

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.

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

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).

References

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