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## Werewomen: An Exhumation of Transness in Horror Cinema

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Werewomen:  
An Exhumation of Transness in Horror Cinema

Sam Miller

## INTRODUCTION: *GINGER SNAPS*

The original idea for this paper occurred because I watched a film titled *Ginger Snaps* (John Fawcett, 2000). I related to it (or rather, to the figure of the werewolf within it) to an almost uncomfortable degree. This was not something I had expected at the outset. *Ginger Snaps* is a modestly budgeted Canadian horror film about a teenage girl who is bitten by, and subsequently transforms into, a werewolf—nothing about it pre-viewing struck me as potentially profound or paper-inspiring. And, to be fair, it was not the narrative of the movie that struck me or even any specific technical element of the film. Instead, it was one minor, seemingly insignificant scene. The scene in question finds the protagonist of the film, Ginger, discovering that she has begun growing a tail. Embarrassed by this new bodily development, Ginger tucks and tapes her tail between her legs before getting dressed and going to school. I assume that, for many people, this extremely brief scene whizzes by without much thought—a mere vignette in the life of a Canadian teenager becoming a werewolf—but this scene did something else for me: it found a way to depict something that I experience daily and yet never see depicted onscreen—to be explicit: tucking, the practice of hiding of one’s penis and testicles so that they are not visible through tight clothing. After this scene, not only did the whole of *Ginger Snaps* read differently to me; I had uncovered a very personal, uncomfortable subtext within a meager horror film.

Of course, after watching the film, I did some digging to see if anyone else had noticed what I had noticed and what they had made of it. Yet, when I researched *Ginger Snaps*, I did not find much. The 2011 article “Out by Sixteen: Queer(ed) Girls in *Ginger Snaps*” by Tanis MacDonald was the closest to tapping into what I had felt, yet its analysis of the “queer(ed) girls” in the film completely leaves out any possible suggestion of subtextual transgenderism

within the film, instead MacDonald focuses solely on the film's possible incestuous lesbian implications. MacDonald writes that *Ginger Snaps* equates "transformation not only with sexual awakening but also with a sharpening of erotic intimacy between queer(ed) girls."<sup>1</sup> Thus, her reading of the film finds it to be a metaphor for incestuous, lesbian awakenings within Ginger. While I do not think MacDonald's reading is incorrect, but I do think it is lacking something—a certain *something* that has been frequently alluded to by those theorists writing about horror, but a *something* which has not received the consideration it deserves. In this paper I will explore that *something* which has seemingly, strangely been absent from scholarship on the horror genre. That "something" is the genre's close, complicated, and longstanding relationship with the ever-evolving concepts of transness and transgenderism.

Adam Lowenstein writes in his book *Shocking Representation* that, "representation, as that vital but precarious link between art and history, between experience and reflection, holds out the promise, however risky, that trauma can be communicated. But is this promise of communication even worth pursuing when its risks tap into representation's complex relationship to history?"<sup>2</sup> This is the aim of my project, to explore trans "representation" in horror cinema, consciously aware of the risk at hand. Of course, this representation is not merely the literal representation of trans bodies onscreen (though that certainly is an important aspect of representation), it is also how transness and trans issues and the trans experience are portrayed and explored in the darkness of the movie theater. For long before words such as "trans" and "transgender" even existed in the popular consciousness, one can see such concepts represented in cinema, and especially within horror cinema.

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<sup>1</sup> Tanis MacDonald. "Out by Sixteen: Queer(ed) Girls in *Ginger Snaps*." *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures* 3 (2011): 63.

<sup>2</sup> Adam Lowenstein. *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film*, (New York: Columbia Press, 2005), 5.

## I. TRANS TERMINOLOGY

Before beginning the analysis, many definitions and explanations of terminology are in order. In particular, I want to define and provide context for the terms trans and transgender and spell out the relationship between these terms themselves as well as their relation to identity labels and to academic discipline. The word “transgender” itself is actually a fairly recent development. For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the terms “transsexual” and “transvestite” were used in its place—transsexual for those who had undergone “the operation” and transvestite for those who presented female, but still had male genitalia. In her 2008 article concerning the historical development of our conception of this relatively new word “transgender” Susan Stryker writes:

Robert Hill, who has been researching the history of heterosexual male cross-dressing communities, found instances in community-based publications of words like transgenderal, transgenderist, and transgenderism dating back to the late 1960s. The logic of those terms, used to describe individuals who lived in one social gender but had a bodily sex conventionally associated with the other, aimed for a conceptual middle ground between transvestism (merely changing one’s clothing) and transsexualism (changing one’s sex). By the early 1990s [...] transgender was beginning to refer to something else—an imagined political alliance of all possible forms of gender antinormativity. It was in this latter sense that transgender became articulated with queer. This “new transgender” marked both a political and generational distinction between older transvestite/transsexual/drag terminologies and an emerging gender politics that was explicitly and self-consciously queer.<sup>3</sup>

The shift in meaning that the word “transgender” has undergone (and seemingly continues to undergo) does make this project of exploring the concept’s relationship with the horror cinema somewhat difficult. As an example of this difficulty, consider the character of Norman Bates in *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960). According to the expository dialogue at the end of the film,

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Stryker. “Transgender History, Homonormativity, and Disciplinarity,” *Radical History Review* 100 (2008): 146.

Norman suffers from a split-personality. He is sometimes himself, Norman, and he is sometimes his mother Norma. By 1960s terminology (when “transgender” implied a conceptual middle-ground between “transvestite” and “transsexual”), the Norma-half of Norman’s being would likely qualify as “transgender,” but it is unlikely that many viewers today would read Norman Bates as transgender—not only because the definition has changed, but also because doing so might seem potentially problematic as it might suggest that Norman’s potential transgender status is simply a symptom of his psychotic condition, thereby linking transgender people to insanity. Despite this, however, I think we must read Norman Bates as “transgender,” not simply because he would have historically represented such an idea but also because we ought to treat “trans as a modality rather than a category,” meaning that the term is not categorical, that transness is, in some ways, context dependent.<sup>4</sup>

And, while “transgender” as an identity has been taking shape, a similar process has been occurring with transgender studies as an academic discipline. The relationship between these two (identity/academic-field) is akin to the relationship between queer as an identity descriptor and queer studies as field. In other words, the aim of transgender studies is not to define transgender as an identity descriptor, but to explore and critique the complex intersectional relationship between gender and (biological) sex. This paper then is both a work of transgender (or really, as I shall explain shortly, trans\*) studies and cinema studies, wherein I explore the relationship between gender and sex with regard to cinema—in particular, horror cinema.

