

“I WON’T LET ANYONE COME BETWEEN US”
REPRESENTATIONS OF MENTAL ILLNESS, QUEER IDENTITY, AND ABJECTION IN
HIGH TENSION

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ABSTRACT

Becca Cragin, Advisor

In this thesis I analyze the presence of mental illness, queer identity and Kristeva's theory of abjection in Alexandre Aja's 2003 film *High Tension*. Specifically I look at the common trend within the horror genre of scapegoating those who are mentally ill or queer (or both) through *High Tension*. It is my belief that it is easier for directors, and society as a whole, to target marginalized groups (commonly referred to as the Other) as a means of expressing a "normalized" group's anxiety in a safe and acceptable manner. *High Tension* allows audiences to reassure themselves of their sanity and, at the same time, experience hyper violence in a safe setting. Horror films have always targeted the fears of the dominant culture and I use this thesis to analyze the impact damaging perceptions may have on oppressed groups.

“My mood swings have now turned my dreams into gruesome scenes”
– Tech N9ne, “Am I a Psycho?”

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INTRODUCTION

“I think that we’re all mentally ill; those of us outside the asylums hide it a little better.”

-Stephen King, “Why We Crave Horror Films”

The intention of King’s article was to explain the desire the average person has to seek out films with the intention of being scared. Referring to the appeal of horror as a “sickness,” King writes about the need for horror to evoke a response from the viewer (King 516). Whether that response is one of enjoyment or displeasure allows for King to separate the sane from insane. To get enjoyment out of these films, according to King, is to admit to being mentally ill to an extent. But then what of the individuals who are already aware of their mental illnesses? Laura Mulvey argues that when a woman overly identifies with a woman as object on screen, it invokes a degree of masochism. Is it possible the same can be said of a mentally ill individual who overly identifies with the actions of a mentally ill character? The use of mentally ill characters as villainous has long been a common trope within the horror genre. Typically the mentally ill occupy the place of a killer or villain, fueled by their unstable mind. Marie, the central character of Alexandre Aja’s 2003 French horror film, *High Tension* is read as both queer and mentally ill, which drives her actions throughout the events in the film. She engages in the insanity and queerness that the average individual avoids based on the manner in which societal norms are dictated. When looking at the horror genre as a method of passing on a culture’s ideology one can look to *High Tension* as a guide to the dangers of stepping outside heteronormative behavior. Had Marie never expressed her queer desires her sanity might have stayed intact. She never would have committed the mass acts of blood splattered terror and she never would have been confined to a mental institution. Marie, the primary focus of *High Tension*, becomes consumed with her desire for her close friend and intended victim, Alex.

Every murder that Marie commits brings her closer to Alex— and insanity. Yet the audience does not watch Marie commit the systematic and brutal slayings of Alex’s father, mother, younger brother, family pet, and an innocent gas station attendant. Instead viewers watch as a nameless Killer picks off all his victims while Marie remains invisible to the Killer.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the way in which *High Tension* depicts the issue of queer identity and the ways in which it is connected to mental illness and Kristeva’s theory of abjection. The film is tightly wound around the idea that one’s mind becomes unhinged through queer desire. *High Tension* is centered on Marie and Alex and the way in which suppressed desire becomes responsible for a night of blood splattered insanity. In order to further develop the central argument of this thesis I have divided it into two main chapters: *High Tension* as a film about the dangers of queerness and mental illness and an analysis of *High Tension* using Kristeva’s theory of abjection. Using a textual analysis I will analyze the characters of *High Tension* through the theory of abjection, queer representation, and disability theory, specifically in regards to the film’s treatment of mental illnesses. The primary characters are analyzed using all three approaches, while the minor characters will only be analyzed in regards to the theory of abjection. The queer and mental illness analysis is especially important in regards to Marie as the film’s central character. The focus will not be centered around what impact the film has on the perception and treatment of queers and mentally ill individuals, but how these issues are portrayed within the film and what said depiction means within a scholarly setting.

The first chapter, “Tell Me You Love Me, Bitch!” examines *High Tension* in regards to its representation of mental illness and queer identity. I also discuss Aja’s frequent use of mentally ill killers post-*High Tension*, the scapegoating of the mentally ill and queer in the horror genre in general, and the reasoning behind the success of films that insist on placing the Other in

the position of murderer. The film shows Marie's gradual mental deterioration, but *High Tension* is only told from Marie's perspective. Perhaps she chose to tell this particular version in order to gain sympathy from her doctors, Alex, and even the audience. In a way *High Tension* only fuels the perception that sociopaths like Marie are mentally ill and queer (McDonald 36). Melanie McDonald quotes Tim Dean on Freud's theories based on perversity and sublimation writing,

According to Freud the triumph of love consists in fucking corpses and eating shit. Or, to put it another way, the triumph of love entails a kind of "mental work" that— by overriding shame, disgust, horror or pain— could be as specifically queer, because this work consists in struggling against the affect-laden social norms regulating sexuality (McDonald 39).

Marie's status as a queered individual only fuels her status as abject. It is a common trend within horror films to scapegoat mentally ill queer characters and *High Tension* is no exception to this rule. "Bloody, Disgusting, and Oozing," focuses on the role abjection plays in *High Tension*, specifically examining the ways in which Father, Mother, Thomas, Alex and Marie are made abject. Driven insane by her desire for Alex, Marie comes to represent abjection. She is, however, not alone. Defined as "the state of being cast off," abjection is social disruption, improper and unclean (Kristeva 1). The appeal of *High Tension* and other horror films, according to academics like Kristeva, is connected to the sublime; people are attracted to the things that would disgust the average neurotypical person.¹ The film, and the characters within, disturbing social reason, which qualifies them as abject. The characters of *High Tension* are all beyond saving; they are either literally or mentally torn apart and can never be pieced back together. Even Alex, the sole character to escape physically intact, is left mentally shattered leaving the audience to wonder if she will suffer from any post-traumatic stress disorders. In the conclusion

I bring *High Tension*, mental illness, queer identity, and abjection together and discuss my personal attachment to the film and the horror genre as a whole.

High Tension unfolds with the camera focusing on a seemingly frail and broken Marie (Cécile de France) in a mental institution. Looking straight at the camera, Marie begins to describe the horrors that she and Alex (Maïwenn) have gone through in a single night. The two young women have traveled to the French countryside with the intention of spending the weekend studying at Alex's home. As the camera moves out of focus Marie's story comes to life. After arriving at Alex's home, their plans to study are quickly dashed when a deranged Killer (Philippe Nahon) breaks into the family's home, brutally slaying Alex's father, mother, and younger brother. While Marie is able to successfully hide from the Killer and consistently evade him, Alex is sexually assaulted, thrown into a rusting truck, and forcibly taken from her home.² Armed with a kitchen knife Marie is able to creep into the truck with the intention of setting Alex free, but is instead caught up in the Killer's kidnapping plot. The audience is led to believe that Marie is exacting revenge for the deaths of her friend's family until the end of the film when it is revealed that the Killer is a figment of Marie's imagination and that she has been acting out the murders of Alex's family. In the director's commentary Aja states that in the initial planning of *High Tension* the male Killer existed outside of Marie's mind. It was only later on during the final writing stages that Aja decided to change the Killer to be imagined by Marie in order to have someone carry out the murders of Alex's family and Jimmy, the gas station attendant. *High Tension* was originally meant to be told entirely from Marie's perspective, which called for adjustments to Aja's script (*High Tension*).

Marie's appearance stands in sharp contrast with her more feminine friend and romantic fixation, Alex. A majority of the film is presented from Marie's point of view, from the

beginning of the film until the Killer's supposed death toward the end of the film. Because *High Tension* is presented from Marie's point of view it is important to question Marie's actions, especially in regards to her avoidance of the Killer, both in Alex's home and in the gas station scenes.³ Marie represents a greater cultural anxiety directed toward mentally ill individuals or those who identify as queer. Marie's decision to attack Alex's family appears to be carefully calculated. The scene in which the Killer is first introduced shows the man receiving fellatio from a dark haired woman, later revealed to be her decapitated head. Like Alex, this victim has dark hair and eyes and as the camera pans across the interior of the Killer's truck, several photographs of dark-haired women are shown. Alex is not Marie's first victim, although she is likely the motivation behind these previous murders, as mentioned by Aja in the film's commentary.⁴

Alexandre Aja

As Aja's first major film, *High Tension* (also credited as *Haute Tension* or *Switchblade Romance*) appears to have been met with poor reviews by mainstream critics but appreciated by fans of the horror genre. The late Robert Ebert wrote a particularly scathing review and gave the film one star. Judging by the *Rotten Tomatoes* review of Aja's film I'd argue that fans have been far more receptive of *High Tension* than critics.⁵ Originally rated as NC-17 in the United States, several scenes were cut from the film in order for it to be brought down to an R rating (specifically the murder of Alex's entire family and the Killer's "death") - (*IMDB.com*).⁶ Because of *High Tension* Aja is included in the "Splat Pack," a group of horror directors known for their low budgets and ultra-violent films (McClintock 1).⁷ Several of the Splat Pack films, like Eli Roth's *Hotel 2*, contain the themes of mental illness, abjection, and queerness, a trend carried throughout a majority of Aja's work. Aja and Gregory Levasseur saw *High Tension* as

their tribute to the horror films of the 1970s and 1980s that had left a lasting impression on the two men. Aja also states in the film's commentary that he wanted audiences to experience "the worst" in *High Tension*, as he and Levasseur were drawing from a common French vacation experience (*High Tension*).

