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## How to Make a Monster: The Homosexual Experience in Horror and Thriller Cinema

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## How to Make a Monster: The Homosexual Experience in Horror and Thriller Cinema

### Abstract

*Horror and thriller's subtextual stories within cinema have been prominent across many subgenres, creating a wide-spread correlation between the homosexual and the monstrous that grew even noticeable after the start of the AIDS epidemic. Much of horror critique and analysis has been focused on the objectification of the feminine, but the unique role that the male plays in horror and thriller (both as a villain and victim) deserves equal inspection. The research done in this paper demonstrates how horror cinema skews the suggested gender roles and how fear makes us more easily let go of the societal norms held so closely. When these differing roles are more often put onto the villain, it encourages a belief that effeminate males are more likely to turn to violence and general terrorism. Despite this, horror as a genre has long been accepted and even eagerly welcomed by (often male) homosexuals. The resignification of the monster creates a contemporary shift towards horror being overtly connected to all members of the LGBT community, and more often created by homosexual auteurs. This research proves the thesis that horror and thriller are gay genres, both from hatred and reclamation.*

### Keywords

Film theory, homosexuality, phallic symbolism, horror, thriller

### Cover Page Footnote

This paper was an independent study able to be completed with the help of the Lavery Library staff and Dr. Jim Bowman. The library staff helped suggest research avenues, provide interlibrary loans, and check citations. Dr. Bowman provided guidance on the rhetorical approaches.

## How to Make a Monster: The Homosexual Experience in Horror and Thriller Cinema

Mia Lindenburg

*Abstract: Horror and thriller's subtextual stories within cinema have been prominent across many subgenres, creating a wide-spread correlation between the homosexual and the monstrous that grew even noticeable after the start of the AIDS epidemic. Much of horror critique and analysis has been focused on the objectification of the feminine, but the unique role that the male plays in horror and thriller (both as a villain and victim) deserves equal inspection. The research done in this paper demonstrates how horror cinema skews the suggested gender roles and how fear makes us more easily let go of the societal norms held so closely. When these differing roles are more often put onto the villain, it encourages a belief that effeminate males are more likely to turn to violence and general terrorism. Despite this, horror as a genre has long been accepted and even eagerly welcomed by (often male) homosexuals. The resignification of the monster creates a contemporary shift towards horror being overtly connected to all members of the LGBT community, and more often created by homosexual auteurs. This research proves the thesis that horror and thriller are gay genres, both from hatred and reclamation.*

Since the visual form of cinema was created, it has allowed for a wide variety of stories to be told that would not have the same impact if maintained solely in the written form. Within these stories are auteurs controlling their artistic vision even under the constraints of strict regulation. Particularly in the genre of horror, the inherent ostracization of the monster from society has allowed subtextual homoerotic themes as well as overt references to the subcultural practices of gay communities in contemporary cinema. As horror developed, especially during and in the aftermath of the AIDS epidemic, this phenomenon turned into a means to reinforce the image of the homosexual as monster within general audiences until it became difficult to differentiate the two. Conflating homosexuality with monstrosity has had strong effects on audiences of all sexualities. Despite many of the intentions being harmful, any depiction of the gay experience has been eagerly digested by gay audiences not used to any representation. In this paper, I will argue that the genres of horror and thriller are tied to homosexuality through both self-reflection by gay directors and

actors and outside disdain from heterosexual creators. Horror is a genre of taboo; when topics like homosexuality break free from taboo, they are either turned into parody or thrown out entirely. Until this happens, the genre is dependent on the motif of the homosexual.

Many scholarly works have already investigated the depictions of homosexuals in horror cinema, most noticeably the work done by Dr. Harry M. Benshoff in his dissertation and subsequent book *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film*. Within it, he explored the various images of homosexuals in popular horror film, starting early in the genre's history. This paper will expand on the ideas presented in Dr. Benshoff's book and further develop the theoretical approach to this subject. For the sake of brevity, this paper will focus solely on male homosexuals. It is worth noting that there are also depictions of lesbian monsters in horror, most notably in films like 1936's *Dracula's Daughter*, 1970's *The Vampire Lovers*, or contemporary films like 2009's *Jennifer's Body*. However, this paper is on the specific

forms of stereotype around gay men and the expectations of their masculinity.

