Slay:

An Exploration and Review of Queer Horror

By

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Contents

The horror genre contains many tropes, ‘Final Girls’, haunted houses, and never ending franchises seem to have become staples of the genre. Despite the mainstream acknowledgement of many of these tropes, one trope that is often ignored is the inherent queerness in many horror films. Horror films contain many queer elements (intentionally or not) and have a history heavily intertwined with queerness. Many historical horror writers have been explicitly queer or heavily theorized to have been queer during times when that was not acceptable. Openly queer authors Oscar Wilde and Clive Barker are responsible for two heavily influential horror stories (*The Picture of Dorian Grey* and the *Hellraiser* series, respectively). Other authors such as Bram Stoker and Mary Shelley are heavily theorized to have been queer despite no explicit proof. Not only is it important to note the queerness of the authors, but also the queer elements of the stories they wrote. Most notably, both *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* have a significant amount of themes that can be related to the queer experience. Oftentimes, the ‘monster’ or other antagonist of a horror story can be interpreted as a stand-in for the queer body. More often than not, the queer coded characters we see in horror films are meant to be the villains. Modern horror has made a shift in representing more queer characters in protagonist roles, these characters are often not explicitly stated to be queer (at least not in the film itself). I would argue, however, that just because these characters are protagonists does not necessarily mean they are always better representations than the queer antagonists and monsters of horror history.

Throughout my research, I’ve studied queer horror films throughout history. From *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) to modern films like *Bodies Bodies Bodies* (2022), horror

films have a variety of ways in which queerness is depicted and how explicitly they choose to explore these queer elements. Unsurprisingly, modern horror films tend to be more explicit about the queerness of their characters and their themes. There is also a noticeable shift in the queer body as a villain, to victim, to survivor as societal views have changed. Just as shifts in public attitudes towards sex changed the horror genre, so has a more accepting view of queerness. Previously, the queerness (both in gender and sexuality) of the villain was used to further villainize them, now, queer characters play pivotal roles in films (and not just as the monster waiting in the closet). Films such as *Freaky* (2020), the *Fear Street* trilogy (2021), and *Bit* (2019) have overtly queer characters and themes. Sometimes the queer monster is also the protagonist in modern horror. In films such as *A Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge* (1985) and *The Craft* (1996) we see the protagonist shift their 'queer behaviors' in order to defeat the antagonists of the film who are often portrayed as the 'evil queer' or a portrayal of the 'gay agenda' tempting the protagonist to 'join the queer side' so to say. Other films, such as *Bit* (2019) show the protagonist accepting their own queerness and empowering themself to defeat the villain. There also exist morally gray queer characters such as the case in *Let the Right One In* (2008) in which the primary character's queerness allows them to protect themself as well as their community.

The primary intention of this research is to find what it is that makes a piece of media (in this case horror films) queer and how that's changed over the years. How has the horror genre been affected by queer communities and societal attitudes towards queerness? In what ways has queer representation in horror changed or stayed the

same? Is the queer monster an inherently negative representation? Throughout my research I've collected and reviewed an assortment of films which fit under the umbrella of 'queer horror'. The intent of this paper is to draw attention and awareness to the prevalence of queerness in the horror space and the importance of queerness in relation to horror. In the context of this research, the usage of queer does not simply apply to LGBTQ+ individuals or groups, but also to communities who generally do not fit into societal norms. 'Queerness', as used in this paper, can be applied to the 'queer straight' as described by Harry Benshoff in "The Monster and the Homosexual". In "The Monster and the Homosexual", Benshoff refers to the concept of a "queer straight" in that queerness as a label can also apply to "issues of race, gender, disability, and class" (Benshoff 2002, p. 94). For example, one might consider *Black Christmas* (1974) queer due to the behaviors of some of the sorority sisters as well as the film's inclusion of an abortion plotline in which the heterosexual woman in the protagonist, or 'final girl', role is not villainized. A more modern iteration of a 'queer straight' is a movie such as *X* (2022), in which the group of protagonists is an adult film crew in 70s Texas. The protagonists (despite mostly dying) aren't villainized for their sex positive lifestyles, and the film makes sure to point out that these adult film stars are people beyond their work. Previous entries into the slasher genre (most prominently *Friday the 13th* (1980)) more often than not portray the victims as sex-crazed teenagers, too busy having sex with each other to survive the deranged killer on the loose. Even if modern slashers still occasionally 'punish' their victims for engaging in sexual behaviors, the characters aren't portrayed as morally corrupt for being sexually active. Horror has slowly yet surely become more progressive in its interpretations of queer characters and elements.

Through my research I hope to show the shift in societal views through the evolution of horror films.

To discuss queer horror films, you must start with classic horror stories such as *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*. Looking back on these classics, the queer elements are not hard to see. Regarding Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the character of Frankenstein's Monster parallels the queer experience throughout the novel. The titular monster spends his existence seeking love and companionship in a world not made for him. His desires are denied at almost every turn by those he encounters. His own creator is afraid of him and sends him away on his own. The monster seeks out others who may give him the love he desires but finds that he terrifies all who he comes across. This constant denial leads the monster to request that Victor Frankenstein create another creature to be his companion; the monster hopes that a creature also created by the doctor could understand him. Despite initially agreeing, Victor ends up destroying the companion leading his monster to vow revenge. The monster returns after Victor's wedding and kills his bride, Elizabeth. There are various ways to read these actions, primarily, this can be seen as the monster not only making Victor feel his own grief, but also as the monster wanting the companionship of his creator. This desire for his creator's companionship can be read as either romantic or familial, however both play into the parallels to the queer experience. By the end of the novel, both Victor Frankenstein and his monster are dead. Victor has died and his creation is found grieving his death before throwing himself into the ocean, killing himself.

