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Let the Monsters Out of the Closet: Overt Queer Depictions in Hollywood Horror Films

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Introduction: Discovering the Monster Queer

"What's your favorite movie?" It is the scariest question a film lover faces. For a viewer like me, who obsessively organizes a list of hundreds of films in my Notes app, the pressure to choose just one representative "favorite" movie requires a certain level of sacrifice. To avoid these anxieties, I have learned to default to one of the classics, a film I am confident represents my interests while remaining popular and accessible. When asked, I say my favorite movie is *The Silence of the Lambs*.

As a prepubescent, when I first saw parts of Jonathan Demme's 1991 psychological horror on cable television, I began fearing cannibals, elevators, and men who tucked their member between their legs. It was only as I aged that I began to appreciate *The Silence of the Lambs* for its filmic value: the performances of the lead actors, the suspense of the narrative and editing, the terror of the set design and score. As my childhood fears subsided, they gave way to a newfound curiosity and subsequent frustration with the monster at the center of the film, Buffalo Bill. A serial killer who tortures and kills young women and harvests their skin to create a "woman suit" for himself, Buffalo Bill is deemed not a "real" transsexual by Dr. Hannibal Lecter, but rather a gay man who hates his own identity and history of abuse so much that he seeks a new gender identity. For a film I often champion as my favorite, I struggle to make peace with this fraught depiction of a queer monster.

As my interest in horror grew and I explored other classics like Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, I faced a similar issue. While a landmark film, particularly for the horror genre, *Psycho* depicts a psychosexual, crossdressing killer in Norman Bates, whose nonnormative masculinity marks him as scary. As a gay man and horror film lover, I cannot ignore a monster queer when I see one, even in films I love.

In his book *Monsters in the Closet*, Harry M. Benshoff details the long history of the monster queer in Hollywood horror films through the twentieth century. Seen by many as a "monstrous condition," homosexuality (and queer gender and sexuality identities broadly) has a central place in the horror genre (Benshoff 1). The basic narrative structure of the horror film can be understood as heteronormative characters being terrorized by a destabilizing queer force, often in the form of a monster, and attempting to destroy it to restore "normality" (36). Beginning in the 1930s, through connotation, the classical Hollywood horror film villainizes and vanquishes anything outside the heteronormative and begins the trend of conflating queer sexuality with perverse signifiers like bestiality, incest, sadomasochism, and rape (69). As the genre progresses, WWII-era horror plots demonize male effeminacy and implement psychiatry to "cure" the monster (84-5). 1950s science fiction films demonstrate fears of invasion, conflating communism and "passing" homosexuality, while the 1960s brought about looser film censorship and therefore more violent, sexualized queer monsters (123, 176). 80s horror is complicated by Reagan era conservatism, the AIDS epidemic, and the mainstreaming of gay culture, with the slasher subgenre commonly understood as warning against unsanctioned sexuality where killers are often trans or gay psychokillers (230-31). These trends, though evolving, plague some of horror's most influential works, including personal favorites like *Psycho* and *The Silence of the Lambs*. Benshoff's observations, in many respects, continue to apply to horror films of the twenty first century.

According to Linda Williams, "genre study has sometimes been the one place in film studies where repeatable audience pleasures…have been scrutinized" ("Discipline and Fun" 359). Certainly, I would not be the first person to scrutinize problematic queer representations in my favorite horror films. However, I find it compelling that these films remain among my

favorites, given their depictions of queer monsters. Out of a personal desire to make peace with my film preferences, I set out to study the history of horror's identifiable queer portrayals, to understand what attracts queer viewers to the horror genre. How can a queer viewer still find pleasure in horror, given the monster queer?

Alexander Doty notes how "the central conventions of horror…actually encourage queer positioning as [it] exploit[s] the spectacle of heterosexual romance, straight domesticity, and traditional gender roles gone awry" (15). Oftentimes including camp (a certain "sensibility" centered around "artifice and exaggeration," involving a "failed seriousness") and a broader, interrelated queer sensibility (an acknowledgement of difference from the heterosexualized hegemony and use of that difference to comment upon it), the horror genre often forces viewers to "question behavior, taste, and what it actually means to be real" (Humphrey 48; Benshoff 41). Despite the horror genre's status as a "low" form in popular culture, the demonization of queer people remains a serious issue, one which media depictions can greatly influence (Benshoff 3-4). It is therefore worth examining ways in which monsters clearly expressing their queer gender and sexuality are portrayed within the horror genre, including and the continuity and change of these portrayals.

Limitations and Language

This analysis of queer horror will limit its scope solely to American horror films with a focus on overt (rather than connotative) queer depictions. In the spirit of inclusivity, however, "horror" is interpreted to include a broad array of subgenres, including psychological horror (*Psycho*, *Cruising*, *The Silence of the Lambs*), slashers (*A Nightmare on Elm Street, Part 2: Freddy's Revenge*, *Sleepaway Camp*, *Sleepaway Camp II: Unhappy Campers*, *Hellbent*), horror

drama (*Freaks*, *Interview with the Vampire*), supernatural horror (*The Hunger*, *The Black Phone*), horror comedies (*Jennifer's Body*, *All Cheerleaders Die*, *Happy Death Day*, *Freaky*), and even musical horror comedies (*The Rocky Horror Picture Show*). When it comes to a consideration of the characters within these films and their identities, despite being a pillar of the horror genre, sequels, reboots, and other adaptations will not be considered (except for *Sleepaway Camp*), in order to preserve a limited scope.

Before analyzing these films and their significance, it is important to clarify certain imposed boundaries on language. Given the ever-evolving nature of language, particularly in areas of gender and sexuality, clarifying my intention with certain words at the time of writing feels pertinent.

Many scholars in queer theory have offered definitions of "queer." I do not intend to drastically depart from the general understanding of "queer" in an academic context. For the purposes of this essay, queer serves as a binary opposition to patriarchal heterosexism. It negates the dominant hegemony known as "normality" both within everyday culture and within texts like horror films (Benshoff 4). As a narrative tool, "queerness disrupts narrative equilibrium and sets in motion a questioning of the status quo," giving it inherent political significance (Benshoff 5). Queer can be deployed as an umbrella term to capture any identity which is not "traditionally" cisgendered/heterosexual. In other words, queer is an inclusive, ambiguous contra-heterosexuality (Benshoff 5). As Alexander Doty notes in his book *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, the identities which fall under the umbrella term (gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans, etc.) each hold their own specific cultural, historical, and personal meanings, while simultaneously having some bearing over the articulation of queerness. Doty acknowledges having to make certain "rhetorical compromises" in order to produce a coherent text, while also trying to acknowledge

the lack of a monolithic queer identity (xvii). Whenever relevant, a specific label will be deployed to describe a character or filmmaker (like trans killer, Angela, in *Sleepaway Camp* and its sequel or gay director, Christopher Landon). When an identity remains unspecified or intersectional in its contra-heterosexual identities by the filmic text, the word "queer" will be deployed. My goal is to avoid as many rhetorical compromises as possible while acknowledging such pitfalls are inevitable.

One such rhetorical compromise I face is grappling with outdated language within the films, especially surrounding transgender identities. For decades, the words "transsexual" and "transvestite" were deployed to describe trans identities, but are now seen as antiquated, with "transgender" preferred in most cases. Since the filmic texts deploy these terms (Norman Bates is declared not a transvestite by the psychiatrist at the end of *Psycho*, Frank-N-Furter is a "sweet transvestite from Transexual, Transylvania" in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, and Hannibal Lecter declares Buffalo Bill is not a real transsexual in *The Silence of the Lambs*), I will occasionally utilize them when directly quoting or referencing specific films. While my first instinct is to just cover over these words with updated, acceptable terminology, the acknowledgement of each film's place in queer history is significant, right down to the language used to describe trans people. Rather than cover over these terms with the more modern "transgender," I will instead rely on the shared prefix "trans" when discussing a gender identity which differs from one assigned at birth. This way, I hope to merge old terms with new terms in an acceptable fashion, without erasing the past while refusing to deploy outdated language unless necessary.

Additionally, Benshoff recognizes the importance of intersectionality when it comes to queer identity. He notes the centrality of gender, disability, race, and class in conjunction with

queer politics (Benshoff 5). While I strive to integrate a diversity of perspectives in my analyses, I must acknowledge a lack of diversity within the filmic texts which will hurt intersectional readings. Gender identity will be central to an understanding of most queer monsters as it is often the queerest thing about them. To a lesser extent, disability will be addressed by certain films focused heavily on the body. Race and class, however, remain largely constant through all these overt queer depictions. Every queer monster I will analyze is white and they always terrorize a majority-white, middle-to-upper class community. In all sixteen of the films I chose to study, characters of color are relegated to the margins (if present at all), with only a few recent films including central roles for non-white actors (*All Cheerleaders Die* and *Freaky*). Yet even in these films, racial diversity is often "colorblind," with characters rarely becoming race conscious.

The only film where race plays any factor is *Interview with the Vampire*. Brad Pitt's vampire, Louis, begins the film owning a plantation and dozens of slaves. Before the end of the first act, however, he feeds on one of his attractive female slaves (played by Thandiwe Newton), burns down his plantation house, and frees the rest of his human property. Maybe the act of freeing his slaves is supposed to make Louis seem righteous, in addition to appearing overcome with newfound guilt for his murderous vampire impulses. Regardless, the effect on the film essentially vanquishes any further consideration of racial difference, as vampiric identities are treated as a monolithic, othered race (regardless of a vampire's skin color) and the core vampires indiscriminately feed on a diverse set of victims in the New Orleans setting.

These unified racial and class models for overt queer depictions in horror perhaps suggest the intended white, middle-to-upper class audience of Hollywood horror films. The lack of diversity also points toward the overwhelmingly white (and male) history of who gets to make films and who gets to star in them. The films considered in this essay, then, center around

financially secure white people as their default mode of "normality." Considering intersections, the marginalization of queer people of color even extends to depictions of queer monsters and their victims. This is not to say there are no examples of overt queer depictions of color in the horror genre, but they are not nearly as well documented (nor widespread) as white depictions. While this essay is limited in its analysis of racial intersections within queer horror, the blame falls primarily on the filmic texts themselves, which almost never factor in race.

Methods of Constructing Queer Monsters and Audience Identification

The most powerful audience identification for the horror film focuses on the queer monster. As the character who "drives the story," the queer monster "allows for a vicarious negative identification" which is "more readily acceded to by a queer viewer – someone who already situates him/herself outside a patriarchal, heterosexist order and the popular texts that it produces" (Rieser 385; Benshoff 12). Through the evolution of the horror film, filmmakers continue to position viewers alongside or within the monster's point of view, encouraging identification with the film's most powerful force of villainy (Benshoff 259). As the horror trope of the monster surviving the final fade-out emerged and became popularized, narrative closure surrounding a return to patriarchal heteronormativity is often suspended in favor of the promise of future queer rampages in sequels, reboots, etc. (Benshoff 201).

Alongside the monster queer's ever-expanding power came what Benshoff calls an "opposing trend" where films actively overturn "the genre's conventions in order to argue that monster queers are actually closer to desirable human 'normality' than those patriarchal forces (religion, law, medicine) that had traditionally sought to demonize them" (231). Celebrating "the monster queer as sexual outlaw, a counter-hegemonic figure who forcefully smashes the binary

oppositions of gender and sexuality and race," queer theorists have attempted a reclamation of the movie monster (Benshoff 231). However, with the monster marred by decades of bigoted connotations, Benshoff notes identification is mostly a matter of perspective as "the monster queer may be a sexy, alluring, politically progressive figure to some, while to others, enmeshed in a more traditional model of monsters and normality, s/he is still a social threat which must be eradicated" (256).

Filmmakers construct queer monsters (and their victims) through a diverse set of signifiers, story elements, and camera techniques. According to Linda Williams, the horror genre's "very existence and popularity hinges upon rapid changes taking place in relations between the 'sexes' and by rapidly changing notions of gender–of what it means to be a man or a woman" ("Film Bodies" 12). And as Diane Negra reflects, "our cultural commitment to preserving the gender split and dichotomizing human sexuality leads us to criminalize middle-range behaviors that span masculinity and femininity more than the extremes," a recognizable phenomenon in American horror (198). Throughout the history of Hollywood's overt queer monsters, doubling, the Final Girl, and conflations of queer identities with depraved sexualities form the basic understanding of gender and sexuality in horror.

