

What Can You Do in Your Dreams? Slasher Cinema as Youth Empowerment

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PERHAPS NO CINEMATIC GENRE IS MORE MISUNDERSTOOD THAN THE classic American slasher. Such films are alternately reviled as random, meaningless spectacle (Crane 147) or revered as cultural products of the exploitation of sexual difference. Psychoanalytic and feminist readers posit that we watch slashers because they act as signifiers of latent teenage sexual anxiety and desire (Mulvey 756). In the grand tradition of *Halloween* (1978), the *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) franchise is “characterized by the presence of a psychotic killer usually involved in a multiplicity of murders” (Dika 87). What sets these films apart from such canonical works as Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960) is the intimate, formulaic relationship between Clover’s chaste, somewhat androgynous “Final Girl” (Clover 35) and her sexually aggressive assailant (Tracansky 65). The Final Girl’s “triumphant” survival is read by some critics as reflecting the conservative sexual politics of a nation then in the throes of an HIV/AIDS and teen pregnancy crisis (Derry 163). In critical analysis, however, this reactionary view tends to obfuscate the generally troubled relationship between parents and their rebellious offspring: in the *Nightmare on Elm Street* films, authority figures either dismiss teenage pleas for assistance or pose direct physical threats. The slasher, then, can be seen as underage society’s revenge-seeking doppelganger, its desire for rebellion made manifest in the murderous tendencies of powerful, sadistic Freddy. And though sexual exploration is a key feature of the slasher, in the *Nightmare* films, preservation of innocence and peer support constitute the most pressing crises and needs of the teenage unconscious.

The *Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise offers us a particularly interesting case because its heroes rebel against abusive authority figures by

relying on the *dream-induced* Krueger as their avenger. The entire premise is itself redolent of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899); Craven's dark dreams are fundamental exercises in wish fulfillment (155), especially when they involve a manifestation of latent fears and anxieties (168): the murderous Freddy silences abusive adults and engages in wanton sexual display with impunity. In this way, the *Nightmare* also acts as unconscious "compensation" for the shortcomings of real life (161). Invoking Krueger as a protector, however, has a price: an overactive imagination often produces the *phantasy* of martyrdom.

One, Two, Fred's Coming for You: A Dream of Innocence Denied

The opening scene of the inaugural *Nightmare on Elm Street* (directed by Wes Craven) features several strong references to sexual innocence. The assembly sequence of the infamous, highly phallic glove is followed by shots of a frightened teenage girl, running through a grimy boiler room in a white nightgown.¹ As Tina runs, the sound of ominous male laughter is replaced by that of bleating and an infant's cry. She quickly becomes cornered and looks fearfully toward the camera, which cuts to a shot of a sheep standing in the girl's place. Craven's usage of the sheep introduces traditional Christian themes of chastity and blood sacrifice; in effect, Tina is the sacrificial lamb. The three obvious signifiers of purity (the white gown, the infant's cry, the innocent, lamb-like bleat) are violently juxtaposed against the image of a badly scarred (visceral and vaginal), knife-wielding Fred, who scrapes his bladed fingers against the nearest pipe before ripping through the nightgown in an act of blatant sexual violation. The next morning, Tina's mother dismisses her fears with a quick "you've gotta cut your fingernails," as though the virginal garment was violated by her own frantic somnambular sexuality. As her mother points out, the act is highly autoerotic. Freud, in fact, believed that masturbation allows for "sexual developments and sublimations in phantasy" ("Contributions to a Discussion on Masturbation" 187): Tina's dreams, then, represent the surfacing of the pubescent id. Freud's view of the subject was largely negative; hence, Freddy's violence and the "*direct* injuries" of her encounters can be attributed to "the ego's resistance and indignation against that sexual activity" (187). For all his grotesquery, Fred is ultimately only an

extension of Tina, offering us “a titillating glimpse into the contents of the id, especially the sexual and violent impulses” (Derry 163).

