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Interpreting *Ginger Snaps* as a Trans Story

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In the 2000 horror film *Ginger Snaps* the beast of Bailey Downs roams at night, killing family dogs behind white picket fences and terrifying the town. This monster, a werewolf, disrupts the suburban community and triggers the events of the film. *Ginger Snaps* is the subject of many feminist readings that focus on the link it makes between menstruation and lycanthropy as well as its lupine twist on the coming-of-age story for young women (Mann 2022, 173-174; Miller 2005, 281-303; Giacopasi 2011, 6-7). While I agree with these readings of the film, I would like to add that the distress related to menstruation and physical transformation shown in the film is not limited to cisgender women and girls. For trans people, this distress is often intensified by gender dysphoria. Many of the difficulties experienced by protagonist Ginger Fitzgerald throughout the film resonate with my own experience as a genderqueer trans man who came of age in the late 2010s and early 2020s, which encouraged me to read Ginger's lycanthropy as a metaphor for transmasculine and genderqueer identity, especially in youth. I want to look at the film as what Caél Keegan calls "a trans point of reception for popular media" (2016, 26) and through Robin Wood's categorizing of some horror films as progressive in relation to how they handle repression, oppression, and sympathising with an Other who threatens the social order ([1979] 2004). Wood defines the Other as "that which bourgeois ideology cannot recognize or accept but must deal with … in one of two ways: either by rejecting it and if possible, annihilating it, or by rendering it safe and assimilating it, converting it as far as possible into a replica of itself" (111). Wood explains that the Other represents what is repressed within the self, and by extension normative society, citing women, children, and sexual minorities as examples of the Other. Although he does not explicitly name nonhuman animals—and certainly not monstrous creatures like werewolves—among these examples of otherness, and he does not name transsexual identity as an example of what is repressed, I find his conceptualization of the Other relevant to my interpretation of *Ginger Snaps* as a progressive trans allegory.

Wood defines progressive horror in opposition to reactionary horror, citing among the differences between the two the reactionary horror film's designation of "the monster as simply evil" and "nonhuman" (2004, 134). For Wood, "the 'progressiveness' of the horror film depends partly on the monster's capacity to arouse sympathy" (134–35), one of Ginger's key characteristics. Although Ginger is shown to be violent and occasionally mean, the film adheres to her perspective and encourages the viewer to sympathize with her and her sister Brigitte by focusing on their relatable (and very human) coming-of-age struggles and their familial relationships. Despite how sympathetic the film is towards Ginger, she is not an entirely likeable character, and, in this way, not so different from other characters in the film, from a drug dealer named Sam, who helps the sisters while flirting with girls much younger than him, to their schoolmate Trina who bullies them, or the boys at school who make sexual comments towards them. Ginger's intensity can at times be off-putting, which makes her all the more understandable and real. That is, she's not an innocent martyr, but neither is she a ruthless monster. Being stuck in between these two positions can be revealing for audiences who wish to identify with a character's sense of otherness.

The experience of going through menstruation and other bodily changes that make one readable as female, along with normative feminine coding running counter to one's own view of themselves as outside binaristic gender roles, is not exclusive to transgender teens. Yet while the current targeting of trans youth by politicians is likely not what writer Karen Walton and writer-director John Fawcett had in mind while making the film in the late 90s, *Ginger Snaps* could be interpreted as a prescient evocation of this moral panic and its effects on queer and trans people. That this moral panic paints trans youth and their bodies as monstrous and pushes the idea that trans people seek to transform vulnerable youth led me to consider the ways *Ginger Snaps* reads as a trans story rather than simply as a teen girl coming-of-age narrative. Key aspects of the film that support a trans reading include the depiction of both werewolves and of transgender youth as abjectly monstrous, the way lycanthropy disrupts cisheteronormative embodiment and social norms, the film's presentation of the misunderstanding and belittling of youth seen as markedly different by adults/society, and the way the Fitzgerald sisters' search for an escape from repressive suburban life mirrors the struggles of queer and trans teens who are stuck in repressive environments.