Doubling

The primary mechanism marking heteronormativity as superior, both in film and everyday society, is "a set of binary oppositions" including "active/passive, dominant/submissive, master/servant, top/bottom, sadist/masochist, white/non-white, physically 'normal'/deformed, and ultimately, straight/gay or 'normal'/queer" (Benshoff 48). One of the filmic forms of binary construction comes through "the figure of the doppelgänger, or double, to

contrast and explore many distinct kinds of subjectivity," according to David Greven in his book *Psycho-Sexual* (61). Considering most monster queers throughout the history of American horror have been centered around a depiction of a homosexual man, "coded as masculine with some type of feminine and/or monstrous taint" (lesbian monsters occur "far less frequently" and trans monsters are even rarer, "though certainly present"), doubling in horror films is often used to characterize and scrutinize masculinity (Benshoff 7). In the first half of the twentieth century, "deviance from traditional gender roles was understood as both a cause *and* a symptom of homosexuality" which "might more aptly be understood as a means of policing and enforcing traditional gender roles" (Benshoff 33). Through doubling practices, filmmakers like Alfred Hitchcock and William Friedkin destabilize traditional gender roles with nuanced portrayals of masculinity.

Hitchcock's 1960 horror classic *Psycho*, which presents "a truly shocking absence of gender stability" for its time, utilizes doubling to characterize Norman Bates as the monster queer (Williams, "Discipline and Fun" 361). As Rieser explains in "Masculinity and Monstrosity," "[the monster queer's] monstrosity is almost always defined in terms of gender deviance or sexual deviance from a hegemonic masculine ideal…he is a defective, abnormal, perhaps nonmasculine man, a male queer figure, in short, but not a woman" (380). Among the earliest, and certainly among the most enduring, overt depictions of queerness in horror, Norman Bates conceptualizes fears of gender instability and non-traditional masculinity. While Norman possesses a symbolic double in the form of his mother, taking on her personality, projecting his jealousies onto her, and murdering women he finds desirable using her hold over him, Hitchcock also utilizes psychical doubling to other Norman (Negra 194). Relying upon "striking physical similarities" between Anthony Perkins's Norman Bates and John Gavin's Sam Loomis,

boyfriend to the murdered Marion Crane and "a strapping, 'healthy' version of Norman," Hitchcock stages an investigation into masculinity "in order to undermine our assumptions about what makes one man sane, the other psychotic; one sexually normative, the other non-normative" (Greven, *Psycho-Sexual* 62, 67). Focusing primarily on the scene where Sam confronts Norman in the Bates Motel parlor, while Marion's sister Lila searches the nearby Bates house for clues, Greven outlines the ways in which Sam's questioning of Norman serves as a crucial battle between warring masculinities.

Through the visual motif of splitting, "Hitchcock emphasizes the physical similarities between both men (tall, lanky, dark-haired, dark-eyed), while noting the contrasts (one somewhat vulnerable and feminized, the other more conventionally masculine and, it would appear, physically stronger)" (Greven, *Psycho-Sexual* 186-7). What begins as a "downright cruisy" meeting, with Sam deploying several homoerotic double entendres, devolves into pointed questioning of Norman's motivations, ending with a physical altercation, where Norman (briefly) triumphs over Sam by knocking him unconscious with a vase (Greven, *Psycho-Sexual* 65). The film's resident "normal" man, Sam's macho masculinity is highlighted by his bare-chested entrance into the film with Marion, the "inaugural image of the heterosexual couple," and his comfortable adoption of another (albeit circumstantial) heterosexual relationship with her sister to investigate Marion's disappearance (Greven, *Psycho-Sexual* 79). As an isolated, outwardly emotional man, Norman's assumption of "the more properly masculine role" through overpowering "the ostensibly strong and stalwart heterosexual male Sam" in the parlor offers one of the ultimate queer pleasures of the film (Greven, *Psycho-Sexual* 82). Non-normative masculinity emerges victorious from the parlor.

With the midway murder of Marion, *Psycho* shifts audience identification to Norman, presumably deserving of sympathy given his murderous mother's domination and harassment of her son. As Norman races to find Lila, however, he fully embodies the monster queer figure, stripping away the emotional connections the audience has for Norman. "Up until the climax," Greven notes, "the audience identifies with Norman far more than Sam, and also…finds him a more sympathetic character," given Norman's sensitive, openhearted meeting with Marion in the parlor, contrasted with Sam's post-coital dismissal of his girlfriend's concerns in *Psycho*'s first scene (*Psycho-Sexual* 67). As Greven acknowledges, "Sam can only overpower Norman when he is *feminized*, dressed up as Mother" (*Psycho-Sexual* 82). By privileging queer over traditional masculinity, albeit briefly, Hitchcock instills fear over shifting gender norms. Before the correction to normality with Norman's discovery and capture as Mother, a queer viewer may justifiably identify with the central killer, which, for most of the film, *Psycho* encourages. What Hitchcock and other filmmakers may not anticipate, however, is continued identification with queer killers like Norman Bates, even after their incarceration, as the suggestion of further destabilization of dominant gender norms persists.

Another overtly queer horror film Greven analyzes in *Psycho-Sexual* is William Friedkin's 1980 psychological thriller *Cruising*, which "takes to a delirious degree the doubling of straight and queer masculinities" (183). A film "obsessed with mirrors and self-recognition," *Cruising* "elaborates greatly" upon themes like "the nature of closeted gay identity and the effects of internalized homophobia" through its doubling practices (Greven, *Psycho-Sexual* 184, 186). The central conflict of *Cruising* finds Al Pacino's Steve Burns going undercover to investigate a string of murders of gay men who all look alike, with victims (and the mysterious killer) sharing Burns's dark features, hence why he is chosen by his police captain for the job.

Across a variety of gay SM bars, Burns searches for the killer, while examining the masculinities and sexualities of the men around him (and ultimately his own). Looking like "one in a series of men manufactured by the same factory," Pacino's Burns explores the world of gay clubs, where "masculinity itself will come to seem the product of this queer factory assembly line, the domain and the creation of a queer aesthetic" (Greven, *Psycho-Sexual* 187).

The film obscures the identity of the killer, whose leather police attire mirrors Burns's, through a variety of shadowy, distorted cruising scenes. In "Redeeming *Cruising*," Palmer suggests the killer is not necessarily gay, though he possesses the "dark energies" of self-hatred and psychological disorder. The killer engages as the top in anal sex before killing one of his male victims and later accepts fellatio in a porno arcade, acts which Palmer claims are not necessarily coded as gay in American culture (97). While the prime suspect at the end of the film, Stuart Richards, is certainly coded as a stereotypical self-hating gay man with daddy issues, he ultimately denies being the killer and the film never discloses the truth of the killer's identity. Whether or not the killer is indeed Stuart or even gay at all (I would argue he must be some degree of queer to engage in such intimate sex acts with other men), his self-hatred and shame juxtaposes drastically from the free, contented, and eager gay men encountered by Steve Burns throughout his investigation (Palmer 97). Once Burns's clues point him toward Stuart, a graduate music student and another dark clone of the same Pacino-base model, the doubling reaches its peak, with both men exchanging villainous acts, "collapsing their identities as the killer" (Greven, *Psycho-Sexual* 193). In their final confrontation in the park, when Burns and Richards both pull knives on one another, "the matching gestures and props reinforce, once again, the idea of men as pairs of murderous doubles" (Greven, *Psycho-Sexual* 204). With the film's conclusion suggesting Burns's involvement in the continued killings of gay men after Stuart's capture,

Cruising demonstrates "straight masculinity's crisis over its own identity," which hinges on bigotry to define itself (Greven, *Psycho-Sexual* 189). As Burns struggles to maintain his heterosexuality in the face of awakening homoerotic desires, "the distinction between queer and straight worlds blurs, making a central point about rigid cultural assumptions" surrounding sexuality and masculine identity (Palmer 92). If anyone can be the killer, even Burns himself, there is no safety in clinging to a patriarchal heterosexist masculinity.

In addition to doubling through physically similar actors, Greven also identifies what he calls the "double-protagonist film" as a site for masculine observation, where "the central conflict is a complex negotiation for power between two protagonists, each played by a star, both of whom lay legitimate claim to narrative dominance" ("Contemporary Hollywood Masculinity" 22). Translating isolated manhood into dyadic manhood, double-protagonist films suggest that "manhood's center cannot hold, that manhood is split, that the warring elements of manhood spill out beyond the individual subjectivity of the star-protagonist, and that the burden of male representation must be carried by two stars rather than one" (Greven, "Contemporary Hollywood Masculinity" 23). Citing "the Hitchcockian psychosexual thriller" as one of the precursors to the double-protagonist film, Greven explores a variety of films across a variety of genres, where "each male star doubles the other, in his battle over narrative dominance, sexual objects, and audience sympathy" ("Contemporary Hollywood Masculinity" 23, 25).

For my purposes, his exploration of Neil Jordan's 1994 adaptation of *Interview with the Vampire*, starring Brad Pitt and Tom Cruise, is most relevant. Labeling Pitt's Louis as an "alternate protagonist" who "falls somewhere between double and co-star," Greven claims, "his function is to react to and register the overpowering and seductive appeal of the main star," Cruise's Lestat ("Contemporary Hollywood Masculinity" 27, 30). Through attempts to "impose

the law on the lawless lead," such as Louis pleading with Lestat to deny his vampiric impulses and feed on animals rather than humans, the "attempt to capture the lead only allegorizes the desiring male's efforts to ensnare his beloved" (Greven, "Contemporary Hollywood Masculinity" 27). Cruise's Lestat is labelled narcissistic while Pitt's Louis is placed "in a position of submission to the narcissistic lead, whose dominance the alternate lead resists" marking him as a masochistic male" (Greven, "Contemporary Hollywood Masculinity" 31). Greven's analysis dictates the "double-protagonist film…is therefore most accurately understood as…[a] contest between narcissistic and masochistic modes of masculine subjectivity for narrative dominance" ("Contemporary Hollywood Masculinity" 31). With the victory of Louis over Lestat, with Pitt's vampire resisting all modes of homoerotic temptation (more on this dynamic in a later section), the masochistic male challenges conventional narcissistic masculinity without outright defeating it, as Lestat ultimately returns in the end, unable to be denied. Double-protagonist films like *Interview with the Vampire* present "an opportunity to compare one powerful style of masculine performance to another," creating a binary opposition which threatens larger binary oppositions like masculine/feminine and "normal"/queer (Greven, "Contemporary Hollywood Masculinity" 43).

Rieser describes "the threat posed by the queer monster" in "Masculinity and Monstrosity" as lurking "in the ideologically unaccounted for and repressed section (lacking masculinity, exhibiting too much femininity, being neither/nor or both, perhaps even roaming freely that whole territory), thereby challenging the neat symmetry of the binary gender system and the naturalization of gender as sex" (381). Filmic doubling presents a concrete strategy for breaking down this neat symmetry through direct comparisons of, most commonly, masculine figures. In *Psycho, Cruising,* and *Interview with the Vampire* (as well as *The Black Phone*, with a

connotative queer monster who will be explored in a later section), "pairings/doublings work to undermine stable, coherent understandings of screen masculinity" resulting in queer monsters who are "neither straight nor queer, neither normal nor perverse, but all of these qualities at once" (Greven, *Psycho-Sexual* 61). For viewers insistence on maintaining a rigid gender binary, monsters who toe the line might be the scariest of them all.

The Final Girl (and Boy!)

Carol Clover's foundational study of the slasher subgenre, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, yields one of the most influential gender-based analyses of horror with the description of the "Final Girl." With most slasher films climaxing in "a battle between a female avenger and a queer monster," the Final Girl proves central to an understanding of gender dynamics and audience identification practices in horror (Greven, *Psycho-Sexual* 65). The Final Girl, "who survives either to be rescued or dispatch the killer herself" is described by James Kendrick as:

> "a survivor, the one person among the young group of victims who not only avoids death, but actively appropriates the power of the gaze (she is able to *see*, while her friends cannot) and turns the killer's violence against him…her youthful vitality is not immediately coded as sexual. Rather, the Final Girl is either explicitly virginal…or simply has more sexual restraint than her friends. As a result she is not easily reduced to a sexual object" (317, 321).