This reflexive identification is epitomized in *A Nightmare on Elm Street Part 2: Freddy's Revenge* (1985; directed by Jack Sholder), in which the male protagonist, Jesse, sees Freddy appear every time he looks in the mirror; he even begins finding the infamous glove on his own hand, often covered in the blood of those Freddy has recently slashed. The two are inextricably “linked: occasionally as opposing sides to a single self. . . . This battling of interior forces is then formally supported by the viewer's shifting identification with the two main characters . . . theirs is a struggle for the dominance of restraint over violence” (Dika 93).

Jesse is caught between an adult embrace of sexuality and the infant's revolted fascination. He is horrified to see traces of the id/Fred appear on his sister: her cereal-box prize is revealed to be a set of bright-red “Fu-Man fingers,” which she immediately applies and brandishes in a frightening parody of Freddy's trademark wave. Having identified these illicit vestiges, the id/Fred suddenly becomes interested in her sexually. While sleepwalking (and therefore acting under the influence of the id), Jesse enters his sister's room and hovers over her. The camera pans to his right, now-gloved hand, which creeps menacingly over her chest and towards her head, as though seeking to remove the bedcovers. The hand completely dominates the screen; it is a force with a mind of its own. Suddenly it draws back, each finger jumping erect, as though it were a person interrupted in the attempt of an illicit act. Its knives rattle ominously, but do not violate her innocence. According to Freud in *Totem and Taboo*, Jesse's attachment to his sister comes as no surprise; like all boys his “first object selection . . . is of an incestuous nature” (810), in this case the sister. Though Jesse does not act on these impulses in his waking life, “the incestuous fixations of the libido still play . . . the main role in his unconscious psychic life” (823).

Three, Four, Better Lock Your Door: In the Boiler Room of the Unconscious

The *Nightmare* films make literal the adage that puberty and the concomitant exploration of sexuality can be painful. In one of the first film's more notorious scenes, Freddy's glove emerges from the water between the Final Girl's legs as she reclines in the bath. Like Tina's torn

nightgown, the shot has autoerotic implications, serving to indicate the psychologically painful dangers of such exploration. A similar effect is achieved by Freddy's pushing against the wall behind the sleeping Tina, which yields, hymen-like, but does not break. The same sequence occurs with Nancy after Tina's death, marking Freddy as a sexually exploratory figure. Interestingly, this effect only becomes possible when the crucifix is absent from the wall; in a similar way, when Freddy kills Tina he gestures to his phallic glove, declaring "This is God," before cutting off her fingers (symbols of her own sexual autonomy) and thrusting himself on top of her. The infant attachments to religion and chastity are thereby overridden by the adolescent id's drive toward sexual experience: at the end of the violent sexual pantomime, a stream of blood can be seen on her inner thighs, signaling the loss of virginity.

Nancy, however, is not relegated to this victimized, feminine position. Not for her the loose flowing nightgown and bare legs; though she is most often seen in white, she chooses to wear pants, marking her as masculine (and thus more difficult to dispatch). Dika explains why slasher heroines are often sexually ambiguous: though feminine, Final Girls like Nancy resemble the killer "in [their] ability to see and to use violence" (91). They are also "less likely to disrobe to the point of nudity for the camera or to be involved in extensive on-screen sexual activity" (Doane 760). Such sexual mobility effectively allows slasher heroines to become "masculine" in the face of an uncanny killer, while the psychotic killer himself becomes an embodiment of the monstrous feminine, compensating for the Final Girl's phallic lack (Dika 91). Thus, in the slasher film, "womanhood" is essentially a mask which may be removed or displayed on cue, making Nancy "essentially a congenial double for the adolescent male" (Clover 51).

Nor are the biological males immune from the catastrophic effects of carnal knowledge. While being held in a cell at the police station, the leather-clad, hypermasculine, sexually domineering Rod (whose very name connotes virility) is dispatched by a twisted, roping, phallic bedsheet, originating in his crotch and curling into the noose that will hold him against the bars of his cell and asphyxiate him. Key here is the notion of phallic imprisonment: the "studly" Rod cannot master his impulses and is literally imprisoned and choked by his own sex drive.

