

Respectfully Representative: An Exploration of Horror's Impact on the Queer
Community

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Abstract

Queer representation has been present in the horror genre since its birth during the Gothic literature era. This thesis analyzes the history and cultural significance of queer horror. Through data from a survey to queer horror fans asking about their thoughts on the genre, this thesis justifies that respectful representation in the horror genre involves writing queer characters with the same respect as straight ones, and that monstrosity and suffering should never be the result of their queerness. This thesis includes a screenplay that utilizes the survey data results to illustrate the use respectful representation in a horror film.

Introduction

My passion for film began to develop when I started watching horror movies. In middle school, I became obsessed with learning how makeup artists used prosthetics to make their monsters look real. Eventually, my interest in storytelling formed while watching *The Walking Dead*, when I realized that the story was less about zombies and more about the human condition.

As I grew older, I began to explore and come to terms with my identity as a queer person. My love for film grew as well, causing me to take a more analytical approach to my favorite movies. I realized that many of my favorite horror films had homophobic and transphobic subtext imbued into them. What surprised me even more was that this realization didn't change how I felt about these films. If anything, I felt even more connected to horror, despite these films depicting people in my own community as monstrous.

I am not the only person who feels this way. In 2016, the streaming service Shudder released a reality competition series called *The Boulet Brothers' Dragula*, a drag competition similar to *RuPaul's Drag Race*, specifically catered toward alternative and horror-inspired drag artists. There are queer Facebook groups, Discord channels, and local book and film clubs dedicated to horror. Although this community of alternative and queer fans of horror is niche, it is thriving.

This piqued my interest in the genre. There is endless research interpreting how society's view of homosexuality has impacted horror, but very little research as to how horror has impacted the queer community. This is what this thesis aims to explore.

Through my research, I conducted a survey to determine how queer horror fans have been impacted by the genre's divisive history. Using this data, I have come up with ways in which horror filmmakers and writers can implement respectful representation into their work, utilizing input from their own fanbase.

In this thesis, I argue that, although respectful representation can be subjective, being intentional with writing queer characters with the same complexity and care as the others, and utilizing the LGBTQ+ perspective, is a good start to achieving respectful representation.

Methodology

This thesis project begins with an in-depth analysis of the history of queer representation in horror films, providing examples for the most common ways in which queerness and horror intersect. Furthermore, I provide a literature review for historically significant queer horror films, highlighting their methods and legacies. However, there is one missing element for discussions surrounding queer horror's impact: the queer horror fans' perspective.

To bridge this gap, I wrote a six-question survey for self-proclaimed queer horror fans. The questions included...

1. What initially made you interested in horror?
2. What does horror mean to you?
3. What effect do you believe your identity as a member of the LGBTQ+ community has had on the way you perceive horror?

4. What criteria do you think a film should have to count as positive queer representation?
5. What horror film do you believe contains the best queer representation and why?
6. What horror film do you believe contains the worst queer representation and why?

This survey was sent to the Facebook group “The Big Gay Horror Fan Club” and its corresponding Discord group, as well as MTSU’s “Queer Media Student Alliance,” aimed toward queer students in the College of Media and Entertainment.

This survey was submitted to the IRB on August 27th, 2025 and was approved on October 9th, 2025. This survey was live for eleven days, and despite reminder posts being sent a week in, only eight responses were submitted. Most likely, the lack of responses is due to the limited sample size and a lack of compensation for completing the survey. If the survey had been sent to more communities, there may have been more responses. However, finding online spaces dedicated to queer horror fans was more difficult than expected. “The Big Gay Horror Fan Club” was the only online, active group I could find. The only other groups for queer horror fans were either an in-person book club located in Glasgow, UK, or online book clubs restricted to paying members through Patreon. Reaching out to these groups would have been outside the scope and financial means of this project.

It is also worth noting that a contributing factor to the limited responses may be the current political climate surrounding the LGBTQ+ community. With the powers currently in charge of the US government being overwhelmingly malicious to the queer

community, it is possible that participants were anxious to open themselves up to potential scrutiny.

Additionally, one participant made clear their grievances with Microsoft Forms while completing the survey on iPhone. When they would leave their browser tab to Google something that they wanted to mention in the survey, their responses would be deleted. This participant made several attempts to complete the survey, but the application's deletion system caused several problems. Perhaps if a different survey system with a more mobile-friendly interface were used, more responses would have been submitted.

Using the results from this survey, I determined how horror films can improve their use of queer representation to be the most respectful toward their LGBTQ+ viewers, while not erasing queerness from horror or pandering to its audience. This was partially determined through the participants' input and partially determined by analyzing the films that participants suggested.

With the literature review and the survey results, I wrote a short, eight-page horror screenplay utilizing the aforementioned elements of respectful representation. By writing a screenplay with the intention of being respectfully representative, I want to illustrate that a horror film can be effective and frightening while still implementing queer themes with decorum.

Gothic Literature and the Rise of Queercoding

One can trace back the birth of the horror genre to the mid-1700s with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, sparking the rise of the Gothic literature movement. As

Fiona Robertson describes it, Gothic literature is “a type of fiction which invites readers’ fears and anxieties in highly stylized mystery tales, using a limited set of plots, settings, and character-types, and including an element of history” (70). This book was one of the first to utilize grotesque subject matter, such as ghosts and a haunted grave, in its storytelling, paving the way for the use of taboo and grotesque subjects to emphasize its themes.

According to eighteenth-century literature researcher Maximilian E. Novak, “grotesque” means “the combination of conventionalized organizational structures, ideas and characters in fiction dealing with the supernatural and bizarre from the time of Horace Walpole to the present day” (50). In eighteenth-century culture, anything from demons to witches and ghosts would have been considered grotesque.

The Castle of Otranto also utilizes another taboo subject in its storytelling: incest. In this book, Prince Conrad dies right before his wedding. His father, Manfred, becomes obsessed with continuing his legacy and attempts to marry Conrad’s fiancée, Isabella. She frequently refers to herself as part of the family, with many claiming that it is wrong for Conrad to pursue his “contracted daughter,” despite there being no blood relation. The use of incest in this book paved the way for unconventional sexuality in Gothic literature moving forward. George Haggerty describes Walpole as among the first “homosexual novelists,” stating that “[they] offer in their fictions a gruesome picture of the nature of human experience...their dark and brooding sensuality, however, these works are liberating – not only because they were able to bring such issues – if not *the* issue – out into the open, but also because they challenge conservative opinion about both the nature of literary expression and the terms of ‘private’ experience” (350).

Unconventional sexuality refers to plot points surrounding sex in a manner that was considered unconventional at the time the media was released. One of the most significant examples of unconventional sexuality in queer media comes from Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. This infamous story follows a group of men attempting to hunt the vampire Dracula as he preys on the citizens of London. This book utilizes unconventional sexuality in several ways, the most obvious being that Dracula has three wives. In nineteenth-century Europe, polygamy was far from the norm.

Primarily, *Dracula* is about Victorian womanhood. Dracula's wives are sexually promiscuous and violent, using men for sex and then killing them. According to Stephanie Demetrakopoulos, these women represent how the Victorians viewed lower-class women. "In the Victorian view, only fallen (and hence lower-class) women enjoyed sex" (106). Dracula corrupts them, and they were transformed from fine Victorian women to insatiable creatures of the night. One of these women is Lucy, who Stoker describes as sweet and pure before her interaction with Dracula. On the other hand, Van Helsing's wife, Mina, represents the other side of Victorian womanhood, the "good women." Mina abhors Dracula and resists his temptations, looking back on her interactions with him with repugnance. She represents a pure, nonsexual Victorian woman who rejects being corrupted by vampirism. Mina is strong-willed, empathetic, and intelligent, and her abilities are the reason that Dracula dies. "[Lucy] is excessively and solely 'feminine' while Mina has, we are told, a 'man's brain--a brain that a man should have were he much gifted--and a woman's heart.'" (Demetrakopoulos, 109).

