

The fatal attraction of queer horror

The relationship between horror and queerness has always been binding, despite the consistent historical attempts to deny and censor any involvement. Horror as a genre has the unique power to display, humiliate, celebrate or weaponize any target of its choosing – which is most often influenced by the social context surrounding the making of the film. Since the core thread of horror is to shock the audience, the premise of keeping the audience on your side largely doesn't exist. Characters are liberated to scream, dance, dress up, perform and even kill – free from consequence. This explains why many queer filmmakers are – and always have been – drawn to the genre, it gave a freedom of expression on camera that isn't permitted in day-to-day life. The further that films push boundaries, corrupt the audience and tempt fate, the better. Filmmakers are expected to bare a piece of their soul, an insight into what scares them, in the hope that it'll resonate with us in return. What more genuine connection across the human experience is there than the reminder that we are fallible?

Archetypes exist across all genres of media, though there are none more iconic than horror. This current era of self-aware spoofs love to engage and have fun with this concept. As much as horror feeds off of innovation and fresh ideas, nostalgia for the classics will always be treasured. The ancestors of these tropes have their roots firmly planted in the early 1930s, with the introduction of the Motion Picture Production Code (the Hays Code) – the first recorded act of film censorship. The Code stated that motion pictures had a moral responsibility regarding their impact on the viewer. "Correct entertainment" aimed to improve the current beliefs and standard of life in a population, as opposed to "degrading" them. Despite no direct mention of homosexuality, the Code defined pure love as "the love of a man for a woman permitted by the law of God and man" (Doherty, 1999). It isn't exactly a stab in the dark to suggest that this statement was intended to forbid queer representation. However, William Hays clearly failed to understand the lengths that queer people will go to in the name of art. Horror films never got less queer, they got better disguises.

The trajectory of queer-coded characters in horror in post-Hays Code Hollywood is simultaneously fascinating and bittersweet. Homosexuality and gender non-conformity were initially only portrayed in sick or mentally ill villains that needed subduing, fixing or conquering. In the 40s this evolved, as it often does, into an attack on femininity and queer women. Thus began the familiar saga of lesbianism depicted as predatory and manipulative, where seductresses were designed to corrupt the women and dispose of the men. Although the end result may seem idyllic to some of us, the core idea of the lesbian vampiress was created from male insecurities. Cisgender, straight men have always been threatened by confident, feminine women who seemingly seek nothing more than to steal their obeying wives and unfounded positions of power.

Fast forward to 1968, which brought the dissolution of the Hays Code and the relaxation of film censorship. The societal shifts of the 70s in response to the movements of feminism and civil rights, coupled with the Stonewall Riots and sexual liberation efforts, were mirrored in the cinema. Horror films became queer, explicit and unapologetic. No film epitomised the concept quite as fashionably as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* upon its 1975 release. However, the AIDS crisis and violent conservatism brought on by the 80s fragmented queer media by thrusting it into the spotlight. Queer existence became a topic that was mainstream, though only to be debated and attacked. The queer community sought approval and acceptance, only to be met with intolerance. Although the loss and pain the queer community suffered through during the AIDS crisis never healed, queer media was able to provide both an outlet and a respite. From the 1990s, representation in horror has only grown more celebratory, complex and genuine.

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The hope is that future horror brings even more diverse stories from queer artists devoid of restriction and censorship. Until then, I can rest easy in the knowledge that the greatest minds of our society have already blessed us with an entire genre of evil, blood-soaked, queer, female characters to fall in love with. Personal recommendations are available upon request.

References

Doherty, T. (1999) *Pre-code Hollywood: sex, immorality, and insurrection in American cinema, 1930-1934*, Columbia University Press