Conversely, Nancy's boyfriend Glen will meet a feminized end, dragged into a hole in a bed from which copious amounts of blood issue and coat the walls. Freddy's sexual mobility rivals that of his

“better half”: if Nancy can assume a masculine identity, so too can Freddy become an embodiment of male fears of feminine sexuality (Nancy in particular), becoming a massive *vagina dentata*. Such gender flexibility is not implausible: Freddy frequently assumes a female form in order to dupe his victims. In the first film, he becomes a pouting hall monitor. By the third, he is capable of transforming himself into a sexy nurse (who becomes an object of fatal attraction for one unlucky male patient).²

Fred, however, is more than a manifestation of fear; he is also an intense pubescent sexual yearning passed down from one movie to the next. Jesse’s move to Elm Street and his occupation of Nancy’s old house and bedroom symbolize his transition to sexual maturity and the adoption of the *Nightmare* legacy, which begins when Jesse and love interest Lisa discover Nancy’s old diary in the closet. In an entry dated March 15— a date that calls to mind Caesar’s bleeding wounds and their *infliction* by phallic betrayal—Nancy describes her nocturnal as-sailant. Lisa, picking up on the sexual overtones of the dream, reads the entry in a sultry, provocative voice:

Sometimes when I’m lying here in bed I can see Glen in his window across the way getting ready for bed. His body is slim and smooth, and I know I shouldn’t watch him, but that part of me that wants him forces me to. That’s when I weaken. That’s when I want to go to him . . . March fifteenth. He comes to me at night—horrible, ugly, dirty . . . under the sheets with me . . . tearing at my nightgown with his steel claws. His name is Fred . . . and he keeps trying to take me to the boiler room. He wants to kill me.

Nancy’s lust for Glen is directly linked to the appearance of libidinous Freddy: innocent, level-headed Nancy holds sway in the daytime; overstimulated, wish-fulfilling Freddy rules the night. In *Freddy’s Revenge*, the eponymous character will himself deny any difference between himself and his “victim”: Jesse “can’t fight me. I’m him!”; “There is no Jesse. I’m Jesse now!”

Like Nancy, Jesse will be visited by overpowering sexual urges. The morning after his first night in Nancy/Freddy’s old haunt, Jesse awakens, drenched in sweat, clad only in a pair of tight, clinging underwear. The camera shot holds his groin just off center, directing the audience’s attention to Jesse’s genitalia, then jump-cuts to two eggs sizzling in a skillet for the morning’s breakfast. The testicular allusion alone conveys a sense of Jesse’s latent pubescent sexual agony; later that night

he will also perform a dance which culminates in the release of a white-corked pop-gun from his crotch. These scenes of coital mimesis serve to underscore the emergence of Jesse's biological anxieties.

Jesse also falls victim to familiar (and concomitant) Oedipal conflicts: his father's demand that Jesse unpack his room alludes to his "unpacking" the long-dormant desires of the teenage subconscious. In defiance of his father's demand, he will simply dump the contents of his moving boxes in drawers, smirking "How do you like that, Dad?" In another scene, Jesse will uncover the violently shaking cage containing the family's pair of lovebirds, at which point one bursts from the cage, attacks the family, and bursts into flames. Jesse is immediately accused by his father of having perpetrated a sick prank, blatantly endangering his mother and sister. Sholder appears to be paying homage to Hitchcock; however, the incident conveys a sense of the dangers of sex (the mating birds attack and are even incendiary) and hints at the slowly escalating Oedipal conflict between father and son.

While experiencing unprecedented urges from the id, Jesse falls prey to acute attacks of sexual anxiety. His psychological conflict is particularly graphic, manifesting itself at a friend's pool party. While making out with his girlfriend Lisa on the floor of the cabana, Jesse opens his mouth to kiss her breasts, only to unroll Freddy's massive, wart-covered, "Tex Avery wolf" tongue. The hugely phallic symbol becomes a reference for what we cannot see, namely, Jesse's "monstrous" sexual arousal. (The scene seems to reference the first movie, in which the same tongue emerges from Nancy's disconnected telephone to lick her and declare "I'm your boyfriend now.") Horrified by this external, waking evidence of his shame, Jesse flees the scene, turning to more sexually adept Grady for help. He begs his friend to watch him while he sleeps (in case Freddy should make another appearance), declaring that "Something is trying to get inside my body." The bemused Grady is quick to point out that the statement betrays Jesse's fear of feminine sexuality: "Yeah, she's female . . . and she's waiting for you in the cabana. And you wanna sleep with *me*." Grady's homoerotic reference and Jesse's (justified) paranoia are ironically underscored by the sign on Grady's door, which cautions "this machine starts automatically." Like said machine, the teenage libido never sleeps: Jesse awakes to find Grady fast asleep (of course) and the steel points of Freddy's glove emerging through the skin of his own hand—Freddy has literally been inside of him the whole time. As Jesse writhes in a parody of sexual