Because both “transgender” as identity label and “transgender” as field of academic study have been rapidly evolving in the past few years, a more recent examination of them is called for. The previously quoted Stryker article is from 2008, meaning there has been over a decade of

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<sup>4</sup> Stryker, “Transgender History,” 148.

development in the usage and meaning of these words. In fact, there has been something of a turn away from transgender to a more modal and less categorical modifier: trans\*. On the contemporary development of transgender or trans\* studies, Cael M. Keegan writes in his 2020 article, “What’s Trans\* About Queer Studies Now?”:

Over the past 10 years, trans\* studies has gained the status of a recognized field. [...] Academia appears to have arrived at a “transgender tipping point” (Steinmetz, 2014) beyond which trans\* studies may find a disciplinary home. Yet the pace and practice of this arrival have been wildly uneven: running fully ahead in elite intellectual centers, forced by student activism in others, taken up through discourses of weak inclusion in many, and often shot through with intergenerational and disciplinary hostilities. The increasing pressure to formalize queer studies and women’s studies programs within the neoliberal university also presents epistemic and political barriers to trans\* studies, which is not equivalent to and values specific breaks from the frameworks of both queer theory and academic feminism. Trans\* studies scholars and pedagogues working within queer and women’s studies contexts often run the risk of becoming the problem by bringing up the problem” of trans\* studies’ incomplete welcome in these spaces.<sup>5</sup>

While trans\* studies seems to finally be achieving acceptance as an academic discipline, the struggle for its recognition among academia is still ongoing. All too often this field of study is simply subsumed by other, more established academic disciplines such as queer studies and women’s/gender studies. As Keegan notes, though both of these disciplines are related to trans\* studies, trans\* studies importantly diverges from and may even challenge some aspects of these fields. Keegan’s points here about trans\* studies’ troubled path to academic recognition are even more striking when considered alongside another article by Stryker from 2004 entitled “Transgender Studies: Queer Theory’s Evil Twin” in which she proposes that trans\* studies has something of a monstrous familial relationship with queer theory—the academic discipline it has been attempting to separate itself from. She writes:

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<sup>5</sup> Cael M. Keegan, “Getting Disciplined: What’s Trans\* About Queer Studies Now?” *Journal of Homosexuality* 67 (2020): 385-386.

If queer theory was born of the union of sexuality studies and feminism, transgender studies can be considered queer theory's evil twin: it has the same parentage but willfully disrupts the privileged family narratives that favor sexual identity labels (like gay, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual) over the gender categories (like man and woman) that enable desire to take shape and find its aim.<sup>6</sup>

Stryker's co-opting of horror tropes—the “evil twin” obviously being a well-established cliché of cross-media horror—is obviously noteworthy considering the purposes of this essay. Trans studies being rendered an evil relative of queer theory is striking as it demonstrates the monstrosity of trans studies as a field. But, also of interest, is the fact that while both Stryker and Keegan have similar aims (as they both are advocating for a new disciplinary field and both specifically expressing a desire for trans\*/transgender studies to break from queer theory specifically), the most striking difference between them may be the change in the very title of the field they are advocating for. Stryker refers to “transgender studies” while Keegan refers to “trans\* studies.” Thus, we must not only consider what the difference between “queer” and “trans/transgender” is, but also the difference between trans and transgender.

Let us begin with the more obvious distinction, that between queer and transgender. Stryker emphasizes ways in which transgender studies breaks from queer studies, but this does not mean there is no relation between the two whatsoever. In our colloquial language, those who identify as transgender are often grouped under the queer umbrella along with gays, lesbians, and bisexuals—yet what is it that aligns transgenderism and homosexuality? They are often societally confused with one another and are frequently re/oppressed within said society, and this rejection is quite possibly due to the fact that both are perceived as threats to the looming hegemony of heteronormativity. As Judith Butler writes,

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<sup>6</sup> Susan Stryker, “Transgender Studies: Queer Theory's Evil Twin,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 10 (2004): 212.



It is important to emphasize that although heterosexuality operates in part through the stabilization of gender norms, gender designates a dense site of significations that contain and exceed the heterosexual matrix. Whereas it is important to emphasize that forms of sexuality do not unilaterally determine gender, a non-causal and nonreductive connection between sexuality and gender is nevertheless crucial to maintain.<sup>7</sup>

The relationship between sexuality and gender is complicated because, while they are perhaps contextually related, they are not a priori ontological truths, nor are they casually linked. Butler continues, “the relation between gender and sexuality is in part negotiated through the question of the relationship between identification and desire. And here it becomes clear why refusing to draw lines of causal implication between these two domains is as important as keeping open an investigation of their complex interimplication.”<sup>8</sup> This careful navigation of sexuality and gender is especially important for this paper in that, while it is ultimately primarily about gender, it is also heavily concerned with sexuality.

As for the difference between transgender and trans, this slight change in terminology actually seems quite necessary. Just as the movement from transsexual and transvestite to transgender expressed a greater degree of liminality and fluidity, so too does the movement from transgender to trans. However, because “transness” is something of a (currently) radical concept, it can be somewhat difficult to define. Sara Aguirre-Sánchez-Beato writes about the difficulty of defining this term and provides her own definition in her 2018 article, “Trans Terminology and Definitions in Research on Transphobia: A Conceptual Review”:

The very definition of trans people seems to be at the root of discrimination and thus a discursive battleground. This battle is manifested, for instance, in trans people’s struggle against the pathologising definition of their identities and experiences. The definition of a social category both describes and constitutes the category, and has implications for the way in which we understand the social world. [...] These reflections raise the question of how to flexibly define

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<sup>7</sup> Judith Butler, “Critically Queer,” *Performance Studies* (2003), 27.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

trans people for research purposes without reproducing clear-cut distinctions between trans and non-trans people. In this sense, I recommend following Bettcher's (2015) argument for leaving the term 'trans people' open to multiple meanings and for offering a minimum definition for research purposes. I consider that this definition should revolve around the notions of bodies and categories. Therefore, I recommend defining trans people as 'people who do not comply with prevailing expectations about gender embodiment to varying degrees and in different ways'. This definition of trans people should be understood as perpetually provisional because, should certain forms of gender embodiment not prevail over others, the distinction between the categories 'trans' and 'non-trans' would lose all sense.<sup>9</sup>

This definition provided by Aguirre will be the one that I will be working with. It encapsulates the difference between the restrictive requirements imposed by the identity-label of transgender while maintaining its disruptive nature. "Transgender" carries with it some implication as to how to perform because it contains the word "gender. This is akin to Butler's claims about the word "girl," that "it reads less as an assignment than as a command and, as such, produces its own insubordinations."<sup>10</sup> "Trans," on the other hand, shatters these implications by removing the concept from the cis-normative, binary-construction of gender entirely. In this paper, I shall use the terms transgender (meaning one who identifies as something other than the gender assigned at birth), trans (meaning one who does not comply with prevailing expectations about gender embodiment to varying degrees and in different ways), transness (meaning the quality or state of being trans), and also transfemininity/transwomanhood (the quality of being trans and feminine, often in reference to those assigned male at birth but to some degree are feminine with regard to identity, expression, or both). These terms—especially the term "trans," which I shall use fairly often, are useful for my purposes because they allow us to better examine the subject of Norman

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<sup>9</sup> Sara Aguirre-Sánchez-Beato, "Trans Terminology and Definitions in Research on Transphobia: A Conceptual Review," *Quaderns de Psicologia* 20 (2018): 300.

<sup>10</sup> Butler, "Critically Queer," 26

Bates' transness. While it is true that Norman may not be transgender, Norman is certainly, unmistakably trans.

