



BOOK REVIEW

Queer for Fear: Horror Film and the Queer Spectator

By Heather O. Petrocelli
University of Wales Press
2023

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The horror genre is having a queer moment. The pages of *It Came from the Closet* (2022) offer queer takes on horror classics—a theme explored in Shudder’s four-part documentary series that debuted in time for Halloween 2022.

Heather O. Petrocelli traces the relationship between film, horror and queer viewers in *Queer for Fear: Horror Film and the Queer Spectator* (the book shares its title with the Shudder series, although the research was completed in 2019). This exhaustive study—the first of its kind—into what makes queer horror fans tick combines the results of a 60+ question survey given to over 4,000 queer horror viewers with 40 more in-depth interviews. Petrocelli helmed the effort because “engaging queer horror spectators directly is imperative to understanding the importance of the horror genre to queer people and, in turn, to foregrounding queer voices in academic critique of the genre” (2).

Petrocelli places her own queer identity (and her love of horror) front and centre, framing the study as queer in both subject and methodology. She argues that being queer shapes queer spectators’ attraction to the genre as well as their perspective. The first chapter lays out the connections:

Indeed, both queer people and horror films are “punished” for their non-normative transgressions. Queers suffer personal abuses, institutional discrimination and anti-queer legislation, among other societal aggressions. Similarly, horror films are not only censored and banned at familial/community and national levels, but also considered by film scholars and critics to form a lowly genre. (10)

The book goes beyond this shared outsider status to consider how “insidious trauma” (per Laura Westengard, 2019) very specifically shapes queer viewers’ tastes and relationship to horror. Taking Harry M. Benshoff’s argument that the queer(ed) monster stands as a challenge to heteronormativity Petrocelli underscores how respondents’ own experiences often align them with the monsters on the screen (26). As per one of the many quotes scattered through the book: “When what is threatened is a sort of heteronormative way of life or society, I’ll tend to side with the monster” (34). While familiar with the ways in which Freud’s theories have shaped horror theory, Petrocelli opts to consider horror more via the embodied than the unconscious, focusing on respondents’ experience as audiences and their reactions to a range of horror films.

The second chapter focuses on common points amongst respondents. It explores the respondents’ gender, sexual identity, and tastes in relation to horror films, arguing that being queer specifically shapes queer audiences’ reading of the genre. “[T]his study privileges the collective community of queer horror spectators over the individual queer horror fan” (6). Petrocelli buries the assumption—laid out by Carol J. Clover and Linda Williams among others—that teen boys are the primary audience for horror films. Building on a similar audience study, Petrocelli carves out a space that is different from Brigid Cherry’s late 1990s study of women horror fans and from queer theorists Benshoff and Darren Elliott-Smith who focus on a presumed male viewer. These interviews include a range of non-binary, trans, genderqueer, and agender horror lovers. This heterogeneity is harder to uphold when considering that while respondents claimed a range of racial and ethnic identities, they made up fewer than 15% of those surveyed. Given many queer horror lovers acknowledge the homophobia they may encounter among straight fans, surely race and ethnicity also offer a particular experience within fandom “indisputably, the queer community is certainly not devoid of racism, misogyny, classism and ableism, with race particularly informing intersectional perspectives and experiences. In other words, queer BIPOC horror fans are subject to society’s, and certainly fandom’s, white supremacist structures” (9).

Petrocelli has been counting down the 1,487 films named by respondents on a Queer for Fear Instagram account, discussing the wide range of favourites in the context of her research. She launched a countdown of the top 31 films mentioned through the month of October. Looking over the list, there is little to suggest that this is a “queer” selection—The *Halloween*, *Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Scream*, and *Friday the 13th* franchises are all featured, along with more recent films such as *Hereditary* (2018), *The VVitch* (2015), and *Get Out* (2017). Even divisive films that reinforce the ‘murderous-man-in-a-dress’ trope such as

Psycho (1960) and *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) make the list. It is Petrocelli's use of her research findings that contextualizes the list. For example, three out of four respondents mentioned that the presence of strong women influenced their appreciation of horror films. "The fact that horror is the only genre in which women are seen on screen more than men is, arguably, a concomitant reason why queer women love horror" (79). Respondents, regardless of gender identity, celebrated the strongest of strong women, the final girl "...who may be victim and monster but also neither" (76). Petrocelli adds that "Queers relate more to the act of survival than the passivity of victimisation" (76).

Survival shapes the two themes Petrocelli explores in depth in Chapter Three of the book. The first is trauma, often considered the therapeutic reason that horror fans are drawn to the stylized, distanced violence on the screen. Petrocelli's second theme, camp, is presented as the queer antidote to this trauma. "The queer community forges a camp relationship to culture and its artefacts as a survival tactic from the constant experience of queer trauma" (41). Ultimately, these disparate concepts mirror each other. The book's final chapter explores the construction of community solidarity through an investigation of cinema live events in which horror films are presented by drag performers for a default queer audience. It explores how these events make explicit the particular relationship queer audiences share with horror, by creating a space for that relationship to be celebrated.

Overall, there is a lot to dig into in this study, much of which couldn't fit in the book, leaving readers to wonder what else was left out. I was seduced by Petrocelli's chatty Instagram takes on the research, which fill in some of those blanks. Unfortunately, the book itself takes a more formal tone and I missed her asides. Petrocelli's insistence on the queerness of horror and the common experiences of horror fans may sometimes flatten and homogenize her analysis of the material. It is difficult to negotiate presenting a particular, shared identity in such a work, without erasing the impact of difference and diversity, especially when certain voices are not equally represented. Exploring the experiences of BIPOC horror queers is definitely a project worth pursuing.

— Karen Herland

Karen Herland fell in with a bad crowd with a taste for horror at a young age. She is a Co-Director of the Montréal Monstrum Society and sits on the *Monstrum* editorial board. She taught at the Miskatonic Institute of Horror Studies beginning in 2012. A lecturer in

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References

Westengard, Laura. *Gothic Queer Culture: Marginalized Communities and the Ghosts of Insidious Trauma*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019.

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