

## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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

---

<sup>1</sup> "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.

<sup>2</sup> 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*.<sup>3</sup> A decade earlier, Findlay co-helmed the exploitation film *Snuff*,<sup>4</sup> 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 discomforting, 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.<sup>5</sup>

---

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

<sup>4</sup> 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).

<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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).

<sup>6</sup> 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,<sup>7</sup> 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.

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

---

<sup>7</sup> 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).

---

**Alex Hall** is a PhD candidate and the creator of Lezzie Borden (@lezzie\_borden) an Instagram archive dedicated to queer women in horror. With a background in cinema studies, her interdisciplinary, theoretical research concentrates on the relationship between (counter) archives, horror studies and the aesthetics around monstrosity and the queer female body in moving image art. Other research interests include critical race studies, glitch aesthetics, death studies, and feminist ecomedia. She has work forthcoming in *MAI: Feminism & Visual Culture*'s issue on gendered death in visual culture, *Somatechnics* and the anthology *Recasting the Bygone Witch*.

## References

- Ahmed, Sara. 2019. *What's the Use?: On the Uses of Use*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Beam, Jennifer M. 2023. "Introduction: Feeling Videographic Criticism." *Feminist Media Histories* 9 (4): 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1525/fmh.2023.9.4.1>.
- Creed, Barbara. 1995. "Lesbian Bodies: Tribades, Tomboys and Tarts." In *Sexy Bodies: The Strange Carnalities of Feminism*, edited by Elizabeth Grosz and Elspeth Probyn, 86–103. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Freibert, Finley. 2023. "Singularity and Conformity: Feminism and Roberta Findlay's Strategic Marketing Communications" In *ReFocus: The Films of Roberta Findlay*, edited by Peter Alilunas and Whitney Strub, 26–42. Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press.
- Heller-Nicholas, Alexandra. 2016. "What's inside a Girl?: Porn, Horror and the Films of Roberta Findlay." *Sensesofcinema.com*, no. 80 (September). <https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2019/20-years-of-senses/whats-inside-a-girl-porn-horror-and-the-films-of-roberta-findlay-issue-80-september-2016/#fnref-38166-7>.
- Harewood, Susan. 2020. "Seeking a Cure for Cinephilia." *The Cine-Files*, no. 14. <https://www.thecine-files.com/seeking-a-cure-for-cinephilia/>.
- Mbembe, Achille. 2002. "The Power of the Archive and its Limits." In *Refiguring the Archive*, edited by Carolyn Hamilton. Cape Town, South

Africa, Dordrecht, The Netherlands, Norwell, MA: David Philip;  
Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Moorman, Jennifer. 2023. “‘Not Even a Lesbian,’ or Roberta Findlay’s  
Ambivalently Queer/Feminist Hardcore Cinema.” In *ReFocus: The Films  
of Roberta Findlay*, edited by Peter Alilunas and Whitney Strub, 43–67.  
Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press.

Stub, Whitney, and Peter Alilunas. 2023. “Introduction: Sleazy Honesty.”  
In *ReFocus: The Films of Roberta Findlay*, 1–25. Edinburgh, Scotland:  
Edinburgh University Press.

Timpone, Anthony. 1986. “Queen of 42nd Street.”  
*Fangoria*, March 1986.  
[https://www.fangoria.com/archives/psycho3-  
tomsavini-demons/](https://www.fangoria.com/archives/psycho3-tomsavini-demons/).

Tuck, Eve, Angie Morrill, and Super Futures Haunt Quollective. 2016.  
“Before Dispossession, or Surviving It.” *Liminalities: A Journal of  
Performance Studies* 12 (1): 1–20.

Walker, Johnny. 2023. “By the Numbers: Roberta Findlay, Home Video, and  
the Horror Genre.” In *ReFocus: The Films of Roberta Findlay*, edited by  
Peter Alilunas and Whitney Strub, 160–176. Edinburgh, Scotland:  
Edinburgh University Press.

---

- 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/>).