Homosexual subtext was born out of necessity, not a desire for cinematic subtlety. The Motion Picture Production Code, known colloquially as the Hays Code, enforced strict regulations from 1934 (when the Production Code Administration was initiated) until it was declared unconstitutional in 1952. However, legal action did not change the culture. The beliefs set forth in the Hays Code kept a tight grip, denying depictions of many acts that were considered unseemly to a more socially conservative public. The most crucial section of this code in reference to this paper is the 1934 addition censoring “any inference of sexual perversion.” The Hays Code was a puritanical attempt to control American audiences through severe censorship. Ironically, it provided an opportunity to create more creative subtext. Vito Russo’s 1987 book *The Celluloid Closet* says of this shift, “The suppression of homosexuality, or the incorporation of it as something alien and sinister, ... influenced homoerotic ideas and longings that achieved expression on the screen” (97). In the case of horror cinema (by its very nature, a shocking and perverse genre), many opted to play with the standards put before them by developing a new type of monster. Attempting to include these forbidden themes created a new and unique dynamic.

### **Homosexual Friendships in Horror Cinema**

One of the most common subtextual depictions of homosexuality is that of homosociality.<sup>1</sup> In a homophobic culture, it is easier to show men in their friendship rather than in a romantic or sexual

relationship. Because horror makes all relationships more desperate and intense, these homosocial relationships fall into that as well. An early example in psychological thriller is that of Hitchcock’s 1948 *Rope*. Of the film, screenwriter Arthur Laurents stated, “[Hitchcock and I] never discussed...whether the characters in *Rope* were homosexuals, but I thought it was apparent” (qtd. in Russo 94). Most audiences attribute this correlation to the confusion of translation from British English to American but lead characters Brandon Shaw (John Dall) and Phillip Morgan (Farley Granger) maintain a closeness that encourages further inspection. Brandon and Phillip enact their murderous ritual as an intellectual experiment, their goal being to prove their superiority over their victim. Their eagerness to prove superiority can be read as an exercise towards demonstrating masculinity, perhaps a consequence of their effeminate natures. Additionally, the murder of David Kentley (Dick Hogan) almost objectifies the man by physically placing him between the pair at the time of the murder. Although there is certainly tension between the two friends, they can stomach working together by including a third into their ploy (albeit as an unwilling victim).

Dynamically like *Rope*’s villainous pair, Wes Craven’s 1996 *Scream* also features a killing pair of male friends. Billy (Skeet Ulrich) and Stuart (Matthew Lillard) conspire together to terrorize their town under the guise of one masked killer. Even ignoring that the desire to kill is what has brought them together in the first place, Billy and Stuart clearly do not have a stable relationship. Whereas Brandon and Phillip are academics putting together an experiment, Craven’s teenagers are just that: reckless young “psychos,” as Billy himself

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<sup>1</sup> The close platonic relationships of those of the same sex, often men.

designates the pair. Their chaotic anger and American slang lead them to more presentative masculinity than is seen in *Rope*, potentially removing accusations of homosexuality. Despite this, the pair have an emotional and physical closeness, eager to share their use of phallic weaponry with each other. This relationship is natural to its participants yet intended to frighten the spectator.

### **The Gay Predator: *The Hitcher* and *A Nightmare on Elm Street Part 2***

It is not unique to a post-AIDS crisis world to have depictions of homosexual men be older, domineering, and ultimately disturbed men preying on an innocent youth. However, the AIDS epidemic amplified this trope to the extreme. Two especially relevant examples from the 1980s are Robert Harmon's 1986 *The Hitcher* and Jack Sholder's 1985 *A Nightmare on Elm Street Part 2: Freddy's Revenge*. Both films have a young male protagonist who is terrorized by an older man, leading both boys to be put in the false position of a villain.

In the case of *The Hitcher*, we are introduced to young Jim Halsey (C. Thomas Howell) as he drives down a dark stretch of freeway alone at night. Soon, he picks up John Ryder (Rutger Hauer) off the side of the road, letting out an utterance that "my mother always told me not to do this." This introductory scene sets the mood for the rest of the film. To say that the homoerotic subtext in *The Hitcher* is unimportant would be to disregard some very crucial parts of its storytelling. Not only are there overt moments of touching a thigh, or phallic symbolism in gun use; the film itself reflects the extreme gay panic overtaking America in the 1980s. Jim, an all-American boy, is a cautionary tale of what will happen to us when the dangerous homosexual comes along to prey on us. Ryder is a (presumably)

unmarried man who waits on the street for young boys he takes unusual interest in. Although this interest is more violently sadistic than sexual, the parallel to stereotypes of homosexual predators remains.

