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THE CAMBRIDGE
COMPANION TO
AMERICAN HORROR

EDITED BY
STEPHEN SHAPIRO
University of Warwick

MARK STOREY
University of Warwick



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India

103 Penang Road, #05-06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781316513002

DOI: [10.1017/9781009071550](https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009071550)

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First published 2022

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

NAMES: Shapiro, Stephen, 1964– editor. | Storey, Mark (Literature teacher) editor.

TITLE: The Cambridge companion to American horror / edited by Stephen Shapiro, University of Warwick ; Mark Storey, University of Warwick.

DESCRIPTION: Cambridge ; New York, NY : Cambridge University Press, 2022. | Series: Cambridge companions to literature | Includes bibliographical references and index.

IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2022007096 (print) | LCCN 2022007097 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781316513002 (hardback) | ISBN 9781009069892 (paperback) |

ISBN 9781009071550 (epub)

SUBJECTS: LCSH: Horror tales, American—History and criticism. | Horror films—United States—History and criticism. | BISAC: LITERARY CRITICISM / American / General |

LCGFT: Literary criticism. | Film criticism.

CLASSIFICATION: LCC PS374.H67 C36 2022 (print) | LCC PS374.H67 (ebook) |

DDC 813/.0873809—dc23/eng/20220228

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022007096>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022007097>

ISBN 978-1-316-51300-2 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-009-06989-2 Paperback

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8

LAURA WESTENGARD

Queer Horror

In “On the Supernatural in Poetry” (1826), Gothic author Ann Radcliffe established a famous binary by distinguishing between terror and horror. “Terror and horror are so far opposite,” she writes, “that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them” (149). Horror confuses and confounds while terror leaves something to the imagination, remains mysterious and obscure, and thereby lends itself to the experience of the Burkean sublime, a “tranquility tinged with terror” (Radcliffe, 149). In the centuries following Radcliffe’s musings, horror has come to be associated with those works penned by men, and terror with those penned by women. This was in part due to the influence of Radcliffe herself as a writer of Gothic romances such as *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and *The Italian* (1797), which deploy the restraint of terror via a series of apparently supernatural events that are explained away by the end of the novel. Conversely, Matthew Lewis’ Gothic novel, *The Monk* (1796), creates the annihilating spectacle of horror via demonic manipulations, sadistic and sexual violence, and scenes of bodily suffering and decay. American Gothic author Charles Brockden Brown reinforces the presumptive superiority of the “terrific style,” for which Radcliffe set a standard of “true genius” while her “ordinary” imitators “endeavour to keep the reader in a constant state of tumult and *horror*, by the powerful engines of trap-doors, back stairs, black robes, and pale faces” (288; my emphasis). However, Gothic fiction, the genre to which Radcliffe’s binary has most frequently been applied, is characterized in part by its very disruption of binaries.

Contemporary horror connoisseurs will recognize both of the experiences that Radcliffe describes – shocking, visceral confusion and cautious, imaginative intrigue – as features of the horror genre as well. The horror/terror divide is, perhaps, not as distinct a polarity as Radcliffe implies since both often appear in the same text and work synergistically to create heightened responses that cannot be clearly parsed. Similarly, the gender

binary established in relation to the horror/terror divide does not hold, since creators and consumers of the Gothic occupy complex subject positions that cannot be contained by an oversimplified gender schema not accounting for queerness, race, class, or any other number of intersecting categories. In *Queer Gothic*, George Haggerty explains that the Gothic emerged at a time in which “gender and sexuality were beginning to be codified for modern culture” and functioned as a “testing ground for many unauthorized genders and sexualities” (2). “Transgressive social-sexual relations,” he explains, “are the most basic common denominator” of Gothic texts and metaphors, marking the genre as queer (2). Max Fincher extends the reading of Gothic queerness to its form, explaining that “we can read Gothic writing at the level of narrative as intimately related to the ‘perverse’ or ‘wayward.’ Gothic stories never follow a ‘straight’ course, a fact that in itself makes them queer” (4).