To further confirm the idea that the story is heavily queer coded, the original author, Mary Shelley, is heavily theorized to have been queer. Additionally, the director of both the 1931 adaptation *Frankenstein* as well as its sequel *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), James Whale, was an openly gay man. The film adaptation and its sequel lean into the queer elements of the story. The films feature many queer actors and are unapologetically camp. *Bride of Frankenstein* is especially interesting as it is not based directly on works of Mary Shelley. The sequel film is even more explicitly queer than its predecessor. The film strays from the original plot of *Frankenstein* in that the doctor's second creation (the titular bride) is created for Frankenstein's Monster with the assistance of another man. Not only does this other man attempt to prevent 'Henry' (the doctor's name in the film adaptation) and Elizabeth's marriage, but he is very heavily queer coded. Dr. Pretorius (played by Ernest Thesinger) spends the film obsessed with Henry Frankenstein and his desire to create life with him. Furthering the queer narrative, the Bride herself rejects Frankenstein's Monster; despite being 'made for eachother' she has no interest in the Monster. This can be read a variety of ways, however this implies the queerness of the Bride herself.

Another horror classic with very queer readings is *Dracula*. While this refers to a singular, specific, vampire, the vampire as a horror creature is heavily queer coded on its own. Vampires are creatures that were 'turned' by another. Their 'affliction' and desire for blood can be seen as a very clear parallel to how queer people have been viewed in society. The fear that one can be 'turned' queer or that same-sex desires are harmful are both personified in the vampire. Oftentimes vampires or portrayed as

charming and manipulative, similar to portrayals of queer people in homophobic propaganda. We can see this behavior specifically in *Dracula* through his interactions with humans, particularly Renfield. Fears of the queer such as these can still be seen in modern day anti-queer sentiments. Accusations of the queer as a 'groomer' or pedophile bring to mind the idea of a vampire luring in vulnerable victims to feed from and 'turn'. Modern times have also led to the idea of vampires as a personification of HIV/ AIDS and its spread amongst queer communities. As discussed by Marty Fink in *AIDS Vampires: Reimagining Illness in Octavia Butler's Fledgling*, "Because vampires manifest unrestrained sexuality as a form of disease, they also perpetuate the popular misconception that sexual deviancy causes HIV/AIDS." (Fink 2010, p.417).

Not only is queerness inherent in many horror stories, but many queer people and communities have a love for the genre. Two of the most prominent pieces of media which reflect the relation between queerness and horror are *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) and the *Dragula* reality TV show. Both of these pieces of media feature explicitly queer elements, most prominently drag and discussions/ portrayals of gender and sexual identity. In *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, the sexualities of all characters are left intentionally vague. The character of Frank-N-Furter is a self proclaimed "Sweet transvestite from Transexual, Transylvania". Frank-N-Furter plays the role of an explicitly queer Victor Frankenstein of sorts. Doctor Frank-N-Furter creates life similarly to Frankenstein, however in this case it's the doctor who seeks companionship from their creation rather than the reverse. Rather than being portrayed directly as villainous, Frank-N-Furter is morally ambiguous. Instead of the 'turning' of the two characters Janet

and Brad (who play the role of the ‘innocent straights’) being a bad thing, it simply shows the characters exploring their own gender and sexuality. Even the ending of the film reflects that of *Bride of Frankenstein*. The end reveals that Frank-N-Furter and the other residents of this strange residence are actually aliens from another planet. Upon this reveal, the castle flies into the sky like a spaceship and the residents return to their planet. Prior to the take-off, Brad and Janet escape, similar to Henry and Elizabeth Frankenstein’s escape from the castle before its destruction in *Bride of Frankenstein*. A primary differentiation is that the viewer is led to believe that the residents of the castle simply return to their home planet, whereas in *Bride of Frankenstein* our queer cast of both monsters as well as Dr. Pretorius are killed in the explosion of the laboratory. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* does not set out to villainize or heroicize queerness, it simply shows a world in which people are free to express their gender and sexual identity freely.

The Boulet Brothers’ Dragula is very different from other forms of media covered in this paper. As opposed to fictional horror depictions with queer-coded characters, *Dragula* is a reality TV show featuring real queer drag artists. The ‘monsters’ (as the contestants are referred to) come from various backgrounds and identities. The show uses the criteria of three categories, horror, glamour, and filth. The contestants are judged based on how well they deliver on these ideas and different challenges call for different usage of the criteria. Past floor show themes include zombified prom queens, reimaginings of horror villains, and gothic brides. The show not only refers to horror media with the categories of the floorshows and challenges, but the contestants must

also survive ‘extermination challenges’ which the lowest placing contestants each week must partake in. These extermination challenges vary from something as terrifying as being buried alive or vacuum sealed in a silicone wall, to challenges which are more light hearted such as riding a mechanical bull or go-kart racing. The horror of this series goes beyond visual aesthetics and truly puts the contestants through frightening tasks making them face their fears. The question asked throughout the series is “Do you have *Dragula* in your blood?”. To discuss queerness and horror and not mention *Dragula* would be a significant oversight, as it shows the exact intersection where the two meet. The show is also indicative of both the horror and queer communities being (generally) welcoming and supportive. Despite all the torturous challenges and floorshow critiques, the atmosphere is largely positive. Before each critique, the Boulet Brothers (the hosts of the show) state to all contestants “We are not here to judge your drag. Drag is art and art is subjective. What we are judging you on is your drag as it relates to this competition”. While there are still winners and losers in this competition, this affirmation shows that the hosts, and queer horror communities in general, care for the wellbeing of each other.