In addition to this introduction of the characters, Ryder is later shown to be obsessive in his pursuit of Jim. A man obsessed with another man and what he might do to him holds a certain implication, especially in its historical context. If the homosexual is out wandering around our American highways, eager to find a new victim, how could they be anything remotely like us? Ryder is a sadist, who derives emotional (and perhaps physical) pleasure from his torturous acts. Even in his first attack, when asked what he wants, he replies, "I want you to stop me." This evokes an image of sexual assault: Ryder is using a masculine power to force Jim into a role of feminine submission (thus, causing him to be read as effeminate and homosexual). At first, Jim escapes the attack, but he has now peaked Ryder's interest in his willingness to fight back. His torment continues as the film leads to its third act, wherein Jim is seen as the true villain and chased by police. This damnation of Jim taken by his association to Ryder suggests a severe consequence of homosexual behavior, whether consensual or not.

In comparison to *A Nightmare on Elm Street 2*, Jim and Ryder's homosexual subtext seems almost tame. By the very nature of his victimhood, Jesse Walsh (Mark Patton) does not fit into the traditional masculine form. Whereas most horror features the terror and eventual survival of the "final-girl" (i.e., *Scream*'s Sidney Prescott, *Halloween*'s Laurie Strode and *A Nightmare on Elm Street*'s own Nancy Thompson), films like this and *The Hitcher* instead show a man

being the one who is terrorized. Not only is Jesse placed in a traditionally feminine role, but he is playing the role of the victim as well as that of the killer. As Freddy Krueger (Robert Englund) terrorizes Elm Street once again, he does so by invading Jesse's dreams, and causing the boy to question his identity as savior or slayer. During this, Jesse frequently rejects the advances of the attractive but female Lisa (Kim Myers), instead sticking with his male friend Ron (Robert Rusler). In one scene, Jesse escapes a party where violence broke out shortly after Lisa made an advance on him. Jesse goes to his friend's house, explaining his fear of Freddy Krueger controlling his body and Ron points out that, "The only thing trying to get into your body is female and waiting for you on a cabana floor. And you want to sleep with me." This acknowledgment of Ron's perception of Jesse is moved on from with haste, but it is difficult to shake.

As the film progresses, it becomes clear how explicit the undertones are becoming. Jesse's gym coach, Coach Schneider (Marshall Bell), is featured explicitly at an S/M club where he meets Jesse, who later is implied to kill him in another confusing dream sequence. In his 1997 book, *Monsters in the Closet*, Harry Benshoff says of this scene that it "...*might* be read as a metaphoric homosexual panic attack, in which Jesse, having been aroused by the possibility of a sexual encounter with the coach, murders him rather than admit to his homosexual feelings" (248). Ultimately, whether this was the meaning of the attack (or if Jesse truly did kill the coach) is irrelevant. Even without such a detail, the fear and shame of one's own homosexuality remains. As Adam Scales states in his 2014 paper, "Something is Trying to Get Inside My Body': A Gay Reception and Narrative Analysis of a Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge,"

Where the slasher film's final girl has to undergo a tenacious endeavor to overcome her aggressor to physically liberate herself, Jesse...has to literally build the courage to mentally vanquish these nightmares – to physically defeat Freddy Krueger who manifests himself as a personification of Jesse's latent homosexuality. Resisting these nightmares is therefore Jesse's central quest, as a way to try and sustain his heterosexual image, while suppressing his deviant homosexual urges that are endlessly negotiated throughout the diegesis. (34)

Within these urges comes the question of his own masculinity, and how horror transforms gender. The horror monster is not an otherworldly creature like in science fiction. It is everything we, the audience and the victim, fear within ourselves. The best way to unveil these hidden aspects of humanity is by distorting the familiar. Gender roles are one of the most commonly unquestioned familiars for any person, hence why it is so unnerving when they are disregarded.