Of course, none of these arguments alone mark the film specifically as a trans narrative but I find that combining and comparing them to the experiences of trans youth gives the film meaning as a representation of the

struggles of trans teens, marking it as what Caél Keegan calls a "trans object." Keegan theorizes "a trans object as offering the subject a normally unseen transfer between seemingly irreconcilable points. … A trans media object would cultivate trans consciousness by offering an aesthetic space in which the subject might feel a way forward through the closed phenomenological horizon of binary gender" (2016, 27). Analyzing the presentation of Ginger from a transgender lens not only allows for an alternative reading of the film, but also, and more importantly, invites a trans spectator to see themselves in a character that is not bound by standards of "good" trans representation—that is, a character that is allowed to be powerful, messy, and scary while still being relatable. In his essay on what he terms "bad trans objects," Keegan explains that "good" trans media objects have essentially "become profitable 'goods' because they assimilate transness, minimizing the threat that transgender embodiment poses to the dominant models of gender and sex upon which realist, mediated worlds rely" (2022, 27). I find that as a potentially "bad" trans object, G*inger Snaps* allows the spectator to entertain a fantasy by relating to a subject—Ginger—who has the ability to fight back against a society that oppresses them, which can be comforting when lashing out in reality is dangerous. Admittedly, Ginger's brand of fighting back means killing people, but these kinds of fantasy revenge scenarios against oppressive social forces take on metaphorical forms of empowerment in horror.[1]

Like the lycanthropes that came before it, Bailey Downs' human-wolf beast is marked as categorically outside conventional species binaries. Caitlin Giacopasi, citing Judith Butler's *Bodies that Matter* (1993), expands on the binary-breaking aspect of the werewolf in "The Werewolf Pride Movement: A Step Back from Queer Medieval Tradition." "The traditional werewolf," argues Giacopasi,

> possesses a "speciesqueer" body: not man or wolf, but both and neither. The genderqueer and the speciesqueer are "those abjected beings who do not appear properly gendered [or specied]; it is their

[1] The only people Ginger kills are those she perceives as oppressors (the bully Trina, the school janitor, the school counselor, and sexual predator and drug dealer Sam). This is not unlike other fantasy narratives, such as in *Jennifer's Body* (2009), in which Jennifer's killing of boys flips the heteropatriarchial script. Obviously, the violence of this kind of empowerment is not meant to be taken literally, but there's something comforting about projecting oneself into a universe in which fighting back is possible. I find it empowering as a marginalized person to imagine situations in which I have the power to flip the roles. I also see this potential in the notorious slasher film *Sleepaway Camp* (1983), and particularly in its status as a "bad trans object," as articulated by Keegan (2020).

> very humanness that comes into question" (Butler 8). The werewolf, then, becomes the ideal metaphor for queer identity—a resistance *to* established identity—whether regarding sexuality, gender, or both. (2011, 2)

Just as the werewolf cannot be classified as purely human or lupine, and is often legible as a combination of embodiments, many trans and genderqueer people resist being classified as purely male or female according to cisnormative standards. By this, I mean to suggest the allegorical possibilities of lycanthropic monstrosity for exploring trans identity, not to make a problematic link to animality or primitivity. *Ginger Snaps* metaphorically parallels a breakdown of species categories with a breakdown of gender categories. Trans people are often viewed as dangerous monsters within a cisnormative framework, and as particularly disruptive because deciding to live as our true selves usually involves actively changing our bodies and not adhering to conventional gender codes or reproducing the nuclear family structure. The turning point in the story (the moment where Ginger is bitten) happens shortly after she experiences her first period. The film links the onset of menstruation with becoming a werewolf, which collapses binaries in that it equates a cyclical "curse" that is considered feminine (monthly periods) to the often-cyclical werewolf curse, which is typically considered masculine in pop culture. Earlier that day, Trina (the sisters' bully) had called Ginger a "freak" and pushed Brigitte onto a dog carcass in front of the whole class. Although Trina has no knowledge of Ginger being a lycanthrope (or metaphorically trans, in-between), she still picks up on her lupine side and insults it by telling Ginger to "stick to [her] own species" and telling Brigitte to "keep [her] bitch sister on a leash."

Ginger and Brigitte decide to use their photography skills, heading out at night to take pictures meant to imply that Trina's dog was attacked by the Beast of Bailey Downs; as they do so, they stumble upon a different disemboweled dog from the one they wanted to photograph. As they are setting up the dog's carcass to photograph it, Brigitte notices blood flowing down Ginger's leg and thinks it is from the animal. She points it out to Ginger, who realizes that she "[j]ust got the curse." Films like *The Wolf Man* (1941) and *Curse of the Werewolf* (1961) figure lycanthropy as a curse, typically for young men. These films figure lycanthropic curses as generational, creating conflict in families (especially between fathers and sons). Ginger's entry into a lycanthropic life thus can be read as masculine in the context of the gendered discourse of the werewolf film, a complex coding that contrasts what some

would consider her entry into womanhood through menstruation. Unlike other werewolf films where there are transformations back and forth between wolf and human in a cyclical way, Ginger slowly transforms into a beast, and there is no going back to "normal" for her. In other words, she will be compelled to acknowledge and bear a marker of difference that she cannot hide.

