A SPECTRUM OF HORROR: QUEER IMAGES IN THE CONTEMPORARY HORROR GENRE

Eric Browning

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

August 2022

Committee:

Cynthia Baron, Committee Chair

Lubomir Popov,
Graduate Faculty Representative

Bill Albertini

Mark Bernard

ABSTRACT

Cynthia Baron, Committee Chair

This dissertation utilizes the videographic essay method to visually analyze the queer aesthetic that distinguishes certain American film and television programs in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The salient features of the queer aesthetic, which includes strategies ranging from lighthearted farcical camp to intense graphic violence, emerged as a critical response to homophobic depictions in mainstream Hollywood horror films of the 1980s and early 1990s and as an aesthetic expression of social protests by queer activists of the time. The empowerment of proudly claiming queer identity led to the development of the independent New Queer Cinema movement. I examine the visual techniques utilized in this politicized film movement to illustrate how queer filmmakers incorporated visual tropes from the horror film genre to convey the terror of the AIDS epidemic as well as ongoing political repression and violent homophobia. To illuminate the notable features of the aesthetic that coalesced in New Queer Cinema films, I analyze the films of gay filmmaker Gregg Araki, who is known for combining stylized camp and violence with tropes of the horror genre. This study shows how queer filmmakers subsequently began to incorporate the queer aesthetic into contemporary horror films and television productions. I closely examine Ryan Murphy's application of the queer aesthetic in his television series *American Horror Story* following the queering of the horror tropes in the New Queer Cinema films.

Mobilizing moving images and sound in analyses makes it possible to demonstrate aesthetic choices in ways that are not possible in a traditional written dissertation, even one featuring still images. By using videographic essays, the dissertation concretely illustrates the

evolution of the queer aesthetic and how it has merged in some instances with horror genre conventions. This dissertation also illuminates the increasingly nuanced depiction of queer identities within selected film and television productions and notes that while queer representation on and off screen is on the rise, there is still a need for more culturally and ethnically diverse queer identities within the narratives and as creatives artists with influence.

For the queer filmmakers making challenging works

that give voice to the queer community.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My mom: For helping me copy-edit this entire thing.

Both of my parents: For their never-ending support and love.

My friends: For keeping me sane through this lengthy process.

Cynthia Baron: For suggesting the switch to videographic analysis, as I had never even thought of that as a possibility for this project, and for supporting this study from the beginning.

My committee members: For sticking with me well beyond the initial time frame of this project.

Beka Patterson: For the endless help you have given me throughout this process.

Rob Sloane: For helping me lay the groundwork for this project in our independent study.

Stephen Crompton: For letting me check out the microphone kit from the film lab to record my narration.

Becky Jenkins: For all your formatting assistance.

My ACS cohort: For going through this together.

The Altimates: For continuing to support each other over a decade after making films together.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

INTRODUCTION

Videographic Essay Link

The contemporary horror film genre in the U.S. is the site of in-depth political discourse and explorations of gender and sexuality, including ones that reflect the emerging cultural impact of the LGBTQ community in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This dissertation sets out to chart the rise in the queer aesthetic and the inclusion of queer identities within certain horror genre films and television productions. Following protests organized by activists against Hollywood films in response to the homophobia of those films, the independent New Queer Cinema movement gave voice to queer narratives from openly queer filmmakers. Many utilized techniques and tropes of the horror genre to highlight queer trauma associated with the AIDS epidemic, political oppression, and the very real physical dangers of homophobia. In addition to New Queer Cinema filmmakers' re-imagined use of horror film conventions, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, selected U.S. film-media productions ranging from lowbrow to highbrow have employed horror film tropes to explore queer perspectives and presented multidimensional queer characters with increasing empathy. Leyla Moy boils the essence of the queer aesthetic down to "four aesthetic modalities: camp, drag, decadence, and revulsion. Each was intrinsically tied to defining queer people's inherently different lived experience in a straight-dominated world" (Moy). This dissertation incorporates intense stylized violence and looming dread as extensions of this definition, as these elements are utilized by queer filmmakers to highlight the politics of the New Queer Cinema movement.

The dissertation provides a written component for each chapter but makes its most noteworthy contribution to film-media scholarship through its use of the videographic essays, which magnify and illuminate the analysis in each dissertation chapter. Originally published as a

standard book, *The Videographic Essay: Criticism in Sound and Image* (2016) is the key text in establishing the academic legitimacy of videographic essays as a developing tool for film and media studies scholars. Since its publication, the authors have transformed the book into an interactive website and taken the book out of print. The highly interactive academic website allows readers to easily view the visual essays discussed in each chapter, instead of requiring them to visit individual websites for each video. The text explains how the authors led workshops for scholars and students to create videographic essays and incorporate them into their scholarship. As video editing technology becomes more affordable and accessible, it has become easier for faculty to incorporate this material into their courses and for students to utilize visual essays in their film analyses. I plan to utilize visual essays in my scholarship and teaching because they provide a creative alternative to students' standard analyses. Additionally, videographic essays provide a stimulating substitute for simple online (lecture) recordings, as the information presented constitutes a more visually accessible resource that effectively illustrates the films being analyzed.

In their article "Scholarship in Sound and Image: A Pedagogical Essay," Christian Keathley and Jason Mittell build an argument for the usefulness of videographic analysis. They ground their argument in points highlighted in Roland Barthes's writing in the 1950s. Barthes explains that critical writing features

> two equally extreme methods: either to posit a reality which is entirely permeable to history, and ideologize; or conversely to posit a reality which is ultimately impenetrable, irreducible, and in this case, poeticize. … We constantly drift between the object and its demystification, powerless to render its wholeness. For if we penetrate the object, we

> liberate it but destroy it; and if we acknowledge its full weight, we respect it but we restore it to a state which is still mystified. (158-159)

In agreeing with Barthes's construction of this dichotomy and his search for a third form of engaging with the text, Keathley and Mittell argue that traditional film scholarship has kept the texts being analyzed separate from the analysis. By comparison, they see videographic essays as a "commingling of the object with the critical discourse" (Keathley, et al. 2). They go on to note of these essays, "[t]hese exercises might be thought of like musical etudes: designed to teach a technical skill, but also with the potential to function as compelling cultural objects on their own" (Keathey, et. al., 2). Keathley and Mittell note how visual essays add a new depth to the scholarship by creating an additional layer of audio-visual information that goes beyond a traditional written analysis. The video essays of Kogonada, a filmmaker who has established a series of high-quality film video essays, and Tony Zhou's *Every Frame a Painting* series serve as the models for this multidimensional method of film-media analysis. Notably, both Zhou and Kogonada have achieved widespread engagement with viewers in an online space and have established careers as filmmakers following their videographic analysis work.

In an interview featuring Kevin B. Lee and Eric Faden in *The Videographic Essay: Criticism in Sound and Language*, the pair highlight the fact that videographic essays can have a higher impact, resonance, and legibility than traditional writing about film. Faden emphasizes the more active approach of the video essay. He explains: "I think of the videographic essay as a means of … 'enacting' cinema. It's no longer a passive experience: it's us at work, it's us putting ourselves into the movie in some ways" (quoted in Keathley, et. al., 5). In addition, Lee highlights that he utilizes videographic analysis in his work as a professional film critic because these "essays" acknowledge the full weight and complexity of the audio-visual material.

Moreover, visual essays are not solely for students or general audiences. In several of the articles featured on the videographic essay website, scholars list academic journals such as *[in]Transition: Journal of Videographic Film and Moving Image Studies* as options for publishing academic work of this nature.

One question that comes up when discussing videographic essays is the stance of their legality, as scholars are including segments from films that are owned by the studios that release them. Jason Mittell notes in his article in *The Videographic Essay* that academic videographic essays fall into the realm of fair use, as they are being used in an educational context that does not seek to replicate a film and exhibit it (8). His article clarifies that these essays transform the film due to analysis.

While the majority of the video essays that are discussed in *The Videographic Essay* are solely focused on film, this dissertation examines filmmakers' uses of genre convention, narrative, and works from both film and television. In addition, rather than simply looking at the productions individually or from an ahistorical formal perspective, I examine them in a cultural and historical context, charting how they evolve in relation to the AIDS epidemic, protests of films deemed homophobic by LGBTQ activists, the rise of the New Queer Cinema movement, and finally the gradual incorporation of queer identities and aesthetic into more mainstream genre work.

This study is broken down into five chapters. The first focuses on the activists' protests of films such as *Basic Instinct* (Verhoeven, 1992) and *The Silence of the Lambs* (Demme, 1991) and how the queer activist groups voiced their concerns, leading to the rise of the New Queer Cinema movement. The second chapter examines the films of this influential film movement and looks at how these independent filmmakers gave voice to queer trauma by utilizing techniques

and tropes of the horror genre to visualize the threats of homophobia and AIDS. The third chapter is an in-depth case study of Gregg Araki, a key filmmaker of the New Queer Cinema movement and someone well known for engaging with the dark aesthetic of the horror genre. The fourth chapter focuses on films and television programs made within the horror genre by queer filmmakers, as they utilize a queer aesthetic to provide a unique lens to re-imagine the genre. Finally, the fifth chapter is an in-depth case study of Ryan Murphy's television series *American Horror Story*, the most mainstream and popular queer horror production in the study.

Through my examination of these selected texts, I argue that the LGBTQ activists' demands in the 1980s for film and media narratives that authentically depict queer perspectives led to the rise of the New Queer Cinema movement. The salience of the dark, violent, and angry New Queer Cinema films inspired a range of queer filmmakers to re-purpose horror film tropes and eventually led to the current rise in queer narratives in the horror genre. This dissertation maps out this trajectory and by utilizing the videographic essay method, allows for closer visual analysis of the visual and narrative motifs in film and television productions that give expression to queer experiences and perspectives.

CHAPTER I. PROTESTING ANTI-QUEER VIOLENCE: FROM *DRESSED TO KILL* TO *THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS*

Videographic Essay Link

As the AIDS crisis ravaged the LGBTQ community in the 1980s, Hollywood films displayed an increase in stigmatized and vilified queer representations. This negative trend would continue into the early 1990s as well, until activist groups demanded change and paved the way for queer filmmakers and nuanced queer images to start easing into the spotlight. In the 1980s and 1990s, the horror genre was a natural fit for the monstrous image of the queer identity to be the source of body horror and menace to the heterosexual audience. For example, twenty years after Anthony Perkins's Norman Bates dressed as his mother to murder the victims of the Bates Motel in *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960), cross-dressing serial killer Dr. Robert Elliot (Michael Caine) violently murders women in *Dressed to Kill* (De Palma, 1980), inciting protests from feminists over the gendered violence in the film. While *Dressed to Kill* was widely protested by the second-wave feminist movement at the time of its production and release, the other films discussed in this chapter were directly protested by queer activist groups. They include the continuing misogynistic trend exemplified by the hypersexual bisexual character Catherine Tramell (Sharon Stone), who director Paul Verhoeven uses to titillate Nick (Michael Douglas) and the straight male viewers of *Basic Instinct* (1992). Delving a bit deeper into queer imagery, William Friedkin's *Cruising* (1980) sends undercover cop Steve Burns (Al Pacino) into the world of gay leather bars in New York City to hunt down a serial killer who is targeting gay men. Finally, Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) casts a troubling shadow on the gay community with its portrayal of Buffalo Bill (Ted Levine) while also subtextually showcasing queer empowerment through the character of Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster), who serves as the jumping-off point for the positive queer images to come throughout the 1990s and

into the new millennium. This chapter will examine each of these films in order to demonstrate that these films connected queer characters with tropes of the horror aesthetic to create monstrous and hypersexualized images of the LGBTQ community. I will further argue that subtextual aspects of each film suggested that there might be space for empowered queer identities within the horror genre.

Voyeurism plays a large part in each of the four films examined in this chapter. The act of looking is used thematically to connect the viewer with the gaze of the killer in *Cruising*, *Dressed to Kill*, and *The Silence of the Lambs* and is used as the visual suggestion of arousal in *Basic Instinct*. By examining how these films visualize the act of looking, the queer gaze is revealed in three of the four films. This is shown through the eyes of Michael Caine's crossdressing killer in *Dressed to Kill*, in both the viewpoint of the killer and the gay men who are violently murdered in *Cruising*, and finally through the monstrous lens of Buffalo Bill and the queer gaze of Jodie Foster's Clarice Starling in *The Silence of the Lambs*. The act of adopting the queer gaze ranges from monstrous and violent to empowered agency. By looking deeper at these images, the content that the feminist and LGBTQ activists were protesting is made quite clear. The majority of these mainstream films use the queer gaze as a way to further stigmatize the queer characters and show them to be violent and counteractive to the heteronormative world. *The Silence of the Lambs* proves to be the film that challenges this concept the most, however. Demme's film manages to further the stigma of the trans community with the controversial representation of Buffalo Bill while also providing progressive images of Clarice that are subtextually queer.

Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media (WAVPM) formed in 1976 to protest the rise in films featuring violence specifically targeting female characters (Lyons 62).

WAVPM targeted films like *Snuff* (Findlay, Frederikssoon, and Nuchtern, 1975), *Caligula* (Brass, 1979), and *Deep Throat* (Gerard, 1972), as well as the rise in slasher films at the time. Detailing the organization's goals, Charles Lyons quotes WAVPM members Diane Russell and Laura Lederer who explain that the organization exists:

- To educate women and men about the woman-hatred expressed in pornography and other media violence to women, and to increase understanding of the destructive consequences of these images.
- To confront those responsible–for example, the owners of pornographic stores and theatres, those who devise violent images on record covers, newspapers that give a lot of space to advertising pornographic movies, politicians who give out permits for "live shows," pornographic bookstores, etc.
- To put an end to all portrayals of women being bound, raped, tortured, killed, or degraded for sexual stimulation or pleasure. We believe that the constant linking of sexuality and violence is dangerous. (62)

Distributing leaflets and organizing in-person protests outside of theatres were the main activities of the organization, and of similar organizations that developed soon after.

After having staved off an X rating from the MPAA, *Dressed to Kill* was given a $6 million dollar ad campaign, featuring suggestive billboards and posters highlighting Angie Dickinson's sexuality in the film, as well as the violence towards women that is at its narrative core (70). Protests over DePalma's film did not begin immediately, however. The film had a rather successful opening week, with positive word of mouth spreading about the film, in comparison to the mixed reviews from film critics. Noting the rise in the film's popularity, the feminist groups WAVPM, Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAM), and WAP

(Women Against Pornography) took action, standing in front of theatres with signs reading "Reel Violence Leads to Real Violence" and "Stop Media Violence," and chanting phrases like "Murder isn't sexy, murder isn't funny, but that's how Hollywood makes its money (Lyons 75-76). One sequence in the film's many violent moments, that WAVAM took notice of was the introductory shower scene where Kate (Angie Dickinson) sexually fantasizes about a man attacking and raping her while her husband is outside the shower shaving. Leaflets were made targeting this scene particularly by stating, "*Dressed to Kill* asserts that women crave physical abuse, that humiliation, pain, and brutality are essential to our sexuality" (Keesey 129). Douglas Keesey quotes WAVAM spokesperson Stephanie Rones as stating that *Dressed to Kill* "entices, eroticizes, and perpetuates violence … scenes such as the one with Angie Dickinson fantasizing rape are dangerous because they promote the 'myth' that women subconsciously want to be raped. With rising rape statistics, there are still these kinds of movies" (129). Unlike the later protests concerning violence against women in film, the organizations did not issue a list of demanded changes. The goal was simply to draw attention to the violence in the film and showcase the problematic issue. As a result, the protests inadvertently assisted the film by drawing more attention to it.

Dressed to Kill, like *The Silence of the Lambs* after it, features a killer that lashes out against women because of their inability to gain access to gender reassignment surgery. Unlike Buffalo Bill, in DePalma's film Dr. Robert Elliott, Kate's psychologist who she makes sexual advances towards, dresses in women's clothing while attacking women. Linked to the crossdressing murderer trope established by Norman Bates in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, Elliott embellishes the act with stronger acts of bloody violence and through lengthy stalking sequences (red herrings to suggest that he is not the killer). There are multiple instances in the film where a

tall blonde woman in a black trench coat follows Kate and Liz (Nancy Allen), proving later to be an undercover cop assigned to assess Liz's involvement in the case. Where *Psycho* uses the power of suggestion and incredibly intricate editing through montage, DePalma's film forces the viewer to witness the violence in great detail.

In the confined elevator sequence where Angie Dickinson's Kate Miller is brutally sliced to death, DePalma accentuates both the cuts that Elliott's razor makes and the blood that erupts out of Kate's body. Not limited by the former production code, DePalma is able to graphically highlight Kate's murder. Instead of focusing solely on the act itself, however, the director heightens the suspense through camerawork and editing. As Kate waits for the elevator to arrive, the camera slowly dollies past her to reveal the blurry face of her killer through the stairwell window. The camera then adopts Elliott's gaze as he looks at Kate through the slightly opened door. The camera moves towards the elevator, suggesting that Elliott is following her as she enters, but the door closes and she appears to be safely inside. Through a series of closeup shots, Kate realizes that she has left her wedding ring on the bedside table of her one-time lover. As the elevator descends, a mother and her daughter enter the confined space. Dickinson's performance here highlights the grief Kate is feeling after discovering the man she just had sex with has a sexually transmitted disease, and that she is most likely infected now, as well. Dickinson also emphasizes the guilt that is steadily building up inside her, as the mother and her child exit the elevator. She pushes the button for the seventh floor repeatedly and quickly, showcasing her rising anxiety. No longer is this a safe space for the character. DePalma's use of closeup and medium shots here really escalates the suspense as the elevator rises. The viewer knows what awaits her at the top floor of the building. What she thinks will simply be an awkward knock on the door to get her ring back will turn out to be a deadly encounter. As the elevator door opens,

DePalma features *Psycho*-esque musical cues and the glisten of Elliott's razor as he steps in to attack Kate. With each floor that the elevator descends, Kate is slashed by the razor. Meanwhile, Nancy Allen's Liz, a high-class call girl leaving one of her john's apartments, waits for the elevator on the ground floor. DePalma goes back and forth between the lobby and the elevator to heighten the tension. Elliott delivers the death cut to Kate's neck and tightly stands in the corner before the elevator reaches the lobby, leaving her leaning against the wall slowly falling to her death. Kate, soaked in blood, reaches up to Liz when the elevator arrives. Outside Liz's eyeline, Elliott extends his blade, ready to attack her as she enters the elevator. The film then cuts back and forth between the eyes of Kate and Liz and the reflection of Elliott in the mirror of the elevator. It is only when light reflects off his blade that Liz is aware of his presence. As the door closes, she quickly grabs the blade that he has dropped on the floor.