### **Impaling Masculinity**

Just as sex and gender are intrinsic in our real world, these roles are apparent on the screen. Often, the cinematic perception of gender has turned women into props rather than characters. As Laura Mulvey demonstrated in her 1975 publication *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, cinema is obsessed with the human form and even implications of it. Very few films have been made that omit any portrayal of the human form and its inclusion will inevitably show the societal biases held about gender, sex, and body. The female form that her work focused on is often a tool in film to

strengthen the male by weakening his opposite. In horror, women are often no more than an erotic object, particularly in the slasher subgenre. However, victimized men in horror can be put into this role just the same. Masculinity in a post-nuclear family society has become so fragile that it seeks defense even in cinema. Horror by nature of its genre subverts all the societal expectations we bring into its viewing. Gender roles are ignored or even mocked, and the broad lines of masculinity and heteronormativity become much thinner. For male victims in horror, their masculinity is deeply altered.

In his 2016 book *Queer Horror Film and Television: Sexuality and Masculinity at the Margins*, Darren Elliott-Smith wrote that “Cinematic masculinity is conventionally *impenetrable* in a physical and sexual sense, as opposed to the patriarchal view of the feminine subject as penetrable” (7). Penetration implies a weakness, a societal flaw that is associated with femininity and should never be applied to the male. Discussed extensively (particularly through the lens of feminist analysis), the phallic symbolism of guns, knives, swords, and other weapons is prominent in cinema. The bigger the better: (i.e., *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*). As a nature of the genre, and particularly in slasher films, the women are often the victims; unwillingly penetrated, and thus either dead or forever scarred and unaccepted in society. For the man impaled by such phallic weaponry, the implications are even more dire. Not only is he forced into the act of metaphorical homosexuality, but there is an inherent voyeuristic approach to this within cinema. Regardless of whether he knows it or not, the male victim’s assault is being actively watched. If he dies, it is a choice of giving in, submitting to the killer. The male is sodomized through his submission. Even in the rare case of female

killers, he still gives up the power and masculinity he held so close. As long as the man is the villain or monster of the horror film, he maintains the status quo of his assumed strength. But to be made into a victim, even a survivor (a final-boy), he loses touch with that masculinity.

The cinematic distortion of masculinity and femininity comes in both physical and psychological terrors. In her 2005 book *Phallic Panic: Film, Horror and the Primal Uncanny*, Barbara Creed writes, “As in the case of women, Freud also argued that the cause of hysteria in men was a failure to take up the designated gender role” (45). If this holds true in cinematic horror, then which gender role the hysterical male victim fits into must be questioned. In some cases, hysteria, and terror lead to an even further push to present masculinity (i.e., Ash’s phallic chainsaw arm in Sam Raimi’s *Evil Dead* trilogy). More commonly, hysteria leads the male to supposed femininity.

### **Momma’s Boy**

When *Psycho* was released by Alfred Hitchcock in 1960, the ending twist was a large part of its appeal. It is not just disturbing that Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) has a delusion; it is disturbing to the audience that this delusion is of his mother, a relationship he clearly values long after her death. What sort of man would go as far as to pretend to be his own mother, even killing innocents “for” her? This implication of homosexual obsession with the mother is not new. It has been common, more so in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for those in medicine to blame avoidance of a heterosexual lifestyle on too close relationships of homosexual males with their mothers. These beliefs about the etiology of homosexuality were explored heavily and spread to doctors and average people alike. Judd Marmor’s 1965 published compilation

of studies *Sexual Inversion: The Multiple Roots of Homosexuality* worked to pinpoint the true cause of this experience. Featured in Marmor's books and often spoken of for his work in conversion therapy, Irving Bieber put the onus for homosexual males on the mother, claiming that "the pattern [of mothers relating to homosexual sons] is an overclose intimacy, possessiveness, domination, overprotectiveness, and demasculinization" (264). Bieber also explored the connections between homosexuals and schizophrenia, suggesting that both "disorders" were caused from the dynamics of the childhood home, often the mother being too involved. As Norman is "a psycho," he is implied to be both sexually and mentally disturbed. When we look towards the visual of the Bates family, prior even to the knowledge of Norman's delusion, it is something meant to disturb polite society. By nature of the expectations of adult masculinity, grown men are not to have a close relationship with their mothers. If they develop this complex of obsession, they have the potential to become both schizophrenic and homosexual. Both of which, in horror, incite fear.

