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Special Videographic Issue: Queer/ing Horror

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**Special Videographic Issue: Queer/ing Horror—Video Essays
at the Intersection of Horror and Queerness**

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Queer/ing Horror

Video Essays at the Intersection of Horror and Queerness

The *Monstrum* Editorial Team and Selected Peer Reviewers,
with Dayna McLeod¹

In *What's the Use?* (2019), Sara Ahmed examines “queer use as reuse” (198). She posits, “If I have considered queer use as how we dismantle a world that has been built to accommodate some, we can also think of queer use as a building project” (2019, 219-221). Here she highlights the potentiality of queer use, emphasizing its capacity to deconstruct a world full of biased systems and to facilitate creative and productive practices. How might we consider “queer use as reuse” in videographic criticism of queer horror? What interventions, analysis, and critique might we manifest if we look at the form of the video essay in relationship to queer/horror media objects? Ahmed writes, “Queer use can also be about not ingesting something; spitting it out; putting it about. If queer use is not ingesting something, not taking it in, queer use can also be about how you *attend to something*” (207-8, emphasis added).

Monstrum 7.2 is a special issue comprised entirely of video essays that “attend to” the intersections of horror and queerness. We encouraged video essay creators to relate Ahmed’s notion of queer use to horror. Contributors were asked to consider re/readings of the monstrous, where it is located, and how it is constructed (Halberstam 1995); dis/identification practices and pleasures in queering and circulating negative and positive affect found in horror

¹We cite at length selections from the peer review statements by Mikaela Bobiy, Joel Burges, Mario DeGiglio-Bellemare, Will Dodson, Michael J. Faris, Anne Golden, Laura Horak, Caél M. Keegan, Nina K. Martin, Catarina Nirta, Kate Robertson, Alanna Thain, Laura Westengard, Annaëlle Winand, and Kristopher Woofter.

A note from the *Monstrum* editorial team: The recent illness and passing of Guest-Editor Dayna McLeod’s wife MJ in the fall of 2024 resulted in a shift in editorial supervision of *Monstrum*’s December 2024 issue. It was Dayna’s original vision that statements prepared by the peer reviewers be published along with the creators’ statements for each video essay in this special issue. Though a rigorous, anonymous peer review of the contributions was conducted and completed, in the interest of facilitating the release of the issue we have opted not to publish the full peer review texts alongside the video essays and artists’ statements. As an alternative, this introduction refers to the reviewers’ comments at length, where possible. We thank our peer reviewers for the time and thought they put into their constructive comments for the video essay artists.

(Faris 2022); and/or how “queer horror has turned the focus of fear upon itself, on its own communities and subcultures” (Elliott-Smith 2016, 197).

Because the video essay is itself an experimental media engagement and performance of moving-image analysis and theory, it has the ability to (re)work the text under analysis in ways that uncover, enhance, reactivate, problematize, or enrich the interplay of horror and queerness. Accordingly, we were interested in how the video essayist might situate queerness relative to horror through the analysis of specific media objects and/or texts and their formal techniques as productive, disruptive, interventionist, analytical, methodological, and/or confrontational. Contributors in this special issue take up whether horror *be/comes* in the process of queering or through its queer re/use, as well as if—and, if so, how—horror lies within queerness itself. Some of the video essayists take the video essay medium or source media object as “the body,” where the medium itself (film, television, web-based media object, etc.) and its production are horrific. These interrogations address what the construction of the media object tells us about queer horror. They ask what exactly the horror *is*, and how queers and queerness encounter and contend with it.

The resulting collection of nine videographic essays in this special issue take up these and other key questions to think about what queer reuse of queerness looks like through a horror lens. These essays themselves are acts of queer re-telling and re-viewing horror practices.

In “Jouissance at the Margins: Revisiting Bersani’s ‘Is the Rectum a Grave?’ Through the Lens of *Swallowed*,” Felicia Cosey looks at the 2022 film *Swallowed* (Carter Smith), a film that she argues fails to fully articulate its narrative of queer possibility, remaining stuck in a heteronormative narrative framework that equates gay-straight intimacy to a form of annihilation. Joel Burges, in his review of the essay, notes that “Cosey takes up the theme of this issue—queer use as reuse, indeed, horrific reuse—by reusing Leo Bersani’s AIDS-era interrogation of the ambivalence of jouissance and how it entails the pain and pleasure of giving up the power of the self through anal sexuality.” Burges explains that “Cosey’s reuse involves a suggestive juxtaposition of voiceover and film in which she speaks text in relation to the moving images from *Swallowed* unfolding on screen while she theorizes this horror movie with Bersani, Jacques Lacan, and others. In so doing, Cosey shifts the reader-cum-viewer of her video essay between listening to her elegant encounter with these thinkers of jouissance and looking at the both vulnerable and violent scenes of gay-straight intimacy at the same time.” As a result of this shifting, Burges finds himself “feeling that the reuse of Bersani here teaches us how difficult ‘not ingesting something’, to recall one way Sara Ahmed describes what queer (re)use

is ‘about,’ can be. For although nearly forty years have passed between Bersani publishing ‘Is the Rectum a Grave?’ and *Swallowed* coming out, queerness remains a horror that cannot be ingested in the film, even as the climactic scene requires the gay male protagonist to ‘attend to’, as Ahmed might put it, the straight male protagonist by fisting him to retrieve the illicit goods inside of him.” Burges sees “more queer potential in this annihilating act of intimacy than Cosey,” and adds that “that potential remains horrifying. The film spits it out in an expulsion that is somehow both queer and heteronormative in the same breath.”

In reviewer Will Dodson’s words, the video essay “Lick the Blade: Locating a Queer Archive of Debris in Roberta Findlay’s *The Oracle*” by Alex Hall, “composts, as it were, refuse or trash from director-cinematographer-editor Roberta Findlay’s 1985 horror film *The Oracle*, reassembling the film as an archive of detritus. Ghostly bits of dialogue—‘What, are you gay or something?’; ‘My God, what’s it saying?’; ‘Oh my God’; ‘I thought it was something in the wall ...’—and repeated elements of the synth score by Sinoia Caves are a sonic tapestry on which bodies contort, hyperventilate, stab, cut, and bleed.” Dodson offers that “Findlay’s life, as a trash genre filmmaker, as a self-described sexual deviant herself, and as a survivor of an abusive relationship, already haunts the source film,” and emphasizes that “Hall’s reappropriation of *The Oracle*’s images and soundtrack ‘defiles’ the film of conventional structure.” Dodson adds that “as *Lick the Blade* constitutes itself in a new, dislocated space, it brings that haunting forward.” For reviewer Annaëlle Winand, Hall’s video works as a “‘disorientation device’ that opens new meanings and narratives through misalignments, superimposition, and repetition. It highlights the power residing in what’s left, and the importance of working with debris, remains, and scraps. The montage of repetitive sounds juxtaposed with citations and striking images creates an affective environment that anchors the knowledge into a contagious message. As spectators, we relish the new substance oozing from the wound of the video, hungrily responding to the title’s invitation.”

“We’re All Scrolling through the World’s Fair: Online Horror Fiction as a Site of Queer Identity Formation” is Max Ranieri’s innovative exploration of queer fan engagement through the creation of, in Ranieri’s words, a “social media microblogging interface” comprised of comments, scenes from Jane Schoenbrun’s 2021 film *We Are All Going to the World’s Fair*, and other “materials that informed my own reading of the film.” Taking off in part from the film’s own inspiration of communal/collective story creation, Rainieri’s video essay becomes both a demonstration of such practices, and an extended act of fan/critical interaction-creation itself. Caél Keegan notes in his review “the eerie

effect the text was having on me, in which I was phasing in and out of feeling like the video was actually *my* screen and then realizing I could not move the cursor myself.” Keegan continues, “This revealed how deeply I have been trained by digital algorithms to click away or move my attention—which is actually an effect produced *by* these feeds and not necessarily my own innate response. This created a very odd-feeling sort of ‘phantom limb’ effect where the screen was ‘mine’, and yet I could not actually control it despite wanting to. All I could do was pause/rewind/advance, which has interesting implications for the battleground over pubertal temporality and puberty blockers as a site where trans autonomy is being newly contested/limited.” Reviewer Michael J. Faris writes, “Ranieri’s video, in my reading, is an estranging, disorienting reminder that queer identities, affects, and perceptions are always mediated, or, more accurately, in late-stage capitalism, hypermediated. And queer hypermediation *is* disorienting. Queers have often turned to horror as a site of queer affective identification—a point Ranieri’s video makes with its references to *The Babadook*. Now we queers turn to scrolling, consuming, and refiguring others’ identifications with horror.”