Queer theorist Jack Halberstam argues that *Dracula* represents abhorrent sexuality, stating, "Vampire sexuality blends power and femininity within the same body

and then marks that body as distinctly alien” (344). Dracula sucks blood from virginal women and turns them into vampires. With that transformation, they become seductresses and huntresses, giving power to their feminine nature. In literature during this time, femininity in relation to power was incredibly uncommon. In addition, the concept of turning someone into a vampire, infusing them with new life, is inherently maternal. In vampire fiction, the process of turning into a vampire is treated as a rebirth. Much like how a mother creates life, so too does the vampire. Although *Dracula* is not explicitly queer, the fusion of masculinity and femininity was unheard of at the time.

The Castle of Otranto sparked a literature movement that utilized fearful and uncomfortable subject matter in its storytelling. Death and sexuality were generally unmentionable in this time, so being discussed in literature in any context was bound to spark discomfort in the readers. According to literature researcher Debbie Joyce Chung, “‘The horror’ in eighteenth-century Gothic literature often pertains to incest, homosexuality, revolution, the pollution of lineage, and the disruption of the linear succession of property” (173). Merging the masculine and the feminine crossed gender norms in new ways. Utilizing incest and polygamy as a plot point wildly taboo. These were methods of intentionally making a scary story even more uncomfortable to the eighteenth-century audience.

One could argue that this use of unconventional sexuality would lead to the development of queercoding in media. Queercoding, according to Dictionary.com, is “the act of implying that a fictional character is LGBT+ through deliberate subtext or the use of stereotypes without confirming this directly.” This could refer to anyone who is neither heterosexual nor cisgender. Nowadays, in an era in which the LGBTQ+ community is

better understood, one might consider unconventional sexuality to be distinct from queercoding. However, in the era of Gothic literature, unconventional sexuality would consist of any semblance of sexuality outside of that era's standards, thus lumping in queerness with the likes of rape and incest. Conventional Victorian sexuality was always heterosexual and, according to historian and gender studies expert Nancy F. Cott, generally considered "passionless" (8).

As a result of this view and the Victorians' limited understanding of psychology, there was little nuance in unconventional sexuality. Historian Elizabeth Fee explains that their lack of knowledge about sexuality and psychology even resulted in the Victorians believing that "nymphomania, pyromania, erotomania, and kleptomania were all forms of mania and occupied a similar theoretical position" (637).

Despite the moral implications of homosexuality during the Gothic literature movement, there was significant queer-coding in these stories. Before this era, there were no queer characters. In the article "Uncanny Recognition: Queer Theory's Debt to the Gothic," Mair Rigby suggests that rather than viewing these depictions as problematic or repressive, they instead provide context for how queerness in literature has developed. "Gothic horror fiction has given queer theorists a language (metaphors, allusions, tropes, and figures) which they have drawn upon to speak about queer experience and produce critical narratives" (54). Ultimately, although these queer-coded characters were portrayed negatively, it was among the first media to depict queerness in any way. With this, literature researchers and historians have a more concrete basis as to how queer representation has evolved. Because of the taboo nature of homosexuality, its representation by heterosexual authors will be perceived negatively. In this case,

queercoded characters in Gothic literature have historically been depicted as villainous or monstrous. However, as horror media evolved, so did the use of unconventional sexuality.

As horror began to take form in film in the early 20th century, queercoding was the most commonly used form of unconventional sexuality, rather than incest and rape, although all were still prevalent in some way. Harry Benshoff, best known for his work analyzing how modern horror converges with queer culture, expands on the discussion of queerness in horror. He claims that there are four ways in which horror films and homosexuality converge: The Queer Character, The Queer Monster, The Queer Creator, and The Queer Viewer. Understanding these categories allows for a clearer view of queerness's impact on the horror genre, and subsequently, the impact that horror has on the LGBTQ+ community.

The Queer Character

The queer character in a horror film is either explicitly or implicitly queer. Benshoff states, "These characters might be victims, passers-by, or the monsters themselves, although gay and lesbian people (to this point in time) have never been placed in the role of the normative hero or heroine" (231). For much of media history, characters who were explicitly queer were few and far between. However, the few that did exist tended to suffer or die early into the story, with the trope taking the name "bury your gays." A recent example of the queer victim happens in Zach Cregger's 2025 horror film *Weapons*. The character Marcus introduces his husband and, in the very same scene, Marcus becomes possessed and murders him.

One could argue that the queer victim may also apply to a victim who suffers in a manner that is reminiscent of the queer experience. A prime example is body horror, first introduced by David Cronenberg with the release of *The Fly* in 1958. Body horror is a subgenre in which the horror centered around mutilation of the human body. Early body horror films revolved around the idea of another species overtaking one's body, causing a painful and involuntary physical transformation.

In his book *Body Gothic*, Xavier Aldana Reyes suggests that David Cronenberg's *The Fly* (1986) remake is an allegory for the AIDS epidemic, capturing how gay men felt about contracting the disease during the outbreak. "[*The Fly* is] a study of the social and corporeal effects of a life-threatening virus like AIDS expressed in the relatively safe language of science fiction and the fantastic, or as an exploration of the increasingly life-changing and controlling role of science on the mutable human body" (58). Whether intended by Cronenberg or not, the resemblance of the AIDS epidemic remained, leaving gay viewers to feel like the film represented their fears.

A more well-known example of the queer character representing AIDS comes from *Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge* (1985), known by horror fans as the gayest horror film ever made. The film's main character, Jesse, is heavily implied to be queer, being depicted as feminine and weak, and Freddy Krueger's character is implied to represent AIDS, taking over Jesse's body during intimate and inconvenient moments. Queer horror fans have made a different interpretation, however. As stated by Dr. Mike Thorn "...The film has been reclaimed by gay horror fans as a meaningful depiction of a sexual identity crisis wherein Jesse is understood as a 'scream queen' who (almost) fulfills the role of 'final girl'" (886).

The concept of body horror shares similarities with the transgender experience. According to the National Library of Medicine, gender dysphoria is an incongruence between a person's perceived gender identity and biological sex. This means that a transgender person can feel like they belong in the wrong body, and oftentimes will undergo social, hormonal, or surgical procedures to feel more comfortable in their body. As a concept, body horror is frightening in a similar way. Its fear is derived from the discomfort of being out of control of one's body, a feeling that transgender people often feel about themselves. Body horror often centers around an invader taking over the body, such as *The Thing* (1982) and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), much like how a transgender person may feel like an outsider in their own body.

Based on these examples, it is apparent that the miseries endured by horror characters are undeniably queer-coded. Whether a gay character is the first to die in a slasher film or agonizes from a monster representing the miseries associated with queerness, these characters tend to suffer as a result of their homosexuality.

The Queer Creator

Benshoff notes that queerness and film can intersect when a queer creator, producer, or actor consciously or subconsciously implements elements of their identity into their art. He mentions the auteur theory, in which the film's director is the primary force for the style of the film. As Jeff Menne puts it, "In its boldest form, auteur theory holds that the unity of a film—its totality of decisions—must be rooted in the director's agency" (36). In this context, a queer director may infuse elements of queerness into their film as part of their artistic vision.

Such is true for breakout filmmaker Jane Schoenbrun, a transfeminine nonbinary director whose experience as a queer person is evident in all of her work, even those with plots unrelated to queerness. Schoenbrun's breakout film, *We're All Going to the World's Fair* (2021), has a plot not directly related to queerness, yet is clearly rooted in Schoenbrun's experience as a trans person. This film follows a teenage girl, Casey, who takes part in an internet horror challenge, following her lonely journey in making videos documenting her experience. This film centers on feelings of loneliness and finding companionship through the internet, as well as the "creepypasta" trend that was popular on the internet during the late 2000s. Throughout this trend, people wrote horror stories and emailed them to strangers, telling them to forward the message to as many people as possible. Although most people knew that the stories were fictional, many teenagers, like Casey, believed that they were true.

Elements of this film seem to align with the experience of a queer teenager during the early days of the internet. For example, Casey immerses herself in the internet trend in hopes of finding community, possibly because she lacks community in her offline life. Many queer people during this era of the early internet likely relate, as finding friends in niche corners of the internet could be easier than finding friends in day-to-day life.

Schoenbrun acknowledges this, saying in an interview, "[*We're All Going to the World's Fair*] is very much a film about the desire to have a language that doesn't exist. Speaking about dysphoria is imbued in the project itself, not so much what any character does. It describes looking for yourself in fiction" (2022). Whether a queer filmmaker tells a story explicitly about their queerness, their queerness has influence over how the story is told.