This sequence parallels the shower sequence in *Psycho* in three ways: the violent death of a character who, up until this point in the film, is viewed as the film's protagonist, the use of montage editing to build the intensity of the sequence, and the passing of the narrative to a different character. Here, DePalma transfers the narrative to Liz and Elliott, much like Hitchcock transferring the narrative to Vera Miles' Lila Crane and Anthony Perkins's Norman Bates. Unlike Hitchcock's film, however, DePalma shows us the face of the killer, assumed to be a tall blonde woman with big sunglasses and a black trench coat. The reveal of Elliott as the killer is saved for the final encounter with Liz at his office at the end of the film.

DePalma again follows Hitchcock by featuring a conversation with Dr. Levy (David Marguilies), a criminal psychologist detailing the diagnosis of Elliott at the end of the film. Dr. Levy states that Elliot has two different personalities, Bobbi, Elliott's transgender patient (who has been leaving incriminating messages on Dr. Elliott's answering machine throughout the

film), and Dr. Elliott, Kate's psychologist. Dr. Levy comments that Bobbi is the more feminine personality wanting the surgery, while Elliott is the heterosexual male personality being sexually stimulated by Kate and Liz. When the Elliott persona takes over and becomes aroused by Kate and Liz, Bobbi gets even by murdering Kate and attempting to murder Liz. The psychologist reports that Elliott had visited him to say that he feared that Bobbi had murdered Kate. The psychologist then brought this information to Detective Marino (Dennis Franz), who had a blonde female detective in a trench coat follow Liz, knowing that she could be used as bait to catch Elliott. Throughout the film, Liz has been working with Kate's son Peter (Keith Gordon) to clear her name as she was a suspect in Kate's murder. Later as the two are sitting in a restaurant, Liz passes on the psychologist's diagnosis of Elliot and gives Peter a report about sexual reassignment surgery meant to horrify and shock a mainstream audience. She details the procedure of castrating a man and creating an "artificial vagina" to Peter's surprise and the absolute horror of an older woman listening in behind him, aghast. DePalma makes it clear that the description of the surgery is meant to horrify and shock the viewer, especially when paired with the brutal murders Elliot commits, to show just how monstrous Dr. Elliott truly is. Liz gets great pleasure from relaying this information to Peter and explains that she is excited to be the star witness in Elliott's trial. Taking issue with the violence against women in the film, protestors did not speak out against the queer issues raised by Dr. Elliott and his struggles with gender identity. A decade later, protestors would include LGBTQ representation in their protests against violence in Paul Verhoeven's *Basic Instinct*.

Following the Stone Wall riots, queer activism and protesting continued well into the mid-1980s and led to attacks on perceived homophobic films such as William Friedkin's 1980 film *Cruising*. The 1970s saw gay activists shift from asking that queer characters not be

removed from films (as had been the practice since the start of the production code) to their demands for more accurate representation of queer identities in film rather than the campy and over-the-top stereotypes that had been the norm for comedic purposes in films of the time (Lyons 115). Yet, the focus on film representation took a backseat with the growing death toll of the AIDS epidemic. Lyons writes, "Within the course of several years, gay bashing and AIDS phobia soared. The Religious Right stepped up attacks on homosexuals, who directly threatened 'family values' (the religious conservative's catch-all phrase for those undefinable qualities in everyday life that they believed contemporary art and the media threatened to destroy)" (Lyons 123). The focus transitioned to challenging these deadly statements that spread condemnation of the LGBTQ community. However, the late 1980s and early 1990s saw the attention return to representation again, as films like *The Color Purple* (Steven Spielberg, 1985) and *Fried Green Tomatoes* (Jon Avnet, 1991) removed the queer narratives from their adapted source material to sanitize their commercial films and as *The Silence of the Lambs* featured a psychotic gay man murdering women. It was with the production and release of *Basic Instinct*, however, that the queer activism and the protests over violence towards women combined.

Unlike the protests of *Dressed to Kill*, Paul Verhoeven's *Basic Instinct* was actively protested during production, instead of simply outside the theatres exhibiting the film. Members of GLAAD (The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation), ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), and Queer Nation made their voices heard by rallying outside of shooting locations. On April 24, 1991, members of the organizations met with screenwriter Joe Eszterhas, Verhoeven, and Alan Marshall (a producer from Carolco) to discuss their issues with the film. The activists stated that hey opposed the film's portrait of bisexual and lesbian women as murderous man-haters and asked that the female killers murder women, as well, to eliminate that

interpretation. They also pitched the idea of Michael Douglas' character Nick being transformed into a lesbian detective, thus showcasing a more positive representation of a queer woman in the film (Lyons 128). Charles Lyons cites that only Eszterhas was receptive to the ideas presented at the meeting and went on to draft thirteen pages of revisions to the script to mediate the issues addressed to "reflect a sensitivity to many of the opinions expressed by gay community leaders, among them":

- Several characters' homophobic remarks would be eliminated, or such remarks would be countered with pro-gay statements by other characters.
- A scene that may read as a date rape would be transformed into a straightforward love scene.
- Two of the murder victims would be made women instead of men in order to show that the killer is not acting from a man-hating rage but from a psychopathic illness as an individual – her violence is directed at both men and women.
- A precredit disclaimer would be added, reading: This movie you are about to see is fictional. Its gay and bisexual characters are fiction and not based on reality. (128)

Members of the organizations were satisfied with these changes and felt that their voices had been heard and respected. Yet Verhoeven and Carolco ignored every revision Eszterhas brought forward and filmed the script as it had been written originally. While the end result may not have reflected the protests, the involvement and ear of the screenwriter proved that the protests had been successful to some degree. In an article for the *Los Angeles Times*, Eszterhas stated that he was "more than disappointed by the rejection (of the proposed changes). I told them they were making a serious mistake. … I just don't think he [Verhoeven] understands the societal impact of

the script. I frankly didn't understand these things either before the meeting last week" (Fox). Michael P. Kelley goes into detailed accounts of several planned protests and more aggressive acts such as outing queer celebrities at the 1992 Academy Awards (mainly targeting Jodie Foster for her contribution to *The Silence of the Lambs*), printing out maps to celebrity's homes who participated in films that Queer Nation found questionable, and more (Kelly 80-81). Little more than modest protesting ending up transpiring, however, and none of the planned larger events occurred. *Basic Instinct* would go on to make $352 million at the box-office during its release, proving that controversy surrounding a film leads to more spectators lining up to make up their own minds.

When looking at the many suggestive sexual sequences of *Basic Instinct*, attention is specifically drawn to the sexualized female form. For the duration of the film, even in sequences where sexual acts are not occurring, Verhoeven's camera lingers on Catherine's body, regardless of who she is interacting with. The marketing of the film proves that the undressed body of Sharon Stone is the spectacle being used to draw in audiences. The controversial leg-crossing sequence where Catherine flusters the detectives in the interrogation room by briefly flashing her genitalia (a shot that was framed to show more of her body that Sharon Stone had been privy to) proves that Verhoeven was aiming solely for titillating the heterosexual male viewer. Describing the voyeuristic relationship between Catherine and the viewer, Angela Galvin writes:

> She is contained, her difference controlled, by the repetition of the looks of male characters (Gus and Nick, the five men in the interview room and so on) and by the voyeuristic point of view which consistently places her as the object of an illicit look – particularly on the occasions where Nick and the audience see her undressing, but also via the video screen as she takes the lie-detector test and in the mirror as she has sex. (225)

The voyeuristic intent of the film extends to the sequences where Nick observes Catherine with another woman. Renée C. Hoogland states, "these tantalizing 'lesbian' kisses serve as a titillating spectacle for the quasi-duped anti-hero: the erotic energy of the scene is not invested in either of the women, but rather aimed at the male watching them" (38). A prime example of this is when Nick follows Roxy (Leilani Sarelle) into the restroom at the night club, where he sees Roxy sit on Catherine's lap. While they snort cocaine with a man in the stall, Catherine makes explicit eye contact with Nick, seeing just how aroused he is getting from observing them. The moment ends with Catherine suggestively kicking the door closed by raising her leg. The sequence eventually leads to Roxy jealously looking on as Catherine dances with Nick before taking him home for a night of sex. It is this portrayal of bisexual jealousy leading to violence and murder that the queer activists took offense to. The characters of Catherine, Roxy, and Nick's therapist, Dr. Beth Garner (Jeanne Tripplehorn), are painted as mentally unwell and hypersexualized bisexual women. Catherine proves to be the murderer that Nick suspects her to be, Roxy is a drug addict who will resort to violence to end her jealousy over Nick sleeping with Catherine, and Beth is shown to have had a past relationship and unstable emotions regarding Catherine, as well. Roxy and Beth are also treated as disposable by the film as they are both killed because of their connections to Catherine. Through its use of homophobic representations and the filmmakers ignoring the suggested changes from the screenwriter and protestors, *Basic Instinct* has proven to be one of the most contentious films dealing with LGBTQ characters.

William Friedkin's *Cruising* shifts from character representation to the representation of the queer landscape and one of its more popular subcultures of the time (i.e. Sadomasochism and leather bars). Protestors were quick to react. In his 1986 case study, Robin Wood described the scope and length of the activist response towards *Cruising*:

> Gay activists have demonstrated against *Cruising* at all stages, attempting to disrupt the filming and attacking it in the gay press. In terms of its probably immediate social impact, they may be quite correct (and in any case the campaign against the film after its release, involving the picketing of cinemas and the distribution of leaflets, is exemplary in suggesting, within a democratic society, a constructive alternative to censorship). (61)

One of the things that particularly incited the outrage of queer activist groups was that Friedkin had selected actual gay bars for some of his shooting locations. Charles Lyons suggests that Friedkin might have ended up giving in to some of the demands of the protestors, by cutting some of the more scandalous content from the leather bar sequences (118). Thematically, it was the concept of a gay man killing other gay men to suppress his gay desires that angered the protestors. Friedkin's script leaves open the possibility that Steve Burns (Al Pacino), the film's protagonist, might be responsible for more than one of the murders for which mentally ill Stuart Richards (Richard Cox) is the lone suspect. Throughout the film, Richards is shown experiencing episodes where he hears the violent voice of his father condemning him for his queerness. But when confronting Richards in the park during the climax of the film, Burns voices the phrase uttered by the murderer that he would have no knowledge of, as one of the witnesses reported it incorrectly to the police. The novel on which the film is based ends with Burns becoming a murderer outright, whereas Friedkin's film only hints at the possibility.

Again, voyeurism plays a huge part in *Cruising*. The core of the plot revolves around Al Pacino's Steve Burns going undercover as a gay man in the leather bars of New York City, where several gay men have been murdered. Burns learns about the culture and spends the entire film observing these queer spaces. Pacino truly inhabits the character in the sequences where he is absorbing the different aspects of cruising culture: from learning about the different colors of

pocket handkerchiefs to indicate what sexual acts you are interested in to witnessing sexual acts taking place in the bars, and finally dancing with gusto to draw the attention of the gay men at the bars. The camera focuses on Pacino's eyes as he stalks Stuart Richards, the main suspect. Burns stares at great length as Stuart works out in his apartment and walks around town. Stuart's repression of his sexuality is what leads to his violent acts, and the viewer is left unsure if that is the reasoning behind Burns' involvement in murder at the end of the film. The lengthy stares towards Stuart's body are suggestive that he too perhaps harbors queer desires. This characterization of gay men as being murderous because of their queerness was at the heart of the protests surrounding the film.

Ted Levine's characterization of Jame Gumb (known to the investigators in the film as serial killer Buffalo Bill) in *The Silence of the Lambs* drew fire from queer activist groups due to its stereotypical homosexual qualities. Unlike the other films mentioned here, the protests involving *The Silence of the Lambs* were more conflicted. Members of GLAAD thought that the problematic images of a psychopathic gay serial killer would lead to further incidents of gay bashing, which was already at a peak due to the AIDS epidemic. Alternately, feminist activists also found fault with the gay representation, but praised the film for Clarice, its complex feminist protagonist, and for lesbian actress Jodie Foster's portrayal of the character (Lyons 124-125). Foster came out officially in a speech at the 2013 Golden Globe awards, but her sexuality had been suspected and praised by queer activists since the 80s. Additionally, since the film never directly states that Bill is a homosexual, critics debated about the sexual identity of the killer. Alexander Doty describes the debate over Buffalo Bill's sexuality by stating:

> While director Jonathan Demme and scriptwriter Ted Tally denied that woman-skinner Buffalo Bill was meant to be understood as gay, critics and audiences were split in their

> responses. Of those who consciously considered his sexuality, some saw Bill's murdered male lover, desire to be a transsexual, nipple ring, colorful silk wrapper, made-up face, tucked penis, and dog named Precious as certain signs of gayness, while others felt these things were not necessarily codes of homosexuality, but of a gender crisis. (156)

When discussing Gumb with Clarice, Hannibal states, "Billy is not a real transsexual. But he thinks he is. He tries to be. … I wouldn't be surprised if Billy had applied for sex reassignment at one or all of them [medical institutions] and been rejected." She asks what would lead to him being rejected for the procedures, to which Hannibal replies, "Look for severe childhood disturbances associated with violence. Our Billy wasn't born a criminal, Clarice. He was made one though years of systemic abuse. Billy hates his own identity, you see. And he thinks that makes him a transsexual. But his pathology is 1000 times more savage and more terrifying." This moment cements the concept that the film's protestors found so abrasive. Demme's film was just another in a long line of films that depicts him as a monstrous homosexual killer lashing out violently.

Unlike Dr. Elliott in *Dressed to Kill*, Jame Gumb does not have any other personalities that kill in acts of vengeance. Describing Buffalo Bill in terms of horror tropes, Yvonne Tasker writes:

> Buffalo Bill is something of a perverse composite of Frankenstein and his monstrous creation, stitching together a new skin that will no more serve to provide an integrated social identity than the bride whom Frankenstein constructs (and then destroys) for his monster. Elsewhere, Bill is animalistic – he stalks and sets traps for his prey. (86)

This transformation from creator to monster (when Bill dons portions of his female skin suit) serves as an excellent illustration of how filmmakers were fond of characterizing any queer shifts

in gender as monstrous. Buffalo Bill spreading his arms with the suit on, displaying his tucked genitalia, and wearing the scalp of one of his victims, is akin to the trope of the monstrous transgender reveal that was popularized in films of the time. The moment is meant to horrify and shock, as is the case with Angela (Felissa Rose) revealing her penis at the end of *Sleepaway Camp* (Robert Hiltzik, 1983) and Dil (Jaye Davidson) presenting her penis to Fergus in *The Crying Game* (Neil Jordan, 1992). The complicated discussion of Jame Gumb's psychosis is one of the more perplexing elements of the film.

While Jame Gumb is heavily characterized as queer, the sexuality of Clarice Starling is only softly hinted at throughout the film. Much like the final girls of the slasher films of the 70s and 80s, Starling does not conform to the traditional concept of femininity. The film begins with a gritty long take of Starling running through the training course at Langley, where she climbs the rope wall, tramps through the mud, and otherwise proves that she is adapting to the hyper-masculine world of the FBI. The film features several shots of Clarice inhabiting these traditionally male spaces: she is dwarfed by an elevator full of men as she makes her way to the office of Jack Crawford (Scott Glenn) and she is looked down upon by local law enforcement when she and Crawford examine the body of one of Buffalo's Bill's victims. Throughout the film, Clarice is forced to respond to the male gaze constantly judging and fixating on her. Demme elevates this by utilizing extreme close-up shots of both Dr. Lector and Clarice as they interrogate one another. This attention to eyes and what they linger on carries over into Clarice's sexuality. While talking to Clarice, Dr. Lector asks if she feels eyes going over her and if her eyes look at what they desire. In two sequences in the film, Clarice is shown researching Buffalo Bill with Ardelia Mapp (Kasi Lemmons), another female FBI trainee and her close friend. Neither sequence is located at the Langley facility or any official location, but rather in more

intimate settings, the first being in what seems to be Clarice's living quarters and the second in a laundry room or laundromat. The second sequence is visibly the most intimate between these two women. They are discussing the case and Clarice's eyes are shown lingering on the other agent and she returns the lingering look. While mere suggestion, this exchange highlights Clarice's eyes lingering on what she desires just as Lector speaks of earlier in the film. The scene is made up of several shot/reverse shots between the two women as they discuss the case. The lingering glances between the two women grow longer as the scene progresses. The scene ends with the two speaking about Lector's notion of how we begin to covet by coveting what we see every day. While Demme's camera keeps a relative distance towards the beginning of the scene, that develops into images that are more intimate and engaged as he switches to first person perspective shots that show us how the women see each other. Ardelia states, "we covet what we see" and Clarice finishes "every day," suggesting that there is a bond stronger than friendship beneath the surface of this everyday relationship. While Ardelia Mapp is a more developed and involved character in Thomas Harris' novel, she has just a few moments on screen in the film. In that small time, however, the chemistry between Foster's Starling and Kasi Lemmon's Mapp is quite striking. It further comments upon the misogyny of the FBI in the film by showcasing these two fiercely intelligent and strong agents in training working together to catch the killer that the male forces at the FBI continually cannot apprehend.