Placed "in the very center of the narrative" and overcoming obstacles" to "rescue herself in the end," the Final Girl puts a woman in a role traditionally reserved for men in film (Rieser 377). While the monster queer often possesses a nonnormative masculinity, "the Final Girl tends to exhibit a lack of traditional femininity and a surplus of masculine attributes: an androgynous

name, boyish interests, and above all, 'hero' qualities of active movement (tracking down the killer), active gaze, and/or employment of phallic weaponry" (Rieser 374). Ultimately, "the Final Girl and the monster fight over who gets to leave the impossible field of gender confusion and who perishes there," with the Final Girl almost always emerging victorious – at least until the monster reemerges for a surprise jump scare ending or an inevitable sequel (Rieser 389).

The 2017 horror comedy *Happy Death Day,* lacking in overt queer depictions but nonetheless riddled with a queer sensibility thanks to gay director Christopher Landon, features an unrelenting loop of Final Girl-ing. Like the nonstop doubling of *Cruising, Happy Death Day*'s cyclical, "same day on repeat" narrative (a slasher spin on *Groundhog Day*) enables its main character, Jessica Rothe's Tree, to become the Final Girl over and over again so she can uncover the identity of the masked figure who keeps killing her. With each day, Tree is stalked, chased, stabbed, drowned, and even exploded in her car by the killer. Interestingly, Tree hardly suffers physical consequences and instead only grows more frustrated with each post-death "restart," undercutting the masochistic elements of the film and adding to its satire. Utilizing a fraternity paddle, a hammer, a knife, and a gun, Tree employs phallic weaponry to aid her conquest as well as a constant investigatory gaze. These empowering tactics prove secondary to Tree's internal improvement, refuting the "mean girl" qualities of her sorority sisters by mending her broken relationships (which are repeatedly reset in frustrating fashion). By vanquishing the killer, Tree's jealous roommate, and getting the guy, a sweet, caring college boy, Tree embraces a strong, mature womanhood void of the "dumb bitch" sensibilities she is criticized for by the killer.

Through her non-traditional gender coding, the Final Girl also provides plenty of queer potential for audience identificatory practices. As Claire Sisco King notes:

> "horror's queerness lies not simply in its specific characters but in the identificatory structures the genre engenders…Identificatory positions are not necessarily fixed, stable, or determined at the outset, or even conclusion, of a horror film; instead, what often characterize horror spectatorship are fluid and adaptive identifications—encouraging spectators to cheer, at one moment, for the victim and, at another, for the killer" (252).

The battle between monster queer and Final Girl enables a wide range of audience identification possibilities. For most of its history, the presumed audience of the slasher film centered around the straight adolescent male, with Clover positing his queer, masochistic identification with the Final Girl in her battle against the monster (Humphrey 40). While Rieser claims "the Final Girl does not so much embody what a male adolescent would want to be *himself* but how he would like *his girl* to be," other scholars presume normative masculine identification with either the Final Girl or the queer monster (or, in many slasher films, both), suggesting queer possibilities (Rieser 385). With terror distracting heteronormative male viewers from misogyny and/or homophobia that might prevent emotional engagement in a queer coded film, the genre enables identification regardless of a character's gender identity (Humphrey 40). Recognition with characters in horror is often circumstantial. Slasher films tend to "favor *primary* identification (with the narrative and camera) over *secondary* identification (with the characters)" due to changing points of view between killer and victim as well as characters who never get to demonstrate depth before being killed (Rieser 386). Identifying with victims can be "a roller-coaster ride of sadomasochistic thrills" for any audience member, however, "the mix of pleasure and pain common to all horror viewing, and aligned with a feminine subject position, is negotiated differently by men than by women. Thus, all viewers experience a second degree of vicarious pain that is felt as feminizing" (Williams, "Film Bodies" 7 and "Discipline and Fun"

371). For queer viewers, feminization through identification may be a welcome phenomenon. Without having to break down layers of stalwart heteronormativity attached to a typical male adolescent viewer, the queer viewer can embrace the empowering elements of the Final Girl both within the narrative and within their own identity. Queer viewers can find a symbol of gender fluid empowerment with the Final Girl and her ultimate triumph over the forces of evil.

Sleepaway Camp 2: Unhappy Campers includes a sharp shift of audience identification from killer to Final Girl. Unlike the original film, the sequel does not dwell on a mystery murderer, instead showing counselor Angela gleefully kill disobedient campers from the very first scene. With a knife, tree branches, a drill, a chainsaw, a guitar string, and even battery acid, trans killer Angela destroys anyone at Camp Rolling Hills who engages in promiscuity, pranking, or bullying of any form (or just anyone who attempts to obstruct her rampage). Deploying a tyrannical puritan worldview, Angela instills humor and camp through ridiculous one-liners and creative kills, like drowning the most sex-crazed camper, Ally, in an outhouse full of piss, shit, and leeches. Angela spends most of the film as the only fleshed-out character, espousing life lessons to the campers advocating for virginity, self-confidence, and the value of friendship.

It is only when Molly, a quiet, bullied camper, feuds with Ally over a triangulated relationship with camp hunk Sean that the audience finds a new source for identification. Molly, a target of homophobic slurs by the other girl campers for what appears to be a closeted crush on Ally, places trust in Angela throughout *Sleepaway Camp 2*, somehow oblivious to all the death around her. In the film's final act, Angela captures Molly and Sean, murders the macho masculine counselor who tries to rescue them, and beheads Sean for not being good enough for Molly. Through these killings, Angela alienates herself from audience identification, no longer

able to hide behind humor as Molly's suffering forms a more coherent character. Molly becomes the Final Girl, freeing herself from Angela's clutches and escaping through the woods with Angela's knife. While Angela insists she just wants to be Molly's friend (though the characters' interactions throughout the film suggests Angela's homoerotic desire with implications of grooming), she chases Molly and eventually leaves her for dead after Molly falls from a cliff.

Once Angela kills all the remaining population of Camp Rolling Hills, she departs by killing a cowboy-hat-wearing driver and stealing her truck. In the slasher's formulaic closing scene, when Molly desperately hopes to escape the woods, Angela (now clad in the murdered driver's cowboy hat) arrives in the truck to pick up Molly, playfully greeting her with "howdy, partner!" to Molly's terror. With the queer connotations of calling Molly "partner" serving as an exclamation point, Angela's embodiment of the queer monster never falters throughout *Sleepaway Camp 2*. As her moral code begins to falter, however, and the kills become more random and reactionary, Molly steps in as the Final Girl, providing a new source for audience identification. While this film's camp aesthetics and quick kills may stand in the way of full engagement with any one character, the distinction between monster queer and Final Girl is apparent. Trans killer Angela's rampage intersects with a connotative queer courting of Molly, providing heteronormative audiences with two distinct sources of horror and queer audiences with a variety of sources for identification.

While offering fluid identificatory potential, the Final Girl must rid the horror film of its queerest sources. She often "purges the film of its unruly, non-normative gendered and sexual aspects, in a word, of its queerness, embodied by a monster, almost always represented as a male who is both a social misfit and sexually dysfunctional" (Greven, *Psycho-Sexual* 83). In contrast to Clover, Rieser suggests a more limited queer potential for the Final Girl who "does not turn

[phallic] weapons against normative masculinity but against a border-breaking monster that is threatening hegemonic gender relations" (377). Shifting perceptions of the Final Girl's masculinity, Rieser clarifies "she is indeed a woman-*hero*, a female figure in a male mold rather than a heroine pursuing a feminine subjective trajectory" as well as "a watered-down version and patriarchal reconception of a liberal feminist ideal, a modern woman who is masculine (read 'strong') enough to participate in the hierarchy of hegemony…yet far from rejecting this hegemony" (378-79). Beyond these patriarchal limitations of the Final Girl, Rieser also notes how "the difference between the nonmasculine monster and the nonfeminine Final Girl (one bad, the other good)" exemplifies "how patriarchy now under certain circumstances allows female figures a degree of masculinity, whereas femininity in men is either funny or horrific" (380). In effect, the Final Girl's confrontation with the monster queer offers the normative male adolescent viewer a "relatively *controlled* loss of control" when faced with masochistic identification in the horror film, while enabling a reclamation of patriarchal power by the film's conclusion (Rieser 386). For a queer viewer, it is often the moments before the vanquishing of the monster queer, when a heteronormative viewer could be understood as having lost control, that provide the most gratifying moments. A world turned upside down offers more promise to a queer viewer than the "return to normal," with all the oppression normality entails.

A great deal has been made over Jodie Foster's Clarice Starling as the Final Girl in *The Silence of the Lambs*, a psychological thriller. Even without the slasher subgenre's emphasis on teenage promiscuity, *The Silence of the Lambs* repeatedly pits Starling against queer monsters in Hannibal Lecter and Buffalo Bill, with the latter functioning as a parallel to the slasher killer during the film's final confrontation in the labyrinthian basement lair. Constantly subject to a threatening male gaze both during her investigation of psychokillers and among the ranks of the

FBI, Starling maintains her own degree of asexuality throughout the film, prioritizing the hunt for Buffalo Bill. In terms of audience identification, Starling carries the film, as viewers discover each twisted turn of the investigation alongside her character. For most of *The Silence of the Lambs*, Clarice functions as the *only* girl, as Cindy, her female friend at the FBI, only makes sporadic appearances to offer support and the other central women (one of which is a corpse during the graphic examination scene) are victims of Buffalo Bill. Catherine Martin, who is introduced around the halfway mark singing along to Tom Petty's "American Girl" before being kidnapped by Buffalo Bill, and her mother, a US senator, offer little opportunity for audience identification besides a masochistic response to the deranged killer. Lecter outright mocks Catherine's mother as she attempts (and fails) to utilize her patriarchal political power to find her daughter, telling her he loves her suit (Negra 199). Arguably the most horrific scenes of *The Silence of the Lambs* center around Catherine's imprisonment in Buffalo Bill's basement. Like Clarice following the investigation, Catherine serves as the audience's main access point into Bill's lair. However, she only offers moments of terror for the audience, as her futile escape plans fail to advance her rescue.

While Catherine (and, to a lesser extent, her desperate mother) continues the longstanding horror tradition of "woman as victim," Clarice Starling offers feminine strength in the face of patriarchal institutions and psychosexual monsters. With the film's opening credits following Starling through an FBI training exercise in the woods, paralleling a slasher film's Final Girl running from the killer, *The Silence of the Lambs* reconceptualizes images of feminine victimhood as sources of empowerment (Tharp 108). Starling's triumph over Buffalo Bill and his voyeuristic night vision goggles demonstrates the Final Girl's vanquishing of the monster queer through a reliance on training and maintaining composure, even as the nearby female victim

trapped in the death pit berates her and calls her a "stupid bitch." In *The Silence of the Lambs*, the Final Girl's capabilities can be learned and improved upon through adherence to a strict code of conduct and clever maneuvering. Clarice Starling ultimately reimposes some semblance of heteronormative order with the destruction of Buffalo Bill and the hegemonic threat of his woman suit, though the threatening presence of Hannibal Lecter lingers over the end credits, suggesting Lecter's ultimate power as a destabilizing monster queer. To some extent, Clarice herself challenges conventional gender binaries, albeit in an institutional setting like the FBI where she outperforms her senior male colleagues, on par with Rieser's "patriarchal reconception of a liberal feminist ideal" (379).

Given the longstanding tradition of the Final Girl and the ever-growing demand for overt queer horror films, it was only a matter of time before the Final Boy emerged. However, the results, for many, are less than satisfying. Rather than properly flipping (and further queering) the gender dynamics of the Final Girl for its male variant, the masculine reversal often doubles down on masculinity. According to Darren Elliot-Smith in the chapter "Gay Slasher Horror: Devil Daddies and Final Boys,"

> "the Final Boy's journey is an allegory of burgeoning sexual development and confidence, and is in effect 'becoming masculine,' further still becoming 'more of a man.' He moves from a shy, closeted, dependent and inexperienced feminised youth into a fully-fledged, independent, masculine [man]…there is no subversion of the symbolism of the Final Girl, simply an excising and replacement of it. Final Boys do not use their femininity to evade or destroy the killer; they are re-empowered by masculinity by overcoming their lack, associated with shameful feminine passivity" (155).