Once a derogatory term for homosexuality, “queer” has shifted in meaning since the 1990s when, in response to the AIDS crisis, some in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) communities began reappropriating the term “queer” as an umbrella term indicating membership in the LGBT community as well as a “range of nonnormative sexual practices and gender identifications beyond gay and lesbian” (Love, 172). In addition to more well-defined genders or sexual orientations, “queer” offers a term to represent those with fluid and expansive relationships to gender and/or sexuality not fully represented by the LGBT moniker. Further, the term’s roots in politicized reappropriation also hold a valence as “resistance to regimes of the normal” more broadly (Warner, 16). Nonnormative genders and sexualities circulate throughout the Gothic, but the mere existence of formal and sexual transgression does not mean that the Gothic always condones queerness. In fact, the use of Gothic horror metaphors such as monsters, vampires, ghosts, and the undead to represent queer ways of being has long been a conservative strategy for marginalizing those who do not conform to the norm.

Gothic fiction was a popular genre that emerged in eighteenth-century England with the publication of Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), a novel that included the supernatural, monstrosity, haunting, familial curses, paranoia, subterranean passages, medieval Catholicism, and sexualized power dynamics represented by a vulnerable woman being victimized by a rapacious patriarch. By the nineteenth century, Gothic novels such as Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) and Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) became more concerned with the potential horrors of science and technology, while novels such as Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897), through the figure of the atavistic vampire

who threatens to seduce and taint British womanhood, address anxieties around immigration and modern gender roles. At its core, the Gothic “may be loosely defined as the rhetorical style and narrative structure designed to produce fear and desire within the reader” by metaphorically representing anxieties and the fantasies, often simultaneously (Halberstam, 2). In the United States, for example, the Gothic emerges from the fears and anxieties arising out of the “frontier experience, with its inherent solitude and potential violence; the Puritan inheritance; fear of European subversion and anxieties about popular democracy which was then a new experiment; the relative absence of developed ‘society’; and very significantly, racial issues concerning both slavery and the Native Americans” (Lloyd-Smith, 4). In other words, the Gothic is inherently shape-shifting, meaning that Gothic “metaphors and aesthetics can offer each generation of readers means for negotiating the complexities of anxiety and desire” in their own time and place (Westengard, 8).

This foundational indeterminacy, “structured so as to heighten this multiplicity of interpretive possibilities” (Haggerty, *Gothic Fiction*, 10), is a characteristic that often creates the affective experience of “a state of thrilling suspense and uncertainty” (Kilgour, *Rise of the Gothic Novel*, 6), a state with which horror consumers are certainly familiar. Indeed, the forms and functions of the Gothic map onto the horror genre in generative ways. For example, Ellen Moers describes the “female Gothic” as a narrative in which the “central figure is a young woman who is simultaneously persecuted victim and courageous heroine” (91). Carol Clover names a similar dynamic “the final girl” motif, a feature of many horror films that conclude with a surviving “female victim-hero” (4). Unlike Moers, however, Clover emphasizes the disruption of gendered semiotics in horror, asserting that male audience members identify with the combination of “suffering victim and avenging hero” epitomized by the final girl (17). In other words, while Gothic tropes may have originated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Gothicism is not tied to any specific historical location or literary time period. The Gothic tropes, aesthetics, and metaphors that entered into the popular consciousness during a certain time period continue to function in similar and divergent ways in contemporary texts, including literature, popular culture, and visual media. While critics such as Radcliffe and Moers have set up binary distinctions such as horror/terror, male/female, victim/perpetrator, and mind/body, these distinctions seldom hold when it comes to both horror and the Gothic. This chapter will take as its foundational assumption that it is the very fluidity of distinction and the disruption of binary frameworks that characterizes queer horror. This is partially due to the fact that the Gothic – as well as its tropes, aesthetics, and metaphors that

make their way into horror texts – is inherently queer. This chapter will examine the queer Gothicism of American horror to consider the ways in which marginalized genders and sexualities have either been condemned or covertly endorsed through horror's textual and visual mediums.