A majority of my research was done through watching and reviewing many queer films (these reviews can be found in the appendix to this paper). Not only did I watch the films myself, but I also studied articles written on queer horror and the specific films I’ve used in my reviews and paper. In addition to my research on queer horror theory, I also researched queer and feminist theory in a more general sense. Through this research I not only discovered queer readings of films I had previously not thought of as queer, but

also found many points in which horror and queerness intersect. Scholars such as Carol J. Clover, Harry Benshoff, and Laura Westengard have written extensively on the topic of queer horror as well as gender and horror. Writing such as Carol J. Clover's *Men, Women, and Chainsaw: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (1992) have become pivotal texts in the study of horror, specifically as it relates to gender and sexuality. In addition to these prolific authors, I also found writings by others such as Kent L. Brintnall, Susan R. Bowers, and Melanie McDougald. Based on my research, the study of queer horror seems to be a growing field in both academic fields as well as in mainstream circles of fans and has been on an uphill climb since the late 1980s. Social Media such as Twitter, TikTok, and YouTube have provided spaces for communities to discuss their love for the genre more easily.

A frequent point of online discourse among horror fans is the lack of official acknowledgement of the genre by award ceremonies and the like. As of 2023, only six horror films have been nominated for Best Picture at the Oscars awards, the most recent of which was *Get Out* (2017). Despite many modern horror films receiving good critical and audience reviews, it seems the genre itself is still not taken seriously. Mainstream views of horror tend to see the *Friday the 13th* franchise (1980 - present) as the poster child of horror, which is to say 'brainless films about horny teenagers being chopped up'. While slashers such as the *Friday the 13th* franchise have their place in media, it has led to horror not being seen as a 'respectable' genre. Not only does this impact the respectability and 'validity' of the genre, but also works to further the connection between queerness and horror. Both horror communities and queer

communities often discuss ‘respectability politics’. This intersection is yet another that ties the queer and horror communities; there is a solidarity to being seen as an outsider that brings both groups together.

The solidarity of ‘outsider’ communities is a very relevant connection between queerness and horror. This can also be applied to the concept of resonating with the outsider as empowering, in this case, particularly horror villains and monsters. Two prominent examples of this are *Let the Right One In* (2008) and *Jennifer’s Body* (2009). Both of these films have characters who are morally ambiguous at best. Despite them committing morally wrong actions during the films, one can’t help but sympathize and, to an extent, align yourself with them. The aforementioned characters both have their own past traumas that cause them to behave as they do. Not only do these characters go through traumatic events in their lives that change them emotionally, but these events also affect them physically. In both cases, these characters’ trauma led to them becoming monsters of sorts. Eli in *Let the Right One In* has both explicit and implied trauma which likely relates to how they became a vampire at such a young age. In Jennifer’s case, her trauma leads to her gaining demonic powers and cravings. The powers granted to both these characters through their trauma serves as a curse of sorts, but also gives them the power to protect themselves from further trauma. The ‘queer monster’ can be seen as aspirational in that it allows these characters to become empowered by their trauma not enslaved to it.

When considering the ‘queer monster’ as an empowering figure, it brings to mind the tragic myth of Medusa. While Medusa is often presented as a victim turned villain, more modern interpretations tend to allow her agency of her own; Rather than her transformation into a Gorgon being deemed purely as punishment, one can also view it as empowering. Athena’s ‘curse’ can also be seen as a blessing. As mentioned by Susan R. Bowers in *Medusa and the Female Gaze*, Medusa presents a “grotesque paradox” of “extraordinary beauty and het horror” (Bowers 1990, p. 222). Bowers refers to Medusa as “the sacred and profane, law and taboo, pure and impure … contagion and cure” (Bowers 1990, p. 222). Much like modern monstrous figures, Medusa has the ability to both empower and horrify. As Bowers discusses in *Medusa and the Female Gaze*, Medusa represents the “fear of female power” and what happens when that feminine power is claimed. Medusa’s powers come not from her gaze alone, but also from the gaze of her spectator. Her ability to turn men to stone requires the meeting of the male and female gaze. Medusa is a figure who defies objectification and victimization by daring to use the monstrous powers given to her. Just because she has experienced traumatic events, does not mean she must be a victim of these events. As stated in Bowers’ writing, while Medusa is recognized as “in some sense, a focus of evil” she is also “innocent of the horror she generated” and what truly makes her fascinating is “her betrayed power and innocence.” (Bowers 1990, 224).

