

(dis)Orientating horror: feeling queerly

Lucy Fife Donaldson

Rather than offering a queer reading of a film text or texts, this audiovisual essay explores the videographic form as a queer methodology. It takes up Sara Ahmed's spatial understanding of queerness from her book, *Queer Phenomenology*, which draws a parallel between considerations of sexual and spatial orientations and questions of how we reside, inhabit and move through them. Prompted by Ahmed's desire to "re-animate[s] the very concept of space" (2006, 12), the audiovisual essay is inspired by the ways in which she articulates manifestations of queer inhabitation, using, stretching, and ultimately disrupting the spatial affordances of visual and sonic composition to embody "queer orientation ... as not following the straight line" (2006, 70).

The idea for this audiovisual essay emerged originally from a disorienting moment in *Midsommar* (Ari Aster, 2019). As the central characters are travelling to join the midsummer celebrations of an insular folk community in Sweden—the Hårga, who reside in Hälsingland—the camera following their car moves above and over the vehicle. As the camera gets past the bonnet, it slowly rotates 180 degrees so that the car appears to be driving upside down. This movement is captured in a fluid long take (presumably using a drone) which continues until they reach Hälsingland, where the camera rotates again, spinning round and up into the sky before turning down and back to the upright orientation to which we are accustomed. Within the narrative of the film, this inversion is a fitting expression of the characters' entrance to a world which operates differently to their own, ultimately to horrific extents. It is also fitting that this diegetic disturbance is communicated in a manner that aims to disrupt its audience tangibly, making us aware on a corporeal level that the characters are entering a dangerous space. Watching this at the cinema on the film's original release made my stomach flip and my body want to sink further into the seat while I attempted to ground myself in an effort to counteract the film's disruption of gravity. It also made me think of Jennifer M. Barker's proposal that we can consider film as embodied, possessing skin, musculature, and viscera. Barker, like Ahmed, is engaged with the question of orientations, and the ways we might share embodied spatial understandings with those of the film, through the camera's movement and negotiation of space: "A film expresses itself to the world through muscular gestures ... The film might beckon or embrace us, keep us at a distance, or push us away" (2009, 78-79). I

understood the sensations produced by *Midsommar* in this moment as a gesture that emphatically overturned any possibility that I might feel safe or comfortable, that its mode of orientation profoundly unsettled my own.

From my fascination with this moment came a recognition that it offered a way into thinking through horror's practices of disorientation. At first this formed around how camera movement is employed frequently to disorient, from other instances of camera rotation / inversion (for example, *Evil Dead* [Fede Álvarez, 2013] and *Night Swim* [Bryce McGuire, 2024]) to the unstable shakiness of handheld camerawork associated with the found footage subgenre, from *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick & Eduardo Sánchez, 1999) to *Host* (Rob Savage, 2020), or the panicked movement and editing which depicts the flight of women from their monstrous pursuers, from *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974) to *La Casa Muda* (Gustavo Hernández, 2010). Connecting Ahmed and Barker, such instances suggested the horror film body's own rejection of straightness (as expressed through uprightness and linearity) and a potential queer delight in disturbance.¹

It also speaks to other generic patterns concerned with space, which might be reconsidered through the prism of orientation. The frequency with which characters in horror films drive into remote sites, especially woods, forms the generic equivalent of a line or path: "A path is made by the repetition of the event of the ground 'being trodden' on" (Ahmed 2006, 16). Regarding this through the idea of orientation as both spatial and sexual, we might ask Ahmed's question 'what does it mean to think of "being orientated?"' (2006, 69) to the horror genre itself. How does forming and following this generic path shape the genre's orientation? Ahmed describes compulsory heterosexuality as a kind of repetitive strain injury (RSI): "Spaces and bodies become straight as an effect of repetition. That is, the repetition of actions, which tends toward some objects, shapes the 'surface' of spaces. Spaces become straight, which allow straight bodies to extend into them, such that the vertical axis appears in line with the axis of the body" (2006, 91). Breaking this generic RSI then became the purpose of my queer videographic method.

