

Slasher, rites of passage and adolescence: the liminar *Queer* subject in *Fear Street* (Netflix, 2021)

Slasher, *rito de paso y adolescencia: el sujeto liminar Queer en La calle del terror* (Netflix, 2021)



Emeterio Diez Puertas is a Senior Lecturer and has had two six-year periods of research. He has given courses and seminars at universities in Argentina, Colombia, and Ecuador. He has carried out academic research in the fields of Audio-visual Narratives, Media History and Gender Studies. He is the author of ten books and over sixty articles. Among his books are: *Cine y Comunicación política en Iberoamérica* (2018), *El sueño de un cine hispano* (2017), *Golpe a la Transición. El secuestro de "El crimen de Cuenca"* (2012), *Historia social del cine en España* (2003) and *Historia del movimiento obrero en la industria española del cine (1931-1999)* (2001). He is a member of AsHisCom (Association of Communication Historians).

Camilo José Cela University, Spain

ediez@ucjc.edu

ORCID: 0000-0002-2206-0480

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Abstract:

Slashers are a subgenre of horror films, full of violence and sex, born in the United States in the 1970s. They star teenagers and triumph, especially, among teenagers. Despite moments of crisis and serious controversy, they are still part of audio-visual fiction today, as illustrated by *Fear Street* (2021). This paper studies the narrative of this Netflix production to interpret the profound sense of a type of filmmaking often accused of inciting femicide and of being exploitative. That is, of using the forbidden, the lurid and the scandalous to, for a low budget, make a killing at the box office through commercial formulas such as sequels and using dubious aesthetic pretensions. Specifically, slashers are related to the sexual awakening and narrations of the rite of passage to heteronormativity, which, in the case of *Fear Street*, is questioned from a *Queer* perspective.

Keywords:

Adolescence; Slasher; horror movies; narratology; rite of passage; heteronormativity; *Queer*.

Resumen:

El slasher es un subgénero del cine de terror lleno de violencia y sexo que nace en Estados Unidos en los años setenta del siglo pasado. Está protagonizado por adolescentes y triunfa, especialmente, entre los adolescentes. Pese a momentos de crisis y graves polémicas, hoy sigue formando parte de la ficción audiovisual, como demuestra el caso de La calle del terror (Fear Street, 2021). El artículo estudia la narrativa de esta producción de Netflix para interpretar el sentido profundo de un tipo de relato que ha sido acusado de incitar al feminicidio y ser cine de explotación, es decir, de servirse de lo prohibido, lo escabroso y lo escandaloso para, con bajo presupuesto, fórmulas comerciales como las secuelas y dudosas pretensiones estéticas, amasar una fortuna en la taquilla. En concreto, se relaciona el slasher con el despertar sexual y las narraciones del rito de paso a la heteronormatividad, la cual, en el caso de La calle del terror, se cuestiona desde una perspectiva Queer.

Palabras clave:

Adolescencia; Slasher; cine de terror; narratología; rito de paso; heteronormatividad; Queer.

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1. Introduction

Slasher films came into being in the late 1970s with two foundational films, *Halloween*, (1978) and *Friday the 13th* (1980). They are a variant of the horror genre, a genre forming part of the tradition of gothic literature (MacAndrew, 1979), which has been, since the 1950s and perhaps because it stars adolescent actors, taken as theirs by teenagers, becoming, along with live music, jeans and comics, a characteristic element of youth culture (García Grego, 2015). The sub-genre itself, following dozens of film and TV productions, seemed to have run out of steam (Rockoff, 2002), however, in recent years, and as a part of post-September-11 cinema, it has made a comeback with even remakes of those foundational classics being filmed.

The narrative outline of a slasher is very simple. The protagonists are high school students of 15-18 years of age. The sexual urge, that is, the initiation to sex as a step in their maturity, marks their character. The teens are a group who are little by little picked off by a masked killer until only the most demure and level-headed girl remains. She, after killing the murderer in the third act, is revealed as the heroine, having overcome all obstacles without the help of an adult. She has done this through her courage, intelligence, prudence and, then yes, by being as violent as the killer.

Figure 1. Jamie Lee Curtis plays 17-year-old Laurie Strode, in *Halloween* (1978)



Source: Universal Pictures

Slashers have drawn academic attention from the very beginning, there being numerous studies from just after the subgenre's birth, from a great variety of perspectives (Brottman, 1997; Carrol, 2006; Kerswell, 2010; Zinoman, 2011). In the Spanish context,

the contributions of Guillot & Valencia (1996), Berruzo (2001), Delgado Matón (2016) and, especially, Higuera (2011) and Pérez Ochoa (2015 & 2016) deserve particular mention. Rubén Higuera defines the subgenre from certain narratological characteristics: a female protagonist, a context far from adult or paternal figures, pre-matrimonial sex, a masked figure, his being a *voyeur*, a bladed weapon with a phallic connotation, a succession of systematic killings, graphically shown, the use of a subjective point of view as well as clear transtextuality. Luis Pérez Ochoa relates slashers to their socio-political context: the movies from the 80s are an expression of that decade's neo-liberalism; the self-reference and parody of 90s slashers derives from globalisation and the extension of mass media culture; early XXI century slashers are related to post-9/11 paranoia and the 2008 economic crisis; and, finally, recent slashers are understood by the hardening of neoliberal, imperialist, androcentric politics, as the endless deaths of the youths in these films is no more than a warning of what awaits them in a competitive capitalist world that in its way massacres people.

One of the most recent slasher productions is the *Fear Street* trilogy (2021), broadcast on the Netflix platform. It is made up of three films *Fear Street (part 1): 1994*, *Fear Street (part 2): 1978*, and *Fear Street (part 3): 1666*. All three are based on the books written by Robert Lawrence Stine, author of terror stories for children and young adults, such as the *Nightmare Room* series. This paper proposes an analysis of this trilogy to reveal its narrative devices and understand its meaning.

2. Theoretical framework & methodology

Our approach to the object of study comes from four different academic traditions: on-screen content, teenage consumption, gender studies and the mythopoetic focus. Within the field of communication, studies of television fiction were established in the eighties and were the heirs of traditional film studies. The TV was no longer the "idiot box" and since then, quality TV series have been studied (Feuer, 1985; Cobo Durán, 2013; Iglesias, 2014; Weiner, 2015; Carrión Domínguez, 2019). Digital convergence means that today studies are turning to programs on paid digital TV platforms. Netflix, Amazon Prime, HBO, Filmin and others are the emerging windows as opposed to cinemas and conventional TV channels. This new form of à la carte consumption and exhibition is what explains *Fear Street's* peculiar format, three films, each of 100-120 minutes, available for binge-viewing.