While offering a fresh take on the conventions of slasher horror, the Final Boy faces criticism for "un-queering" the queer potential of the Final Girl and the horror genre broadly (King 250). By offering transgender audience identification for male viewers, the Final Girl destabilizes the gender binary. Meanwhile, the Final Boy insists on expanding masculine principles (albeit varied and sometimes counter-hegemonic in their approach).

Elliot-Smith focuses on the impact the Final Girl offers specifically to a gay male spectator, as cross-gender identification derives from sharing the same love object "in a pleasurable and empowering identification which also reminds him of his perpetual parallel with femininity by heteronormative culture" (152). Such identification may stimulate shame surrounding gay male associations with femininity, though the masculinizing empowerment of the Final Girl serves to remasculinize a gay male viewer (like a heteronormative male viewer) through the prizing of a masculine female over a feminine male (Elliot-Smith 153). Should the Final Girl be re-feminized after the vanquishing of the monster queer, the gay male spectator is left either to identify with the dead/disavowed queer monster or with a Final Girl as woman (Elliot-Smith 154). Regardless of this potential alienation, "the Final Girl provides a *queer* access point in her gendered androgyny for the gay male spectator and a strong source for identification with powerful femininity," should a gay viewer embrace it (Elliot-Smith 155). In a film like *Hellbent*, these fears of feminization and identification are brought to the forefront through the Final Boy.

The 2004 gay slasher *Hellbent* offers a Final Boy in the midst of an all-male cast of killers and victims (save for the Final Boy's sister, who is largely relegated to the narrative's margins). Establishing "an almost complete rejection of femininity," *Hellbent*'s Final Boy, police technician Eddie, learns to embrace masculine principles to defeat the Devil Daddy psychosexual

killer (Elliot-Smith 136). Throughout the Halloween-based film, Eddie wears a police officer costume and his dead father's badge, demonstrating his inability to be a "real" cop like his father due to an injury which resulted in losing an eye. During the final confrontation with the killer, Eddie's lover, Jake, is attacked by Devil Daddy while Eddie is handcuffed to his bedframe. Moments before, Jake engages in rough foreplay with Eddie and leaves to get a condom but is interrupted by the intruding murderer. Jake is wounded by the Devil Daddy's long, phallic scythe, leaving Eddie to force his way out of the handcuffs and utilize his dead father's police revolver. After Devil Daddy removes Eddie's glass eye with his tongue, he holds Jake hostage. Dangling from the fire escape, Eddie overcomes his terrible aim (a consequence of his missing eye) to shoot Devil Daddy and save his lover. Embodying all the elements of the Final Girl, Eddie as Final Boy overcomes his masculine shortcomings which plague him throughout the film. He successfully assumes the "real" cop persona of his father to eliminate the demented daddy figure and rescue his dominant love interest, flipping the dynamic of the relationship where Eddie now possesses the phallic power (perhaps an attempt by gay director Paul Etheredge-Ouzts to show a journey from feminized bottom to masculinized top). Though *Hellbent* "dispenses completely with any implied 'unpleasantries' involved in identifying with the Final Girl" for gay male viewers, the result is a valorization of masculinity and a total dismissal of femininity, deemed inadequate by the gay men of the film (Elliot-Smith 155).

In the essay "Un-Queering Horror: *Hellbent* and the Policing of the 'Gay Slasher,'" Claire Sisco King criticizes Eddie's "performance of hegemonic masculinity," which she argues "does little to disrupt traditional gendered norms" and follows a larger pattern of the film's lack of queer politics (262). While *Hellbent* intentionally focuses on depicting hypermasculine gay stereotypes, largely through the characters' costuming and sexual prowess (Eddie as the cop,

Jake as the biker, bi/pansexual Chaz as the cowboy, and sexually inexperienced Joey as a harness-wearing leatherboy), this renders femininity invisible and largely invalid (Elliot-Smith 138). Further, the "straight-acting" cast of gay characters excludes a gay male effeminacy, adding to its stigma, while highlighting the erotic appeal of seducing a heterosexual, masculine man for some gay viewers (Elliot-Smith 142). With *Hellbent*'s abundance of male homosexual imagery, adding gay twists to recognizable horror stereotypes, the film caters to a specific audience of gay men while simultaneously alienating most other audiences (even other queer viewers). Representing a "limited range of subject positions" *Hellbent* still self-proclaims a queer labelling as a "gay slasher film," a labelling which draws criticism from King, who argues "it cannot be taken for granted that a 'gay film' is inherently queer" (252, 262).

While I recognize a film like *Hellbent*'s endorsement of a specific brand of masculinity, which threatens progressive notions of gender identity, I *do* believe it can be taken for granted that a gay film is inherently queer. A queer labelling is subjective, part of a spectrum of politics, often reliant on perspective and what a viewer deems acceptable. To me, the mere existence of a feature film where every major character is gay invokes queer politics. Even when those gay characters fit a neat mold of gayness, which certain normative viewers will find acceptable, they still threaten Hollywood's heterosexual hegemony whereby every film needs a central straight love angle. For gay men alone to carry a film promises a queer future where straight characters are not required to tell a story, a realization which somehow still evades almost every American film, even in the horror genre. Of course, the limited perspectives of the specific gay male identity of *Hellbent* cannot accommodate a broad inclusivity, nor is it trying to. The film merely demonstrates that a standard slasher film can function with only gay characters, which is a queer achievement in my opinion. A subtle achievement, yes, but one which offers potential for more

diverse queer identities to carry their own stories in the future. The gay male stereotypes of Hellbent may not offer much for an advancement of queer politics, but by intentionally providing gay men with viewing pleasures, a marginalized community gains recognition and empowerment in their viewing experience.

With the Final Girl (and even its Boy variant), horror films can flirt with the barriers between masculine/feminine, man/woman, "normal"/queer, resulting in queer audience pleasures. However, the genre's "tendency to punish nonhegemonic masculinity and to expulse femininity ultimately serves to reinforce heterosexual and homophobic masculinity" (Rieser 389). Queer identification and enjoyment may be short-lived or moment-to-moment in the horror film, while heteronormative male identity can "be placed in imaginary danger…and then rescued in a process of separation and border reinstitution, without ever being scrutinized itself" (Rieser 389).

Conflation of Queer Sexuality with Depravation and Violence

Reflecting on the ways in which queer sexuality is demonized by conservative right-wing and Fundamentalist Christian sectors of American society, Benshoff notes how "they do so primarily by painting the [LGBTQ+] community in shocking, horrifying colors" in which queer people "are violent, degraded monsters and their evil agenda is to destroy the very fabric of American society" (2). These conservative voices rely on a long history of conflating queerness with horrifying practices, a tradition which Hollywood often promotes (sometimes indirectly) through the horror genre. According to Benshoff, during the classical era of Hollywood cinema, "any and all deviance from heteronormativity fell under…'sex perversion,' and would continue to be linked with homosexuality throughout the course of the twentieth century, both in horror

films and culture-at-large" (56). While Benshoff's *Monsters in the Closet* focuses predominately on depictions of homosexuality in horror films, with the majority of queer monsters centered around elements of male homosexuality, his observations on conflation can often apply to any queer identity, depending on the time period. As modern American conservative discourse shifts toward demonizing trans and non-binary gender identities, the conflation of these identities with unsavory cultural signifiers will only expand.

Throughout the history of the horror genre, queer identities have repeatedly been linked to depraved practices like bestiality, incest, pedophilia, cannibalism, necrophilia, and sadomasochism (Benshoff 56). Depending on the time period, queer sexuality has also been conflated with serial killing, rape, Satanism, Nazism, and communism (Benshoff 240). Benshoff notes how all of these conflations were "reflected in the [respective] era's monster movies" and the overt depictions I include in my analysis are no exception (124).

Across the films I viewed, pedophilia is among the most consistent combinations with queer identities. The two major villains of the 1985 slasher *A Nightmare on Elm Street, Part II: Freddy's Revenge* both harbor their own pedophilic connotations in addition to queer sexualities. Focused on the invasion of protagonist Jesse's body by devious forces, the film depicts Jesse being picked up at a queer SM bar by his gay gym teacher and repeated scenes of Freddy Kreuger dominating the adolescent as he tries to possess Jesse. While Freddy is only connotatively queered, the gym teacher's blatant pedophilic efforts to woo his student serve as the central "out" gay depiction in the film. In the *Sleepaway Camp* series, adult counselors targeting child campers becomes something of a motif. While instances of pedophilia in the 1983 original derive from heteronormative adult men, the 1988 sequel centers around a grooming narrative with trans killer/counselor Angela (who was a victim of pedophilic advances herself in

the first film) attempting to court teen camper Molly, whose queer sexuality remains closeted but strongly suggested. Explored in more detail in a future section, the 1994 horror drama *Interview with the Vampire* privileges the pedophilic relationship between Louis and Claudia over any of the homosexual advances from other male vampires like Lestat, who also has a penchant for hunting young victims. Even the 2022 supernatural horror film *The Black Phone* queer-codes the child predator villain (also explored in a later section). If the horrors of sexually soliciting minors were not enough, these films instill a secondary cultural fear over non-normative gender and sexuality to further other their monsters. As if pedophilia were exclusive to a specific sexual identity, horror films often run the risk of suggesting a link between non-normative masculinity (or femininity, to a lesser extent) and attraction to children.

The Silence of the Lambs, of course, presents troubling links among its two queer monsters, Hannibal Lecter and Buffalo Bill. Dr. Lecter, whose sexuality never becomes clear amid his queer masculinity, is nicknamed "Hannibal the Cannibal" for his propensity to consume human flesh. Buffalo Bill, meanwhile, is a gay man who skins women and wants to build a woman suit (only after being denied a sex change operation, naturally) because he is convinced he is trans. Of course, the appeal of this film centers around the monstrosity of these two iconic characters (more than most other horror films, I would argue), yet they nonetheless both demonstrate queer gender and sexuality amid their depraved actions. For a queer viewer like myself, the queer elements of these characters offer a point of examination and even celebration, but for a heteronormative viewer bent on a bigoted right-wing worldview, *The Silence of the Lambs* might be just another reason to suspect the worst from queer people.

Most of the actions of the murderous, yet glamorous Frank-N-Furter in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* can be excused due to the film's campy tone. One of the queerest characters ever

put to film, Frank-N-Furter seems to possess no understanding of consent when it comes to seeking his sexual thrills with Rocky, Janet, and Brad. The bed trick scenes between Frank/Janet and Frank/Brad, in particular, highlight the monster queer's deception. Again, these sequences are played for laughs, demonstrating the overwhelming sexual appeal of the central "villain," but they nonetheless do not age well. An element of the film which does hold up, however, is the murder of Frank-N-Furter by the incestuous couple of Riff Raff and Magenta. The couple's climactic act of treachery, destroying the queer cabaret and its organizer, frees the normative characters while also drawing a clear distinction between incest and queer sexuality. Sibling lovers/killers ruin the queer pleasures of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, offering a valuable separation of depravity from non-normative gender and sexuality.

Beyond the overt lesbian homoeroticism at the center of the 2009 horror comedy *Jennifer's Body* between Megan Fox's Jennifer and Amanda Seyfried's Needy, the film also connotatively queers the male members of Satan-worshipping indie rock band Low Shoulder by implying their own homoerotic bonds (while also demonstrating their lack of interest in the infallible sexual allure of Jennifer). After suggesting the band raped Jennifer on the night of her disappearance and assumption of demonic powers, the film later reveals Low Shoulder, led by the charismatic Nikolai, attempted to sacrifice Jennifer to Satan in an effort to obtain fame and fortune. Before sacrificing Jennifer's body, Nikolai asks her, "Do you know how hard it is to make it as an indie band? There's so many of us, and we're all so cute and it's like if you don't get on Letterman or some retarded soundtrack, you're screwed, okay? Satan is our only hope." Framed as an absurd reason to sacrifice an innocent teen girl, Nikolai's ambition to make it big involves coercing his band mates through valuing their feelings and physically touching the other

men in acts of comfort and understanding. In this way, Nikolai and his band mates are characterized as "lesser" men by the logic of the film.