Once I started working with *Midsommar* on the timeline I found myself experimenting with editing techniques—multiscreen, image flipping and mirroring, repetition, looping, reversing direction—which allowed me to elaborate on the disorientation already present in the film. The simple action the moment depicts—a group driving into a remote place which

¹ Although he does not express it in relation to queerness exactly, this connects to Robin Wood's observation that horror is an outlet for our nightmare wish to destroy normality. See "The American Nightmare: Horror in the 70s" in *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan ... and Beyond* (2003, 63-84).

triggers horrific events—reminded me of other similar sequences, starting with the opening of *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980), where the Torrance family drive into the Colorado mountains accompanied by Wendy Carlos' synth reinterpretation of the "Dies Irae" of Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*,² and then onto *The Descent* (Neil Marshall, 2005) and *Jeepers Creepers* (Victor Salva, 2001).³ These formal experiments were channelled through the work of Ahmed and Barker to consider the audiovisual essay, like its maker and the films from which it is made, as an embodied form, one that uses gestures to express its arguments. I found videographic ways to build on the queer implications of resisting the straight line and its normativity: "queer desire becomes a form of 'derailment,' of making the wrong turn" (Ahmed, 2006, 76); "[q]ueer is, after all, a spatial term ... a term for a twisted sexuality" (2006, 67). Accumulating these twists and turns results in folding the audiovisual body in on itself, images and sounds touching and mingling to recall Ahmed's observation about the queerness of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology where exterior becomes interior and vice versa, where "what touches is touched" (106). If queer orientations overcome the "differentiation between those who can and cannot be reached" (107), then the videographic aims to expand this merging and reaching further, to accept Ahmed's invitation to "not aim to overcome the disorientation of the queer moment, but instead inhabit its intensity" (107). Embracing the intensity through an increasing abstraction of image and sound is finally a gesture of hopefulness; just as the videographic can reconstitute its components to form new audiovisual patterns and regimes, queerness provides a reorientation of the world if we are prepared to experience it as such:

The point is not whether we experience disorientation ... but how such experiences can impact on the orientation of bodies and spaces, which is after all about how the things are "directed" and how they are shaped by the lines that follow. The point is what we do with such moments of disorientation, as well as what such moments can do - whether they can offer us the hope of new directions, and whether new directions are reason enough for hope. (Ahmed 2006, 158)

² My thanks to Evelyn Kreutzer who pointed out to me the significance of the "Dies Irae" a melody which, as central part of a requiem mass, embodies death, and that Carlos' own reinterpretation of this very traditional form might be considered a queering in itself.

³ Other potential examples include: *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (and its sequels/remakes), *Last House on the Left* (Wes Craven, 1972), *The Hills Have Eyes* (Wes Craven, 1977), *The Howling* (Joe Dante, 1981), *The Evil Dead* (Sam Raimi, 1981) (and its sequels/remakes), *Friday the 13th* (Sean Cunningham, 1982) (and its sequels/remakes), *The Blair Witch Project*, *Dog Soldiers* (Neil Marshall, 2002), *Cabin Fever* (Eli Roth, 2002), *Dead End* (Jean-Baptiste and Fabrice Canepa, 2003), *The Cabin in the Woods* (Josh Wheedon, 2011), *Significant Other* (Dan Berk and Robert Olsen, 2022), and many more. Thanks to Alison Peirse for her help with suggesting titles.

I follow the lines provided by previous scholars in connecting Ahmed and Barker, especially the brilliant work of Katharina Lindner, whose book, *Film Bodies: Queer Feminist Encounters with Gender and Sexuality* (2017), offers an inspirational model of how to attend to the spatiality of gender and sexuality in film. Just as this audiovisual essay nods to Ahmed's repeated returns to the table (whether desk or kitchen table) as a primary orientating object, especially through its role in "establish[ing] lines of connection between those who gather, while the table itself 'supports' the act of passing things around" (80). Lindner is one of the scholars, along with Ahmed, Barker, José Esteban Muñoz, and Dayna McLeod, whose ideas and inspiration are passed around the table on which I work.

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

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