Bates' potential Oedipus complex is crucial, but he is not the only villain of horror who maintains this disturbed relationship. Seven years after *Psycho*'s release, Herschell Gordon Lewis directed *The Gruesome Twosome* (1967), a gory horror about a mother/son duo of serial scalpers. Although more focused on the mother character of Mrs. Pringle (Elizabeth Davis), the intellectually disabled Rodney Pringle (Chris Martell) is an active, albeit manipulated, participant in the murders. It is notable that Rodney's victims are entirely female, and the male gaze is still present in this film, such as in the dormitory scene with future potential victims lounging in lingerie. However, Rodney does not seek his victims out because of any attraction, he is

only following the order of his mother. There are scenes where the body is emphasized by Rodney's interaction with it. Take for example a particular victim whose internal organs Rodney inspects out of curiosity. In this way, Rodney is more comparable to the asexual effeminate monster of early horror in that he has no sexual desire beyond an intrigue in other human bodies because of his mother keeping him away from the rest of the world.

In other instances, such as William Lustig's 1980 slasher film *Maniac*, sexuality is more than present. Frank Zito (Joe Spinell) is a decidedly sexual creature, regardless of how unorthodox his interests may be. It is established early in the film that Frank actively seeks out his female victims, frequently sleeping with them prior to killing them. However, his murders are still controlled by his obsession with his mother, despite her being deceased. In one particularly unsettling episode, Frank clutches onto a fresh victim while moaning "mommy" in hopes that there's still a chance for her to protect him. It is later revealed that he never got this protection, as Carmen Zito abused her son when he was a boy. Because of Frank's complex history with women, it is hard to see where the attraction is truly coming from.

Even in films where the male villain is resolutely heterosexual, such as Stephen King and Mick Garris' 1992 *Sleepwalkers*, these men care more for their mother than any other woman, feeding into the Freudian belief that homosexual men maintain too close of a relationship with their mother. In horror cinema, this fixation only serves to unnerve the audience. But repulsion is an essential part of the genre, and the more gruesome the tale, the stronger this repulsion grows.



## The AIDS Monster

Even predating any hint of a moving picture, diseases have been compelling devices in narrative. These diseases come along with varying implications, often related to the morality of the infected. In Susan Sontag's 1978 *Illness as Metaphor*, she examines the social conceptions surrounding cancer and tuberculosis. More relevant is the latter, and how blood as a controlling visual can relate to the metaphor of HIV and AIDS in horror cinema. Where visuals of blood in TB are romantic and tragic, blood in relation to HIV and AIDS is something to jump away from, something poisonous. As quoted from Sontag's 1989 addition to the book, "...AIDS obliges people to think of having sex as having, possibly, the direct consequences: suicide. Or murder" (160). What could be more of a horror?

Blood can be a shocking and alarming visual: humans are naturally repulsed by the sight of it outside of our bodies, where it shouldn't be. However, adding the panic and fear surrounding HIV and AIDS makes bloody visuals in horror take a different turn. In Joel Schumacher's 1987 *The Lost Boys*, blood as a metaphor becomes evident. The exchange of blood for vampires is an incredibly intimate ritual, one that requires one of the pair to be "pure" and the other already tainted. As stated by Andrew Schopp in his essay *Cruising the Alternative: Homoeroticism and the Contemporary Vampire*,

Michael [our unwitting protagonist] endures a series of initiations, including drinking David's blood...[he] attempts to destroy David so that he won't have to face the consequences of having shared

David's blood; so that he won't have to become 'just like David.' Produced during the height of AIDS panic in America, it is difficult not to interpret this as AIDS hysteria. Blood can also signify semen<sup>2</sup>, and thus Michael clearly fears not only 'infection,' but becoming one of the infectors—i.e., queer. (237)

Even the final twist of the film, in which an older man is revealed to be the enemy, ties back to the previously mentioned themes of metaphorical homosexual predators. Perhaps more than any other sickness, AIDS is deeply connected to morality. We are expected to see those diagnosed with HIV/AIDS as essentially synonymous with a killing cult, as vampires are. Young men share blood with older men and go on to spread an infection, killing innocents along the way.

