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Fictional Survivors and Real Life Survivors: Fede Alvarez's *Evil Dead* as a Slasher
Film and Unnecessary Depictions of Sexual Violence

Fede Alvarez's 2013 remake of Sam Raimi's *The Evil Dead* warps the original storyline. Alvarez's film follows more closely the formula of a slasher film when he makes the survivor of the movie the sister figure, Mia, rather than her brother. There is no "Ash" (the original movie's hero and the franchise's main character) in Alvarez's film—only one woman left standing, after being brutally raped, possessed, and then pursued by a demonic presence. However, one iconic scene of the original is not left out from the new take Alvarez attempts with his remake—that being the scene where the sister figure, Cheryl in the original, and Mia, in the 2013 film, is raped by a tree. While there are a few discrepancies between the two scenes in each film, it still stands that these two films utilize the rape of a woman as a plot device. In both films, it is the rape that is the catalyst for the demonic possession of the characters. It is the rape that "explains" how the possession occurs in the first place. Making Mia, the Cheryl figure, in the 2013 remake of *Evil Dead* the survivor renders her masculinized at the end and does not in any way redeem the tree rape scene—a scene that in both films uses rape to further the storyline, shallowly explicating the original possession of these girls and the resulting chaos throughout the rest of the film.

By making Mia the sole survivor instead of the “Ash” figure (her brother David) Alvarez crafts a film that follows more closely with the slasher film subgenre than the original *The Evil Dead*. According to Carol J. Clover, author of the article “Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film” slasher films contain a specific set of components. First there is the “terrible place” (Clover 80). For Mia, David, and their friends, this is a cabin in a remote forest. Next, there is the weapon. This is often something phallic (Clover 81). At the end of the film, Mia defeats the demonic presence with a chainsaw. Another element of the slasher includes the victims, which can be male or female, dying off one by one (Clover 82). This is where the 2013 *Evil Dead* deviates slightly from the slasher formula, given that the demon does not kill the group at the cabin one by one, but rather the female characters become possessed and attempt to kill the male characters, who fight back. This results in the deaths during the film, rather than a single presence picking off the group from the shadows, like a classic slasher. Lastly, there is the “Final Girl” (Clover 84). Alvarez’s Mia becomes the Final Girl exactly as Clover defines it:

The image of the distressed female most likely to linger in the memory is the image of the one who did not die: the survivor, or Final Girl. She is the one who encounters the mutilated bodies of her friends and perceives the full extent of the preceding horror and of her own peril; who is chased, cornered, wounded; whom we see scream, stagger, fall, rise, and scream again. (Clover 84)

The viewer sees Mia, who overcomes her possession, realize the gravity and reality of her situation and subsequently finds herself hunted by the female demon that terrorized her at the beginning of the film. One watches Mia “scream, stagger, fall, rise, and scream again” as she tries to flee, but then she decides she must fight back. Mia finds a chainsaw in

the shed, and the last image in the movie includes the demon girl crawling towards Mia on her hands and knees, hissing something along the lines of “I’m going to eat your soul,” to which Mia, chainsaw placed in-between her hips, plunges the chainsaw into the mouth/head of the demon girl, shouting, “Eat this!” (*Evil Dead*).

According to Clover, the Final Girl, besides providing the fear that a male character could not, also contains a very specific metamorphosis over the course of a film. This transformation includes the Final Girl becoming masculine, so that a male audience can identify with and cheer on the sole survivor (Clover 92-93). Alvarez’s Mia does just that—chainsaw between her hips, she acquires the phallus deemed necessary for power and survival. The binary view of gender is flipped, and the new, masculinized Mia, fellatio imagery and all, defeat the demon girl.