In mainstream cis-heteronormative society, queer genders and sexualities have been an abjectified, “horrific” presence, and these mainstream investments represented via horror, as a mode of expression devoted to irruptions of the body, mean that the presence of queerness is often registered as an a priori spoliation of bodily norms. Indeed, the narrative trajectory of most horror texts involves monstrous creatures threatening the status quo with their very existence before finally being destroyed. Horror, then, and its Gothic rhetoric and aesthetics, is a tautology – queer and horror collapse into each other in the public imagination. Monstrous figures become a representation of anything that is “other” – “deviant subjectivities opposite which the normal, the healthy, and the pure can be known” – and as such can stand in for anxieties around race, class, and ability in addition to gender and sexuality (Halberstam, 2). In Gothic horror, this othering often means that the monstrous figure is usually the antagonist, a villain who disrupts the norms established at the beginning of the narrative, terrorizes the protagonist, threatens their way of life (and often their life itself), and who is ultimately conquered for the sake of the “restoration of a norm, which after the experience of terror, now seems immensely desirable” (Kilgour, *Rise of the Gothic Novel*, 8). This general trajectory implies that any disruption of norms by social and cultural outsiders is a horrifying, threatening nightmare that must be destroyed for the sake of reinforcing the status quo.

This conservative mode, however, has always existed in tandem with queer counterstrategies of content creation and viewer identification. Horror and its subcultures have frequently been a means for these “villainous” identities to be represented as a form of resistant or alternative sociality. In *The Celluloid Closet* Vito Russo describes the counter-identificatory strategies of queer viewers of twentieth-century cinema, explaining that even though queerness was often coded as insanity, predation, and monstrosity, queers recognized and gravitated toward representation in film despite its consistent association with villainy and death. This is certainly true in the context of horror in which conservative Gothic metaphors represent queer “others” for the sake of marginalization and destruction, but queer consumers are still able to read queer coding, or the subtextual evocation of queerness that is generally used to signal danger or perversion, and thereby access representation despite its negative connotations.¹ Indeed, like the term “queer” itself, audiences have often reappropriated the Gothic figures that appear in horror, and some queer creators have intentionally deployed such

Gothicisms for the sake of representing queerness – from the ghostliness, monstrosity, and high camp in James Whale’s *The Old Dark House* (1932) and *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) to the queer beefcake horror of David DeCoteau.² In the remainder of the chapter, I will explore the conflicting purposes of horror’s depiction of queerness by reviewing several Gothic tropes as they appear in American horror texts, focusing specifically on monstrosity, vampirism, the asylum, medical body horror, and haunting.