Figure 2. *The Fear Street* trilogy



Source: Netflix

Secondly, this paper belongs among those that cover teenagers' consumption of TV series, whether they be studies focused on early adolescence (10-14 years-of-age) or later (15-19), be they from a theoretic perspective or another (educational, social, gender, psychological...), looking at one or other risk factor (drug addiction, isolation, dropping out, pregnancy, suicide, etc.) (Abad & Fernández, 2016; Bandrés Goldáraz, 2019; Belmonte Borrego, 2016; Chicharro Merayo, 2012; Donstrup, 2019; Forteza Martínez, De Casas Moreno, & Vizcaíno Verdú, 2021; Mateos-Pérez, 2021; Ramírez Alvarado, Gutiérrez Lozano & Ruiz del Olmo, 2020; Trujillo Fernández, 2015). It is true that slashers are "adult" films. The authorities rate these films for the over-18s, and even, in some cases, make cuts or ban them. However, with the growth of domestic video and cable TV plus greater tolerance, teenagers have been able to access this "taboo". In fact, Halloween was classified in 1978 for over 18s (over 16s in France) but other countries have recently lowered the rated age to 12-13. Moreover, there is a "rite" among adolescents to see the most "mythical" horror films, and especially slashers, on Halloween night. The market has created yet another consumption rite. It should not be forgotten that cinema-going and TV-watching are practices that have been compared to religious rites. Geoffrey Hill affirms that the cinema theatre is a temple; the filmgoer, a communicant; the ticket, an offering to the gods; and what we watch on the screen, the myth (1992: 4). Marc Augé states that the television is a domestic altar for small gods (1997: 138-139).

Figure 3. *Slasher* (2016-). A Canadian series created by Aaron Martin. Now in its fourth season



Source: Chiller Films, Super Channel, Shaftesbury Films

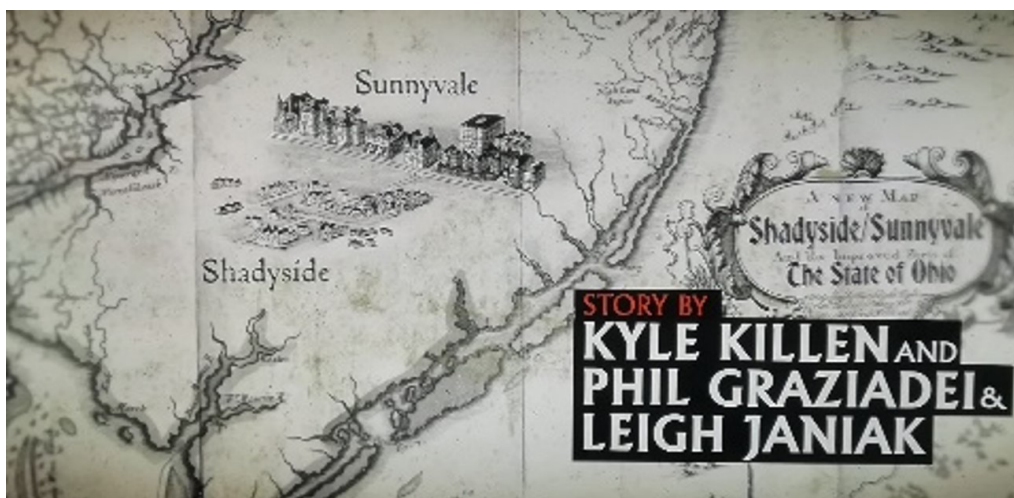
Thirdly, we set out from a gender perspective, a source of abundant academic output in the case of slashers. From an early stage, it was spoken of as exploitation cinema and as a subgenre based on a patriarchal and heteronormative regime which reproduced female stereotypes and exercised victimising violence and objectification towards women (Clover, 1987 & 1992; Dika, 1990; Creed, 1993; Pinedo, 1997; Karlyn, 2003; Leal, 2020). In this sense, slashers are taken to be a demonstration that gender is a regulated social construction (Butler, 2007). Their images are a cultural representation of what each gender role is allowed to do or prohibited from doing in society. In the case of *Fear Street*, we enter into what Fonseca Hernández and Quintero Soto call *peripheral sexualities*: “those which cross the border of socially accepted sexuality [...] are based on the resistance to traditional values, and on assuming the transgression many times the price to be paid is that of social rejection, discrimination and stigma” (2009: 44).

As regards the mythopoetic, the relation between tale and rite/myth, between fictional and sacred text, is now a commonplace (Campell, 2014; Durand, 1993 & 2005; Frazer, 2011; Frye, 1963; Jung, 2002; Lévi-Strauss, 2000 & 2006; or Propp 2008 & 2020). As pointed out by Chillón, media culture is largely narrative, and is built on transtextuality, that is, on an intense dialectic relation with the preceding cultural tradition and adheres to the mythopoetic character of human imagination and the collective imaginary world, in the sense that its tales are constructed by mythemes and archetypes inscribed in the anthropological limits and possibilities of the species. Consequently, “the imaginary figures generated by media culture are indebted to representations that have been crystalised and sedimented by the cultural tradition considered *sensu lato*.” (2000: 138) Therefore, audio-visual fiction is full of tales about rites of passage such as *The Emerald Forest* (1985), based on a true story, or such fiction has a narrative derived from the rite

of passage, as in those films that follow the narrative outline of the monomyth or the Hero's Journey. People's social lives, for Arnold van Gennep, are marked by these rites of passage, by transitions from one state to another: from youth to maturity, from single life to matrimony, from child to parent, from peace to war, from life to death, etc. Some of these transitions are so important that society controls and ritualises them. It controls them because there is danger that certain individuals may not pass such a step. It ritualises them through a ceremony with a series of community and symbolic activities.

Uniting these four perspectives allows us to formulate our hypothesis in the following way: the Netflix trilogy (digital screens) shows the teenagers (the target audience) a rite of passage and a myth (mythopoetic) related to their sexual identity (gender assimilation). The slasher was born as a myth that explained to adolescents the rite of passage to full sexuality, or rather, it explained to them why they should accept the heteronorm. However, our hypothesis is that *Fear Street* fights against this discourse, as the actantial subject is a Queer liminar subject.

Illustration 4. The credits show the story's geography: the wealthy town of Sunnyvale and the poor town of Shadyside on the land occupied in 1666 by Union, the pioneer settlement, built by those Queers who had arrived in the New World fleeing from religious and political persecution in Europe



Source: Netflix

To demonstrate this hypothesis, we are going to perform, in the results section, a narratological analysis of the trilogy starting from Greimas's proposal (1973, 1982, 1983, 1991). The methodology consists of taking the actantial model and studying the semiotics of the action in *Fear Street* as regards: 1) space-time; 2) the actantial structure, 3) the subject's competence; and 4) the narrative outline of the tests. Below, in the discussion section, we consider the relation between semiotic modes of existence, peripheral sexualities and certain elements of the rite of passage of initiation, what its phases are, the *liminal personae*, the *communitas*, mysteries and terror. Finally, we finish with a synopsis of conclusions.

