Horror Films

by Gary Morris

The coupling of homosexual and monster has been an enduring, if not always consciously acknowledged, cultural motif. Cinema has been an especially welcoming venue in this regard, populated as it is by a disproportionate number of queer artists working as directors, writers, set decorators, etc., and ideally positioned as a space in which gender anxieties can be explored and vented on a mass scale.

Coding the Queer as Monster

The monsters of cinema, indeed of popular culture in general, are troubled, and troubling, outsiders, their sexuality thwarted or altered, sometimes seductive and suave, other times repulsive and terrifying, but always threatening to the social and sexual order.

They can easily be read as doubles for societal views of homosexuals as predatory, amoral, perverse, possessed of secret supernatural powers, capable of--and very interested in--destroying "normal life" and toppling such vulnerable institutions as the nuclear family, the church, capitalism, the heterosexual paradigm, or a combination thereof.

Coding the queer as monster allows viewers the catharsis of experiencing the terror of a threat to "normal life," while insulating them against that threat by presenting it as a fantasy character or *demimondain* usually destroyed by film's end.

Queer Couples

One of the major strategies in the perceived queer monster's arsenal is replacing straight couples with gay or gay-coded ones. This was evident even in the silent era, in films such as Robert Weine's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1922), which presents one of the earliest of cinema's many "unwholesome" male couples--a sensitive, vulnerable younger man under the control of an older, more sophisticated "mentor" who lures his protégé into a terrifying dream world far from normalcy, that is, far from the heterosexual norm.

Gay director James Whale's *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) is one of the most direct expressions of this trope, with aged, corrupt, effeminate Dr. Praetorius (married but gay Ernest Thesiger) luring the nervous, neurotic Dr. Frankenstein (rumored bisexual Colin Clive) into a heady world of "gods and monsters."

But *Bride* also presents intriguing variations on the theme that would persist. It shows two major male couples in blasphemous alliance: Praetorius and Frankenstein, whose collaboration results in the unholy progeny of the "Bride" (who makes a memorable appearance in the film's witty assault on marriage); and a partnership of outsider-equals in the Frankenstein monster and the blind hermit, who briefly set up what is in effect a loving homosexual household before it is literally destroyed by the meddling of two straight townsmen.

Whale's *Old Dark House* (1932) has a similarly threatening male couple in the two main outsiders, the

inchoate butler Morgan (Boris Karloff) and the insane Saul (Brember Wills), whose death unleashes Morgan's deepest anguish and violence.

A subset of the queer male relationship is the basis of Tod Browning's *Dracula* (1932), that is, master and slave in a sadomasochistic relationship. Renfield's perpetually apologizing, groveling posture is contrasted throughout the film with Dracula's rigid uprightness as he commands, degrades, and ultimately enslaves Renfield, forcing him into all manner of depravities.

Queer Monsters as Predators

Society's idea of the homosexual as a kind of virus that wastes its victims and spreads its monstrosity unchecked requires that there be multiple--in fact endless--victims. (David Skal has explored the link between societal views of vampirism and AIDS.) Thus, the predatory Dracula must conquer London neck by neck, exercising his penetrative, pleasure-and-survival needs on men, women, and children; and, as Judith Halberstam has pointed out, in a way that is emphatically anti-procreation and anti-family.

The queer monster/corrupted straight victim relationship reappeared in further variations in later decades, where the corrupter is more of an authority figure than a monster, but still coded as queer.

During the 1950s, the low-budget studio American International Pictures specialized in a subgenre of horror in which a successful, middle-aged professional, often a scientist or trusted teacher, transforms a maladjusted youth under his (or her) care into a monster, playing off the then-current notion that older homosexuals were driven to "recruit" the young and vulnerable into their lifestyle.

I Was a Teenage Werewolf (1957) and *How to Make a Monster* (1958) present both a perverse male couple (scientist and assistant in the former, a make-up artist and assistant in the latter) and a robust but troubled youth who is forced to act out the couple's gruesome antisocial agenda.

Just as Dracula was compelled to find fresh victims, the scientist in *How to Make a Monster* demands a string of "boys" on whom to work his lethal magic. A lesbian variant on this conceit from the same period can be found in Herbert L. Strock's *Blood of Dracula* (1957), in which an unmarried female science teacher hypnotizes a female student into becoming a violent monster who does her bidding.