One point of interest considering the above articles regarding trans\* studies is the fact that the very journals these articles were published in are "GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies" and the "Journal of Homosexuality." This may indeed be evidence of their claim that trans\* studies is often subsumed by queer studies and occasionally women's/gender studies as well. And this is one possible pitfall my essay may fall into, as it deals heavily in some aspects of both queer and feminist theory. However, my ultimate aim is that this paper will reveal the necessity of a trans\* studies lens with which to view horror cinema by looking to those places where queer theory and feminist theory seem to be lacking something. My citations of queer and feminist theorists are not to conflate nor to subsume trans\* studies to them, but to express precisely why we need the field of trans\* studies in the first place.

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## II. HORROR: FOUNDATIONS, THEORIZATIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Having established what transness is, we then have the other element of this paper to grapple with—horror cinema. Thus, I must provide some sort of explanation of what exactly qualifies a film as a “horror film” in the first place. Obviously, such a question is broad and deeply complicated and one that I will not be able to thoroughly explore in the scope of this paper. However, such a question does bear immediate importance to my purposes—for we must have some idea of what a horror film is before we can examine them. Noël Carroll provides one potential answer to this question in his book *The Philosophy of Horror*. For Carroll, “arthorror”—which is “horror” as we use it to refer to a cross-media genre of fiction as opposed to “natural horror” (e.g. “the horrors of war”)—is defined by the affective relationship it normatively has with its audience. His formula for this relationship goes something like this: I am art-horrified by a monster if and only if I am in a state of physical agitation that has been caused by the thought that said monster is a “possible being,” physically threatening, and impure.<sup>11</sup>

Let us use Dracula (Carroll’s example) as a demonstration of how this formula operates. If a person is engaged with a piece of fiction about Dracula, and they are frightened by the possible thought of Dracula’s reality because he is both physically threatening and somehow impure—then this person is experiencing art-horror. We should note that Carroll’s theory does not *require* that such an emotional response is actually and successfully instilled in the audience members, rather, only that such a response is the kind that works of art-horror are supposed to elicit from said audience (i.e. you personally do not need to “be scared” by a horror film for it to be a horror film). It is also important to note that—by Carroll’s definition—a monster must have

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<sup>11</sup> Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror*, (New York: Routledge, 1990), 27.

both the property of being physically threatening, and also the property of being impure. For if a fictitious figure only has the property of being physically threatening (e.g. Darth Vader in *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977)), then this figure is not a monster; they may be “scary,” but they are “(art-)horrifying.” Similarly, if a fictitious figure only has the property of being impure (e.g. Divine when she eats the dog shit in *Pink Flamingos* (John Waters, 1972)), then this figure is also not a monster—they may elicit a reaction of disgust and possibly revulsion, but not one of art-horror.

The usage of the word “impure” in Carroll’s theory is immediately striking, especially in light of queer people’s historical relation to the concept of impurity. Carroll’s illustration of the impurity of monsters is as follows, “that they are putrid or moldering, or they hail from oozing places, or they are made of dead or rotting flesh, or chemical waste, or are associated with vermin, disease, or crawling things.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, the monster is in some way gross or repugnant. Though it seems to me that the word “impurity” carries some stronger implications as well—implications related to the “un-tainted-ness” of an object, particularly as it relates to matters of the body and especially sex. This is not something that Carroll explores, but this relation between “impure” as in gross and “impure” as in (deviantly) sexual is hard to ignore considering the sexuality present in many horror films, even from the early days of Hollywood (this is a point which will become clearer during my discussion of Benshoff in the upcoming pages).

From Carroll’s formula for how horror as a multi-media genre operates on an audience, we can turn to Robin Wood’s formula for how horror operates in cinema specifically. This formula, which Wood developed in *American Nightmare: Essays on the Horror Film*, is only

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 23.

this: “Normality is threatened by the Monster.”<sup>13</sup> Wood’s formula fits easily with Carroll’s as they both seem to locate the proper site of horror within the figure of the Monster. Yet, while Wood’s formula first appears rather simple, it actually offers something a bit more substantive:

Although so simple, the formula provides three variables: normality, the Monster, and, crucially the relationship between the two. The definition of normality in horror films is in general boringly constant: the heterosexual monogamous couple, the family, and the social institutions (police, church, armed forces) that support and defend them. The Monster is, of course, much more protean, changing from period to period as society’s basic fears clothe themselves in fashionable or immediately accessible garments.<sup>14</sup>

Wood’s formula can be observed even in very early works of what we would now call horror. Consider one of the earliest surviving films by one of the influential early filmmakers, Georges Méliès’ *The Vanishing Lady* (Georges Méliès, 1896). The film consists of a simple trick in which Méliès, through the use of jump-cuts, transforms a woman into a skeleton before transforming the skeleton back into the woman. Here, we can clearly see Wood’s formula at work. The woman and Méliès are signs of normality at the film’s outset—they are representatives of heterosexual monogamy, of the family. When the woman is transformed into a skeleton, this normality is perverted into monstrosity and the implied heterosexual monogamy is substituted for death and even possible necrophilia. However, the film “defeats” the monster and restores normality when Méliès “magically” transforms the skeleton back into the woman, reversing the earlier perversion and leaving his audience momentarily frightened, but ultimately relieved by the return to the normal.

While Carroll’s formula for horror seems more concerned with an audience’s relation to the Monster, Wood seems concerned with why exactly said Monster was created in the first

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<sup>13</sup> Robin Wood, *American Nightmare: Essays on the Horror Film* (Toronto: Festival of Festivals, 1979), 14.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

place; yes, the audience is supposed to be scared of the Monster, but *why* is the audience supposed to be scared? This question has itself produced its own sub-category of horror theory: monster theory. This is unsurprising as the figure of the Monster is so central to horror. Because the Monster is positioned in opposition to normality, horror cinema can easily become and is often read as politically regressive, as fear-mongering moral fables attempting to preserve the status-quo from some nefarious other. Monster theory, however, often complicates such a reading of horror. For instance, Elaine Graham writes in her essay, “The Gates of Difference”, that, “the monster, that which refuses to abide by axiomatic orderings, carries a terrible threat to expose the fragility of its defining categories and thus the fiction of normality itself.”<sup>15</sup> Another theorist, Jeffrey Cohen adds:

Monsters are our children. They can be pushed to the farthest margins of geography and discourse, hidden away at the edges of the world and in the forbidden recesses of our mind, but they always return. And when they come back, they bring not just a fuller knowledge of our place in history and the history of knowing our place, but they bear self- knowledge, human knowledge, and a discourse all the more sacred as it arises from the Outside.<sup>16</sup>

Such claims reveal that the Monster is not just a sign that signifies that which is other, but that Monsters are always signs of a *particular* other. Any given Monster reveals to us something about our own societal baggage and concerns while also potentially shattering our constructed binaries and categories of being. The Monster’s complexity is further emphasized by a point Wood makes, which is that “few horror films have totally unsympathetic Monsters; in many ways the Monster is clearly the emotional centre, and much more human than the cardboard representatives of normality.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Elaine Graham, *Representations of Post/Human: Monsters, Aliens, and Others in Popular Culture* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 54.

<sup>16</sup> Jeffrey Cohen, *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 20.