3. Semiotic analysis of *Fear Street*

3.1. Paradigmatic organisation: the articulation of space-time

Concerning the paradigmatic blueprint, we focus on the chronotope. Furthermore, this articulation is decisive in how the trilogy is told. The title *Fear Street* comes from Stine's novels and is the name of a street in Shadyside. The name "Fear" comes from the surname Fier, a family whose mother and daughter died accused of witchcraft.

The space-time articulation is as follows:

Narrative now: 1994.

Narrative before: 1666 & 1978.

Narrative after: 2021.

Physical space: the town of Shadyside.

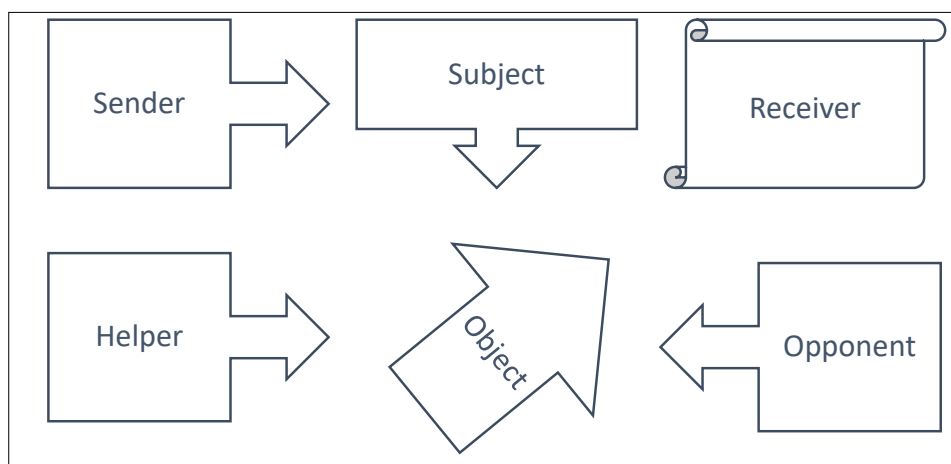
Surrounding spaces: the town of Sunnyvale and Nightwing camp.

Location of the time junction: the village of Union.

Paratopic space (where the competence is acquired): tunnels.

Space junction (place of successive junctions and disjunctures): the buried hand tree (in the woods and later in the shopping centre), which is the symbol of the union between the heavenly world (marking the date of the celebrations), the earthly world of the living and the underground world of the dead and the Devil.

Figure 5. Greimas's actantial model



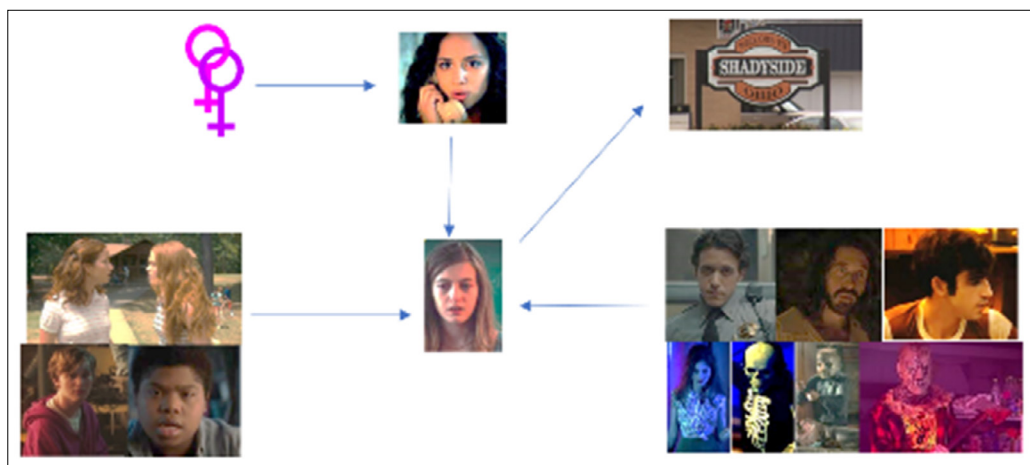
Source: created by the author

3.2. Actantial structures

Greimas holds that there are six actantial positions in every story: the *subject* (the actant who desires the object and, therefore, is able to move events), the *object* (that of value which is desired, the good sought by the subject), the *sender* (that which moves the subject, that indicates the value of the object or good), the *receiver* (who obtains the object), the *opponent* (difficulty or the one who makes the gaining of the object difficult) and the *helper* (who acts in favour of the subject). The object can be a person (the princess), an animal (a shark a gorilla...), a thing (a ring, gold, a sword), a quality (king, married, rich, mature...) or knowledge (information). The important thing is that the object's desire turns the subject into a subject-operator, a *performing subject*, an executor of an *actantial force*, that is, that acts and is transformed on achieving its goal.

In the case of *Fear Street*, as the story takes place over three centuries, several characters, although almost always the same actor, occupy the same actantial position. For example, the subject is called Sarah (the character in 1666) and Deena (the character in 1994) but both are played by the actor Kiana Madeira. The same thing happens with the object: Hannah and Sam (Samantha), played by Olivia Scott Welch. In the case of the principal opponent, there are three characters: Salomon, Nick Goode, teenager and Nick Goode, sheriff. The first and the third are played by Ashley Zukerman. The second, by Ted Sutherland. The actantial plan is the following. For three centuries, in the state of Ohio, lesbian love (sender) has meant that Sarah Fier/Deena (subject) has struggled to be the partner (actantial force) of Hannah/Sam (object). She has been able to count on the help of, among others, her brother, her friends or Martin (helpers). However, the Devil, his lackeys, such as Salomon, Nick Goode, Skull Mask or The Milkman, and the citizens of Sunnyvale, amongst others (opponents) have opposed them.

**Figure 6. Representation of the actantial model in the *Fear Street* trilogy.
Not all the actors or characters are included in each actantial position**



Source: created by the author

If Sarah Fier/Deena were to win at any time, the receiver would be the town of Shadyside, as the curse that fell on them for being Queer would disappear.

3.3. *The subject's competences*

Before performing (the operation of setting a transformation on track: make/be lesbian), Sarah Fier/Deena has to gain *competence*, that is, want, be able to, know, feel the need to join or be joined to an object of her same sex: Hannah/Sam. Each of the four verbs expresses a modality with the object. Such competences, according to Greimas, can be shown on different axis.

The relationship sender vs. subject expresses the modality duty-action, *motivation* or *deontic competence*: why is the subject going to do that? Why do they want it? Why must they do it? In the trilogy, Sarah Fier/Deena's motivation, that which unites her with the object, is an impulse related to lesbian love (sender).