The events of *Jennifer’s Body* can be almost directly linked to the myth of Medusa. Early in the film, Jennifer is taken away by a band of young men and symbolically raped (as explained by Carol J. Clover “Actual rape is practically

nonexistent in the slasher film" (*Her Body, Himself*, 1987 p.195-196)) and sacrificed to fulfill a demonic pact. The men intend to sacrifice a virgin and believe her to be one. In contrast to common horror tropes, Jennifer being a sexually active character is what saves her rather than dooms her. The botched sacrifice leads to Jennifer acquiring demonic powers which are sustained by feeding on male fear and flesh. The film blurs the line between victim and villain in the tragic character of Jennifer. Jennifer spends the film preying on young men to increase her own power. The film inverts the male gaze and allows Jennifer to weaponize it; She preys on those who see her as a sexual object and turns that into her own power. Much like Medusa, Jennifer turns her 'curse' into a power by weaponizing both the male and female gaze. Both figures recognize how they are seen by men, and reclaim that power to their own advantage. Even the deaths of both figures is seen as tragic as both are not fully responsible for the horrors they generate. Jennifer and Medusa are both figures betrayed by those they worshiped. In Medusa's case, this betrayal comes from her goddess Athena, for Jennifer this betrayal comes from the band 'Low Shoulder' who she admires as godlike figures. It's important to note that the women in both stories are nearly exclusively shown using these powers against men. As Jennifer states in a trailer for the film, I'm not killing people, "I'm killing boys". This line (despite not actually showing up in the film itself) shows Jennifer, just as Medusa, as a sort of protector of women. When Jennifer is confronted by her best friend Needy, Needy states "I thought you only ate boys." to which Jennifer responds "I go both ways". This interaction implies that throughout the film, Jennifer easily could have satiated her hunger by preying on women as well as men; despite this, she makes a point of only preying on men showing her care for other women in her life, regardless of

her ability to show this. Jennifer's relationship to other girls, mainly Needy, is shown to be complicated as she has her own insecurities which make it difficult for her to express this care in fear of being seen as weak. Ironically, the trailers for the film seem to focus on Megan Fox as Jennifer as a figure to be objectified. Despite the film not directly sexualizing Jennifer's body, even when naked, the trailers seemed to lean into the idea of Megan Fox as a sexual object for young men; The trailers themselves rely on the male gaze to then subvert those expectations when the object of this gaze reclaimed the power given to her.

In *Let the Right One In*, one of the main characters, Eli, is a centuries old vampire who is stuck in the body of a child. Similar to Jennifer and Medusa, Eli is a character whose power comes from tragedy, having been forcefully castrated and turned into a vampire by a, presumably pedophilic, adult vampire. As we see in the 2008 film, Eli has been forced to adapt to their life as a child vampire over centuries. Making the best of a tragic situation, Eli uses their appearance to prey on those that would normally prey on them. Just as Medusa or Jennifer Check can be seen as protectors of women, Eli can be seen as a protector of children (to an extent). Unlike Medusa or Jennifer, however, Eli does not harness a female power as when their gender is questioned they simply state they are "not a girl" which allows them to occupy a genderless space in which they can be seen as they want to be seen by their victims. Notably, Eli's caretaker for a significant portion of the story is implied or directly stated to be (depending on which version of the story is consumed), a pedophile himself. This 'pedophilic gaze' allows Eli to take back the power that was taken from them. Similar to

Medusa or Jennifer, Eli reverses the roles in a situation in which they would normally be the victim and instead uses this to their advantage. Eli seems to have somewhat of a disdain for adults which is likely rooted in how they became a vampire. To survive, they form what can be described as symbiotic relationships; in the case of their relationship with Oskar, the young boy they befriend, they both protect each other. Eli kills Oskar's bullies when it seems they are going to kill him, and Oskar provides protection for Eli during the day when Eli cannot go outside themself. Not only is their relationship one of survival, but also contains elements of romance similar to that of Jennifer and Needy's relationship in *Jennifer's Body*.

Jennifer's Body, *Let the Right One In*, and many other films without explicit queer representation are still praised as queer films. Why is it that these films are praised in such a way when they don't explicitly portray characters as queer? Not only this, but often these characters who are implied to be queer are portrayed as villainous or in some way 'punished' in queer horror films. Characters like Jennifer Check, Frankenstein's Monster, and even Freddy Krueger are, on more than one occasion, implied to represent queerness in some aspect. Noticeably, all three characters are villains and/ or find themselves punished by their films' conclusion. Jennifer is a boy killing cannibalistic demon who, as previously discussed, 'goes both ways' and ends up killed because of this. Frankenstein's Monster voluntarily kills himself, his Bride, and Doctor Pretorius when he blows up the laboratory and prior to this wreaks havoc on his surroundings due to behaviors he cannot contain. In *Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge*, the protagonist, Jesse, is heavily implied to be queer and is later

possessed by Freddy Krueger (implied queer in this film and an implied pedophile throughout the franchise). By the film's conclusion, Freddy leaves Jesse's body and he finds himself in a relationship with his female best friend. This conclusion brings to mind the concept of conversion therapy or otherwise 'fixing' an individual's queerness. So then why is it that queers find themselves punished or taking on villainous roles in these films?