In one of *Jennifer's Body*'s most camp sequences, the hypermasculine police cadet Roman, played by a young Chris Pratt, emasculates the band in front of Jennifer as she ogles them before their performance in a local bar. Jennifer, underage, horny, yet innocent in this adult setting, says, "You can totally tell they're from the city." Roman, clad in camo and hunting apparel, beer in hand, dismisses Jennifer's attraction to the indie band, replying, "Yeah, 'cause they're wearing eyeliner. They look like a bunch of faygos." Jennifer then calls Roman a "small time Gomer" and wishes more men in their rural town of Devil's Kettle were like the members of Low Shoulder, "all stylish and shit." With the focus on the band's goth style and Jennifer's naïve attraction to these threatening outsiders, the film casually criticizes their unorthodox masculinity. Meanwhile, Colin, the other goth character in the film who vies for Jennifer's affections, is criticized by the title character for wearing nail polish. Jennifer confidently states, "My dick is bigger than his [Colin's]" after rejecting a date with him to a midnight screening of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* because she dislikes "boxing movies."

In addition to criticisms of goth fashion, Nikolai triangulates conversations surrounding other girls' (namely Jennifer's) virginity with his bandmates, and later says, "God I hate girls" when Jennifer resists her sacrifice. Another telling camp moment of the band's queer sexuality comes during the Satanic sacrifice itself, when Nikolai unsheathes his long, phallic knife, prompting nearby bandmate, Dirk, to say, "Dude, that is a hot murder weapon." Nikolai clarifies "It's a Bowie knife," which leads the indie rock band to reference the influence of David Bowie (a notable queer rock icon) just before brutally murdering Jennifer. While never outright shown engaging in homosexuality, *Jennifer's Body* provides loads of subtext characterizing the

sacrificial Satan worshippers of Low Shoulder as queer. More often than not, their non-normative masculinity is played for laughs, with the horror of their actions obscured by Nikolai's ridiculous conquest.

Like *Jennifer's Body*, the 2013 lesbian cheerleader revenge flick, *All Cheerleaders Die*, works to queer existing horror stereotypes, especially the ditsy, sex-crazed cheerleader and the lesbian witch. After several stunning displays of misogyny by the football team, led by their toxic masculine captain, Terry, a group of teenage girls is killed in a car accident. Out of desperation to save her ex-girlfriend, Maddy, the stereotypical lesbian "freak witch," Leena, who practices "Wicca bullshit," revives the cheerleaders with enchanted gemstones. A camp spectacle, *All Cheerleaders Die* follows the formation of an all-girl, queer, found family of man-eating zombie cheerleaders led by their witch mother. One bigoted football player (shortly before he is murdered by one of the vengeful cheerleaders) describes the plot: "that voodoo dyke and her little bitches are picking us dogs off." Through the power of their sex appeal, solidarity, and a bit of magic, the cheerleaders exact revenge by killing all of the football players who harmed them and absorbing their life forces.

Though several of the girls are also killed along the way, *All Cheerleaders Die* offers a powerful message of feminine empowerment from oft-ignored lesbian characters. Flipping the "long and tangled history" of the lesbian witch into a unifying, motorcycle-riding badass mother figure in Leena, the film offers a traditionally damaging horror stereotype as "an icon of pride, self-worth, and the promise of social change through coalition building" (Benshoff 103, 174).

However, *All Cheerleaders Die* is written and directed by two men (every film I analyzed is directed by a man, besides *Jennifer's Body*), contributing to a problem where horror films about lesbians are "steeped not in a lesbian sensibility, but rather a heterosexual male one" where

the takeaway is “much more indicative of a straight man’s fear of women’s sexuality than they are any expression of lesbian desire” (Benshoff 195). The bicurious cheerleaders (and their lesbian witch mother) in *All Cheerleaders Die* often appeal directly to a heterosexual male gaze, sometimes as a plot device to seduce a male victim (like Megan Fox’s Jennifer) but sometimes just for the sake of gratuity. This kind of fetishistic approach to overt queer portrayals certainly appeals to a heteronormative adolescent male viewer, but it can still provide pleasures for lesbian audiences hoping for accessible sex appeal. Like *Hellbent*’s appeal to gay men despite broader regressive gender politics, *All Cheerleaders Die* (as well as *Jennifer’s Body*) can appeal to lesbian (and other queer) viewers despite its reliance on objectification. The found family of cheerleaders, led by a lesbian witch, directly assaults pillars of masculinity which seek to marginalize them, offering accessible queer themes which challenge stereotypes of queer people’s inherent wickedness.

Alongside depravity, homosexuality in horror has also been linked repeatedly to disease, especially in 80s and 90s films with the growing awareness of the AIDS epidemic. As David J. Skal reflects in *The Monster Show*, “prosperous America of the 1980s denied the reality of AIDS, locking its doors against victims of the plague, while monstrous images popped up everywhere in its collective dreams” (334) and Benshoff notes how “the narrative and representational patterns of the gothic novel and monster movie had been readily applied to the situation at hand” in journalistic depictions during the height of the epidemic (242). With media narratives established in the real world, “the initial connection, in industrialized countries, between AIDS and gay men was paralleled on the plane of popular fantasy with a blurring of the image of the homosexual with that of the vampire” (Skal 346). Benshoff notes how gay men became marked in media as “contagions – vampires – who, with a single mingling of blood, can

infect a pure and innocent victim, transforming [them] into the living dead" (2). Modern horror's "focus on visceral gore and bodily fluids neatly dovetails into AIDS hysteria as well" (Benshoff 243).

Plaguing a wide range of subtextual readings of gay men in horror, especially blood-sucking vampires, fears of AIDS extended to any queer identity, as evidenced by the 1983 vampire film *The Hunger*. Loaded with an iconic goth aesthetic and disorienting montage editing, *The Hunger* centers around the courting of Susan Sarandon's Dr. Sarah Roberts by Catherine Deneuve's cosmopolitan bisexual European vampire, Miriam. Following the rapid aging and zombification of Miriam's longtime lover, John (memorably played by David Bowie), Miriam seeks a new companion, targeting anti-aging specialist Dr. Roberts. Soon after asking Miriam "Are you making a pass at me?" in the film's most memorable scene, which feels straight out of a porno, Roberts spills red wine on her white shirt. The women kiss and the film suddenly cuts to a lesbian sex scene, with a classical music score, angelic blue lighting, and flowing curtains framing the overt act of homosexual lovemaking. Once the vampiric impulses arise and blood starts to flow, a familiar synth horror score strikes, with Roberts now infected (both by queer desire and an unknown virus). Later, at dinner with her husband who confronts her over her whereabouts, Roberts becomes distracted by nearby female swimmers. Back in her lab, she tests her blood, discovering "some alien strain" is consuming her from the inside. Shortly thereafter, vampiric hunger overwhelms Roberts, resulting in a feverish, sweaty, weak state, mirroring real-life symptoms of HIV/AIDS. Miriam's obsession with youthful lovers (one of her previous partners is named Lolita, in a not-so-subtle literary reference) also highlights the ever-present problems of queer vampires: conflating pedophilia with queer sexuality. With the arrival of the AIDS epidemic, vampires now marked conflation of disease and queer sexuality.

While Skal claims certain depictions, like *Interview with the Vampire*, might serve "a coping function, symbolically representing a dreaded plague-death while at the same time triumphantly transcending it" for queer viewers, many depictions, like *The Hunger*, show characters succumbing to their queer disease (346-7).

Perhaps the most common association with queer sexuality in film, especially among closeted gay men, centers around violence. Often emerging "as the substitution for sex and desire," acts of violence are seemingly inseparable from queer identity in film (Greven, *Psycho-Sexual* 191). While this trend tracks beyond the horror genre (in films like *The Talented Mr. Ripley* and *Brokeback Mountain*, for instance), horror's unique traits of blood and gore offer a broad platform. Throughout the twentieth century, according to Benshoff, film censorship "has usually been more concerned with sexuality than with violence. As such, the depiction of violence has often been made to 'stand in' for instances of unrepresentable queer sexuality" (166). Reflecting on this trend, Linda Williams notes that "*Psycho* is the film that first linked an erotic display of sexual attractions to a shocking display of sexualized violence" through the actions of psychosexual Norman Bates, "but its attractions were no longer deployed within a stable heterosexual framework or within the hegemony of an exclusive masculine subjectivity" ("Discipline and Fun" 358). Additionally, *Cruising* torments its gay underworld with brutal acts of murder stemming from repressed homosexual urges. This film's depiction of violence against gay men, unlike other films, does not claim that "homosexuality is the cause of violence" and instead posits the homophobic murders as "morally insupportable" (Palmer 93). Nonetheless, a "conflation of homosexuality, homosexual repression, sadomasochism, and violence" presides over the action of *Cruising* (Benshoff 204). Violence also interferes in the (gay) sex lives of the characters in *Hellbent*, who are all just out to have a good time on Halloween, yet face the

murderous wrath of the psychosexual Daddy Devil. *Hellbent* punishes overt acts of homosexuality, though also refuses to morally condone them, instead demonstrating the horrors of "fag bashing." Though they are the status quo, violent depictions extend beyond gay male depictions.

The aforementioned *Jennifer's Body* explores the unlikely pairing of high school "mean girl" Jennifer with dorky, innocent Needy. Throughout the film, Jennifer, jealously denigrates Needy's relationship with her boyfriend, Chip. Triangulation patterns surround the girls as they both attempt to prove their sexual prowess to the other by attracting boys. As Needy loses her virginity to Chip, she cannot stop thinking about Jennifer, whose murderous rampage haunts her. Following yet another seduction-turned-murder of a boy, Jennifer's demonic ecstasy leads her to invade Needy's bedroom, where the two engage in a steamy make out session. Jennifer offers to stay the night so the two can "play boyfriend-girlfriend like we used to," but Needy insists Jennifer leave, as the monster queer terrifies her too much. Jennifer's demonic attacks tear apart boys in brutal fashion, but they also tear apart the families and friendships of the small-town community of Devil's Kettle, demonstrating the consequences of queer sexuality let loose. Needy's obsessive research into the occult and Jennifer's demonic possession drives a wedge between her and Chip, so Jennifer takes advantage by seducing the innocent nice guy, telling him to "say I'm better than Needy." Upon Chip's eventual rejection of Jennifer in an abandoned pool house because their hookup "just feels weird," Jennifer attacks him, but cannot finish the kill before Needy arrives, seeking to "crush this bitch." A war of words unfolds, with the two angsty teen girls throwing verbal haymakers before Jennifer decides to attack her first girl victim, quipping "I go both ways." Needy is saved by Chip who impales Jennifer with a pool skimmer but dies from his wounds, while Jennifer escapes back to her bedroom.

In the final confrontation, Needy and Jennifer fight in Jennifer's bed, grunting, moaning, biting, choking, and clawing at one another in perhaps the most violent lesbian foreplay of all time. Wielding a box cutter, Needy quips "it's for cutting boxes" and Jennifer shoots back "Do you buy all your murder weapons from Home Depot? God, you're butch." The sexy girl fight concludes in explosive fashion when Jennifer gets on top, levitating above the bed with Needy at her mercy. When Needy rips off Jennifer's "BFF" necklace, symbolizing the end of their friendship (and perhaps the threat of something more intimate) a shocked Jennifer falls back down to the mattress, enabling Needy to stab her through the heart. A film which tracks the queerification of its chaste main character through the overt homoerotic acts of the demonic queer, *Jennifer's Body* resorts to girl-on-girl sexually charged violence to rid itself of the horrors of full-fledged lesbianism.