Monstrosity, a Gothic trope that arguably originated with the entrance of a deadly giant knight in the first pages of *The Castle of Otranto*, figures prominently in horror, often with queer connotations. As a hybrid creature pieced together in a laboratory from both human and animal remains and birthed from the mind of an obsessive genius, Frankenstein’s creature queers the concept of heteronormative reproduction as well as binary gender and the human/other divide. In *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Mr. Hyde’s physiognomy is described as “troglodytic” and his nocturnal pleasures, never to be explicitly described, range from “undignified” to “monstrous” but are consistently aligned with the Victorian conflation of homosexuality with the unspeakable.³ Vampires entered the popular consciousness with the publication of John Polidori’s *The Vampyre* (1819), in which the “protagonist’s ‘coded’ interest in a mysterious older man echoes the discursive production of ‘homosexuality’” (Rigby, para. 3). Later, Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* (1872) would bring a lesbian valence to the vampire through Carmilla, a strange visitor who develops intense romantic connections with lonely and unsuspecting young women by sneaking into their rooms at night in the form of “a monstrous cat” to suck from their breasts. Directly influenced by the publication of *Carmilla*, Bram Stoker crafted the quintessential and perhaps most influential vampire in 1897.⁴ Count Dracula, a powerfully wealthy, primitively feudal, and inscrutably foreign figure, threatens the norms of British sexuality when he decides to immigrate to England. His very presence is an unwanted and improper colonial penetration as he brings his “boxes of earth” from Transylvania into the center of the British Empire (Stoker, 81). Further, his desire to penetrate Jonathan Harker, Lucy, and Mina is a queer one, in terms of both their varied genders and his creation of new, unorthodox holes through which to consume their blood. Many theorists over the years have discussed Count Dracula’s queer semiotics, often arguing as Carol Sned does that “his thirst for blood and the manner in which he satisfies this thirst can be interpreted as sexual desire which fails to observe any of society’s attempts to control it – prohibitions against polygamy, promiscuity, and homosexuality” (428).⁵ There is a long history of queer coding in monster and vampire

figures, and that association continues into the American horror texts emerging in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The Frankensteinian monster frequently stands in for transgender embodiment in the horror genre, and because of its widespread use to marginalize transgender characters for the sake of shoring up binary gender norms, monstrosity serves “widely divergent narratives of transphobic insult and trans* resistance alike” (Koch-Rein, 134). In films such as Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960), Tobe Hooper’s *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), and Jonathan Demme’s *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), maniacally homicidal killers don the clothing and skin of dead women as a means of accessing alternate modes of gender expression. These films imply that gender transgression is not only motivation for violence but is itself an act so monstrous that it often supersedes the horror of the murders themselves. However, trans and gender nonconforming viewers can also potentially identify with the attribution of monstrosity in complex and redemptive ways. Anson Koch-Rein explains the tension between critique of monstrosity as a transgender signifier and the reclamation of the monstrous figure for trans uses:

In a world where the monster is circulating as metaphoric violence against trans* people, reclaiming such a figure faces the difficulty of formulating resistance in the same metaphorical language as the transphobic attack. Moreover, as a figure of difference, the monster appears in racist, ableist, homophobic, and sexist discourses, making its use especially fraught. Still, we cannot simply dismiss the monster for its history or injurious potential. It is precisely the monster’s ambivalent ability to speak to oppression and negative affect that appeals to trans* people reclaiming the monster for their own voices. (134)

In this sense, the monstrosity that resonates with trans audiences stems in part from the horrors of compulsory gender norms and the violence of their social, medical, and legal policing. Transgender studies scholar Susan Stryker theorizes the power of the monster as both identity and tool, explaining, “I want to lay claim to the dark power of my monstrous identity without using it as a weapon against others or being wounded by it myself.” By “embracing and accepting” words such as “creature,” “monster,” and “unnatural,” she continues, “we may dispel their ability to harm us” (240).

Jim Sharman’s *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) (based on Richard O’Brien’s stage cabaret) recirculates Frankensteinian monstrosity with a decidedly queer and campy bent. The film follows the sexual awakening of Brad and Janet, just-married virgins from the Midwest, as they find