A second axis is that marked by the subject vs. object opposition. It configures the axis of desire or the teleological axis and expresses the modality of wanting-action and the *volitive* or *determination competence*. Thus, said modality would be the following: Sarah Fier/Deena (subject) fights to be the partner (actantial force) of Hannah/Sam (object). The fact that the story is told backwards (1994-1978-1666) means it begins with deontic competence on the part of Deena, that is to say, she assumes her homosexuality, but without having determinative competence, as Sam is reluctant to enter that type of relationship due to societal pressure and is even possessed by the Devil (the heteronorm). Therefore, there is a *narrative program of identification* in 1994, as it is a subject (Deena) separate from the object (Sam) in her initial state and joined to the same object in her final state after acting. However, the 1666 story fits a *narrative program of identity*, as a subject (Sarah) who is joined to the object in the initial state (Hannah accepts the relationship) is still in conjunction at the end and after doing (Stockinger, 1991: 202).

As regards the axis of the sender vs. the receiver, this is the etioloical or communicative axis, it expresses the modality of knowing-doing and the *competence of knowledge* or *cognition*. As lesbian love is not accepted/tolerated, the subject fights for the re-joining in Union of the towns of Sunnyvale and Shadyside (receiver). It is about achieving a world without persecutors or victims, where the odd and the different can find a space: blacks, the indigenous, homosexuals, transsexuals, the poor, Muslims, vegans... This competence of doing-knowing is acquired gradually by the subject, that is, Deena understands that she and Sam are, in a sense, Sarah Fear and Hannah, and Sunnyvale and Shadyside are the result of a pact with the Devil.

Finally, the axis of the helper vs. the opponent configures the axis of the conflict, of the opposing forces, and expresses the modality of being able to-doing and the *competence of power* or *choice*. On the side of Sarah/Deena's desire are her brother, her friends and the people of Shadyside, such as the sisters Berman and Martin (helpers). But her enemies are many and powerful, such as the inhabitants of Union and Sunnyvale and, especially, the Goodes, such as Solomon and Nicke, who have made a pact with the Devil and convert the inhabitants of Union and Shadyside into victims or demons/killers, such as Cyrus Miller, Skull Mask, Ruby Lane, The Milkman or Tommy Skater, the Nightwing camp killer (opponents). The most difficult thing for Sarah/Deena is to acquire that competence of power, as the killers seem to be immortal.

It can be deduced from the above that what predominates in the trilogy is a performativity of aptitudes. On one side, a *decision pragmatic*: doing is placed in a cognitive dimension closely linked to knowing what happened in the past (1666 & 1978) and what

the dark side hides (the Devil). On the other side, an *executive pragmatic*: doing is placed in a supernatural power dimension that is home to very powerful opponents, zombie-like killers, typical of fantasy stories.

3.4. Syntagmatic organisation: the tests

As regards the narrative program, we are going to start with its syntagmatic organisation in tests. A slasher usually begins with a couple making love at an age when they should not, or with a teenager immersed in a terrifying / erotic dream. Starting from that transgressive event, a crime is committed, and a question is raised for the protagonist: who is the killer? This question moves the slasher towards a crime story. In this sense, the subject has to pass a series of *qualifying tests* and this activity generates a program of use depending on the base program. Among the qualifying tests in *Fear Street* are the deciphering of the Devil's book, of the nurse's diary, the role of Sarah's amputated hand, etc. Deena's brother also has an important part to play, with his ability to find the information they need on the Internet to understand what has been happening for years.

Secondly, to achieve the object, the subject initiates a base narrative program, the performance of which obliges him to pass a *decisive test*. The question of who the killer is becomes almost secondary in a slasher, and more so in its sequels, where we already know the killer's identity. The question becomes: will the subject survive? Slasher fables, therefore, are about survival. There is a succession of crimes until one teen remains almost alone: the girl in the third act. Then the combat begins between her and the psychopath. After several "rounds" and the discovery of her friends' dead bodies, the girl slays the killer. This climax gives a positive answer to the central question. We get our happy ending. In *Fear Street*, the *decisive test* comes at the end of the third part, when Deena and her helpers prepare an ambush in the shopping mall, and, finally, Deena destroys Nick Goode in the tunnels.

The *glorifying test* is what closes off the tale and consists of society recognising that the subject has reached the object and the transformation her success supposes for her and her community. In *Fear Street*, the glorifying test comes in the here and now, 2021, because the characters from 1994, on leaving their underground world, cross a threshold and are presented in a context where the differences between the two towns have disappeared and homosexuality is broadly accepted.

However, the truth is we have witnessed a false climax. A final scare or point leaves the door open to further action, as a slasher always ends with the chance that the psychopath has survived and thus, could kill again. This gives the slasher a circular, or rather, spiral structure: everything revolves around the killer's "reincarnation", again and again, the reproduction of the blood rite. During *Fear Street's* final credits, we find a scene where someone steals the devil's book and, consequently, a fresh pact with Satan and a new chain of killings is made possible.

4. The rite of passage to sexual identity or coming out of the closet

Arnold van Having described the narrative structure of *Fear Street* the question is: what deeper content is hidden? what is it talking about? Our hypothesis is that, just as a myth explains a rite, a slasher is a tale explaining a rite of initiation. The hypothesis, of course, is not new. Pérez Ochando says that slashers "contain an initiation narrative which invites the listener to identify with the protagonist who is abandoning childhood and joining the adult world; [...] it is a process of learning and of absorption of the values and aptitudes inherent to the dominant ideology" (2015: 52). In our case, we turn back to the interpretation of the slasher as an

audio-visual myth of teenagers' rite of transition to sexual initiation, we are going to adopt a gender and mythopoetic perspective to explain the singularity of *Fear Street*.

Gennep affirms that rites of passage break down into rites of separation, threshold or crossover rites, and rites of aggregation (2013: 25). For example, a funeral is a rite of separation. A baptism is one of aggregation. It implies, among other acts, that the baby is being given a name with meaning that points to a future personality. In *Fear Street*, the name Sarah means 'that which is sacred' and she falls in love with Hannah, which means 'full of grace'. Deena means 'innocent' and she falls for Sam, a male and female name, as it is a diminutive of Samantha, Samson and Samuel. As for the rites of margin, we can cite those that affect teens, such as the Quinceañera celebration in Hispanic America, Sweet 16 in the US or the more traditional Jewish Bar Mitzvá (12-13 years-of-age). All three are rites of initiation, as puberty begins the transition to maturity.

In this sense, a slasher is a tale of adolescents who have reached physical puberty, who are children no more (for example, breasts, wider hips and menstrual flow in girls) and must obey the norms of social puberty: assume the rules of their age in society. Some of these rules may imply a taboo: an order to not do something. Depending on the culture and time, it could be: no pre-marital sex, no sex without contraceptives, no sex with members of your same sex, it might refer to promiscuity, to sex crimes, etc. In any case and regardless of when the slasher was produced and the specific heteronorm of the time, a slasher is a tale that conditions the sexual desire of teenagers. Slashers regulate sexual practices.