rapture, Freddy's eyes begin to peer out of his throat. Finally he emerges and promptly impales Grady on the door, suggesting homosexual rape or revenge for perceived acts of neglect (falling asleep) or ritual castration (earlier in the film Grady pulls down Jesse's shorts in front of Lisa and her friends). Regardless of motivation, a horrified Jesse turns to face the mirror, only to find Freddy playfully wagging a finger at him.

Hysterical now, Jesse returns to his bewildered girlfriend, telling her that Freddy is "inside me—I'm scared" that "he wants to take me again" and that "he owns me." Such language is typical of rape—it is as if being at the mercy of libidinous anxieties has feminized Jesse. In fact, one of Jesse's dream-encounters with his sexualized self finds him struggling against Freddy to keep the basement door shut, as though it were a kind of male hymen barring carnal knowledge. When he fails, Freddy overpowers him and holds their bodies together in an erotic embrace, a single erect claw pointed menacingly at Jesse's body. Lisa tries to reassure Jesse that Freddy is only a manifestation of his internal state, stating that "because you created him, you can destroy him." However, his libidinal doppelganger soon re-emerges. Predictably, the camera cuts to images of grilled hot dogs bursting into flame and cans of beer gushing white foam: images of the sexual climax Jesse/Freddy has again been denied. "Freddy" takes control once more, taking Lisa to the floor, grabbing her buttocks and biting into her thigh, releasing a very vaginal stream of blood in yet another ritualized rape. Lisa only half-heartedly defends herself after being stabbed with a kitchen knife, returning the blow as gently as possible. "Jesse" emerges for a moment, issuing a tender "I love you" from Freddy's lips. The two are now officially indistinguishable. Jesse/Freddy drops the knife, rushes out toward the party, declares that "you are all my children now," and . . . vanishes.

He returns, of course, to the infamous boiler room, the steamy scene of the crime where many of Krueger's encounters occur. Most other encounters take place in a very similar locale—the basement room of the Elm Street House, which contains the furnace. Freddy's boiler room—located "across the tracks" on the outskirts of town—and Nancy's furnace room are all sites tucked away from sight, dangerous to enter because they are the repository of the teenage heroes' most illicit fears and dreams. These are the sites of Freddy's triumphs and defeats, where he rises and falls. They are where Freddy, the *id*, dwells—making them, collectively, the seamy boiler room of the subconscious. Both Tina and Nancy make their first acquaintance with Freddy in the factory boiler room. Both

Nancy and Jesse discover phallic and sexual power—Freddy’s glove—in the basement of the Elm Street house; it is hidden, appropriately enough, inside the furnace. And, regardless of phallic implication, both Final Girl and Final Boy will eventually try on the glove, literally or symbolically.

The inability of the Elm Street teenagers to control their libidinal urges also manifests itself in self-inflicted violence. This “betrayal of the self” comes to the fore in *A Nightmare on Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors* (1987; directed by Chuck Russel). Early in the film, Kristen is attacked by Freddy in the bathroom, who holds her immobile as he draws one finger delicately across her arm. When she wakes up, however, she appears to have slit her own wrists (she is holding a razor blade). Freddy reaches new levels of grotesque in the dreams of the other young inhabitants of the psychiatric ward to which Kristen is then committed: he slices the arteries from one boy’s limbs and uses them as puppet strings, forcing the boy to climb to the top of a tower. With a flick of his glove, he cuts the ties, and the boy plunges to his death, ostensibly committing suicide (the action is particularly interesting given that the victim is himself a maker and manipulator of puppets). In the same vein, Freddy attacks the paraplegic boy with a spiked wheelchair (his paraplegia is the result of a suicide attempt). A former junkie is dispatched with hypodermic fingernails (her “old friends”), which plunge into suddenly gaping, mouth-like track marks. The Freddy/self utilizes the repressed id of each of the victims and destroys them with their own negative libidinal energy, further underlying the concept of struggle of the divided self.