<sup>17</sup> Robin Wood, *American Nightmare: Essays on the Horror Film* (Toronto: Festival of Festivals, 1979), 15.

This highlights one area of Carroll's initial theory that requires expansion. While it may be true that the monster is typically meant to elicit "arthorror" reactions, is there not also a possibility that the audience may identify with the Monster? It was, after all, my own identification with Ginger in *Ginger Snaps* that inspired me to write this paper in the first place. There are, of course, numerous ways in which one can identify with the Monster. Rhona Berenstein, in her book *Attack of the Leading Ladies: Gender, Sexuality, and Spectatorship in Classic Horror Cinema*, provides a classic example of this process in the final scene of the film *King Kong* (Merian C. Cooper, Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1933),

in which Denham (Robert Armstrong), the film director who heads the expedition to the creature's island and brings Kong back to New York for a brief but memorable stint on stage, recites an epitaph about beauty killing the beast. Denham is far from sympathetic character and his summation of the proceedings is rendered without emotion or sensitivity. Despite Denham's distanced meditation, however, spectators may well sympathize and identify with Kong's tragic fate.<sup>18</sup>

Kong is a useful example for illustrating the potential of sympathy for the monster, but I find that the truth of these claims can be even more readily observed in the most iconic movie Monster of all time, Frankenstein's Monster (the Monster who is only known by the name Monster). Frankenstein's Monster goes further than mere sympathy by essentially becoming a tragic hero in *Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1931). Karloff imbues the corpselike character with much more emotion and humanity than is allowed to the film's human characters. And, by the film's conclusion, one cannot help but feel a compassion for the misunderstood Monster as the mob of "normal people" attempts to remove his perceived perversion from existence. The Monster also

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<sup>18</sup> Rhona Berenstein, *Attack of the Leading Ladies: Gender, Sexuality, and Spectatorship in Classic Horror Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 20-21.



serves as a reminder of homosexuality in that his existence is brought about not by heterosexual procreation, but by the perverse experiments of Frankenstein and Igor, a male-male couple.

Here, a different element of horror cinema comes into play: the genre's longstanding relationship to queerness and to queer people. The director of *Frankenstein*, James Whale, was, in fact, a gay man whose homosexuality was an open secret in Hollywood. He even developed an alleged nickname, "The Queen of Hollywood."<sup>19</sup> Whale's nickname highlights the importance of gender performativity in early Hollywood and underscores the historic confusion between transness and homosexuality. In his own nickname, Whale's gender identity and sexuality are confused. The moniker of "queen" is even more striking now that it was then, instantly conjuring images of drag, the explicit and exaggerated playing with and violation of gender performativity norms. Because Whale's sexuality (and debatable gender-deviance) was so widely known, it is perhaps unsurprising that his personal life and attitudes often leaked their way into his films—especially his horror pieces. As Harry Benshoff writes:

Most critics will agree that there is to be found within Whale's work something that might be termed a "gay sensibility." What this might mean is the sensibility of a man who recognizes his status as a sexual outsider, someone who acknowledges his difference from the heterosexualized hegemony, and uses that distancing as a way to comment upon it. [...] His films are filled with jibes against Christian morality and heterocentrist pretension.<sup>20</sup>

This may partially explain why the Monster becomes the most sympathetic character in Whale's adaptation of *Frankenstein*—while in the original book the reader's sympathy lies slightly more with Frankenstein himself (it is, after all, entirely told in his voice)—because Whale himself was also considered "not normal."

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<sup>19</sup> Gregory William Mank, *Hollywood Cauldron* (Jefferson, NC: MacFarland & Company Inc., 1994) 34.

<sup>20</sup> Harry Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film* (Indiana: Manchester University Press, 1998), 41.

To return to Wood's formula for horror cinema—that normality is threatened by the monster and—we can see why American horror cinema (especially of early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century) was so frequently tinged with or even submerged in queerness. For most of American cinema's existence, normality has been defined by heterosexuality, while monstrosity has been defined by the homosexuality and other “deviant” sexual behaviors (e.g. sadomasochism, bestiality, necrophilia, incest, etc.). For a long time, it was thought (or rather *taught* by the Western Judeo-Christian tradition) that any sexual activity outside of marital procreation was somehow deviant and evil as such activities are, in some capacity, related to the idea of death. Leo Bersani notes that this correlation between homosexual sex and death reached its peak during the AIDS crisis in his essay, “Is the Rectum a Grave?”—but, this correlation has always been present in horror cinema.<sup>21</sup>

This relation between taboo sexuality and death is obviously the present in *Frankenstein*, as the monster, the product of a homosexual union, is a literal liminality, a perverted imitation of life made up out of that which is dead. But this is also the case in the traditional vampire narrative, where the bite (read: kiss) of the vampire perverts the subject and produces in them a state akin to death in its victim. The zombie, then, can merely be seen as the epidemic evolution of such an idea. While the narratives of Universal's classic mummy films always conjure images of necrophilia (the long-dead corpse always pursuing the affections of a young, alive woman), the narratives of their classic wolfman films always conjure images of bestiality in much the same way. Indeed, there are many examples of classic horror films which express perverted sexual desire—desire which is un-procreative and thus aligned with death. Their existence speaks directly to Carroll's requirement that the monster be “impure”—often this impurity is

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<sup>21</sup> Leo Bersani, *Is Rectum a Grave?: and Other Essays* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010).

related to a kind of deviant sexuality, the kind of the thing that would most readily be read as impure by early 20<sup>th</sup> century filmgoing audiences. The mummy is impure because he is a corpse, but he is even more impure in that his desire implies necrophilia.

The relation between monstrosity and “sex-perversion” is not only embedded within horror cinema, but it can also be observed in many pieces of anti-gay propaganda, which clearly play into this perceived correlation. One such example is *Boys Beware* (Sid Davis, 1961) an “educational” homophobic short shown in public schools. The film depicts homosexuals as nearly-vampiric beings who prey on little boys. The narrator’s description of “the homosexuals” could easily be confused for a description of Dracula—he calls them “sick,” “contagious,” and claims that they even cast “spells” with their “glamour.” This shared and societally-bestowed “deviancy” between a prospective queer viewer and the onscreen Monster renders the Monster even more sympathetic to them than to the unassuming, straight viewer. To quote Benschhoff again:

While the classical horror film encourages everyone in the audience to understand these narrative patterns from a queer perspective, it was probably easier for homosexual men and women to do so on a more regular basis. Because of their already disenfranchised location outside of the dominant culture, or their practice at leading "double" lives, many homosexual spectators of the genre would perhaps be more likely than heterosexual ones to identify with the figure of the monster or villain, even as he or she was eventually vanquished by the narrative's heterosexist agents. This facet of gay and lesbian readership (making do with less than optimal representations) is today still a facet of how non-straight people negotiate popular media texts. [...] Queer spectators may identify with a monster such as the lesbian vampire, enjoying her exploits for the majority of the film's running time, while ultimately discounting the patented narrative resolution and its concomitant reinstatement of heterosexual norms.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Benschhoff, *Monsters in the Closet*, 37.

