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QUEER FEARS (JUNE 28, 2019)

Conference Report by Daniel Sheppard

Queer Fears. A One Day Symposium on New Queer Horror Film and Television. The Odyssey Cinema, St Albans, UK, 28 June 2019.

Jack Halberstam's 1995 monograph, *Skin Shows*, and Rhona Berenstein's 1996 monograph, *Attack of the Leading Ladies*, sought to liberate Queer Horror from the margins of critical discourse. Drawing across the history of Horror, then, Harry Benshoff's 1997 monograph, *Monsters in the Closet*, built on the foundation of these works to examine the multifarious ways in which queer sexuality has been referenced allusively, theorising the figure of the monster queer. Where Horror studies had previously defined audiences in relation to a normative gender binary and compulsory heterosexuality, these works were radical in accounting for patterns of queer spectatorship and provided new frameworks to consider Horror cinema in the twentieth century. From the moment that scholars were equipped with these theoretical frameworks, however, Queer Horror 'outed' itself and fundamentally changed, presenting a basis for the first ever academic symposium dedicated to the subject.

Queer Fears follows Darren Elliott-Smith's 2016 monograph, *Queer Horror Film and Television*, and sought to develop the critical discourse on New Queer Horror: a broadly defined subgenre that emerged in the twenty-first century, crafted by LGBTQ+ directors and producers whose film and television texts feature homoerotic, or explicitly queer narratives, with 'out' LGBTQ+ characters. Convened by Darren Elliott-Smith (University of Stirling, UK) and Jaysica Marvell (University of Hertfordshire, UK) with support from the University of Hertfordshire, BAFTSS (British Association of Film, Television and Screen Studies), and The Odyssey Cinema, *Queer Fears* accumulated four panels and a keynote lecture which examined how, since the new millennium, New Queer Horror has directly addressed LGBTQ+ anxieties and audiences in characteristic and narrative form.

The thematic concerns of the symposium were established during the first panel, "In and Out of the Closet." Here, panellists Christopher Lloyd (University of Hertfordshire, UK), Tim Stafford (Independent Scholar, UK), and Ben Wheeler (University of Hertfordshire, UK) explored how sex and death, trauma, and shame have informed New Queer Horror across film and television. Lloyd opened the panel by examining how FX's *American Horror Story* (2011-current) structurally manifests American queer anxieties. By interrogating the structural premise of the anthology format, Lloyd demonstrated how *American Horror Story* materialises subcultural trauma without resolution, resetting itself each season. Carrying this theme of regression, then, Stafford presented a critique of Netflix's *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018-2020) which has otherwise been celebrated for its LGBTQ+ representation. Stafford identified an ideological entanglement in the series' portrayal

of queerness, interrogating how LGBTQ+ characters are assimilated in heteronormative terms. Assimilation is far from a new development, however, as Wheeler concluded with analyses of Joel Schumacher's early films, *The Lost Boys* (1987) and *Flatliners* (1990). According to Wheeler, Schumacher's early work reads as an autobiographical reflection of shame, screening intimacies between homoerotic metaphor and death.

Complementing the thematic concerns of the symposium, questions of performance were addressed during the second panel, "Queer Performative Horror." This panel included Valeria Villegas Lindvall (University of Gothenburg, Sweden), Daniel Sheppard (Birmingham City University, UK), and Lexi Turner (Cornell University, USA), who each explored how New Queer Horror relies on performance to communicate its themes. Lindvall opened the panel by considering the abject politics of waste and filth in OutTV's *The Boulet Brothers' Dragula* (2016-current). Applying these concepts to the performance of drag, Lindvall charted the radical queer potential of *Dragula* which uses abjection to reclaim the emotion of negative affect. Lindvall preceded to neatly dovetail Sheppard's approach, as he examined how LGBTQ+ communities have reclaimed queer monstrosity in the figure of the Babadook. As drag artists embody the monster queer in LGBTQ+ spaces, Sheppard theorised their performances as utopian moments of queer resistance which literalise the emancipatory theorisations of Benshoff. Turner finalised the panel by returning to contemporary Horror and discussing the cinematic performance of queer dance in *Suspiria* (2018) and *Climax* (2018). Here, Turner examined how dance is used to paradoxically blur the boundaries that define identity, disturbing while reinforcing the discursive production of binarised difference.