Terminology

Throughout this thesis I use various terminologies to describe *High Tension* and its characters. Such terms are borrowed from queer and feminist theory, disability theory, and personal conversations with fellow queers and mentally ill individuals (in-house conversations). Because of this I have included an explanation of these terms and their purpose within this thesis.

Neurotypical and Mental Illness

The term "neurotypical" is used to describe individuals discussed in this thesis who do not qualify as mentally ill, meaning they do not suffer from one or more chronic mental illness. The term was originally coined by the autistic community for individuals who do not fall on the autism spectrum (Cashin 138). I use the terms neurotypical frequently throughout this thesis in order to separate the sane from mentally ill; however, I have only encountered the use of neurotypical in discussions with other mentally ill individuals. Statistically speaking one in every four Americans (61.5 million) will experience a mental illness in any given year and one in every seventeen Americans (13.6 million) will suffer from a chronic mental illness (schizophrenia, major depression, or bipolar disorder) - (Duckworth 1).⁸

Heteronormativity and Queer Behavior

In this thesis “queer” is used to describe any non-heteronormative behavior or any gender oddities within *High Tension*. Marie, Alex, and the Killer are all queer or queered at various points they’re Othered by their gender failures. However, because lesbian theory is at times closely associated with heterosexism and gay theory can be attached to patriarchal privilege it is necessary, for the sake of this thesis, to expand beyond such restrictive theories (Case 200). Both are too gender specific for *High Tension* especially since Marie’s gender or sexual orientation is never stated. In the case of this film I believe it is better to be broad when discussing Marie’s identity as a queer, as she (and by extension Aja and Levasseur) never state her gender or sexual orientation. The concept of heteronormativity was developed out of Gayle Rubin’s idea of the sex/gender system and Adrienne Rich’s concept of compulsory heterosexuality. *High Tension* is a queer film; it’s strange and bizarre from start to finish. The use of the term “queer” is especially important since those labeled as such appear as unnatural oddities and, “break with this life/death binary of Being through same-sex desire” (Case 200). While queer has been previously used as a slur and part of anti-gay rhetoric it has since been politicized by self-identifying queers and activists who have chosen to embrace and reclaim all things considered queer.

The Final Girl

The Final Girl, as described by Carol Clover, is a common trope in the horror genre that refers to the last woman left in a slasher film who finally confronts the killer after everyone else around her has been eliminated. The Final Girl is often masculine or forced into masculinity and has some connection to the Killer. Both Marie and Alex fall under this trope at various points in *High Tension* and the audience is intentionally misled to perceive Marie as the Final Girl. While Marie seems to embrace her role as the Final Girl by chasing after the Killer and attempting to

rescue Alex, these actions are entirely imagined by Marie. In comparison, the more feminine presenting Alex is an ideal Final Girl; she is forcibly queered by her relationship with Marie, witnesses the death of her family, and penetrates Marie with a crowbar (her impromptu phallus).

High Tension

This film, to me, is completely and utterly bizarre. Throughout the commentary Aja insists that it is a love story, the focus being on Marie's daring rescue of Alex, whom Aja refers to as "her love" (*High Tension*). What he reads as love I see as an all-consuming and dangerous obsession. Marie is driven mad by her desire for Alex, leading to the death of Alex's family, an innocent gas station attendant, and numerous nameless (and unseen) victims. *High Tension* contributes to the long history of unfortunate queers and stigmatized mentally ill individuals who have been transformed into evil sub-humans in the name of entertainment and horror. Whether intentional or accidental on Aja and Levasseur's part, *High Tension* is representative of the monstrous, which is "produced at the border which separates those who take up their proper gender roles and those who do not; or the border is between normal and abnormal sexual desire" (Creed 11). *High Tension* also plays into the fears of young viewers, who are often anxious about and resistant to the Other (a common trend in horror films as a whole). To Aja, which he reveals in the film's commentary, *High Tension* is about the tension created, not the murders, which places the emphasis on the relationships Marie has with her victims. This perspective stresses the overall connection that Marie, along with the other characters, has with mental illness, queer identity, and abjection.

Notes

1. The home is representative of the womb and is meant to be a safe haven. When Alex is removed from the home occupied by her family, she is literally ripped away from the safety that her home was meant to provide.
2. Horror monsters can be divided into two separate beings: the monster from outside (Dracula, Wolfman) and the monster from within (Marie). Consumed by her mental illnesses, Marie becomes the monster.
3. While it is clear that *High Tension* is told from Marie's perspective, the unrated cut of the film is more direct about this. When Marie is shown in the mental institution she looks at the camera and says, "Is it on?" (*High Tension*).
4. Because of this Marie fits the profile of a serial killer, as she is removed from the violence that takes place, but has a degree of sexual interest in murder— much like Ted Bundy only murdering blonde women because of his attraction to his first girlfriend.
5. *Rotten Tomatoes* reports *High Tension* as having an average rating of 5.2/10, with 67% of the 47,712 reporting that they enjoyed the film ("*High Tension*")
6. *High Tension* was distributed through Lionsgate Films. This production company is responsible for the *Saw* franchise, *Cabin in the Woods* (2012), *You're Next* (2011), *Hostel* (2005), and *The Descent* (2005), along with various other gore and splatter horror films.
7. Also included in the Splat Pact are directors Darren Lynn Bousman, Adam Green, Neil Marshall, Greg McLean, Eli Roth, Robert Rodriguez, James Wan, Leigh Whannell, and Rob Zombie (McClintock 1).
8. According to the 2013 National Alliance on Mental Illness report 18.1% of Americans live with anxiety disorders, 20% of state prisoners and 21% of local jail prisoners have "a recent history" of a mental health condition, and 60% of adult Americans received no mental health services in 2012 (Duckworth 1).

CHAPTER I

“Tell Me You Love Me Bitch!”: Mental Illness and Queer Identity in *High Tension*

“Society, which defines itself as sane, must be able to localize and confine the mad, if only visually, in order to create a separation between the sane and insane.”

– Sander Gilman¹

A crazed killer is a common theme within the horror genre, whether an obsessive former lover or a deranged psychopath. The use of a mentally unstable killer is a means by which directors can expose an audience’s anxiety and discomfort toward the mentally ill. This continuous scapegoating of mentally ill individuals is not exclusive to the horror genre, but the impact on mentally ill and non-mentally ill people is long lasting. The constant perception of mentally ill people as violent, unpredictable, and untreatable certainly fits the description of films like *High Tension*. This perception (Othering) can be seen with the presentation of Marie as mentally deranged and unstable. As Marie is consumed by her desire for Alex she becomes increasingly unhinged, yet does not see herself as insane despite the violent murders of Alex’s family. Horror films are created to bring out an audience’s anxieties over the dangerous Other; be it the menstruating woman in a high school locker room or the emotionless psychopath terrorizing teens in the woods. Marie is representative of societal anxieties often directed at mentally ill and queer individuals. She is not the first character in horror to be used in such a manner. Norman Bates, Buffalo Bill, and Hedra Carlson are all individuals who were consumed and eventually destroyed by their mental imbalances and queer desires.²

One of the first scenes in *High Tension* takes place inside the room of a mental institution and the camera moves to focus on Marie who asks, “Are they recording?” Immediately the

audience is thrust out of reality and into Marie's mind. Once the camera begins to record, the truth fades away as Marie's story begins to take shape. It is possible the audience is not aware that she is in a mental ward. All they can see is Marie's battered and scarred body as she rocks her body, presumably in pain, and repeatedly whispers "I won't let anyone come between us anymore." It is not until the film concludes that the audience is aware of Marie's mental instability and that the story she has been telling is, in fact, a lie.³ Unlike her friend, Alex did not occupy this space until she was forced into mental instability as a result of Marie's actions. It is difficult to see Alex as being able to return to normalcy after the events of *High Tension*.⁴ But because the film, and by extension Marie, has led the audience to believe Marie is the Final Girl Alex is thrown to the wayside, her mental state unknown. The intention of this chapter is to examine and analyze *High Tension* in regards to the treatment of mental illness and queer identity.