Of the four films discussed in this chapter, *The Silence of the Lambs*, while being protested for its representation of Buffalo Bill, proves to be rather progressive in terms of its presentation of gender within the FBI and subtextual queer connections between female characters. Demme would go on to direct the AIDS drama *Philadelphia* (1993), which presented Tom Hanks, one of the most popular leading male actors of the time, as a gay man. This period

of time marks the transitionary period where queer characters shifted from being merely subtextual or viewed as monstrous to leading dramatic roles. The protests against these four films helped pave the way for this change. Because of this, queer filmmakers were able to start telling stories of their communities that did not showcase them as monsters or murderers. Instead, the queer community was given the chance to be shown as legitimate human beings, capable of complex drama and comedy, but also capable of leading ensembles in genre films. Independent filmmakers like Todd Haynes, Gregg Araki, Kimberly Peirce, Rose Troche, Gus Van Sant, and John Cameron Mitchell inhabited the New Queer Cinema movement with LGBTQ-driven narratives that altered how queer identities were presented in film for the following decades.

CHAPTER II. CREATING VISIBLE IDENTITIES: THE DARK AESTHETIC OF NEW QUEER CINEMA

Videographic Essay Link

With the AIDS epidemic in full swing and the protests of anti-queer violence gaining attention in the press, the late 1980s and early 1990s saw the beginnings of an independent sector of filmmaking blossom. Longing for visibility on the silver screen, queer filmmakers took notice of the cultural moment and took advantage of the rise of more affordable film equipment to get their narratives produced. By using videotape, 8mm, and 16mm film stock, filmmakers were able to severely cut production costs for their projects. As the New Queer Cinema films gained critical attention through film festivals, filmmakers like Todd Haynes, Rose Troche, and Cheryl Dunye rose in popularity and jumpstarted their film careers. The term New Queer Cinema was coined by B. Ruby Rich in her pieces covering early 1990s film festivals for the Village Voice. In her book *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut*, Rich looks back at the origins of the film movement and notes the main causes for its existence by writing, "four elements converged to result in the NQC: the arrival of AIDS, Reagan, camcorders, and cheap rent. Plus, the emergence of 'queer' as a concept and a community. Outrage and opportunity merged into a historic artistic response to insufferable political repression" (vx-vxi). Following the activist protests of the films such as *Cruising* (Friedkin, 1980) and *The Silence of the Lambs* (Demme, 1991) discussed in chapter one, queer organizations such as Queer Nation and ACT UP had gained a solid sense of community, which was reflected in the films of the New Queer Cinema.

The New Queer Cinema filmmakers created works that reflected the avant-garde aesthetic of the independent films of the 1980s and 1990s. Joan Hawkins discusses the attributes of independent cinema of the time, which she refers to as downtown cinema, by stating:

> What draws together avant-garde cineastes and cinephiles of the late twentieth century is a common urban lifestyle, a shared commitment to formal and narrative experimentation, a view of the human body as a site of social and political struggle, an intense interest in radical identity politics, and a mistrust of institutionalized mechanisms of wealth and power. (78)

This correlates directly with the films of the New Queer Cinema movement, as so many of the films are set in either New York City or Los Angeles, they feature queer bodies as the source of both social and political struggle, and queer politics are visibly at the center of each narrative. Highlighting how the independent films of the time connect with genre specific aesthetics, Hawkins comments:

> In terms of cinematic style, they seem to draw equally from surrealism, European art cinema, and the avant-garde tradition of Andy Warhol. But they also borrow heavily from 'low' culture – erotic thrillers, horror, sci-fi, and porn, and the adjectives most frequently used to describe their work are 'dark,' 'disturbing,' 'intelligent,' 'provocative,' and 'quirky.' (78)

While some of the New Queer Cinema films do not utilize the aesthetic of these 'low' culture genres, the films discussed later in this chapter rely heavily on the tropes and visual motifs of the horror genre to convey queer trauma in a gritty and unapologetic manner. Hawkins comments on the narratives featured in New Queer Cinema films by stating, "the stories they tell – about hustling in the sex industry, about drug addiction, about alienation, racism, homophobia, environmental illness, cultural malaise, and AIDS – frequently are not the stories mainstream filmgoers want to see. There is a raw grittiness here, which often extends to the formal elements of filmmaking (80). She points out that this type of filmmaker connects more with grungy

exhibition spaces instead of megaplexes and prestigious film festivals. It is in the museums, underground festivals, and other seedy spaces that they are drawn to. By connecting the filmmakers of the New Queer Cinema movement to this concept of downtown cinema, I assert how the horror genre is a natural fit to illustrate the traumatic narratives present in many, but not all, of the films.

Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* (1996) exemplifies the intimate and low-budget nature of New Queer Cinema. With its gritty cinematography, Dunye's film focuses on the Black lesbian experience of the 1990s, giving voice to a further subjugated group of queer voices. In the film, Dunye plays a fictitious version of herself as she goes on a quest to uncover the history of a fictional Black actress known for playing "mammy" roles in the golden age of Hollywood, and who is simply credited as "The Watermelon Woman" (Lisa Marie Bronson), a reference to the fact that Black actors were entirely left out of the credits of the films. Cheryl works in a video store and begins work on a documentary within the film to showcase her progress on the project. Dunye created special footage meant to look like a film from the 1930s entitled *Plantation Memories*. The black and white footage is aged to match the look of films from the period, contrasting with the crisper colorful images of the film's present day. *The Watermelon Woman* also takes a look at interracial relationships within the lesbian community. Through Cheryl's African American friend Tamara (Valarie Walker), the viewer sees the racially driven issues start to develop within Cheryl's relationship with Diana (Guinevere Turner), a white lesbian video store customer. Tamara confronts Cheryl about their relationship, claiming that Cheryl is not embracing her Blackness and wants to be white, and that Diana is simply satisfying a racist desire for Blackness. Through moments like this, Dunye presents a previously unseen discussion on the experiences of Black lesbians. In an interview with Emanuel Levy, Christine Vachon

highlights the profound effect of intersecting systems of oppressions. As she explains, “it’s a known fact that lesbians will go and see *The Living End* or *Poison* or *Swoon*, but I don’t think gay men will go to see lesbian films. So an even smaller section of the gay community has to be targeted” (167). Expanding upon her point, the majority of the New Queer Cinema films prominently featured gay white male protagonists and included lesbian or transgender characters in supporting roles. *The Watermelon Woman* thus proved to be a landmark film in terms of both Black and lesbian representation in the 1990s.

Another exception to the white gay male lens of the New Queer Cinema is Rose Troche’s *Go Fish* (1994), which was made for just $15,000 and gave voice to lesbians of different ages. The film follows young lesbian Max (Guinevere Turner, who also co-wrote the film with Troche) as she embarks on a relationship with Ely (V.S. Brodie), a lesbian who is a decade older than her. The viewer gains insight into how lesbians of different ages approach the mid-1990s dating scene in Chicago. Contributing to the experimental qualities of New Queer Cinema, Troche utilizes brief shots of individuals, images of the city, and random objects as transitionary visuals between each scene. Some of the transitions harken back to the jump-cut techniques used in many of the French New Wave films and the experimental images of Maya Deren’s filmography. While not directly connected to the characters in the scenes, the edits give the viewer the chance to observe the lesbian gaze of the time period. The moments range from images of mundane tasks like chopping vegetables and walking around the city to characters having sex and yelling back at an aggressive homophobe. The film also features several “talking heads” sequences where the characters are laying in a circle with their heads next to each other discussing everyday topics. One particularly humorous talking head moment in the film, features Kia (T. Wendy McMillan), Mimi (Mimi Weddell), and two of their friends trying to come up

with a nickname for the vagina. It is these very casual and intimate moments that give the viewer authentic insight into the minds of each of these women. Moreover, Troche shows the women in moments of professionalism, heartbreak, love, and friendship.

New Queer Cinema films highlight the many different ways in which queer people date. *Go Fish* showcases how age factors into the dating practices that each character engages in. Ely has a partner who lives in Seattle which limits her engagement in the community, while Max is single, flirtatious, and uninhibited. At the beginning of the film, Ely's relationship is very singular, while several of the characters' friends are shown being in polyamorous relationships. As the film progresses, Ely slowly begins questioning her romantic life, realizing that her partnership is holding her back. One scene that visually displays Ely's emotional transformation is the haircut sequence where she is shown getting her long hair chopped into a crewcut. This moment reveals that Ely is finally ready to move on, abandoning her long shoulder-length hair for a high and tight crew cut, which garners her even more attention from the lesbians around her. Troche uses brief shots in this sequence to mirror the movement of the scissors while adding a layer of intensity to depict just how important this transformation is. By shedding the longer hair, Ely proves that she is ready to open up to those around her, instead of shielding herself from romantic possibilities. Max is one of the first women to notice Ely's hair and this leads to them meeting up for their first date. Reveling in the awkwardness of the first date, Ely arrives a bit early at Max's apartment and casually mentions that she forgot to clip her fingernails while Max finishes getting ready. Highlighting the evolving relationship between the two, Max is shown trimming Ely's fingernails for her. Troche quickly fades the image to black for a brief moment before going back to the nails, as Ely gently kisses Max's neck. A brief sex sequence follows, ending with Ely sweetly pulling a blanket over Max as she leaves the apartment the following

morning. We see Ely's walk of triumph following the death of her long sexual drought. What follows is a sequence that cuts back and forth between Max and Ely as they recount the events of the night before to their roommates, including a joke on the nail cutting. The film ends with a montage of the couple walking around the city, getting coffee, sitting by the water, and other everyday situations while also including various moments of the film's many lesbians kissing and having sex, proving that the film was meant to shine a light on lesbian representation in an authentic and everyday way.

The film also addresses the gatekeeping nature of queer identities in a moment where Daria (Anastasia Sharp), who identifies as a lesbian, is confronted by a large group of lesbians for having sex with a man. Troche navigates the "trial" scene in a nightmarish manner with the camera in constant motion, moving in from face to face as the women chastise and condemn Daria for her actions, telling her that she shouldn't call herself a lesbian because she had also chosen to have sex with a man. This form of gatekeeping is extremely common in the LGBTQ community, particularly where bisexuality is concerned, with the gay and lesbian individuals often stigmatizing bisexual people for not being able to "make up their minds." *Go Fish* broke ground on this issue long before the discussions of bisexual erasure entered the conversation. Citing Troche and Turner's views of the film's reception, B. Ruby Rich writes, "Troche and Turner have a philosophical view of their film now: Even if lesbians who see it say, Damn that *Go Fish*, that's a success. If they swear they can top it, and they make their own, great, let it spur successors and oppositions and debate, so long as it generates more films" (64). There is a rawness and energy to the film that captures the essence of truly independent filmmaking. Multiple scenes were limited to a few or maybe even one take, as dialogue slip-ups are still left in, giving a sense of realism to those moments. Through its experimental imagery, realistic

portrayal of lesbians, and discussions about queer issues of the mid-1990s, *Go Fish* became one of the most successful films of the movement, earning $2 million in box office revenue, and cementing its place as a film of great importance in the history of queer cinema.

The Watermelon Woman and *Go Fish* showcase the grungy and independent film aesthetic of many of the films of New Queer Cinema. Moving past the purely queer images of these specific films, one can apply a more genre-specific analysis, when examining how the horror aesthetic was often applied in the films of the movement, as well. The horror genre is one of the most expressive in terms of how visual imagery, sound design, and the overall atmosphere are utilized to concoct a sense of dread and fear within the viewer. It is easy to limit the concept of aesthetic and atmosphere to solely the visual elements, as these components are used so clearly to define the feel of the film. Just from seeing a segment of a film's trailer, the viewer can easily understand the visual definitions of genre and how they will impact the viewing experience. Robert Spadoni notes that most film scholarship refers to atmosphere solely in a visual sense and specifies that it goes far beyond those limitations by listing "not just non-diegetic ('mood') music, off-screen diegetic sound, an d mise-en-scene, but elements of style routinely cordoned off from atmosphere, including framing and editing" (154). It is the combination of all these elements, ranging from the visual to the auditory to the narrative, that builds the encompassing sense of atmosphere that constructs the horror aesthetic. The films of the New Queer Cinema showcase these genre motifs primarily in tense moments that use these tools to highlight the queer trauma of homophobia, sexual assault, and violence.

When looking at John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978), the image of Michael Myers slowly walking behind Jamie Lee Curtis's Laurie Strode as she runs back to the Doyle house is suspenseful and effective in its own right. But when Carpenter's eerie score is added, as well as

the viewer's knowledge that her babysitting charges are alone in the house, the sense of dread is greatly amplified. Regarding the construction of dread through atmosphere, Spadoni writes:

> [M]y working definition of dread is that it fosters (unlike the broader category of suspense), less a state of hopeful expectancy (when will James Bond defuse the bomb?) than one of awful near certainty that the imminent outcome for a character will be bad. In the case of the horror film, this outcome is often the death at the hands of a monster or other stalker waiting somewhere nearby in the darkness. In its most conventional configurations, the threat is unseen, and manifests itself in things like indeterminate off-screen noises and shadowy movements in the out-of-focus background. This is dread, which again is a form of suspense. (157)

Dread is established many times in Carpenter's film, as we see through the eyes of the killer as he stalks and kills Laurie's friends Lynda (P.J. Soles) and Annie (Nancy Kyes). It continues in the Doyle house, as Laurie locks herself inside, slowly realizing that the window in the living room is open and that she can hear the heavy breathing of the killer and again when we see Myers slowly sit up after Laurie thinks she has victoriously slain the killer by stabbing him with his knife. As *Halloween* proves, it is more than just the visuals of a film that contribute to its atmosphere. Spadoni notes that narrative is also a key factor in the construction of a film's atmosphere by stating:

> I am not claiming that narrative is the sole or even the most important source of film atmosphere, only that it is a neglected and poorly understood one. Certainly, stylistic choices generate atmosphere as well. A camera creeping over a moonlit swamp, accompanied by sounds of snapping branches and indistinct gurgling, will be atmospheric, even if this is the first shot in the film and viewers have no narrative context

> in which to set it. But confining a scene's atmosphere to setting, time of day, season, and weather – and even if one adds other aspects of film style – can only account for atmosphere in an incomplete and inaccurate fashion, for the sum of these elements will be less than the atmospheric whole. (162)

He cites previous criticism of *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979), *The Black Cat* (1974), *The Old Dark House* (James Whale, 1932), and *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) as examples of films that are often discussed in terms of their "thick, enveloping, [and] saturating" atmosphere (159). The crashed alien ship in Scott's *Alien* features an atmosphere that manages to feel menacing, moody, and damp, but also fascinating and enthralling, matching the inquisitive nature of the characters inspecting the ship with the curiosity of the viewer.

Kimberly Peirce's *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), a tragic biopic staple of the New Queer Cinema movement, utilizes the horror genre's construction of dread to traumatically detail the murder of 21-year-old Brandon Teena (played by Hilary Swank), a transgender man who was killed in Nebraska in 1993. Throughout the film, Brandon is shown popularly interacting with people in the town, developing a loving relationship with Lana (Chloë Sevigny), and bonding with the increasingly violent John (Peter Sarsgaard) and his friends. Knowing the outcome of the real-life events, however, fills these tender and friendly moments with dread and suspense, as the viewer knows that John will turn on Brandon once the truth that Brandon is trans is revealed, leading to John raping and murdering Brandon. Like many New Queer Cinema films before it, Peirce's narrative does not shy away from the explicit and violent details of the story, as we see both acts committed against Brandon. The film also adopts the New Queer Cinema trend of utilizing expressive imagery to heighten the emotional context of the moment. When Brandon is being attacked in the bathroom by John and his friends, the film removes the viewer from the

middle of the action to showcase an apparition of Brandon watching the events unfold from the hallway. The apparition even makes eye contact with Brandon, highlighting that he knew that this incident would lead to his eventual death. While *Boys Don't Cry* is not a horror film, Peirce utilizes the horror aesthetic and the creation of dread to amplify the impact of the bursts of violence and murder that results in Brandon Teena's death. The film also serves as the first New Queer Cinema film to be highly praised in the Awards circuit, as Swank won the Best Actress Academy Award for her performance as Brandon. While *Boys Don't Cry* is on the higher budgeted end of the films of New Queer Cinema, it still features many of its signature (horror) elements: the representation of queer trauma at the hands of heterosexual society, moody production design, and candid and realistic portrayals of queer relationships.

Todd Haynes's *Poison* (1991) is a film made up of three narrative segments: "Hero," the story of a young boy who kills his father for abusing his mother, "Homo," the tale of an imprisoned gay thief who deals with romantic feelings for another prisoner, and "Horror," a horror satire that serves as a metaphor for the AIDS epidemic and how heterosexual America perceived the queer community during that period of time. Haynes defines each segment with a unique aesthetic. "Hero" looks like a tabloid-style documentary, while "Homo" features a gritty look with colorful dream sequences, and finally, "Horror" is modeled after the horror films of the 1950s that deal with monsters and anti-communist messages. While "Hero" has campy performances to match its visuals, it does not feature any elements of the horror aesthetic. "Homo" was heavily influenced by controversial French filmmaker Jean Genet's *A Song of Love* (1950), an erotic short film that tells of physical attraction between two male prisoners. Genet's film is also experimental and relies on its images instead of dialogue to tell the story. Emanuel Levy writes, "In defiance of dialogue or words, Genet relies on close-ups of semi-naked bodies,

faces, armpits, butts, and penises. Well ahead of its time, the film's eroticized and fetishistic look has influenced many gay artists" (168). Genet's film was simply labeled pornography and was banned in the US. Sol Landau, the film's distributor took the case to court. Levy writes, "The court rejected Landau's suit, condemning the film as 'cheap pornography calculated to promote homosexuality, perversion, and morbid sex practices'" (169). Over two decades later, conservative lawmakers unsuccessfully sought to ban Haynes's film due to the sexual images in the "Homo" segment.