As a final note on the conflations levied against queer sexuality, an analysis of the classic Hollywood horror film *Freaks* demonstrates broad interpretations of queer identity and its overlap with disability. "In Tod Browning's microcosmic circus, there are physical barriers to normal sex at every turn," including a little person, Hans, seeking a romantic relationship with a normative trapeze artist, Cleopatra, as well as Roscoe, the crossdressing "Roman Lady," getting engaged to Daisy, who is conjoined with her twin sister, Violet (who later gets engaged to a different man), Phroso the clown lacking functional sex organs due to an operation, and the "half-man, half-woman" Josephine Joseph merely existing, which draws a violent outburst from the normative strongman, Hercules (Skal 149). In effect, every relationship in *Freaks* is queer, save for the villainous duo of Cleopatra and Hercules, whose normativity places them in bigoted contrast to the rest of the circus troupe.

Drawing "attention to the fluidity and mobility between ability and disability," *Freaks* "is not about the abnormal but rather the questioning of normality altogether, particularly in matters of sex: an array of bodies demonstrating erotic possibilities" (Sutton 73, 81). In his essay, "Avenging the Body: Disability in the Horror Film," Travis Sutton notes the links between heteronormativity and able-bodiedness where "people do not question" them because they are "the assumed norm, consequently making [them] invisible" (75). Reflecting upon this conflation, Sutton claims:

> "the sexuality of disabled people is culturally marginalized as queer, even when the sexual activity between disabled persons might involve heteronormative (monogamous, reproductive) practices…dominant notions prefer to understand disabled bodies as non-sexual; if a disabled person is sexual…then the sexuality is generally marginalized as perhaps curious or gratuitous but most certainly unusual/queer. Compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness work in tandem as ideals that ultimately mark the Other. Historically and even today, the horror film is fundamentally 'about' such considerations of normality and monstrosity, and works to reinscribe (or much more rarely critique) the allegedly heteronormative and able-bodied nature of human beings and human cultures" (76).

The "dirty, slimy freaks" of the 1932 horror drama engage in their respective sexual endeavors, providing titillation for a normative audience.

In *The Monster Show*, Skal recounts the sadistic filmmaking process of Browning and his mistreatment of the freaks for the film, which othered the real-life performers cast in the project. Despite the film's narrative commonly being deemed compassionate in modern times, the film's advertising strategy in 1932 was "pure exploitation, emphasizing the alien qualities of the

performers and none of their humanity" (152-4). Even with this troubled production history, I agree with Sutton, that *Freaks* "affirms the humanity of the sideshow performers with the theme that maintaining oppressive divisions risks damage to all within the system," as the film demonstrates a valuable example of a queer community overcoming the phobic forces which seek to harm it (82).

Throughout the film, the freaks face scrutiny outside of the camp by private property owners and within the camp by the normative performers. Their lives are dominated by othering, except when surrounded by their own. Among themselves, the freaks are free to love and be loved, sharing stories, drinks, and sex. The dynamic of the freaks looking out for one another while the normative characters ultimately turn on one another, exploding into a violent climax with the death of Hercules and the mutilation of Cleopatra, speaks to the freaks' shared response to oppression.

While "as a genre, horror emphasizes the body," these emphases centering around further othering of marginalized individuals ought to be addressed more often (Sutton 73). Whether the body horror is aimed at disability like *Freaks*, "a series of adolescent symptoms" like menstruation in *Carrie*, or the site of a naked trans body at the conclusion of *Sleepaway Camp*, these depictions often marginalize difference more than they celebrate it (McGee 177). Conflations of queer identity with depravity and violence do the same.

The Closet of Connotation and *Interview with the Vampire*

Up to this point, I have avoided discussing connotative queer elements of the Hollywood horror film, mostly because I find them less interesting than an overt depiction. To me, there is much more value in blatantly displaying the queer elements of a film for the audience to analyze

through acts of physical intimacy, dialogue stating characters' desires, costuming, queer-coded mise-en-scène, etc. Readings (and authors' intentions) become clearer. A film's place in the spectrum of queer politics is much more secure with overt queer depictions. Debate around central issues can be transparent and straightforward, as opposed to the "multiplicity of various readings and reading positions" fostered by connotation (Benshoff 15). While there is validity to all kinds of queer reading practices, which can be conducted on any text regardless of connotation versus denotation, a non-queer consumer will often miss (or outright ignore) the connotation. Describing the "closet of connotation" as "oppressive," Doty observes the deniability of queerness by thinking within conventional heterocentrist structures, which "already have decided that expressions of queerness are subtextual, subcultural, alternative readings, or pathetic and delusional attempts to see something that isn't there" (xii). Hence, I prefer an undeniable queerness in my horror films, where even the most conservative of grandfathers cannot pretend not to see it. Perhaps this view runs counter to queer politics by advocating for heteronormative viewers to accept more queerness in their media, thereby running the risk of queer assimilation. However, I believe overt queer elements in film present more, not less, potential for a destabilization of dominant ideologies of gender and sexuality, especially compared to connotative elements. Queer politics can be better recognized, understood, and replicated when queer depictions are allowed to prosper on screen.

William Friedkin's 1980 psychological horror *Cruising* presents wildly overt depictions of New York City's gay nightlife to the benefit of its queer politics. As the film follows Al Pacino's Steve Burns on his undercover police investigation into a psychosexual serial killer targeting gay men, the settings and people within them become crucial sights of examination. Across a collection of New York City SM clubs used as sets for the film, Friedkin utilizes as

many as five hundred leather bar patrons as extras (Palmer 96). Through this neorealist deployment of real locations and bar patrons, *Cruising* conjures a queer identity politics which contests the attempt of heteronormative society to define queerness (Palmer 98). The nightclub scenes, the most enduring images of *Cruising*, display unapologetic acts of homosexuality, from dancing to kissing to oral sex to an infamous shot of fisting. Within bars, theaters, parks, and bedrooms, on-screen acts of male-to-male intimacy flood the film. In this way, *Cruising* becomes energized by "a representational adventurism (taking the vast majority of viewers, including many gays, where they literally had never been before)" according to R. Barton Palmer in the chapter "Redeeming Cruising" (93).

Beyond the narrative, *Cruising* also serves as "a valuable documentary portrait of pre-AIDS gay culture, a record of a vanished moment in gay history" (Greven, *Psycho-Sexual* 187). While the film faced criticism from gay rights groups at the time of filming and upon release due to perceptions of "a partial, demeaning, and exotic depiction of gay life," the narrative never posits the SM subculture as representative of all gay lifestyles (Palmer 89). As an overtly queer text, *Cruising* "depicts a subculture with vitality and rules of its own that owes nothing to the straight life and the then widely accepted stereotypes passing for knowledge of gay culture in the broader community" (Palmer 96). The narrative's open-ended conclusion of Steve Burns disturbed by his newfound queer pleasures suggests a universalist stance to queer sexuality where anyone can possess some degree of queerness. According to Palmer, Friedkin's point in *Cruising* is "broadly humanist," aimed at challenging and dialogizing fixed boundaries between gender/sexual identities (92). With a queer political agenda, *Cruising* challenges established heteronormative models through an investigation of overt (though in the film, hidden within subcultural nightlife) gay sexuality.

For the "exceptionally queer" slasher *A Nightmare on Elm Street, Part 2: Freddy's Revenge*, overt displays of queerness enable the film to take on opposing meanings (Benshoff 246). Three unique homosexual forces tempt the protagonist, a quiet loner named Jesse: 1) his gym coach, who is rumored to frequent queer SM bars, 2) his jock friend, Grady, who strikes up a suggestive bond with Jesse, and 3) Freddy Kreuger, the monstrous manifestation of Jesse's internalized homophobia. All three of these queer forces are vanquished in *Freddy's Revenge*, with the first two murdered by Freddy and Freddy "killed" (note the many sequels to follow) by Jesse's loyal girlfriend, demonstrating the power of heteronormative love. While Benshoff and other scholars have already connected every piece of homoeroticism in this film to elicit its meaning, I simply posit that these meanings are only possible through the overt queerness of the film. In no way is *Freddy's Revenge* connotative when its teen boy protagonist wanders half-naked into a queer SM bar, has his pants pulled down by the cute jock who is always asking about Jesse's girlfriend, and has his body invaded by a dominant, punishing psychosexual. The supernatural, surface-level story of a killer possessing ("getting inside of") an innocent teen boy who just wants to enjoy his relationship with his girlfriend operates in the foreground, while the realistic, implied story of internalized homophobia leading to violent outbursts operates (not very far) in the background.

Benshoff recognizes that, depending on the views of the audience member, two opposing readings of *Freddy's Revenge* are possible. Heteronormative and/or unengaged viewers may simply link homosexuality with violence, a long-held trait of the monster queer. For queer and/or "alert spectators," the film describes "how internalized, socially-inscribed homophobia can be a monstrous force" (Benshoff 249). In a sense, the overt queerness of the film serves as an audience litmus test for seeing and understanding queer readings. An inability to "connect the

dots" on such a heavy-handed teen slasher, even without fully embracing a progressive queer reading, identifies a potential problem for a viewer. In other words, ignoring or deriding the homosexuality of *Freddy's Revenge* as a source of the film's themes is certainly ignorant and likely homophobic.

Both *Cruising* and *Freddy's Revenge* are valuable examples of horror films which remove "mass culture queerness from the shadowy realm of connotation to which much of it has been relegated" (Doty xi). In *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, Doty declares "connotation has been the representational and interpretive closet of mass culture queerness for far too long," serving as the predominant form of queer depiction (xi). Regardless of the directorial intentions of William Friedkin and Jack Sholder for their respective films, both examples demand a queer discourse, refusing subtextual classification. By openly displaying the queer themes of these films, viewers are better able to interpret their place in a queer body politic.

As Benshoff notes in *Monsters*, "Hollywood's closet mentality has thrived during much of its history and is today still a potent tool working to keep queerness invisible within mass culture" (158). Through practices like blacklisting queer filmmakers, typecasting queer actors, and censoring overt queer themes from narratives, Hollywood films have long kept queerness regulated to the closet, especially the most radical departures from the heteronormative. While the first two practices (blacklisting and typecasting) fall outside the scope of this essay, both seem destined for improvement given the current state of queer representation in media. It is a testament to the advancement of LGBTQ+ rights and visibility in America that the concept of blacklisting based on gender and sexuality now seems like a bygone issue. As for typecasting, with current discourse surrounding casting of queer characters with queer actors, the problem may evolve to take a different form, but still seems like a step forward for queer actors. When it

comes to censoring overt queer themes within the filmic text, however, the problem persists, even in horror films where monsters are blatantly queer.

For Neil Jordan's 1994 gothic horror drama *Interview with the Vampire,* an adaptation of the wildly popular Anne Rice novels, the attempt to shove queer themes back into the closet demonizes the main characters' respective sexualities. In order for the film adaptation to be made in the first place, several changes were made from Anne Rice's book, namely by reducing the homosexual tension between the main characters (Tom Cruise's Lestat and Brad Pitt's Louis) by emphasizing the heterosexuality of Louis (Pintilie 645). Pitt's character is straight-coded through the entire film, beginning by mourning the loss of his wife and child (he mourned his brother's death in the book), emphasizing his interest in feeding on women, and resisting every advance from Lestat and, later, Antonio Banderas's Armand. Through scenes added to the film which were not included in the book, such as when Louis comedically attacks a pair of poodles rather than murder an aristocratic woman while Lestat simultaneously murders her "fop" husband, *Interview* quells the queer desire between Louis and Lestat and enables audience members to read the relationship as mere companionship (Pintilie 645). Though the pair become "one big happy family" by fathering a vampire child, Kirsten Dunst's Claudia, together (what Benshoff describes as "one of the clearest examples of a domestic queer monster couple in the current horror canon"), their homoerotic bond often "lurks around the edges" of the filmic text "rather than announcing itself forthrightly" (Benshoff 270, 15).

Lestat's infatuation with Louis is undoubtedly queer, with the film marking Lestat's gaze on Louis through many scenes. At the start of the film, after Lestat has properly stalked (still human) Louis and deemed him an attractive companion, the elder vampire bites his victim and flies him into the air like a horrific first kiss. Soon thereafter, Lestat turns Louis into a vampire

with a long bite to the neck while Louis holds the back of Lestat's head as he is lowered to the ground. As Louis lay dying, Lestat offers his bleeding wrist for Louis to suck, which he gratefully accepts. The vampiric foreplay results in both characters exhaustively climaxing as Louis's transformation begins and Lestat's power is drained, the ritual complete.