This common use of the mentally ill individual as a deranged killer is not without its consequences. Such perceptions fuel the manner in which audience members perceive the already stigmatized mentally ill, regardless of how obvious or inconspicuous the stereotypes are featured in such films.⁵ Aided by our mind's "natural tendency" to latch on to negative stereotypes, horror films feed into the deepest fears of audience members which only serve to further oppress an already marginalized group (Kambam 1). As a result audiences either choose to or are forced to associate mental illnesses with uncontrollable evil. Of this Gilman writes,

The mad, especially in the incarnation of the aggressive mad, are one of the most common focuses for the general anxiety felt by all members of society, an anxiety tied to the perceived tenuousness of life... Our response to the perceived aggressiveness of the mad... reassures us. We have localized the source of our fear. We know who is dangerous. (Wahl 126)

Aja is no stranger to using the mentally ill killer trope in his films. *The Hills Have Eyes*, *P2*, *Mirrors*, and *Maniac* all contain killers whose mental states are either implied or proven to be unstable, fueling their desire to slaughter.⁶ Aja's films present the mentally ill as pure evil, driven by their desires to brutally murder anyone who stands in the way of their ultimate goals.⁷ *High Tension* encourages such fears by mixing the stereotyped mentally ill murderer with queer identity. Neurotypical individuals rely on horror films that focus on mentally ill killers in order to separate themselves from madness and further emphasize their sanity (Wahl 126).

The myth of the violent and insane individual feeds these fears neurotypical individuals have in regards to the mentally ill. The lack of positive representation of mentally ill individuals feeds into popular thought, leaving a majority of individuals to perceive those afflicted with mental illnesses to be violent and unsympathetic and, in a way, sub-human. This lies in stark contrast to carefully researched studies and facts, many of which exist for the sole purpose of countering public perception. A 2011 article published by the *Harvard Mental Health Letter* reported that 60% of Americans believed "people with schizophrenia were likely to act violently toward someone else, while 32% thought people with major depression were likely to do so," ("Mental Illness and Violence" 1). The report goes on to state that "most individuals with psychiatric disorders are not violent," and "findings have been inconsistent about how much mental illness contributes to this behavior and how much substance abuse and other factors do," ("Mental Illness and Violence" 1). A separate study conducted by the Institute of Medicine reported that, "although studies suggest a link between mental illnesses and violence, the contribution of people with mental illnesses to overall rates of violence is small, and further, the magnitude of the relationship is greatly exaggerated in the minds of the general population," (Hiday 1). Horror films like *High Tension* allows for neurotypical audiences to create an "us" and "them"

mentality, further alienating the mentally ill. Since “the iconography of illness is an indication of the way in which society deals with and conceptualizes disease,” it should be no surprise that the trend of mentally ill killers in horror films show no sign of slowing down (Cross 199).⁸ A bloodied and deranged insane killer wielding an ax will never be them (neurotypical audience members). They will never go down the path of insanity. Using Otto Wahl’s work on mental illness representation in the media, Simon Cross noted that, “Wahl saw cinematic representations of conditions such as schizophrenia (repeatedly implying that it leads inexorably to violence) as a form of psychological reassurance” to neurotypical audience members (Cross 201).

The use of mentally ill murderers is certainly a crowd pleaser. According to a 2013 article in *Forbes Magazine* some of highest grossing horror films of all time include *The Silence of the Lambs* (\$131 million), *Hannibal* (\$165 million), and *The Sixth Sense* (\$239 million) - (Mendelson 1).⁹ All of these films contain, to varying degrees, mental illness or mentally ill killers in their plot. Wahl writes, “One of the driving forces in media selection of what to present to the public is the financial bottom line,” (Wahl 110). Essentially, crazy sells. The desire for a high profit and appeal of insanity comes from the stigma surrounding mental illness and the desire to see individuals commit horrific and violent crimes. The most notorious killers of the slasher genre, Leatherface, Freddy Kreuger, and Jason Vorhees, are the subjects of numerous remakes, prequels, and sequels and show no indication of slowing down. (The most recent installment in the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* franchise was the poorly received 2013 *Texas Chainsaw 3D*). The sensationalization of mental illness in the mainstream media only serves to encourage such inaccurate perceptions. The most recent shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School and at the Century Movie Theater in Aurora, Colorado garnered so much media attention after the stories first broke because of the shooters’ mental states. “Nothing sells newspapers like

an insane, unpredictable, undetectable, gory killer on the loose who has caused a great deal of pain and anguish to the friends and relatives of the victim— all of high moral character” (Wahl 111). The very same can be said of horror films and their use of mentally unstable killers.

While Marie’s mental imbalance is the secondary focus in *High Tension* it is nonetheless the driving force for her actions, as well as the decisions Aja and Levasseur made while working on the film. It is interesting to note that despite her hyper violent actions Aja still wants Marie to be the hero and, in a way, she is. Marie is the hero of her own story, which is comprised of lies and poisoned by her mental instability. Throughout the film’s commentary Aja consistently defends Marie’s actions, but he is forced to admit that, “she [Marie] is fucking crazy” (*High Tension*). Throughout the film’s commentary Aja and Levasseur make reference to *Maniac* (1980) and *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977).¹⁰ Aja also states in the director’s commentary that because Marie is retelling the events of *High Tension* from a hospital room she is unsure of the events, hence her desire to present herself in a more heroic light (*High Tension*). Aja and Levasseur’s perspective on Marie’s mental state is not far from my own theories; however they manage to skirt around her queer identity (as well as the role her mental instability may play in her desire for Alex). Instead the two men refer to Alex as Marie’s “love,” avoiding the issues of consent, sexual assault, and queerness all together.

High Tension allows neurotypical audiences to safely experience their anxieties toward mental illnesses. While Marie’s mental instability and obsessive desires are not revealed until the end of the film the audience still witnesses her brutal and unforgiving actions through the Killer. As a result *High Tension* must be split between Marie and the Killer. Marie’s reimagining of the murders as being committed by a man in order to present herself as a hero links her mental instability with her queerness and labels her as monstrous in the process. Typically, in slasher

films, men are presented as the killer (Michael Meyers, Freddy Krueger, and Jason Voorhees being the most recognized names in the slasher sub-genre) as they are engaging in the actions that have been engendered as masculine. Marie, as a masculine woman, possibly found it easier to recreate the murders of *High Tension* as being committed by a man by using the cultural assumption that men are far more violent than women. Clover writes about the masculine/feminine divide in her book *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*,

Slasher killers have much in common with the monsters of classic horror- monsters who, in Linda Williams's formulation, represent not just "an eruption of the normally repressed animal sexual energy of the civilized male" but also the "power and potency of a *non-phallic* sexuality." To the extent that the monster is constructed as feminine, the horror film thus expresses female desire only to show how monstrous it is. (Clover 47)

Marie is forced into a grey area; as she is neither man no woman at various points in *High Tension*. Her masculinity is emphasized as a means of indicating her status as the Final Girl to murderer and as the Killer, her femininity is put on display in order to equate her insanity to her queerness. As a slasher film *High Tension* relies on Marie's masculinity because it provides an explanation for her actions as the Killer (Clover 15). Marie commits her acts of ultra-violent horror at the drop of a hat, while Alex only fights back when her life depends on it.

Had Marie and the Killer never been written as the same person, it is possible that Marie's mental instability would have never been written into the film. Until the gas station security footage is revealed Marie's actions seem rational, although there are subtle indications prior to the gas station scene that contradict this. Her descent into madness serves as a warning of the dangers that accompany queer desires, especially to young women. As someone who isn't

“properly gendered” Marie is seen as less than human and “represents the limits of the human and [they] present a monstrous arrangement of skin, flesh, social mores, pleasures, dangers, and wounds,” (Halberstam 141). It’s possible the reasoning behind making Marie the murderer had to do with the perception of women as a whole; because of gendered expectations women should not be capable of mass acts of violence and this makes Marie’s actions (once revealed to the audience) all the more shocking. In comparison the Killer’s behavior is almost more acceptable because he is presented as male, although his actions render him inhuman (much like Leatherface or Jason Vorhees). He rarely speaks, his face isn’t shown for the majority of *High Tension*, and he has a very masculine physical appearance. His intimidating appearance marks him as the perfect murderer.¹¹ However, the Killer is far from being perceived as heterosexual, as I will address later on in this chapter.