In "Homo" gay and imprisoned thief, John Broom (Scott Renderer) finds himself increasingly attracted to Jack Bolton (James Lyons). John had previously known Jack as a fellow inmate at a juvenile detention center when they were younger. In the earliest intimate moment between the two, Jack shows John all of the scars on his body. Haynes's camera lingers very close on each mark as Jack sensuously touches them, while John looks on, desire clearly in his eyes. This segment has many moments where the queer male gaze is utilized in the framing of the images. Haynes lingers on Jack's body time and time again, leading to the moment where John slowly caresses Jack's sleeping body while lying next to him. The lengthy sequence revels in John's arousal as he explores Jack, progressing to Jack grabbing his hand just as John grips his penis. Haynes shoots the quiet moment in a way that captures the pleasure John experiences, leading to the thrill of getting caught by Jack. The viewer is left unsure of how Jack regards the moment. The relationship shared between the two men is contentious, to say the least. They slap and hit each other often, suggesting their extreme dislike of the other, but there are also genuinely tender moments shared between them that showcase a complex lust and desire. The final scene with John and Jack begins with John confronting Jack on the stairs, Jack hitting John, and ultimately John pinning Jack against the wall and raping him. Instead of focusing on the

intensity of the assault itself, Haynes chooses to parallel Jack's trauma with images of the bullies spitting on his face at the juvenile detention center. Levy states, "*Homo* is more about mental than sexual brutality: a homosexual rape is discreetly shot, emphasizing the emotional rather than the physical abuse" (171). Like many New Queer Cinema films, the "Homo" segment of *Poison* highlights queer trauma concerning non-consensual sex and the impact of the bullying of gay youth.

The story entitled "Horror," focuses on the story of Dr. Tom Graves (Larry Maxwell) who has discovered an "elixir of human sexuality," the cause of the sex drive. Haynes shot this on black and white 16mm film, drawing many similarities to the monster films of the 1950s. With its images of beakers and other scientific equipment, it parallels the narrative of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, as Dr. Graves accidentally ingests the elixir, turning him into a monstrous and decaying creature, spreading his leprous condition to others, clearly referencing the AIDS epidemic of the time. The horror element of dread is gradually applied here and amplifies as the segment progresses. After killing a woman by transmitting his condition through a kiss, Graves locks himself in his apartment. His collaborator, Dr. Nancy Olson (Susan Norman) visits him the next day, prompting him to ask her, "Do I look lascivious, like the pitiful decrepit result of some hideous indulgence?" as he presents himself to her for the first time. Olson states that she is not disgusted by him, but that her heart breaks for him; then the two embrace one another. Levy writes, "Although Haynes never mentions it, the allusions to AIDS are obvious, and the message is clear. The naïve dreams of Nancy … give way to knowledge that love equals death" (170-171). We see the community look on in aversion as Dr. Olson walks with Graves down the street. The looks of horror and shock at Graves' grotesque appearance parallels the experience of individuals living with AIDS in the 1980s and 1990s. While at a bar together, Olson hears on the

television that a mysterious leper has been linked to the spread of an unknown disease that has been infecting hundreds of men, women, and children in the town. Horrified, she realizes that Graves is the leper and that he is contagious. After Graves tells Olson that he loves her, we see her slowly tilt her head forward as the couple embraces, revealing a patch of the infection on her neck. Olson eventually succumbs to the sickness and dies, leaving the community to hunt down Dr. Graves, paralleling the witch hunt nature of the reporting of the AIDS epidemic. Haynes interweaves the three stories in a visually jarring way as he goes between the segments boldly jumping between aesthetics. *Poison* is a prime example of the combination of Joan Hawkins' discussion of avant-garde filmmaking of the time and the elements of the horror genre used to vividly depict queer trauma.

Tom Kalin's *Swoon* focuses on the stories of Nathan Leopold, Jr. and Richard Loeb, the murderers of 14-year-old Bobby Franks, which was the basis for Alfred Hitchcock's film *Rope* (1948) and Richard Fleischer's *Compulsion* (1959). Cinematographer Ellen Kuras uses black and white 16mm film to visually match the actual film footage from the 1920s that is used throughout the film. Kalin incorporates images of the streets of Chicago of the time period, clothing of the time, and simple everyday moments as transitionary images between sequences. Unlike *Rope* and *Compulsion*, the homosexuality of the two murderers is not simply hinted at or encoded in the performances of the actors. *Swoon* actively seeks out the gay moments shared between Leopold and Loeb and even tackles the concept that their killing tendencies were the result of their sexuality. Leopold and Loeb are shown in very intimate moments together. Even when burying the shoes of the boy whom they have murdered, they kiss each other fiercely. Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin write, "*Swoon*, like many other New Queer works, foregrounds the historical and social construction of deviance… In Kalin's version of events,

Leopold and Loeb seem to commit murder mostly as a way to commit themselves to one another" (227). In one intimate moment, Kalin pays tribute to Hitchcock by replicating Grace Kelly's iconic entrance as Lisa in Hitchcock's *Rear Window* by having Leopold (Craig Chester) wake up Loeb (Daniel Schlachet) from his dreams of crime and murder by slowly kissing him and using Hitchcock's dialogue. Instead of falling directly into the horror genre, Kalin's film treads around multiple genres and never solidly lands in one. There are elements of courtroom drama, experimental arthouse, thriller, melodrama, romance, and horror. The horror elements are limited to the murder scene itself and the overall disturbing nature of the murderers. Loeb is painted to be the brawn of the pair, as he is the one who murders Bobby Franks in the back of the car. After abducting the boy in a city park, the pair drive off. Loeb bludgeons Bobby to death, as blood spurts around him in the car, some even carefully landing on Leopold's face in the front seat. This is one of just a few moments of actual violence in the film, the others being Loeb's violent interactions with inmates while serving his jail sentence, and ultimately his death at the hands of another prisoner who was interested in him sexually.

Swoon discusses the sexuality of the two leads in terms of the period it represents, focusing on the concept of perversion and sodomy being viewed as mental illness. As such, the prosecuting attorneys identify their violence is a result of their sexuality, but the Kalin does not. Benshoff and Griffin discuss the trial in the film, stating, "By using actual transcripts for dialogue, the film also reveals how the trial often became more about Leopold and Loeb's 'perverted' desires than about the murder they committed. To underline that point, Kalin films the two men in bed together *in the courtroom* to suggest visually exactly what behavior is really being adjudicated" (227). Treading a fine line of justifiably condemning the two men but also highlighting that their queerness is not the cause of their actions, Kalin is careful not to paint the

murderers in a sympathetic light. The only real moment of connection occurs when Leopold sees Loeb's body after he is murdered in prison. It is the first time in the film that Craig Chester's performance of Leopold achieves any connection with the audience. For the rest of the film, Chester's performance somewhat mimics that of Farley Granger's Philip in *Rope*, focusing on the bottled-up intensity and the manic anxiety just below the surface. Even in the love scenes shared between Leopold and Loeb, Kalin shoots the pair in a way that removes any emotional connection with Leopold, focusing just on Loeb's attachment to him. Their sexual acts are based more on Leopold's manipulative hold over Loeb. That is why the moment of Leopold breaking down after Loeb is murdered is so shocking. Early on in the film, Loeb is shown removing two rings from his mouth and placing one on Leopold's ring finger, symbolically marrying them. As Leopold looks at the corpse of his lover, he removes the wedding ring and gently slides it into Loeb's mouth. After this brief moment of emotion, as Leopold's prison sentence continues, he is shown to engage in sex with the man who murdered Loeb, returning to his manipulative nature. The eerie relationship between Leopold and Loeb, which highlights Leopold as the creator of the murderous plot and Loeb as the executor of it, is Kalin's focus throughout the film, and as a result, the viewer is given insight into the troubled psychology of both of these men.

Due to the nature of the film, it sparked controversy with LGBTQ activist groups, who were concerned about it connecting homosexuality with murder. Benshoff and Griffin address the controversy by stating, "Kalin's *Swoon* makes Leopold and Loeb unequivocally queer. According to Kalin, "[I] wanted to show a homosexual couple who had pathological behaviors [but] not pathologize homosexuality." However, many critics, both straight and gay, thought that he failed to achieve that goal" (226). With the benefit of hindsight, the film differentiates the killers' actions from their homosexuality.

Todd Verow's *Frisk* (1995) takes the horror conventions a bit further by showcasing the trajectory of gay serial killer Dennis (Michael Gunther), from his discovering snuff pornography as a teenager to his developed interests in harming people to the eventual murders he commits. The controversial film was banned in the UK while the unrated print was screened in the US. Through frequent monotone narration, Dennis details his kinks, encounters, and evolving taste for murder through letters he sends to Julian (Jaie Laplante), his former lover, who then gives them to Julian's brother Kevin (Raoul O'Connell) to read. The casual tone in Gunther's delivery predates Christian Bale's smooth-talking narration as Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho* (2000) by five years. Unlike the artistic expression of sexual desire in Tom Kalin's beautifully shot *Swoon*, Verow's film utilizes a dirty and grungy aesthetic that revels in the sexual encounters of everyone in the film, as well as the murder sequences. Dennis eventually teams up with fellow serial killers Ferguson (Parker Posey) and Pete (James Lyons) for two murder sequences. Like many of the New Queer Cinema films before it, Verow's film also includes experimental images as transitions between scenes. For their second kill as a group, they film the murder. Instead of showcasing the graphic details, Dennis describes the murder and the aftermath in detail while black and white footage of the group as they kill plays. This feels even more disturbing than if the viewer had seen the murder take place. Through Dennis' narration, the viewer can feel the full extent of his satisfaction with the act.

One of the more experimental elements occurs when Kevin and Julian visit Dennis, and Kevin nearly sees the videotape of the murder. Kevin dreams he's speaking with one of Dennis's victims, and he sees flashes of the murders that we had not seen as they occur. The victim tells him that Dennis is on a quest for answers and that murdering is how he thinks he will get them. The victim then says that those that are murdered are the only ones who get any answers. The

blue tint of the sequence somewhat matches the static from the television as Kevin falls asleep, and the victim is covered in blood. Kevin wakes up and leaves the apartment so that Dennis and Julian can have a threesome with a random gay man. After the man leaves, Kevin returns. It is here that an odd narrative question is introduced. Julian had tested Dennis to see if he would kill the man and reports back to Kevin that he is not a serial killer. Julian then leaves so that Dennis and Kevin can have sex. Instead of engaging in sex, Dennis asks Kevin to help him recreate some pornographic snuff photographs where the model has a bag on his head. As the photos are taken, the viewer begins to believe that Dennis has killed Kevin here and is posing his corpse in the photos. The image fades to black without answering the question. Narratively, this moment requires the viewer to think back on the events that have occurred. Are Ferguson and Pete simply a concoction of Dennis's letters? He did admit to spicing them up to make them more entertaining for Julian and Kevin. The credits roll and finally afterward, Kevin is shown removing the bag from his head as Dennis comes in to kiss him. Verow leaves it up to the viewer to decide if any of the murders actually took place or if they were all just concocted for the letters. *Frisk* presents an even more controversial representation of gay male desire, by combining sexuality with bloodlust. Through its abrasive aesthetic, Verow establishes the sense of dread for the entire film by heightening the suspense involving Dennis' fascination with murder, as well as his participation in the group killing sequences. *Frisk,* based on Dennis Cooper's novel, is certainly a horror film made within the New Queer Cinema movement.

The films of the New Queer Cinema challenged audiences' perspectives of what queerness was. The filmmakers sought to give voice to those who had not had one before. They sought to showcase themselves so that there was a record of their identity in film history. They challenged heteronormativity by presenting unfiltered queerness. They were films made in

traumatic times for the LGBTQ community. AIDS was killing people at a drastically increased rate. The religious right was further developing anti-queer legislation. New Queer Cinema allowed independent queer filmmakers the opportunity to work in a field where out and proud filmmakers had not been accepted publicly. Through their low-budget aesthetic and their inclusive and challenging narratives, these films forged the path for queer audiences to engage and critique stereotypical homophobic images produced by straight filmmakers. Refusing to create polished and overly sanitized images of queerness, the New Queer Cinema films showcase queer characters in a raw and realistic manner, highlighting their flaws alongside their strengths. The films were a way to showcase the true traumas experienced by the community so that everyone else might understand a bit. While not all New Queer Cinema films engage in horror tropes, by sometimes utilizing the aesthetic of the horror genre, filmmakers were able to display that trauma in a gritty and confrontational way to showcase the true impact of the attacks against the LGBTQ community.

CHAPTER III. THE KIDS ARE NOT ALRIGHT: THE FILMS OF GREGG ARAKI

Videographic Essay Link

Few directors that were part of the New Queer Cinema movement of the late 1980s to late 1990s have as productive a filmography as gay filmmaker Gregg Araki. While many filmmakers of the time produced one or two films during the New Queer Cinema era, Araki directed seven films in that window of time. Primarily known for his "Teenage Apocalypse" trilogy which featured *Totally Fucked Up* (1993), *The Doom Generation* (1995), and *Nowhere* (1997), his work predated B. Ruby Rich's coining of the term New Queer Cinema (vx-vxi**)** with *Three Bewildered People in the Night* (1987) and the unreleased *The Long Weekend (O' Despair)* (1989). Araki's films are synonymous with the counterculture current of the movement through their depictions of queer youth rebelling against heteronormative society through sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll. The "Teenage Apocalypse" trilogy focuses on youth battling the harmful outside forces of religion, the stigmatization of the AIDS epidemic, the US government, and the violent threat of homophobia. Through his use of the cultural landscape of Los Angeles throughout the 1990s, Araki shows how the AIDS epidemic greatly impacted the city as time passed. As with many of the New Queer Cinema films, Araki's work never shies away from the traumatic and deeply disturbing, as several of his films deal with the trauma of sexual assault, suicide, and murder that often accompanies queer narratives. Giving voice to the angry queer youth of the 1990s, Araki developed a unique signature style that would continue to grow throughout his career.

Araki's filmography fits nicely into Joan Hawkin's category of "downtown" films. Hawkins writes:

> All of these films reject sentimentality. Grim episodes are recounted or, in the case of the fiction films, acted out, with irony and with a certain sense of matter-of-fact detachment and cool. Perhaps more disturbingly, violence is often exploited in the interest of provoking real sensation in the audience. Directly engaging the body of the spectator, the films frequently use the visuals and thematic tropes of 'low' genres like horror and porn to make their point. (80)

The filmmaker's work is linked with aggressive and vibrant color palettes that mix with gritty and realistic Los Angeles locations, punk soundtracks, and an overall visual and thematic sense of anti-establishment and anti-conservative rage. While the issues at the heart of Araki's films are challenging and uncomfortable, the director manages to combine these themes with his camp aesthetic in a way that is unique to queer filmmakers. Glyn Davis writes:

> Queer camp, then, it would seem, is used by queers to speak to other queers, and although it may occasionally be humorous, is never "merely" funny; such are the subtle intricacies of queer camp that it cannot be used by anyone from "outside." At the heart of this distinction, then, is the need to maintain alterity, to sustain the cohesion of the "subculture," and to continue to assert camp's political status. (57)

The concept of a contradictory subculture is central to nearly all the films of the New Queer Cinema movement. Queer filmmakers were casting aside the heteronormative narratives that emerge in mainstream films produced in Hollywood. Instead, Araki and his peers created characters that were actively breaking that mold. Araki's characters have no interest in assimilating to heteronormative identities, many going so far as to call for violence against their straight oppressors. Araki's work connected with queer youth of the time and continues to resonate as he still works on angry youth-centric narratives to this day. Through his inclusion of

AIDS trauma, violent homophobia, the horror of adolescence and growing up, the inclusion of blood and gore, and his dealing with themes of sexual assault and suicide, Araki heavily incorporates the horror aesthetic into his New Queer Cinema films, more so than any other director of the time. Davis continues:

> [T]he violence in *The Living End*, *The Doom Generation*, and *Nowhere* is extreme, cartoonish, unrealistic; … the reptilian alien and giant talking bug in *Nowhere* seem to have wandered in from other narratives; and the day-glo colours and design of Araki's later films are brash and Pop Art-inspired. (61)

While the violence in Araki's work is considered queer camp, it is also a stark reaction to the trauma experienced by queer youth of the time. Araki works through the extreme issues faced by the queer community by showcasing them through his camp lens.

With the AIDS epidemic still in full swing in the early 1990s, Gregg Araki's first two films of the decade, *The Living End* (1992) and *Totally Fucked Up* (1993) deal quite heavily with the trauma surrounding the virus and the LGBTQ community at the time. *The Living End* focuses on the violent relationship of two gay men who have AIDS. At the beginning of the film, Jon (Craig Gilmore) is a film critic who leads a mundane life until he tests positive for AIDS. Luke (Mike Dytri) is a hustler who has been hitchhiking across the country and has lived with AIDS for an undisclosed amount of time. After murdering a group of homophobes that were trying to kill him, Luke is hit by Jon's car. Jon takes Luke home for the night and the two have sex. Aware that they both have AIDS, the pair begin developing feelings for each other and leave on a cross-country trip so that Luke can avoid being captured by the police. This crusade against heteronormativity and the oppressive religious right is not a simple subtext either. The intent of the film is directly stated by Araki in the film's credits. Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin write,

"Araki ends his film with the following dedication: "to Craig Lee (1954–1991) and the hundreds of thousands who have died and the hundreds of thousands more who will die because of a big white house full of republican fuckheads" (233). Moments like this in the New Queer Cinema films display the personal effect of the AIDS epidemic on their filmmakers and others involved in the production of the films. Throughout *The Living End*, Jon is forced into one violent situation after another because of Luke's impulsive behavior. What begins as a fun road trip that is purely a reaction to Jon discovering that he has AIDS turns into a tale of regret and contemplation. Benshoff and Griffin note, "the film suggests that no one can have much fun in the age of AIDS. The best one can manage is a sick and tired, cynical humor" (232). While the pair may experience romance throughout the film, the viewer is constantly reminded that their time is limited. Once Jon begins coughing, it is easy to see the direction that the film will take. Araki evokes the ticking time bomb trope that is utilized frequently in zombie films when a human becomes infected through a zombie's bite. Jon knows that his time is running out. Does he go back to his normal existence and die alone, or does he die in a blast of rage and sexual pleasure? The film ends with Jon giving in to his struggle with Luke, as Luke forces himself on Jon while the pair are sitting on the beach. Initially fighting off Luke, Jon eventually seems comforted by the presence of his violent lover and starts holding him and reciprocating the sexual advances, knowing that he too will be dying in the not-too-distant future.

