

‘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

As the Queer Horror Film and TV sub-genre matures, its focus is turning to sub-cultural fears and anxieties within LGBTQIA+ communities. In this context, the hope that a more enlightened approach to queer fears might be more inclusive in their representations and metaphors also grows. In my previous works *New Queer Horror Film and TV* (2020) and *Queer Horror Film and Television: Masculinity and Sexuality at the Margins* (2016), I have argued that, in recent years, the sub-genre has shifted “out of the shadows” of furtive symbolism whereby, as Harry Benshoff puts it “the monster is to ‘normality’ as homosexuality is to heterosexuality” (1997, 2). It has now matured into an art form that allows for informed cultural critique and devoted identification with Otherness for some that can be emancipatory. However, Queer Horror’s emergence from its history of mixed and problematic representations from the past is still in its infancy.

In Harry Benshoff’s *Monsters in the Closet* (1995), Susan Stryker’s work—specifically “Transgender Studies: Queer Theory’s Evil Twin” (2004)—and my own extension of the study of contemporary Queer Horror, we argue that that this identification provides a source of joyful self-recognition. At the same time, however, this affinity with the monstrous is not always entirely pleasurable and can be a complex negotiation with pride and shameful elements that the monstrous metaphor is then re-appropriated to represent. Even when studying contemporary Queer Horror that may well appear to be crafted by LGBTQIA+ creatives and allies, we should be mindful of Benshoff’s caution to be wary of the continued *monsterisation* of homosexuality (and I would add by extension LGBTQIA+ subjectivities), as it runs the risk of further Othering and pathologising difference.

Queer Horror creators are in the process of negotiating historically toxic tropes from horror film and television and finding ways to mitigate negative associations, thus reclaiming horror for queer stories, lives, and spectators. I want to suggest that it is also time for queer and horror theorists to do the same in negotiating with, re-reading, rejecting, and reinterpreting old cis-normative and binary theories around gender and sexuality in order to see ourselves in the texts we study and in the theories we use to analyse and interpret those texts. The way forward can be seen in some trailblazing academic work.

At the 2019 gathering of 3,500 psychoanalysts at their annual conference at the Ecole de la Cause Freudienne in Paris, the academic and author Paul B. Preciado (a trans man) delivered the paper, “Can the Monster Speak?,” which offered a startling rebuke to the profession that had previously understood him to be “a mentally ill person” suffering from gender dysphoria. Preciado’s work (published in 2020) demanded changes in the psychoanalytical establishment, challenging it to affect a paradigm shift that would allow marginalised voices (like his own) to be part of the academic discourse. He argues for the discipline to break its complicity with the cisheteronormative colonial ideology of sex, gender, and sexual difference, stating:

And so it is from the position assigned to me by you as a mentally ill person that I address you, an ape-human in a new era. I am the monster who speaks to you ...

As a trans body, as a non-binary body, whose right to speak as an expert about my condition or to produce discourse or any form of knowledge about myself is not recognised by the medicinal profession, the law, psychoanalysis or psychiatry. I have done as Red Peter did. I have learned the language of Freud and Lacan, the language of the colonial patriarchy, your language, and I am here to address you. (2020, 19)

So, following Preciado’s call to arms, the challenge is this: we have an obligation as LGBTQIA+ fans, creators, and researchers of horror to learn the language of the genre, psychoanalysis, and cultural theory that once oppressed and stigmatised us. We need to reinterpret it, re-express it and re-present it; doing so allows queer filmmakers, fans, and theorists to take up that mode of address and offer critiques of our own subcultures, and of those that still oppress us.

However, as with Queer Theory’s frequent failure to speak about and for trans* subjectivities,¹ the horror genre can also fall foul of problematic attempts to symbolise LGBTQIA+ experiences as horrific when universally folding all subjective experiences into an amorphous Queer Horror umbrella.