According to Aja, *High Tension* was originally intended to be a very simple story of survival and heroism. The Killer and Marie were separate characters and Marie was supposed to take on the role of the Final Girl. This formulaic plan was scrapped as Aja made the decision to combine the Killer and Marie. By keeping the Killer’s true identity a secret Aja was able to continue using common horror tropes, including the use of a violent male murderer as a means to emphasize the Killer’s masculinity. The Killer’s sexual desire for Alex is also quite clear as he channels Marie’s suppressed desires for her friend throughout the film. While the use of a male killer may have been easier for audiences to stomach because of a larger “cultural acceptance of aggression as verification of masculinity,” it is still important to remember Marie’s appearance as an indicator of her status as a murderer (Wahl 127). As a masculine woman she is marked both as a Final Girl and as a murderer, although not at the same time. Once Marie is exposed as the killer she loses all traces of her femininity and is essentially revoked of her womanhood. The

downfall of Marie's femininity accompanies the increase in her mental instability and queer desire. These inseparable identities snowball after Marie arrives at Alex's family home with bloody results.

While the Killer is shown lingering in the area surrounding the farmhouse, he does not arrive until after Alex and Marie have settled in. *High Tension* links queer desire to murderous intent when Marie is shown spying on Alex showering as she smokes a cigarette outside and later is shown masturbating after everyone else has gone to sleep.¹² Marie's voyeurism is particularly important as it, and therefore the camera, represents the male gaze and classifies Alex as an object of male desire. The masturbation scene potentially assists the audience in identifying Marie as having queer desires toward her friend since it follows previous scenes that hint of her attraction to Alex (Cohen 5). This masturbation scene is particularly important, as the Killer arrives shortly after Marie has climaxed, connecting her to the Killer. The Killer's arrival also results in the rapid deterioration of Marie's mental state, perhaps because all her energy (and therefore her sanity) is going toward her creation of the Killer and the recreation of her story. Throughout *High Tension* Marie's mental state becomes increasingly more unhinged as she is consumed by her desire for Alex.¹³

Marie's mental instability dehumanizes her, reducing her to an obsessive and dangerous queer. It's difficult to see her as being a friend, daughter, or student prior to the events of the film. This lies in stark contrast to Alex who is very clearly presented as beloved daughter and sister, as well as a dedicated student.¹⁴ As a result Marie lacks the skills and traits that neurotypical people are presented as having (Wahl 44). Marie is able to manipulate the audience; early on her actions in the film appear to be logical.¹⁵ Once she is exposed as mentally unstable all her efforts to save Alex are erased and she is easily dehumanized by the viewer. This is

common in the depiction of mentally ill individuals in horror films, as it rationalizes their actions and on a broader scale “the overall inaccurate message of mass media references to mental illness is that those with mental illnesses are unlike others, that they are indeed a breed apart,” (Wahl 55). Marie’s status as queer clashes with her insanity and the two appear to be interconnected. Her creation of the Killer can be seen as making her desires for Alex more acceptable within a heteronormative culture and essentially protect Marie from being perceived as queer. *High Tension* hints of Marie’s attraction to her friend several times before she truly confesses her love for Alex. However Alex either chooses to ignore Marie’s affections or is oblivious to it. Any attempts made by Alex to encourage or tease Marie into engaging in a heterosexual relationship are met with fierce resistance on Marie’s part. Early on in the film Marie calls Alex a slut or a whore for her relationships with men. While this seems harmless, the audience later watch as the Killer attacks Alex, accusing her of tempting him. The Killer himself is representative of Marie’s internalized misogyny and homophobia in human form. It is only after Alex (under intense coercion by way of a concrete saw) confesses her love for Marie that the Killer vanishes, replaced by a bloody Marie. Had Marie stayed inside the realm of an “acceptable” homosocial relationship, as opposed to “overt homosexuality,” it is entirely possible that the vicious events of *High Tension* would have never occurred (Young 133). Marie’s use of extreme violence toward Alex’s family can be dismissed just by labeling her as mentally ill. *High Tension* moves from one ultra-violent murder to the next with minimal explanation. Until the death of Jimmy, the Killer does not speak to his victims and Mother’s questioning of her own death remains unanswered. On the subject of scapegoating mental illnesses as an explanation of violent acts Wahl writes,

Understanding the multiple and complex factors that may contribute to individual violent acts, however, requires substantial effort; far easier is to accept the simple explanation that violence is merely a by-product of an individual's deteriorated mental condition. (Wahl 127)

There is no real explanation given for Marie's actions (other than her desire to keep Alex to herself), especially in regards to what may have triggered her decision to murder Alex's family and create a fantasy world in which she rescues Alex from the Killer. In the initial planning of *High Tension*, as stated in the commentary by both Aja and Levasseur, the male Killer was originally written as a character outside Marie's mind. It was only later on during the writing stages that it was decided to change the Killer to be Marie's creation and have him carry out the murders of Alex's family and Jimmy, the gas station attendant. Marie is temporarily able to regain her sanity by bashing the Killer's face in with an improvised weapon. With the Killer defeated Marie lets out an animalistic scream and rushes to free Alex from the Killer's truck, promising the panicked Alex that her horrific ordeal is over. However, the rescue is short lived as he is brought back after Alex attacks and then runs from Marie after rejecting her love. The Killer is only eliminated when Alex professes her love for Marie, which is the same moment in which Alex is finally able to stop Marie's murderous rampage.

The Killer is queered in a strange scene with Jimmy, a doomed gas station attendant. When the Killer stops to refuel, Marie escapes the truck with the intention of getting help. Once inside Marie pleads with Jimmy to call the police. Confused by the barefoot woman Jimmy fails to help her and the Killer enters the gas station. The Killer appears to know Jimmy, calling him by name and engaging in conversation with him. The Killer teases Jimmy and asks if any of the older women who stop by the gas station have paid Jimmy to have sex. He then begins to fiddle with sunglasses and ask for Jimmy's opinion. At one point during their conversation Jimmy

looks down to his hidden gun and the Killer leans over to caress Jimmy's hand with his own filthy fingers, a strangely queered moment with the otherwise masculine Killer. He then asks the innocent employee for some alcohol which ultimately leads to Jimmy's death. The Killer charges Jimmy, swinging an axe into the man's chest.¹⁶ Much like Father and Thomas' deaths, Jimmy's death is quick and less drawn out than Mother's death and Alex's continued physical and mental torture. Outside the context of *High Tension* this scene is bizarre and unnecessary, but it's needed in order to further turn the Killer into an abject oddity. Essentially, the gas station scene is necessary in order to place both the Killer and Jimmy into feminine positions as a means of labeling them queer (White 212). This scene also plays a part in revealing Marie both the murderer and mentally ill, as it is later shown again when police are reviewing the gas station's security tapes. This later scene switches *High Tension* from Marie's perspective to a third person narrative.

In his book, *Monsters in the Closet*, Harry M. Benshoff addresses the long standing history of queer identity being treated as a mental illness. Benshoff specifically examines psychoanalyst William Stekel's 1922 book, *The Homosexual Neurosis*, which backs up Magnus Hirschfeld's claims that homosexuality was an "inborn condition," (Benshoff 32). It's through these claims that one can identify the use of cultural anxieties in horror, including the fear of the gendered Other. Drawing from Stekel's work Benshoff writes that,

Stekel associates homosexuality with epilepsy (which he understands not as a somatic disorder but as a "particular form of hysteria") as well as with sadism, masochisms, incestuous desires, jealousy, paranoia, criminality, and regression to baser animalistic instincts: all states or aspects of human existence that would more or less compromise the catalog of the classical Hollywood horror film's themes and obsessions. (Benshoff 32)

The creation of a gender monster in *High Tension* is borne out of Hollywood tropes and cultural anxieties, specifically the “sexual psychopaths “of the 1980s (Benshoff 88).¹⁷ Nineteenth century monsters were “marked by racial or species violation,” while Marie and other queer Killers are all gender (Halberstam 3-4). Essentially this means that Marie is consumed by her queerness, which destroys her from the inside out. Sue-Ellen Case writes that heterosexuality is linked to life, where homosexuality is associated with “unlife,” (Case 200). Alex’s family, prior to Marie’s arrival, engage in ordinary household tasks and are representative of the average family that consists of caring parents, an energetic younger brother, and Alex as the dutiful daughter. Marie destroys this when she walks into the farmhouse. She started with the Father (the symbol of the patriarchy), moved to Mother (who dies because of her heteronormative relationship with Father), and then murdered Thomas (the product of a heteronormative relationship who benefited from the patriarchy). In contrast Marie’s aggressive actions toward Alex can be seen as her attempting to free Alex from patriarchal and heteronormative oppression and expectations.