While the epidemic becomes more of a background issue from *The Doom Generation* on, Araki returns to the trauma of AIDS in *Mysterious Skin* (2004) as Neil (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) works as a hustler. With most of the narrative taking place in 1991, the AIDS epidemic is still in full swing. Neil is shown having sex with multiple johns in his small Kansas town. His best

friend Wendy (Michelle Trachtenberg) is continually making him promise to be safe during his encounters. Her fear of AIDS escalates greatly when the pair move to New York City.

One hustle greatly raises Neil's awareness of the AIDS epidemic and just how dangerous it can be to him personally. He is picked up by an older john named Zeke (Billy Drago). Instead of a traditional sexual hookup, Zeke is mainly seeking physical touch. As Zeke disrobes, Neil sees many Kaposi sarcoma lesions all over his body, highlighting that he has been living with AIDS. Zeke notices Neil's alarmed expression when he sees the lesions and promises that this will be the safest encounter of his life. Zeke asks Neil to give him a back massage, as he has gone so long without the touch of a man. After the massage, Neil runs home, clearly horrified at the risk he's been taking on his other encounters. Araki differentiates this moment visually from Neil's other encounters. Instead of Neil simply fading into the sexual exchange, he is completely present here, moving between expressions of pity, horror, and disgust as he massages Zeke. Araki instills the sequence with a complexity that the other sexual encounters in the film simply do not feature. This is not just another anonymous transaction for Neil. Unlike some of Araki's earlier films, *Mysterious Skin* does not feature camp images of blood and gore, it is grounded in reality.

Araki deals heavily with blood and gore in *The Living End*, *The Doom Generation*, and *Nowhere.* He frequently showcases the danger of blood as a vessel for AIDS transmission, particularly in *The Living End* and *Totally Fucked Up.* In *The Living End*, Luke cuts his arm to highlight the danger of his blood that is infected with the AIDS virus. Here, Araki comments on the threat of just a single drop of blood as being capable of causing someone's death. Throughout the film, Jon continues to struggle with the concept that his body is now considered a weapon, an idea propagated by the dangerous condemnation of the religious right and the Republican

politicians of the time. Moving beyond the symbolic, *The Living End* also features several murder sequences. When hustling at the beginning of the film, Luke goes home with a john and the pair are caught by the wife. She violently kills her husband, with Luke managing to escape. He is then approached by a group of violent homophobes in a parking lot. As they threaten to kill him, he shoots each of them. This is the moment that leads to his introduction to Jon, who reluctantly picks him up on the side of the road. Araki showcases Luke's violent tendencies as something that Jon can look beyond due to their shared AIDS diagnoses, until he reaches his limit. Araki uses the violence to comment on the horrors that the queer community experiences at the hands of law enforcement, the policies of a repressive government, and through hate crimes committed by homophobes.

The Doom Generation features the most explicit images of gore in Araki's filmography. The prime example is the convenience store sequence, which sets Jordan White (James Duval), Amy Blue (Rose McGowan), and Xavier "X" Red (Johnathan Schaech) on the run from the law. While driving around Los Angeles one evening, lovers Jordan and Amy pick up X, an attractive drifter. Araki fills the film with moments of sexual chemistry between the three leads, as they slowly develop lustful and romantic feelings for one another. After driving around for a bit, the trio stop for snacks at a convenience store. Amy smokes a cigarette in the store while waiting for Jordan to top his hotdogs with condiments and make a slushie. The clerk behind the counter tells her to put out her cigarette. She drops the cigarette on the floor and puts it out with her boot. The clerk tells her to pick it up and throw it away, to which she replies, "Eat my fuck." The clerk pulls out a shotgun and points it at her. She picks up her cigarette as Jordan goes to pay for their snacks. The price for all the food comes to $6.66. Jordan realizes he doesn't have his wallet and Amy's is missing when she checks her pocket. The clerk pulls his gun on them again when Amy

says they'll go out to the car to get their wallets. X jumps up behind the clerk, attempting to knock the gun from his hands. In a whirling montage of events and quick cuts, the clerk's wife attacks X, James drops the hotdogs, and the gun fires, blowing the clerk's head off and across the room by the condiment station. For a moment, everyone in the room stares in shock at the head, which slowly opens its eyes as the mouth oozes relish. Meanwhile, X steals the money from the open cash register. While the sequence does feature a traumatic and violent death for the convenience store clerk, and the aftermath will haunt Jordan for the remainder of the film, Araki infuses the burst of violence with his signature camp aesthetic, featuring the over-the-top reanimation of the clerk's head.

The trio remain on the run from the authorities after this incident for the remainder of the film. The final sequence of violence in *The Doom Generation* occurs at the very end of the film. Jordan, Amy, and X are about to engage in a threesome in an abandoned warehouse where they've been sleeping, when Amy steps out of the building to pee. Soon a group of neo-Nazi skinheads arrive, led by one of Amy's ex-lovers whom they had encountered in a fast-food drive-thru earlier in the evening. They attempt to rape Amy and when Jordan stands up to them, they mutilate his body with garden shears and ultimately murder him. Araki films the attack on Jordan through quick flashes of light, so the audience is never aware of what is truly happening to him. But the sounds of his screaming and Amy and X's horrified reactions inform the viewer of the traumatic event unfolding. Kylo-Patrick R. Hart comments on the change in tone of the violence in the film by writing:

> Although somewhat disconcerting, these violent episodes are carried out in such over-the-top ways that it is impossible for the viewer to take them very seriously. In dramatic contrast to them, however, is the extremely violent episode that composes the film's

> powerful concluding sequence, which certainly tests the gag reflexes of its viewers. Araki sets up the viewer to expect comedic violence throughout this offering and then, without warning, serves up startling visceral violence in its place. (44)

Amy kills the neo-Nazis with their shears. Then she and X flee the scene in her car, driving off towards the camera with the shock of what has just happened, and the film ends. This bleak and open ending to the film, with the future of both Amy and X left uncertain, is a signature of Araki's gritty and thematic narrative structure. Continuing the anti-conservative streak of *The Living End* and reversing the traditional concept of the outlaw in westerns and road films, Araki proves that the trio of protagonists in *The Doom Generation* is not the danger here. The society around them is the real threat. Hart continues:

> careful consideration of the work's latent content indicates that it is actually social and religious conservatism that most greatly endangers such well-being, and that there are people in this world, such as the trio's attackers at the film's end who are acting on the behalf of such conservatism, who are the real "outlaws" that must be feared. (47-48)

This anger towards the repressive government and homophobic society is a theme that connects the majority of Araki's work.

Araki's conclusion to the Teenage Apocalypse trilogy, *Nowhere*, tones down the violence and limits it to very brief graphic bursts. Throughout the film, Dark (James Duval) has been seeing visions of an alien. He is unsure if these images are real or perhaps an illusion from drugs, so he keeps it to himself. Dark has been trying to develop a serious emotional relationship with his girlfriend Mel (Rachel True), who is looking purely for sex and not a romantic relationship. Dark's friends and fellow high school students start disappearing and he soon senses a connection with their disappearances and the alien. Leading up to the big party that is the goal of

every teen in the film, Dark and his friends play hide and seek while high. He goes into the school's locker room to hide and finds Montgomery (Nathan Bexton), to whom he is visibly attracted. To his horror, he witnesses Montgomery's abduction by the alien in the locker room. Dark is stunned and shocked. However, when his friends leave for the party, he doesn't tell them what he saw. He drifts around the party as Mel is aiming to have sex with two models. He sees the alien again in the kitchen at the house party and then decides to head home. When in bed, he hears a tap on his window and sees Montgomery. He lets him in and the two lie closely together in bed. Montgomery asks Dark if he can spend the night. Dark says only if he never leaves. It is clear to the viewer that Dark has finally found someone that he can exist with and love. This intimate moment is disturbed by Montgomery violently coughing. His body then explodes and reveals an alien inside, who leaves out the window. Dark is left staring at the camera shocked, and the film ends. Much like *The Doom Generation*, Araki leaves Dark's fate completely open. The explosion of blood from Montgomery's body also continues Araki's camp portrayal of violence. While narratively disturbing, the over-the-top explosion of blood is a shock when the film has consistently featured more toned-down and subtle instances of violence and blood.

The trauma of sexual assault is another theme that Araki explores in several of his films. As with many of the films of the New Queer Cinema movement, sexual assault is often at the heart of queer trauma. The entire narrative of *Mysterious Skin* is devoted to the trauma of both Neil (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) and Brian (Brady Corbet) as they come to terms with the reality of being raped by their little league coach (Bill Sage) as children. For a majority of the narrative, Neil who can thoroughly remember the experience, views it as a loving relationship shared between him and the adult. Brian, who blacked out after each experience, has memory loss and cannot recall five hours. To explain the gap in time, he has come to believe that he was abducted

by aliens. Neither young man can confront the coach, as he moved away not long after the assaults. Instead, they eventually commiserate as Neil recounts the experience to Brian after they break into the house where the events had taken place. Araki uses blood to visually connect to his other films through Brian's frequent nosebleeds as a physical manifestation of the lingering trauma of abuse. B. Ruby Rich discusses this disturbing narrative by writing:

> *Mysterious Skin* conjures a universe in which a baseball coach has a radical impact on two boys, one who grows up testifying to his abduction by aliens, the other who evolves into life as a hustler. It resonates deeply, transporting viewers into the dark universe of a troubled childhood, precisely because Araki sets irony aside. (94)

By shedding the more visually camp aesthetic of his Teenage Apocalypse trilogy and delivering a muted and darkly realistic world in *Mysterious Skin*, Araki proves that he wants to provide a more mature and grittier telling of these events. A profound sense of dread envelopes Brian's narrative, as he only has flashes of his memory with what seems to be an alien lifeform reaching for him. As the film progresses, the image clears up and becomes that of a faceless adult man. It is not until he is in the coach's old house, however, that the memories fully return to Brian, leaving him devastated and destroyed, leaning his head on Neil's shoulder for comfort. This sequence is where Joseph Gordon-Levitt's performance changes drastically. For the entirety of the film, Neil has been visibly fighting back any emotion. While audiences can see fear in his eyes on several occasions, these flashes of emotion are quickly swept aside in favor of his bravado and macho pretense. Here, he is unable to hide his remorse and regret any longer. Following his being violently attacked and raped in New York City by an intended john, Neil has finally realized that he must come to terms with his childhood trauma. He knows that the coach used him to lure other young boys into danger and he must finally confront that. The way that he

talks to Brian about how the coach treated him takes the form of someone simply speaking of an ex-lover, not a malicious child rapist. Neil continues to harbor strong feelings and attachment to the coach. Despite feeling overwhelming regret at his involvement, Neil is still emotionally distant, as Araki has been portraying him as seemingly sociopathic for much of the film. His emotions are never revealed to the same extent as Brian's, who has been a completely open book for the entire film, unable to hide his very visible emotions from his family. This moment of connection between Neil and Brian is the heart of the film, as both young men are left open and their pasts have been made visible to them. As with Araki's other work, the film simply ends after this revelation. With *Mysterious Skin*, Araki proved that he could make a larger budget arthouse film that still maintains the anti-establishment and anti-heteronormative vibe of his earlier work. Queerness is still very much at the heart of *Mysterious Skin*, as Neil has shaped his identity as a queer man after the events with the coach and Brian has complicated feelings for their shared friend Eric (Jeff Licon). While Araki's other films utilize the trauma of sexual assault as a device that leads to suicide or death, *Mysterious Skin* places it uncomfortably at the heart of the narrative, forcing the viewer to confront these challenging demons right alongside Neil and Brian.

The films of Gregg Araki are emblematic of the counterculture focus of the New Queer Cinema movement. Using the looming threat of the AIDS epidemic, over-the-top blood and gore, and the trauma of sexual assault, Araki provides the viewer with challenging but rewarding films that dig to the heart of the themes that populate the New Queer Cinema films. Of all the NQC filmmakers, Araki is most acknowledged for using the visual horror aesthetic to construct tension and dread and to convey the horrors of queer trauma. His films stand as historical markers of the challenges faced by the queer youth of the 1990s. They invoke reactionary and

shocked responses from the viewer, going further than many of his peers in terms of content shown on screen. By examining his works, it is easy to see how he has inspired current queer horror filmmakers in their work within the genre.

CHAPTER IV. BLACK LEATHER, LESBIAN CAMPERS, AND NON-BINARY DOLLS: QUEERING THE HETERONORMATIVE SLASHER SUB-GENRE

Videographic Essay Link

Following the rise in queer narratives due to the films of the New Queer Cinema movement, queer identities began popping up in more mainstream Hollywood narratives, such as *Philadelphia* (Demme, 1994), *Brokeback Mountain* (Lee, 2005), and *Chasing Amy* (Smith, 1997). These narratives continued to be primarily directed by straight cisgender male directors. As queer filmmakers became more recognized because of their New Queer Cinema projects, they continued directing films within the independent film circuit, leading to more specified genre work. The horror genre became a clear space where queerness could be more openly depicted. In a genre that once stigmatized queer identities as monstrous and transgressive, queer filmmakers found a space to showcase queerness in a way that challenged and recontextualized the horror films of the past. The main area where these queer updates of horror tropes and narratives are visible is the slasher sub-genre. Here, filmmakers could directly challenge the traditionally heteronormative narratives and gendered character tropes of decades of slasher films and present queer audiences with films that connected directly to them and cast aside the genre's use of queer identities solely as monstrous killers. Through these films, queer identities were able to be explored in more complex ways, with characters ranging from queer protagonists, sidekicks, victims, and recontextualized queer villains. Outside of the slasher sub-genre, queer filmmakers also began adapting traditionally heteronormative narratives into queer horror works. This chapter examines how filmmakers challenged the decades of queer stereotypes within the horror genre and how they lead to the current inclusion of queer narratives in mainstream horror films and television productions. Paul Etheredge's *Hellbent* (2004) and Sharon Ferranti's *Make a Wish* (2002) serve as examples of queer horror prototypes that would

go on to inspire many independent horror films after their release. The work of screenwriter and director Don Mancini within the popular Chucky film franchise (1988-2017) and television series (2021-) serves as the first time that a queer filmmaker was able to introduce explicitly queer narratives and characters into a mainstream horror franchise.

Continuing in the low-budget tradition of the New Queer Cinema movement is Paul Etheredge's *Hellbent* (2004). Marketed as the first gay slasher film (despite Ferranti's *Make a Wish* being released two years prior), *Hellbent* actively queers the heteronormative tropes of the conventional slasher film. Instead of employing gay male stereotypes, *Hellbent* takes care to give each character realistic depth and allows them to naturally fit into the character molds that are easily identifiable within the sub-genre: the final girl, the slut, the jock, etc. Darren Elliot-Smith writes:

> The film exploits the conventions and stereotypes of the slasher sub-genre to produce a text that plays with patriarchally constructed definitions of gay male subjectivity and consciously offers a social commentary on them. This is achieved via its display of ironic stereotypes and representations of gay male gender and age anxiety (137).

As the film follows Eddie (Dylan Fergus) and his friends throughout Halloween night as a killer is murdering gay men, each trope is addressed and molded into a gay male equivalent. Eddie is the final boy: intelligent, loyal, suspicious of his surroundings, observant, and slightly awkward with men. Chaz (Andrew Levitas) is the hypersexual figure, constantly encouraging his friends to hook up with men they encounter throughout their evening. He is also openly identified as pansexual. While this characterization is progressive in terms of Hollywood's lack of pansexual figures in film, it does fall back on the problematic trope of the bisexual and pansexual identities as being more sexually active and promiscuous, as a continuous source of comedy. Joey (Hank

Harris) is the young gay man who is very inexperienced and whom Eddie has taken under his wing to protect from the hypersexual Los Angeles gay community. Tobey (Matt Phillips) is the underwear model who just wants a night where he is not constantly objectified, so he chooses to go in drag for his Halloween costume. Finally, Jake (Bryan Kirkwood) is the leather jacket-wearing tattooed bad boy whom Eddie has his eye on. These queer takes on slasher character tropes allow Etheredge's film to feel fresh but also familiar, as the sub-genre has dealt with these figures since its inception. Elliott-Smith writes of Tobey's drag costume:

> In choosing to attend the festivities dressed in female drag, Tobey … appears to subvert the masculine fancy dress of the carnival but, instead, reveals a world where gay male sexuality is disguised in *both* hypermasculine and hyper-feminine modes. *Hellbent*'s drag queen character … is used as a means of literalising gay male anxieties about being thought of *as a woman* (143).

The slasher sub-genre has always served as a complex examination of femininity in terms of the construction of the less feminine final girl and the misogynistic iteration of the hyper feminine and overtly sexualized female victim. *Hellbent* aligns with other films in the sub-genre by showcasing femaleness through a gay lens as something that is viewed as sexually repellent to gay men. Tobey had hoped simply to have an evening of fun with his friends where he could flirt with just a couple gay men instead of the crowds of lusty men that normally surround the underwear model. To his surprise, his costume is met with disgust throughout the evening. Etheredge plays this for comedy to highlight the concept of the beautiful and masculine gay man being rejected when he sheds his hyper muscular image for a feminized costume. The other characters in the film all deal with elements of hypermasculinity through their respective costumes.

