Halloween, dir. by David Gordon Green
(Universal Pictures, Miramax, and Blumhouse, 2018)

Both John Carpenter's *Halloween* and the figure of Michael Myers are significant landmarks in horror cinema. The 1978 film, depicting an apparently motiveless spree killer in small-town America, captured perfectly the unspoken anxieties of a generation apprehensive about the changes wrought by the social and sexual revolutions of the 1960s, a generation still recovering from the debacle of Vietnam, and reeling from the senselessness and almost cinematic brutality of the Sharon Tate-LaBianca killings. The potent characters created by Carpenter and co-writer/producer Debra Hill have spawned numerous cinematic sequels, re-interpretations and imitations, not to mention a plethora of paratextual and transtextual narratives. Mask, figures, and cookie jars introduce Michael Myers as a commodity, a lifestyle accessory, a procurable bogey-man. Comics have provided a medium both for adaptations of the films and for original stories that further excavate the character and his setting. Unfortunately, not all of these works have managed to achieve the quality and effectiveness of the original and, in many cases, such as *Halloween: Resurrection* (dir. by Rock Rosenthal, 2002), they embody the weakest and most predictable aspects of the slasher genre. In view of these considerations, it might be understandable to approach the eleventh film in this expansive franchise with somewhat jaundiced expectations. Thankfully, David Gordon Green's new offering simply and elegantly sidesteps the problems and pitfalls engendered by such a cinematic legacy, and presents an intelligent, fresh, and vibrant follow-up to the 1978 film.

Green has a proven record as director, with a solid portfolio of comedies and complex, character-driven works such as *Undertow* (2004), *Pineapple Express* (2008), and *Prince Avalanche* (2013). His focus and skills show in the story and handling of *Halloween* (2018). The sharp script, homing in on the characters created by Carpenter and Hill, was collaboratively written by Jeff Fradley, Danny McBride, and Green, who last worked together on *Your Highness* (2011). Wisely, the writers have chosen to reset the story and adhere very closely to the narrative arc of the original film, essentially enabling them to disregard practically all the other material accreted in the history of the franchise. This new film works from the premise that Myers was caught after the Halloween killings in Haddonfield in 1978, and has been mute and unresponsive in a secure facility since then. Laurie Strode, powerfully reprised by Jamie Lee Curtis, never fully recovered from the events of that night, and has lived in state of fear and preparedness since that time, rendering

her socially dysfunctional, as she alienates friends and family. Shot in South Carolina, the town of Charleston acts as the fictional Haddonfield; its tree-lined streets effectively replicate the Californian avenues originally used by Carpenter and Hill, and ground Richard Wright and Sean White's production design and art direction firmly in the same believable Middle-American story-world.

Carpenter has also returned, scoring this film in collaboration with his son Cody and with Daniel Davies, refreshing and embellishing the simple but driving 5/4-time rhythm, which provided so much tension and atmosphere for the original film. Michael Simmonds's cinematography makes beautifully composed use of the field of view to create tension and suspense, with many vital events unfolding in the background, around oblivious protagonists. The photography evokes, and at times references, the cinematography of Dean Cundey from the 1978 film, including numerous scenes that reward those familiar with the original. Timothy Alverson's editing is razor sharp, with every cut pushing the narrative onward, orchestrating the ebb and flow of fear and anxiety, while concisely conveying the action and mental states of the characters. Curtis brings a power and anxious agency to her performance as the older Laurie, her life damaged by the events of her past. Strode's experience and survival of that Halloween night have shaped all her actions since then, at a terrible price.

Laurie's daughter, Karen, played with nuance by Judy Greer, has been raised in fear of attack, trained from an early age to fight, shoot, and defend herself. Taken by welfare workers from Laurie when she was twelve, and now a parent herself, she views her mother as an individual who has fused trauma to her identity and refuses to let it heal. Karen looks back with resentment on her cloistered childhood and the fortress home she thought of as a cage, framing her mother within pop-psychology mantras perhaps learned from her carers. Karen's own daughter, Allyson, astutely portrayed by Andi Matichak, has a more positive attitude toward her grandmother, but is still wary. Like the group of friends in the original, these three women form the core of the story and it is their relationships that give this iteration of *Halloween* an emotional centre so often lacking in the slasher film. Curtis has tellingly referred to these women as the 'Hallowomen'.[1]

The masked killer provides the counterpoint and catalyst to their story. Ironically, and perhaps inevitably, Myer's escape is facilitated by those who want to understand him, to solve the mystery of why he did what he has done. Where Laurie sees him as 'the shape', a thing of pure evil, those in charge of the mute and apparently inert Michael try to situate his

[1] As stated by Jamie Lee Curtis, 'The Legacy of Halloween' Featurette, *Halloween* (dir. by David Gordon Green, 2018) [bluray].

actions against terrible but understandable human motivations. This outlook encapsulates one of the key flaws in the sequels prior to this, which themselves often ascribe motivations and rationales to Myers, a strategy that, in the end, does little but diminish his monstrousness. Green's handling of the material makes it very clear that it is not possible to understand Michael. Green takes Myers back to Carpenter's acknowledged interest in and debt to H. P. Lovecraft, suggesting that Myers is almost a subtle embodiment of Lovecraftian horror; he is an unknowable force, indifferent to human life, which destroys without compunction, pleasure, or purpose.[2] If we run with this reading, then Myers's mask and overalls, though vested with socio-economic overtones, may not after all be a human disguise, but can instead be interpreted as a cipher-shell within which nothing human exists. Acting randomly and without motivation, Myers moves through the suburban landscape taking lives arbitrarily. Hill, co-creator of the original, links Myers with ideas of unstoppable evil recurring at the festival of Samhain.[3] In line with this thinking, Green's *Halloween* makes it clear that Myers acts without sexual motive, and isn't a force of puritanical repression, as Robin Woods has argued.[4] Myers is simply the unlooked-for violence of modern life; the tragic accident, the inexplicable killing of the vulnerable, forces which have implicitly been sexualised by the eye of the camera.

This film picks up on ideas hinted at in Carpenter's original, and renders more overtly the parallels between Myers and Laurie. Their actions at times reflect each other; both are unstoppable, resilient combatants, Myers a blank, Laurie all psyche. Laurie's preparedness enables her and her children to subvert performatively the conventions of the slasher genre, turning the tables on their antagonist, becoming those who hunt the hunter. Daringly, this also suggests that acts of violence forge a terrible, unresolved correlation between perpetrator and victim. The film's climax sees the three women wrestling with the individual whose violence has damaged all their lives, and we are reminded, explosively, that cages can become powerful traps for predators.

The performances of the three female leads, the filial love they display, and their agency provide a great emotional heart to this work. The narrative, cinematography, and editing offer recognition of the investments of fans by intelligently and knowingly playing

[2] Jason Zinoman, *Shock Value: How a Few Eccentric Outsiders Gave Us Nightmares, Conquered Hollywood, and Invented Modern Horror* (London: Duckworth Overlook, 2012), p. 61.
[3] Mark Salisbury, 'Done to Death', *The Guardian*, 18 October 2002 <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2002/oct/18/artsfeatures1> [accessed 4 March 2019].
[4] Robin Woods, *Hollywood: From Vietnam to Reagan ... and Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), p. 172.

with the conventions of the slasher genre and reinvigorating them, breathing menacing new life into a series of films that had long lost their way.

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