Five, Six, Grab Your Crucifix: Full Fatal Parental Deniability

According to Sarah Tracansky, rebellion against heavily authoritarian society is a subject constantly broached in the slasher: parents, step-parents, and teachers are always portrayed as psychologically oppressive or physically abusive, suggesting that slasher villains are symbolic representations of the youthful rebellious drive (Tracansky 65). Charles Derry believes that in the slasher, “the most horrifyingly violent acts are not committed by the monsters, but by members of the American family” (Derry 168). It is not surprising to find, then, that the nightmares spawned by the id in these films have a close connection to the

home; the concept of the Freudian *Unheimliche* is blatantly exploited throughout the *Nightmare on Elm Street* saga. According to the Freudian theory, that which reminds us of the home becomes the source of our most uncanny terrors and phobias (*The Uncanny* 134). Hence, Craven's villain becomes not only a representation of the repressed id, but a physical manifestation of the teen's reaction to family politics as well. As Robin Wood points out, this "creature from the id" may actually be a throwback to traditional horror, "not merely a product of repression but a protest against it" (80).

In all three films, teenagers are denied access to "the truth about Freddy"; their unconscious struggles are variously dismissed as the result of insomnia, raging hormones, narcissistic bids for attention, and even guilt with uniformly disastrous consequences. Quite often these adult figures act as castrating influences and/or direct threats to the teens' survival, and they are often punished for it: it is not a supernatural presence but the teenagers themselves that desire to bring about the demise of the wayward, negligent parent or authority figure.

Throughout the original film, Nancy's mother attempts (unsuccessfully) to hide half-empty liquor bottles from her daughter's sight, eventually forcing the confrontation that leads the pair to the boiler room for the revelation of "the truth about Freddy."³

She takes her to the cellar; the scene of disclosure will take place within the realm of the unconscious id. After repeated badgering, Mrs. Parker admits that she "didn't see how much you needed to know" and that she had been "trying to protect you" by withholding information. According to the mother, Freddy cannot return: "He's dead, honey, because mommy killed him." She pulls Fred's glove from its hiding place in the furnace, an act which suggests the castrating maternal *vagina dentata*: Mrs. Parker has literally usurped Freddy's symbol of potency and imprisoned it in a very vaginal red metal box. She has become the dreaded pre-Oedipal castrating mother, an "object of sexual jealousy and desire," threatening "symbolically to engulf the infant, thus posing a threat of psychic obliteration" (Creed 109); she has rendered both Nancy and Freddy impotent via the withholding of knowledge, but only until her daughter's teenage libidinal energies emerge. In effect, Nancy will actually use that libidinal energy (in the form of Freddy) to destroy her mother, who attempts to prevent Nancy from leaving the house in which she is being assaulted by locking the doors *from the inside*.⁴

The conflict between mother and daughter begins to appear around the time of Nancy's sexually exploratory bath, before which she rejects the maternal offering of a glass of warm milk ("gross!"), which symbolizes Nancy's rejection of mother–infant relationship. Maternal influence affects Nancy's id in other frightening ways; after imprisoning her daughter within Freddy's domain, she begins to drink and the camera immediately pans to a now-bleeding wound in Nancy's thigh. Hence, her mother's self-destructive behavior is a trigger which unleashes the violence of the id. Freddy, however, certainly gets his revenge: her mother is forced to die *twice* in the course of the film's conclusion. On the first occasion her bed literally sinks down into an abyss, the red glow emanating from the bedframe serving to indicate either hell or the fiery id; either way, Nancy's suffering is avenged. On the second occasion (one of Craven's trademark false-utopian endings) the outwardly friendly mother is dragged backwards through a hole in the door with Freddy's knives at her throat, a fitting reversal of her attempted castration of both Nancy and Freddy.⁵