themselves in a Gothic castle inhabited by Dr. Frank-N-Furter, a scientist who has created a creature named Rocky to serve as a sexual plaything. The film advances an intentionally topsy-turvy worldview in which all that was normative in 1970s culture is cast as disdainful, and the subversive, the strange, and the queer rule the day. In their study on the sociology of cult films, Kinkade and Katovich explain that the film “offers a pessimistic world view that appeals to postmodern sensibilities in the nuclear age. Its vilification of institutions, degradation of heterosexual romance, and its reflexive critique of its own production (in which the audience participates) make Rocky Horror a unique document” (203). Beyond simply unique, I would add, the upending of norms marks the film’s overall value system as decidedly queer. Dr. Frank-N-Furter’s relationship with his creation exemplifies this since Rocky is not the hideous wretch of Shelley’s *Frankenstein* but a gloriously sexy beefcake, and Dr. Frank-N-Furter himself, as he reveals his penchant for women’s lingerie and explains that he is “a sweet transvestite from Transsexual, Transylvania,” aligns with the common horror trope figuring gender nonconformity as monstrosity.⁶ Of course, in this context the monstrosity of gender transgression is desirable rather than horrifying, and queer fans have identified with and embodied Frank-N-Furter in midnight showings around the world by dressing as him (and other characters) and pantomiming scenes as they occur on the screen. The problematic transgender/monstrous affiliation still stands – especially since Frank-N-Furter turns out to be (spoiler alert) a homicidal cannibal alien and is destroyed in the end – but that has not stopped queer audiences from seeing representation, empowerment, and community in his depiction and in the film as a whole. As Judith Peraino explains, “at the height of the movie’s cult popularity in the early 1980s, city dwellers and suburbanites, gays and straights, participated together in a ritualistic celebration of unfettered and undefined sexuality” (234). *Rocky Horror’s* brand of participatory Gothic queer horror has been a touchstone of queer community building.

In a more recent take on monstrosity and gender nonconformity, Ari Aster’s 2018 film *Hereditary* depicts a young girl named Charlie who is a host to the spirit of a demon named Paimon. However, Paimon’s gendered essence aligns more with the physiological markers of masculinity than with those associated with Charlie’s body. As a result, Charlie is decapitated early in the film so that Paimon may systematically inhabit a more appropriate body, that of Charlie’s brother Peter. Sasha Geffen argues that this film represents anxieties around narratives of transgender transition in which cisgender folks feel threatened by the gender-affirming measures taken by trans folks. “*Hereditary’s* transition allegory,” Geffen explains, “involves not only the violent death of a girl, but also the torture and eventual

evacuation of a cis male body. Charlie does not merely change, but steals something that belongs to a man,” and in this way, the film “employ[s] in reverse, a formula used by *Silence of the Lambs* and *Psycho*: One gender swirled up into another creates a monster” (paras. 9, 3). However, Geffen argues, some trans and gender nonconforming viewers also see their own experiences of gender dysphoria in the narrative of Paimon’s deeply “gendered spirit” searching for a physical body that feels more appropriate (para. 12). Like the ambiguous portrayal of gender transgression in *Rocky Horror*, the demonic monstrosity of *Hereditary* can be read both as a transphobic narrative of body theft and as an affirmation of gender that exists beyond its physical manifestation. In her examination of the intersection of queer desire, trans embodiment, and monstrosity, Ana Valens explains the attraction of monstrosity: “we see our queer selves in monsters. We see the queer bodies we desire in their beautiful grotesqueness. We see the narratives that define our queer lives. There’s no better role model for the transgressive queer than the fantastical beasts of our collective imaginations” (para. 5). The expansiveness that monstrosity represents – around concepts of gender, sexuality, and humanity – makes it a Gothic trope that resonates with horror fans for contradictory reasons, eliciting simultaneous fear and desire as well as imaginative possibility.

As a specific type of monster, the vampire also appears in horror texts as a representation of sexual and gendered others. Unlike Frankensteinian monsters, however, the vampire has become an increasingly glamorous figure of sexualized power and freedom; Anne Rice’s *Vampire Chronicles* (1976–2018), Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight Saga* (2005–20), and Charlaine Harris’ *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* (2001–13) circulate around individualistic identity within a neoliberal worldview in which the discovery and eventual acceptance of one’s vampire lifestyle – coming “out of the coffin” – represents “liberation from the fear and terror generated by ignorance or outdated notions of sexuality” (Harris, 1; Day, 31). However, the fear and desire that vampires elicit relate to their taboo meal of choice – blood – as well as their method of consumption – penetration. The ingestion of blood from living humans means that vampires are cannibalistic monsters whose diet both threatens and challenges distinctions since cannibalism “depends upon and enforces an absolute division between inside and outside; but in the act itself that opposition disappears, dissolving the structure it appears to produce” (Kilgour, *From Communion*, 4). In other words, both cannibalism and vampirism demand and then collapse the distinction between eater and eaten as the ingested creature becomes part of the eater. This dizzying disruption of categories is both fascinating and repulsive, an experience of abjection that is familiar to horror connoisseurs.