Schoenbrun's second film, *I Saw the TV Glow* (2024), is a more direct metaphor to the transgender experience. The film is a psychological horror about two teenagers, Owen and Maddy, who discover that they actually belonged in their favorite TV show's universe, the Pink Opaque, and that the show's antagonist, Mr. Melancholy, transported them to the wrong universe. Maddy, miserable and unsatisfied with her life, is buried alive and reenters the Pink Opaque. She returns years later to convince Owen to join her. Owen is also unsatisfied with his life, but refuses to leave everything behind.

This film is undeniably an allegory about transgender pain. In the finale, Owen breaks down in tears while at work, telling everyone that he was dying, then cuts his chest open with a boxcutter in the bathroom. Because Owen rejected the idea that he could be living a life that never belonged to him, he suffers.

Maddy, an open lesbian, embraces who she is and escapes to the Pink Opaque, living a satisfying and full life, while Owen, someone who does little self-reflection on his identity, ignores the call to begin again elsewhere and allows himself to suffer. Maddy and Owen represent the duality of transgender life, with Maddy representing the desire to cut off relationships and destroy one's current life to live one that matches their own identity, while Owen represents the desire to keep the peace and ignore the need to transition and live openly.

Schoenbrun has spoken openly about how their experiences as a transgender person have shaped the film. In an interview with John Boone, they state, "I think that Owen and Maddy are two sides of my own experience with the process of gender transition...for me, in my own un-repression and the early stages of the transition that this movie was written to capture, both of these perspectives were very present for me:

The desire to stay home... and the desire to not leave behind everything that you've known of yourself and your community and your family and life” (2024).

Perhaps what makes this film stand out from the rest of queer horror is the fact that it was written from the perspective of a transgender person, someone who understands dysphoria and queerness in a visceral and personal way that few other filmmakers understand. Although transgenderism is not new to the realm of horror, this film was one of the first that tackled it from a lens of compassion toward the transgender characters. Here, Owen and Maddy are not the villains, rather, the monster is the manifestation of the fear of losing everything as a result of transitioning. Although the audience may judge Owen for rejecting the idea of living a better life, the film also frames Maddy’s request with a context that makes Owen’s hesitance understandable. Although returning to one’s true reality may seem like a no-brainer, the idea of potentially dying and leaving everything behind just to enter a TV show seems impossible enough for Owen’s reaction to be justified. The film frames Owen’s choice in a similar way to how transgender people reflect on their own decision to transition. Although it would make them happier and more comfortable in their skin, many need to sacrifice friends, family, and safety to live a more comfortable life. Schoenbrun treats the weight of this decision with the respect and realism it is owed, in a way that may help a cisgender audience recognize how difficult jumping into a transition may be.

I Saw the TV Glow is an example of respectful representation through the lens of a queer filmmaker. The film does not imply that being transgender is horrific, nor does it dehumanize Maddy or Owen, and their experiences are grounded in reality, written by a person who understands the feeling firsthand.

While Schoenbrun's films provide the most respectful representation, the genre owes a great debt to Don Mancini. He is an openly gay filmmaker and creator of the *Child's Play* franchise, which follow a violent doll imbued with the soul of a murderer. The first several installments of the franchise did not include specific queer representation, aside from subtextual themes that viewers could interpret. For example, the concept of a soul being stuck in a different, uncanny vessel could represent transgenderism.

However, as the franchise continues to evolve, the use of queerness has become progressively more concrete and matches the progression of acceptance toward LGBTQ+ people in media at the time. *Bride of Chucky* (1998) featured its first explicitly gay character, David, a side character who does not survive the film, meaning that he falls into the "queer victim" stereotype. However, this type of explicit representation was very uncommon during the late 90s. In an interview with the entertainment news site *Looper*, Mancini explained how the inclusion of a gay character was initially a way to keep the writing interesting, but developed the franchise's queerness through its casting. "I wrote it for Jennifer Tilly and she brought an aspect of gay culture to it because of her persona in gay culture and the movie *Bound* and all of that. Alexis Arquette and even John Ritter, because of the character he played on *Three's Company*, he had certain connections to gay culture already. So, I was like, 'Let's do this!' I think it made it more interesting, so I just decided, 'Well, I'm just going to increasingly brand my franchise as the gay horror franchise.' Why not? I'm in a position to do it, so I'm just going to do it" (2021).

In the following film, *Seed of Chucky* (2004), Chucky and Tiffany have a gender-fluid child, Glenn/Glenda. Needless to say, genderfluid characters have always

been few and far-between, especially in 2004. As told by Mancini in an interview with the *New York Magazine*, “What if Chucky had a gay kid?” To me, that’s hilarious ... As a gay guy myself, it’s fun to get that kind of material into a mainstream movie in a subversive way. You know, I see so many gay-themed movies suffocated by their good intentions” (2004).

The trend of including queer characters in the franchise has continued with the *Chucky* (2021) TV series. The protagonist is a gay middle schooler, which is rare, even in an age where queer representation is getting more common. Many filmmakers feel hesitant to write minors as queer, so the choice to make the main character a queer 14-year-old was quite progressive.

Mancini’s approach differs from other horror creators in that he had no intention of erasing the history of the queer villain. Instead, he wanted to embrace it for the sake of intriguing storytelling.

The Queer Villain

In the horror film, the monster is often representative of the “other.” People tend to fear what they don’t understand. Therefore, horror films break societal norms to tap into this human discomfort for the misunderstood. Breaking gender norms is one way in which horror films attempt to make the audience uncomfortable. This, as it pertains to queer-coded characters, is where the idea that horror films poorly represent the LGBTQ+ community originates. Historically, horror has selected traits of the queer community and exaggerated them into something disturbing, rather than implementing positive and accurate representations of the LGBTQ+ community.

One of the more infamous examples of the queer monster is Norman Bates in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, a film deeply in touch with the Gothic, utilizing plots centered around incest and crossdressing. In this film, Bates is a motel owner who, after murdering his mother, starts dressing like her, re-creating her as an alternate personality. When his mother's personality takes over, he kills women to whom he is attracted. Bates only does this when he is in drag, which in and of itself makes him a queer-coded villain, but Bates's identity revelation is also indicative of the homosexual subtext. His identity is revealed against his will at the end of the film. He attempted to come across as a regular, heteronormative person, and his "coming out" was out of his control, a significantly common scenario for queer people. As expressed by Jeremy Russell Miller, "because the characters are presented as actively hiding their [gender-nonconforming] identities from others, they must be trying to deceive others" (109).

Bates falls between masculine and feminine. He cross-dresses and considers himself to be, in some way, female. However, his aggression and violence are considered masculine traits. As Diane Negra states, "Our cultural commitment to preserving the gender split and dichotomizing human sexuality leads us to criminalize middle-range behaviors that span masculinity and femininity more than the extremes" (198). Simply put, in a society in which the feminine and the masculine are so opposing, characters that exist within the in-between are more likely to create a sense of unease in a heteronormative audience.

Marjorie Garber supposes that many would consider a woman's desire to be male is naturalized by society, given the power that men have over women, stating that "penis envy is the very cornerstone of female subjectivity" (118). However, a man's desire to be

a woman is unjustified, given their natural position in our society. This would explain why horror films often portray male characters with feminine traits. In a society of male privilege in which people consider masculinity to be more powerful than femininity, one may believe that any sensible person would strive to lean toward the power of masculinity. A masculine female character would be normal, possibly even heroic, but a feminine male character is unnatural and unsettling. As Carol Clover states, “It is the male killer’s tragedy that his incipient femininity is not reversed but completed (castration) and the Final Girl’s victory is that her incipient masculinity is not thwarted but realized (phallicization).” (50).

Upon analyzing Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960) in relation to Gus Van Sant’s adaptation, *Psycho* (1998), queer theory specialist David Klein Martins makes similar observations about the difference between the masculine woman and the feminine man in horror. Van Sant, an openly gay man, redirected the source of queerness in this film from Bates to the heroine, Lila. The film portrays Bates in a traditionally masculine and heterosexual way, such as showing Bates with pornographic magazines depicting women. Generally, this film emphasizes the “male gaze” element, depicting Bates as a sexually depraved man. Instead, Lila is portrayed as butch, with more masculine clothing and a less feminine attitude. All around, this remake represents queer people in a more positive light than the original, changing the queer-coded character from the villain to the hero. However, switching the queerness from a feminine man to a masculine woman also reinforces the idea that masculinizing a woman is less threatening than feminizing a man.

