

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.

Click [***](#) to view the video essay.

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.

References

- Ahmed, Sara. 2019. *What's the Use?: On the Uses of Use*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Bersani, Leo. 2010. *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays*. Chicago, Ill. London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Lacan, Jacques, and Bruce Fink. 2004. *Ecrits: A Selection*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.
- Lacan, Jacques, and Jacques-Alain Miller. 2008. *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII*. Routledge Classics. London: Routledge London.
- Smith, Carter, dir. 2022. *Swallowed*. Momentum Pictures.

- 2024 -

MONSTRUM is Published in Montréal, Québec by the Montréal Monstrum Society.
Copyright and intellectual property rights are held by the individual author(s).



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).