The video essay “Queer+Horror” by Heather O. Petrocelli and May Santiago queerly reanimates Petrocelli’s 2023 book *Queer for Fear: Horror Film and the Queer Spectator*. In this collage, the effect of the editing +++ of horror scenes argues for what the authors call an ontological identification between queerness and horror. Such ontologies are both about recognition—testifying to the ways that queer spectators have both witnessed and transmitted this connection—and a creative excess that also characterizes queer embodiment in the world as haunted, uncanny, and transgressive. Laura Westengard identifies this as precisely the value of this format: “Connoisseurs of horror and/or cinema will certainly experience nostalgia when recognizing the layered images from various films bringing together queerness and horror. However, the extraction of images from their narrative contexts, the palimpsestic transparent overlay of images from different genres and times, and the incomplete and over-reproduced visuals screen challenge that nostalgic connection. What results is certainly an uncanny reframing of the familiar, an eerie temporal and ghostly disruption of narrative chronology and conventional meaning making.” The essay makes an intimate and embodied appeal to the potential of horror for queer lives. As Kate Robertson points out in her review of the video, “Where *Queer+Horror* excels is in its use of videographic practice to explore queer embodiment, specifically, how it aligns with horror cinema. The video essay makes tangible Petrocelli’s contention that queer people are both haunted and societal spectres.” For instance, she points

out that “the video’s persistent visual fragmentation, combined with irregular pacing, evoke a sense of the uncanniness that Petrocelli argues defines queer experience.”

“Inside(s) Out” by Ada Rosen, in the words of reviewer Catarina Nirta, “proposes a reading of the trans experience that goes straight *into* the body where flesh, organs, skin, and blood fold in unpredictable ways, creating unique shapes that refuse all representations and demand a unity of their own.” And Laura Horak invokes transgender studies scholar Susan Stryker’s “affinity between myself as a transsexual woman and the monster in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*” (1993, 238), to explain that Rosen’s video “criticizes the demand for coherent personhood.” For Horak, “‘Inside(s) Out’ takes on the problem of mind/body dualism and how it undergirds a shallow ‘wrong body’ explanation of transness and the neutered, biologized didactic tool of the ‘genderbread person.’” Horak explains that the “video’s power comes from its exceptional remix of deep cuts of trans cinema, like *Dr. Jekyll & Sister Hyde* (1971), *Let Me Die a Woman* (1977), and *Come Back to the 5 and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* (1982), alongside crass contemporary news reporting, the Oscar-winning *The Danish Girl* (2015), and a wide range of monster movies from the 1960s to today.” For Horak, with this video essay Rosen “joins a chorus of trans scholars and artists who, in the wake of Stryker’s field-defining piece, embrace monstrosity as politically and personally potent for trans subjectivity.”²

Julia Erhart and Susan Bruce’s “Decentering Monstrosity in *The Children’s Hour* (1961)” combines images, music and dialogue from William Wyler’s 1961 film, along with readings of outraged responses to the controversial film by the public. Showcasing the film’s “dialogue between satanic panic, the lavender scare, and the more general moral panic of which they were part,” reviewer Mikaela Bobiy notes that both the source materials and the discordant and distorted remix of sound and image in this essay “firmly place the video essay within the tradition of horror, particularly those horror

² Horak points to the following studies: Jack Halberstam, “Skinflick: Posthuman Gender in Jonathan Demme’s *The Silence of the Lambs*,” *Camera Obscura* 9, no. 3 27 (January 9, 1991): 36–53, https://doi.org/10.1215/02705346-9-3_27-36; Cael M. Keegan, “In Praise of the Bad Transgender Object: The Silence of the Lambs,” *Flow: A Critical Forum on Media and Culture* 26, no. 08 (June 1, 2020), <https://www.flowjournal.org/2020/06/in-praise-of-the-bad-silence/>; Anson Koch-Rein, “Monster,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1–2 (May 1, 2014): 134–35, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2399821>; Sabine Sharp, “Monstrosity and Trans Literature,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Trans Literature*, ed. Douglas A. Vakoch and Sabine Sharp (Routledge, 2024); Dan Vena and Islay Burgess, “The New Border War? An Intergenerational Exchange on Bad Trans Horror Objects,” *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 61, no. 2 (2022): 189–93, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2022.0004>.

films which include archival footage or documentary effects.” For Bobiy, this “shift[s] the blame and alter[s] the traditional relationship between the scapegoat and the community [b]y focusing on the accusing eyes and faces of the public, overlaid with the eerie music and cacophonous sounds, in addition to the stark colours,” ultimately pointing “to the community as the monster, as opposed to the seemingly loving lesbian couple at the centre of Wyler’s film.” For Erhart and Bruce, the film at every level “immerses us in a world where the accusations of perversion are physically palpable” and they use this as the animating impulse of their analysis. Pitting the historical moment of moral panic of the late 1950s and early 1960s against the brittle homonormativity of queer “security” today, the essay short circuits an example of the film’s hate mail (preserved in the Wyler archives at UCLA), read out in voiceover against the film’s tactical re-orientation of monstrosity and blame, giving Rosa Von Praunheim the final word: “It is not the homosexual who is perverse, but the society in which he lives.” When the comments section of today’s online videos removes the intermediary of studios or letters to the editors, what cover or weapons might remediations of horror provide against moral panic now?

In “Every creak, every groan, every tap in the wall, you’ll think of me’: Spinning the Web of Trans*-Horror-Metaphors in *Cobweb* (2023)” Darren Elliott-Smith stresses that LGBTQIA+ fans, creators, and researchers of horror need to “reinterpret,” “re-express,” and “re-present” the problematic discourses of psychoanalysis and queer theory in horror academic accounts and representations that leave out trans* subjectivities. His video essay takes up the problematic “deploy[ment of] metaphor and allegory to represent LGBTQ+ anxieties/fears,” pointing to the film’s failings, but also opening up the film’s representation of trans* identity to the possibility of “positive identification” with the film’s monster’s occasionally darkly comical dismantling of the domestic and of the bodies of several invading bullies. Elliott-Smith’s video essay’s careful pacing (re)captures much of the melancholic tone and deliberate pacing that underscores the film’s unraveling of domestic heteronormativity and chrononormativity attached to the oppressive rituals and routines of family. The essay revisits one of *Cobweb*’s (and the horror genre’s) most effective subversive settings—the family dinner table—looking, via Sarah Ahmed, at this oppressive heteronormative site of behaviour and routine modeling. For Elliott-Smith, the film’s queer-coded, possibly trans-coded character Peter makes radical moves to reverse the “punitive parental force-feeding” Peter experiences. While this act leads to releasing a similarly coded monster, Peter’s “sister” Sarah, who engages in welcome acts of “queer revelry,” the film for Elliott-Smith ultimately

retreats into containment of Sarah's monstrous disruption, despite her final reminder that "[w]e're family."

Pivoting on (and away from) the axis of queer analysis to queering practice, Lucy Fife Donaldson's "(dis)Orientating horror: feeling queerly" takes up the way horror works with orientation in perspective, direction and movement to create productively unsettled space. Kristopher Woofter notes in his review that "'(dis)Orientating Horror' sees space as embodied, not empty and waiting to be filled, or merely to be traversed. The essay both points to and incarnates a kind of vertical interiority that queers direct movement in favor of shifts, swerves, twists and turns, flip-flops, and folds. Donaldson's videographic essay *performs* these scenes by multiplying, reconfiguring and folding them in upon themselves so that spatial, causal, and temporal relationships collapse into queer forms that call for other readings—ones that draw out the queer possibility (frustration and dizziness, giddiness and enticement) suggested by moments of disorientation." In his review, Mario DeGiglio-Bellemare explains, "Carol Clover says that horror directors 'rub our faces' in camera work, but I also like the queer performativity of dislocations presented in this piece via Sarah Ahmed and others." He cites in particular how in this video essay "the notion of queer spatialization and the monstrous are one and the same—activated sonically, too, when a piece by Berlioz is suddenly interrupted" and in "how a 'master text' is also disturbed with *The Shining* as an example of queer dislocation."

"Alison Peirse's 'I Can Hear Someone Coming' video essay starts with a seduction. A simple 'would you like to listen and find out?' provides the provocation, set in lavender (of course) on a picturesque background of floral arrangements and ripe, bursting fruit. When the narrator intones a warning for the potentially 'shocking' content of the essay, viewers are still unsure of this strange juxtaposition between the proper and the strange." This is Nina K. Martin's response to Peirse's cheeky aural history of 1930s queer female representation, anchored to the predatory, captivating figure of Countess Marya Zaleska in *Dracula's Daughter*. In this hauntological approach to history, "one would expect a visual unfolding of desiring women sharing longing looks," Martin points out, "but instead, 1930s horror cinema becomes a landscape of whispers and moans, as Alison Peirse hones in on snippets of horror soundscapes." Evocatively, this video essay encourages rich associations to other films and stars of the 1930s, what reviewer Anne Golden describes as the work's "associative tendrils," or its queer reuse: "Her essay acts as a catalyst in the search for other images that beguile, for representations that resonate with queer viewers who respond to images that they recognize even before they come

into focus.” Peirse’s formal choices encourage a reverie, as Golden edges out from the work’s content to draw other references to mind, from “the trio of Dr. Frankenstein, the monster and his bride (as) queer figures that restlessly dwell at the margins of society” in *Bride of Frankenstein* or “Tod Browning’s *Freaks* (as) a pre-code love letter to queerness of all kinds.” Queering the video essay for thinking horror goes beyond practices of consumption and encourages makers and viewers alike to play with their food, to sometimes sustain, sometimes satiate queer hunger for horror’s more-to-life.