While *Psycho* initiated the genderqueer serial killer stereotype, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) has birthed several horror tropes. The film follows a group of

teenagers who go on a road trip and explore an abandoned house. There, they are slaughtered one-by-one by a cannibalistic murder family. The most recognizable character, Leatherface, is a speechless chainsaw-wielding, and gender non-specific villain. His amorphous silhouette and the apron he wears emasculates him, making him neither discernably feminine or masculine. His chainsaw, like many weapons in horror, is considered a phallic weapon, representing masculine power. According to Clover, "...the use of noisy chainsaws and power drills and the nonuse of such relatively silent means as bow and arrow, spear, catapult, and even swords, would seem to suggest that closeness and tactility are also at issue" (198). Here, the chainsaw is a symbol for power, chaos, and forceful taking. In this film, however, the chainsaw is dismantled, meaning a reduction in this masculine power, making Leatherface a more androgynous villain. The horror is neither feminine or masculine. Leatherface's nondescript gender and silhouette make him more unsettling to a heteronormative audience, who is used to a prominently masculine monstrosity.

Although serial killers in horror tend to represent the genderqueer, some monsters are more aligned with the homosexual. Few tropes in the horror genre are as consistent with its homosexual subtext as the vampire. According to Gordon Melton in *The Vampire Book: The Encyclopedia of the Undead*, "[Vampirism] became a symbol of the release of sexual behavior common to many societies. Homosexual behavior had always been suppressed during the centuries of Christian dominance in the West, and thus, it could be expected that heightened sensuality associated with vampirism, some homosexual elements might be present—and such has been the case" (301). The very first English

vampire poem, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Christabel" written in 1897, was about a lesbian vampire relationship. Queer subtext in all forms of vampire media is undeniable.

Eventually, the use of queer representation in vampire media shifted. Rather than implying that the vampires' unconventional sexuality stemmed from their monstrosity, the homosexual subtext became more normalized. The vampires were not queer because they were monsters; they embraced their queerness because they were not held to the same societal standards as humans. Such is the case with *The Lost Boys* (1986), *Fright Night* (1985, 2011), as well as the film *What We Do in the Shadows* (2014) and its TV series spinoff *What We Do in the Shadows* (2019). The characters in these films embrace their taboo lifestyles because they have no reason to conform to humanity anymore.

As vampire films have developed, the queer subtext has become textual. Anne Rice's *Vampire Chronicles* (1976) is a franchise that illustrates the vampire's core queer nature, while also exhibiting a strikingly accurate example of the development of queer horror through time. Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* was published in 1976, seven years after the Stonewall Riot, right in the middle of the AIDS epidemic. Tension surrounding the LGBTQ+ community was high, so a book by a straight author following two queercoded characters was unusual. The story is about Louis and Lestat, two vampiric immortal companions, bordering on the point of obsession, which can be read as homoerotic. The book follows Louis's perspective, a plantation owner living in New Orleans, who is approached by Lestat, a flamboyant and confident vampire who stalks the night, killing and torturing his victims. Lestat turns Louis into a vampire, they live with one another, "adopt" a child by turning a 5-year-old girl into a vampire, and eventually break up.

According to Haggerty, Rice's depiction of Lestat is reminiscent of society's perception of gay men in the 70s. Lestat shows Louis a freer, more glamorous life than the one he currently has. He is immortal, can fly, read minds, and can run faster than any human can. He is not shackled by the monotony of human life. To some level, this resembles the freedom that queer people have over straight people, not being confined to gender roles, especially in a time when gender roles were so prevalent. According to Haggerty, "I think Rice's vampires express our culture's secret desire for and secret fear of the gay man; the need to fly with him beyond the confines of heterosexual convention and bourgeois family life to an exploration of unauthorized desires, and at the same time to taste his body and his blood; to see him bleed and watch him succumb to death-in-life" (6).

As Louis's rose-colored glasses fade, he realizes that Lestat, and vampire life in general is not as glamorous as he once thought. He is uncomfortable with the innate violence he must enact to survive. At the end of the day, the vampire has freedom and power that the human does not, but must return to the shadows once the day begins, much like how queer people were perceived in the 70s. Despite their freedom from gender norms, they lack the ability to openly and safely express themselves.

At the time, society viewed homosexuality as a choice, and that their queerness was an intentional decision to follow sin. Lestat represents the seductive and dangerous gay man, confesses his nature to the misled and vulnerable Louis, distraught and lonely from the death of his brother. In his state of emotional distress, Louis gives in, deciding to join Lestat. Much like how society viewed homosexuality in the 70s, vampirism was a choice made by someone uninformed and vulnerable, influenced by a predatory seducer.

Interview with the Vampire (2022) took an entirely different approach to the story. Rather than Louis being a plantation owner, he was now a black man who owned a brothel, and his relationship with Lestat was now explicitly homosexual. This adaptation is unique in that it recontextualizes Louis and Lestat's relationship, both with one another and with themselves, in a way that normalizes their homosexuality without erasing the core theme of queerness relating to monstrosity.

In this adaptation, the audience sees Louis as he struggles in his personal life. Before meeting Lestat, Louis feels isolated from the rest of the world. His mother blames him for his brother's suicide, he struggles to suppress his sexuality, and he experiences racial discrimination every single day. When Lestat proposes vampirism to Louis, he tells him that he will be something beyond human. His life will improve, he will be stronger, faster, and immortal. He finishes his proposal by asking Louis to be his immortal companion. Not only will Louis advance to a more powerful version of himself in a world where he is constantly seeking power that he cannot attain, but he will finally be with someone who sees and respects him. Louis turning to vampirism is a result of society casting him away, so it is only natural that he joins the one person who makes him feel at home.

This show continues to inextricably link queerness with monstrosity, much like the film and books do. The exception is that here, the audience sees the story through a queer perspective. Even if Louis had not become a vampire, it would not have erased his queerness. Instead, he would have continued to live as an outcast without the companionship of someone like him.

In the *Interview with the Vampire* franchise, vampirism represents where queer people go when they are shunned by society. It represents turning away from heteronormative society, recognizing that they may never be viewed as “normal” again. Louis’s choice to become a vampire also represents the decision to embrace his homosexuality. The show adaptation shows vampirism through the lens of a queer person, whereas the book series views it through the straight eye, in which vampires are free and powerful, but eventually end up hiding away from the rest of society. This duality of representation perfectly encapsulates the evolution of queer media. Before, filmmakers told stories through a heteronormative lens, but as film progressed, so did the ability to expand perspective.

The homosexual subtext in vampire media is so ingrained in the fabric of its existence that, when this subtext is removed, it also removes a key aspect of what makes vampires frightening. This is most apparent in Stephanie Meyer’s series *Twilight*, a book series (2005-2008) and its subsequent film adaptations (2008-2013). Meyer is a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who writes her vampire characters with a very surface-level monstrosity. Here, vampires and werewolves are not only of no threat to humanity, but they are also shining heroes and saviors, literally speaking. Vampires even sparkle in the sun, rather than bursting into flames.

Straight relationships in vampire media are very common. According to Kelly Budruweit, when teenage vampires are depicted as love interests, they exist under the “bad boy” stereotype. “[They] never quite lose the aura of danger that accompanies vampirism: they often ‘fall off the wagon’ by going back to hurting people in one way or another” (275). The difference with *Twilight* is that Edward Cullen never comes across as

threatening to Bella or to the audience. Instead, every difference between vampires and humans is treated as an improvement, rather than a “curse” as vampire media has historically portrayed it. The *Twilight* series shows that when a vampire’s sexuality is watered down into something consumable and nonthreatening, stripping any sense of danger, queerness, or unconventionality, the vampire also becomes stripped of what initially made it monstrous.