Ginger seems to be as disturbed, if not more so, by her period as she is by the fact that she is turning into a werewolf. She even says that "[her] own body screws [her]" and asks Brigitte to shoot her if she "start[s] simping around tampon dispensers and moaning about PMS," seemingly more horrified by the idea of turning into a woman than that of being a hairy beast. Ginger fears falling into a stereotypical female role that does not reflect how she views herself because it means following the social expectations placed on her to become, in her view, a "mindless little breeder" like other high schoolers. Rather than being a symptom of female puberty, Ginger's lycanthropy offers her an escape from those expectations.

Choosing to undergo physical gender-affirming changes that are seen as abject by society also connects the experiences of some transgender people to the pop culture's figurations of lycanthropy, and even though some lycanthropes do not choose or wish to become beasts, Ginger ends up embracing this form of embodiment. In a similar way as lycanthropy is figured as monstrous mutation and even mutilation of the natural human body, the gender affirming treatments trans people choose to go through can elicit a reactionary response. Both the werewolf and the trans person's body can elicit fear and discomfort within cisnormative society, prompting a response that views transition as bodily mutilation or transgression of a "natural" biological order. The physical transformations from human to werewolf and other people's repulsion at these transformations are key parts of the film (and indeed other werewolf films such as *The Howling* and *An American Werewolf in London* [both 1981]), and aspects that I find to be the most trans-coded. The discomfort some people experience with regards to trans bodies is likely rooted in part in a refusal to understand that people might not feel at home in a body that conforms to binary gender, and by extension in the idea that trans people are "ruining our bodies." In this context, the fact that trans people are actively choosing to live outside of societal norms with greater comfort and success becomes a threat to cisnormative society.

While transforming into a werewolf, Ginger acquires many traits that are seen as monstrously masculine by a society that reads her gender as feminine based on gendered norms of smooth, hairless skin, and behavioral

traits such as nurturing, sensitivity, empathy, and so on. For example, she grows body hair and a phallic tail, gains physical strength and takes on a dominant role during sex which prompts her sexual partner Jason to ask her, "who's the guy here?" Turning into a werewolf brings power and pleasure to Ginger, even though it blurs the lines between species and gender binaries, turning her into a monster in the eyes of society, causing her suffering, and leading to her death at the hands of her own, largely empathetic sister. She is seen as out of control, as a danger to herself and to others because of her "condition," which mirrors the ways in which transphobes see being trans as a mental illness. While some trans people struggle with mental health and self-harm due to dysphoria and transphobia, being trans is not inherently a mental illness.

Though Ginger feels empowered by her transformation, those around her see it as a threat to order. Ginger does end up killing several people, but I would argue that those people were all perceived by her to be reinforcing oppression and/or repression. For example, she kills the bully Trina, the guidance counselor (who disciplines her and Brigitte for the contents of their presentation, but not classmate Jason whose comments sexualize Ginger), the janitor (whom Ginger accuses of looking down Brigitte's shirt), and Sam (who dies trying to prevent Ginger from transforming). Since Ginger's embrace of lycanthropy and the power it gives her in welcoming her difference could be read as embracing one's trans embodiment, the film's horror is not solely located in an animality that does not correspond to a normative understanding of the human, but also in a sexuality and gender expression that do not correspond to the societal norms associated with an assigned gender, nor to the expected performance of that gender later on.

In a parallel to the werewolf figure, transgender people cross a boundary between two binaries (human/nonhuman and male/female), which threatens to break down that boundary and stokes feelings of abjection. As Barbara Creed explains: "Here, the horror film constructs and confronts us with the fascinating, seductive aspect of abjection … The werewolf, whose body signifies a collapse of the boundaries between human and animal, also belongs to this category" (1986, 47-48). Creed emphasizes the importance of the collapsing of boundaries as a threat to the stability of oppressive norms upon which society is built. This sense of abjection could also be part of why transphobes are so repulsed by transgender people and our bodies. We threaten the order of a repressive society that is dangerous to us and prevents us from living as our true selves, and defending ourselves against its violence paints us as monstrous.