As might be expected, Nancy is much closer to her father. Clover points out the presence of the "patently erotic threat" in horror film, noting that it is "easily seen as the materialized projection of the viewer's own incestuous fears and desires." Thus, as with the aberrant mothers, "this disabling cathexis to one's parents [here the father] . . . must be killed and re-killed in the service of sexual autonomy" (Clover 49). In fact, her dialogue seems to come dangerously close to violating the incest taboo: when her father follows her in order to track down Rod (whom he suspects of having murdered Tina), she accuses him of having "used" her. When her mother refuses to believe her nightmares, she runs to the police station and to her father's protection. She will seek this protection again, offering her father "a proposition"—will he mind "cold-cocking this guy" (meaning Freddy) when he "comes to break down my door in exactly twenty minutes?" Her father assumes the role of sexual guardian, with Freddy as violator of her chastity. In *Dream Warriors*, by contrast, Nancy and her father have drifted apart: after the loss of his wife, he has become an alcoholic. Nevertheless she appeals to him again for help, stating that he somehow "owes" her for a past transgression. But only by assuming the image of her father (as he does in the penultimate scene of *Dream Warriors*, after killing the real father) can Freddy trick Nancy into yielding to him; when this happens, she dies. The false father declares that he has "crossed over,"

before violating her, stabbing her through the chest with his phallic glove. However, Nancy's parricidal id has already made short work of him.

Dream Warriors takes these parent-child conflicts one step further: Kristen's mother abuses alcohol, brings home men at late hours, and, in Kristen's fantasy, perceives her daughter as the sexual rival Nancy seems in danger of becoming. Kristen's final dream replays the opening sequence of the film, in which the mother enters the room, castigates her daughter for playing loud music so late, and angrily bids her good night. Her demeanor betrays her eagerness to return to the living room, in which an unknown man is requesting the location of the liquor cabinet. When the dream is "replayed" in Kristen's fantasy at the end of the film, mother and daughter are completely reconciled, bidding each other a fond, psychosociologically fulfilling goodnight. The man downstairs is still insistent on the gin; now, however, the mother is willing to linger to tuck Kristen in. All appears well—until Fred shows up, brandishing the maternal head, which is furious and still capable of speech. It promptly accuses Kristen of sabotaging her love life: "Every time I try to bring a man home you ruin it!" the still-made-up face screams.

Unfortunately for Kristen, such accusation comes closer to the reality of their relationship. When questioned by Nancy (who is now studying psychology in graduate school), the mother insists that Kristen's neuroses have "gotten worse since I took away her credit cards," suggesting that her daughter's actions constitute a selfish bid for attention. Because the head is controlled by Freddy (this all takes place in Kristen's dreamscape), her dialogue serves to indicate Kristen's own perception of their sexual rivalry. In this case, the blood on her wrists at the beginning of the movie may also be seen as menarche, the bloody act that triggers maternal rejection of the female infant.

Rivalry, however, is not the only sexual attention the teens receive from adults. In *Freddy's Revenge* Jesse and Grady are tormented daily by the sadistic male gym teacher, Coach Schneider. But the hint of sexual abuse does not end at push-ups and laps; during one of his nocturnal strolls Jesse is drawn to a gay bar, in which he encounters the teacher in full leather bondage gear. When he is discovered, the teacher drags him back to the school gym, tells him to shower, and retreats to his office. Jesse is now naked and vulnerable to the threat of castration or rape (or both) at the hands of the gym teacher; his *id*, however, is not. Freddy