Once Louis becomes a vampire, he learns the predatory ways of his elder, resisting them the entire time. The eccentric Lestat hunts members of high society to feed upon, enjoying a "fresh, young girl" and "gilded beautiful youth." For one of Louis's first vampiric feedings, he and Lestat share a woman in a brothel, with triangulated implications of a three-way. Lestat derives sadistic pleasure from his hunting and feeding, with several scenes beginning with Lestat having sex and ending with him murdering his partner(s). Meanwhile, Louis fears giving in to these impulses and opts to feed on animals instead, causing him to become weak and sick.

The first half of the film revolves around the internal conflict of Louis turning toward the dark side of his vampiric urges at the insistence of Lestat. When Louis decides to leave his vampire partner in crime, Lestat turns young Claudia into a vampire to make Louis stay and help care for her. Eventually, Louis and Claudia form their own intimate bond and Claudia plots escape from Lestat, her abusive, manipulative parent. By offering the elder vampire the bodies of young boys, which he cannot resist, Claudia poisons Lestat. Before she and Louis can escape New Orleans, however, Lestat returns as an undead monster to seek revenge but is again defeated, this time consumed by flames in the family home, marking the ultimate destruction of the domestic sphere.

At the end of the film, after the European excursion, Louis has an unlikely reunion with Lestat, who lives on, weak, in an abandoned home. In their brief encounter, Lestat tells Louis he is "still beautiful" and during the peak of Lestat's power, "no one could resist me, not even you

[Louis]. The more you tried, the more I wanted you." Through emphasizing Louis's resistance and Lestat's predatory nature (both toward Louis and his young victims), the dynamic between the two characters reads less as a gay love story and more as a straight man denying the advances of an insistent, more powerful gay monster.

This same dynamic characterizes Louis's Paris getaway with Armand, who also tells Louis he is "beautiful." In their vampire-run theater, Armand and his troupe of vampire "actors" perform a public sacrifice of a beautiful young woman on stage, which Louis deems "monstrous" from the audience. Upon their formal meeting immediately thereafter, Armand presents Louis with a young boy covered in bite marks to feed on. Louis appears troubled but politely accepts the gesture, working to find an unmarked part of the boy's hand before biting into him. This is yet another revised moment from Rice's novel: in that version, Louis experiences ecstasy when feeding upon the boy (Pintilie 645). Motivated by jealousy over Louis's relationship with Claudia, Armand endorses the murder of the girl so long as he can have Louis. While Louis's interest in Armand stems from "curiosity," over the information the eldest vampire possesses about their monstrous culture, Armand clearly states his attraction to Louis for his pure morals. In the closeted queer vampire equivalent of a breakup scene, Louis spends an offensive amount of time holding Armand's face in his hands before nearly kissing him, but he pulls back and ends the relationship, drawing "the spectator close to a frightening queer sexuality," before reasserting "normality" (Benshoff 272). Once again, the sinister courting tactics of the overtly queer character are no match for the heterosexualized Louis.

While Pitt's Louis avoids getting too gay with either of his male love interests, "the liaison between Claudia and Louis represents the film's strongest erotic bonding" (Pintilie 650). After decades of being a vampire, Claudia becomes a woman trapped in an immortal young

girl's body. Her adopted father, Louis, evolves into her passionate lover. On their marine voyage to Europe, the two "explore each other's mysteries," deepening their love for one another. When Louis describes Claudia as his "daughter" to Armand, the latter corrects him by labelling Claudia as Louis's "lover." Repeatedly calling Louis her "beloved," Claudia presents a heterosexual (granted, pedophilic and incestuous) outlet for Louis's desires. Yet in the logic of *Interview with the Vampire*, Louis's love for a young girl's body is safer to openly express than a love for other men.

The narrative attempts to present sexual desire as fluid across age and gender, a standard vampire trope also seen in *The Hunger*. However, this message falls flat when the forces of homosexuality (Lestat and Armand) are deemed far more predatory than the force of incestuous pedophilia (Louis). By the logic of the film, one may argue Louis's love for Claudia is neither incestuous nor pedophilic due to her adopted, woman-in-a-girl's-body status. I will not engage deeply in a counterargument when Lestat and Louis spend significant screentime raising Claudia as a vampire child and the reality of Brad Pitt and Kirsten Dunst as lovers in 1994 says enough. Put simply, heterosexual pedophilia has a more privileged place than homosexual desire in *Interview with the Vampire*. This did not have to be the case if the queer aspects of Louis's character were fully explored on-screen. By protecting the leading-man statuses of Brad Pitt and Tom Cruise and sparing the viewer of having to see overt acts of homosexuality, the film aims to be more profitable and enjoyable for general audiences (Pinitilie 646). But in the end, every monster queer in *Interview* comes across as a predator thanks to Hollywood's closet mentality, with the film not only conflating pedophilia with homosexuality but taking a moral stance that the former is more acceptable. As Benshoff summarizes, "keeping homosexuality within the

closet of connotation continues to marginalize and minoritize, even as it allows for other more general notions of queerness to be warmly received by mainstream audiences" (268-69).

The Black Phone Calls for a Queer Reading

Like *Interview*, the 2022 supernatural horror film *The Black Phone* hides in the closet mentality, resulting in a monster whose depraved sexuality can easily be conflated with queerness and few areas of attachment for queer viewers. The film centers around the abduction of thirteen-year-old Finney by "The Grabber," a serial kidnapper who abducts teen boys, traps them in his soundproof basement, and eventually kills them. The Grabber's crime spree unsettles the residents of the suburban setting, though his identity remains unknown (to the characters in the film) as a police investigation unfolds. Trapped in The Grabber's basement, Finney learns a variety of survival/escape tactics by communicating with The Grabber's previous victims through the titular black phone, a supernatural device which enables Finney to speak to the ghosts of murdered teen boys. By the end of *The Black Phone*, Finney learns the proper methods of being the "Final Boy" from The Grabber's previous victims and overcomes his oppressor through self-defense, killing The Grabber using the phallic phone receiver, among an array of other tools the murdered boys point him toward.

Much of the violence of *The Black Phone* takes place outside of the kidnapping plot, with school bullies assaulting and harassing Finney throughout the film's first act. The bullies, whose motivations are not fully explored, rely on homophobic slurs and specific notions of masculinity to criticize the young teen protagonist. Finney is characterized as a quiet nerd who struggles to talk to girls, especially his crush, Donna. In one noteworthy scene, Finney is saved by his more masculinized friend, Robin, in the school bathroom when the bullies corner Finney after class.

Robin dismisses Finney's tormenters by reminding them of his ability to fight (his knuckles are still bloody from a brawl before school where Robin showed his dominance over another local bully). Having just been called homophobic slurs earlier in the scene, Finney uses the protection of Robin to pee in the now-bully-free bathroom's urinal. This lies in Robin's line of sight as he washes the blood of that morning's fight from his hands at the sink. The security of Finney's body, including his penis, is Robin's responsibility as much as it is Finney's. In exchange for physical protection, Finney provides Robin with academic help, establishing a quid-pro-quo homosocial bond where Finney consents to Robin's partial ownership of his body. In the violent, patriarchal hierarchy of *The Black Phone*, Robin's protection over Finney shields the latter from sadistic forces.

When Robin becomes one of The Grabber's victims and is subsequently murdered, the only person left to defend Finney from the bullies is his younger sister, Gwen. In another fight scene, Gwen bashes one boy with a rock to disband an assault on her brother. Rather than preventative protection, which Robin provided Finney, Gwen can only be reactionary, as the bullies are not intimidated by a younger girl. Even her rock cannot end the attack, as two of the boys continue pummeling Finney after their friend is sidelined. It is only after Finney himself is abducted by The Grabber and the threats to his body become both violent and sexual that he learns to defend himself. Through a series of phone calls with the ghosts of The Grabber's victims, Finney learns a variety of escape and defense tactics. The most valuable of these lessons comes from his original protector, Robin, who trains Finney to weaponize the phallic power of the phone receiver. During the final confrontation, when Finney becomes the "Final Boy," all the lessons of the ghost victims combine to trap The Grabber and allow Finney to snap his neck (and escape The Grabber's prison-like suburban home). By the end of the film, Finney learns to take

power over his own body (notably from one of the boys who used to hold power over it) to defeat the forces which threaten to harm it.

The Black Phone relies heavily upon doubling practices to construct its monstrous villain. Before his abduction, the film explores Finney's home life with his abusive, alcoholic father and his close bond with his younger sister, Gwen. Perhaps the most disturbing scene of the film has nothing to do with The Grabber but instead centers around Gwen being beaten by her father for vocalizing her psychic powers to police (which will later be used to help find Finney). Though never physically harmed himself, Finney demonstrates overt caution around his father, with both siblings carefully choosing their words out of fear of retaliation. The theme of parental abuse is amplified to the extreme by Ethan Hawke's Grabber (who physically resembles the father, played by Jeremy Davies).

Without an established backstory nor vocalized motivations, The Grabber operates as a psychosexual predator with pedophilic connotations. The enduring image of the film's villain centers on his attempts to engage Finney in a game referred to as "Naughty Boy." The game invokes sadistic domination, with clear links to fathering. The Grabber leaves the (usually locked) door to the basement prison open and waits at the top of the stairs, shirtless and armed with a leather belt, prepared to punish a defiant prisoner attempting escape. Finney is warned by one of the ghost victims not to play along, as that is what The Grabber wants. Though Finney avoids facing the direct consequences of "Naughty Boy" throughout the film, his escape plans operate in similar fashion to his normal home life, with careful consideration of the physical punishments awaiting him at the slightest misstep. The link between The Grabber's sadistic gratification over his teenage boy victims and the father's "standard" abuse, then, adds a troubling wrinkle to the film's depiction of violence. This doubling is further complicated when

Finney's father repeatedly expresses how similar his daughter, Gwen, is to her mother. Within the world of *The Black Phone*, The Grabber serves as the psychosexual daddy double to Finney's normative (yet abusive) suburban father.

The Grabber's status as the queer monster centers around a connotative crisis of identity for both the audience and The Grabber himself. *The Black Phone* never investigates the villain's origins or motivations, leaving the viewer to try to fill in the blanks. With these "narrative ellipses," the connotation of The Grabber's potential queer identity risks being expanded and conflated with the much clearer (yet still only implied) elements of pedophilia (Benshoff 36). The audience receives only one piece of personal information about The Grabber, which involves his brother, Max. In an ironic twist, a coked-up Max comes from out of town to stay with his brother (in the same house Finney is being held in the basement) to investigate the suburban town's string of abductions (why The Grabber would allow this in the first place and how Max avoids the above-ground interactions between Finney and The Grabber seem like glaring issues, but I digress). When Max finally discovers the basement prison, he is immediately murdered by The Grabber with an axe in a moment akin to Annie Wilkes killing Sheriff Buster in *Misery*. Shaken by fratricide, The Grabber accuses Finney of making him kill his brother, saying "he was an idiot, but he was my idiot." Though the film does little to demonstrate a close sibling bond between The Grabber and his brother, the power of sibling bonds is a crucial theme demonstrated by Finney and Gwen, making Max's murder thematically significant. Their bond may have once been strong, but The Grabber and Max's brotherhood ends in violence and betrayal, a far cry from the ideal sibling pair of Finney and Gwen who repeatedly save one another.

One of the most horrific elements of The Grabber is his interchangeable horned mask, which serves as a dynamic disguise throughout the film. Different scenes feature The Grabber in different mask variations: sometimes smiling or frowning, sometimes lacking a mouth or face covering altogether. Bouncing between human and monster, The Grabber uses the mask to cut off his humanity from the world around him. While the audience only ever sees this masking play out with Finney within the confines of the basement prison, it stands to reason the mask has always been a crucial element of The Grabber's killing of teen boys. In the climax of *The Black Phone*, Finney overcomes The Grabber's superior physical strength by stripping him of his mask, revealing Ethan Hawke's frightened face. The unmasked Grabber tries to shield his face from sight, enabling Finney to gain the upper hand and kill his abductor. The Grabber's ultimate weakness proves to be his own identity. Max's involvement destabilizes the routine nature of yet another Grabber abduction and the removal of the killer's mask forces him into a defensive position. The mask, in particular, points to The Grabber's inability to face himself, introducing insecurity or shame to the character right at his point of demise.