Lesbian Monsters

Until the 1970s, lesbian monsters were less visible in cinema than their male counterparts. The most important early image of the dyke vampire is in Lambert Hillyer's *Dracula's Daughter* (1935), which presents Countess Zaleska's (Gloria Holden) vampiric encounter with a beautiful, innocent young woman as an unmistakable homosexual seduction.

The female vampire who preys on other women has long been a staple of literature high and low, and is probably the most common image of the queer female monster in cinema.

In the 1960s and 1970s this character resurfaced in stylized but surprisingly sensual portrayals in films such as Roger Vadim's *Blood and Roses* (1961) and Harry Kumel's *Daughters of Darkness* (1971), in which the lesbian vampire is presented as irresistibly beautiful and stylish--and unapologetic--rather than homely and tormented as in *Dracula's Daughter.*

More model-beautiful vampires (some of the actresses had been *Playboy* bunnies) appear in Hammer Studio's "Carmilla" trilogy (based on J. Sheridan LeFanu's famous 1872 novel). Roy Ward Baker's *The Vampire Lovers* (1970), Jimmy Sangster's *Lust for a Vampire* (1971), and John Hough's *Twins of Evil* (1972) titillated both heterosexual male and lesbian audiences with images of sharp female teeth sinking into heaving breasts.

1980s and 1990s Horror

Cultural anxieties around the queer monster continued in films throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and persist today. The sleek, sexy female vampires of the 1960s continued to set the standard in films such as Tony Scott's *The Hunger* (1982), but queer horror could be found more often in subtext than text, despite a general loosening of cinematic standards.

Wes Craven's *Nightmare on Elm Street 2* (1982) features both an out homosexual in the form of a sadistic gym coach (who is brutally dispatched in a Grand Guignol shower scene) and a coded/closeted queer boy, Jesse (Mark Patton), whose outsiderness attracts the attention of the monster Freddy Krueger (Robert Englund).

Harry Benshoff reads the scene of the coach's death--which occurs through Freddy's inhabiting, that is, penetrating, Jesse--as a version of homosexual panic that results in Jesse's becoming a murderer. Freddy's function is both to unleash Jesse's potential homosexuality and to possess Jesse himself, an extension of the 1950s theme of the sophisticated older homosexual taking charge of a vulnerable, wavering younger man.

Queer auteur Joel Schumacher's *Lost Boys* (1987) transformed the teen drama popular in that decade into an ensemble of queer-coded vampire boys who often seem more interested in each other--after all, they have to seduce new "recruits" into their ranks--than in their nominal heterosexual relationships.

Neil Jordan's *Interview with the Vampire* (1994) exposed many of the tensions around the queer monster, both tantalizing viewers with a series of obviously queer relationships and dancing nervously around the details, as when it almost, but not quite, has Louis (Brad Pitt) and Armand (Antonio Banderas) kiss.

Porn, Exploitation, and Independent Horror Films

Porn, exploitation, and independent films have often provided a warmer haven for queer horror than mainstream cinema. Hardcore porn titles such as James Moss's *Dragula, Queen of the Vampires* (1973) and Roger Earl's *Gayracula* (1983) show that the vampire remains the gay monster of choice, even in disreputable genres.

A gay werewolf cult is the subject of Will Gould's sympathetic independent film *The Wolves of Kromer* (1998). Most recently, David DeCoteau, a former director of gay and straight porn, has expropriated formerly straight cultural spaces in a series of luridly homoerotic teen-horror programmers.

The Brotherhood (2000), *The Brotherhood 2: Young Warlocks* (2001), and *Voodoo Academy* (2000) are as much unabashed paeans to the post-adolescent underwear-clad male physique as they are horror films. (One critic disparagingly likened them to feature-length Calvin Klein commercials.)

Voodoo Academy is particularly outrageous in this regard, with a gay priest working for a female demon, both of whom caress their charges before transforming them into voodoo dolls. In the director's cut, the camera lovingly lingers on the handsome students as they writhe possessed in their beds in self-stimulating poses that recall the teasing postures found in porn films.

The fact that these films went directly to video without a regular theatrical release suggests the culture's reluctance to acknowledge such blatant displays of homoerotic horror in "approved" mainstream venues. The fact that they have been successful on video, acquiring a minor cult reputation, points to the culture's continued, if uneasy, accommodation of queer horror.

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