Other more subtle instances still reinforce this correlation, and they need not include the sharing of blood. In John Landis' 1981 *An American Werewolf in London*, the themes of men sharing diseases or infections are still present, in this case provoked by a violent attack rather than a ritual. After being attacked at night and undergoing a gruesome transformation, David (David Naughton) is frequently haunted by visions of his close male companion Jack (Griffin Dunne), who rots away while he tries to go on without him. This goes beyond metaphor, with David's task laid out for him early in the film. During a vision occurring at his hospital stay, Jack comes to him with flesh hanging off his face and neck and encourages David to commit suicide, saying, "Take your own life! Suicide, David. Join me...it's cold, David, and I'm so alone...I'm lonely. Kill yourself, David,

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<sup>2</sup> Blood is a liquid that often coats women (or feminine characters) to enact dominance, it is often

shared, or directly following the use of a phallic symbol.

before you kill others.” Not only does this impassioned speech reiterate the close friendship between the two men, but it also brings about the fear of harm to others as a homosexual male. Given when this film was released, the AIDS panic metaphor is considerable. Because of the monster that David was turned into, he will inevitably spread his pain and suffering to others, whether that be through spreading the lycanthropic “virus” or by killing those like Jack and putting them in a state of limbo. Jack’s condition is reminiscent of the flesh wounds that often come with late-stage AIDS, albeit a much more dramatic portrayal. There are two clear options for those with AIDS or lycanthropy that are set out for the film’s audience: 1) Die a mangled version of your old self, stuck eternally rotting or 2) Spread the illness by contaminating others and let the cycle continue. By killing himself and ridding the world of werewolves, David has ended this sequence.

### **The Dandy Vampire**

The vampire is a creature of intrigue and seduction. He is often a man living alone who cares more to live in extravagant excess than with another soul. However, the appeal of the vampire is that he can be convinced to seduce for love rather than for the deception of feeding. Additionally, many women find vampires appealing for being unlike the traditional overly masculine heterosexual. In her 2005 book *Phallic Panic: Film, Horror and the Primal Uncanny*, Barbara Creed describes the vampire as “a strangely feminized creature...a sensualist, a creature of the flesh whose conquests represent a triumph of body over conscience and of sex over death” (72). However, when the

vampire uses these powers of seduction on the male rather than the female, his intrigue still succeeds in swaying them towards his favor.

This notion of homosexual subtext in the vampire genre is so common that it’s even poked fun at. For example, Taika Waititi’s 2014 *What We Do in the Shadows* features a scene in which the group of male vampire friends go out for a night on the town in extravagant clothing, only to be yelled a jeering “Homos!” by a passing teenager. Andrew Schopp stated that, “By its very nature, the vampire is an outsider, an ‘other.’... The vampire represents an unknown that may be threatening, but also exposes the culturally repressed. The contemporary vampire’s otherness configures its world as a place to act out fantasies and desires without the constraints of human socio-cultural, sexual, or even physical mandates” (233). Thus, the vampire draws attention to the supposed abnormality hidden within human societies.

This paper will not go into depth on Neil Jordan’s screen adaptation of *Interview with the Vampire: The Vampire Chronicles* (1994).<sup>3</sup> This film has been picked apart repeatedly, and it is clear that Louis (Brad Pitt) and Lestat (Tom Cruise) have an especially intimate relationship that is emphasized by their extravagant effeminate behavior and their joint raising of an adopted child. However, the film can still be used as a frame of reference for the differences across the vampire genre.

Louis and Lestat, like many vampires, are wealthy and white. When vampires aren’t white, their story is tied to a different metaphor. Black vampires do not often fall

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<sup>3</sup> Should the reader seek further analysis, they can find it in the following citation: Bendel, Jared A. A

*Queer Perspective: Gay Themes in the Film "Interview with the Vampire"*. Diss. Colorado State University, 2013.

into the metaphor of homosexuality. When we are given the rare glimpse at Black vampires, the metaphor is not of an underground sexual or homosocial society; rather, such as in Bill Gunn's 1973 blaxploitation film entitled *Ganja & Hess*, the metaphor is one of unfortunate addiction that polite society may find unwelcome for other reasons. As stated in the film, "[Hess] is not a criminal; he's a victim. He's addicted to blood." Although different, both metaphors strengthen the separation from "the normal."

The character of George Meda (portrayed by director Bill Gunn) soliloquizes on his nature as a murderer and a victim, in constant battle with himself. The outside world torments him as much as he does himself. The white vampire can hide in the shadows, whereas the black vampire (and more importantly, the black male vampire) is interrogated by outsiders even prior to his transformation. While attempting to talk down a suicidal Meda who speaks of drowning himself, Hess says "Mr. Meda...there's no possible way for you to know this, but I'm the only colored on the block. And if another black man washes ashore around here, you can believe the authorities would drag me out for questioning." Hess is not afforded the luxury and extravagance of his white counterparts (who are not shown explicitly in this film, save for a mysterious masked figure). Even though Hess is shown to be wealthy and prominent in his community, he still finds his "fix" more from blood banks and other inconspicuous sources. Unlike vampires such as Louis and Lestat, Hess has a true and reasonable fear of being caught. He must be tied down to the social expectations and not risk anything that ostracizes him further. Thus, the masculinity of a vampire is contingent on his racial and economic standing.