manifests himself and goes to work on the sadistic teacher with a vengeance. In a reversal of the coach's own brutal designs, the invisible Freddy binds Schneider with his own jump ropes, launches every single ball (the phallic implications are clear) at his head, rips off his clothes, drags him under the showers, and savagely slaps him in the rear with a wet towel. The camera work, however, keeps Jesse separate from Freddy's action; as the still-invisible Freddy intimidates the gym teacher with jump ropes and balls, the camera cuts back several times to a frightened, harmlessly showering Jesse. Before Schneider is killed, the shot cuts back to Jesse, who appears to be surprised to find his naked coach in the showers. A blanket of mist temporarily obscures him, and then Freddy is observed to occupy his place. It appears that only after Freddy is realigned with Jesse can he kill Schneider, which he does with customary relish, causing the phallic showerheads to squirt blood in mock-castration. The camera then cuts back to Jesse, who is standing in the same spot, now covered with blood and brandishing Freddy's glove. What is most interesting about this sequence is that it sheds new light on Freddy's nature—now, he can be both tormentor and self-defense mechanism. Given that he is a manifestation of the teenage id, this comes as little surprise; his victims always include those who pose a risk of castration, including sexual rivals (mothers, Grady). This new "protective" side seems to support theories of conservative family politics in horror; "bad" or "unnatural" parents and sexual deviants posing a threat to teenage innocence are always destroyed.

In fact, all adults operating on *Elm Street* are negligent to some degree, dismissing the nocturnal struggles of their teens as arising from hormonal imbalance or sleep deprivation. Throughout *Nightmare on Elm Street*, Nancy's mother informs her daughter that the nightmares will vanish when she finally gets some sleep (completely overlooking the fact that several of Nancy's friends have been brutally murdered during the past few nights). Jesse believes his family thinks he is on drugs. But the most blatant denial comes from *Dream Warriors*, in which Dr. Sims (an eerie fusion of Nurse Ratchet and Dr. Leonard McCoy) declares that the teens "won't make any progress until [they] recognize [their] dreams for what they are . . . the byproducts of guilt [from] moral conflicts and overt sexuality." Like the rest of the Elm Street parents, she believes the "cure" lies in "uninterrupted REM sleep" and a refusal to "blame your dreams for your weakness." She also insists on sedating her patients; an act which, as the viewer knows by

now, is essentially a death warrant (as one teen declares toward the end of the film “you stupid bitch, you’re killing us!”).

Seven, Eight, Before It’s Too Late: Only Straight Talk in Here

Teenagers like Jesse and Kristen only manage to survive because of a peer support network. In *Freddy’s Revenge* Lisa is capable of “exorcizing” Freddy by offering Jesse love and unconditional understanding. In a similar way, Nancy’s return in *Dream Warriors* heralds the first group discussion of Freddy’s hauntings; this “straight talk” allows the group to band together against their assailant, resulting in an unprecedented number of survivors.

Lisa achieves this by forcing Jesse to accept that Freddy is a fundamental part of his own identity; “you created him, you can destroy him!” She offers to “figure it out together,” and though Freddy frequently threatens to kill her, he is unable to make good on his promise. The penultimate “showdown” between Lisa and Freddy occurs in Freddy’s original boiler room; with its dark red lighting, pipes, and narrow walkways it too resembles a monstrous vagina (Creed 53). The scene can therefore be analyzed as Jesse’s first sexual encounter. Paradoxically, it is Lisa who must penetrate the dangerous area in search of her boyfriend. Before entering the labyrinth in which Freddy/Jesse lurks, she passes two monstrous bulldogs with grotesque baby faces, a reflection, perhaps, of the infant status she must leave behind to “save” Jesse. The experience is not at first pleasurable; she burns her hand on a phallic pipe and experiences a fantasy of red ants on lacerated skin; a clear metonymy for the rupture of the hymen. “Come to me, Lisa” Freddy beckons from within the cavernous boiler room. She acquiesces, kneeling before him in clear surrender. He touches her hair, declares that “Jesse is dead,” and raises his glove. Before he can penetrate her, however, she tells him that she loves him. This marks a bizarre turning point in the sequence: in yet another reversal of gender function, Freddy begins to bleed, allowing Lisa to both embrace and kiss him. A steam valve releases in the background and a fire is lit below them, signaling climax. At this point Freddy begins to melt, revealing Jesse inside him. Triumphant music plays; the tension has finally been relieved. Lisa has safely guided him through his first coital act, removing

the “monstrous” anxiety Jesse’s psyche had attached to his perceptions of it.