The Hays Code, or Production Code, was introduced in 1930 in order to regulate cinema through censorship of things deemed 'morally wrong' (Kuhn & Westwell 2020). This censorship was enforced in an attempt to encourage morally good behavior through cinema. Most notably, the code targeted sexual content in cinema. Certain themes were either prohibited outright or required the film to cast these 'deviant' behaviors in a negative light. The enforcement of the code became more lenient in 1954, allowing sexual themes to be treated with restraint rather than entirely removed (Kuhn & Westwell 2020). By the late 1960s, the code was replaced by a rating system such as the one we see today, but the effects of the Production Code still impact modern media (Kuhn & Westwell 2020).

The Hays Code, led to the creation of what we currently call 'queer coding' of characters, themes, or entire pieces of media. Queer coded characters essentially find themselves as close to crossing the line of 'appropriate' content under the Hays Code, but make sure not to cross that line. Doctor Pretorius, for example, is played by a homosexual man and behaves in over the top, campy, ways which we would now

recognize as such even by those outside the queer community. However, the character is portrayed as nearly asexual and simply cares for the science of creating new life with Dr. Frankenstein. More modern characters, such as Jennifer Check, are coded in much more explicit ways. We see Jennifer kissing Needy, and even heavily imply that they have had sexual interactions in the past; Despite these almost obvious queer themes, the film never explicitly states that Jennifer, or Needy, are bisexual, gay, lesbian, or otherwise queer except for a single scene in which a classmate teasingly refers to them as “lesbi-gay” for eachother. These movies were released over seventy years apart, yet both use similar methods of queer coding. Queer coding of characters is a particularly widespread method of incorporating queer characters without the difficulties of explicitly stating their queerness in the media itself. This media technique can be seen in all forms of media from the aforementioned queer horror film, to children’s animation. In part, this method serves as a way for queer people to see themselves represented without the outrage that often comes from queer representation in media.

Despite the lingering effects of the Hays Code, modern media has become more explicit in its representations of queerness. Horror films such as *They/ Them* (2022), *Bodies Bodies Bodies* (2022), and even classics like the *Scream* Franchise (1996-present) all include explicitly queer characters. These representations vary between films. In *They/ Them*, the identities of the characters are forefronted (as the title suggests). The film is a slasher set at a conversion camp for queer teens in which the victims are all violently conservative camp counselors. Unlike many other slasher films, the killer isn’t motivated purely by a sadistic bloodlust, but by their desire for

revenge on counselors who harm queer youths. On the other hand, *Scream* and *Bodies Bodies Bodies* don't put queer identities at the forefront of the films, they simply happen to include queer characters. In *Scream* (2022), Mindy Meeks-Martin, played by Jasmin Savoy Brown, is casually shown to be a lesbian. This aspect of her character is not pushed to the forefront and doesn't significantly change how she acts in the film. Mindy isn't a character built off queer stereotypes and her queerness is only relevant to her character in who she chooses to date. In *Bodies Bodies Bodies*, queer characters are similarly portrayed. Their queerness isn't reduced to stereotypes and is simply a character trait that is shown through their relationships throughout the film. The two final girls at the end of the film are a lesbian couple with their own personalities beyond their queerness.

Arguably, the forms of representation shown in *They/ Them* can be seen as virtue signaling or pandering. The film follows a group of queer youths sent to a conversion camp where the conservative, homophobic, counselors begin to be killed off one by one. Having been released in 2022, when queer communities (particularly gender identity) were a huge topic of discussion, it's not difficult to see how this could be a possibility. The title alone, while clever, immediately shows the film's capitalization of the discourse surrounding the queer community. This isn't helped by the film's shallow representations of queerness and lack of any real political engagement beyond the existence of queer characters in the film. The film essentially reduces itself to an intro to gender and sexuality class through its portrayals of queer characters and need to hold

the audience's hand through each character's identity as to make it easily digestible for a mainstream audience.

While it's great to see explicitly queer characters in media, films like *They/ Them* make an argument in favor of queer coding over explicit representation. Films such as *Jennifer's Body*, *Bride of Frankenstein*, and *Scream* (2022) arguably represent queerness in more nuanced ways. Despite its explicit representations of queer characters, *They/ Them* ends up portraying a majority of the cast as one dimensional versions of their given queer identities. As opposed to *They/ Them*, the other aforementioned films don't (with the exception of *Scream* (2022)) explicitly state the sexualities of the characters. This decision to not put queerness at the forefront of these characters allows them to be portrayed in more nuanced ways without a need to constantly reaffirm their queer identities. A film like *They/ Them* uses its dialogue as a constant reminder that the characters we're supposed to root for are queer, whereas the other films show this queerness through subtler ways such as mannerisms or actions of characters. The constant verbal reminders of a character's identity can feel so redundant it can cause the viewer to almost resent the characters. When watching a horror film, the viewer doesn't want to be constantly berated with lines that remind you of the same thing, and *They/ Them* does just that.

When discussing queerness in media, it seems that audiences primarily recognize overt portrayals; We often acknowledge the gender and sexuality of queer characters and themes, but not themes which are relevant to other forms of queerness.

In *The Monster and the Homosexual* (Benshoff, 2002), Benshoff refers to the concept of the “straight queer” and ‘Queer’ as anything beyond “normative heterosexuality and traditional gender roles (Benshoff, p.93). Examples of this can be seen in films such as *Hellraiser* (1987) or *Alien* (1979). Despite neither film having explicitly or heavily implied LGBTQ characters, both contain queer themes with a heavy focus on human relations to sex.

