

MonsterDykë (2021, dirs. Kaye Adelaide and Mariel Sharp)

Dan Vena



Figure 1: *MonsterDykë*

I first encountered Kaye Adelaide (she/her) and Mariel Sharp's (xe/xer) strangely erotic tale *MonsterDykë* (2021) at Montréal's Festival Fantasia, an apt locale to watch a short about a burgeoning trans-queer romance between a sculptress and her tentacled creation. Watching as a trans horror fan, the film felt like a salve on an open wound, working deep into a hurt produced by each underwhelming filmic encounter of trans representation and healing the ache with a playful, lustful, and heartwarming celebration of trans-queer love. Birthed out of creative ingenuity and practical limitations impressed upon the filmmakers during Québec's COVID-19 lockdowns, Adelaide and Sharp, with their accompanying production team, offer a compelling meditation on loving the strange. Mapping neatly onto larger discourses of settler Canada's supposedly 'weird' sexual cinematic proclivities (see Monk 2001), the film adds

some much-needed self-authored, trans-queer representation into the orgiastic mix.

The film begins with a title card, a quote taken from Tumblr that boldly announces: “There are only two genders: monster fuckers and cowards.” The next cut reveals our protagonist, the Sculptress, as she picks up a voice message from Brett (clearly, the coward) who states, “You know, I’m kinda doing you a favour, right, cause I kinda don’t go for the whole chubby, trans goth girl usually. But anyway, hit me up.” Understandably annoyed and upset by the message, the Sculptress refocuses her attention onto her creation, tenderly laying wet clay onto its face while sultry electronic tones score the moment. Soon, the sculpture awakens and extends its tentacles to its creator. The Sculptress, although briefly vexed, consensually embraces the monster and the two indulge in an ecstatic, fluid-filled sexual encounter.

Shot on a Bolex camera with a pack of leftover 16mm black and white film, the short is a naughty ode to classic monster movies in the style of past DIY, queer-feminist experimental cinema. In keeping with these lineages, the film shares common themes with its predecessors such as monstrosity, sexual agency, identity, and belonging, but adds further commentary on how to indulge in a pleasure that cannot be easily accounted for under cis-heteronormative binaries. In doing so, the directors refuse canonical permutations of the monster as a ‘thing’ to be killed or destroyed, instead reimagining the creature as a partner/lover who offers vital opportunities to explore one’s limitations of the self and desire. This portrait importantly goes against the expectations of horror as well as queer politics of acceptability, which continue to strive for so-called positive (read normative) images of trans sexuality. Instead, the directors opt to render a portrait of trans sexuality that extends past human-centric ideas of the possible, into a wonderful world of the strange where being trans is perhaps not the oddest identity to occupy. Here, transness finds its ability to love and survive, not in the restrictive of coils of normativity, but in its allyship with the monstrous.

To this extent, *MonsterDykë* seems to pick up where Adelaide and Sharp’s previous co-directed short, *Don’t Text Back* (2020), leaves off. The earlier title focuses on Kelly, an ill-fated woman who unwittingly accepts a cursed necklace from a men’s rights member, forcing her to text him back lest the necklace get tighter. With the help of Jaren, an energy healer/graphic designer, the two women attempt to break the necklace’s curse before it strangles Kelly to death. In sum, the story’s main premise hinges on Kelly’s willingness to explore the possibilities of queer romantic dynamics rather than rely on toxic heteronormative ones. The arc of the action maps nicely onto *MonsterDykë*,

which begins with the Sculptress not calling Brett back, instead putting down her phone and opening herself up to a non-normative/traditional sexual encounter (as if nodding to the possibilities Kelly may be able to experience if she too does not text back). Although not intentional by the filmmakers, the overlapping narrative action of both shorts reveal telling personal journeys for the duo, especially Sharp. As xe shared in a joint interview with Adelaide and myself:

This is a little backstory about *Don't Text Back* because I think it all plays together in the creation process. I spent a long part of my 20s in emotional combat – just misery. I had a lot of bad experiences dating. And then, I was starting to connect with Kaye and my own queerness, and developing this love of horror and making horror – all around the same time. [...] So, *Don't Text Back* became how we saw toxic heteronormativity as a curse you *could* break. And that's controversial, I guess, for lots of reasons. But that's how it felt for us.

The important theme of *choice* is physicalized in both films by the shared prop of the phone, which offers both protagonists a way out of heteronormativity. Tightly enwrapped in the sociality of the day-to-day, heteronormativity, just like the phone, needs to be disconnected from to free up one's consciousness. Although I agree that the insinuation of sexuality as a choice may be controversial, I am equally compelled by a film that plainly asks its audience what they themselves *accept* and thereby *choose* as normal. In other words, who are they *choosing* to text/call back?

As touched upon by Sharp in xer above comment, the question of choice comes from a uniquely personal place of self-exploration; after reflecting on past relationships and xer desires, Sharp found a partner in Kaye by bonding over shared expressions of trans/non-binary identities, queerness and horror (amongst other things). Indeed, the reason why the film works as a salve for other injured trans mind-bodies is because it comes from such a personal place of trans-queer affection. The film's affect radiates a knowingness that there are other monsters out there, waiting to be loved or waiting to make known the depth and capacity of the partnerships. Furthering these affects is the delightful behind-the-scenes trivia that Adelaide purposefully stepped into the role of the Sculptress as a trans-queer creator herself, while Sharp agreed to lend xer voice to the creature. Embedded into the heavily edited audio work of the film is a beautiful time capsule of Adelaide and Sharp's love, punctuating the on-screen moments with an off-screen romance.

For some, the emotional cadences of romance and sexual delight of *MonsterDykë* may not be ‘enough’ to classify this film as horror – fantastic yes, but horrific? However, as I continue to petition, it is time to rethink the definitional boundaries of this historically cis-masculine genre, taking cue from trans-queer creators who are exploding and rebuilding horror towards new possibilities and successes. For Adelaide and Sharp, horror is a love language shared with the self or others. Making love and making horror need not be at ends, but indeed part of the same affective tethers that bind.

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