In the third thesis of "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," Jeffrey Jerome Cohen highlights that monstrosity is defined by exactly this kind of category crisis. He states that "[t]his refusal to participate in the classificatory 'order of things' is true of monsters generally: they are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration. And so, the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions" (Cohen 1996, 6). This definition of monstrosity is congruent with how many transphobic or misinformed people view queer and trans people. That is, with the recent rise in hateful anti-trans rhetoric, more and more people see trans people as dangerous, and view openly queer youth both as victims and as threats to "normal" kids. The only actual threat we pose is to a harmful normative sensibility that sees queerness and trans identity as a kind of infection that will spread to cis-het folks, forcing them out of comfortable, legible (and therefore controllable) categories that keep things as they are. So much fear-mongering targeting transmasculine youth, for example, focuses on the idea that vulnerable young girls are being manipulated into becoming hairy and aggressive men. The physical changes sought out and embraced by trans people are demonized, and many who have not talked directly to queer and trans youth weaponize parents' fear of the difficulties they face against efforts to restrict their bodily autonomy. Multiple laws in Canada, the United States and, most recently, New Zealand seek to erase the existence of trans people from public life (such as laws blocking youth from accessing gender-affirming care, forcing schools to out children to their parents and not to use their chosen name, or bills preventing trans people from using the bathroom that matches their gender). A lot of the previously mentioned abjection that cisgender people direct towards trans people and the stereotypes that come with this are also part of this terrifying push to remove us from society.

In part because transgender youth's experiences are often belittled, ignored, or associated with mental illness, trans youth sometimes even deny or repress their own feelings in hopes of fitting in and being granted an easier life experience. In *Ginger Snaps*, a few characters, including Ginger herself, deny that her distress is caused by things other than puberty. After all, Ginger is experiencing the hardships of female puberty as well as something deeper that many other characters ignore. Some adults around her, such as her mother Pamela and the school nurse, tell her that everything she is going through is normal, ignoring that menstruation may not be the only source of her distress and that lycanthropy (or, metaphorically, being trans) is also causing her to struggle. For example, Pamela emphasizes the normalcy of periods and

Ginger's struggles at the dinner table, and she even looks forward to her daughters' periods. As April Miller puts it, "[Brigitte and Ginger's mother]'s interest in her daughters' menstrual processes could be interpreted as a repressive desire to see them enter the normalizing, reproductive order valued by their suburban community, rather than a typical motherly concern that her daughters are menstrual latecomers" (2005, 291). Another example of this denial from adults is when the sisters ask a school nurse about Ginger's period and lycanthropy-related changes (such as heavy pain and abnormal hair growth), to which the nurse responds by assuring them in a well-meaning way that these are all completely normal changes. I find this experience of not having any adults around who understood the distress of going through puberty in the "wrong" way relatable; as a trans person I was told that every girl struggled with this distress, and that everything would fall into place once I got used to the ways my body was changing. What is missing from these discourses is consideration of the added trauma that my body was changing in ways that themselves felt *wrong*.

Ginger Snaps highlights the dangers of the normative suburban society in which the protagonists live and with whom they are at odds in many ways. For example, the pictures shown in the opening credits depicting several creative and disturbing death and suicide scenarios are taken by Brigitte and Ginger and then revealed to be a school project titled "Life in Bailey Downs," which could be interpreted as a darkly humorous representation of how they see life in these suburbs as a death sentence. The slideshow includes pictures of deaths that could be read as accidents, murders, or suicides, such as Ginger impaled on a fence, having her insides ripped out by a lawnmower, and drowning in a pool fully clothed. It also features several pictures more clearly legible as suicides, such as Ginger being crushed by a garage door with a note taped to it, Brigitte drowning in a bathtub and later hanging with a note attached to her, and a scene of the sisters being poisoned after a pretend tea party during which they drank chemicals. Their teacher is disturbed and sickened by their project and asks to see them in the guidance counselor's office. The Fitzgerald sisters' non-normative identity and behaviour is punished and expected to be a phase they will grow out of. The film thus immediately sets up that they have been outsiders for years and long to escape repressive suburban life, which is highlighted by their pact: "out by sixteen or dead in the scene, but together forever." They long to get out before they are old enough to be forced into a repressive gendered role, a situation that is relatable to a lot of queer youth. Although turning into a werewolf brings out

Ginger's queerness/transness rather than helping her to hide it, the sisters and their refusal to fit in are identifiable as queer even before Ginger is bitten.