Clive Barker’s *Hellraiser* (1987) is a film adaptation of his novella *The Hellbound Heart* (1986) in which themes of human sexuality are at the forefront. While none of the characters in the film are explicitly LGBT, Barker himself is an openly gay man, and the themes are directly inspired by those of BDSM culture. While perhaps not an accurate depiction of BDSM culture, the film very directly refers to the ideas of pleasure and pain as two sides of the same coin. The idea of pleasure and pain being closely linked sensations is a very overt depiction of queer sexualities that are not necessarily LGBT. In addition to these ideas, the cenobites (supernatural beings from another world) are shown in black leather and latex clothing reminiscent of bondage gear. Not only do the cenobites wear BDSM inspired clothing, but they’re bodies have been heavily modified. This body modification brings to mind things such as gender affirming surgeries. These beings represent a sexual deviance and openness which is often attributed to queer communities and its demonization by heteronormative societal views.

In regards to *Alien* (1979) as a representation of the ‘straight queer’, the most obvious theme is the portrayal of Ellen Ripley (portrayed by Sigourney Weaver). As

opposed to traditional tropes of the final girl being unexpectedly prepared for a fight against a greater force, Ripley is more than capable of dealing with this unknown threat throughout the film. The film deviates from the typical portrayals of women as irrational and emotional by portraying Ripley as rational and level-headed throughout the film as opposed to her male colleagues; It's this rational approach to the situation which allows Ripley to survive as opposed to other final girls who often seem to survive out of luck as they frantically flee the killer. Ripley refuses to take a passive role as seen in other films that follow the trope of a 'final girl' and instead is proactive in her survival. Not only do her actions deviate from the typical final girl, but so do her relationships. Throughout the film, and the franchise as a whole, Ripley is not shown to have a romantic interest in any of the men in these films. The relationships between Ripley and other characters are purely platonic and can even lead the viewer to see her as somewhere on the queer spectrum. While this is a valid interpretation of the character, her sexuality is not important to the film. Films often insert a love interest for the 'final girl' or otherwise sexualize them, but in *Alien*, this is the least of Ripley's worries. When fighting for survival against an unknown alien threat, why would her sexuality matter?

Not only does *Alien* portray gender roles in a non-normative way through Ripley, but it can also be seen as an allegory for rape, specifically that of a fear of male penetration. The titular alien in the film, known as a Xenomorph, can be seen as a phallic figure. *Alien* brings sexual violence against men to the forefront, a concept not often discussed. Throughout the film, a majority of the victims of the Xenomorph are male; the first victim of the film is a man who is attacked and impregnated by an alien

creature. As the crew is having a meal together, they watch in horror as this first victim gives a gruesome birth to the creature as it bursts through his chest, covering them in blood. As Barbara Creed states in *The Monstrous Feminine*, “When male bodies become grotesque, they tend to take on characteristics associated with female bodies; in this instance man’s body becomes grotesque because it is capable of being penetrated. From this union, the monstrous creature is born.” (Creed 1993, p. 85). When we first see the creature it’s form is phallic and flesh colored. As it quickly matures throughout the film, it retains phallic features, such as its head shape, its protruding tongue, and long prehensile tail it uses to skewer its prey. Sexual violence against women is something that is often discussed and portrayed, but in *Alien* everyone, regardless of gender, is at equal risk of attack. Not only is everyone at equal risk of attack, but each character is a possible subject for the same consequences. The primary goal of the Xenomorph is to reproduce, and the film shows a world in which men are also subject to the fear of involuntary impregnation. This penetration of male characters by any of these phallic objects brings both parties into a “primitive, animalistic embrace.” (Clover, 1987 p. 198) and suggests that queer desire (such as a male desire to be penetrated rather than penetrate) is “linked with violence, aggression and death” (Brintnall, 2007 p.152).

Horror as a genre can be very telling of the societal values of a time. It can also be used to give voices to those seen as outsiders. The genre has provided a way to uniquely embody the queer experience, or embody attitudes towards queerness at the time the films were released. Certain films used their characters as allegories for their

own relationships with queerness, while others used it to villainize queer communities. However, even those meant to demonize queers can be looked at as empowering. To relate to the ‘other’ can be a comforting experience, as you know you aren’t the only one who feels like an outsider. Similar to queer communities, horror communities allow those who have felt like outsiders to find like minded people. Seeing how significantly the genre has changed in a little less than a century, makes one wonder how it could evolve in even the next decade. Will we look back on the films of today and see what we couldn’t now? What would James Whale or Mary Shelley think of today’s queer horror? Horror films occupy a unique space in their ability to represent the ‘outsider’ perspective and culture. With horror becoming a growing genre with more mainstream appeal, is it possible that it becomes less subversive? Perhaps it will even become more subversive as more societal issues arise and things previously seen as taboo become more accepted.

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Filmography

Alien. Directed by Ridley Scott, 20th Century Fox, 1979.

Bit. Directed by Brad Michael Elmore, Vertical Entertainment, 2019.

Black Christmas. Directed by Bob Clark, Warner Bros., 1974.

Bodies Bodies Bodies. Directed by Halina Reijn, A24, 2022.

Bride of Frankenstein. Directed by James Whale, Universal Pictures, 1935.