[View the Special Issue.](#)

Dayna McLeod is a performance-based media artist and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) postdoctoral fellow at Middlebury College (2023-2025). She actively engages queer and feminist approaches to research-creation through art and media. She is part of a collaborative videographic project, *Ways of Doing*, which fosters an ethical praxis of audiovisual research with Lucy Fife Donaldson (University of St. Andrews), Colleen Laird (University of British Columbia), and Alison Peirse (University of Leeds). Her video essays have been published in [\[in\] Transition](#), [Teknokultura: Journal of Digital Culture and Social Movements](#), and [Intermédialités: History and Theory of the Arts, Literature and Technologies](#).

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Jouissance at the Margins
Revisiting Bersani’s “Is the Rectum a Grave?” Through the Lens of
Swallowed

Felicia Cosey

Carter Smith’s film *Swallowed* offers an interesting paradox. Smith, an openly gay filmmaker with an extensive resume in the horror genre, crafted a story that is unapologetically queer. Yet, *Swallowed*’s central message reinforces the following heteronormative ideology in artistic representation: when a straight man engages in sexual acts with a gay man, he must either abandon his straight identity or face death. *Swallowed* suggests that straight masculinity is destroyed when exposed to the realm of gay-straight intimacy. Once Dom, the straight character, loses his straight identity, the narrative discards him. His identity as a straight man defines his role in the film. Without this identity, Dom loses not only his power but also his purpose.

Swallowed is about two friends’—Dom and Ben—last night together. Ben, who is gay, is leaving their small town in Maine to become a gay porn star in Los Angeles. To help finance Ben’s trip, Dom tries to secure quick cash. He transports drugs, as a drug mule, across the US/Canada border. When a gaybasher punches Dom in the stomach, he ruptures one of the drug baggies, which contain bug larvae, not drugs. The larvae hatch inside Dom and release a venom that causes intoxication, paralysis, and sexual euphoria. The larvae must be removed from Dom before he dies. He asks Ben to remove them, meaning Ben essentially must fist him. Yet, after removing the last larvae, Dom still dies.

This narrative inspired my “queer reuse” (Ahmed 2019, 198) of Leo Bersani’s 1987 essay “Is the Rectum a Grave?”¹ I sought to explore why *Swallowed*, like many other stories, clings to the notion that a straight man who engages in gay sex cannot remain straight or even survive. Bersani’s essay provides a curious counterpoint because it advocates the notion that anal sex is a destabilizing force that shatters illusions of power and identity. Bersani views gay male anal sex, often seen as feminizing, as a form of *jouissance*—an overwhelming pleasure that disrupts the notions of a unified self (Bersani 2010, 30).

¹ Sara Ahmed’s phrase “queer use as reuse” informs the conceptual framework of *Monstrum*’s special issue. For my project, I take up this idea by reusing Bersani’s “Is the Rectum a Grave?” as the foundation for my theoretical investigation.

Jouissance, as Jacques Lacan theorizes, exists beyond language in the pre-symbolic Real. *Jouissance* is not simply pleasure, but an intense form of pleasure that is experienced as suffering or pain. Lacan states that *jouissance* “implies the acceptance of death” (Lacan and Miller 2008, 189). Bersani embraces this surrender as a path to liberation. Giving up power disrupts the ideological structures that define traditional masculinity. *Swallowed* briefly acknowledges this potential in its climax, where Dom, overcome by the larvae’s venom, writhes on the cabin floor in a euphoric, agonizing state. His body contorts in torment, caught between the extremes of pain and pleasure.

But where Bersani identifies *jouissance* as liberatory—a way to abandon the unified self and escape rigid structures of identity—*Swallowed* resists this idea. The film portrays straight masculinity as too fragile to endure such a loss of control. Dom’s submission reinforces the idea that surrender leads to annihilation. Yet, the film also complicates this notion by shifting power to Ben after Dom’s death. In the final act, Ben takes on the active role commonly associated with the “final girl” trope in horror films. He exacts revenge against drug kingpin Rich by subjecting him to a painful, yet pleasurable death—as a victim of larva venom—at the bottom of an outhouse. Ben’s assumption of power, while decisive, remains feminized, echoing the horror genre’s tradition of the final girl—empowered yet shaped by vulnerability and trauma.

Bersani’s essay, which was originally written to address right-wing conservatives who blamed the AIDS crises on gay men and their alleged promiscuity, imagines the loss of control as a means for rejecting the masculine/feminine binary. *Swallowed*, however, clings to the cultural anxiety that equates the loss of masculine identity with death.

My video essay answers the call for “queer reuse” by investigating cultural resistance to challenging heteronormative ideology and by exploring the ways *Swallowed* embodies the tension between queer liberation and the persistent grip of heteronormative ideology. By focusing on the film’s depiction of gay-straight intimacy and its refusal to embrace the liberatory potential of *jouissance*, my video essay engages with the tension between queerness and horror. It explores how horror, as a genre, can both expose and reinforce cultural anxieties about masculinity and queerness. In this way, my video essay critiques *Swallowed* for its inability to confront heteronormative ideology, while also acknowledging its ability to imagine new possibilities for queer horror storytelling.

Felicia Cosey is an assistant professor of film and media studies at Western Washington University. Her research and teaching focus on psychoanalytic theory, race and representation, and gender and sexuality in media. Her work, published in journals such as *Popular Culture Review* and the *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, examines Black representation in popular film and depictions of post-apocalyptic narratives in animated cinema. Felicia is passionate about fostering critical engagement with media through courses on race, gender, sexuality, and psychoanalytic theory.

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Lick the Blade

Locating a Queer Archive of Debris in Roberta Findlay's *The Oracle*

Alex Hall

Roberta Findlay is a particularly curious figure in the study of women's filmmaking and horror historiography.¹ Despite having been called "The Queen of Splatter" (Timpone 1986, 50), Findlay's anti-feminist politics remain a case study on the re-appraisal of queer "trash" and the bad object in queer and feminist horror spectatorship.² It seems crucial to mention that lesbianism is indeed overtly represented throughout Findlay's filmography. In *Blood Sisters* (1987) and *The Oracle* (1985) lesbianism is framed within the contexts of sex work, foregrounding queer erotic bodies as active agents. As Barbara Creed argues, "in pornography the body of the lesbian is constructed as insatiable—a monstrous quicksand of desire" (1995, 86). Notably, the lesbians in these films are not merely passive figures to be watched but actively desire back. In the case of *The Oracle*, the character of Farkas (played by Pam La Testa) was originally written for a man. This decision forced a body to mutate from page to screen, pushing against the script's original confines of compulsory cis-heterosexuality. In the realm of exploitation cinema, Farkas' gender ambiguity is exalted, perhaps even fetishized and queered by Findlay's gaze. With this in mind, engagement with much of her work requires a malleable and adaptable approach, guiding speculative practices that seek to forge new and strange affinities with her films.

After a significant career making "roughies" and hardcore pornography, Findlay split from her collaborator and husband Michael Findlay, and ventured into directing cheaply made horror alongside a continued production of

¹ "Curious" here speaks to the generative and surprising nature of Findlay's role in feminist film history through her anti-woman and anti-sex politics in that it destabilizes and complicates the typical sensibilities of what queer and feminist horror cinema can look and *feel* like. This curiosity may in fact "vibrate with affection" (Sara Ahmed 2019, 197) in its reorientation towards the possibilities of queer image-making, and the potential for videographic response.

² The designation "anti-feminist" is widely attended to not only by scholars, film historians and critics, but Findlay herself. See Strub and Alilunas, Walker, Freibert, Moorman and Heller-Nicholas for further engagement with Findlay's adamant negation of feminist practice and politics.

pornographic films. A self-described “cameraman” (Moorman 2023, 52) she capitalized on the straight-to-video boom of the 1980s with her first horror feature as director, *The Oracle*.³ A decade earlier, Findlay co-helmed the exploitation film *Snuff*,⁴ a “video nasty” the backlash against which culled the emergence of the anti-pornographic group Women Against Pornography in the late 1970s. As such, the politics of image-making are fraught when assessing Findlay’s longstanding “failure” to legitimate certain feminist readings, but also productive through re-approaching the radical aesthetic possibilities of sticky queer visual artifacts. This video essay begins to think through how reappropriating “bad” audio-visual objects becomes a generative queering act within horror’s ugly affects. This work looks at the value of accumulating “dirty” and discarded traces, or what Sara Ahmed describes as “queer use as reuse,” as a means to “bring to the front what ordinarily recedes into the background” (2019, 198). I’m interested in exploring what happens when we start considering the discarded history of low-budget horror film culture as an “unused” or repurposed lesbian archive.

These appropriative tactics do not aim to repair textual problematics but act as a recovery/discovery process that excavates *The Oracle* as a valuable site of queer knowledge, imagining new lines of visual intimacy within the work. My intent with this work is to avoid assimilative strategies that aim to make Findlay’s work palatable. Instead, I follow my “gut” feelings toward a more contaminated understanding of “queer,” moving along troubling registers. Reworking the queer archive, especially within horror cinema, often requires venturing into the annals of “bad” media, incorporating textual poaching and affective resonances that may feel sticky, strange, and discomfiting, but no less arousing and transgressive. Refusing dominant processes of the archive, queerness often leans into erasure and dispossession, working against rigorously enforced systems toward counter-archival practices.⁵

³ Prior to *The Oracle*, Findlay was the cinematographer for *Shriek of the Mutilated* (1974) and *Snuff* (1976).