However, others have argued that *Twilight* carries the same queer subtext as other vampire films. Actress Kristen Stewart, who plays Bella Swan in the series, believes that *Twilight* is queer, stating, “It’s such a gay movie. I mean, Jesus Christ, Taylor [Lautner] and Rob [Pattinson] and me, and it’s so hidden and not OK. I mean, a Mormon woman wrote this book. It’s all about oppression, about wanting what’s going to destroy you. That’s a very Gothic, gay inclination that I love” (2024). Kristen Stewart openly identifies as queer, and her interpretation of the films further emphasizes the concept that a film’s meaning is partially dependent on its audience’s interpretation. Additionally, this analysis of the franchise implies that vampirism, as a concept, cannot truly be separated from its homosexual roots. Even the straightest vampire stories are queer, not in their content, but in the fabric of the vampirism. The secrets and the danger of being discovered are all synonymous with the queer experience.

The Queer Viewer

The final way in which homosexuality converges with horror is through the lens of the queer viewer. It’s no secret that the interpretation of a story is dependent on the interpreter. A person’s experience shapes them and the way they view the world around

them, including their perspective on media. A person may assume that a film with an ambiguous ending actually ends in a way that feels most satisfying or relatable to them.

Benshoff suggests that if Roland Barthes's fashion theory is applied to film, then one can assume that a film is nothing but abstract notions signifying meaning brought by our interpretation of the real world. Barthes's book *The Fashion System* (1967) describes the semiotics of fashion as a concept in which a person can communicate their cultural, social, and economic standing through their clothing. A person can make interpretations about another person's life through observing what they wear. The same goes for film, in that a person can interpret meaning in a film based on their own personal experiences. Depending on a person's interpretation of the world, the meaning of the film is changed. There would be no correct or incorrect interpretation; it is entirely up to the viewer.

This being said, the concept of truth within connotation has allowed filmmakers and TV executives to imply queerness to draw in LGBTQ+ viewers, only to then deny any canon representation. Notably, this was prevalent in shows during the late 2000s to early 2010s, such as *Supernatural* and *Sherlock*. Oftentimes, this would lead queer fans to write their own versions of the story in which the characters are together, widely known as fanfiction.

As Monique Franklin states in *Queerbaiting and Fandom: Teasing Fans Through Homoerotic Possibilities*, "Queer fan readings combine celebration and critique, celebrating the queerness they find in the text while highlighting its limited exploration by expanding on it themselves. The act of creating, sharing, and enjoying these readings was thus presented as a challenge to the validity of a default heteronormative interpretation and the role of the producers as a final voice of authority on a text's

meaning” (42). Despite a lack of canon representation, fanfiction allows queer fans to build community with one another over a shared interest.

The *Hannibal* franchise is one that best illustrates these concepts. Every installment ties to either the queer creator, character, villain, or viewer, and its evolution demonstrates how queer horror has developed as time passes.

The Silence of the Lambs and the Hannibal Franchise

The *Hannibal* (1986) film franchise, based on Thomas Harris’s book series of the same name (1981), has a history of both respectful and disrespectful representation. Its long and varied lifespan acts as an example as to how queer representation has developed throughout horror film history. The *Hannibal* franchise has been in the hands of many creators. A straight man has directed every movie in the franchise, with every film touching on queer themes in some manner.

These films ranged in delicacy and respect toward the topic. Jonathan Demme’s *The Silence of the Lambs* attempted to clarify that the cross-dressing villain was not transgender, but his overwhelmingly queer characteristics caused that sentiment to be lost on many viewers. The antagonist, Buffalo Bill, much like Norman Bates, fits the stereotype of the cross-dressing serial killer. He kidnaps and flays women, sewing their skin into a dress for himself. This film makes a point to specify that Bill is not “a real transsexual,” and that he is trying to find his place in the world. Regardless, Bill’s more monstrous traits are those that align with his queerness. His entire reasoning behind killing women is to be as in-touch with his femininity as possible. In one scene, Bill is almost completely naked, revealing that he had a vaginoplasty, and makes sexual

comments about himself. Although not specified in the film, Thomas Harris's *The Silence of the Lambs* (1988) book reveals that Bill had male partners. Buffalo Bill's desire to understand his own identity drives this narrative. In a frenzy of confused identity, he leans into a feminine persona, one that drives his intent to kill.

One could argue that *The Silence of the Lambs* proves both Negra and Garber's point with the distinction between Clarice Starling and Buffalo Bill. Clarice, the female protagonist, both dresses masculinely and has many traditionally masculine traits, such as a dedication to her career and minimal desire for men. Neither Clarice nor Bill fit within traditional gender norms, but Clarice's masculinity serves as a factor in her heroism, and Bill's femininity makes him more unsettling. Alternatively, Clover argues that the femininity versus masculinity in this film is a commentary on functional sexuality, "It is worth remembering that in the long and rich tradition of which he is a member, the issue would appear to not be homosexuality and not heterosexuality but the failure to achieve functional sexuality of any kind" (233). With this interpretation, Demme's distinction between Clarice and Bill was about balancing a healthy sexual identity, rather than making a statement on the respectable masculine female and deplorable feminine male.

More installments in the Hannibal franchise utilizing similar themes include Michael Mann's *Manhunter* and Brett Ratner's *Red Dragon*. These films utilize a plot point in which the FBI publicly announces that the serial killer Francis Dolarhyde is queer and sexually assaulting his male victims to make him angry and potentially reveal himself. Both films generally have the same plot and are based on the same book. Despite *Manhunter*'s status as a cult classic today, it was a box office failure upon release, only grossing about \$8.6 million, compared to *Red Dragon*'s \$93 million domestic gross,

according to Box Office Mojo. In *Red Dragon*, Dolarhyde invades FBI investigator Will Graham's home. In defense, he uses homophobic slurs against his son, in hopes of triggering Dolarhyde's trauma from verbal abuse and throw him off. Director Brett Ratner has a history of homophobia. A *Hollywood Reporter* article states that in 2011, he made homophobic remarks in an interview resulted in his firing from producing the Oscars. Elliot Page also stated in a Facebook post that Ratner outed him as gay in front of their entire film crew.

Much like how a queer filmmaker imbues their work with queer subtext, a homophobic filmmaker can imbue their work with homophobic subtext.

In almost every depiction, Hannibal Lecter is queercoded. He is a man with a sense of distinguished style, a love for fine art, and a well-versed vocabulary. He embraces both his masculine and feminine sides, to an extent in which characters in canon assume he is queer. As stated by Geoff Klock, "Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde loved men, and so our modern ideas of homosexuality and aestheticism are entwined" (83).

In 2013, Bryan Fuller, an openly gay man, developed the TV show *Hannibal*. Although not a direct adaptation of the prior books or films, this show utilized characters and plots from the previous installments. Fuller took measures to make this show more diverse and inclusive. He gender-swapped some of the characters, such as changing Alan Bloom to Alana Bloom and Freddy Lounds to Freddie Lounds. Additionally, he altered the storyline in which the FBI calls Dolarhyde queer, and instead announced that he is a sexual deviant and a product of incest.

Fuller implements a homoerotic and romantic subtext between Hannibal Lecter and Will Graham. A point of development for both characters is their recognition of their mirror-like relationship, meaning that Will's empathy disorder allows him to see Hannibal for who he is, and Hannibal can relate to and nurture Will's homicidal desires. This similarity causes the two to bond with one another in ways they can't bond with others, with the two admitting that their "lines are beginning to blur." Editing choices also solidified this implication. A scene in which Will has sex with Margot Verger is spliced with a scene of Hannibal having sex with Alana Bloom, making it look as though Alana and Margot are together, and Will is with Hannibal. Later in the show, Alana and Margot become a couple, leaving Will and Hannibal for one another.

This being said, a murderous homosexual couple is not new in horror. What makes Lecter and Graham's relationship unique is how their story is told. As film and TV scholar Stephanie Graves says, "They are complicated characters whose forging of a homosocial family unit is portrayed in a positive manner, dispensing with the repeated internalized homophobia and transphobia evident in the Thomas Harris source text" (60). The audience can see how Graham and Lecter benefit from being with one another in their isolation. Graham is a troubled empath, suffering from the consequences of empathizing with the very serial killers he tracks down. Lecter, however, has been unable to find someone who can empathize with who he is on the inside. Lecter feels as though he has found someone who is intellectually stimulating and can relate to his innermost desires, while Graham appreciates that Lecter encourages him to explore his violent appetite. This show also humanizes these characters. Although they do terrible things, the

audience can recognize how these characters reached that point and empathize with their struggles.