This embracing of their identity and willingness to use it as a threat to society reminds me of how a lot of queer people politically reclaim the idea that they are a threat to heteronormativity, embracing the changes that make them feel at home in their body and the ways in which their love and gender expression threatens homophobes. In werewolf lore, the werewolf exists outside the societal boundaries and figures as a disruptive, dangerous force, but also as an indication of wildness and the possibilities available to those who can tap into this wildness. There is a degree of antisocial, libidinal, aggressive energy in the werewolf that looks a lot like the return of the repressed, and so the werewolf stands at the threshold of becoming-other (see, e.g., Cohen, 1996, 20), of possibilities outside of oppressive social structures. Being a monster that goes from a "normal" person to an Other that defies social norms (in this case, sex, gender, and sexuality) and evokes desire, the werewolf is a fitting metaphor for realizing one's repressed queer and/or trans identity. It shows a "self-knowledge," as Cohen describes it, no matter how far away we push, hide and ignore them (1996, 20). Wood describes repression as "fully internalized oppression," and the werewolf sheds this internal manifestation of oppression once transformed into an animal (2004, 109).

Conclusion

Not just in their acerbic photographic project, but also throughout the film, the sisters voice their disdain for the society within which they are trapped (especially their school and family) with snarky comments and vengeful pranks. A lot of the adults around them dismiss their distress as a normal part of puberty, as something they will grow out of. Their classmates either tease them or sexualize them, with Jason asking to see the slideshow pictures of Ginger again (adding a sense of necrophilic perversion to attempts to control her body) and making comments about her; this, in addition to my earlier mention of Trina who, despite being unaware of Ginger being a werewolf, picks up on her lupine side and insults it by telling Ginger to "stick to [her] own species" and telling Brigitte to "keep [her] bitch sister on a leash." Many trans teens, even while they are still in the closet, are bullied for being different in a similar way to how Ginger and Brigitte are bullied by classmates such as Trina. Both the werewolf transformation and the elaborate death and suicides that the sisters set up for their photoshoot offer an escape fantasy to the girls,

who would rather die than make it to adulthood in the cisheteronormative suburbs where they were born. Their promise to each other that they would be "[o]ut by sixteen or dead in the scene" is a dream of escaping the suburbs even if it kills them. Ginger and Brigitte's suicide fantasies would be relatable to many queer and trans teens, who view suicide (and fantasy) as the only way to escape an existence of constant suffering. The suicidality of queer youth is also often exacerbated by living in repressive environments. In the aforementioned pact of being "[o]ut by sixteen or dead in the scene," the idea of being "out" is suggestively related not only to the suburbs, but to being "out" regarding one's sexuality or gender identity. Ginger's werewolf transformation takes her outside of suburban life: she gets to become a force of nature that disrupts cisheteronormative society and experiences physical changes that empower her. During her lupine transformation, Ginger becomes less and less bound by societal norms. She finds power and strength in a hybrid state that defies both species and gender binaries, and refuses to become what society expects her to be.

Even though Ginger ends up dying soon after transforming, it gives her what she wants: an opportunity to escape. And it models for viewers of the film a fantasy prior to this of getting "out" from under the strict social codes expected of youth. Ginger's death is also readable as a suggestion that in a community that will not accept or support their true selves, queer youth see death as their only release from the pain of having realized who we are but not being able to fully express it. Even though this ending is sad, it does not negate the fact that Ginger was able to express her identity and feel empowered by her transformation. As a metaphorical parallel to queerness and transness, lycanthropy is not something someone can choose to be: it just happens. It is a part of one's struggles and identities whether they like it or not. I find the idea of being liberated by turning away from humanity and embracing hybridity especially touching as a trans person who found safety in nonhuman animals unbound by gender and other social norms. Although sometimes being trans feels like a "curse," we must endure, especially when people see our wellbeing as a threat. Our identity and embodiments challenge the norm in ways that are active and political. Queerness and trans identities are political positionalities. Thus, Ginger's defiance of gender norms is radical, and this is a threat to anyone who wishes to uphold the social status-quo.

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