⁴ A collaborative effort between husband and wife, the film was directed by Michael, and shot by Roberta, who took on the role as cinematographer for the film, originally titled *Slaughter* (Alilunas and Strub 2023, 17).

⁵ Here, my discussion of counter archives within videographic criticism is indebted to postcolonial scholar Susan Harewood. She explains, “Where videographic essays can take a scholarly lead is in drawing on the feminist, postcolonial, critical race, and digital media scholarship that strips ‘the archive’ of any possible claims of disinterested innocence” (2020). In turning to approaches that reactivate an object’s material agency, Harewood draws attention to how tactics of reuse give space not only to alternative readings but to the formation of speculative modes of film historiography outside dominant regimes of production and reproduction. This entails redirecting a critical intention

Through a videographic study of queer “debris” in *The Oracle*, this work aims to establish a creative schema of haunting as refuse/al. In navigating audio-visual assemblage, I kept returning to what it means to archive and manipulate the “scraps” of bad media objects. As such, I’ve developed a methodology that draws on what Achille Mbembe describes as “reassembling remains” (2002, 25). This repurposing of videographic materials requires disrupting what one might consider “proper” function and in the case of film excerpts, the normative use of visual media archives. It’s a way of assembling queer film historiography otherwise. In a sense, the desecration involved in the editing process of *Lick the Blade* opens up possibilities for *more*. Repetition, erasure, and tampering with temporal cues cultivate new cinematic grammars of queerness, in which the once discarded scraps become *all* there is. It’s here that the defilement of a film makes visible and audible the queer cadences of debris in horror cinema. What emerges is a chance to explore, roam and occupy with curiosity the speculative spaces that videographic work can envision.

Further, in its theoretical aims, *Lick the Blade* draws on queer, feminist and decolonial approaches to videographic haunting within its moving body. Playing with different theories of what I’m terming “scavenge/venge,” this work encounters the notion of the return of the repressed, using it as a method of queer reuse. In this sense, “The ever threatening is always happening” (Tuck, Morrill, and Super Futures Haunt Quollective 2016, 7). The repetition techniques become a form of return, a refusal of foreclosure, an always becoming and re-becoming of the visual material.

I learned to live with the many errors I encountered with this first videographic work.⁶ Accidental erasures, overwrites, and cuts became critical aspects of my process, integrating failure into the fibre of this work. This entailed leaving imprints of “mistakes” not only on the timeline but also on the video materials. As such, the queer worldmaking of *Lick the Blade* is as much located in a poetics of awkward erasures as it is in the arguably (anti)productive impulse to imagine and archive one’s own technical failures.

By invoking “blade” in the title, this work draws attention to the tactile components of cutting into/out of visual material through editing. The

toward scholarship and academic visual modes that can help make visible particular ‘vanishings’ within “the coloniality of ‘the archive’” (Harewood, 2020).

⁶ This is an approach Findlay also notably applied to her filmmaking practice with *The Oracle*, and one she also extended to her sexploitation films, “based not ... on any awareness of what was likely to sell in the fluctuating marketplace, but rather, as an experiment in trial and error” (Johnny Walker 2023, 163).

violence of the cut never felt understated or went unnoticed as I worked with troublesome film segments that became so small they persisted like ghostly residues. I soon noticed the way materialist agency tends to leak out when we break into, slice and sever a media object into fragments, speaking to the many seepages within reworked materials. Operating on a minute scale and proximity enabled a complex relation to the uncomfortable and violent realities of horror visuals and their affective resonances. Within this intimacy lies an underlying sentiment of (queer) terror. It feels impossible not to develop strange intimacies with violent visual fragments, sounds, textures, and all of the idiosyncrasies of the small-scale materials being worked with. What can practices of intimacy do to objects that often feel prickly, opaque, violent to witness and, thus, hard to access? Upon closer observation, the collaborative nature between a media object and video essayist(s) may allow for more expansive ways of thinking through textual appropriation.

This process of reanimating discarded life and vibrancy allows a queer poetic practice to emerge within certain videographic production. Through intuitive editing methods,⁷ I began *feeling* my way through the material of the film, a method I've become keen to apply to my ongoing reappraisal of queer objects discarded within horror and queer studies. As a result, *Lick the Blade* creates new contact zones and spaces of convergence and collaboration between the visual artifacts recovered from the margins of screen space. What materialized was a playful approach that attends to the way contradiction and ambivalence are central to queer aesthetics in horror. This idea that magical life is inadvertently recovered from the discomfort of the "bad" media object became the archival drive of this essay. By decontextualizing images and sounds along queer registers of messy "gut" feelings, videographic work has the potential to transform limitations within the original body of the text, uncovering other possible worlds in the process.

⁷ I would come to realise this method most aligns with Jennifer M. Beam's "Feel First, Think Later" approach as discussed in her introduction, "Feeling Videographic Criticism" for *Feminist Media Histories* (Beam 2023).

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We're All Scrolling Through the World's Fair

Max Ranieri

Many films in recent years have employed the computer screen as a site of action. So-called “screenlife” films such as *Unfriended* (2014), *Searching* (2018), and *Host* (2020) take place entirely within the boundaries of the computer screen. Jane Schoenbrun’s 2021 film *We’re All Going to the World’s Fair* incorporates screenlife techniques alongside a conventional third-person narrative. The film follows Casey, a young person living in suburban isolation, as they create and consume horror fiction videos for the World’s Fair Challenge, a collective interactive game in which participants take the challenge and then report their “symptoms.”

As *We’re All Going to the World’s Fair* progresses, the frames around screens tighten, with the effect that the outside world drops away. What remains is the stream of content. Consecutive social media posts have physical proximity, but may be tonally, thematically, and even chronologically distant from each other. It falls on the user/viewer to decide how to make sense of the continuous series of juxtapositions that they encounter on the social feed.

For this essay, in order to engage with the act of scrolling through the social feed, I designed and developed a social media microblogging interface, which I titled “Content Trough” in reference to the fact that such feeds often encourage rapid, indiscriminate consumption. By presenting ambiguous clips from *We’re All Going to the World’s Fair* alongside materials that informed my own reading of the film, I have attempted to make my interpretive experience accessible to the viewer without explicitly stating one definitive interpretation. Accordingly, this particular feed is populated with posts that gather, at various distances, around the idea of queer and trans identity in horror media. The video is a screen recording, captured as I scrolled through the webpage. I found it curiously difficult to perform these screen gestures, uncertain of whether my engagement looked convincingly organic.

With its non-linear progression through time and affect, the social feed creates potential for queer readings. Although this mode of gathering information is not inherently queer—many social users log on to be confronted with ideas and images that are utterly “straight”—I wanted to explore whether it was possible for the social feed to promote a sideways growth of meaning. In *The Queer Child*, Kathryn Bond Stockton characterizes “growing sideways” as

“what recent cognitive science recognizes as the brain’s growth (throughout a person’s lifetime) through the brain’s capacity to make neural networks through connection and extension” (2009, 11). Although Stockton’s account of sideways growth mainly concerns the deferral of children’s queer desires, she also makes note of the pathologization of transgender children by adults who cannot or will not recognize children’s self-knowledge (2009, 7-8). Jules Gill-Peterson has extended Stockton’s analysis to address the ways that transgender children have been made “ghostly” in the medical archive (2018, 11) and “forced to find almost unintelligible, shadowy outlets” for their identities (2018, 155).

Stockton also draws a connection between growing sideways and “Jacques Derrida’s notion of delay as the inescapable effect of our reading along a chain of words (in a sentence, for example), where meaning is delayed, deferred, exactly because we read in sequence, go forward in a sentence, not yet knowing what words are ahead of us, while we must take the words we have passed with us as we go, making meaning wide and hung in suspense” (2009, 4).

The accumulation of meaning in the social feed is not necessarily building toward any particular outcome—the feed possesses no narrative throughline for the user to follow. Instead, posts pile upon each other, at once totally independent of their surrounding context and inseparable from it. One post can scarcely be interpreted before another is in view, perhaps altering the meaning of all that came before and all that will follow. Walter Benjamin deploys Georges Duhamel to describe the effect of film on audiences: “I can no longer think what I want to think. My thoughts have been replaced by moving images” (1969, 239). Often, I feel as though all my thoughts have been replaced by tweets.

It is within this context that *We’re All Going to the World’s Fair* finds Casey. Fearful of a parent or guardian that is only rarely heard and never seen onscreen, Casey retreats into the screen world of horror fiction. Casey may be read as a non-binary character—their name is gender-neutral and they do not explicitly refer to themselves using gendered language—who is unable to embody that self-knowledge in their offline life. Under this reading, the screen becomes a site wherein their gender identity finds expression, but not embodiment. In vlogs of ambiguous authenticity, they describe feeling out of place and out of control in their own body. Their only audience for these videos is JLB, a much older man who chats with Casey from what appears to be a child’s bedroom in a large suburban home. Out of sight of most adults, Casey is also growing sideways, their identity deferred (they insist that JLB “doesn’t even know [their] real

name”) until one is ascribed to them by JLB. This essay works backward from JLB’s ascription in an attempt to counter its finality.