The queer viewer's relation to the horror film has been the subject of much discussion. Similarly, the complicated gendered viewing practices of the horror film have also been thoroughly written upon. Berenstein, for instance, discusses the importance of drag in classic horror cinema—both within the texts of the films themselves and also as an activity participated in by the spectators of such films. She writes:

As a sexually and ontologically ambiguous figure, the monster complicates a rigid one-to-one rapport with spectators [...] Classic horror's representations offer a schism between spectator (human) and monster (non-human) in viewing terms. That schism is compounded by the divide between character (monster) and role (man) that plays out at the diegetic level.<sup>23</sup>

This process, Berenstein claims, is akin to the practice of drag in that identification with the monster crosses binaries. These can be binaries of human/non-human, living/dead, and, of course, male/female. This observation ties neatly into monster theory, but places greater emphasis on the perverse, heretical nature of the spectator's relationship with the monster. In other words, "one pleasure offered by classic horror viewings is identifying against oneself."<sup>24</sup>

This identification against oneself naturally extends itself to cross-gender (or even trans-gender) identification. For instance, while examining the slasher films of the 70s and 80s, Carol Clover theorized that there was a kind of cross-gender identification that occurred in male audience viewers who watched such films. Clover is centrally concerned with, "the appeal to a largely male audience of a film genre that features a female victim-hero."<sup>25</sup>

That the slasher film speaks deeply and obsessively to male anxieties and desires seems clear—if nothing else from the maleness of the majority audience. And yet these are texts in which the categories masculine and feminine [...] are collapsed into one and the same character. [...] The willingness and even eagerness (so we judge from these films' enormous popularity) of the male

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<sup>23</sup> Berenstein, *Attack of the Leading Ladies*, 43-44.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 58.

<sup>25</sup> Carol Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997), 44.

viewer to throw in his emotional lot, if only temporarily, with not only a woman but a woman in fear and pain, at least in the first instance, would seem to suggest that he has a vicarious stake in that fear and pain. If it is also the case that the act of horror spectatorship is itself registered as a "feminine" experience—that the shock effects induce in the viewer bodily sensations answering the fear and pain of the screen victim—the charge of masochism is underlined.<sup>26</sup>

Clover's theory is that the horror film provides a unique avenue for a male viewer to experience a kind of feminization. This is true for all horror films in that every horror film is intended to frighten the audience—thus allowing male viewers to engage with and even embrace their "irrational, sentimental, emotional, spiritual, vulnerable side."<sup>27</sup> However, this claim is heightened by the fact that many horror films—especially those in the slasher subgenre—feature female protagonists.

One possible concern to consider at this juncture might be that these theories perhaps make transfeminine horror fans apt targets for some rather harsh, dubious psychoanalysis. Indeed, a particularly skeptical psychoanalyst might claim that my own transfemininity is actually a result of my affinity for horror cinema—as if I have been sutured to Laurie Strode and delighted in the "feminizing experience" of screaming one time too many. And this possibility was something that legitimately troubled me upon first reading Clover's work with relation to the slasher subgenre. Yet, I propose that this causal chain happens in the opposite direction. My dysphoric feelings were precisely the thing that drew me to horror as a genre originally. Unlike other genres of film that primarily feature female protagonists (e.g. melodrama), horror allowed me to experience a kind of feminization and cross-gender (or perhaps, trans-gender) identification without drawing the attention that a boy really loving melodrama might draw. In

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 61.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, xiii.

this way, horror has always allowed me a sort of covert transgender identification—even though I was not explicitly aware of what was occurring until I read *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*.

While theorists like Beshoff and Clover have explored the horror genre's relation to sexuality and gender respectively in great detail, there is one thing aspect that is left out of their discussions. While, Clover's *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* is a foundational work in the examination of the gender dynamics within the modern horror film and while it concerns itself with cross-gender identification, the word "transgender" does not appear anywhere in the book (though the word "transsexual" does appear twice, once within a David Cronenberg quote and once referring to the character of Buffalo Bill as a "would-be transsexual").<sup>28</sup> Yet, Clover's consideration of "cross-gender" viewing practices seems ripe for further consideration from a trans studies perspective, especially since other theorists have gone so far as to claim that horror cinema "allows young male viewers to engage in (unrecognized) transgender experiences."<sup>29</sup> Claims this provocative certainly deserve greater consideration from trans studies scholars.

Similarly, the term "transgender" never appears in one of the primary texts for understanding horror cinema in relation to queerness and homosexuality, Beshoff's *Monsters in the Closet*—although, again, the term "transsexual" is used twice (but only in relation to the cross-dressing director Ed Wood). Yet again, Beshoff's theories also seem apt for trans studies consideration—especially given the historical confusion between the two and some of Beshoff's own claims, such as his statement that "traditional models of gender inversion are invoked to suggest [...] queer otherness."<sup>30</sup> The fact that transness is not directly considered by

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>29</sup> Daniel Humphrey, "Gender and Sexuality Haunt the Horror Film," in *A Companion to the Horror Film*, ed. Harry Beshoff (New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), 40.

<sup>30</sup> Beshoff, *Monsters in the Closet*, 272.

either Benshoff or Clover is not necessarily an oversight on either of their parts of Clover and Benshoff, but the topic likely deserves further exploration and analysis.

One of the few places I found explicit analysis of transness in horror cinema was in a chapter in the book, *Transgender on Screen* by John Phillips.<sup>31</sup> The chapter in question is entitled “Psycho-Trans” and examines a few explicit portrayals of trans-identities within horror cinema, namely *Psycho*, *Dressed to Kill* (Brian De Palma, 1980), *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991), and *Cherry Falls* (Geoffrey Wright, 2000). Yet Phillips’s aim with this chapter seems to be a condemnation of these films for their association of transness with psychopathy as he ends each section on each film with comments like “the film [...] conveys a generally negative impression. The implied messages are that gender dysphoria is a state of uncertainty [...] that might even lead to psychosis and murder.”<sup>32</sup> While it is true that the practice of associating transness with murderous impulses (a common trope of horror and thriller films) is dubious and harmful, I believe that there is more to be discovered—both within these horror texts that explicitly depict transness (even in such a negative light) and also in other horror texts which may not be so blunt about their trans representation. Phillips’s argument almost appears to easy to make, but I intend to do something closer to the examinations of the genre undertaken by the likes of Clover and (especially) of Benshoff, both of whom have been touchstones in my personal understanding of horror.

While Benshoff’s and Clover’s theories are indispensable with regard to understanding horror cinema, it seems to me that there are other viewing practices to consider further. Benshoff and Clover seem to hint at the kind of viewing experience that I have when I watch a film like *Ginger Snaps*... or a film like *Cat People*. It seems to me that, while a lesbian viewer may

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<sup>31</sup> Phillips, John. *Transgender on Screen*. (Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 106.

identify with the pursuits of Countess Zaleska in *Dracula's Daughter* (Lambert Hillyer, 1936) as she searches for a female partner—fearing the scorn and wrath of the surrounding society which resents her lifestyle, I argue that a similar process can occur within a transfeminine viewer watching a film such as *Cat People* (Jacques Tourneur, 1942).