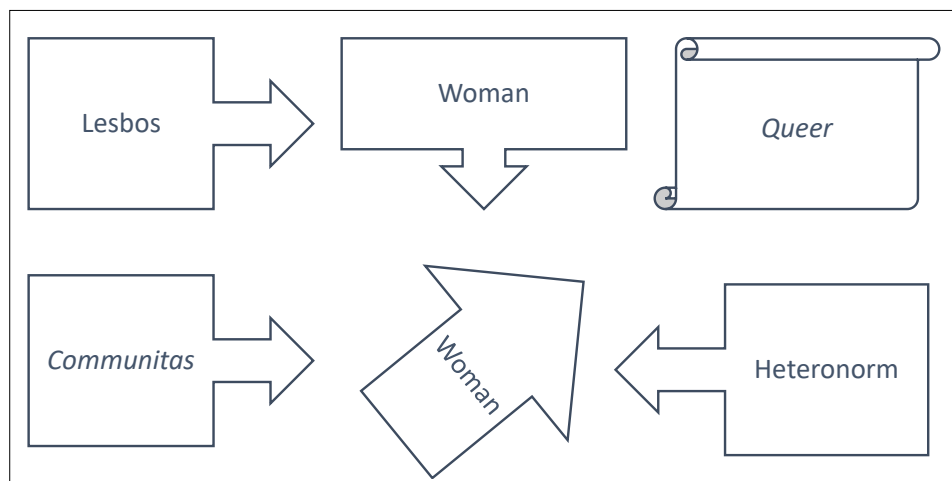
4.1. Queerness

It is in this historical development of changing messages about initiation into sex that we find *Fear Street*. Its novelty lies in that it uses the slasher, an artistic form that, as we have seen, has been considered as a paradigm of patriarchy, to flip it over and launch a Queer message, namely: do as the heroine (subject) does, whose lesbian impulses (sender) drive her to fight for the love (actantial force) of another woman (object) with the help of her *communitas* (helper) and despite those who defend the heteronorm (opponent) so that you get your society (receiver) to accept Queerness. We must not forget the different meanings of the word "Queer": "homosexual", "gay", "lesbian" (as a substantive); "destabilise", "perturb", "ruin" (as a verb); "strange", "twisted", "odd" (as an adjective). The heteronorm defends heterosexual, monogamous relationships, between people of the same age and class, without sadomasochism, without payment... and, therefore, a "lesbian" (noun) "perturbs" (verb) because she is "strange" (adjective). But as Fonseca Hernández and Quintero Soto put it:

If desiring a man does not necessarily mean identifying as a woman and desiring a woman does not involve a masculine identification, the heterosexual system is no more than an imaginary logic that continually reproduces its own ungovernability. The naturalisation of heterosexuality is no more than a mirage. (2009: 54).

In reality, Judith Butler utilises the term Queer to avoid terms such as gay, lesbian, transexual, etc., as she considers that these words impose a certain correct way of being, for example, a lesbian. Moreover, says Butler, a heterosexual can be Queer too. Queer, in other words, is a term against gender specificity. *Fear Street*, although focused on the protagonist's sexual identity, goes further and includes all those who are excluded: blacks, the unemployed, immigrants etc. among the Queer.

Figure 7. Actantial model of *Fear Street* as a rite of initiation



Source: created by the author

4.2. The entrance of the unknown

We have said that, according to Arnold van Gennep, each stage of life is predominated by a type of rite of passage: separation, margin or aggregation. At the same time, each rite of passage has three phases that also imply separation, margin, and aggregation. These phases, we argue, are related to what Greimas's theory calls the phases of the tale and the subject's modes of existence. Also, though we are not going into this, it has to do with what Campbell's hero myth calls the parts of the journey: separation, initiation and return.

In the rite, specifically, the separation phase is the moment in which the initiate separates from the group and from the normative conditions to which, until that moment, they belong by age, sex, status, etc. In the rite of sexual initiation, it is the pubescent who breaks away from their parents, siblings and family in general. At the same time, they feel that, like the hero in the story, they are not competent for a new doing-being as they don't want to, don't feel they should, can't or don't know what to do. Because what is this pubescent's sexual orientation? The initiate in the rite and the subject in the tale are in *virtuality mode*: the duty-doing has not taken place and the sender has to tell the subject about it so that they want-do. In the trilogy, the teens leave the adults to have a party in the woods (1666 story), live in the summer camp in the woods (1978 story) and take part in a sporting event that ends with a road accident in the woods (1994 story).

4.3. The liminal personae & the communitas

The next phase in the rite of initiation is the liminal. The initiate enters a territory where the attributes of the previous state are all but worthless and they lack those needed to culminate the passage. In the tale, the subject is placed in an interstice where not-doing or not-doing-yet leads to the chance of assuming a new role on the social map. The subject steps into *actuality mode*, as they go acquiring the competence of being able to-doing and knowing-doing.

Turner (1980) says that the initiate has three conditions in this marginal phase: 1) liminality: the initiate breaks away from society, becoming marginal and ambiguous; 2) invisibility: the initiate is unclassifiable, not totally defined culturally and therefore, overlooked; and 3) deficiency: the initiate has neither status nor properties, is neither seen nor listened to. Consequently, we are faced with a *liminal personae*: neither infant nor adult, single or married, alive or dead and with ambiguous rights and obligations. Anything is possible. The initiate lives in chaos full of perspectives and eventualities, though everything seems to drive the novice to feel a desire to accept the social role expected of them. The important thing, for the tribe, is that they are contaminated by being a strange mix of attributes and are taboo as they display dissonance with the social order. They are “dirty”. They are even hidden away because it’s a scandal. That’s what Sam’s mother does.

Figure 8. *Fear Street's* credits reproduce the image of George Jacobs's Trial in Salem (1692), by Tompkins H. Matteson. A Queer was a witch in those times