Max Ranieri is an independent scholar and lapsed IT professional based in New York. They self-publish video essays about film, with a focus on horror, under the name max teeth. Their work has received recognition in three of *Sight and Sound’s* annual best video essay polls. They also help to coordinate The Essay Library, an online video essay collective.

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Queer + Horror

Heather O. Petrocelli and May Santiago

In the video essay *Queer+Horror*, Heather O. Petrocelli and May Santiago collaborate to bring written arguments from Petrocelli's book *Queer for Fear: Horror Film and the Queer Spectator* (2023) to visual culture. This shift from the academic written text to visual media facilitates the expansion of the book's arguments through video practice in order to show how the queer relationship to horror is ontological, visually demonstrating the queer-horror connection by creatively repurposing, reanimating, and reclaiming horror film scenes/clips in new contexts.

Queer for Fear employs original research to evidence that queer embodiment shares a haunted, uncanny, and transgressive nature with the medium of film and that queers have a distinctive connection with horror film, the queerest genre. By creating an audiovisual collage using segments from horror and/or queer films, Petrocelli and Santiago not only reinforce the *Queer for Fear* thesis, but also recontextualize the film clips into a new independent work with multilayered meaning. *Queer+Horror* plays with the recognition of filmic texts in order for the spectator simultaneously to find pleasure in recognition and to have their connective curiosity piqued.

Queerness, film, and the horror genre all share essential qualities that inextricably connect them: their uncanny, transgressive, and haunted natures that manifest in distinct ways. The connection between queer-film-horror in part stems from their survival despite ongoing societal censorship, discriminatory legislation, and familial control. Queerness is uncanny because it is a liminal state, as well as a transgressive existence and embodiment outside cisheteronormative society. Film exists as an uncanny intrusion of the past in the present, while horror's distinct uncanniness comes in part from how it specifically plays with both aesthetic and representational effect/affect. The queer-film-horror uncanny nature is further found in their shared hauntedness. Queer otherness stems in part from the queer history of invisibility and absences, whereas film operates as a ghostly manifestation of the past, and horror haunts our psyche by tapping into our deepest fears and anxieties.

Queer+Horror employs the video format to show these elements, which

are organized into three segments. Each section displays different formal elements and creative experimentation that modify existing media, all together creating a new artifact that represents the meaning of the source written text. Each segment is crafted to demonstrate the practice of editing itself as fundamentally disruptive through fragmentation and the refashioning of time and space. Three quotes from the *Queer for Fear* text anchor the sections and act as the scaffolding that supports the visual experience, allowing the spectator to make new connections and meaning from the media objects.

The first segment, “Queer,” utilizes manipulated frames and constructed shadows from queer films that feature queer hauntings—hauntings of longing and loneliness: *Rebecca* (1940), *Mulholland Drive* (2001), *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019), and *All of Us Strangers* (2023). Putting the selected queer films and haunted characters in relation to one another transgresses the temporal bounds of the original texts, forming an uncanny disruption and queering of linear time.

In “Film,” the second segment, the themes of the haunted queer and queer haunting are expanded to speak directly to the queer, haunted, uncanny, and transgressive nature of film itself by using techniques such as layering, echoes, and the disruption of linear time. Film functions as not only a graveyard of the past, but also a queered intrusion of the past into the present, so each layer of media used is, in and of itself, an intrusion of the past into the present. This segment highlights the layering of temporalities by featuring Cary Grant, a posthumously outed queer man, from *Arsenic and Old Lace* (1944) and overlaying and fusing him into multiple films: one of the first ghost films *The House of the Devil* (1896); an experimental dyke documentary *Nitrate Kisses* (1992); and the David Lynch short film—shot with the Lumière brothers’ cinématographe—*Premonition Following An Evil Deed* (1995). This layering highlights film’s ability to disrupt linear time and digitally puts different media in relation to one another as a deliberate act of burning disconnected forms of queerness into each other.

The final section, “Horror,” is a montage crafted through match cuts and mash-ups to put transgressive queer cinema into dialogue with both queer horror films and banned horror films (including “video nasties” that were successfully prosecuted under the UK’s Obscene Publications Act). This segment uncannily suspends fractions of controversial films in time in order to emphasize an important connection between queer embodiment and horror film: both queer people and horror films have and continue to be haunted by personal, professional, and political discrimination and violence for their transgressions on normative society.

We celebrate film's potential as a transgressive tool and a political force—particularly for marginalized communities. *Queer+Horror* focuses on and articulates aspects of queer culture by remixing, layering, and disrupting extant media objects with the specific goal of leaving the spectator with an uncanny and haunted feeling.

Heather O. Petrocelli, PhD is a multidisciplinary independent scholar who works across film studies, queer theory, and public history, conducting research that engages with and renders visible queer stories and experiences. This academic foundation has combined with a life-long horror obsession and decades of experience making, studying, programming, and marketing film. This all informs Petrocelli's book *Queer for Fear: Horror Film and the Queer Spectator* and now the road show *Queer for Fear Live!* that they co-host in cities around the world with legendary drag icon Peaches Christ.

May Santiago is a cultural studies scholar and essay filmmaker. She is a PhD candidate in the Cultural Studies program at George Mason University. Her work focuses on Puerto Rican cinema, particularly at the intersection of horror, queer, and feminist studies. She is also a filmmaker who has had films screened at Final Girls Berlin Film Festival, Ax Wound Film Festival, Panama Horror Film Festival, and Wench Film Festival. She was named one of the rising voices within video essayists in *Sight and Sound* in 2023 and 2024.

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“Inside(s) Out: The Uses of Monstrosity”

Ada Rosen

There was a shelf in my college’s library, tucked away on the very bottom floor, that housed twenty to twenty-five titles grouped together under the topic “transgender.” In contrast to the theoretical and scholarly books on every other shelf, these “transgender” texts turned out to be nothing more than didactic guidebooks for the tolerant cissexual.

Here’s the essential vocabulary you need to be a good ally! Don’t forget to put your pronouns in your email signature!

Susan Stryker claims that “transgender studies’ most critical task” is to “disrupt ... denaturalize ... rearticulate ... and make visible the normative linkages we generally assume to exist between [gender and] the biological specificity of the sexually differentiated human body” (Stryker 2006, 3). What I found in these texts was an attempt to *renaturalize* rather than denaturalize—to write trans bodies into the normative structuring of sex and gender. Even at their best, these books aspire only to evoke sympathy through the deployment of the “wrong body” trope that has already been so thoroughly critiqued by theorists such as Gayle Salamon, Sandy Stone, and Judith Butler, to name a few.

As what Jeffrey Jerome Cohen terms a “harbinger of category crisis” (1996, 6), the transgender body becomes a monstrous body, a threat to be dealt with immediately. In attempting to render transness non-threatening, the books I found at the library are but a part of a much larger project. As I argue in my piece, transgender representation in the American mainstream functions as a form of threat negation, operating through either abjection or absorption. Looking broadly at the scope of said representation, one might be inclined to think that things have changed for the better—that the popular shift from abjection to absorption must signal a similar shift in attitude, from disgust to acceptance. To this point I have several things to say: first, to believe that progress is linear—that all things get better with time—is to ignore the continued and heightened violence, both physical and legislative, faced by trans people every day. Second, to desire acceptance into the current social order is to strip transsexuality of its transformative potential, for it is through exclusion

that the outcast is given a different perspective. Sara Ahmed writes of not being accommodated as the experience of being hammered, of having one's existence chipped away at. Those who experience hammering, she tells us, are given a hammer of their own with which they can begin to demolish the very structures they find themselves excluded from.

Attending now more directly to the intersection(s) of monstrosity and queerness—the monster is similarly constructed through exclusion. As Jack Halberstam writes, “monsters are defined both as other than the imagined community and as the being that cannot be imagined as community” (Halberstam 1995, 2). Monsters have long served as a way of “policing” the border between the known and the unknown (Cohen 1996, 12), the acceptable and the unacceptable. Etymologically, the English *monster* is thought to be descended from the Latin *monstrare*—to demonstrate—and *monere*—to warn. There is thus a pedagogy of monstrosity; the monster is that which demonstrates wrongness, impressing upon us an understanding of the human subject and its limits. The title of my project, *Inside(s) Out*, is a reference to the binary opposition of insides and outsides, external and internal, upon which the signification of both horror and gender often rely.

The closing section of my video functions as a love letter to some of the films that have inspired me in my own bodily revolts. Although my decision to close with a montage is rather non-traditional within the practice of videographic criticism, I was attempting to heed Sandy Stone's (2022) words and find a new position from which discourse is possible. If we want to enact change beyond the individual we must reject what Stone calls the “Derridean imperative” that reads: “Genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix genres” (quoted in Stone 2022, 16). The monstrous embodiments found in works of body horror serve as my primary object of fascination due to their slippery and hybrid nature(s), neither cleanly human nor monster. “Am I becoming a 185-pound fly?” a mutating Seth Brundle asks in David Cronenberg's *The Fly* (1986). “No. I'm becoming something that never existed before. I'm becoming Brundlefly.” A mixing of genres, a commitment to dissonance and illegibility, to becoming something new—that is what inspires me.