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### III. *CAT PEOPLE*: A STUDY OF TRANS SUBTEXT IN CLASSIC HORROR

Like *Ginger Snaps*, *Cat People* has traditionally also been read as a lesbian subtextual narrative. In fact, this lesbian reading was so prevalent—even in the 1940s that the film’s screenwriter, DeWitt Bodeen, was once quoted saying that the producer of the film, Val Lewton,

Got several letters after *Cat People* was released, congratulating him for his boldness in introducing lesbiana to films in Hollywood... Actually, I rather like the insinuation and thought it added a neat bit of interpretation to the scene. Irena's fears about destroying a lover if she kissed him could be because she was really a lesbian who loathed being kissed by a man.<sup>33</sup>

While there is definitely potential for a lesbian reading of *Cat People*, it appears to me that it has another untapped potential in its possible trans subtext. This chapter will explore the potentiality for such a reading in *Cat People*, in order to serve as a case study for how such subtexts often exist in horror films—even in those from Hollywood’s golden age, far before the existence of trans\* studies as a discipline. In short, *Cat People*, while ostensibly a narrative about a woman who is a were-cat, can be read as a subtextual narrative about a stealth transwoman (that is, a transwoman who lives her life as a woman and is not “out” regarding her transgender identity)—just as *Dracula’s Daughter*, while ostensibly a narrative about a woman who is a vampire, can be read as a subtextual narrative about a closeted, repressing lesbian.

To better illustrate this subtext, I shall more closely examine the film’s narrative. In its first scene, the film immediately makes it clear that there is something “off” about Irena, initially established by her reserved-ness and foreign-ness. These are traits that, in classical Hollywood cinema, often identify a character as queer-coded, as Benschhoff notes, “it was not uncommon for audiences to think of foreign lands, and Europe especially, as the site of sexual decadence, the

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<sup>33</sup> Mank, *Hollywood Cauldron*, 22.

birthplace of Oscar Wilde and others of his ilk.”<sup>34</sup> Her strangeness is exemplified even further in an early scene of her and her straight cis-male suitor, Oliver, wherein she says such cryptic things as “I like the dark” and explains the history of “her people” to him. She tells him a story of how her village was once overtaken by creatures called mamluks. She says,

You see, the mamluks came to Serbia long ago and they made the people slaves. Well, at first, the people were good and worshipped God in a true Christian way. But little by little, the people changed. When King John drove out the mamluks and came to our village he found dreadful things. People bowed down to Satan and said their Masses to him. They had become witches and were evil. Well, King John put some of them to the sword but some—the wisest and the most wicked—escaped into the mountains.

The first thing to note here is that the reference to mamluks further establishes the “foreign threat” of Irena, but it also subtly establishes her, shall we say, “genital otherness” due to the mamluks historical relationship to genital mutilation. But this quote will also resonate as perhaps all too familiar for many queer viewers raised in America due to the dominance of so-called “Judeo-Christian values” which traditionally hold that homosexuality is both threatening and impure (i.e. it is monstrous), a malicious sin and a rejection of God’s divine will. I know that this was at least my experience attending a Catholic school throughout my adolescence. The imagery of witchcraft often serves to queer code a character as well, based upon the historical link between witchcraft and queerness to consider, which Benshoff explains.

The linkage of homosexuals and witchcraft within popular understanding has a long and tangled history [...] Certainly many of the women (and men) put to death for witchcraft throughout the preceding centuries might have been considered homosexual by twentieth-century definitions. And it is part of gay folklore, apocryphal or not, that the term “faggot” comes from the fagots thrown onto the fires used to burn such victims at the stake.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet*, 59.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 103.

When Oliver attempts to kiss her, she says to him that she has lived “in dread of this moment” and that she has “fled from the past” from some things which he “could never understand.” This then establishes the essential fact, though Irena desires Oliver (i.e. she has heterosexual desire) she cannot kiss him because she is afraid that she will be rejected for the “monstrosity” of her body. Furthermore, the idea of “not knowing” is central to the horror genre. As Graham writes, “monsters stand at the entrance to the unknown, acting as gatekeepers to the acceptable.”<sup>36</sup> The knowledge which Irena possesses, the knowledge that Oliver cannot understand, makes her a monster. This “unknowable knowledge” is not just correlated with monstrosity, but also with queerness. In children, we think of innocence as relating to unknowing, specifically when it comes to matters of sexuality. But since queer sexualities have been forbidden—even adults are not allowed to “know” them. This ancient idea of forbidden “carnal knowledge” can be traced back to the Bible, a foundation of Western Judeo-Christian morality:

But before they lay down, the men of the city, even the men of Sodom, compassed the house round, both young and old, all the people from every quarter; and they called unto Lot, and said unto him, Where are the men that came in to thee this night? bring them out unto us, that we may know them.<sup>37</sup>

This passage, from the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in the book of Genesis, directly relates homosexuality and knowledge. Indeed, other translations make this connection even more explicit: “bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them” reads the New International Version.<sup>38</sup> And, by the conclusion of this story, the Sodomites are clearly portrayed and judged

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<sup>36</sup> Graham, *Representations of the Post/Human*, 53.

<sup>37</sup> Genesis 19:4-5 (ESV).

<sup>38</sup> Genesis 19:5 (NIV).

as monstrous. Irena's simple claim that she has knowledge that Oliver cannot have subtly marks her as a queer outsider and a potential monstrous threat.

Though, it is possible that all of this could merely code Irena as lesbian. But, an essential narrative aspect of the film, which a lesbian reading might ignore, is Irena's clear desire to be with Oliver; she wants to kiss him, but is afraid of what might happen if she does. It also must also be noted that Irena's refusal of Oliver's kiss in this scene is not merely to be read as a refusal of a kiss, but of sex. During the Hayes code era, a depiction or even frank discussion of sex could not be present, so Irena's concerns here may be representative of physical carnality itself, not just this one kiss. This point is repeatedly furthered throughout the film. Oliver even marries Irena simply in order that—as he seems to understand it—he can have sex with her. When Irena refuses physical carnality even after their marriage, Oliver becomes so distraught at Irena's refusal to consummate their marriage, while Irena continues to say more suspicious things, like her claim that she envies “every woman she sees on the street” because they have something which she does not—which is, of course, the ability to consummate their love because they will not be rejected by the society that surrounds them.

Eventually, however, Oliver pressures her into seeing a psychoanalyst, believing that doing so will “cure” her. Irena goes to one meeting with this psychoanalyst and never returns—though afterwards she has nightmares wherein she imagines the psychoanalyst as King John, the man who drove out the “evil” mamluks. Obviously, Irena is no way “cured” and because she still refuses carnality with Oliver, he finally decides to simply divorce Irena so he may begin a relationship with his co-worker, Alice (perhaps he is hoping this one will include sex?). This deeply upsets Irena—which is important to note as it further establishes that Irena actually does

have romantic feelings towards Oliver, despite her inability/unwillingness to have sex with him. In fact, Irena is so upset by this that she begins aggressively stalking Oliver's new beau Alice.