In a film dominated with themes of bullying, abuse, and childhood trauma, it does not feel like a stretch to suggest The Grabber's backstory centers around these same issues. Given Ethan Hawke's performance, which slips between effeminate and monstrous, it stands to reason The Grabber faced attacks on his masculinity and sexuality as a child, like Finney in the first act. Now placed in a position of power, The Grabber continues a cycle of domination and oppression, targeting the same demographic which once victimized him. While the attempt to determine the backstory for a child predator based solely on connotation feels somewhat misguided, the film suggests much more to The Grabber's story with his panicked response to the removal of his mask. By leaving everything to the audience, viewers can be lead down a trail of thought

suggesting the socialization of a child predator through an abusive upbringing, while also linking this to queer displays of masculinity. As the sadistic daddy double of Finney's father and the most monstrous departure from every other man in the film, The Grabber's masculinity falls far outside the heteronormative. In the heterosexist patriarchal world of *The Black Phone*, the child predator is the queerest force, and his story lacks the clarity required to avoid conflating pedophilia with valid queer identities like homosexuality.

Upon freeing himself from The Grabber, Finney reunites with his father and sister. After his near-death encounter with a psychosexual sadistic daddy, Finney appears unsettled by the presence of his father, despite his father's relief over his safety. Even Gwen, who arguably learned little new information about her relationship with her father after Finney's abduction, senses things have changed now that Finney has claimed his masculine power by defeating The Grabber. The final scene of the film sees Finney "get the girl" by finally working up the courage to talk to Donna in class. Privileging a specific version of heteronormativity while vanquishing abusive and queer forms of masculinity, *The Black Phone* is a coming-of-age story advocating for "normality." Like the majority of horror canon, the queer destabilizing force is vanquished (though The Grabber's memory may continue to haunt Finney and Gwen's home life as they reevaluate their relationship with their father) and heteronormativity is restored by the end of *The Black Phone*. The death of Robin and his training of Finney to weaponize phallic power prove convenient for removing any gay subtext to Finney's new life after his abduction.

With markedly anti-queer themes focused on conforming to a specific heteronormative model to avoid bullying and abuse, *The Black Phone* offers little for queer viewers to latch onto. The monster queer is a child predator with few redeeming qualities, actively avoiding an identifiable or relatable perspective. Finney and (especially) Gwen, both abused and bullied for

aspects of their identity outside their control, offer potential for identification from queer viewers looking to fight their oppression – though the solution to this oppression posed by the film is far from transgressive. If anything, the dynamic between Robin and Finney offers queer potential in a film lacking camp and transgressive gender and sexual politics. The only in-depth example of a connotative queer monster in my analysis, *The Black Phone* serves to benefit from leaving less of its queer elements to connotation and risking conflation of queerness with monstrous acts like pedophilia.

Conclusion: The Promise of *Freaky* and Future Overt Depictions

While many modern films like *The Black Phone* demonstrate how the horror genre continues to be "a 'safe' but demonizing place in which queerness hides," I advocate against this hiding (Benshoff 273). Should they be queer-coded, let the monsters out of the closet. Acknowledge what is there. Horror films will become more enjoyable for an audience longing for representation, one which already identifies with a genre full of society's lowest creatures. Empowering marginalized audience members can become a central tenant of horror with overt queer depictions, rather than an unintended consequence through reclamation of depraved portrayals. At the same time, a commitment to broader narrative diversity across all identities (not just the heterosexual, white, economically secure men the genre traditionally caters to) brings the promise of new directions for overdone formulas. All characters, not just the monster, can exhibit a non-hegemonic identity. This way, the phenomenon described by Benshoff in which "so few 'normal' homosexuals [appear] on screen in any of these horror films, by default the image of the monster queer becomes the image of homosexuality that moviegoers regularly encounter and come to know" can be avoided, not just with homosexuals but with any identity,

whether queer, Black, immigrant, neurodivergent, etc. (249). Modern directors/producers like Jordan Peele, Guillermo Del Toro, Ryan Murphy, and Leigh Janiak add crucial diversity to the horror genre, but there is always room for more stories, especially from the most marginalized communities. One particular story, from gay director Christopher Landon, offers a hopeful note for the future of queer horror.

The 2020 horror comedy *Freaky*, a mashup of *Freaky Friday* and *Friday the 13th*, blatantly queers horror conventions while also empowering an openly gay hero. *Freaky* follows high school nice girl, Millie, as she confronts an escaped convict psychokiller, the Blissfield Butcher, played by Vince Vaughn. Armed with a ceremonial dagger, the Blissfield Butcher attempts to sacrifice Millie after a football game where she performed as the Blissfield Valley High School's mascot, the "Biting Beaver." Before he can finish the job, however, Millie is saved by her police officer older sister. The queer logic of *Freaky* dictates that the incomplete sacrifice ritual results in the killer and his victim switching bodies, with the Blissfield Butcher waking up the next morning in Millie's bedroom (and body) and Millie (as the Butcher) awaking in a homeless encampment surrounded by drug addicts and murderous paraphernalia. The rest of the film follows Millie (now played by an effeminate Vince Vaughn) trying to take back her body from the Blissfield Butcher (played with camp menace by Kathryn Newton).

Landon's queer sensibility refuses to relent throughout *Freaky*, as the psychokiller and Final Girl become inverted and overlap. Enlisting the help of her friends, campy gay boy Joshua and strong Black girl Nyla, Vince Vaughn's Millie is forced into a delirious cycle of absurd gender-bending activities. While hiding in the boy's bathroom, Millie explores her new body ("Standing and peeing's kinda rad!") and, equipped with newfound physical strength, stands up to one of the boys who regularly bullies her. During the bathroom scenes, Joshua inquires on the

size of the killer's penis, prompting pushback from Nyla who frustratingly declares "I think we're past labels" to excuse her own presence in the bathroom (she also later corrects a character's pronouns when referring to the killer in Millie's body). When the police manhunt for the escaped convict forces Millie to hide in a dressing room, she anonymously flirts with her single mother who confides in the unknown man behind the door about grieving her dead husband (Millie's father). In the queerest dynamic of the film, Vince Vaughn's Millie gains the help of her crush, a classmate named Booker, and the two relentlessly flirt with one another despite Millie's physical appearance as a grown man. While the two lovebirds wait in the backseat of a car for Nyla to steal the sacrificial dagger from the police station, Booker initiates a kiss with Vince Vaughn's Millie, to both of the characters' disbelief. Meanwhile, Kathryn Newton's Blissfield Butcher hunts and kills an array of high school characters, all of whom regularly bully normative Millie. From the social media obsessed Ryler (who questions if Millie is a lesbian based on the methodic stalking of her Butcher persona, claiming "it's fine if you are") to her stern and dismissive woodshop teacher to a collection of misogynistic jocks who all objectify Millie's body (which she no longer possesses), Kathryn Newton's Blissfield Butcher brutally slaughters all of them with sadistic pleasure. Through bathrooms, classrooms, locker rooms, dressing rooms, parties, and first dates, *Freaky* explores transgender themes and queer vengeance in a celebratory, accessible manner.

Additionally, the "out and proud" gay best friend, Joshua (played by non-binary actor Misha Osherovich), adds valuable camp contributions to the film. Introduced by saying "I love your black wiener" to an African-American neighbor walking his Dachshund, Joshua inserts a queer sensibility to every scene. When Vince Vaughn's Millie chases her friends, trying to convince them of her true identity, Joshua and Nyla are terrified, with Joshua screaming "You're

Black! I'm gay! We are so dead!" After a slew of panicked escapes and confrontations, Joshua is tasked with standing watch over a captured, bound, and gagged Kathryn Newton's Butcher while the rest of the group goes to reverse the curse. As the comedy formula demands, something goes wrong. Joshua is discovered by the surprise arrival of his mother, who questions why one of Joshua's friends is being held captive in her dining room, prompting Joshua to claim the two were role playing. In this queer masterclass, Joshua nervously comes out as straight to his mother, who immediately rejects the claim, seeing through the lie and validating her gay son's identity. And since it is a horror movie, the killer in Millie's body escapes soon thereafter.

In the film's climax at the "party at the old mill," Joshua rejects the drunken advances of a closeted jock, who calls Joshua a "loser faggot" before being slaughtered by a returning Kathryn Newton's Butcher. Composing himself, Joshua rushes to his friends' aid and helps reverse the curse by holding down Millie's body with Nyla. Once the Butcher reclaims the power of Vince Vaughn's body, Joshua commands the arriving police squad to "Shoot that motherfucker!" and they oblige. *Freaky* validates and highlights the out gay identity of a central protagonist (something it mostly refuses to do with Nyla's minoritized racial identity beyond a few jokes), empowering Joshua to weaponize an entire police force to his advantage while destroying the closeted forces which seek to harm him.

Interestingly, the character of the Blissfield Butcher, from Vince Vaughn's depiction to Kathryn Newton's and back to Vince Vaughn, defies queer-coding. Even inside Millie's body, the Butcher remains committed to heterosexuality and it is only the circumstance of appearing as a teenage girl which queers him. Alongside the queer depictions of the film, from Joshua to Booker's kiss to closeted high schoolers, the monster becomes the least queer presence. If anything, the Butcher presents a hegemonic threat with his misogynist power. Yet he also kills a

slew of bigoted bullies and male sex pests in the body of a teenage girl, offering fulfillment for a stereotypically disempowered figure. The queer politics of *Freaky* refuse to present a queer monster, at least not one which forwards harmful notions, opting instead to queer its heroes.

While Vince Vaughn's Millie initially claims she feels "oddly empowered being in this body" because it makes her feel "invincible or kinda badass," the reversal of the curse places things back to normal, leaving Millie to rely on her own feminine strength. After the police shoot the Blissfield Butcher, presumably killing him, Millie "gets the guy," enjoying a "normal" kiss with Booker. She also repairs her relationships with her grieving mom and sister. Of course, the killer inevitably returns to get revenge on Millie, breaking into her house and weaponizing the masculine strength he once lacked. Channeling her mascot, the "Biting Beaver," Millie fights back with the help of her mom and sister. In response to the Butcher's claims of experiencing Millie's physical weakness while in her body, she kicks him in the balls, creating an opening for the matriarchy to vanquish the psychokiller once and for all. A slick example of queer doubles, *Freaky*'s Millie-as-Butcher and Butcher-as-Millie explore the varieties of feminine strength (a similar theme to Landon's other comedy horror, *Happy Death Day*).

Ultimately privileging internal over external power, *Freaky* offers an overload of queer pleasures for its audience, including an awkward same-sex kissing scene, a campy gay boy, and numerous examples of hegemonic bullies being destroyed. By refusing to closet its queer themes, *Freaky* is free to explore all the wonderful weirdness of gender nonconformity and queer sexuality.

As conservative sources continue to demonize and marginalize trans and non-binary identities with monstrous depictions, based in transphobic fears seemingly ripped straight from *Sleepaway Camp*, the power of the horror film to shape discourse around identity remains

prevalent. Of course, the functional impacts of "representation" are often limited (if "colorblind" diversity casting is any indication). I do not believe filmmakers must "conform to some imagined sense of responsibility to [a] group identity and put forth the 'positive portrayal' of it," especially in the horror genre, where gruesome, "low" depictions are often desired (Greven, *Psycho-Sexual* 184). However, for a queer horror lover accustomed to having to "grin and bear it," more positive, or just nuanced, portrayals of queerness (like Joshua in *Freaky*) are a welcome arrival.

As Benshoff notes, regardless of the mysterious "origins" of queer genders and sexualities, which many horror films seek to explain, the framing of queerness as "perverse or monstrous is clearly the construction of historical and social ideas" (22). Hate and fear, the specialties of the horror film, are socialized. Cultural artifacts like horror films shape perceptions. If *Freaky* is any indication, there has never been a safer, more promising time for Hollywood to embrace the power of overt queer depictions, in horror and beyond. The outcome could be life changing and even lifesaving for victims of America's most bigoted monstrosities.

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