Ada Rosen is a media scholar and video essayist based in Los Angeles, California. Their research interests include queer provocations, feminist deconstruction, exploitation filmmaking, and CA State Route 110. Their recent work on gender deviance and monstrosity was awarded the Kinder Prize for Innovation and Excellence in Critical Media. Ada received their bachelor's degree in Media Arts & Culture from Occidental College in Los Angeles.

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‘Every creak, every groan, every tap in the wall, you’ll think of me’

Spinning the Web of Trans*-Horror-Metaphors in *Cobweb* (2023)

Darren Elliott-Smith

As the Queer Horror Film and TV sub-genre matures, its focus is turning to sub-cultural fears and anxieties within LGBTQIA+ communities. In this context, the hope that a more enlightened approach to queer fears might be more inclusive in their representations and metaphors also grows. In my previous works *New Queer Horror Film and TV* (2020) and *Queer Horror Film and Television: Masculinity and Sexuality at the Margins* (2016), I have argued that, in recent years, the sub-genre has shifted “out of the shadows” of furtive symbolism whereby, as Harry Benshoff puts it “the monster is to ‘normality’ as homosexuality is to heterosexuality” (1997, 2). It has now matured into an art form that allows for informed cultural critique and devoted identification with Otherness for some that can be emancipatory. However, Queer Horror’s emergence from its history of mixed and problematic representations from the past is still in its infancy.

In Harry Benshoff’s *Monsters in the Closet* (1995), Susan Stryker’s work—specifically “Transgender Studies: Queer Theory’s Evil Twin” (2004)—and my own extension of the study of contemporary Queer Horror, we argue that that this identification provides a source of joyful self-recognition. At the same time, however, this affinity with the monstrous is not always entirely pleasurable and can be a complex negotiation with pride and shameful elements that the monstrous metaphor is then re-appropriated to represent. Even when studying contemporary Queer Horror that may well appear to be crafted by LGBTQIA+ creatives and allies, we should be mindful of Benshoff’s caution to be wary of the continued *monsterisation* of homosexuality (and I would add by extension LGBTQIA+ subjectivities), as it runs the risk of further Othering and pathologising difference.

Queer Horror creators are in the process of negotiating historically toxic tropes from horror film and television and finding ways to mitigate negative associations, thus reclaiming horror for queer stories, lives, and spectators. I want to suggest that it is also time for queer and horror theorists to do the same in negotiating with, re-reading, rejecting, and reinterpreting old cis-normative and binary theories around gender and sexuality in order to see ourselves in the texts we study and in the theories we use to analyse and interpret those texts. The way forward can be seen in some trailblazing academic work.

At the 2019 gathering of 3,500 psychoanalysts at their annual conference at the Ecole de la Cause Freudienne in Paris, the academic and author Paul B. Preciado (a trans man) delivered the paper, “Can the Monster Speak?,” which offered a startling rebuke to the profession that had previously understood him to be “a mentally ill person” suffering from gender dysphoria. Preciado’s work (published in 2020) demanded changes in the psychoanalytical establishment, challenging it to affect a paradigm shift that would allow marginalised voices (like his own) to be part of the academic discourse. He argues for the discipline to break its complicity with the cisheteronormative colonial ideology of sex, gender, and sexual difference, stating:

And so it is from the position assigned to me by you as a mentally ill person that I address you, an ape-human in a new era. I am the monster who speaks to you ...

As a trans body, as a non-binary body, whose right to speak as an expert about my condition or to produce discourse or any form of knowledge about myself is not recognised by the medicinal profession, the law, psychoanalysis or psychiatry. I have done as Red Peter did. I have learned the language of Freud and Lacan, the language of the colonial patriarchy, your language, and I am here to address you. (2020, 19)

So, following Preciado’s call to arms, the challenge is this: we have an obligation as LGBTQIA+ fans, creators, and researchers of horror to learn the language of the genre, psychoanalysis, and cultural theory that once oppressed and stigmatised us. We need to reinterpret it, re-express it and re-present it; doing so allows queer filmmakers, fans, and theorists to take up that mode of address and offer critiques of our own subcultures, and of those that still oppress us.

However, as with Queer Theory’s frequent failure to speak about and for trans* subjectivities,¹ the horror genre can also fall foul of problematic attempts to symbolise LGBTQIA+ experiences as horrific when universally folding all subjective experiences into an amorphous Queer Horror umbrella.

The recent release *Cobweb* (Samuel Bodin, 2023) arguably does exactly this. Bodin’s film is a competently directed hidden monster/haunted house fusion that is academically literate in its approach to Horror/Gothic allegories. However, despite its attempts at symbolically materialising the trauma and anguish of the oppressed young trans* body—via its central protagonist Peter (Woody Norman)—its frequently on-the-nose metaphors

¹ See Stryker’s aforementioned article (2004).

of gendered-doubling run the risk of offering up a paint-by-numbers approach to LGBTQ-adjacent Horror that fails to capture the nuances of queer and trans* existence. The androgynously presented Peter is bullied at school and is prevented by his seemingly over-protective (yet oppressive) parents from taking part in trick-or-treating at Halloween due to their fears of abduction, as the town is haunted by the real-life instance of the disappearance of a young girl several years earlier. Peter begins to be woken at night by a knocking and later the “voice” of a young girl named Sarah (Debra Wilson) from behind his bedroom wall asking for help. She reveals that she has been held captive in the walls of the house by his parents and is his twin sister whom his parents locked away after deciding they didn’t want her anymore. She convinces Peter that the same fate may well fall on him if he doesn’t help her escape her immurement.

Interpreting *Cobweb* from a trans or queer perspective might well open-up the repression of Peter’s “sister” as an enforced oppression of Peter’s true femininity, which in its enforced entombment has become monstrous because of those same heteronormative, patriarchal forces and, having been released, this repressed monstrous-feminine form then returns to effect revenge upon those same structures. Sarah operates as a floating queer/trans signifier in the text, and the spectator is never quite in full belief of her status as “simply” Peter’s sister. She may well be, but she also represents Peter’s repressed passivity (deemed feminine by cis-hetero-patriarchal culture) and the “lost” girl who went missing on Halloween (who may or may not have been murdered by the parents or Sarah herself). More abstractly, Sarah could well be seen to represent what Jack Halberstam (2005) suggests is a kind of living death that trans* subjects experience, a feeling of being alive but still associated with death (dead names). The trans* body for Halberstam in its unfinished, fragmented, “wild” and “unnamable” (Halberstam 2020, 23) form is a reminder that all human subjectivity is in a state of becoming.

Peter (a fitting in-joke perhaps as to this binary biological genital indicator, but also a reference to the central antagonist Peter/Angela from the historically traumatic trans-horror film *Sleepaway Camp* [1983]) decides to team up with Sarah to escape his parents’ essentialist grip—freeing her by accessing a tiny door to her domain hidden behind a fittingly “chrononormative” (Freeman 2011, 3) Grandfather Clock. It is later revealed that Sarah was locked away due her non-normative “monstrous” bodily appearance, deformed at birth. She emerges out of the feral darkness in which she had been forced to dwell, in the form of a murderous, twisted human with arachnoid attributes, then turns on Peter, jealous of his life in the light.

This video essay attempts to reveal the problematic thin line that Queer Horror films often tread when deploying metaphor and allegory to represent LGBTQ+ anxieties/fears and trading in sometimes harmful and/or stale tropes that offer confused conclusions to their narratives. Utilising a recurring visual motif of shattering, more specifically imagery and sounds of fragile glass panes breaking or fragmenting, I draw attention to the hackneyed pattern of splitting when representing binarized gender and sexuality. To work the concept further, the video essay offers a multiplicity of possibilities that shatter the gender binary and break out-of-date metaphors. Peter's bedroom wall, at one point, acts as a cinema screen projecting out some key regressive and progressive examples of horror film past and present that deal with trans and queer bodies in the genre, ranging from the problematic, *Psycho* (1960) and *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), to the more affirmative *T-Blockers* (2023), to the slippery and suggestive *Let the Right One In* (2009), and finally to the hauntingly toxic *Sleepaway Camp* (1983).

Using Stryker's concept of the "Evil Twin," I hope this video essay suggests that *Cobweb* walks a thin (webbed) line of open symbolism and allegory that allows for some positive identifications with the position of an oppressed child/children who doesn't "fit in" to societal demands (of body, of gender, and perhaps of sexuality), resisting harmful parental structures. The embrace of monstrosity and Otherness often thrust on the "different" being can be revelled in via the emergence of Sarah as a vengeful, non-normative subject and her often comic destruction of the domestic space and its toxic masculine invaders. However, the web of metaphors of queerness and transness begin to fall apart upon further inspection, revealing a collapse into problematic, monstrous femininity that must be imprisoned to allow for a normative conclusion to the narrative and for Peter to emerge into the symbolic as a "securely" and "traditionally" gendered child. This video essay argues via *Cobweb* that producers and creators of horror films that flirt with LGBTQ+ allegories and counter-readings need to be more aware of the Othered voices that are present and precisely who it is that speaks through the symbolism of the genre.