The scene wherein Irena follows Alice to the pool is interesting because it is directly after this scene that Alice states she has come to believe Irena's "story." This too supports my reading, as pools and their adjacent locker rooms would be one of the places where Irena's transness might accidentally be revealed to Alice. Such spaces may also be a site of terror—both for transwomen and for certain "unexpected" ciswomen. Indeed, the bathroom has been something of a primary battleground in the fight for trans rights. And similar fears once surrounded homosexuality, as the aforementioned scare film *Boys Beware* claims in a scene which depicts a boy being pursued by a homosexual at a public beach, "public restrooms can often be a hangout for the homosexual." The fact that the restroom and areas such as the beach and the pool have always been battlegrounds for such issues is unsurprising—not only because they often involve less clothing than usual and thus possible exposure to nudity and subsequently sexuality, but also because they are seen as sites of potential contamination. This sort of contamination is precisely the kind of "impure" thing that is essential to the formation of an art-horror monster for Carroll. According to fearmongering films such as *Boys Beware*, it seems that, for much of American history and even still to this day, queer people have been monsters. It is this pool scene that finally establishes the "impurity" of Irena. Once Alice becomes aware that Irena has been near the pool, she no longer desires to swim in it.

It is, however, the climax of the film that truly crystalizes my reading of the film. Irena first appears (in "cat-form") to Oliver and his new beau Alice as they are preparing to leave work, but Irena is chased away by Oliver wielding a makeshift cross, a symbol of the Christian God which harkens back to Irena's early comments about the mamluks while solidifying the idea

that there is something impure and threatening about Irena (i.e. that she is monster) while also suggesting that Christianity is the proper way to combat such monstrosity. After being expelled by Oliver's vigilant Christianity, Irena goes to her psychoanalyst, Dr. Judd, who essentially forces himself upon her. When he kisses her, however, something strange happens. The camera cuts to a shot of Irena's face slowly being subsumed by shadow, before cutting to a shot of Dr. Judd drawing a phallic weapon against Irena and attacking her. In these two instances, Irena grants Oliver, Alice, and Dr. Judd access to her unknowable knowledge and is thus revealed to be a monster—a gatekeeper of the unknown. Irena's knowledge is different from the knowledge often held by gay characters in that it is not about her sexuality but about her very person. To demonstrate, while the unknowable knowledge held by the excessively queer Dr. Pretorius in *Bride of Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1935) pertains to an activity (his acts of procreation without heterosexuality, the homosocial/sexual bond between Frankenstein and himself), the unknowable knowledge held by Irena pertains to her body itself. Dr. Judd does not discover anything about Irena's activity or desire by knowing her carnally (the audience has already been made aware of her desire for Oliver), he only discovers the “monstrosity” of her body. Thus, while both homosexuality and transness are marked by a secret knowledge, the former is knowledge of one's desire, while the latter is knowledge of one's very identity.

Let us consider the two distinct reactions of Oliver and Dr. Judd in closer detail. Oliver's reaction is striking in that it depicts Christianity as an effective combatant against monstrosity and “unknowable knowledge” (or simply, knowledge of deviant sexualities and identities). But Dr. Judd's reaction is perhaps even more interesting in that interaction he has with Irena reads exactly like a moment of “gay panic”: a horrible and horribly common phenomenon wherein (typically) men violently attack homosexual men, or—as in this case—transwomen. It is in this

moment of carnal consummation that Irena's monstrosity is finally explicitly "revealed" to a member of the cis-normative and transphobic society and the person she has been "outed" to tries to kill her. Irena kills Dr. Judd in self-defense, but then she runs to the zoo and frees a panther which kills her. Irena has been outed as monstrous and does not feel as though she can live in this world anymore, so she takes her own life. The freed panther then immediately runs into the street where it is hit by a car and killed. The film concludes with Oliver saying that Irena "never lied" (since her secret has now been revealed) and then an intertitle taken from a poem that reads "But black sin hath betrayed to endless night / My world's both parts and both parts must die". Both "parts" of Irena are dead, her public female self, and her private, "monstrous" trans-self.

Through Wood's aforementioned formula for horror, i.e. that "normality is threatened by the monster, the sub-textual reflection upon transphobia in *Cat People* becomes even more blatant. As long as Irena is able to pass as a "normal" girl, she is accepted and even sought after by straight men. It is only when her violation of heteronormativity is revealed that she becomes figured as "monstrous" to the audience and the other characters of the film. The fear which the film centers around appears to be precisely the kind of fear suggested by the gay panic defense: the fear that straight people around you might really be queer people in disguise. This is one of the most common societal fears expressed in horror cinema, especially of the classical Hollywood era.

Yet, this regressive reading of the film is complicated by the fact that Irena is the clearest point of suture in the film—even for straight audience members. Like King Kong or the Monster in *Frankenstein*, Irena is by far the film's most sympathetic character. She is the protagonist of the story and the film essentially presents her narrative as one of tragedy. Thus, the central fear

of *Cat People* could be interpreted as the fear experienced by closeted queer people, whose lives may be put in jeopardy if they are outed. *Cat People* may initially appear transphobic in that it ties transness with monstrosity, but—like the tie between homosexuality and monstrosity—this is not a societal connection that the film itself is creating, but rather one it is reflecting on. Furthermore, we must consider the “against-the-grain” reading processes which queer people have developed with regards to most forms of media, including cinema. As Berenstein writes, “if monsters are the most compelling figures in these stories, and I believe they are, their destruction at the end of the films does little to quell the anxieties sparked during the bulk of the narrative.”<sup>39</sup> This especially true when regarding the relationship of the queer audience to early horror films, which pathetically return the audience safely back to the realm of heteronormativity after allowing them to delight in the pleasure of queer identification for the rest of the film’s runtime. For queer audiences, this cheap return to heteronormativity at the conclusion of many horror films could be easily disregarded. Those five minutes of “required” heteronormativity do not undo the ninety minutes of queer subversion that preceded them.

This is as much the case for *Cat People* as it is for *Dracula’s Daughter*, which features a similar, tragic end for its heroine. A queer reading of *Cat People* finds it to be yet another horror story wherein the audience (especially its queer members) identify with the character of the sympathetic monster, whilst discounting the film’s ultimate conclusion, where Irena is killed, thereby reinstating a sense of heteronormativity and relieving the straight audience, providing them with a “happy ending” after they have perversely enjoyed the queering experience of the film and their suture to a queer character. *Cat People* is distinct from most of the films discussed by Benschhoff only in that it invites identification with a character subtextually coded as trans,

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<sup>39</sup> Berenstein, *Attack of the Leading Ladies*, 31.



rather than one coded as homosexual. Of course, this confusion is not surprising, as Benshoff notes, the prevailing “theory” of homosexuality during the 1930s and 40s was one of “gender inversion”—meaning it was thought that gay men were women trapped in men’s bodies and gay women were men trapped in women’s bodies. Of course, this theory would eventually become the prevailing theory about transgender people, yet today we have mostly moved away from it entirely. In any case, the historical confusion between transness and homosexuality has perhaps incorrectly labeled many early instances of transness in cinema as instances of homosexuality. *Cat People* is only one such example.