Source: Netflix

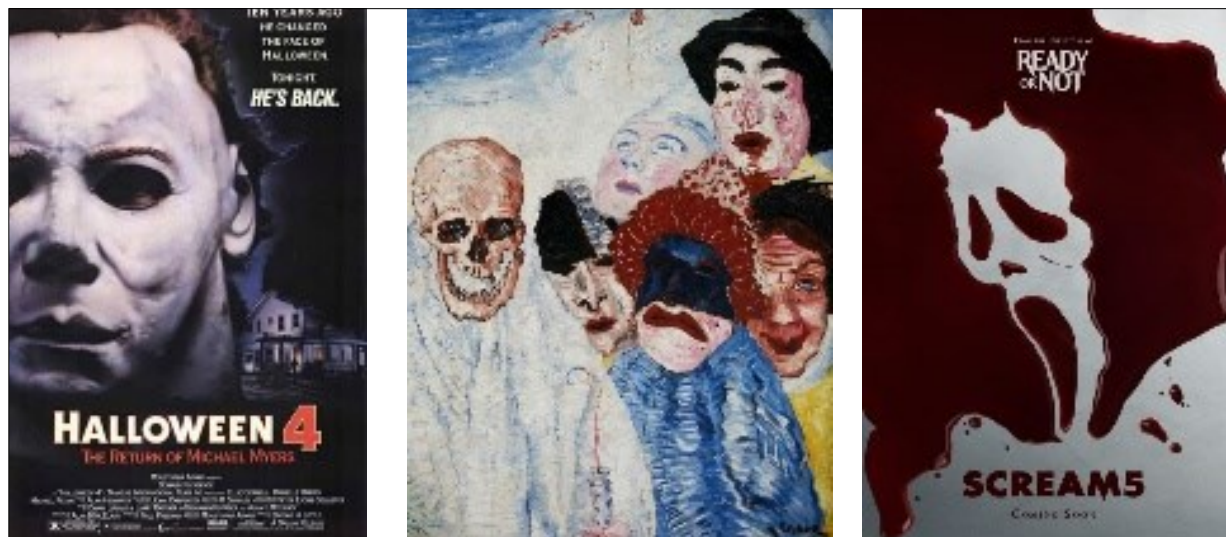
The liminals form a *communitas*, a group of similar individuals faced by the authority of the elders who control the rite and who represent society as regards *structure* or state (Turner, 1988: 104). Society as a structure is hierarchical, organised by a political, judicial and economic system. Society as *communitas* is a group of peers in transition, a group in confrontation with the structure due to their marginal position, or who live separated from the rest with their rules and their own culture. For the teens, new forms of music, clothes, drugs, tattoos, piercing, self-mutilation, risky acts like driving flat out, etc. are ways of rejecting society. Liminars set themselves on the limits to seek out the meaning of life. That's why teen culture, their *communitas*, is an anti-structure and anti-hierarchy manifestation. The teen feels suffocated by the norms that guarantee society's functioning and come into conflict with the contradictions and imbalances inherent to the structure.

In a slasher, the *communitas* is made up of the group of teens that the opponent has decided to kill. In *Fear Street*, they are the actants who hold the position of helpers.

In the case of gays and lesbians, as indicated by Pacquiao and Kay Carney (2000), the fact that they have not undergone the rite of sexual initiation as established by the heteronormative society has driven them to create their own *communitas*: their own marginal subculture. After all, it's easy to hide. It's easy to pose as heterosexual. Ambiguity allows one, for example, to escape from homophobia. As Pacquiao and Kay Carney say:

The fact of being gay or lesbian carries a psychological, social and cultural risk that may at times bring on emotional crises. The homosexual experience has several phases, each of them loaded with a fair dose of emotional confusion and profound personal risk. Unlike others among life's transitions, the process of coming out is not announced as a process in which one is going to form part of a family or society. In contrast with other passages in life, coming out does not necessarily mean entering a category of social acceptance within the social structure. Therefore, a homosexual teen may easily find himself in a constant state of extreme stress, tension and facing a potential crisis (2000: 85).

Figure 9. The protagonist of *Halloween* (1978) has a poster of a James Ensor picture. His grotesque paintings, of masked or disguised characters, inspire the mask of the killer Michael Myers and the face of all slasher serial-killers. *Halloween 4* poster (1988), *death and masks painting* (1897), by James Ensor, and *Scream 5* poster (2022)



Source: created by the author

However, hiding one's sexual orientation brings with it a loss of rights. It creates an unwanted marginalisation in all social institutions, from the family to work and educational spaces. That is why the LGTB movement considers that ambiguity (for us liminality) has a dark side.

4.3.1. Mysteries & revelations

We have said that in the liminal phase the knowing-doing competence develops. This is clearer if we relate it to what in the initiatory rites are the mysteries and the revelation and their connection to the *sacred liminality*. According to Arnold van Gennep, the initiation rite has three symbolic functions: 1) the mysteries (the pubescent knows nothing of the adult world, does not know how to have sex, nor hunt or earn a living); 2) the revelation (the initiate will learn what she/he doesn't know through symbolic and transcendental revelations); and 3) divide (there is one way of acting before and another after the initiation). That is, the novice acquires transcendental, sacred, and invoked knowledge channelled by the community's representatives. Turner states: "This knowledge (manna) which is handed down in the holy liminality does not consist of a simple sum of words and phrases; it has ontological value, it remoulds the novice's very being" (Turner, 1988: 110).

In the tale, the mysteries and revelations manifest in what we have previously called qualifying tests. In *Fear Street*, the protagonist, as we have seen, is the one who acquires the competence of knowing. She wants to understand her opponent: who he is, why he attacks her, how to destroy him... The deciphering of the Devil's book, reading of the nurse's diary, knowing the role played by

Sarah's hand, and even, watching and reading slashers form a part of these qualifying tests. Slashers are sources of knowledge for the characters in the slasher. Teens see on their TV fragments of films such as *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th*. In *Fear Street*, the characters speak of the writer Stephen King and the apparent decisive test against killers, "do a Carrie", is based on a joke that King tells in his novel *Carrie* (1974), filmed in 1976. The joke involves emptying a bucket of blood over the protagonist. In other words, in the trilogy, Stephen King is a sort of wiseman or mentor.

Figure 10. The knowing-doing of the tale or the manna of the rite linked to the consumption of tales and myths itself. "Do a Carrie"



Source: MGM

What is more, *sacred liminality* explains many doubts about whether what we see on the screen is real, only a thought or a character's dream or even if the diabolical has manifested itself. That is why the final scare in a slasher is so important: it terrifies us again; leaves an open-ended tale and poses the question of the realistic or fantastic nature of the story we have witnessed. A slasher normally lies between a realistic horror story, such as *Psycho* (1960), and a fantastic horror story such as *Dracula* (1931). We do not know if the killer is from our world or another, if he survives because he is so clever and strong or because he is immortal. Slashers are creepy because the most unsettling thing is feeling oneself unable to determine the nature of evil. In this sense, we said that the action in *Fear Street* takes place in a cognitive dimension closely linked to knowing what has happened in the past (1666 & 1978)

and what the dark side hides (the Devil). Moreover, like Ulysses, Orpheus or Aeneas, the protagonist must enter the underworld and Hell itself, through the underground tunnels. There are even tests in which the protagonist or the object die or transit to the lands of the dead, although they return. This happens in *Fear Street* to Deena and Sam.

Among the things the subject must learn, we dedicate a section of this paper to those related to the chronotopes of tales and rites. They are related to a Queer's feelings of guilt and the fact that they feel they belong in a damned place.