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Margins (2016) and co-editor of *New Queer Horror Film and Television* (2020). His research to date is centrally focused on representations of queerness, gender, sexuality and psychoanalysis in horror film and television. It does however extend to the role of curation theory in film and visual art programming, the study of cult, trash, and experimental film, adaptation from page to screen, film and gender, queer theory, and is also put into practice via several academic videographic film projects and video essays.

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Decentring monstrosity in *The Children's Hour* (1961)

Julia Erhart and Susan Bruce

In 2002 Lisa Duggan identified what she called the “new homonormativity”: the appropriation of a “sexual politics of neoliberalism” to promote a version of gayness which is aligned with class, racial, and cultural norms and which supports, rather than counters, heteronormativity. Twenty-two years later, while some LGBTQ+ identified individuals have achieved mainstream status, others have experienced new heights of othering and demonisation. In Australia, where the authors of this video essay are based, this is seen especially within faith-based schools, which are still allowed to discriminate against queer-identified students and teachers, and in public libraries, where books depicting same-sex parents have been banned in the state of New South Wales. For LGBTQ+ people living and working in these sectors and trans people especially, anti-queer and -trans moral panics are alive and thriving, with queer bodies in the crosshairs.

This video essay aims to bring these issues to the fore by creatively re-engaging with a queer film text and its ephemera which appeared in an earlier perilous moment: *The Children's Hour*, the first commercial American movie to feature a lesbian character in a leading role. Released in 1961, the film was adapted from a play by Lillian Hellman and appeared at the end of a period of brutal anti-gay persecution in the US, known as the Lavender Scare; this period saw the mass dismissal of thousands of employees from the US federal workforce on account of their sexuality. Accusations of “perversion” and “monstrosity” were at the core of many of these dismissals, and it's these themes and their activation within and around the historical text, which we wanted to explore.

Our video essay engages centrally with a single source text and its ephemera: *The Children's Hour* is about two schoolteachers who are expelled from the community following an accusation that they have been lovers. The architect of the accusation is pupil Mary Tilford (played by Karen Balkin), who ventriloquises community sentiment about what women are permitted to feel and when their behaviour should be deemed aberrant (or, to use the film's language, “unnatural”). Scripted by the anti-McCarthyist Hellman, *The Children's Hour* immerses us in a world where the accusations of perversion are physically palpable. The film exemplifies in minute auditory and visual

detail how the women are harassed, tormented, and stalked by a coterie of “concerned citizens.”

Although *The Children’s Hour* was marketed as a realist drama and the publicity department avoided linking “lesbian” with “monstrosity” (Erhart 2024), these associations permeate paratextual and publicity materials, including mainstream critical reviews and hate mail received by the film’s director (where one viewer went so far as to accuse him of depicting cannibalism), as well as the film’s musical score by Alex North, who was (like Hellman) a pro-communist sympathiser with a strong interest in social justice and had an eclectic political and artistic CV. The musical score North scripted includes eerie, discordant musical motifs which are arrhythmic, slow, minimalist, and meandering. The eerie music is heard at several key points in the movie, associated, in nearly all instances, with moments of lesbo-phobic hate (when the women are being gossiped about) and moral panic. What are we meant to be horrified by here? The characters associated with the eerie score are not the film’s lesbian/s, but rather the “concerned citizens” who turn on the two women. The effect of North’s innovative scoring is to turn the conventional alignment of queerness and monstrosity upside down and on its head, to demonstrate that it’s not the lesbians who are monsters, but rather the society in which they live.

Working creatively with the score by North, ephemera from the William Wyler Archive (at the University of California, Los Angeles), the movie’s image track, and key lines of dialogue voiced by Balkin, the video essay gives new shape to the materiality and emotional impact of affective moral panic, as something that turns, not on a single argumentative point, but on the mass accrual of discourse. Through repetition, stretching, colorising, slowing, and other gestures and processes, the sounds and images of this original panic are highlighted, intensified, made blatant, and (we hope) decentred. Through the creative re-working of these components, it is hoped that the video essay provides opportunity to gain insight into the histories and experiences of lesbians from prior periods and perhaps to link their experiences with present day struggles.

In terms of the video essay creation process: the video essay was created as a collaboration between Julia and Susan. Julia identifies as a scholar of LGBTQ+ media and wanted to explore and build on ephemera (including hate mail) she encountered while creating research for her book on *The Children’s Hour* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, Queer Film Classics series, 2024). Susan identifies as a video artist and has a history of work with queer-themed and found images and was drawn to the idea of manipulating a commercial film text with lesbian content. The video essay, with concepts and raw materials provided by Julia and edited by Susan, was created through a back-and-forth process, using components of the movie’s

image and soundtracks and two letters in the William Wyler archive, voiced aloud by professional actors, Tamara Lee and Tiffany Lyndall-Knight. With the exception of the quotes, the video essay's image track derives completely from the image track of the 1961 film, re-edited, slowed, and coloured. The sound scape is a blend of *The Children's Hour* soundtrack and found sound, blended, stretched, distorted, and amplified.

Julia Erhart is a feminist film scholar and Associate Professor at Flinders University who researches in the areas of women's media authorship, LGBTQ+ representation, and gender equity and the Australian screen industry. Her books *Gendering History on Screen: women filmmakers and historical films* (2018) and *Gillian Armstrong: popular, sensual & ethical cinema* (2020) examine women's media authorship in film genres that include biopics, period films, and documentaries. Her newest book, *The Children's Hour* (Queer Film Classics, McGill-Queen's UP 2024) explores the production and reception circumstances surrounding the first commercial American film to feature a lesbian character in a leading role.

Susan Bruce is an award-winning multi-disciplinary moving image and collage artist whose work has been exhibited in Australia, Indonesia, India, Europe, and the United States. She is the recipient of the South Australia Screen Awards, Best Experimental and Best Animated film categories (Finalist, 2024); the Advertiser Contemporary Art Award, Sala Festival (Winner, 2023); the Pigeon D'Or Award, Luis Bunuel Memorial, Kolkata, India (2023); *Tracing the Anthropocene*, a partnership between Guildhouse and the SA Museum (2020); and the Heysen Prize for landscape (Finalist, 2018).

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(dis)Orientating horror: feeling queerly

Lucy Fife Donaldson

Rather than offering a queer reading of a film text or texts, this audiovisual essay explores the videographic form as a queer methodology. It takes up Sara Ahmed's spatial understanding of queerness from her book, *Queer Phenomenology*, which draws a parallel between considerations of sexual and spatial orientations and questions of how we reside, inhabit and move through them. Prompted by Ahmed's desire to "re-animate[s] the very concept of space" (2006, 12), the audiovisual essay is inspired by the ways in which she articulates manifestations of queer inhabitation, using, stretching, and ultimately disrupting the spatial affordances of visual and sonic composition to embody "queer orientation ... as not following the straight line" (2006, 70).

The idea for this audiovisual essay emerged originally from a disorienting moment in *Midsommar* (Ari Aster, 2019). As the central characters are travelling to join the midsummer celebrations of an insular folk community in Sweden—the Hårga, who reside in Hälsingland—the camera following their car moves above and over the vehicle. As the camera gets past the bonnet, it slowly rotates 180 degrees so that the car appears to be driving upside down. This movement is captured in a fluid long take (presumably using a drone) which continues until they reach Hälsingland, where the camera rotates again, spinning round and up into the sky before turning down and back to the upright orientation to which we are accustomed. Within the narrative of the film, this inversion is a fitting expression of the characters' entrance to a world which operates differently to their own, ultimately to horrific extents. It is also fitting that this diegetic disturbance is communicated in a manner that aims to disrupt its audience tangibly, making us aware on a corporeal level that the characters are entering a dangerous space. Watching this at the cinema on the film's original release made my stomach flip and my body want to sink further into the seat while I attempted to ground myself in an effort to counteract the film's disruption of gravity. It also made me think of Jennifer M. Barker's proposal that we can consider film as embodied, possessing skin, musculature, and viscera. Barker, like Ahmed, is engaged with the question of orientations, and the ways we might share embodied spatial understandings with those of the film, through the camera's movement and negotiation of space: "A film expresses itself to the world through muscular gestures ... The film might beckon or embrace us, keep us at a distance, or push us away" (2009, 78-79). I

understood the sensations produced by *Midsommar* in this moment as a gesture that emphatically overturned any possibility that I might feel safe or comfortable, that its mode of orientation profoundly unsettled my own.