The third panel, "Consuming Queerness and Other Gross Tales...", acknowledged both thematic concerns and performance in its three papers. Accordingly, panellists Robyn Ollett (University of Teeside, UK), Eddie Falvey (University of Exeter/Plymouth College of Arts, UK), and Laura Mee (University of Hertfordshire, UK) each used their papers to speculate how queer audiences might identify with New Queer Horror's cinematic narratives. Ollett opened the panel by queering the cannibal in Julia Ducournau's *Raw* (2016). Here, Ollett furthered Elliott-Smith's notion of the gay male audience to encapsulate queer audiences more broadly, and used this framework to interrogate how *Raw* uses restrained cannibalism to critique compulsory heterosexuality. Falvey then situated *Raw* among its contemporaries, drawing on *Teeth* (2007), *Thanatomorphose* (2012), and *Contracted* (2013). Falvey analysed how these films characterise the monstrous individual and their place in the world, and argued that the monstrous-feminine has evolved to capture queer subjectivities. Mee concluded with a necessary reappraisal of Lucky McKee's films which, unlike *Raw*, have otherwise been dismissed as problematic. Mee contextualised McKee's representations of misogyny, homophobia, and biphobia in their narratives and, in doing so, reclaimed his depictions of queer women, arguing that his indie horror aesthetics obfuscate his feminism.

Thematics and performance, characterisation and identification were neatly summarised during the final panel, "Frightfully Problematic Queerness." Here, panellists Siobhan O'Reilly (University of Hertfordshire, UK) and Sam Tabet (University of Strathclyde, UK) used the slasher subgenre to think about the inevitable paradoxes of New Queer Horror. O'Reilly opened the panel

by considering the transphobic politics of representation in Robert Hiltzik's *Sleepaway Camp* (1983). O'Reilly interrogated the bothersome methods used to encourage cisgender audience identification and concluded with nuanced, empathic ways of improving transgender characterisation. Shifting towards contemporary slasher, Tabet closed with a radical lesbian reappropriation of Colin Minihan's *What Keeps You Alive* (2018). Tabet adapted theories of lesbian spectatorship to conceptualise how an affective gaze draws on the anxieties of lesbian audiences and provides cathartic pleasure in the film's conclusion.

Where each panel had examined individual filmmakers, films, and television texts, Darren Elliott-Smith's concluding keynote lecture, "Unbury Your Gays: Queer Zombies, Mental Illness and Assimilation Anxieties," examined New Queer Horror's rendering of the zombie subgenre by identifying recurring motifs that characterise such film and television texts. Analysing Bruce LaBruce's *Otto; or, Up with Dead People* (2008) and *L.A. Zombie* (2010), as well as BBC Three's *In the Flesh* (2013-2014) and David Freyne's *The Cured* (2017), Elliott-Smith expanded on his previously published work to consider how New Queer Horror's rendition of the zombie subgenre articulates subcultural anxieties surrounding the gay male community, cultural acceptance, and homonormative assimilation. Specifically, Elliott-Smith emphasised the intersection between the queer zombie's sympathetic Othering and mental illness, demonstrating how queerness is pathologised, and concluded that queer masculinity is depicted in such a way that is fragile and susceptible to psychological anguish.

Preceded by an evening wine reception, *Queer Fears* closed with a public screening of the timeless favourite among Queer Horror fans and scholars alike, *A Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge* (1985). Much to the surprise of delegates, *Freddy's Revenge* was introduced by the protagonist himself, Mark Patton, with a pre-recorded video message, giving audiences a sneak preview to the trailer of *Freddy's Revenge* documentary, *Scream, Queen: My Nightmare on Elm Street* (2019).

Writing *Monsters in the Closet*, Harry Benshoff categorises Queer Horror in four ways: texts which feature 'out' LGBTQ+ characters; texts written, produced, and/or directed by LGBTQ+ creatives; texts which allude to queer sexuality by subtextual or connotative means; and, broadly speaking, any given text interpreted by LGBTQ+ audiences. New Queer Horror essentially blends these categories and updates them to create a fifth, emerging as a subgenre: texts crafted by LGBTQ+ creatives which feature homoerotic, or explicitly queer narratives, with 'out' LGBTQ+ characters. *Queer Fears* developed the critical discourse on New Queer Horror, as the symposium sought, but what further emerged from the four panels was a scholarly interest in more broadly developing the critical discourse on Queer Horror itself. Indeed, although it seems that Queer Horror was liberated from the margins of critical discourse in the late 1990s, these theoretical frameworks remain largely unscrutinised.

Queer Fears, inspired by Darren Elliott-Smith's work on New Queer Horror, marks the beginning of an essential project that does not merely accept Queer Horror's existing theoretical

frameworks. Rather, it tries and tests the limits of an overlooked discourse, bringing to the forefront a body of work that is otherwise underdeveloped. University of Wales Press recently published *New Queer Horror Film and Television* (2020), edited by Elliott-Smith and John Edgar Browning, and with a network of scholars on the horizon, Queer Horror studies is in the midst of a revival.

BIONOTE

Daniel Sheppard is a PhD candidate and Visiting Lecturer at Birmingham City University, UK. His thesis is called "Gays, Women, and Chainsaws: Queer Approaches to Characterisation and Identification in Contemporary Slasher Film and Television, 1996-2019" and is fully funded by the AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council) Midlands4Cities Doctoral Training Partnership. He has written for *Horror Homeroom* and *Screening Sex*, contributed to such edited collections as *Monsters: A Companion* (2020), and presented at various international conferences.