The spectacle of the penetrated, oozing body is also one of the terrors of horror – often in the form of body horror that grotesquely disrupts distinctions between self and other, inside and outside. Partly because of the term’s ability to elicit disgust, cannibalism has been a tool of power. Colonizers often labeled indigenous people as cannibals in order to justify territorial occupation and genocide, and they also used the label “sodomite” for the same purpose.⁷ Jonathan Goldberg explains that sodomy, like cannibalism, “names something otherwise unnameable, something that goes beyond the evidentiary and the logical; it is a category of a violation that violates categories” (196–97). The unnatural penetration that constitutes the vampire’s bite stands in for queer sexualities, making vampires, like cannibals and sodomites, aligned with the violation of taboos and norms. Kelly Hurley describes the Gothic fixation with the ruination of the human body, or the “abhuman subject” which is a “not-quite-human subject, characterized by its morphic variability, continually in danger of becoming not-itself, becoming other” (*Gothic Body*, 3–4). The dual nature of this fascination reflects the conflicting purposes of queer Gothic horror more broadly: “The prefix ‘ab-’ signals a movement away from a site or condition, and thus a loss. But a movement away from is also a movement towards – towards a site or condition as yet unspecified – and thus entails both a threat and a promise” (4). Shape-shifting vampires, as well as their victims, are always in danger of uncanny corporeal collapse or eruption. Bram Stoker’s Count Dracula is among these abhuman “interstitial creatures” because he is “Nosferatu, or Undead: living and not living, aglow with a horrible ruddy vitality, and yet stinking of the charnel house” (Hurley, *Gothic Body*, 24). As with the Frankensteinian monster, the vampiric, cannibalistic, sodomical monster queers normativity in a spectacle of nauseating corporeal decay paired with a “certain gleefulness at the prospect of a world in which no fixity remains, only an endless series of monstrous becomings” (28).

In her later exploration of body horror films such as *Alien* (1979) and *Rabid* (1977), Hurley explains that the “narrative told by body horror again and again is of a human subject dismantled and demolished: a human body whose integrity is violated, a human identity whose boundaries are breached from all sides” (“Reading like an Alien,” 205). Where perverse, violating appetites are concerned, queer horror can be found, whether it is in vampire texts such as Tony Scott’s *The Hunger* (1983) or those that more explicitly merge vampirism with cannibalism, such as Antonia Bird’s *Ravenous* (1999). In *The Hunger*, queerness in the form of bisexuality constitutes an explicit element of the plot. The opening sequence introduces Miriam and John, an apparently heterosexual couple lurking in an underground Manhattan club to the tune of Bauhaus’ “Bela Lugosi’s Dead.” Once they

stalk, seduce, and consume their victims in a deadly *ménage à quatre*, however, their queerness and vampirism come into focus. Later, Miriam seduces young gerontologist Dr. Sarah Roberts in order to replace the rapidly aging John with Sarah as Miriam's new eternal (lesbian) partner. The erotic encounter not only challenges Sarah's apparent heterosexuality, but breaches her body and identity from within as we watch her frantically grapple with her drastically shifting appetites. From its opening scene to its casting of David Bowie as John to its spectacular treatment of decaying opulence, *The Hunger* celebrates Goth(ic) subculture, queer sex, and alternate ways of living and dying while centering the "dismantled and demolished" body ravished by vampiric penetration.