Like many traditional slasher films before it, *Hellbent* deals in objectification and exploitation, but instead of the male gaze lingering on the undressed bodies of young women, Etheredge utilizes the gay male gaze to linger on the muscular and suggestively costumed bodies of his gay male characters. Subverting the heteronormative male gaze in this way allows the film to comment on the incredibly sexual way slasher films objectify and sexualize female bodies. Despite the locations of the narrative shifting from leather bars, bathrooms, and bedrooms, Etheredge's film remains quite chaste and limits the objectification to the suggestive Halloween costumes and the occasional kiss shared between men. The main focal point of objectification is simply the muscular bodies of the film's characters. Eddie dresses in his dead father's old police uniform (which incidentally happens to be quite form-fitting), Chaz is dressed like a sultry cowboy, and Joey is wearing a leather harness with a chain. The killer in the film, known only as the Devil Daddy, wears only leather pants and a devil mask, with red lighting often showcasing his incredibly muscular physique.

Produced by three of the producers of the original *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978), *Hellbent* shares many similarities with the iconic slasher film. Much like Michael Myers, light is never shed on why the Devil Daddy is killing gay men. He stalks and creeps throughout the background of the film, leading up to the death sequences. The Devil Daddy also takes pride in his killings and takes his victim's heads as souvenirs to display for the final boy to discover towards the end of the film. While there is no budgetary data listed for the film at this time, the filmmakers discuss the low budget nature of the production in the making-of documentary on the film's DVD. Etheredge was able to utilize digital editing technology to showcase the headless corpses of the Devil Daddy's victims. Though this is used in a very limited manner, it echoes the body reveals in Carpenter's film. Etheredge had to be clever to conceal the budget limitations to

convey the blood and gore that he wanted to showcase. The documentary details the digital process of overlapping footage of the actors with the background of the set to create the illusion of a beheaded corpse. Bringing in a mere $183,066 at the box office during its brief ten-theatre theatrical run, *Hellbent* went on to develop a cult following in the DVD market.[1]

Two years prior to the release of *Hellbent*, lesbian filmmaker Sharon Ferranti completed work on *Make a Wish* (Ferranti, 2002). The film features a gang of queer women going on a weekend camping trip to celebrate Susan's (Moynan King) birthday. Each of the women in the group is a former lover and now friend of Susan, aside from Andrea (Amanda Spain), the current girlfriend of Monica (Virginia Baeta). As the weekend unfolds, the women are slowly butchered one by one. They suspect that their tormentor is either the redneck truckdriver who has been harassing them since they arrived in the large national park or Linda's (Melanie Freedom Flynn) new boyfriend whom she began dating after being in a relationship with Susan. It is ultimately revealed to be Susan who has been killing her former lovers after having recently escaped from a mental institution. Ferranti creates her own takes on the character tropes of the slasher sub-genre by adapting them to fit her lesbian and bisexual female characters in the film. Susan is the promiscuous figure of the group, as she has cheated on nearly all her lovers, while Monica is the jock of the group and is very handy with tools, and Michelle (Nora Strain) is the initial victim in the vein of Drew Barrymore's Casey in *Scream* (Wes Craven, 1996). There is no definitive budget information for the film, but in an interview included on the DVD, Ferranti hints at the budget being about $180,000 and how they were only able to spend approximately $100 on the blood and gore effects.

---

1 "Hellbent." *Box Office Mojo*, https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt0356159

Sex scenes play a large part in the slasher film. Exploitation of the female body has been a key visual trope of the sub-genre since its inception. Ferranti explores this by creating sex sequences that feature a characteristically queer female gaze. There are several sequences in *Make a Wish* in which Susan engages in sex with her former lovers, the women develop physical relations with one another, and Linda proves her bisexuality to her friends who tease her for being a straight woman now that she is dating a man. As the film takes place in a national park, the majority of these sequences take place in the tents that the women have set up at their campsite. Tents have been an oft-frequented location for quick lovemaking sessions in slasher films. To define the queer female gaze in Ferranti's film, the sex sequences in *Make a Wish* will be compared to the images from sex scenes directed by straight male directors Marcus Nispel and Adam Marcus in their films in the *Friday the 13th* franchise, *Friday the 13th* (2009) and *Jason Goes to Hell: The Final Friday* (1993), respectively. Ferranti's sex sequences feature lengthier close-up and extreme close-up shots of the two female bodies connecting: ranging from simple handholding to the physical exploration of their bodies. While the sequences are clearly meant to arouse the viewer, they focus on the emotionally physical connections between both women. Countering this is the sex scene in *Friday the 13th* (2009). In his remake of the first three films of the franchise, Marcus Nispel features a split narrative that features two groups of sexually active characters, one of which is slayed rather quickly at the beginning of the film. In this first quarter of the narrative, Nispel showcases a tent sex scene shared between arrogant Richie (Ben Feldman) and his girlfriend Amanda (America Olivo). As they sit around the fire, Amanda teases Richie by slowly revealing her body to him while his stoner friend Wade (Jonathan Sadowski) bores him with conversation. This leads to Richie suggesting the pair meet in the tent to have sex. Nispel extends the scene by cutting back to it as other characters in the

group are off exploring Camp Crystal Lake and looking for marijuana. Unlike Ferranti's sequences, Nispel utilizes a medium shot of Richie and Amanda having sex, solely to showcase her breasts. The scene is clearly just about Richie's pleasure as he climaxes well before Amanda, and the majority of his body is hidden behind hers. Even the shadow of their activity seen through the side of the tent is meant to highlight her breasts. The scene inevitably leads to both Richie and Amanda being brutally killed by Jason. As with most sex scenes in slasher films, this example demonstrates how their purpose is generally meant to titillate the young male viewer. Sixteen years prior, Adam Marcus included a sex scene in *Jason Goes to Hell: The Final Friday*. Marcus goes against the female exploitation visual trope of the slasher sub-genre by including a sex scene that features an equal balance of male and female nudity. Celebrating the incorrect announcement of the death of Jason in the film, Deborah (Michelle Clunie) and Luke (Michael B. Silver) decide to spend the night at Camp Crystal Lake with their friend Alexis (Kathryn Atwood). Unlike Nispel's scene, Marcus's sequence highlights Luke actively pleasuring Deborah and utilizes medium full shots to showcase the two closely connected. While this is a more progressive image in contrast to Nispel's focus on the female form, it still aligns with the male gaze, as it actively focuses more on Deborah's nude body. It also ends with Jason slaughtering both lovers. Ferranti's queer female gaze focuses on the intimate physical touch shared between two women instead of the more direct and explicitly sexual images of a man having sex with a woman. The main difference between the gaze in these examples boils down to a difference between sensuality vs. sexual objectification. Ferranti's images showcase a more intimate sensuality whereas the images from the *Friday the 13th* films are more concerned with showcasing the full scope of the sex act itself, primarily focusing on the objectification of the women involved.

While *Hellbent* and *Make a Wish* are both prime examples of truly independent slasher films, mainstream Hollywood slasher films took some time to catch up in terms of queer narratives. Only one of the popular slasher franchises has included more than a queer secondary character. *Scream 4* (Wes Craven, 2011) jokingly states that in the 2010s, one of the only remaining ways to survive a slasher film is to be gay. Even with that bit of dialogue, gay screenwriter Kevin Williamson still did not include a queer character in the film. Instead, as Robbie (Erik Knudsen) is about to be killed by Ghost Face, he blurts out that he's gay, but quickly amends the statement with, "if it helps." It would take the *Scream* franchise another eleven years to include an actively defined queer character through Mindy Meeks-Martin (Jasmin Savoy Brown) in *Scream* (Bettinelli-Olpin and Gillett, 2022), the fifth film in the popular franchise. While the films featuring Michael Myers, Freddy Krueger, and Jason Voorhees may not contain any directly queer characters, it is in the Chucky franchise where gay screenwriter and director Don Mancini was able to construct an intricate legacy of queer horror that has continued growing over the decades.

What started as a simple idea meant to serve as an allegory for consumerism following the early 1980s phenomenon that was the Cabbage Patch Doll grew into a complex and comedic exploration of queer identities in the 21st century. For the first three films in the Chucky franchise (1988-1991), Don Mancini was the sole screenwriter and was restricted in his ability to incorporate queerness into their narratives. The early Chucky films work as more direct examples of slasher horror, in that while Chucky does get comedic lines through Brad Dourif's voicework, the attention is still focused on the grisly deaths that the voodoo-possessed doll instigates. It is not until *Bride of Chucky* (Yu, 1998) that Mancini directs the franchise into its current comedically camp stance. *Child's Play* 1-3 (1988-1991) depict the terror of Andy

Barclay (child actor Alex Vincent in the first two films and older Justin Whalin in *Child's Play 3*) as he works to stop the reincarnated doll body of serial killer Charles Lee Ray from killing everyone around him and possessing his body.

Bride of Chucky curves off into a new direction by focusing on the odd romance between Tiffany (Jennifer Tilly) and Chucky. Before his soul was transferred into the body of a doll in the first film, Tiffany had been Chucky's girlfriend and murderous accomplice. Director Ronny Yu visually matches the camp themes of the screenplay by creating a film that pokes fun at the classic Universal horror film *Bride of Frankenstein* (Browning, 1935) while updating the narrative for the 1990s. Jennifer Tilly's performance as Tiffany combines melodrama and romance with a maniacal blood lust. Mancini's take on the love interest of a serial killer is quite complex, as she is shown to be more capable than her murderous lover and is the sole reason that he is brought back to life for the film. Judith Halberstam writes of Tiffany:

> Tiffany, one of horror film's finest castrating bitches, delivers powerful feminist speeches in defense of equal rights in marriage, and she ultimately kills her male rather than allow him to humiliate her further. (33)

Mancini also critiques the concept of heteronormative marriage throughout the film, using it as a symbol of death and violence. The honeymoon-style road trip that the two dolls embark upon, along with Jade (Katherine Heigl) and her boyfriend Jesse (Nick Stabile) results in the slaughter of many victims. The marriage of Chucky and Tiffany, along with the heteronormative desires of Jade and Jesse, are synonymous with the death and violence of the film. Mancini's script expands on this by using their road trip as a gory celebration of their brutal romance. Additionally, it is people outside of married heterosexual relationships that are murdered in the film. The most dramatic instance is Jade's gay best friend David (Gordon Michael Woolvett)

who gets run over by a truck after discovering the remains of a dead body. David also serves the first openly queer character in a mainstream slasher franchise. Halberstam goes on to discuss the price paid by Tiffany for adherence to heteronormative desires by stating:

> When Chucky Jr bursts forth from her pulverized doll body in the film's last moments, we see the price she has paid for trading in her plastic affections for fleshy desires: the scene of reverse castration [where Tiffany reconstructs the pieces of Chucky to reanimate him] that promised so much at the film's start now returns to haunt Tiffany as she is slain by woman's oldest enemy: not a madman with a chainsaw but the violent, bloody and horrific effects of heteronormativity. (42)

Throughout the film, Tiffany's main goal is simply to marry Chucky and start a family with the serial killer. The film quickly points out to the viewer that this is impossible, as Chucky will always love killing more than he can ever love Tiffany, but she realizes this far too late, resulting in her realization that they both deserve to die. She attempts to kill Chucky and ultimately dies as Chucky stabs her with his knife. *Bride of Chucky* marks the starting point for Mancini's inclusion of queer themes and characters within the narrative of his franchise.

Following the success of *Bride of Chucky*, Don Mancini was hired to both write and direct *Seed of Chucky* (Mancini, 2004), the fifth film in the franchise. With this film, it is easy to see that Mancini no longer felt restricted in his inclusion of queer themes in his narrative. As the title suggests, the film focuses on the child of Chucky and Tiffany who was born at the end of the previous film. Glen (Billy Boyd) is a sentient doll who, while pretending to be a ventriloquist dummy for a comedy act, discovers that he is the son of the murderous dolls and seeks them out. He learns about them through a trailer that he sees for *Chucky Goes Psycho,* a new film about Chucky and Tiffany starring Jennifer Tilly as Tiffany (in a very comical and meta narrative).

Tilly plays dual roles in *Seed of Chucky* as both Tiffany and Meta Jennifer Tilly. After their deaths at the end of *Bride of Chucky*, Glen uses the voodoo amulet, which Chucky had used throughout the franchise to reincarnate himself to bring his parents back to life, resulting in them concocting a plan to transfer their souls into human bodies. In *Seed of Chucky*, Tiffany returns to her heteronormative goal of the previous film: yearning for a perfect family with Glen and Chucky. Mancini critiques this concept by once again using the theme of the traditional family as a symbol for their shared murderous bloodlust. In the mind of Chucky, the family that slays together, stays together. Ben Raphael Sher discusses how the nostalgia for the perfect family unit of the 1950s is often explored within the horror genre, leading to films like *Seed of Chucky* that attempt to disassemble and poke fun at the concept (212). Sher makes this point in response to the films of Rob Zombie, but it is certainly relevant to the discussion of the traditional heteronormative family in *Seed of Chucky*. While convoluted and overly complicated, Mancini's film ultimately leads to a gendered duality within Glen, who is revealed to have a male and a female soul combined within his body. Glenda (the female soul) takes over occasionally and kills like her parents whereas Glen (the male soul) has an active hatred for murder and spends the film attempting to help the soon-to-be victims of Chucky. The names of the two souls reference the cult film director Ed Wood's controversial film *Glen or Glenda* (Wood, 1954) that features the director playing the lead character of transvestite Glen. Toward the end of Mancini's film, the souls of Glen and Glenda combine to create Glen/da, as the character is now a non-binary character with both male and female characteristics. Despite the narrative of *Seed of Chucky* being overly complicated, it serves as a great step forward in terms of queer representation, as a non-binary character had never been featured in a major slasher franchise film.

The two following films, *Curse of Chucky* (Mancini, 2013) and *Cult of Chucky* (Mancini, 2017) take a step back from the queer camp and feature more traditional slasher narratives. The two straight-to-video films focus on the struggle of Nica Pierce (Fiona Dourif), a paraplegic woman whose disability was caused by Chucky stabbing her mother in the stomach when she was pregnant with Nica. Mancini uses these films to escalate Chucky's voodoo abilities as he continues transferring his soul into several more doll figures. Following the violent deaths of her family members in *Curse of Chucky*, Nica is institutionalized in *Cult of Chucky* where she teams up with Chucky's former adversary Andy Barclay (once again played by Alex Vincent), which establishes the building blocks of Mancini's largest scale project in the franchise, the *Chucky* television series.

The first season of Don Mancini's *Chucky* (Syfy/USA, 2021-) aired in the fall of 2021. Working as the showrunner and one of the lead writers on the project, Mancini uses the longer narrative television format to his advantage to add more depth and clarity to the rather complicated voodoo-centric and meta narrative of the Chucky franchise. He also greatly elevates the queer themes of the narrative to the forefront. The series focuses on Jake Wheeler (Zackary Arthur), a gay middle schooler who uses dolls in his creepy art projects. After purchasing a Chucky doll at a yard sale, he discovers that the doll is inhabited by the soul of Charles Lee Ray and was planted at the yard sale by the Tiffany-possessed Jennifer Tilly (again playing herself). Here, Mancini establishes the first queer protagonist in a mainstream slasher franchise. Jake's sexuality is addressed in the very first episode and is built upon as the season progresses. His coming out proves to be a point of contention with his father (Devon Sawa) whom Chucky quickly kills to win Jake over. The murder of his father forces Jake to move in with the family of his father's twin brother (also played by Devon Sawa). As Jake is talking with Chucky, the doll

tells him about his non-binary child and how Chucky is very supportive of the LGBTQ community. While this is obviously just an attempt to win the boy over, Mancini still conveys the moment as one of actual sincerity. This sets the tone for the remainder of the season. Jake develops a romantic relationship with Devon (Bjorgvin Arnarson), a classmate who produces a true crime podcast. As Chucky plans to create an army of killer dolls that are hosts to a portion of his soul, Tiffany-possessed Jennifer Tilly is revealed to have kidnapped Nica, who is now possessed by Chucky, as well. Chucky's consciousness in Nica's body slips in and out throughout the season, causing Tiffany to fall in love with Nica over Chucky. Tiffany's bisexuality is one of many queer additions to the series that Mancini has crafted. Mancini also plays with gendered casting by featuring Fiona Dourif as the young version of Charles Lee Ray (originally played by her father Brad Dourif in the original *Child's Play* film). Through the use of make-up and a prosthetic chin, Fiona Dourif is a near replica of the younger image of her father in the original film. While still rather complicated, with its meta narrative and extension of the mystical voodoo of the franchise, the longer television series format allows Mancini to develop the narrative in a much more accessible way that enables him to showcase the essential queerness at the core of the series.

In looking at the queer narratives and aesthetic of *Hellbent*, *Make a Wish*, and the popular Chucky film and television franchise, the rise in queer representation in terms of both narrative relevance and character inclusion in the slasher sub-genre is quite clear. Independent horror films were the launching point of queer narratives within the genre, but as time progresses and queer representation increases, queer horror is becoming more mainstream. Charting the early inclusion of a secondary queer character as a mere victim of the killer in *Bride of Chucky* to the prominent showcase of a queer protagonist in the television series *Chucky*, mainstream slasher

films are beginning to follow Don Mancini's lead and elevate queer identities and narratives. Films like Netflix's *Fear Street* trilogy (Leigh Janiak, 2020) and *Scream* (2022) prove that straight filmmakers are beginning to include queer identities in their narratives, as well. *Fear Street* is a rare example of a slasher film trilogy that centers itself on the romantic relationship between two lesbian students. Gone are the days of needing to hunt down a hard-to-find DVD copy of a film released by an independent distribution company. Queer horror is becoming accessible on streaming platforms within the home. While *Chucky* is a strong example of a television narrative that focuses on queer identity, the most successful and watched example of queer horror on television is Ryan Murphy's *American Horror Story*. Through this series, Murphy laid the groundwork that allowed for *Chucky* to fully embrace its queerness. The following chapter will take a closer look at the evolution of the queer aesthetic at work in *American Horror Story* and how it has developed overtime to include more diverse examples of queer identities.