It is possible to view Alex as yet another manifestation of Marie’s mind, much like the Killer. Marie has the visible appearance of a non-passing queer woman (essentially, she is a dyke). In comparison Alex is feminine and behaves in a manner expected of straight and cisgender woman. Dividing the three characters of *High Tension* as separate personalities and not people audiences can view Marie as the primary personality who dominates queer spaces, the Killer as the manifestation of Marie’s internalized homophobia and misogyny, and Alex as the straight woman that the closeted Marie masquerades as at home. Alex’s family is then Marie’s family, whom she lashes out against and kills when she is no longer able to maintain a hold on her personalities. Marie’s inability to explain her queer desires to her family is then expressed in her mental instability and violent acts (Halberstam 144). The Killer compensates for Marie’s

closeted queer desire by murdering (and possibly sexually assaulting) women who would not engage in a relationship with Marie. As a man Marie is able to act on these forbidden desires in a more acceptable (and heteronormative) manner. Alex's sexual assault is implied by both the Killer's actions and his expression of desire for Alex. Audience members may then view the events at the end of the film as Marie bringing Alex back into her mind with the Killer, which emotionally and mentally destroys her.¹⁸

To me, the ultimate question of *High Tension* lies in the film's ending. If Marie had not lived in a heteronormative and patriarchal society would she have snapped? Benschhoff argues that the rise of "queer social practices and theory" in the past has brought monstrous queers closer to normalcy than the "patriarchy forces that have traditionally sought to demonize them," (Benschhoff 231). *High Tension* could have followed this trend by keeping Marie as the Final Girl and framing the film around the rescue of her love. Marie was so clearly set up as the film's heroine with only small indications of her insanity that gradually builds up over the course of the film. Marie's lack of interest in men can also be read as a hatred of men, which, using outdated theories of homosexuals, would explain her willingness to attack the Killer and her status as queer. Stekel believed that queer women had a deep fear and hatred of men, which would give way to "the homosexual's perverse appetites arise, as well as the host of anti-social behaviors which commonly accompany her," (Benschhoff 33). By attacking the Killer Marie is lashing out against the patriarchy and the individuals who have suppressed her queer identity, while at the same time fulfilling Stekel's theory.

Notes

1. Gilman's quote originally appeared in his book *Disease and Representation: Images of Illness to Madness to AIDS* (1988).
2. Norman Bates of *Psycho* (1960), Buffalo Bill of *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), and Hedra Carlson of *Single White Female* (1992).
3. The opening scene merely hints at Marie's madness. However, it does not give any explanation for her behavior. While she appears to be disturbed and it could be assumed she is in some kind of hospital or institution, these facts are not revealed until the end of *High Tension*.
4. Depression, PTSD, and anxiety are all possible mental illnesses that Alex could develop as a result of the events in *High Tension*.
5. Margarita Tartakovsky writes about how the depictions of mentally ill individuals in the media have fueled perceptions held by neurotypical individuals. Such stigmas impact the mentally ill as well, preventing them from seeking treatment (Tartakovsky 1).
6. *The Hills Have Eyes* (2006), *Mirrors* (2008), and *Maniac* (2010) are all remakes. Aja was a producer and writer for *P2* (2007) and *Maniac* and was a director and writer for *The Hills Have Eyes* and *Mirrors*. Aja also worked as a director and writer on *Over the Rainbow* (1997), *Furia* (1999), *Piranha 3D* (2010), and *Horns* (2013) but these films do not contain the theme of mental illness found in his other work (IMDB.com).
7. Aja's use of mentally ill and disturbed killers is not unique to horror. Numerous directors and writers have employed this trope resulting in the success and notoriety of films like *Peeping Tom* (1960), *My Soul to Take* (2010), *The Devil's Rejects* (2005), and the *Halloween* franchise.
8. Of the 16 American made horror films that came out in 2013 at least five of the films included mental ill characters/killers. These films, while terrifying, serve as a means to reassure the non-mentally ill.
9. I am operating under the belief that Hannibal Lecter is neuroatypical. This is a means of categorizing mental illness in horror films and not an explanation or excuse of his actions. Wahl lists Lecter in a discussion of the popularity of "insane villains," (Wahl 58).
10. Aja would go on to remake both of these films. Aja constantly references *Maniac* and *The Hills Have Eyes* in the commentary. *High Tension* has very clear references to *Maniac*, which has a mentally ill killer who is also obsessed with possessing young women.
11. In the commentary Aja and Levassure remark that Nahon (the Killer) resembles a French serial killer.
12. Smoking cigarettes is often used as a means of emphasizing someone's masculinity.
13. Mental illness has a long history of being connected to queerness. In 1952 the American Psychiatric Association classified homosexuality as a "sociopathic personality disturbance" in the first *DSM* (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*) and in 1968 homosexuality was reclassified as a "nonpsychotic mental disorder, (Eaklor 150). Homosexuality would be removed from the list of mental disorders in 1973 (Eaklor 151).
14. Alex is presented as heterosexual, clearly stating her interest in men to Marie and expresses her disappointment in Marie's lack of interest in men and dating.
15. The audience watches Marie commit one murder as herself. However, the audience witnesses Jimmy's murder via a gas station security camera as police are reviewing the store's tapes.
16. Aja states in the film's commentary that Jimmy's death is a direct reference to Dick Hallorann's (Scatman Crothers) murder in *The Shining* (1980)- (*High Tension*).
17. 1980s horror films served as warnings about the dangers of AIDS (and therefore, queer relationships) and as a result Killers were primarily transgender, queer, or transvestites (Besnhoff 231).
18. This theory was originally bought up by Brock Webb in Dr. Maisha Wester's "Wicked Wives and Queer Cannibals" course at BGSU. I have since added to and developed it further.

CHAPTER II

Bloody, Disgusting, and Oozing: Kristeva's Theory of Abjection

"Abjection also occurs where the individual is a hypocrite, a liar "

– Barbara Creed, The Monstrous-Feminine

High Tension as Abject

Defined as "the state of being cast off," abjection is social disruption, improper and unclean (Kristeva 1). Developed by Kristeva, the theory of abjection is primarily used in psychoanalytic circles as a means to explore anything that is rejected by or disturbs social reason and bodily boundaries. In his study of gender and monstrosity within *High Tension* Joshua Cohen writes that the study of abjection is necessary when analyzing horror films from a feminist perspective (Cohen 2). I believe that Kristeva's theory of abjection is particularly useful when examining individuals who belong to oppressed and marginalized groups outside of (but still including elements of) feminist theory. Women, queer individuals, and the mentally ill all fall under the theory of abjection and these groups are included in *High Tension*. Marie's status as a queer, mentally ill woman easily qualify her as abject, but she is not alone. Alex, her father, mother, brother, and Jimmy are all abject. As a direct result of Marie's obsession with Alex all of the characters in *High Tension* are beyond saving as they are literally or mentally torn apart and can never be pieced back together. The appeal of *High Tension* and other horror films, according to academics like Kristeva, is connected to the sublime; people are attracted to the things that would disgust those who are not mentally ill. As a gore/splatter film it is impossible to discuss *High Tension* without mentioning the role that abjection has within it, especially in regards to the parade of blood drenched corpses the audience views throughout the film. The intention of this

chapter is to analyze abjection as it appears in *High Tension*, with a specific focus on the scenes in which a character is rendered abject and as a result, beyond saving.

While the on screen body count is at a modest four, one scene in particular draws attention to the bodies not seen. The Killer is parked outside of Alex's house in broad daylight; his moans of pleasure can be heard as the camera approaches the rusted vehicle. What is first assumed to be a dark-haired woman performing fellatio on the Killer is in actuality a woman's severed head. This scene serves as a warning to audience members, as it demonstrates the abject horrors the Killer is capable of. His truck is littered with photographs of women who resemble Alex, the target of the Killer's lust.¹ In Freud's own psychoanalytic studies paranoid fear was broken down to "deformations of sexuality and gender," which only serves to further support Kristeva's own theories (Halberstam 107). Abjection works to separate the human from non-human, demonstrated in *High Tension* by Marie's emerging mental illnesses and queerness (Creed 36). The mental instability and queerness that Marie demonstrates qualifies both her and *High Tension* as abject. It is necessary to have a queer threat in order to mark "the border that Kristeva identifies as the demarcation between ourselves and the abject we thrust away, in order to take and hold a place in the social," (McDonald 46). Since "heterosexual love and procreation are the only form of sexual love allowed by civilization" one can assume that *High Tension* exists to warn audience members of the dangers associated with queer relationships (Cohen 4).