Fuller was able to take the content from previous installments in the franchise and, with his perspective as a gay man, reconstruct the problematic elements of the story into something more respectful to the LGBTQ+ community without erasing the horror or boiling the characters down into more palatable representations. The *Hannibal* franchise shows the development of queer representation in horror throughout time and through the lens of different filmmakers. *Manhunter* and *The Silence of the Lambs* likely had no intention of causing harm to the LGBTQ+ community, but they depicted queerness in a way that gave heteronormative audiences a less than stellar perception of it. The impact of a filmmaker's personal life is also made clear through the difference between Ratner and Fuller's work. Ratner's homophobia subtly woven through the plot, just as Fuller's queerness was made clear through Will and Hannibal's homoromantic dynamic. This franchise is just one example of a horror installment with a history of evolving queer representation as time passes.

Survey

There is a countless amount of research and analysis showing the correlation between horror and queerness. However, studies have neglected one substantial viewpoint in the years of discussing queer horror, and that is how horror has impacted its queer viewers. If homosexuality has made a significant impact on horror, then there should be more discussion as to how horror has impacted the LGBTQ+ community.

To initiate this conversation, I created a short survey aimed at self-identified queer horror fans to gather their perspectives on queer horror, specifically, with the intent of defining respectful queer representation in the eyes of the queer audience.

When answering the question “How do you perceive queer representation in horror movies?” most of the respondents acknowledged that much of the representation they have seen is negative, many noting that the representation has either been absent or historically harmful. Several mention that horror movies typically use highly stereotyped caricatures, while others mention the “bury your gays” trope. The reactions toward queer horror was generally negative, with one person saying that they approach queer horror “with apprehension, as usually queer people immediately die in horror movies.” However, one participant another noted that they are excited about the direction that queer filmmakers have been going as of late. “I think a lot of new voices are giving great opportunities to explore and represent the community with love.”

Every answer to the question, “What effect do you believe your identity as a member of the LGBTQ+ community has had on the way that you perceive horror?” has acknowledged that their queerness does correlate to the ways they perceive horror, but each in different ways. One submitter comments that the entirety of the horror genre is inherently queer, stating, “Connection with those felt othered, overcoming seemingly insurmountable odds, perseverance despite everything, all of this is inherently queer and adds an element of connection to the genre overall.” Others discuss how their perception as a queer person affects their view on life in general, with one person describing how they find queer themes in everything they watch, while another intentionally seeks queer stories. Some find comfort and escapism in the genre, with the strangeness and taboo

nature of horror making them, as a queer person, feel less alone. One person says, “Personally I believe that if there was a correlation [between queerness and horror] , it would have to be how they're both ‘different.’ As if horror could be a way of escapism. Being part of the LGBTQ+ community has really given me the freedom to express myself no matter how odd it might be to other people, specifically with my obsession with horror movies and true crime, etc.”

Each participant also had a different answer to the question “What criteria do you think a film should meet to count as queer representation?” Some respondents believed that a film should follow very specific requirements, while others did not. For example, one participant believes that a queer couple should “be alive, two consenting adults, and not related,” while another notes that “either the film should include a queer character whose queerness is clearly seen either via through dialog or not, this character must contribute meaningfully to the plot and act to drive the story forward. A movie can also fit queer representation by having queer themes or discuss queer struggles in some way. should be explicitly stated through dialogue, they should be integral to the plot, and the film should include clear queer themes” [*sic*]. Other participants believe that queer characters should be multi-dimensional, be treated like equals to their heterosexual counterparts, and be realistically flawed.

Lastly, the participants discussed which horror films they believe contain the most and least respectful representation. Overwhelmingly, participants said that *I Saw the TV Glow* was the horror film that had the best queer representation. One element that makes *I Saw the TV Glow* feel distinct is that its queer themes are handled with subtlety. With a bit of critical thinking, most viewers can recognize that the main character struggles with

accepting being transgender, but generally, only those who struggle with gender dysphoria themselves completely can really understand how the film is carefully crafted to weave every scene with this familiar sorrow.

Many of the negative reviews on Letterboxd and IMDb for *I Saw the TV Glow* called the film “boring” and “not scary” and to a cisgender heterosexual audience, this may be the case. This film does not rely on jumpscare or serial killers in masks, the horror reflects inner struggles that transgender people experience. In this way, the film resonates with transgender audiences. While many films discussing transgender topics will go into detail to explain what being transgender means to a cisgender audience, *I Saw the TV Glow* is intentional in making its trans audience feel seen, without going out of its way to explain itself to others. In this way, *I Saw the TV Glow* is the ideal horror film for a queer audience. It is made specifically for its LGBTQ+ audience, from the perspective of a genderqueer director. The film is scary because, to a trans audience, it is a fresh perspective on their everyday reality, created by someone who knows that feeling firsthand.

Interestingly, some submissions mentioned the *Hannibal* series, the *Interview with the Vampire* (1994) film, and *Scream* (1996) as being prime examples of respectful representation. Each submission specifically references the dynamic and romantic tension between the main characters, with one discussing *Scream* stating, “Although the two killers’ relationship isn’t labeled I don’t think it has to be, and in fact that’s what makes it good representation since even though they’re killers their relationship isn’t the reason for being evil.” However, as previously mentioned, none of these films contain explicit confirmation that these characters are romantically involved. What makes these entries

feel like positive queer representation is not the existence of a canon gay relationship, but rather, the implication of a relationship with an existence so taboo and disturbing, that it relates to its queer audience.

The submission discussing *Hannibal* says, “It feels queer, not only because it's two guys going bonkers for each other, but because that sort of intense love and the certainty that others will find it repulsive feels true to the queer experience.” This could be evidence to suggest that the queer villain is not always a harmful stereotype. Although queercoded murderer and vampire couples seem like they would do nothing but paint a bad image for the LGBTQ+ community, some queer people feel seen by this type of representation. These couples are everything but conventional, making both a heteronormative audience and the other characters in-universe uncomfortable. Considering that heteronormative society treats queerness as unconventional, seeing these unconventional queercoded couples can be reassuring for a queer viewer.

One submitter discusses *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), a horror/comedy musical, pointing out that it plays into harmful stereotypes, while still being a beloved classic for many in the LGBTQ+ community. This film follows a newly engaged couple as they stumble upon a mansion hosting a convention for aliens from the planet Transsexual, Transylvania. They meet Dr. Frank-n-Furter, a self-proclaimed transvestite and a scientist in search of making a man. “Dr Frank played by Tim Curry is extremely queer, he builds a community of like minded queer people and is very important to the plot. Frank spends the movie struggling with a common problem for queer and trans people of that time, which is finding companionship... The movie does suffer from some dangerous stereotypes of queer people. Frank is seen as overly sexual and at times

violent, Frank is obviously a manipulative person and often times is seen as the villain of the story.”

It can be said that this film’s depiction of queer people as aliens is harmful. However, many people resonate with it. In a heteronormative world in which queerness has historically been taught to be suppressed, a film that shows aliens being their true, unapologetic, queer selves may resonate with a group of people who feel alienated in their own society. Mark Siegel states, “The paradigm of sexuality offered by *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* may not be adequate as a model of behavior for bisexuals in our society, but this is because we have refused to legitimize any new overt models. Therefore, we have here a covert, disguised paradigm. The most obvious feature of which is its acceptance of alienation from normal human society” (311).

Although these stereotypes can give a heteronormative audience the wrong idea about the LGBTQ+ community, at times these stereotypes, if written properly and with nuance, can make a queer audience feel understood. *Rocky Horror* has a cult following with straight audiences as well. Its countercultural and sexually promiscuous nature was appealing to teenagers when the film was released, and many more as time progressed. This film follows a straight couple go down the rabbit hole of sexual experimentation and crossdressing, not unlike the typical straight audiences who embrace this film’s overt queerness and sexuality.