In her section of the 1993 book *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in the Hollywood Cinema*, Robyn Wiegman discusses the complex cinematic masculinity of the African American man, stating that,

[when] denied full admittance to the patriarchal province of the masculine through the social scripting of blackness as innate depravity and occupying an enhanced status through masculine privilege in relation to black women, the African American male challenges our understanding of cultural identity and (dis)empowerment based on singular notions of inclusion and exclusion. (174)

Black vampires are not granted the same transcendence of gender as white, wealthy, vampires who bask in extravagance. This therefore begs the question of what happens when a vampire finds himself in the combined metaphor of being both black and homosexual. Even with wealth such as Hess', masculinity must remain intact for a black vampire to be safe.

This is a complete divergence from what is expected of a vampire, with understandable logic behind it. Still, Gunn never explains directly why Hess is not the effeminate seducer so many before him have been. It is left to the audience to make assumptions on his masculinity. Hess is neither overtly macho nor overtly dandy. Traditionally, especially for horror, there is very little subtlety to where the character fits on the scale of the masculine.

### **The Butch Werewolf**

The vampire may be able to avoid masculinity in many cases, but it is able to do so by being shown against the traditional masculine. In films strictly focused on

vampires, this masculine opposition is often shown in a heroic human. For horror films with more than one creature, the werewolf is often shown to be the opposite of the vampire in every sense. Where vampires are tied to wealth and dandyism, werewolves are shown as their down-to-earth, blue collar, counterparts. This creature is an escape for the heterosexual male fantasy of returning to the wild. Without even being human, the werewolf is the ideal man in terms of traditional masculinity. This visual is easy to put on the screen, appealing to the audience by showing internal desires held by men and women alike. The werewolf is still a sexual creature, although not a seducer like the vampire. In some ways, this masculine creature is more agreeable than the feminine vampire. Dr. Benshoff argues that werewolves are evidence to how unwilling cinema is to portray homosexuality, stating that “beneath the queerly bestial nature of these romances, they all remain resolutely heterosexual, suggesting perhaps that any form of heterosexuality – even one tinged by bestiality – is still more palatable to mainstream audiences than is consensual homosexuality” (259).

Indeed, we see these themes of sexual perversion far more frequently than we are ever shown homosexuality as a natural, human state. As we’ve seen, when homosexuality does appear on screen, it is in the monstrous, the unwanted, the terrifying, and most importantly, the dangerous. In the 1981 John Landis horror-comedy, *An American Werewolf in London*, the line between beast and man becomes blurred, as is the nature of the werewolf. However, David (David Kessler) and his horrific, bone-breaking, metamorphosis makes it clear that he is no longer fully human. Even with this knowledge, the audience is more willing to see Nurse Alex (Jenny Agutter) engage in a sexual relationship with a man

who is part beast than any level of homosocial or homoerotic behaviors.

In Mike Nichols’ 1994 *Wolf*, this confirmation of the heterosexual werewolf is clear. By transforming into a werewolf, simple book publisher Will Randall (Jack Nicholson) is granted vigor, stamina, and an overall increase in traditional masculinity, thus making him more attractive to women with whom previously would have had no chance. Like David, Will’s sexual appeal is inherently tied to his animalistic nature. Yet again, a beast is deemed more appropriate in public sexuality than a homosexual, even when he attempts to sexually assault a female character. These themes reoccur frequently in the werewolf subgenre, frequently reinforcing the idea of a werewolf as the ultimate hypermasculine creature. Again and again, horror teaches us that a man is a wolf, and being turned into a lycanthrope is the only way to unleash this true expression of masculinity. In this way, the wolf is a closer metaphor of homosexuality when a woman is put under the curse of lycanthropy. Regardless of its sex, the sexuality of the werewolf is shown to be more acceptable than any true deviation from heterosexual expectations.