The Boulet Brothers' Dragula. Directed by Nathan Noyes, and Micheal Varrati ,Boulet Brothers Productions, 2017-2021.

Dracula. Directed by Tod Browning, Universal Pictures, 1931.

Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge. Directed by Jack Sholder, New Line Cinema, 1985.

Friday the 13th franchise. Created by Sean S. Cunningham, Paramount Pictures, 1980-2009.

Get Out. Directed by Jordan Peele, Universal Pictures, 2017.

Hellraiser. Directed by Clive Barker, Entertainment Film Distributors, 1987.

Jennifer's Body. Directed by Karyn Kusama, 20th Century Fox, 2009.

Let the Right One In. Directed by Tomas Alfredson, Magnolia Pictures, 2008.

Rocky Horror Picture Show. Directed by Jim Sharman, 20th Century Fox, 1975.

Scream franchise. Directed by Wes Craven, Dimension Films, 1996-2011.

Scream. Directed by Matt Bettinelli-Olpin, and Tyler Gillett, Paramount Pictures, 2022

They/Them. Directed by John Logan, Peacock, 2022.

X. Directed by Ti West, A24, 2022.

Appendix

Select Film Reviews

Bit (2019)

2/5 ★

The concept of queer feminist vampires immediately got me interested in this film. While it wasn't a terrible film, it definitely isn't anything incredible. However, it does feature interesting themes, primarily those of chosen family in queer communities and the impact growing up queer has on one's mindset.

The film follows a trans girl who is adopted into a gang of queer vampire women while on summer vacation. Themes of empowerment are overarching throughout the movie, especially regarding queer people and women. While these themes are covered in an interesting way, through the metaphor of vampirism, it ultimately takes middling positions on social issues. The character of Duke is shown to have a hatred of men which we find out roots from her being hypnotized and raped for years by a male vampire named Vlad. While the film obviously, and rightfully, villainizes Vlad for this, we are meant to see Duke as a villain as well. By the end of the movie she's made to pay for her 'crimes' against men in what essentially amounts to a message of 'Not All Men'. Overall, not a bad movie, but the themes absolutely could have been handled better and its eagerness to villainize a deeply traumatized and abused woman leaves a bad taste in my mouth. However, as a film about queer vampire women, it's pretty enjoyable.

Bodies Bodies Bodies (2022)

4/5 ★

Taking advantage of slasher tropes, much of the film is based on a lack of information by both the audience and its characters. A group of vapid, rich, Gen Z 20-year olds decide to get together and have a party during a huge storm. Someone gets a machete to the neck off screen and chaos ensues. Filled with incredibly quotable dialogue and a lot of fun visuals, it's hard not to enjoy the viewing experience.

I'm particularly a fan of Rachel Sennott's performance as Alive in the film. Just about every scene she's in, she steals. My eyes and ears were focused only on what she said in every scene she appeared. Alice is a fantastic portrayal of Gen Z stereotypes. She has a podcast, does coke, and wears glow sticks during a game in which stealth is critical. While you'd expect her to be a miserable vapid person, the pure entertainment she provides throughout the film is what really makes it shine. Even the primary couple of the film, Sophie and Bee, don't have the screen presence that Alice has. Just about every line that comes from Rachel Sennott's mouth in this role has been burrowed into my memory. This is not to say the other performances were bad, they weren't. Each character was distinctly characterized by their actors and reacted to the situation in their own way. While the plot of the movie is fun, the actors' performances are what really makes this movie fantastic.

Fear Street: 1994 (2021)

4/5 ★

Primarily this film is simply a great slasher with some incredible and shocking kills. In the final sequence of the film I found myself screaming at the screen “NO! NO! NO! They wouldn’t!” and despite my pleas, they still did. Beyond the fact that this is a fun slasher film, it also has great representation of two lesbian teenage girls in the 90s. While not omitting their sexuality, the film makes sure not to fetishize it either.

Each character has a distinct personality, as do the multiple killers who chase them. Taking a note from the *Scream* movies in its intro scene, the film immediately shows us a relevant scream queen as she’s chased then gutted in a shopping mall. The seemingly unending stream of undead killers brings the entertainment often seen in ‘monster of the week’ style shows. The roster of killers ranges from generic jason vorhees-esque brute, to a 16 year old girl from the 60s who sings as she approaches her victims with a straight razor. You can’t help but root for your favorite killer to rack up the most kills while hoping the protagonists make it out alive.

Freaky (2020)

4/5 ★

Who would've guessed that turning *Freaky Friday* into a slasher film would be so great? Conceptually alone this film is very fun and campy with some great gore. Beyond this, the film has genuine moments which help to personify the characters. *Freaky* follows the path of the *Scream* franchise in its self-referential nature as its characters don't live in a world unaware of horror tropes.

Themes of body dysmorphia, gender identity, and sexuality are also explored throughout the film. As expected with 'body swap' genre films there's the obvious themes of body dysmorphia by both the final girl and the killer once they've swapped bodies. The killer isn't used to not having the strength he had in his own body, and the protagonist, Millie, hates the sights and smells of this new body. As the film progresses however, both characters become accustomed to and accept their new bodies to an extent. The killer uses the unassuming appearance of a small teenage girl to lure in victims, and Millie begins to appreciate the strength of her new body (and being able to pee standing up). The film even includes a scene in which a character is corrected in his misgendering of the killer in Millie's body. Additionally, we see a scene in which Millie (in the killer's body) and her crush have a heartfelt conversation ending in a kiss. This scene is mainly played for laughs but also shows the acknowledgement that regardless of how Millie looks, she's still Millie. Overall a fun slasher which covers some important themes in an approachable way that doesn't take away from the rest of the experience.