In a similar way, Nancy guides her younger peers at the psychiatric ward through their id-based torments. Now a graduate student in psychology with a budding romantic attachment to Neil (the head clinician), she represents a half-way point between teenager and adult, able to bridge the gap because she “used to be like them.” Unlike Neil or Dr. Sims, she freely offers the teens the information about Freddy she herself was denied; she can see they are “ready” to hear it. More importantly, she understands from personal experience that it may save their lives. “It’s not you,” she counsels, “your parents . . . they burned him alive. And now we’re paying for their sins.” She then advises the teens that each of them possesses the potential to destroy Freddy; each of them “[has] this inner strength. Some special power that you’ve had in your most wonderful dreams.” She believes that “together we can use that power if we try,” and both she and Neil preach “straight-talk only” group strategy methods to combat the rampantly rebellious id; each of them will enter the same dream and fight Freddy together in the final conflict.

Ultimately, though the horror film has been reviled as mindless slaughter, the *Nightmare* films appear to preach a positive message of group sexual awareness and understanding. Contrary to popular opinion, these films are not reactionary. They do not channel teens toward conforming to any hegemonic order: when conservative politics come to the fore, the transgressors are not teens, but are instead their parents and teachers. It is no mistake that the slasher lies “beyond the purview of the respectable (middle-aged, middle-class) audience”; what appears to be “degenerate aberration” to adults makes psychosocial sense to teens, providing us with “a clearer picture of current sexual [and familial] attitudes” (Clover 21). Freddy forces the reader toward greater awareness of their own psychological reality, pushing them to react to authority’s manifest abuses. The association of these films with a predominately teen audience renders them an ideal forum for the venting of teenage dilemmas. Ultimately, therefore, the Elm Street teens represent what can effectively be considered the beginning of a cinematic youth movement.

Notes

1. One of the more interesting aspects of the films is that first appearance of the killer is almost always preceded by one or more prepubertal girls in white nightgowns or party dresses, who

sing the infamous “Freddy chant.” In the original *Nightmare on Elm Street* Nancy must pass through their ranks to access the house; they can thus be perceived as the protective, psychic barriers of childhood. Interestingly, while she is dreaming, Lisa will follow one such child into the popsicle-stick house after warning her not to enter it. In the basement she finds a room full of childrens’ corpses (Freddy was a child murderer). The little girl (whom she had been cradling in her arms) immediately becomes a skeleton, underscoring the metaphorical decline of childhood innocence.

2. Though young, the nurse is nevertheless an authority figure; her successful seduction of the boy results in the most graphic sexual consequences of any of the first three movies. The nurse/Freddy binds him to the bed with four phallic tongues (from her own mouth). The mattress then vanishes, revealing the flaming abyssal pit over which he is suspended. This falls in accordance with conservative theories of horror: the pairing of an adolescent and an adult violates taboo and must be punished.
3. Freddy is particularly dedicated in his dispatch of abusive alcoholics. “The bastard son of a hundred maniacs,” he is raised by an abusive alcoholic (portrayed by shock-rocker Alice Cooper in *Freddy’s Dead: The Final Nightmare*), and is ultimately immolated by a group of alcoholic Elm Street parents, whom he is particularly enamored of killing. In the first and third films Freddy dispatches two alcohol abusing mothers (Nancy’s and Kristen’s) and one father (also Nancy’s). Tina’s mother is also alcoholic; however, he does not get access to her.
4. 1428 Elm Street (the historical home of Freddy as well as all the Elm Street teens) is, with its very vaginal red door, figured as female. As Barbara Creed points out, Freud argued that houses in dreams often symbolize bodies, the rooms and passageways within it are particularly vaginal. Interestingly, the father’s initial response to his daughter’s nocturnal violation is to bar the windows in a vain attempt to prevent *external* (penile) penetration, which stands in contrast to his wife’s attempt to “seal” Nancy from the inside. With a nod toward the *Heimliche*, the house will reappear in the sequel and also the third installment—this time as a popsicle-stick mock-up created by Kristen, modeled on the place she encounters Freddy in her nocturnal struggles. Both Nancy and Kristen will return there to “finish” the fight.
5. One obvious message: there are no teenage utopias.

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