### **The Thriller and its Psychosexual Nature**

Even with its very name, the thriller genre suggests that it will lead its audience to excitement, perhaps of more than one kind. Of the films within the thriller genre, some have more overt reference to themes of sexuality than others. In the case of Cronenberg’s 1996 *Crash*, the metaphor becomes explicit instances of sexual taboo, both in homosexuality and other more unexpected taboos. The subculture of *Crash* can be put directly parallel to the S/M subculture in the reality of the homosexual underworld, not just as a hidden community, but as a combination of pain and pleasure.

The film itself is a commentary on the genre it's within. As said, fear and sex are not juxtaposed in their differences; they are nearly an identical feeling. The adrenaline rush experienced by James Ballard (James Spader), Helen Remington (Holly Hunter), the mysterious Vaughan (Elias Koteas), and the rest of the widespread<sup>4</sup> subculture is such a strong chemical that it negates any social norms, including those of gender. Even though Ballard is already shown to have questionable sexual morals from the start of the film, he undergoes a transformation of letting go of his preconceived notions about where, in what circumstances, and with whom he can engage sexuality. In the aftermath of Ballard's titular crash and subsequent recovery, he must reconcile with a new aspect of his identity that would be rejected by the whole of moral society. No longer is this world an unspoken taboo. Even as early as his first walk in the hospital, Ballard has already begun to experience homosocial engagement with Vaughan.

As thriller becomes more horror, these Freudian psychosexual obsessions blur the lines between sexuality and fear. Both incredibly vulnerable aspects of human experience, it becomes difficult to distinguish the emotional response. One extreme example of these blurred lines is the 1989 work of Brian Yuzna, entitled *Society*. While most often spoken of for its fantastic use of practical special effects, Yuzna's both frightening and sexual world created in the film is an incredibly fascinating juxtaposition. In comparison to the rest of his town, Bill (Billy Warlock) is the most straight-laced. From the start of the film, already taboo sexual acts are referenced in the form of incestuous relations. Later, same-sex relations start to be referenced,

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<sup>4</sup> The subculture is shown to be widespread by large crowds at the James Dean crash recreation and

with Bill's sister saying on a recording, "Then you can do it with women as well as men?" These overt references are not oblique, but symbolism is also apparent throughout the film. When at the beach with his girlfriend, Bill is forced into a position of submission as he is placed physically underneath the domineering Clarissa, who squirts a bottle of sun-tan lotion over him in an act of clear phallic symbolism. Bill frequently rejects these and tries to escape the horrors.

This theme of being introduced into a morally reprehensible community is common throughout both horror and thriller. Other films, like Robin Hardy's 1973 folk-horror *The Wicker Man*, show a similar premise of a resolute missionary heterosexual terrorized by the perverse society he is tricked into. In some ways, this switch of the "sexually normal" being the outsider makes for a start at horror being more welcoming to the homosexual. It is worth remembering that the sexually ambivalent characters are the ones we are meant to fear. Despite this, seeing a commune of unquestioned sexuality and gender starts to lead into reclamation.

### Reclaiming the Monster

From horror's birth, homosexuals (particularly men) took interest in the implications laid out to them. The death of the Hay's Code brought a change to how open horror could be, and what its audiences took it for. The most famous example of this is 1975's *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, the epitome of a cult classic. Others, like David Cronenberg's 1987 *The Fly* were accepted by their audience because they were seen as representative of the struggle of the AIDS crisis. Cronenberg himself says

frequent references to changes in traffic, emphasizing the drivers' possible destinations.

this wasn't his intention, but intent is not the only relevant part here. As we know, cinema is an exchange. There are the themes of sexual confusion (choosing between partners) and fear of infection within *The Fly* that many gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transsexual viewers could latch onto in its release. Whether it is as clear of a metaphor as other films does not matter ultimately if it is accepted by the community.

The gradual acceptance of gay men has been reflected on the screen as time passes. There is less needed to latch onto subtextual evidence, thus changing the position of the homosexual in horror. Rather than being a monster or a feminized victim, homosexuals are more often set up as characters whose

sexuality has no moral implications. Films such as *B&B* (2017), *Bit* (2019), *Hellbent* (2004), *Spiral* (2019), and others demonstrate that being gay in horror is no longer about hiding. Although this shift is welcomed by many, it is difficult not to be jolted by the sudden disappearance of the artful implication. Horror may not seem to appreciate subtlety, but we can see that homosexual characters in the genre have always tiptoed over careful taboos. The question is only what new taboos will arise in this new era. Films reflect their times; the films made in our modern world will show that in new ways we may not expect. But horror cinema will always have its origin in gay experience.

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