CHAPTER V. LESBIAN JOURNALISTS, TRANS BARTENDERS, AND VISCERAL TRAUMA: QUEER AESTHETIC AND IDENTITIES IN RYAN MURPHY'S *AMERICAN HORROR STORY*

Videographic Essay Link

While queer horror has only recently become more present in mainstream horror cinema, queer narratives have enjoyed a successful run-on television since 2011. This is due primarily to the success of Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuk's *American Horror Story* series (FX, 2011-present). Murphy and Falchuk have been producing partners since their early collaborative days creating FX's popular *Nip/Tuck* series (2003-2010). While the FX network is defined as premium cable, it is still included in most generic cable packages offered through the major cable companies. FX also has an exclusive streaming contract with Hulu that allows their programs to stream on the platform the day after they have premiered on cable. This accessibility has opened the door for queer horror well beyond the niche programming of the late 1990s and early 2000s with shows like *The Lair* (2007-2009) and *Dante's Cove* (2005-2007) that aired on the here! network, an LGBTQ-focused cable channel that viewers had to pay an extra fee to access. here! has since become a streaming platform, as well. Without the additional cost of premium cable channels, FX's *American Horror Story* enabled viewers to watch a television series that became increasingly queer as it progressed. Throughout its run, Murphy and Falchuk's series has gone from featuring extremely secondary queer characters in the first season to including queer protagonists and villains at the very heart of the later seasons' narratives. As an anthology series, each season of *American Horror Story* tells a different tale that focuses on a new horror sub-genre or concept. This chapter examines how, of the Murphy and Falchuck pair, gay showrunner and producer Ryan Murphy was responsible for infusing *American Horror Story* with a queer

aesthetic that expanded on the queered horror tropes utilized within the films of the New Queer Cinema movement and quickly developed the queerest horror program on mainstream cable.

While *Nip/Tuck* does feature several minor queer characters and a hefty homoerotic undertone to the relationship between lead characters Sean McNamara (Dylan Walsh) and Christian Troy (Julian McMahon). The horror aesthetic is only utilized in the third season of the series to add tension to the Carver serial killer plotline. Murphy and Falchuk would go on to produce Fox's *Glee* (2009-2015), which details the struggles of a teacher and his glee club in a small town in Ohio. *Glee* is Murphy's first program to feature explicitly queer characters as central figures in the narrative. As a series on a major network that was aimed at a young adult audience, featuring these queer identities at the heart of the narrative was a cultural steppingstone to greater and more visible queer representation in mainstream television. Similarly, *American Horror Story* can be considered the building block in television's horror programming that has slowly embraced queer narratives and identities. Andrew J. Owens notes:

> *American Horror Story* has become a prominent televisual artefact contributing not only to the cultural mainstreaming of queer identities, but particularly their increasing articulation through manifestations of the occult across US media landscapes. Moreover, considering recent industrial innovations, I maintain that the queerness of *American Horror Story* is doubly articulated, discernible not only within the narrative and affective pleasures of the occult, but also in unsettling some of the normative spatiotemporal structures of television itself. (156-157)

With shows like *Chucky* (2021) following in the footsteps of *American Horror Story*, it is quite clear that Murphy and Falchuk's series set the bar for the mainstreaming of queer horror on American television. That progress was not made instantaneously with the first season of the

show, but rather over the course of several seasons. The first season of *American Horror Story*, commonly referred to as "Murder House," features the least active queer presence in the series, as the only openly queer characters in the narrative are Chad Warwick (Zachary Quinto) and his boyfriend Patrick (Teddy Sears), gay lovers who formerly owned the Murder House. Minor character Chad is a stereotypical catty gay man who is more interested in restoring the house than he is in his muscular boyfriend. The remainder of the season focuses on the current family inhabiting the house and their heterosexual romances.

Asylum, the second season in the series, is the first to introduce a queer character as the protagonist. Like many of the other seasons of the series, *Asylum* features a convoluted narrative that includes an alien abduction, aa former Nazi surgeon, and a killer Santa Claus. Set in 1964, *Asylum* features lesbian journalist Lana Winters (Sarah Paulson), investigating Briarcliff Manor, an insane asylum. Under the pretense of writing an article about the asylum's bakery, in actuality, she is attempting to uncover the story of the notorious serial killer Bloody Face who is supposedly a patient of the asylum. Lana Winters is a complex character who showcases strengths and flaws as the viewer learns more about her secretive and symbolic marriage with grade school teacher Wendy (Clea DuVall). Due to the aggressive homophobia of the 1960s, Lana and Wendy's relationship is kept quiet with the two claiming to simply be friends and roommates. After Lana's first journalistic visit, the abusive Sister Jude (Jessica Lange) discovers this secret and uses it to force Wendy to sign a form declaring that Lana is mentally unwell. Lana is then forced to be a patient at Briarcliff. In discussing the inclusion of lesbian characters in television, Andy Medhurst writes:

> For rare glimpses of lesbian explicitness, viewers have had to rely on other genres, particularly the literary adaptation … Later-evening scheduling, [and] minority channel

> location … have meant that programme makers can actually show lesbians between the sheets. (85)

As *American Horror Story* airs on Thursday evenings at 10 PM on the FX network, it perfectly fits within this space where queer identities can safely exist.

Murphy uses the *Asylum* to discuss the dangers of conversion therapy, particularly in the 1960s. Sister Jude forces Lana to undergo electro-shock therapy to eliminate her lesbian desires. Psychologist Oliver Thredson (Zachary Quinto) even comments on how barbaric and outdated the practice is in the 1960s and that behavioral aversion therapy is the current method for curing homosexuality. Thredson has been appointed by the county court to the facility to assess Kit Walker (Evan Peters), the young man who has been arrested for the crimes of Bloody Face. Dr. Thredson agrees to use the then more modern practice of aversion therapy to cure Lana so that she can be released from the facility.[2] He injects her with apomorphine, a drug that induces vomiting, as she is forced to look at suggestive photos of women in the attempt to lessen her sexual attraction to women. Sarah Paulson's portrayal of Lana in this scene is filled with deep emotions as Dr. Thredson shows her an image of her wife Wendy in bed suggestively smoking a cigarette. Lana's facial expression conveys her pain as the apomorphine slowly causes her to retch while she looks at the woman who she once loved. Dr. Thredson informs Lana that there are two parts of this behavioral therapy, aversion therapy with the apomorphine, and then the conversion therapy. For this treatment, Thredson escorts fellow patient Daniel (Casey Wyman) into the room. Despite the facility's inhumane treatments, Daniel somehow manages to look like an androgynous model. The doctor instructs Lana to pleasure herself while looking at Daniel's

---

2 This practice was considered a common treatment for averting homosexual desires during this time period. (Auffret et al)

body in the attempt to shift what triggers her sexual desires. She is then forced to touch Daniel while continuing to pleasure herself. The treatment does not work and only results in Lana's continuing to vomit into the bucket. Dr. Thredson then decides that he cannot help her any further. Murphy uses this scene to convey the trauma that is caused by conversion therapy, as Lana is only agreeing to the treatment so that they will release her from the institution. The episode showcases the misguided and incredibly harmful techniques of what was considered a modern and mentally sound practice in the 1960s. While clearly less physically harmful than the shock therapy treatment, the trauma associated with aversion/conversion therapy is psychological and the effects are much more long lasting. The episode showcases how barbaric this treatment was fifty years prior to the airing of the episode and how it is shockingly still legally in practice in many states within the U.S.

After the disturbing treatment, Dr. Thredson apologizes to Lana and tells her that he plans to take her with him when he leaves the facility at the end of the week when his court appointed position at the facility ends. He takes Lana to his home with the promise of the pair going to the police the following day to shut down the institution for its horrific treatments and Lana's wrongful imprisonment. While sitting on his couch, she notices something rather chilling about the lampshade beside her and the mint bowl on the coffee table and realizes that Dr. Thredson is not what he seems. Lana realizes that Dr. Thredson is Bloody Face. He has recorded a fake confession from Kit to place the blame on the young man. Much like Buffalo Bill (Ted Levine) in *The Silence of the Lambs*, Bloody Face is modeled after real life serial killer Ed Gein, in that he uses the skin of his victims to make lamp shades and other household items. He also dons a face mask constructed from the skin of his victims, earning him the grisly nickname "Bloody Face." The murderous psychologist locks Lana in his soundproof basement so that he can act out

a disturbing sexualized mother fantasy with her. After he rapes her, the angel of death (Frances Conroy) appears to Lana offering to free her soul from her body, but she refuses so that she can escape and kill Thredson. Lana attacks Bloody Face and escapes from the basement only to end up in a car accident, after which she is sent back to Briarcliff. The remainder of the season focuses on her attempt to destroy Dr. Thredson and free herself from the asylum.

Lana proves to be one of the strongest willed and most capable queer characters in the entire series. With Kit's assistance, she records Thresdon confessing to the murders he committed. Lana's most compelling moments occur when she is facing down Thresdon as he searches for the hidden tape of his confession. This culminates in the dramatic moment when she leaves the hospital with the help of the mother superior. A split screen is employed to show Lana as she walks down the stairs with the tape in her purse on the right side of the frame, while Thresdon and Kit are walking up the stairs on the left side of the frame. Lana makes eye contact with Kit and conveys her need for him to distract Thresdon as she continues down the stairs. While Thresdon's back is turned, Lana slips behind him and hurries towards the door where a taxi is waiting to drive her away. Too late, Thresdon realizes what has occurred as Lana enters the cab. He bolts out of the building. She greets him with a firm middle finger as she holds the tape against the window. The cab drives away. The episode then cuts to Lana, holding a gun and waiting for the murderous psychologist in his living room. She tells him that the police have the tape and are on their way. As Thresdon taunts her with the idea of him simply being institutionalized instead of getting sent to the electric chair, Lana shoots him in the head, ending the Bloody Face reign of terror. Through Lana, Murphy presents an incredibly strong and capable lesbian woman who faces down her tormentor and kills him, just as she promised. Lana's primary flaw in the narrative is her pursuit of fame. After killing Bloody Face, she greatly

embellishes her account of the events in the successful book she writes, which leads to her becoming an incredibly successful journalist.

In addition to the inclusion of a lesbian character as the main protagonist, *Asylum* also serves as the first example of a hyper visual camp sequence amid a dark and disturbingly violent narrative. While queer camp is present in the first season through the characterization of Jessica Lange's Constance Langdon, Murphy refrains from featuring an overly visual camp aesthetic in *Murder House*. A colorful and cheerful musical number occurs at one of the darkest moments of the season, as Lana witnesses the slow mental decay of Sister Jude after she has ironically been subjected to the traumatic electroshock therapy which she forced many of her patients to endure. This moment draws influence from the musical routines of *Glee,* as Sister Jude performs her rendition of Shirley Ellis' "The Name Game," shedding the dreary gloom of the common room of the asylum for a surreal moment of joy and vibrant life which she is no longer capable of experiencing. Darren Elliot-Smith describes this moment and how it is emblematic of many camp moments within queer horror texts by stating:

> One key scene from *AHS: Asylum* best summarises the genre-busting, anti-essentialist appeal of *AHS* and, I would argue, is an inherent element of queer horror *per se*. The episode 'The Name Game' … draws attention to the queer Gothic's potential for performative pleasures and outrageous camp in its presentation of a (not-so-well) choreographed dance scene that seems incongruous in the season as its only diegetic musical number… The scene is represented as pure fantasy and its style eschews the dishwater grey and brown palette of the asylum's spaces in favour of a more vibrant saturated colour scheme, alongside a camp nostalgia that is present in Jude's bright sky-blue mini-dress and 60s kitsch blond tresses. (189-190)

Jude is a character who both administers and then eventually suffers a great deal of pain, resulting in a complexly tragic narrative where she is ultimately able to atone for her treatment of Lana, but is never able to escape the eventual suffering brought upon her by the hypocritical men of the Catholic church. The musical "Name Game" sequence is a jumping off point for Murphy to incorporate more aggressively camp moments in later seasons, culminating in *Hotel,* the most vibrantly camp season of the series.

This moment is echoed in the glamourous and camp musical performances that Jessica Lange gives during the *Freak Show* season (2014-2015) as Elsa Mars. While the majority of the fourth season of *American Horror Story* is focused on the incredibly disturbing murders committed by Twisty the Clown (John Carroll Lynch), Murphy sprinkles in musical camp performances by Elsa, the owner of the titular freak show. Through beautiful lighting, lush costuming, and incredibly emotive performances from Jessica Lange, these musical interludes allow a reprieve from the trauma experienced throughout the season and showcase the great talent of the performer. Lange went on to win two Emmy awards for her performances in *American Horror Story*. *Freak Show* would be the final season that Lange would appear in *American Horror Story* as a lead actor. These camp moments prove to be a worthy goodbye to the acclaimed lead actor of the series and help pave the way for the introduction of Lady Gaga as the new lead in the most vividly camp season of the series.

Hotel, the fifth season of *American Horror Story*, incorporates several queer characters into the heart of its narrative. The story centers on the Hotel Cortez in Los Angeles, a cursed space that traps for eternity the souls of everyone who has died on the premises. Murphy introduces the first trans character in Liz Taylor (Denis O'Hare), the bartender at the hotel. The season also focuses on the bisexual vampire queen The Countess (Lady Gaga) and her lover

Donovan (Matt Bomer) who arrange orgies to feed their bloodlust. Great attention is paid to the grandiose entrances of The Countess and Donovan. Liz is also given several instances of dramatic walks and poses. This is the season in which Murphy fully embraces the queer and camp aesthetic and melds it fully with the dark visuals for which the series is known. While earlier seasons have queer characters and occasional camp moments, the setting of the Hotel Cortez allows for a visibly queer space for these queer identities to inhabit. Unlike the dark and horrific spaces of Briarcliffe Manor in *Asylum* and the travelling circus in *Freakshow*, the Hotel Cortez blends old Hollywood grandeur with the grime of the late 1980s and early 1990s, as drug addicts, sex workers, and actors are killed within its halls. Murphy's love of old Hollywood grandeur would also later influence two of his Netflix miniseries, *Hollywood* (2020) and *Halston* (2021), as well as his FX series *Feud: Bette and Joan* (2018). The art deco halls pair well with the Countess' love of neon lighting, thus embracing the old and new. *Hotel* contrasts the glamourous fashions of The Countess with the truly grisly murders that take place within the walls of the hotel.

As the first trans character in the series, Liz Taylor, played by cisgender actor Dennis O'Hare, is given a solid narrative arc throughout the season, including a detailed backstory and a passionate romance with Tristan (Finn Wittrock). Tristan also happens to be one of the Countess' vampire lovers, putting Liz in a dangerous love triangle. Liz is shown to have once been a father in Topeka, working as a medical rep and dressing in women's clothes while on the road. On a business trip with colleagues, Liz stays at the Hotel Cortez and privately changes into a dress in her room. The Countess appears in Liz's room and reveals that she knows Liz's true identity by stating, "You dress like a man, walk like a man. But you smell like a woman." This genuinely sweet moment showcases the maternal side of The Countess as she fully supports Liz. She takes

Liz under her wing and gives her a makeover to fully embrace her femininity. The transition occurs in a montage as Kim Carnes' "Bette Davis Eyes" plays. The Countess christens her Liz Taylor, after iconic film star Elizabeth Taylor and emboldens Liz to walk to the ice machine down the hall in her first display of external femininity. On the walk down the hallway, Liz is confronted by her homophobic colleagues, who she had always been friendly with when dressed in her male clothing. The Countess slits their throats, condemning them to death for their verbal abuse of Liz. She then hires Liz to work as the bartender of the hotel. Over the years, Liz dishes out helpful advice to her customers and is viewed as the most morally sound character of the season. She gains closure about leaving her family behind when her son visits the hotel and drinks at the bar. Murphy gives Liz a great deal of depth that was not awarded to the trans characters on *Glee* or *Nip/Tuck*. Liz's involvement in the central plot of the season greatly counters the inclusion of trans identities in the television landscape of the 2000s. Discussing the erasure of trans and bisexual identities in television during this time, Samuel A. Chambers writes:

> It remains unacceptable, however, for your sexuality to remain an undecided. And this means that transgender identities are erased whenever possible, while bisexuality either means a transit point on the way to being truly gay, or a lifestyle option of sexy younger women. (80)

Going against the norm of minimal inclusion, the character of Liz Taylor is a deeply explored individual who plays an important part in the narrative. Her relationship with Tristan is also the only genuinely loving relationship in the season. After discovering their secret relationship, The Countess punishes Liz by slaughtering Tristan in front of her. This tragedy devastates Liz for the remainder of the season. In the final episode, Liz develops prostate cancer. She gathers her

ghostly and vampiric friends in her room to end her suffering so that she can join them for eternity in the hotel. To Liz's shock, The Countess dramatically appears in the room and as a sign of the pair repairing their friendship, she notes how Liz is her most "fabulous creation," and quickly kills her. Liz's ghost is reunited with Tristan so that they are finally together.

Hotel also marks the first queer person of color in the series. Angela Bassett's bisexual Ramona Royale, a famous actress who became the queen of Blaxploitation films of the 1970s, is turned into a vampire by The Countess and their romance lasts for nearly twenty years. Ramona is a fiercely powerful vampire who is the only true adversary of The Countess. She plots with Donovan and his mother Iris (Kathy Bates) to finally kill The Countess. During their relationship, Ramona viewed The Countess as the love of her life and was devastated by their breakup. Angela Bassett portrays Ramona as a fierce and strong-willed individual who is dead set on righting the wrongs of her past by seeking vengeance on The Countess. When Ramona finally confronts the Countess, with the goal of killing her, she is shocked to hear the Countess apologize for breaking Ramona's heart. She offers Ramona the hotel and continues to repent. Ramona rethinks her vengeful plan and comments, "It's harder to kill you when I'm sitting in the same room as you. Easier to carve your heart out of your chest and eat it when you're just a monster in my mind." The Countess responds, "That sounds like a dream way to die. So erotic." They kiss. Then the Countess states, "I want to go … Kill me. But screw me first." The two make love for the last time. As The Countess leaves the room, she is killed by John (Wes Bentley) who has been waiting for her in the elevator to end her life because of her threatening his family. While Ramona has come to terms with her troubled past and relationship with The Countess, she remains rather neutral to her death and sets out to take over the business of the hotel. With *Hotel*, Murphy was able to introduce more diverse examples of queer identities

through Liz Taylor, The Countess, and Ramona Royale, with each being given a significant part to play within the narrative.