Figure 11. Past and guilt in *Fear Street*



Source: Netflix

4.3.1.1. The past and sexual guilt

A slasher traditionally deals with three diegetic times. It starts in the past, continues in the present and as events unfold, we find that everything started before the beginning of the film: the past has a past, an origin. In *Friday the 13th*, for example, the past's past took place in 1957 (a boy was drowned at the camp), the past corresponds to the beginning of the film, that is, to 1958 (the killing of the child's monitors) and the present starts in 1980 (the reopening of the camp). In *Fear Street* we see 1666 (origin), 1978 (past), 1994 (present) and 2021 (future). The relevant point is that, if all rites hark back to a past event (the mass is a repetition of Christ's Last Supper; Good Friday, his death on the Cross), a slasher always has its origin in a crime: a non-virgin youth killed by a child (*Halloween*), a child drowned due to negligence (*Friday the 13th*) a youth hanged as a witch (*Fear Street*). That is, the protagonist has to understand that they are passing a rite of human sacrifice as expiation of guilt, of an error, of a taboo previously infringed, normally committed by others and of a sexual air or due to sexual imprudence.

4.3.1.2. The date marked and repeated

The sacrifice, which we will speak of later, always takes place at night and, usually, during a storm that fills the sky with thunder and lightning, or, if it is summer, in the middle of a fireworks display filling the sky with explosions and coloured lights, such that the moment of the crime captures the struggle between light and shadow. Furthermore, if all sacrifice is part of a rite and the rite is always linked to a special or favourable date, the killer must massacre the teens on a date related to a holiday, ceremony or ritual: November 31 (Halloween or the day of the dead), Friday 13 (Friday being the day of Jesus's death and 13 being the number of the chapter in the *Apocalypse* dedicated to the antichrist), the anniversary of the passing of a loved one, July 4 (Independence Day in the US), graduation day, an eighteenth birthday, etc. Moreover, time is measured, in relation to that date: "x" days to go till... or "x" days have passed since... The important thing is that, given that the special date will be repeated next year, it is highly probable that the killer, that nocturnal creature, will come back to execute their blood rite. In the case of *Fear Street*, the fateful date is the killing of Sarah Fier.

4.3.1.3. The marks of the damned place

The aforementioned past crime is what turns the place of the action into a damned place. The population are so traumatised by the past event that nobody wants to approach the scene of the first death, and no-one wants to speak of it. In fact, it is almost a taboo of passage, like crossing the camp sign in *Friday the 13th*. If that "gate" is passed, one enters into a prohibited, dangerous sphere. This forbidden place tends to be in an isolated village, sparsely inhabited, a small, seemingly peaceful community, often rural: the village near Crystal Lake camp, the hamlet of Haddonfield, a fishing village, a quiet farm on the outskirts, Elm Street, etc. In this place, the help the teens may turn to is a dim-witted sheriff and little more. The right thing to do would seem to be to lock oneself in at home and hope that the killer is unable to gain entry. In reality, the psychopath has already profaned the place and made it theirs. The house is no longer respectable/sacred. The mark is the house or cabin door and indicates a limit that offered protection until that moment.

In *Fear Street*, Shadyside is the damned place. It is a *communitas* of the strange, the poor, and psychopaths. In fact, it is the bloodiest and most crime-ridden town in the country. Sunnyvale, on the other hand, is a settled, orderly, prosperous social *structure*. But, as the protagonist learns, it is the safest and richest town in the country because it sacrifices/exploits/sucks the lifeblood of the people of Shadyside. Shadyside represents the witches, the liminals and the colour blue. Sunnyvale represents the devils, structure, and the colour red. Although these and other properties (Table 1) have a symbolic development similar to that of a rite, we will not go into that question.

Table 1. Properties of liminality & the status system

<i>Communitas</i> (Shadyside)	Social structure (Sunnyvale)
Transition	State
Sacred	Secular
Foolishness	Wisdom
Sexual continence	Sexuality
Minimisation of gender differences	Maximisation of gender differences
Equality	Inequality
Altruism	Selfishness
Absence of property	Property
Absence of hierarchy	Hierarchy
Absence of status	Status
Anonymity	Nomenclature
No rights or obligations	Rights & obligations
Acceptance of pain & suffering	Avoidance of pain & suffering

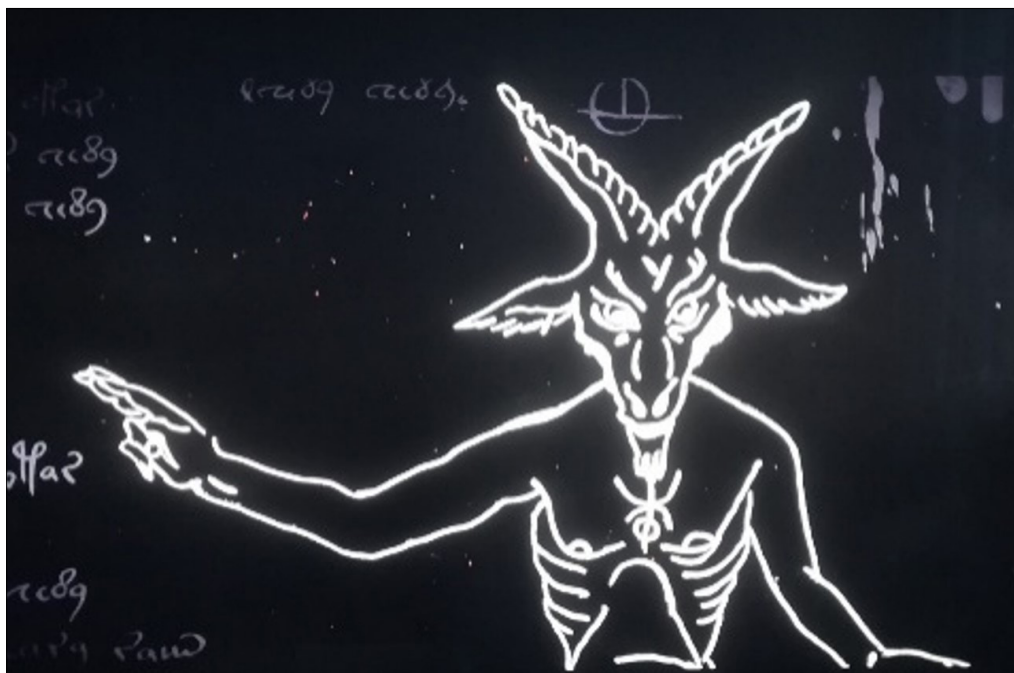
Source: from Turner, 1988: 113

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4.3.2. Blood, sacrifice & terror

We have said that *Fear Street* renounces the reality-fantasy game or, if you prefer, truth-myth and enters a clearly transcendent terrain, but between the fantasy tale and the sacred tale. This decision has great repercussion in the realisation pragmatic, as doing is situated in an optional dimension opposed to very powerful, supernatural opponents that are a transposition of the sacred liminal. In this sense, the optional competence implies enormous stress for the protagonist when facing the Shadow, which calls for sacrifices and provokes horror.