From my fascination with this moment came a recognition that it offered a way into thinking through horror's practices of disorientation. At first this formed around how camera movement is employed frequently to disorient, from other instances of camera rotation / inversion (for example, *Evil Dead* [Fede Álvarez, 2013] and *Night Swim* [Bryce McGuire, 2024]) to the unstable shakiness of handheld camerawork associated with the found footage subgenre, from *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick & Eduardo Sánchez, 1999) to *Host* (Rob Savage, 2020), or the panicked movement and editing which depicts the flight of women from their monstrous pursuers, from *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974) to *La Casa Muda* (Gustavo Hernández, 2010). Connecting Ahmed and Barker, such instances suggested the horror film body's own rejection of straightness (as expressed through uprightness and linearity) and a potential queer delight in disturbance.¹

It also speaks to other generic patterns concerned with space, which might be reconsidered through the prism of orientation. The frequency with which characters in horror films drive into remote sites, especially woods, forms the generic equivalent of a line or path: "A path is made by the repetition of the event of the ground 'being trodden' on" (Ahmed 2006, 16). Regarding this through the idea of orientation as both spatial and sexual, we might ask Ahmed's question 'what does it mean to think of "being orientated?"' (2006, 69) to the horror genre itself. How does forming and following this generic path shape the genre's orientation? Ahmed describes compulsory heterosexuality as a kind of repetitive strain injury (RSI): "Spaces and bodies become straight as an effect of repetition. That is, the repetition of actions, which tends toward some objects, shapes the 'surface' of spaces. Spaces become straight, which allow straight bodies to extend into them, such that the vertical axis appears in line with the axis of the body" (2006, 91). Breaking this generic RSI then became the purpose of my queer videographic method.

Once I started working with *Midsommar* on the timeline I found myself experimenting with editing techniques—multiscreen, image flipping and mirroring, repetition, looping, reversing direction—which allowed me to elaborate on the disorientation already present in the film. The simple action the moment depicts—a group driving into a remote place which

¹ Although he does not express it in relation to queerness exactly, this connects to Robin Wood's observation that horror is an outlet for our nightmare wish to destroy normality. See "The American Nightmare: Horror in the 70s" in *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan ... and Beyond* (2003, 63-84).

triggers horrific events—reminded me of other similar sequences, starting with the opening of *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980), where the Torrance family drive into the Colorado mountains accompanied by Wendy Carlos' synth reinterpretation of the "Dies Irae" of Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*,² and then onto *The Descent* (Neil Marshall, 2005) and *Jeepers Creepers* (Victor Salva, 2001).³ These formal experiments were channelled through the work of Ahmed and Barker to consider the audiovisual essay, like its maker and the films from which it is made, as an embodied form, one that uses gestures to express its arguments. I found videographic ways to build on the queer implications of resisting the straight line and its normativity: "queer desire becomes a form of 'derailment,' of making the wrong turn" (Ahmed, 2006, 76); "[q]ueer is, after all, a spatial term ... a term for a twisted sexuality" (2006, 67). Accumulating these twists and turns results in folding the audiovisual body in on itself, images and sounds touching and mingling to recall Ahmed's observation about the queerness of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology where exterior becomes interior and vice versa, where "what touches is touched" (106). If queer orientations overcome the "differentiation between those who can and cannot be reached" (107), then the videographic aims to expand this merging and reaching further, to accept Ahmed's invitation to "not aim to overcome the disorientation of the queer moment, but instead inhabit its intensity" (107). Embracing the intensity through an increasing abstraction of image and sound is finally a gesture of hopefulness; just as the videographic can reconstitute its components to form new audiovisual patterns and regimes, queerness provides a reorientation of the world if we are prepared to experience it as such:

The point is not whether we experience disorientation ... but how such experiences can impact on the orientation of bodies and spaces, which is after all about how the things are "directed" and how they are shaped by the lines that follow. The point is what we do with such moments of disorientation, as well as what such moments can do - whether they can offer us the hope of new directions, and whether new directions are reason enough for hope. (Ahmed 2006, 158)

² My thanks to Evelyn Kreutzer who pointed out to me the significance of the "Dies Irae" a melody which, as central part of a requiem mass, embodies death, and that Carlos' own reinterpretation of this very traditional form might be considered a queering in itself.

³ Other potential examples include: *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (and its sequels/remakes), *Last House on the Left* (Wes Craven, 1972), *The Hills Have Eyes* (Wes Craven, 1977), *The Howling* (Joe Dante, 1981), *The Evil Dead* (Sam Raimi, 1981) (and its sequels/remakes), *Friday the 13th* (Sean Cunningham, 1982) (and its sequels/remakes), *The Blair Witch Project*, *Dog Soldiers* (Neil Marshall, 2002), *Cabin Fever* (Eli Roth, 2002), *Dead End* (Jean-Baptiste and Fabrice Canepa, 2003), *The Cabin in the Woods* (Josh Wheedon, 2011), *Significant Other* (Dan Berk and Robert Olsen, 2022), and many more. Thanks to Alison Peirse for her help with suggesting titles.

I follow the lines provided by previous scholars in connecting Ahmed and Barker, especially the brilliant work of Katharina Lindner, whose book, *Film Bodies: Queer Feminist Encounters with Gender and Sexuality* (2017), offers an inspirational model of how to attend to the spatiality of gender and sexuality in film. Just as this audiovisual essay nods to Ahmed's repeated returns to the table (whether desk or kitchen table) as a primary orientating object, especially through its role in "establish[ing] lines of connection between those who gather, while the table itself 'supports' the act of passing things around" (80). Lindner is one of the scholars, along with Ahmed, Barker, José Esteban Muñoz, and Dayna McLeod, whose ideas and inspiration are passed around the table on which I work.

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I Can Hear Someone Coming

Alison Peirse

“I Can Hear Someone Coming” is a celebration of queer women and the joy of queer desire. The material for this work comes from the 1930s, a period of film history that I haven’t explored since my first book, *After Dracula: The 1930s Horror Film*, was published over a decade ago. Ellie Slee notes that lesbianism is “inherent in much of 1930s horror but never mentioned” (2014, 42), and as such, finding a queer woman character generally requires a viewer willing to read for what Patricia White describes as “queer resonances” (1999, 226). We can choose to read queer in Luna’s movement towards Irene in *Mark of the Vampire* (1935), fading to a swooning black; or we can pick and choose from a multiplicity of moments in the films of openly gay director James Whale: the Bride’s screaming rejection of the Monster in *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), the “theatrical mocking of the heteronormative family unit” in *The Old Dark House* (1932) (Miller 2024, 1). In fact, only *Dracula’s Daughter* (1936) has a female character whose lust for women forms an integral and unambiguous aspect of the plot (in *Mark of the Vampire*, Luna’s craving is revealed as a feint).

Even in *Dracula’s Daughter*, Countess Mary Zaleska’s yearnings are not presented positively. In her analysis of the film, Rhona J. Berenstein reveals that the Production Code Administration rejected the plan for Zaleska’s intended victim Lily to “pose in the nude”; only her “neck and shoulders” can be seen and “there will be no suggestion that she undresses . . . the whole sequence will be treated in such a way to avoid any suggestion of perverse sexual desire” (1996, 26). Furthermore, Zaleska is tormented by her predilections; Harry M. Benshoff describes her as “rather weak-willed” and notes that she aches to be “cured” of such longings (1997, 81). My video essay acknowledges the queer traces in 1930s horror film history, but then asks, what if *all* the women in 1930s horror films were *actually* queer? And then—most importantly—what if they really knew how to enjoy themselves?

To create this alternative world, I have chosen to (mostly) ignore reappropriating film visuals and to focus, instead, on sound. Here I’m following Lola Olufemi’s idea that “the image is a dead-end because it implies an archive: a point of entry, a site that enables us to access the story of *how the image came to be*, a record of conditions” (2021, 18). To make this video essay, I have extracted individual words, sentences, and evocative utterances voiced by women across nineteen 1930s horror films from China, Japan, mainland Europe, Mexico, the United Kingdom, and the United

States. Without the constraint of the explanatory image, the audio becomes entirely more flexible and supple. It is clear now that when “between the lines” *are* the lines, all the women are queer, and they all want to have fun.

The resultant video essay is an auditory intervention into queer representation in horror cinema. It creates an archive of speech acts uttered by women in a wide variety of non-sexual scenarios and reconfigures them to be about women, women’s bodies, women’s needs, and in response to women’s voices. This speaks to Teresa de Lauretis’ understanding that texts can be queer when they not only work “against narrativity, the generic pressure of all narrative toward closure and the fulfillment of meaning”, but also when they pointedly disrupt “the referentiality of language and the referentiality of images” (2011, 244). Such a disruption is also a feminist act. Continuing my feminist praxis (see Peirse 2022, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c), when I cite films in my audiovisual and written work, I do not default to including the director’s surname, given that this is a prestigious role that has historically been dominated by men. Instead, at the end of my work, I create a filmography and cite the woman in the most senior production role on the film. In this way, my conceptual and citational practices speak to Sara Ahmed’s principle of queer use as reuse—that is, “how things can be used in ways other than for which they were intended or by those other than for whom they were intended” (2019, 199). Ahmed further suggests that with queer use, one can “linger on the material qualities of that which you are supposed to pass over; it is to recover a potential from materials that have been left behind” (2019, 208).

In this audio remix, I am asking you to encounter a new, sonic index of queer women’s lust, sourced from a plethora of cinematic moments with the potential for desire. “I Can Hear Someone Coming” is thus attendant to the videographic possibilities for remaking film histories through a queer feminist lens, a remaking that lingers in imagined pleasures.

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