The recent release *Cobweb* (Samuel Bodin, 2023) arguably does exactly this. Bodin’s film is a competently directed hidden monster/haunted house fusion that is academically literate in its approach to Horror/Gothic allegories. However, despite its attempts at symbolically materialising the trauma and anguish of the oppressed young trans* body—via its central protagonist Peter (Woody Norman)—its frequently on-the-nose metaphors

¹ See Stryker’s aforementioned article (2004).

of gendered-doubling run the risk of offering up a paint-by-numbers approach to LGBTQ-adjacent Horror that fails to capture the nuances of queer and trans* existence. The androgynously presented Peter is bullied at school and is prevented by his seemingly over-protective (yet oppressive) parents from taking part in trick-or-treating at Halloween due to their fears of abduction, as the town is haunted by the real-life instance of the disappearance of a young girl several years earlier. Peter begins to be woken at night by a knocking and later the “voice” of a young girl named Sarah (Debra Wilson) from behind his bedroom wall asking for help. She reveals that she has been held captive in the walls of the house by his parents and is his twin sister whom his parents locked away after deciding they didn’t want her anymore. She convinces Peter that the same fate may well fall on him if he doesn’t help her escape her immurement.

Interpreting *Cobweb* from a trans or queer perspective might well open-up the repression of Peter’s “sister” as an enforced oppression of Peter’s true femininity, which in its enforced entombment has become monstrous because of those same heteronormative, patriarchal forces and, having been released, this repressed monstrous-feminine form then returns to effect revenge upon those same structures. Sarah operates as a floating queer/trans signifier in the text, and the spectator is never quite in full belief of her status as “simply” Peter’s sister. She may well be, but she also represents Peter’s repressed passivity (deemed feminine by cis-hetero-patriarchal culture) and the “lost” girl who went missing on Halloween (who may or may not have been murdered by the parents or Sarah herself). More abstractly, Sarah could well be seen to represent what Jack Halberstam (2005) suggests is a kind of living death that trans* subjects experience, a feeling of being alive but still associated with death (dead names). The trans* body for Halberstam in its unfinished, fragmented, “wild” and “unnamable” (Halberstam 2020, 23) form is a reminder that all human subjectivity is in a state of becoming.

Peter (a fitting in-joke perhaps as to this binary biological genital indicator, but also a reference to the central antagonist Peter/Angela from the historically traumatic trans-horror film *Sleepaway Camp* [1983]) decides to team up with Sarah to escape his parents’ essentialist grip—freeing her by accessing a tiny door to her domain hidden behind a fittingly “chrononormative” (Freeman 2011, 3) Grandfather Clock. It is later revealed that Sarah was locked away due her non-normative “monstrous” bodily appearance, deformed at birth. She emerges out of the feral darkness in which she had been forced to dwell, in the form of a murderous, twisted human with arachnoid attributes, then turns on Peter, jealous of his life in the light.

This video essay attempts to reveal the problematic thin line that Queer Horror films often tread when deploying metaphor and allegory to represent LGBTQ+ anxieties/fears and trading in sometimes harmful and/or stale tropes that offer confused conclusions to their narratives. Utilising a recurring visual motif of shattering, more specifically imagery and sounds of fragile glass panes breaking or fragmenting, I draw attention to the hackneyed pattern of splitting when representing binarized gender and sexuality. To work the concept further, the video essay offers a multiplicity of possibilities that shatter the gender binary and break out-of-date metaphors. Peter's bedroom wall, at one point, acts as a cinema screen projecting out some key regressive and progressive examples of horror film past and present that deal with trans and queer bodies in the genre, ranging from the problematic, *Psycho* (1960) and *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), to the more affirmative *T-Blockers* (2023), to the slippery and suggestive *Let the Right One In* (2009), and finally to the hauntingly toxic *Sleepaway Camp* (1983).

Using Stryker's concept of the "Evil Twin," I hope this video essay suggests that *Cobweb* walks a thin (webbed) line of open symbolism and allegory that allows for some positive identifications with the position of an oppressed child/children who doesn't "fit in" to societal demands (of body, of gender, and perhaps of sexuality), resisting harmful parental structures. The embrace of monstrosity and Otherness often thrust on the "different" being can be revelled in via the emergence of Sarah as a vengeful, non-normative subject and her often comic destruction of the domestic space and its toxic masculine invaders. However, the web of metaphors of queerness and transness begin to fall apart upon further inspection, revealing a collapse into problematic, monstrous femininity that must be imprisoned to allow for a normative conclusion to the narrative and for Peter to emerge into the symbolic as a "securely" and "traditionally" gendered child. This video essay argues via *Cobweb* that producers and creators of horror films that flirt with LGBTQ+ allegories and counter-readings need to be more aware of the Othered voices that are present and precisely who it is that speaks through the symbolism of the genre.

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

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