Father

The Killer enters Alex's home by attacking Father with a razor blade, slashing his face.² The Killer does not enter the home by force- he simply unlocks the key that had been left in the door by Marie. Father's agonized screams fill the house and the camera moves to show Marie, who

has been watching the gory exchange from a window in the family's guest room. Blinded by blood and pain, Father is murdered when the Killer forces Father's head into the staircase and slides a dresser across the family's hardwood floor, decapitating Father. His body spurts blood from his neck, coating the floor and the staircase (Figure 1). His headless corpse dominates the narrow staircase and his blood stains the floorboards. By not allowing Father's body to remain intact, the Killer desecrates Father's corpse. The disgusting pooling mass of blood on the floor erases Father of any purity he may have had and emphasizes the animalistic nature of the Killer's actions (Kristeva 96). The audience's continued exposure to Father's corpse is the "ultimate" in abjection, as the audience is forced to examine Father's spilled blood and rotting body (Creed 9).

Until the moment of his death Father does not embody the Other and as a result, he becomes abject postmortem (Kristeva 10). However, his response to the Killer's attack and his feminine bathrobe may be partly responsible for his status as abject. By definition abjection does not apply to able bodied men, but Father's status as an outsider allows him to slide into abjection. The audience is forced to stare at Father's corpse multiple times throughout *High Tension*, his body is, "seen without God and outside of science, it is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life-" (Kristeva 4). Indeed, Father's death signifies the beginning of the never ending blood and gore throughout *High Tension*. After Father is first struck with the Killer's razor blade the beloved family dog, Hendrix, is killed in order for the Killer to continue his silent slaughter.³ As the only adult male in the household Father's death is far from insignificant, especially given that he is the first to die. His death symbolizes a direct attack on patriarchal power and protection, which leaves the rest of his family in a vulnerable state. In abjection women are "rendered unthinkable by patriarchy except as reproductive vessels or maternal caretakers," which essentially renders the women of *High Tension* useless without Father (Chanter 3).⁴ Father,

however, can be seen as losing his masculinity the second the Killer's blade comes down on his face, rendering him abject.

Constantly reminded of the abject, the audience is forced to stare at Father's corpse multiple times throughout *High Tension*, his body is, "seen without God and outside of science, it is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life," (Kristeva 4). Indeed, Father's death signifies the beginning of the never ending blood and gore throughout *High Tension*. As the first to be murdered, Father sets up *High Tension* as a film focusing on the close relationship between queerness, mental illness, and abjection. However, his death is significantly less gory than his wife's murder. The disgusting amount of blood splatters that appear on the hardwood floor occurs postmortem unlike Mother's slower and bloodier murder. By definition abjection does not apply to able bodied men, but Father's status as an outsider (as indicated by Alex to Marie) allows him to slide into abjection. Yet as a man Father's death and very existence is inherently less abject than Mother's death, as is similarly seen in the deaths of Thomas and Jimmy.

Mother

Woken by the sounds of her husband's death Mother is the next to be murdered by the Killer. After warning Thomas to go back to his bedroom she attempts to investigate the noises coming from the staircase. Ordering the young boy appears to be a display of Mother's maternal power, which he fails to obey and perhaps as a result he is later gunned down by the Killer (Creed 45). Upon discovering of her husband's body, Mother attempts to flee from the Killer and is stabbed multiple times off-screen before she crawls back into the refuge of her bedroom. The audience is forced to listen to her screams as Marie attempts to plug a phone into a television socket.⁵ Mother's screams are punctuated by brief moments of silence, emphasizing the brutality of the

Killer's attack. During this time Marie, in a misguided (and entirely fictional) attempt to call for help, has fled to Mother's bedroom and is forced to take refuge in the closet where she witnesses the Killer slashing Mother's throat. Blood erupts from the wound, staining the pristine white closet and carpeting.⁶ As the Killer saws away at Mother's throat and hand, the camera focuses on Marie's eyes, once again forcing the audience to focus on Marie's experience and not the gore of Mother's death (Figure 2). Marie attempts to investigate Mother's body, only to be startled by the dying woman's last agonizing words, "why me?"⁷ By the very nature of Kristeva's work Mother is labeled as abject before the Killer's blade touches her throat. The mother is thrown into the same category as bodily dismemberment, incest, and castration anxiety and as a result is viewed as abject; she is a disgusting mass of impurity, primarily because she has given birth to her children before the events of *High Tension* (Kristeva 77). Lucy Fischer cites patriarchy as the reason behind women being labeled as abject, as women are associated with "menstrual blood and infantile excrement," and as a result men reject women, much like the Killer brutally rejects Mother (Fischer 421). Her death appears to be far more violent than the murders of her husband, son, and Jimmy, possibly because she is a woman. Her death also takes far longer than the men's deaths in *High Tension* and she is still alive when Marie goes to investigate her body. According to Kristeva,

It is always to be noticed that the attempt to establish a male, phallic power is vigorously threatened by the no less virulent power of the other sex, which is oppressed... That other sex, the feminine, becomes synonymous with a radical evil that is to be suppressed. (Kristeva 70)

This can also be applied to Marie's imagining of a male Killer. Women, especially the mother, are labeled as abject because of what their bodies do (namely childbirth and menstruation, on top

of “normal” abject bodily functions). It is important to note that the Killer’s violent removal of Mother’s hand (perhaps as a punishment for attempting to call for help) is a symbolic castration; “since the mother is a member and symbolic pillar of the heterosexual familial institution, the removal of her hand functions symbolically for Marie’s castration of patriarchal society,” (Cohen 5). Alex’s home, dominated by her heterosexual family, is meant to be a place of safety and protection. The murder of Alex’s parents early on in *High Tension* represents the lack of protection Alex has throughout the rest of the film and emphasizes her isolation and helplessness (Sobchack 150). When the Killer pulls Alex from her home, she is not simply being removed from a physical location. She is being forcibly ripped from her mother’s womb and her familial connection is permanently severed.

Thomas

Unlike Father and Mother, Thomas’ death is not shown on screen. Instead the audience watches Alex’s face as three shotgun blasts are heard in the distance. Alex is gagged; her silence (much like Marie’s silence during the deaths of Father and Mother) renders her abject (Cohen 6).⁸ Thomas’ death, much like Father’s murder, is silent and further separates him from Mother. As previously mentioned, Thomas was ordered by his Mother to return to his bedroom after they were both woken by the Killer’s attack on Father. Seen as a display of maternal power, Thomas fails to obey Mother and, perhaps as a result, is murdered shortly after (Creed 45). Much like Alex being forced out of the home, Thomas’ attempt to escape the farmhouse as he calls for his mother is a symbolic flight from the protection of his mother’s womb. Thomas’ death mirrors that of Father and Mother. The focus is not on his death, but on Alex’s reaction (much like the camera focused on Marie’s reaction during the murder of Father and Mother). Marie is shown

trying to comfort Alex during this time, but it is debatable as to whether or not this particular scene actually occurred because of Marie's unreliable story.

Alex

Throughout *High Tension* the audience witnesses a gradual deterioration in Alex's physical appearance. She goes from clean and pristine to sweaty, bloody, and injured. All of this is the direct result of the Killer's treatment of her. Alex is effectively silenced by the Killer as she is gagged and bound by metal chains and thrown into the Killer's truck. She is isolated in the Killer's truck as he drives further into the French countryside. The Killer's truck is likely one of the few honest parts of Marie's story, as it exists after the focus has shifted to a neutral perspective. This does not mean that Alex is unaware of the Killer's actions. While not shown on camera she was most likely carried past her father's headless body and listened to the deaths of her mother and brother.

While Alex is not originally meant to be the Final Girl in *High Tension* she is forced into the role. Her two potential rescuers are Marie and a nameless man, whom she encounters while trying to escape Marie.⁹ Any attempts to rescue are quickly thwarted by the Killer or Marie's apparent bad luck. The final few scenes of *High Tension* show Alex's transformation from helpless victim to Final Girl, especially once Marie has supposedly stopped the Killer. Marie approaches the Killer's truck and unlocks the back, intending to set Alex free. Instead Marie is met with a hysterical Alex, who insists that the bewildered Marie has slaughtered her family. During the ensuing panic Alex slashes and stabs Marie with a kitchen knife and flees.¹⁰ Yet it is not Marie who pulls the knife from her chest, but the Killer. This scene serves two purposes: it throws Alex into the role of the Final Girl as she shoves her phallic extension into Marie/the

Killer's chest and Marie's place within abjection as she pursues Alex. Grabbing a power saw out of the truck a heavily bleeding Marie, now seen by the audience as the Killer, shambles through the forest after Alex. When Alex manages to flag down the nameless driver, he is brutally slain when the Killer pushes his saw through the windshield, showering Alex in blood and gore. Alex attempts to flee on foot, but a large shard of glass in her Achilles' tendon forces her to crawl away as the Killer taunts her with his power saw (Figure 3).¹¹ Alex manages to stop the Killer (and restore Marie to her "normal" self) once she convinces Marie that she is indeed in love with her. She then penetrates Marie with her only available weapon- a crow bar. Marie, appears unaffected as she whispers, "I won't let anyone come between us anymore."