However, this blow-job-like ending to the film does more than just define the film as a slasher, or define Mia as a Final Girl, it also serves as the second blatant instance of gratuitous, sexually charged violence in the movie. In this way, Alvarez’s film does not wander away from Raimi’s original to explore different subgenres. Along with the sexually exploitative ending image, Alvarez’s film includes the tree rape scene that also occurs in the 1981 original. These scenes echo each other in certain ways and deviate from each other in other ways. Both introduce the sister character as vulnerable, whether in be the panic-stricken Cheryl in the 1981 movie or the heroin-addict Mia in the 2013 version. Both scenes involve the sister character, separated from the group of other characters, wander into the woods and suddenly become restrained by tree branches. In Cheryl’s case, the tree itself penetrates her, and the camera lingers on her exposed body and hints at her possible pleasure (*The Evil Dead*). Mia, however, is restrained by a tree but then visited by a

demonic presence in the form of a woman who resembles Mia herself. This demon opens her mouth and a long, branch-like vine emerges and penetrates Mia (*Evil Dead*).

Presumably, these scenes serve to further the plot, to explain how the demon possessed its first victim. This is a disturbing and cheap way to further a storyline, but moreover, it is a dangerous manner in which to construct a plot and afflict an audience with the desired horror these films are created to cause.

In his review of Alvarez's *Evil Dead*, called "Evil Dead 2013 and the Politics of Tree Rape" movie critic Devin Faraci recounts his experience at a premiere of the film, "The most disturbing part of the SXSW premiere screening of *Evil Dead 2013* came *after* the tree rape scene, when the hundreds of people in the Paramount Theater erupted into applause. "YEAH!" shouted a guy from the balcony" (Faraci). While Faraci notes that this could just be a reaction from fans of the series responding to a nod to the original film, to claim that this excited reply to a scene depicting rape is troubling is an understatement. Especially when one looks back to Clover and her examination of the horror film's mostly male audience, and the horror film's goal of allowing males to identify with the characters, one can assume that this display of sexual power may resonate with certain male viewers. In an article explicating their study titled "Attributing Responsibility to Female Victims After Exposure to Sexually Violent Films," Hedy Red Dexter, Daniel Linz, Steven Penrod and Daniel Saunders compile the following information: "Past research on the effects of exposure to filmed violence with male subjects has shown that repeated exposure to sexualized violence against women results in a desensitization effect" (Dexter et al. qtd. Linz, Donnerstein, & Adams, 1989; Linz, Donnerstein, & Penrod, 1984, 1988: 2149).

They go on to point out:

In these studies, men exposed to so-called slasher films containing violence against women became less anxious and reported fewer negative affective reactions with repeated film viewing; they later showed reductions in physiological reactivity to depictions of domestic violence, showed less sympathy for victims of sexual violence in more realistic contexts, and judged these same victims to be less injured compared to no-exposure control subjects. (Dexter et al. 2149).

Previous research, as well as the research conducted by the four researchers named above, all point to the damaging emotional affects of viewing sexual violence as entertainment. And while women and those of other genders can certainly be perpetrators of sexual violence as well, the whittling empathy of men who consume sexually violent images is particularly disturbing because it is men who are most often the offenders of real life sexual violence (“Sexual Assault Statistics”). Thus, using rape or other forms of sexual violence specifically as a catalyst for events in a story becomes more than just harmless entertainment. It becomes desensitization (Dexter et al. 2149). It becomes normalization of the exploitation of vulnerable bodies. An audience does not see these characters as full people, or the instance of rape as something beyond horror, and they are not meant to. In both Raimi and Alvarez’s *Evil Dead*, an audience watches this rape scene and they are meant to see a superfluously grisly explanation of a demonic possession, all for their entertainment. This entertainment feeds itself back into a culture which silences, blames, terrifies and furthermore dehumanizes real life victims of rape and sexual assault.

Perhaps Alvarez, upon including the tree rape scene, thought that fashioning Mia into the sole, powerful survivor instead of the respective “Ash” figure would somehow excuse the unnecessary sexual violence. One could argue that perhaps Mia’s transformation

into a Final Girl instead of another victim, like Cheryl, symbolizes triumph over her sexual violation. However, this cannot be so; aforementioned, Mia must be masculinized and then put in the same position of power as her original sexual offender to do so. "Turning the tables" produces no redeeming qualities whatsoever when it comes to justifying why a rape scene should have been included in the film in the first place.

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