Figure 12. The Devil as the guardian of heteronormativity in Sunnyvale: capitalist, homophobe, racist



Source: Netflix

For construction of the Shadow, the mask motif is fundamental, in that the psychopath (Michael Myers, Jason Voorhees, Freddy Krueger...) embodies all that is evil in man: revenge, cruelty, sadism, madness, ugliness, monstrosity, or, for Pérez Ochando, capitalist exploitation. In some slashers, the fact that the killer wears black and even a tunic turns him into something akin to a sacrificing priest. Indeed, in *Fear Street*, one of the opponents is a parish priest.

As for the decisive test, it may seem contradictory that the protagonist adopts a masculine role (wielding a phallic object) to empower herself, that is, to finish off the patriarchal social structures that dictate women's sexual conduct. But, at the same time, her bloody act supposes assuming the Shadow itself, understanding that the dark side is no longer the monster, stepmother, villain or the psychopath but, rather, oneself.

Once more, all of this (the option competence, the decisive test, the Shadow) is part of the initiation rite. As in the tale (rather it is the tale that imitates the myth-rite), the initiate experiences a very painful transit, great tension, and even lives a terrifying experience. She has to pass many tests and challenges. She has to understand that she forms a part of a sacrificial rite. Moreover, we should not forget that, in some cultures, rites of puberty can be bloody and imply mutilation (knife cuts), such as ablation of the clitoris or the sectioning of the male perineum to control the pleasure of sex. This is in order to change the initiate's conduct, so

they become a strong and brave person. That is why blood is so important in a slasher. In fact, the subgenre is so named because the killer's weapon must be one that creates slashes, incisions and cuts, such as a knife, machete, hook, scissors or some other that leaves the wound and the gushing blood visible. This is so because this type of fiction is not only about crimes but, as we have said, sacrifices: such as when Longinus pierces Jesus Christ's side with a lance, or when an Aztec priest opens his victim's breast with a flint knife to extract their heart.

Figure 13. Blood, sacrifice, pain, and terror as components of the liminal phase



Source: Netflix

We see, therefore, that “terror” is present in our lives as a cinematographic genre, as an experience of characters in a tale and as a traumatic emotion in a rite, a liminal situation. Terror is even spoken of in the Queer world to refer to two vital experiences: homophobic terror and aggression or the fear of suffering gay bashing. Fonseca Hernández and Quintero Soto say: «Homophobic terror of homosexual acts is, in reality, terror of losing one's own gender and never again being a “real woman” or “real man”. » (2009: 54). As we have pointed out, homophobia is represented in *Fear Street* by the devil and his fruit, the town of Sunnyvale.

4.4. Aggregation

Finally, there is the return phase, the incorporation to society. The teen is reborn as a mature adult and acquires a social position that implies behaving in accordance with certain norms and having rights and obligations. As Turner points out, all rites imply a transformation and the ceremonies associated with the change of state serve to confirm the individual's new status in society

(1980: 106). In a tale, the subject acquires the competences (power, knowledge, duty, desire), is transformed (doing) and gains a new state (being), that is stable and defined, and with conduct determined by their position. The subject reaches reality mode: they act and produce the transformation.

In *Fear Street*, Deena ends up aggregating the segregated, that is, all those who are strange and live in Shadyside. As we have pointed out, that would be the novelty of *Fear Street*, as according to Pérez Ochando, the subject of a slasher fights for what Sunnyvale represents in the trilogy: “a struggle for individual survival in consonance with the new neoliberal moral of «look out for number one»” (2015: 504). This aggregation has meant that Deena and Sam come out, not only before society, but also to themselves. Pacquiao and Kay Carney write, using the word “fear” again:

The expression come out of the closet for yourself refers to realizing what it is or should be to be gay. The experience can be very positive, as it gives a name to many confusing thoughts and feelings. The most common experience is a negative one, as it creates the fear of the possible loss of the love and acceptance of friends and family and generates fear of the predominant culture's sanctions against homosexuality. Coming out for yourself is the first step in the process and must be followed by an increase in personal acceptance before one can feel able to come out before family and friends (2000: 79).

Fear Street seems to tell us that coming out and passing the glorifying test are necessary requisites of aggregating Queerness to society. Should the passage of coming out be a rite? Must we institutionalise/ritualise homosexual culture and symbols? Of course, in the past, homosexuality or homosexual practices formed part of rites (Gennep, 2013: 236).

5. Conclusions

Our goal so far has been to demonstrate that *Fear Street* is a mythopoetic treatment of a liminar Queer subject whose long format corresponds to the rites of the compulsive consumption of audio-visual fiction by teenagers.

We have argued that tales, including slashers, are an expression inherent to the human being, to their aesthetic position in the world, as a human is born and lives mythopoetically and is placed in a collective, inherited or acquired, imaginary world, such as that of the rites and myths of passage. In this sense, slashers are a poetic configuration of human reality. They form part of humankind's symbolic and imaginary world. They allow us to understand the dark and unintelligible. That is why the anthropologist Michel Petit maintains that, faced by a hostile world, the young need tales that let them inhabit this world, find sense and escape chaos. In slashers, the youths access the next mythopoetic: In a small, damned town (space), due to a sex crime or sexual negligence years before (past), a youth (the Heroine) fights against a psychopath (the Shadow) that, on one special day (time), uses a bladed weapon to make a mass sacrifice of the teens outside the heteronorm (fable).

In the specific case of *Fear Street*, what happens is the appropriation of a genre related with the rite of sexual initiation to alter its message. Effectively, in its origins, a slasher was a patriarchal and heteronormative horror story which explained to a teen, basically a woman, about to discover her Shadow, a liminar taboo about sexual practices. *Fear Street*, on the other hand, goes against this discourse: it prohibits the permitted (homophobia) and permits the prohibited (homosexuality). In other words, although the heteronorm remains as the dominant discourse of audio-visual fiction products, the major digital TV platforms and screens in general are offering more and more visibility to different sexual orientations and to their manifestation in young characters. It is reasonable to interpret this as greater acceptance of sexual diversity, although, on many occasions, this does not mean questioning

the heterosexual model of society, but allowing the strangest and most anomalous to live in it. Butler, on the contrary, says that: “the task here is not to praise every new option possible *for being an* option, but to redescribe the options that *already* exist, but which exist within cultural fields qualified as culturally unintelligible and impossible” (2007: 288).

In truth, interpreting Turner’s theory (1988: 138), homosexuals have passed from being a *spontaneous communitas* (arising from a certain existential state: sexual orientation) to a *normative communitas* (controlled by the LGTB movement to achieve certain rights) and an *ideological communitas* has sprung up (which seeks a social structure based on their utopian model of society, in its existential state, in their struggle to end the heteronorm). *Fear Street* is a manifestation of this ideology, as Deena and Sam’s story is a fictional representation of the conflict around sexual dissidence or, what is the same, about peripheral sexualities, those which cross the border of socially accepted sexuality and, thus, encounter social rejection, discrimination and stigma. Furthermore, the trilogy ends by repurposing the insult “Queer” and deconstructing stigmatised identity to conclude that different sexual options are a human right and a “pride”, just as Queer theory holds and argues.

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