However, it is also possible to view Alex as yet another manifestation of Marie's mind, much like the Killer. Marie has the visible appearance of a queer woman; she is a masculine woman fitting Clover's depiction of a Final Girl while Alex has a feminine appearance and behaves in a manner expected of a straight woman (Clover 53). Gender is used by the horror genre in order to reproduce fears, especially when targeting the gendered other, which is what makes Marie (and possibly Alex) such an easy targets for the Killer's rage in *High Tension*.

As a result of Marie's actions Alex is left with the implication that she has been categorized as mentally ill as a result of the film's events. Her father was murdered while Alex slept, she was sexually assaulted by her mentally unstable friend, and had to listen to the sounds of her mother and brother being murdered. Of this Kristeva writes,

A wound with blood and puss, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death. In the presence of signified death- a flat encephalograph, for instance- I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks,

refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficult, on the part of death (Kristeva 3).

Until the events of *High Tension* it is likely that Alex was never troubled with the idea of death. Not only did Marie's actions force her confront her own mortality through the deaths of her family, but it also has clearly left her traumatized. Alex is forced to confront her crumbling mental stability at the end of the film when she visits Marie in a mental hospital. While Marie cannot see or hear Alex in her tiny room and the two do not interact, the visit serves as a reminder to Alex as to how fragile one's mental state can be and how she walks the fine line between relative mental stability and insanity.

Marie

The film does not simply focus on Marie's sexual desire of her friend, but the monstrosity that lies beneath her skin as a result of her queer desires (Halberstam 139). Marie, a character who is clearly queered yet unable to act upon her queer desires, envisions a mentally deranged murderer carrying out hyper-violent acts against her friend's family. She can be seen as being punished for her queer identity as she is interfering with the creation of life by attempting to vocalize her desire for Alex (Kristeva 85).¹² Marked as mentally unstable on the basis of her creation of a separate killer, Marie is can be viewed as a gender nonconformative individual because the killer she invents is clearly male. Marie's failure to identify with the female sex forces her into the category of monster (Halberstam 21). This imagined Killer not only acts out Marie's murderous acts, but also Marie's sexual desire. Viewed as heterosexual by Alex, Marie is unable to articulate her queer desires for her friend. *High Tension* shows the unraveling of

Marie's psyche, slowly revealing her fragile mental state. Marie splits her personality between a neurotypical state and the Killer, a man who carries out Alex's sexual assault and the murders of four innocent people. It is important to note how Marie presents herself, especially when compared to Alex. Marie has a masculine appearance, short hair, and clearly defined muscles, while Alex is feminine in appearance. Marie's interest in men is never expressed in the film, while Alex makes it clear that she is attracted to men. Marie's presentation as the Other emphasizes her status as abject, as she stands in direct opposition to what is deemed societally acceptable (Sharrett 253).

It is possible that Marie believed her only chance of being romantically or sexually involved with Alex was to eliminate any contact she has with the outside world. Since Alex had stated that her sexual attraction was limited to men, Marie created the Killer to carry out the murderous deeds that Marie had deemed necessary in order to force Alex into a dependent relationship. Marie's efforts to insert herself in Alex's life finally fail when Alex physically penetrates Marie with a knife and then a crowbar, an act that forces Alex into the role of the masculinized Final Girl. Marie's inability to express her queer desires toward Alex can be read as Marie's internalized homophobia, which is expressed in her mental instability and violent acts (Halberstam 144). *High Tension's* treatment of gender and mental illnesses is fascinating and terrifying in regards to abjection. For example, Marie is only able to shake the Killer's hold on her by bashing his skull in, but he is brought back when Alex runs from Marie. The Killer is eliminated once Alex professes her love for Marie, which is the same moment in which Alex is finally able to stop Marie's murderous rampage by penetrating her former friend's chest with a crowbar.

Toward the end of *High Tension* Marie is finally able to confront the Killer. There is no evading the Killer and no hiding behind doors or under beds. The scene begins with Marie following the Killer in a stolen car, a gun lying on the passenger seat. Meeting the Killer's eyes in the reflection of his grungy mirror Marie looks on in horror as the Killer drops six bullet's (meant for Marie's gun) on to the bumpy dirt road. Unable to defend herself, the Killer forces Marie off the road. She emerges from the wreckage resembling one large open wound (Figure 4 and 5). In that moment Marie's bloody body is a reminder to herself and the audience that a body is constantly on the "border between inside and outside," and can easily fail (Kristeva 53). On this particular topic Kristeva writes,

It is as if the skin, a fragile container, no longer guaranteed the integrity of one's "own and clean self" but, scraped or transparent, invisible or taut, gave way before the dejection of its contents. Urine, blood, sperm, excrement then show up in order to reassure a subject that is lacking its "own and clean self. (Kristeva 53).

Marie and the Killer then engage in a brutal fight which ends when Marie, bloodied, exhausted, and shaking, swings a barbed wire wrapped fence post at the Killer's face. Yet this is not the last time the audience encounters the Killer, but merely Marie attempting to shake off the fictitious personality she has created.

Conclusion

High Tension ends with Marie shackled to a mental ward bed like an animal, consumed by her mental instability and desire for Alex (Image 6). The sheer amount of gore, Marie's murderous tendencies, and the creation of the Killer clearly demonstrate abjection. The film shows Marie's gradual mental deterioration, but *High Tension* is only told from Marie's

perspective. Perhaps she chose to tell this particular version in order to gain sympathy from her doctors, Alex, and even the audience. In a way *High Tension* only fuels the perception of that sociopaths like Marie are mentally ill and queer (McDonald 36). In her article “Queer Presence in Post Modern Horror,” Melanie McDonald quotes Tim Dean in regards to Freud’s theories based on perversity and sublimation. She writes,

According to Freud the triumph of love consists in fucking corpses and eating shit. Or, to put it another way, the triumph of love entails a kind of “mental work” that- by overriding shame, disgust, horror or pain- could be as specifically queer, because this work consists in struggling against the affect-laden social norms regulating sexuality (McDonald 39).

Marie’s status as a queered individual only fuels her status as abject. It is a common trend within horror films to scapegoat mentally ill queer characters and *High Tension* is no exception to this rule.

Notes

1. In the film's commentary Aja and Levassuer discuss at length the woman's severed head and photographs of women in the Killer's car. They conclude (possibly for the audience) that Alex is not Marie's first victim (*High Tension*). The truck is also another film reference Aja chose to include in his film, constructing the Killer's ancient and rusted truck to resemble the vehicle used in *Jeepers Creepers* (*High Tension*).
2. Father is credited as Père Alex, is also called Daniel by Mother (credited as Mere Alex). For simplicity's sake they will be referred to as Father and Mother throughout this thesis, as their identities do not appear to exist beyond their connection to Alex and Thomas. Interestingly Andrei Finti (Father) and Oana Pellea (Mother) are Romanian actors, which appears to further cement their status as Other within *High Tension*. In a cast and crew dominated by French nationals, why not cast two French actors to play the role of Mother and Father? The only other non-French actor in *High Tension* is Jimmy, played by American actor Franck Khalfoun (*High Tension*).
3. I find it interesting that while Hendrix is murdered along with the human beings occupying the farm house, the family's birds are left untouched even though they are capable as making the same amount of noise as the dog. Since Hendrix is often seen accompanying Father or Thomas, the viewer can assume that Hendrix is struck down by the Killer for his status as "man's best friend."
4. Marie, using the Killer's form, not only murders the patriarchy, but capitalism as well (Chanter 3). This is seen when she murders Jimmy, who is the only person in *High Tension* directly attached to capitalism.
5. Interestingly Marie scrambles to use a phone in the guest bedroom instead of coming to Mother's aid or helping Alex and Thomas.
6. The contrast of the white of Mother's nightgown, bedroom decor, and her pale skin with the reds of her blood is reminiscent of the same contrast used throughout *American Psycho*.
7. According to the film's commentary this particular scene is a favorite of Alexandre Aja and Grégory Levassuer (*High Tension*). The audience is forced to listen to Marie's soggy footsteps across the blood soaked carpet to Mother's body and a majority of the audience during the premiere was reported to have jumped in surprise at Mother's ragged, gasping breaths. When Marie rushes to the blood stained telephone, the audience sees Mother's severed hand on the floor which, while never explained, only adds to the gore.
8. Thomas' death is only implied in the rated version of *High Tension*. The unrated version shows the Killer slowly pursuing the young boy as he runs into the cornfield and crawls over the dirt in an attempt to prevent detection. Aja, in the film's commentary, says that Thomas' death was originally supposed to be shown but was removed after being deemed "too much," (*High Tension*). Aja also points out that the shotgun used to kill Thomas is shown several scenes prior in Alex's home, implying that Marie has taken the gun from the family home.
9. The scene in which Alex forces the nameless driver to pull over appears to be inspired by the ending of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. This scene also mirrors the beginning of *High Tension* (revealed to be a dream sequence), but with Marie running through a forest instead of Alex.
10. This particular scene is a bizarre plot hole. According to Marie, she supposedly handed Alex the kitchen knife before running into the gas station. However, if the Killer is actually Marie, how would Alex have gotten the knife?
11. During this scene the Killer accused Alex of teasing him (Marie), calling her a slut and insists that Alex does not love him. Once a terrified and clearly traumatized Alex screams, "Yes. Yes I love you!" the Killer vanishes forever. Marie, covered in both fresh and dried blood leans in to kiss Alex, who is still hysterical (*High Tension*).
12. Kristeva writes that, "defilement is the stopping of life; (like) sexuality without reproduction," and because queer desires do not result in children, "it amounts to tampering with the mother," (Kristeva 85).