As *American Horror Story* has developed, more queer identities have been represented on screen, leading to the inclusion of a trans person of color being cast as a cisgender character in *1984*, the ninth season of the series. Murphy casts Black trans actor Anjelica Ross as Dr. Donna Chambers. The casting of a trans woman as a cisgender woman was a big step for trans actors, as they are usually cast solely in trans roles, if they are cast at all. *1984* is Murphy's take on the slasher sub-genre, as the majority of the action takes place at a rundown summer camp. After learning that her father is a serial killer, Donna decides to focus her academic research on the pathology of serial killers. In a monologue, she states how she has interviewed actual serial killers such as John Wayne Gacy, William Bonin (the Freeway Killer), and Robert Hansen (the Butcher Baker). She then sets up an interview with series character Benjamin Richter (John Carroll Lynch), a summer camp janitor who was arrested for the murders of several campers. Richter was nicknamed Mr. Jingles because his large ring of keys would jingle as he drew closer to his victims. Donna has developed a particular interest in Richter, and instead of conducting an interview with the killer, she decides to help him escape. It is part of her plan to study him as he continues to kill at the summer camp. Donna goes undercover as the nurse of a summer camp to observe Mr. Jingles, as he kills the new counselors and campers. Soon she regrets this decision and decides to help the counselors stop Mr. Jingles. Donna is one of the few survivors of the season, as she uncovers the truth that Richter was framed as Mr. Jingles by the murderous Margaret (Leslie Grossman). After clearing Benjamin Richter's name, she becomes the new administrator of the asylum where Richter was once imprisoned. While *American Horror Story* does primarily focus on white queerness, particularly through Murphy's casting of the attractive

and publicly outed gay actors and celebrities of each year, over time it has slowly started to feature queer people of color.

American Horror Story is the first major steppingstone in the current trajectory of queer horror in mainstream film and television. As shows like *Chucky* and films like Netflix's *Fear Street* trilogy (Leigh Janiak, 2021) have introduced queer identities as their protagonists, they are paving the way for more representation that will eventually work its way into even more accessible media. Gone are the days of closeted gay youth hunting down expensive DVDs of films and television shows that were not aired on network television or in mainstream cinema. With Netflix and its rival streaming platforms, queer narratives and identities have found their way into the accessible apps and televisions of queer youth. Viewers can just hit play and the entire *American Horror Story* series is at their fingertips. The horror genre has given queer filmmakers vital tools with which to express the trauma of living in a rigidly heterosexual society. Over time, the horror genre has provided a cite for political commentary and the compassionate exploration of marginalized identities. As queerness continues to become more represented in mainstream media, queer horror has the room to thrive and evolve to incorporate even more queer figures and identities. While *American Horror Story* has proven to be a solid step forward in terms of queer representation, there is still a lot of space for more inclusion, as mainstream theatrical cinema is still relegating queer identities to the sidelines as secondary characters within their genre films.

CONCLUSION

Videographic Essay Link

The chapters of this dissertation have used the videographic analysis method to showcase the queer aesthetic of the films of the New Queer Cinema movement and how that aesthetic was then later applied to works within the contemporary horror genre. By incorporating the films and television productions directly into the academic analysis, this project has been able to provide a more in-depth examination of not only productions' formal elements, but also helped the audience visualize the evolution of the queer aesthetic and how it was adapted to fit the horror genre.

The analysis traces the path from the earlier days of the monstrous queer villains in films like *Cruising* (Friedkin, 1980) and *The Silence of the Lambs* (Demme, 1991) to the films of the New Queer Cinema movement to showcase how queer filmmakers utilized the horror aesthetic to convey queer trauma and consciously examine the naturalized homophobic state of queer representation in the mainstream horror genre. In looking at the films of the independent New Queer Cinema movement, the dissertation shows how the films' use of the horror aesthetic and tropes of the genre highlighted the horrors associated with the AIDS epidemic and the violence of homophobia. The study's in-depth analysis of visual and narrative elements associated with New Queer Cinema work illustrates the queer aesthetic that was then utilized in selected queer-authored horror films and television programs.

In limiting this study to works created by queer filmmakers, there is a space for future scholarship about the construction of queer identities and narratives within the horror genre in works created by heterosexual cisgender filmmakers, such as Netflix's *Fear Street* trilogy. With rare exceptions, the films of these filmmakers are still given a wider distribution than their queer

contemporaries. This is an area that I would like to pursue in my future scholarship, as these films are easily accessible while the majority of the horror films made by queer directors are still distributed by independent or boutique film companies. While *American Horror Story* helped establish the rise in queer narratives within the horror genre, there is still a great deal of room for the inclusion of more diverse queer narratives within the genre. However, by tracing the effect of LGBTQ activists and the influence of New Queer Cinema filmmakers, this study has shown that "outsiders" can have a powerful influence on American visual culture. Visual essays provide an engaging examination of these developments and can help contribute to these positive changes in the future.

WORKS CITED

Auffret, Manon, Sophie Drapier, and Marc Vérin. "The Many Faces of Apomorphine: Lessons from the Past and Challenges for the Future," *Drugs R.D.* 15 March 2018. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5995787/>

Bartes, Roland. *Mythologies*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972.

Benshoff, Harry M. and Sean Griffin. *Queer Images: A History of Gay and Lesbian Film in America*. Rowman and Littlefield: New York, 2006.

Chambers, Samuel A. *The Queer Politics of Television*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

Davis, Glyn. "Camp and Queer and the New Queer Director: Case Study – Gregg Araki," *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*. Ed. Michele Aaron. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004.

Elliott-Smith, Darren. *Queer Horror- Film and Television: Sexuality and Masculinity at the Margins*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2016.

Fox, David J. and Donna Rosenthal. "Eszterhas Presses for 'Basic Instinct' Script Changes: Movies: The screenwriter is swayed by gay outcry, but director Paul Verhoeven rejects his call for revisions. Police arrest about 25 protesters." 1 May 1991. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1991-05-01-ca-1102-story.html>

Galvin, Angela. "Basic Instinct: Damning Dykes." *The Good, The Bad and The Gorgeous: Popular Culture's Romance with Lesbianism*, edited by Diane Hamer and Belinda Budge, Pandora Press, 1994, 218-231.

Halberstam, Judith. "Neo-Splatter: *Bride of Chucky* and the Horror of Heteronormativity," *Postfeminist Gothic: Critical Interventions in Contemporary Culture*. Eds. Benjamin A. Brabon and Stéphanie Genz. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Hart, Kylo-Patrick R. *Images for a Generation Doomed: The Films and Career of Gregg Araki*. New York: Lexington Books, 2010.

Hawkins, Joan. "Dark, disturbing, intelligent, provocative, and quirky: Avant-garde cinema of the 1980s and 1990s," *Contemporary American Independent Film: From the Margins to the Mainstream*. Eds. Chris Holmund and Justin Wyatt. New York, Routledge, 2005.

"Hellbent." *Box Office Mojo*, https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt0356159

Hoogland, Renée C. *Lesbian Configurations*. Columbia University Press, 1997.

Keathley, Christian, Jason Mittell, and Catherine Grant. *The Videographic Essay: Practice and Pedagogy*, 2019. http://videographicessay.org. Accessed: 7 April, 2022.

Keesey, Douglas. *Brian De Palma's Split-Screen: A Life in Film*. University Press of Mississippi, 2015.

Kelly, Michael P. "Basic Instinct: Does Hollywood Instinctively Marginalize Lesbians and Gays?" *Untying the Tongue: Gender, Power, and the Word*, edited by Linda Longmire and Lisa Merrill, Greenwood Press, 1998, 77-86.

Levy, Emanuel. *Gay Directors, Gay Films?* New York: Columbia University Press, 2015.

Lyons, Charles. *The New Censors: Movies and the Culture Wars*. Temple University Press, 1997.

Medhurst, Andy. "One queen and his screen: lesbian and gay television," *Queer TV: Theories, Histories, Politics*. New York: Routledge, 2009.

Moy, Leyla. "The 'Queer Aesthetic: From Camp to Commodification," *Off Kilter,* 9 November, 2020. http://offkilter.co/bymargeaux/the-queer-aesthetic. Accessed 16 April 2022.

Owens, Andrew J. "'If You Look At The Face of Evil, Evil's Gonna Look Right Back At You': Anthologising Supernatural Sexualities on *American Horror Story: Coven*," *New Queer*

Horror: Film and Television. Eds. Darren Elliott-Smith and John Edgar Browning. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2020.

Rich, B. Ruby. *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013.

Sher, Ben Raphael. "Sisters United: Feminist Nostalgia, Queer Spectatorship and the Radical Witch Politics of Rob Zombie's *The Lords of Salem*," *New Queer Horror: Film and Television*. Eds. Darren Elliott-Smith and John Edgar Browning. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2020.

Spadoni, Robert. "Carl Dreyer's Corpse," *A Companion to the Horror Film*. Ed. Harry M. Benshoff. West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2014.

Tasker, Yvonne. *The Silence of the Lambs*. BFI Publishing, 2002.

Wood, Robin. *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*. Columbia University Press, 1986.

FILMS CITED

Alien. Dir. Ridley Scott. Perf. Sigourney Weaver, Ian Holm. 20th Century Fox, 1979. Blu-ray.

Basic Instinct. Dir. Paul Verhoeven. Perf. Sharon Stone, Michael Douglas. TriStar Pictures, 1992. Blu-ray.

Boys Don't Cry. Dir. Kimberly Peirce. Perf. Hilary Swank, Chloë Sevigny. Fox Searchlight, 1999. DVD.

Bride of Chucky. Dir. Ronny Yu. Perf. Jennifer Tilly, Brad Dourif. Universal Pictures, 1998. Blu-ray.

Bride of Frankenstein. Dir. James Whale. Perf. Boris Karloff, Elsa Lanchester. Universal Pictures, 1935. Blu-ray.

Brokeback Mountain. Dir. Ang Lee. Perf. Jake Gyllenhaal, Heath Ledger. Focus Features, 2005. Blu-ray.

Caligula. Dir. Tinto Brass. Perf. Malcolm McDowell, Helen Mirren. Penthouse Films, 1979. DVD.

Chasing Amy. Dir. Kevin Smith. Perf. Ben Affleck, Joey Lauren Adams. View Askew Productions, 1997. Blu-ray.

Child's Play. Dir. Tom Holland. Perf. Catherine Hicks, Chris Sarandon. United Artists, 1988. Blu-ray.

Child's Play 2. Dir. John Lafia. Perf. Alex Vincent, Jenny Agutter. Universal Pictures, 1990. Blu-ray.

Child's Play 3. Dir. Jack Bender. Perf. Justin Whalin, Perrey Reeves. Universal Pictures, 1991. Blu-ray

The Color Purple. Dir. Steven Spielberg. Perf. Whoopi Goldberg, Danny Glover. Warner Bros, 1985. DVD.

Cruising. Dir. William Friedkin. Perf. Al Pacino, Karen Allen. United Artists, 1980. Blu-ray.

Cult of Chucky. Dir. Don Mancini. Perf. Fiona Dourif, Alex Vincent. Universal Pictures, 2017. Blu-ray.

Curse of Chucky. Dir. Don Mancini. Perf. Fiona Dourif, Brad Dourif. Universal Pictures, 2013. Blu-ray.

The Doom Generation. Dir. Gregg Araki. Perf. Rose McGowan, James Duval. The Teen Angst Movie Company, 1995. DVD.

Dressed to Kill. Dir. Brian De Palma. Perf. Angie Dickenson, Michael Caine. MGM, 1980. Blu-ray.

Fear Street: 1994. Dir. Leigh Janiak. Perf. Kiana Madeira, Olivia Scott Welch. Netflix, 2021. Digital.

Friday the 13th. Dir. Marcus Nispel. Perf. Jared Padalecki, Amanda Righetti. New Line Cinema, 2009. Blu-ray.

Fried Green Tomatoes. Dir. Jon Avnet. Perf. Mary Stuart Masterson, Mary-Louise Parker. Universal, 1991. DVD

Frisk. Dir. Todd Verow. Perf. Michael Gunther, Craig Chester. Bangor Films, 1995. DVD.

Glen or Glenda. Dir. Edward D. Wood, Jr. Perf. Edward D. Wood, Jr., Bela Lugosi. Screen Classics, 1953. DVD.

Go Fish. Dir. Rose Troche. Perf. V.S. Brodie, Guinevere Turner. Killer Films, 1994. DVD.

Halloween. Dir. Jonathan Carpenter. Perf. Jamie Lee Curtis, Donald Pleasance. Compass International Pictures, 1978. Blu-ray.

Hellbent. Dir. Paul Etheredge. Perf. Dylan Fergus, Bryan Kirkwood. Sneak Preview Entertainment, 2004. DVD.

Jason Goes to Hell: The Final Friday. Dir. Adam Marcus. Perf. John D. LeMay, Kari Keegan. New Line Cinema, 1993. Blu-ray.

Kaboom. Dir. Gregg Araki. Perf. Thomas Dekker, Chris Zylka. Desperate Pictures, 2010. Blu-ray.

The Living End. Dir. Gregg Araki. Perf. Mike Dytri, Craig Gilmore. Desperate Pictures, 1992. Blu-ray.

Make a Wish. Dir. Sharon Ferranti. Perf. Moynan King, Hollace Starr. Open Circle Productions, 2002. DVD.

Mysterious Skin. Dir. Gregg Araki. Perf. Joseph Gordon-Levitt, Brady Corbet. Desperate Pictures, 2004. Blu-ray.

Nowhere. Dir. Gregg Araki. Perf. James Duval, Rachel True. Desperate Pictures, 1997. DVD.

Philadelphia. Dir. Jonathan Demme. Perf. Tom Hanks, Denzel Washington. TriStar Pictures, 1993. Blu-ray.

Poison. Dir. Todd Haynes. Perf. Larry Maxwell, Susan Norman. Killer Films, 1991. DVD.

Psycho. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. Perf. Anthony Perkins, Janet Leigh. Universal, 1960. Blu-ray.

Rear Window. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. Perf. James Stewart, Grace Kelly. Paramount, 1954. Blu-ray.

Rope. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. Perf. James Stewart, Farley Granger. Warner Brothers, 1948. Blu-ray.

Scream. Dir. Wes Craven. Perf. Neve Campbell, Courteney Cox. Dimension Films, 1996. Blu-ray.

Scream. Dir. Matt Bettinelli-Olpin, Tyler Gillett. Perf. Neve Campbell, Courteney Cox. Paramount Pictures, 2022. Blu-ray.

Scream 4. Dir. Wes Craven. Perf. Neve Campbell, Courteney Cox. Dimension Films, 2011. Blu-ray.

Seed of Chucky. Dir. Don Mancini. Perf. Jennifer Tilly, Brad Dourif. Rogue Pictures, 2004. Blu-ray.

The Silence of the Lambs. Dir. Jonathan Demme. Perf. Jodie Foster, Anthony Hopkins. Orion Pictures, 1991. Blu-ray

Snuff. Dirs. Michael Findlay, Horacio Fredriksson, and Simon Nuchtern. August Films, 1975. Trailer.

A Song of Love. Dir. Jean Genet. Perf. Bravo, Java. Cult Epics, 1950. DVD.

Swoon. Dir. Tom Kalin. Perf. Daniel Schlachet, Craig Chester. Killer Films, 1992. DVD.

Totally Fucked Up. Dir. Gregg Araki. Perf. James Duval, Roko Belic. Desperate Pictures, 1993. Blu-ray.

The Watermelon Woman. Dir. Cheryl Dunye. Perf. Cheryl Dunye, Guinevere Turner. Dancing Girl Films, 1996. DVD.

TELEVISION CITED

American Horror Story: 1984. Prod. Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk. Perf. Emma Roberts, Billie Lourd. FX, 2019. Blu-ray.

American Horror Story: *Asylum*. Prod. Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk. Perf. Jessica Lange, Sarah Paulson. FX, 2012-2013. Blu-ray.

American Horror Story: *Freak Show*. Prod. Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk. Perf. Jessica Lange, Sarah Paulson. FX, 2014-2015. Blu-ray.

American Horror Story: *Hotel*. Prod. Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk. Perf. Lady Gaga, Sarah Paulson. FX, 2015-2016. Blu-ray.

American Horror Story: Murder House. Prod. Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk. Perf. Jessica Lange, Connie Britton. FX, 2011. Blu-ray.

Chucky. Producer: Don Mancini. Perf. Jennifer Tilly, Brad Dourif. Syfy/USA, 2021-Present. Blu-ray.

Dante's Cove. Prod. Michael Costanza. Perf. William Gregory Lee, Gregory Michael. here!, 2004-2007. DVD.

Feud: *Bette and Joan*. Prod. Ryan Murphy, Jaffe Cohen. Perf. Susan Sarandon, Jessica Lange. FX, 2017. Blu-ray.

Glee. Prod. Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk. Perf. Lea Michele, Jane Lynch. Fox, 2009-2015. Blu-ray.

Halston. Prod. Ryan Murphy. Perf. Ewan McGregor, Rebecca Dayan. Netflix, 2021. Digital.

Hollywood. Prod. Ryan Murphy, Ian Brennan. Perf. David Corenswet, Darren Criss. Netflix, 2020. Digital.

The Lair. Prod. Fred Olen Ray. Perf. David Shae, Colton Ford. here!, 2007-2009. DVD.

Nip/Tuck. Prod. Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk. Perf. Dylan Walsh, Julian McMahon. FX, 2003-2010. DVD.