The submissions discussing the least respectful representation were the most similar, with a majority of responses being about *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991). One participant explains how they liked the movie, but didn’t believe that Buffalo Bill’s character resonated in the way that was intended. “Despite loving it, Silence of the

Lambs. I think they attempt to be sympathetic to Buffalo Bill, but it doesn't hit right. The focus on Bill from an outside perspective feels prescriptive. His own experience and autonomy is removed from his identity. I know he's a serial killer, but i think there was a lot that could've been done to change his character favourably” [*sic*]. Once again, the issue with Buffalo Bill seems to be a detachment from the queer perspective. As a villain, his determination to look like a woman drives his homicidal actions. Perhaps, with a fleshed-out backstory explaining what drives him to believe that he is transgender, Buffalo Bill could be further separated from real transgender people. For this to work, there would need to be more than a passing comment about why he is the way he is.

The given input from participants varies, with some entries contrasting one another. It is clear that there is no singular or universal way in which respectful representation can exist, but there are many elements that filmmakers should take into consideration when making an effort to write queer characters respectfully.

Based on this survey and the observed films, I have concluded that, for the sake of respectful representation, filmmakers should make an effort to write queer characters just as they would write straight characters. They should be multifaceted, with both realistic flaws and strengths. Many writers create queer characters without the proper depth and nuance. These characters should not pander to a queer audience by making them flawless, but their flaws also should not solely be a result of their queerness. Historically, queercoded characters have been the monster in horror films. This does not mean that queer characters should never be the villain, but their monstrosity should not come from their queerness, but through a more complex history and background. Future horror writers should also do away with “burying your gays.” Horror films have always been

under scrutiny for killing off marginalized characters early in the movie. For example, the “black man always dies first” trope has been prevalent throughout horror history.

Representation feels performative when the diverse characters die before given the chance to be dynamic characters, so giving these characters a fair chance is another step toward respectful representation.

The true definition of respectful representation varies from person to person, but the biggest aspect of determining whether representation is respectful is whether or not filmmakers treat them with the same level of care, complexity, and passion as the other characters. Their flaws should not be boiled down to a critique on queerness. If the filmmakers had given Buffalo Bill a complex background and multi-dimensional personality like Clarice, perhaps he would have been a more positive depiction of queerness. Films that wish to make a commentary on queerness, even in relation to monstrosity, should do so from the perspective of a queer individual, rather than the lens of heteronormative society.

With this information, I wrote a short horror screenplay with discernable queer themes at different levels. My intention was to write a plot engraining queerness with the horror through the lens of the queer perspective. I wanted the horror to be a result of society’s perception of queerness, rather than queerness itself.

The Wrath of Lilith

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EXT. PORCH - DAWN - PRESENT

On the front porch of her timeworn house sits Lilith (early 30s), pale, wearing a dark flannel and smoking a cigarette. The house sits in a field, surrounded by forest on all sides.

MISTY, a gray pit bull terrier, BOUNDS up the porch steps, holding a stick too big for her mouth. Lilith takes the stick and tosses it. Misty chases after it.

ALBA (early 30s) opens the front door and steps on the porch. She pets Misty and gives Lilith a knowing smile before heading down the steps. She climbs into her car and drives away.

In the distance, just by the treeline, is a low groan. The groan changes in tone unnaturally, morphing into an uncanny feminine, robotic voice.

VOICE

LIL...LITH.

Lilith freezes before she can take Misty's stick. After a beat, she and Misty go through the front door, locking it with a CLICK.

VOICE (cont'd)

Lilith...

INT. CHURCH - DAY - PAST

Lilith, now 10 years old, sits at the end of the church pew next to her mother BETH while the PASTOR preaches. Beth (late 40s) is thin and wiry, speaking with a thick Appalachian accent. Lilith looks down at her shoes.

BETH

(whispering)

Lilith. Pay attention.

Young Lilith comes to and eyes the pastor.

BRENDA (early 40s), heavysset and wearing a floral blouse, shuffles down the aisle and sits in the pew opposite to Lilith. Brenda sets her hand on the armrest. It is wrapped in a bandage, with the pinky finger missing. She nervously taps her pointer finger on the wood.

Lilith stares at her hand. Brenda notices and puts her hand in her lap.

EXT. CHURCH - DAY - PAST

Holding Lilith's hand, her mother walks them both outside after church. A few people mingle outside, Brenda smokes a cigarette. Lilith slows to take another look at her hand.

YOUNG LILITH

Miss Brenda, what happened to your
finger?

Beth glances at Brenda before yanking Lilith away.

BETH

Come on, Lilith.

Brenda turns away as Beth drags Lilith to the car.

INT. LIVING ROOM - EVENING - PRESENT

Lilith lays on the couch and reads a book. Misty growls, facing the front door.

After a moment, something KNOCKS on front door, rapid and aggressive.

Startled, Lilith looks out of the peephole. No one is at the door.

The knocking stops. Lilith heads back to the couch. On the coffee table now sits a knife that was not there before. She glares at it for a moment, anxious. She wraps it in a white kitchen towel and throws it in the trash.

INT. CHURCH - DAY - PAST

Young Lilith, dressed as a wise man, stands in front of the congregation. She stares down at the plastic baby Jesus, swaddled in white. She is surrounded by other kids dressed in various nativity costumes.

JUDE, 12, wears a rose-colored robe and a brown wig. He smiles as he picks Jesus up.

JUDE

Thank you for visiting us, wise men.
I know that the Almighty will protect
us on our journey to Egypt.

INT. CHURCH - DAY - PAST

The service has ended. Jude, still wearing the robes and wig, runs around the church pews, surrounded by adults, laughing.

Young Lilith colors in a coloring book near the Pastor and a concerned CHURCHGOER. They speak in hushed tones.

CHURCHGOER

It's not right. He could... get a complex.

PASTOR

None of the girls wanted to play Mary.

CHURCHGOER

They should have. You of all people should know.

Jude's father, RALPH (late 40s), snatches the wig off his head and throws it in the trash.

CHURCHGOER (cont'd)

At least someone's got some sense.

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD - DAY - PAST

Young Lilith rides her bike down the sidewalk of a neighborhood. The houses are newer and bigger than her own, with neatly trimmed lawns.

Down the street, a blood-curdling SCREAM bellows. Startled, she stops, then follows the sound down the road.

She reaches the house at the farthest end of the cul-de-sac. The screams continue from the backyard. Carefully, Lilith places her bike down and walks across the lawn to the backyard gate. She opens it and goes through.

EXT. BACKYARD - DAY - PAST

Young Lilith stands in the open yard and sees Jude, who sits in the lawn and cuts his knee with a pair of kitchen scissors.

YOUNG LILITH

JUDE!! What are you doing?

Jude doesn't acknowledge her. She runs over to him, in an attempt to take the scissors away.

Jude's parents run outside and grab onto Jude, pushing Lilith away.

YOUNG LILITH (cont'd)
Why is he doing that? Is he okay?

JUDE'S FATHER
Go home, Lilith.

YOUNG LILITH
But-

JUDE'S FATHER
GET OUT!

Her eyes tear up and she runs back to her bike.

EXT. PORCH - SUNSET - PAST

Young Lilith runs up to the porch to Beth, who sits outside on a rocking chair. Lilith grabs onto her, and Beth pulls her into her lap.

YOUNG LILITH
Mama! I biked down by Jude's house
and I saw him cutting his leg up!

Beth silently hugs Lilith.

YOUNG LILITH (cont'd)
It was terrible! He was bleeding like
crazy. Why was he doing that, Mama?

Beth's eyes well up. She collects herself, taking a deep breath.

BETH
You don't need to be hanging around
that kid no more, you hear me? He's
no good.

YOUNG LILITH
But why?

BETH
He's no good. No good.

Beth strokes Lilith's hair together. They watch the sunset over the horizon.

EXT. PORCH - SUNSET - PRESENT

Lilith sits on the porch while Misty pants beside her. They watch the sunset together.

As the sun lowers into the horizon, everything goes silent. The crickets stop chirping, the birds stop singing, the wind grows still.

Once again, something GROANS. It's louder this time.

Lilith opens the front door and whistles for Misty to follow.

VOICE

Lilith...

INT. LIVING ROOM - EVENING - PRESENT

Lilith drags a chair over to her front door and props it up underneath the doorknob.

Beside the couch sits a large oak chest locked with a rusty lock. Lilith pulls out a key from her pocket and unlocks it, pulling out a shotgun.