CONCLUSION

“She Can’t See Me, Right?”

“But mostly what I learned is that how little is actually known about mental illness. All they know is that it’s rarely about finding solutions, it’s just more about managing expectations.”

– Hannibal, “Buffet Froid.”

As mentioned previously, the use of a mentally ill or queer killer is not a new convention in the horror genre. These individuals represent a larger cultural fear directed at a marginalized community. But we are not all Marie; we are not Aileen Wuornos, James Holmes, or Adam Lanza. I include myself in this because these tropes affect me as someone who is both queer and mentally ill. Horror is personal and I find it both comforting and uncomfortable for me, which is why I think I find myself so attached to it. I keep coming back to horror films, no matter how disturbed I am by their content. My obsession with horror started with I was six years old. Behind my parents’ backs I snuck into our living room and watched a heavily edited *Hellraiser* on television. Next were *Child’s Play* and *Jaws*; movies that scared me to the core. I would walk through the horror aisle of our local video store daring myself to look at the video jackets and gauging my fear. As a freshman in high school I saw *The Grudge* with the high school swim teach, my first in-theater horror experience. I watched it through my fingers, trying to hold back tears and as a sophomore in undergrad I had an anxiety attack during *Dead Silence*. Yet my fixation on horror films continued. As a senior at UW-Green Bay a close friend reintroduced me to horror and I began consuming an unending number of horror films with renewed appreciation. The fact remains that from *The Bride of Frankenstein* to *Sharknado*, I am unapologetically in love with horror and all its sub-genres.

As I've moved through academia I've found it difficult to separate my fan interests and identity from my scholarly interests. Ableist slurs are commonplace in our vernacular (psycho, crazy, insane) and anti-queer attitudes (while slowly disappearing) are still very much a part of our culture as a whole. Perhaps as a direct result of my personal politics, I do not consume horror without critique. I find myself viewing horror films through a far more critical lens because of my love of the genre and all its components. It's this love of horror that has resulted in my critique of *High Tension*. Aja, like many Splat Pack directors, has fallen into the trap of targeting the oppressed, as his films lie at the intersection of anti-queer paranoia, mental illness stigma, and misogyny. There is, however, potential for change in horror. Fede Alvarez's 2013 remake of the *Evil Dead* replaced Ash Williams (the hero of the 1981 *Evil Dead*) with Mia Allen, a heavily flawed addict and the first to be possessed. Much like Alex, Mia has no hero and must save herself after everyone else has died.

High Tension is terrifying. It's not the massive amount of blood that scares me, but the realism behind it. The film twists reality order to form the monstrous, echoing the audience's anxieties. *High Tension* has also managed to take a monstrous threat from the outside (the Killer) and transform that threat into an internal monster (Marie). This is especially alarming as Marie does not see herself as a monster or a murderer, but a hero, complicating *High Tension*. The Killer exists for a sole purpose; to terrorize his victims before eliminating them. To me, a truly terrifying murderer in horror is not an emotionless and bloodthirsty Killer or Jason, but a complicated and sympathetic Marie or Carrie White. These characters are scary because they have some degree of humanity left in them— until they snap. These killers mirror the audience's anxieties and manipulate their emotions. Leaving the theater we don't know *how* we're supposed to feel about these characters. Their reign of terror has been stopped, but that doesn't change the

human behaviors these individuals exhibited, and the sympathy they potentially evoked from the audience. That is true horror.

I believe that *High Tension* could be an expression of Aja's own anxieties that he projects onto audiences. King did something similar with *Carrie*, referring to its theme as "how women find their own channels of power, and what men fear about women and women's sexuality," (Clover 3). He took the cultural climate of the 1970s and channeled it into *Carrie*, producing a story revolving around the terrors of adolescence and female power. By taking the fears surrounding queers and the mentally ill, Aja transformed *High Tension* into a story about the dangers of repressed desires— or an overall warning about the atrocities the crazy and queer can commit. As a result, my previous question: if Marie (and by extension, the audience) had not been raised in a homophobic, misogynistic, and repressive society, would she have fallen victim to her inner Killer?

I saw the trailer for *High Tension* when I was still in high school. I cannot remember how old I was, the year, or how I had stumbled across it. I simply remember being transfixed by the images coming across my family's computer screen. Watching Marie attempt to hide all evidence of herself from her friend's guest room (making the bed, hiding her belongings, and wiping the sink dry) was utterly terrifying. It seemed so real to me, and I remember wanting to see if the film was based on an actual event. I still find myself unable to shake the images of the trailer from my mind; they've cemented themselves into the furthest recesses of my brain. Despite all this, I never watched it or even knew the title of the film until my first semester of graduate school. In one seminar we studied, among various other horror films, *High Tension* and my fixation on the film was immediately revitalized to near obsession. During a depressive episode last spring, I kept watching it on repeat. During that time *High Tension* never once left

my DVD player. This film centered on obsession quickly became my own. I've learned to manage my expectations with horror, as I realize that those deemed Other will always be targeted and scapegoated for audience pleasure. I can't help but be pessimistic in regards to equal representation and because of this I will continue to consume the horror I love through a critical lens.

LIST OF FIGURES

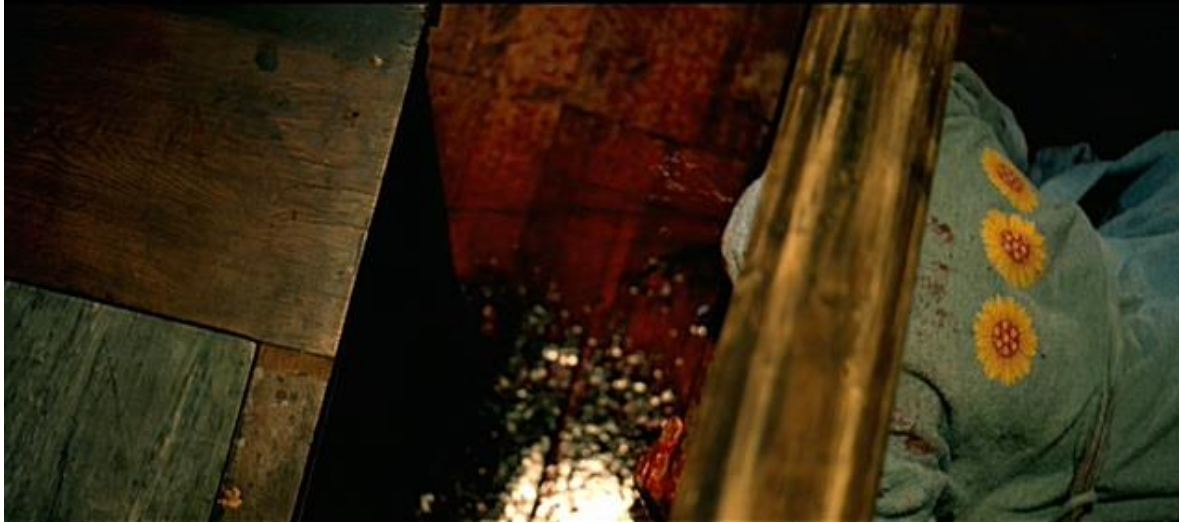


Figure 1: Father's headless corpse shortly after his murder. Father's floral bathrobe is clearly shown in this scene (*High Tension*).



Figure 2: Mother's body after the Killer's attack. Marie has not yet emerged from her hiding space in the closet (*High Tension*).



Figure 3: Alex's leg and ankle as she attempts to crawl away from Marie (*High Tension*).



Figure 4: Marie in the gas station bathroom, prior to the car crash (*High Tension*).



Figure 5: Marie bandaging her arm (shown off-screen) after the crash (*High Tension*).



Figure 6: Marie at the end of *High Tension*, almost as if she can sense Alex's presence (*High Tension*).

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