

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.

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- 2024 -

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