She sits on the couch, shotgun pointed toward the door. She waits.

A GROAN, followed by knocks, this time coming from the window. Lilith turns her head toward the sound. She looks back at the gun, only to realize it's now aiming at her own leg.

She screams and drops the gun. BANG. It fires as it falls to the ground. Misty runs into the kitchen, terrified. The groans and knocks stop.

Lilith stumbles back and steps on a creaky floorboard.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT - PAST

Young Lilith steps on a creaky floorboard as she walks out of her bedroom, down the hallway. The sound of SAWING and LIQUID SPURTS come from the living room.

When she enters, she sees Beth at the table, who saws her hand off with a bread knife, blank and expressionless.

YOUNG LILITH

MAMA!!

Beth doesn't react. Her hand dangles from her wrist, connected by a loose flap of skin. She rips it off with her other hand and wraps the wound in a cloth towel. She takes her severed hand and walks out the front door. Young Lilith cries.

YOUNG LILITH (cont'd)
Mama, where are you going?!

EXT. PORCH - CONTINUOUS

Beth does not acknowledge young Lilith. She walks down the porch steps and into the front yard. She places the hand down on the lawn. Young Lilith watches in horror from the front door.

YOUNG LILITH
Mama come back!

Beth stares toward the treeline. A silhouette emerges, almost the height of the treeline it comes from. At first, it appears human, but its limbs are too long and thin and its facial features subtly shift, like trying to see fine details in the dark.

It staggers toward Beth, its legs bending in unnatural ways. It stops at the hand and stares at her for a moment, before its gaze turns to Lilith. It smiles, its mouth is too wide and has too many teeth.

It picks up the hand and crawls back into the treeline. Beth collapses to the ground.

INT. KITCHEN - NIGHT - PRESENT

Misty whines on the kitchen floor. Lilith sits with her, comforting her. The groans begin again.

Lilith scrambles from the floor and looks out the kitchen window out at the treeline.

She makes her way back to the living room.

INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Cautiously, Lilith picks the shotgun back up, careful to keep it pointed far from her own body. She laps around her house.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT - PRESENT

Lilith points the gun into the room before she steps in. She surveys, before hearing the KNOCKING once again. She looks toward the window.

There, peering in, is a distorted, uncannily inhuman face. It stares at Lilith, its eyes slowly shifting.

Lilith FIRES the gun.

INT. HOSPITAL - NIGHT - PAST

Beth lies in the hospital bed, hooked up to an EKG, an IV bag, and blood bags. She is pale, breathing gently. Lilith lies in bed next to her, holding her tight. Beth stirs.

YOUNG LILITH

Mama.

BETH

Hi, baby.

She gently strokes young Lilith's hair. They sit together for a long beat.

YOUNG LILITH

What happened?

Beth is silent. She looks over at her missing hand.

BETH

It was just an accident.

YOUNG LILITH

No, mama. I saw you cut your hand off.

BETH

If anyone asks, you say it was an accident. When we get out of here, we won't talk about it again, okay?

YOUNG LILITH

Why?

BETH

No more questions, baby. Just sit with mama.

They lie together in silence.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT - PRESENT

Lilith stands in front of her shattered window, gun still pointed forward. The figure is gone. She looks out the window. The creature skitters back to the treeline on all fours, like a frightened animal.

Lilith sinks to the floor, putting the gun beside her. Misty enters, trembling. The two sit next to each other in comforting silence.

FADE OUT

Screenplay Discussion

At the most rudimentary level, readers can gather that Lilith is in a lesbian relationship, and that Jude feels most comfortable crossdressing.

Beyond that, the setting is intended to take place in a religious, tight-knit town the Deep South. In places like these, gossip spreads fast, so people learn to keep quiet about information they don't want spread. Beth's judgement toward the people who injure themselves, and her insistence on keeping Lilith quiet when she does the same thing to herself, exemplifies this idea. This cycle of judging others and fearing judgement keeps people from being their true selves, and keeps them from getting help when they need it.

The creature is a symbol of shame and embracing heteronormativity out of fear. It approaches the victims when they have broken the heteronormative status quo and feel compelled to sacrifice parts of themselves. Physically cutting off parts of their body represents how queer people need to sacrifice being true to themselves to survive in a hostile, homophobic environment.

The story concludes with Lilith warding off the creature because she saw her mother experience the same thing when she was a child. Watching her mom make such a sacrifice gives Lilith the clarity to recognize that she doesn't want the same thing to happen to her, much like how watching a parent abandon their true selves out of shame and fear of rejection can make an impact on their children. Instead, Lilith is aware of the creature's call and is prepared to face it and ready to defend herself. She does not kill the creature, but runs it off. The shame may return, but she is grounded and confident in herself enough to take care of it.

This screenplay is about the idea that communities built on shame and judgement build an expectation that people need to surrender the queer or unconventional sides of themselves to fit in. To break the cycle, one must be aware of it and make a conscious effort to build enough confidence and self-love to embrace who they are.

Conclusion

Queerness has remained a part of horror since its birth in the eighteenth century. Throughout this time, queer representation has never been perfect, often depicting homosexuality and transgenderism as monstrous. Despite this, the correlation between queer alienation in heteronormative society and horror's taboo nature has generally made members of the LGBTQ+ look fondly upon the genre. Regardless of its flaws, horror makes a place for those who feel like they do not belong.

Moving forward, horror filmmakers have the option to make the genre even more accessible to queer viewers by embracing respectful representation. To do so, they should make an effort to write queer characters with as much dimension as straight ones and embrace the queer perspective. Rather than writing stories about how heteronormative society views gay people as monstrous, they could embrace the horror within a queer person's perspective living in heteronormative society.

Working on this thesis has been an incredibly enlightening honor, and I loved having the chance to deep-dive into a subject matter so close to my heart. I hope that this research will spark conversation about recognizing the impact that representation has on a community, and how to factor in the audience's perspective when writing characters of a marginalized community.

Film is unique in that it can offer both an escape, and teach viewers valuable life lessons from a different point-of-view. Regardless of intent, the content in our stories makes an impact on the viewers, so by making conscious decisions to represent marginalized communities in the most respectful way possible, we are taking the extra steps to ensure that our stories are uplifting these communities, not tearing them down.

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From: do-not-reply@cayuse.com 
Subject: [EXTERNAL] IRB-FY2026-44 - Initial: Initial Exempt Protocol Approval Letter
Date: October 9, 2025 at 3:43 PM
To: Jerod Hollyfield Jerod.Hollyfield@mtsu.edu, Griffin Stump srs9v@mtmail.mtsu.edu



INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
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Murfreesboro, TN 37129

Date: October 9, 2025
PI: Griffin Stump
Department: Middle Tennessee State University, Media Arts
Co-PI: Jerod Hollyfield
Department: Middle Tennessee State University, Media Arts
Re: Initial - IRB-FY2026-44
Exploring Horror's Impact on the Queer Community

The Middle Tennessee State University Institutional Review Board has rendered the decision below for the above referenced study.

Decision: Exempt

Findings:

Research Category:

Category 2.(i). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects;

Research Notes:

Please note that even though your proposed study is deemed exempt from further IRB review, the following apply to your approved study:

1. In accordance with 45 CFR 46.110, expiration dates do not apply to research eligible for Exempt Review under the Common Rule, and continuing review is not required by the IRB.
2. Any unanticipated harm to participants or adverse events must be reported to the Office of Compliance.
3. **All modifications to the approved study must be submitted for review through Cayuse IRB for approval before their implementation.** The IRB will determine if the modification changes the protocol status from exempt to expedited. Please note that adding new researchers constitutes a modification to the protocol. Per MTSU Policy, a researcher is defined as anyone who handles the data or interacts with participants. Everyone meeting this definition for this project must have completed the required CITI training and received IRB approval prior to becoming actively involved in the project.
4. Closure of the study must be submitted within Cayuse when the study ends.
5. Federal regulations require human subjects records be retained for at least 3 years after completion of the research.
6. If your research is funded by a sponsor, they may have specific data retention policies that supersede the standard IRB guidelines.
7. Data should be destroyed using a secure method that permanently erases information.

Sincerely,

The Middle Tennessee State University Institutional Review Board