Irena’s status as a cinematic monster is unique because, while she fits all the requirements for the horror theories of Carroll and Wood, and monster theory, and has traditionally been read as a lesbian—it appears to me that she actually is a transwoman. However, the fact that she has historically been read as lesbian illustrates both society’s conflation/confusion of the two concepts and also the fact that transgender and trans are fairly recent phenomenological and conceptual developments. To return to Butler’s distinction between gender and sexuality, Irena’s monstrosity is not derived from her desire/sexuality (in fact, she seems quite good at containing her sexual desire for Oliver) but rather from her identity/gender. Irena is not a monster because she wishes to marry Oliver—in any other Hollywood film of this period, that would make her something of a model woman—no, she is a monster because she is a girl who is perceived as not a girl. She is a monster because she is both threatening and impure, because she threatens the state of normality, because he has unknowable knowledge, and because of her liminal identity. She is a profound exemplar of the monstrous in that she “carries a terrible threat to expose the fragility of [...] defining categories and thus the fiction of normality itself.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Graham, *Representations of the Post/Human*, 54.

## CONCLUSION: TRANSNESS AND MONSTROSITY

Of course, there are many more films to consider besides *Cat People*. For starters, there is an entire history of explicit transvestism and transsexuality on display in horror cinema, especially during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, where such topics were nowhere more prevalent in visual culture than in the realm of the horrific. Hitchcock's *Psycho* was already mentioned in this piece, but let us not forget its imitators and descendants, which are as variable as the cheap, immediate cash-in rip-off *Homicidal* (William Castle, 1961) and the auteur-driven, aesthetically-defined *Dressed to Kill*, which both feature the same gender-bending twist as *Psycho*. Even looking at two icons of 20<sup>th</sup> century horror visual culture, we can see unique and distinct representations of transness. Compare the Dr. Frank-N-Furter of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Jim Sharman, 1975), who is entirely defined by his transvestism, which Leatherface from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974) whose transvestism, despite his ubiquitous presence and iconic status, is rarely (if ever) acknowledged, let alone examined in detail.

And then there is no shortage of less iconic horror films which also use explicit transvestism as a marker of monstrosity, such as *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* (Russ Meyer, 1970), *Three on a Meathook* (William Girdler, 1972), *Deranged* (Jeff Gillen, Alan Ormsby, 1974), and *Stripped to Kill* (Katt Shea, 1987). Yet, even films as popular and acclaimed as *The Silence of the Lambs* feature very explicit, grotesque, and problematic depictions of transsexuality—alongside cheap low-brow trash such as *Ticked-Off Trannies with Knives* (Israel Luna, 2010). But it is not merely transvestites and transsexuals who are so often depicted as monstrous in horror films, there are even portrayals of literal transgendered characters, such as in the rather popular *Sleepaway Camp* franchise.

But such obvious onscreen depictions of transness are not the ones that interest me the most. Instead, it is films like *Cat People* and *Ginger Snaps* that are the most fascinating—films that are able to communicate an experience of transness without ever bringing their trans elements to the surface of their texts. For starters, there are many tales of monstrous mutations, changes within one’s own body that frighten and disturb. Specifically, there is a plethora of films akin to *Cat People* and *Ginger Snaps*—films about secretly monstrous, transformed women, such as *The Wasp Woman* (Roger Corman, 1959) or even something as contemporary as *The Lure* (Agnieszka Smoczyńska, 2015)—which is about a mermaid who wishes to undergo an operation to remove her fishlike tail and get legs and a vagina in order to be more appealing to men.

Then there are also the multiple re-interpretations of the Frankenstein myth which bring the Monster’s gender identity and gender confusion into sharp focus. One example being *Frankenstein Created Woman* (Terence Fisher, 1967), wherein Dr. Frankenstein places the “soul” of a dead man into the body of a dead woman and brings this male/female creature to life. Or take *Frankenhooker* (Frank Henenlotter, 1990) for instance, in which the Doctor’s girlfriend dies and he reconstructs her using pieces of dead prostitutes... and concludes with a twist ending wherein the resurrected Monster must reconstruct the Doctor’s body, but also does so using female prostitutes’ body parts.

The extreme prevalence of these widely variant kinds of trans representation in horror cinema calls for much greater analysis than I am able to provide in the scope of this paper. Yet their existence is to be expected considering horror cinema’s relation to transness. The claim at the outset of Benshoff’s *Monsters in the Closet* says it all: “In short, for many people in our shared English-language culture, homosexuality is a monstrous condition. Like an evil Mr. Hyde,

or the Wolfman, a gay or lesbian self inside of you might be striving to get out.”<sup>41</sup> This claim is equally true for trans people. Indeed, the very fact that transness is often defined by an identification with the ontological “other” and even a fear of one’s own body makes the trans experience one that is even more akin to that of Mr. Hyde (in fact, there is even a film that directly plays with this idea, *Dr. Jekyll & Sister Hyde* (Roy Ward Baker, 1971)). That horror cinema fosters drag spectatorship and cross/trans-gender spectatorship is only further proof of the need for a greater trans studies analysis of horror cinema. Above all else though, it is the figure of the monster that stands as the representative of horror’s inherently trans nature. The monster is the liminal being that violates our most sacred binaries, human/non-human, living/dead, and, of course, male/female.

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<sup>41</sup> Benschhoff, *Monsters in the Closet*, 1.

## Films:

<i>Beyond the Valley of the Dolls</i>	Russ Meyer, 1970
<i>Boys Beware</i>	Sid Davis, 1961
<i>Bride of Frankenstein</i>	James Whale, 1935
<i>Cat People</i>	Jacques Tourneur, 1942
<i>Cherry Falls</i>	Geoffrey Wright, 2000
<i>Deranged</i>	Jeff Gillen, Alan Ormsby, 1970
<i>Dr. Jekyll &amp; Sister Hyde</i>	Roy Ward Baker, 1971
<i>Dracula's Daughter</i>	Lambert Hillyer, 1936
<i>Dressed to Kill</i>	Brian De Palma, 1980
<i>Frankenhooker</i>	Frank Henenlotter, 1990
<i>Frankenstein</i>	James Whale, 1931
<i>Frankenstein Created Woman</i>	Terence Fisher, 1967
<i>Ginger Snaps</i>	John Fawcett, 2000
<i>Homicidal</i>	William Castle, 1961
<i>King Kong</i>	Merian C. Cooper, Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1933
<i>Lure, The</i>	Agnieszka Smoczynska, 2015
<i>Pink Flamingos</i>	John Waters, 1972
<i>Psycho</i>	Alfred Hitchcock, 1960
<i>Rock Horror Picture Show, The</i>	Jim Sharman, 1975
<i>Silence of the Lambs, The</i>	Jonathan Demme, 1991
<i>Sleepaway Camp</i>	Robert Hiltzik, 1983
<i>Star Wars</i>	George Lucas, 1977
<i>Stripped to Kill</i>	Katt Shea, 1987
<i>Texas Chain Saw Massacre, The</i>	Tobe Hooper, 1974
<i>Three on a Meathook</i>	William Girdler, 1972
<i>Ticked-Off Trannies with Knives</i>	Israel Luna, 2010
<i>Vanishing Lady, The</i>	Georges Méliès, 1896
<i>Wasp Woman, The</i>	Roger Corman, 1959

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