violence and the demonic ("Disability in Slashers"). Revealing the societal link between disabled people, immorality and malice illustrates an effective picture for listeners of the harm the stereotype causes that community. All while making sense of disabled people's usual position as the antagonist in slasher films, AnDread remarks that this is a device existent due to the need of movie-goers to be able to distinguish the killer from everybody else; people like themselves. Films like *American Psycho*, subvert this idea, portraying killer Patrick Bateman as someone who is outwardly conventionally attractive, charming, and somebody that would be inconsistent with killers of *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>*, *Halloween*, or *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, who are all visibly disabled and dissociated from the average able-bodied individual.

Matthew Connolly, a fellow horror enthusiast had a less than positive reaction to the ranking of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* according to Katelyn Nelson's "5 Great Representations of the Disabled in Horror Films". The passion in his initial reaction stems from

his own experience with his disabled father, who lived with multiple sclerosis (MS) during his formative years. Given that he also hails from the countryside, in which most slashers are set, Matthew disliked the fact that the existence of the disabled in rural areas is ignored especially by horror films (Matthew Connolly, *Disability in Slashers*).

What is different about *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* is that it portrays one of its protagonists, Franklin, as a mobility impaired wheelchair user. Paramount to Franklin's portrayal is his death scene. The podcasters recap his death to listeners, characterizing its simplicity: he was not treated differently by 'Leatherface', the antagonist, because he was in a wheelchair. By doing this, Matthew realizes, not only are rural, disabled people being represented as they often are not, but this character was treated equally to the likes of his able-bodied counterparts. In fact, Franklin was "disposable in the mode of any other character," (AnDread, 01:15:00-01:17:00). Listeners of the podcast at this point, can assess how this challenging take on representation within *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* reshaped Connolly's opinion of the film's capacity to normalize disabled people.

As fanatics of the sub genre, AnDread and his friends in this episode cover the topic of disabled representations and frequent use in slashers in a way that is ethical and inclusive. Although their discussion is of great relevance and importance, AnDread and his guests may have failed to extend their reach beyond people who are already passionate about both horror and disability studies. Most people, especially those who are not as engaged with the topic as them, would find it lengthy and hard to follow at times. What this podcast could benefit from in future episodes or conversations, especially if they are aiming to broaden their audience, are perhaps alternate versions of episodes that are condensed and succinct to maximize the effectiveness of their arguments and ideas. Catering to those who may be disheartened to hear beloved films

critiqued to death, the speakers present the argument that slasher films offer up a safe space for watchers to brave topics and ideas such as their own mortality and issues within society such as the treatment of the disabled community. The podcasters also brought attention to those they deemed “problematic police”. While they believe that picking apart a piece of art for its problematic content betrays its complexity, they recognize that the portrayal of groups like the disabled, perpetuates harmful thoughts and stereotypes, maintaining the belief of the “demonic cripple”, and keeping them in the margins of society.

Works Cited:

“Disability in Slashers.” *Freaks & Psychos: The Disability in Horror Podcast*, hosted by

AnDread. Episode 4, Mantra & WordPress, November 15, 2020,

<https://freaksandpsychospodcast.com/episode-4th/>