Hellraiser (1987)

4.5/5 ★

One of the most iconic queer horror films, *Hellraiser* covers themes of sexuality through gore and body horror. The Cenobites show up covered in leather and metal with plenty of body modifications. Their cold intellect and disgusting appearances in the short time we see them makes them immediately iconic characters. While many think the cenobites are the villains, the primary villains of the film are the humans. The humans in question, Frank and Julia, have an ongoing affair which is a catalyst for the events that follow. Frank and Julia's blood splattered, flesh rending affair is the central conflict of the film as Frank desires sensation like he's never experienced. This sexual desire leads to him being taken by the Cenobites to experience both pleasure and pain in great excess. Next we see him, he's been skinned and has an insatiable need for blood which he insists Julia assists with. Julia lures men to Frank with promises of sex before bashing them over the head with a hammer to be consumed by Frank.

The protagonist, Kirsty, is Frank's niece and Julia's stepdaughter. Over the course of the film, Kirsty investigates the puzzlebox which summons the Cenobites while also trying to avoid the same fate as Frank. Kirsty is opposite Julia in just about every way. While Julia is openly sexual and uses this to her advantage, Kirsty is generally quiet and timid. Despite her initially quiet demeanor, Kirsty resolves to endure the horrors that await her in order to save herself and her father. Despite Kirsty being the protagonist of the film, Julia's charming personality almost makes you want her to succeed. This gory body horror film is pivotal to both queer cinema and horror.

Jennifer's Body (2009)

4/5 ★

Jennifer's Body (2009) based solely on the trailers originally released would come off as a film created specifically to capitalize on Megan Fox's fame and sex appeal, and in a sense it does, but not how one would think. The film itself subverts the expectations by having Fox's Jennifer reclaim that sexuality and make it her power.

Fox plays a high school girl who becomes possessed by a demon and consumes boys to retain her looks and power. While the film was received poorly on its release, over the years it's become a cult classic. Both Megan Fox and Amanda Seyfried give great performances in their portrayals of Jennifer and Needy, respectively, and the complications of high school friendships and discovering one's sexuality. The film manages to subvert the audience's expectations of horror tropes through its cast of characters. The film tackles themes that are unexpected from a campy horror-comedy meant to capitalize off young men's sexuality. While definitely not a perfect movie, many of the themes remain relevant, even if its outdated references don't. I find myself revisiting this film often and often notice small details which change how I view it. Definitely worth watching as a fun movie that doesn't take itself too seriously while also not underselling its ability to cover themes of queer identity and female power.

Seed of Chucky (2004)

2.5/5 ★

While by no means a ‘GOOD’ movie, the way this film covers themes of gender identity has no right being as good as it is. This installment in the *Child’s Play* franchise is by far the ‘grossest’ and definitely follows John Waters ideas about ‘bad taste’ as confirmed by his cameo in the film. Vomit, piss, semen, disembowelment, artificial insemination, doll sex, this movie has all that and more. Under all this disgusting bodily excrement and filth however, is a story of a dysfunctional family just trying to find themselves and their acceptance of their queer child.

The film covers gender identity through the character of Glen/ Glenda, and their journey of finding their identity. Interestingly, this is essentially a nonissue to their parents who are more concerned about the family tradition of serial murder. Switching between these personas throughout the film, by the end they are given human bodies so both personas can exist separately. Who needs expensive gender affirming surgeries when you can do voodoo blood magic body possession!

They/Them (2022)

1.5/5 ★

They/Them (2022) seemingly set out to do something original with the campground slasher trope, but ultimately falls short in nearly every aspect. The name *They/Them* immediately intrigued me and when hearing the plot of the movie I hoped it would at the very least be a fun, gory slasher. A film featuring explicitly queer protagonists of varying identities in a genre I love sounded promising, especially with a recent revival of slasher films such as *X* (2022), and the *Fear Street* trilogy (2021). I went into *They/Them* nearly blind and was excited to see violent homophobes be killed off in creative, brutal ways, as one would expect from a slasher film set at a conversion camp; I was severely disappointed.

I had hoped to like this movie even if only as a campy (pun partially intended), fun, violent, slasher. My hopes were low that this movie would be anything better than average, but even then I was disappointed. While I wouldn't watch the film again, I still have a soft spot in my heart for queer films that are just plain bad so I can't convince myself to give this only one star..

Appendix Filmography

Bit. Directed by Brad Michael Elmore, Vertical Entertainment, 2019.

Bodies, Bodies, Bodies. Directed by Halina Reijn, A24, 2021.

Fear Street 1994. Directed by Leigh Janiak, Netflix, 2021.

Freaky. Directed by Christopher Landon, Universal Pictures, 2020.

Hellraiser. Directed by Clive Barker, Entertainment Film Distributors, 1987.

Jennifer's Body. Directed by Karyn Kusama, 20th Century Fox, 2009.

Seed of Chucky. Directed by Don Mancini, Universal Pictures, 2004.

They/Them. Directed by John Logan, Peacock, 2022.