Ravenous, however, is a story of homosocial normativity gone awry, less of a queer celebration than a cautionary tale. A tongue-in-cheek Western horror film, *Ravenous* is set in a remote California fort in the 1840s whose inhabitants encounter a desperate man and his story of Donner party–esque survival cannibalism. The film indulges in gory depictions of cannibalistic incorporation as the characters become increasingly tempted by the power and energy they gain from consuming the bodies of others. Simultaneously, the homosociality of the film slips increasingly into queer-coded tableaux of sexuality, romance, and kinship. In a scene of homosexual panic, a search party sets out to rescue the remaining members of the stranded survival cannibals, and the soft-spoken Private Toffler, who had earlier sustained a deep wound on his abdomen, awakens screaming, "He was licking me . . . sick man outside!" to which the assailant replies, "It's not what you think. I was having a nightmare. . . I awoke. I was on top of him . . . my lips were on his wound." It is unclear whether Toffler's greater horror lies with the act of cannibalism or the erotic implications of having his oozing and bloody wound licked by another man. The cannibal is revealed as Colonel Ives, a man who has discovered that cannibalism provides him with a kind of vampiristic quality – the ability to incorporate the vitality of those he consumes and to heal from mortal wounds. He decides to create a new kind of family, a queer kinship structure in which several of the men at the fort would join him in his uncontrollable cannibalistic appetites while establishing a sustainable and reliable vampire lifestyle at the fort. Captain John Boyd gives in to Ives' plan for a while but later resists, and we watch as they fight to the death. The film concludes with an unmistakably romantic tableau as Ives and Boyd are caught together face to face in a bear trap, mutually perishing in an eternal embrace. From homosexual panic to queer alternate lifestyles, *Ravenous* uses the collapse of cannibalism and vampirism to figure the threat of masculine homosociality collapsing into queer ways of being. The film's poster proclaims, "You are who you eat," and it is this very

disruption that rests at the heart of the horrors of cannibalism, vampirism, and the queerness they imply.

Another Gothic trope that frequently appears in contemporary horror involves the threat of institutionalization in an asylum and the culturally contingent definitions of sanity deployed to pathologize difference. Eighteenth-century Gothic fiction introduced the threat of involuntary institutionalization within the walls of the convent where one was subject to the rules and (often sadistic) caprices of those in power. With the rise in scientific and medical discourse in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the locus of institutional, top-down control shifted from the convent to the asylum. Hurley argues that nineteenth-century medical discourse itself was indebted to the Gothic that came before it, meaning “scientific disciplines like sexology, which sought to fix the meanings of human identity” contained Gothicism, and Gothic fiction incorporated new discourses emerging from science and medicine in a reciprocal relationship (*Gothic Body*, 9). The “province of the nineteenth-century human sciences,” Hurley explains, “was after all very like that of the earlier Gothic novel: the pre-Victorian Gothic provided a space wherein to explore phenomena at the borders of human identity and culture – insanity, criminality, barbarity, sexual perversion – precisely those phenomena that would come under the purview of social medicine in later decades” (5–6). The resulting cultural productions such as Edgar Allan Poe’s “The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether” (1845) incorporate a kind of medicalized Gothic horror depicting the vulnerable body under institutional control as well as the dehumanizing bureaucracies that can arise out of scientific and medical theories.

Two contemporary examples of medical queer horror can be found in Ryan Murphy’s Netflix series *Ratched* (2020) and Tina Horn’s queer dystopian comic book series *SfSx (Safe Sex)* (2019–21). *Ratched* is the backstory to Nurse Mildred Ratched’s character from Ken Kesey’s novel *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1962) in which she serves as the face of the mental institution where McMurphy is committed. After an extended battle for power – and McMurphy might argue the battle for his humanity in a context designed to erase individuality and nonconformity – Ratched wields her institutional power to have McMurphy lobotomized. Sarah Paulson’s 2020 version of Nurse Ratched is cold, manipulative, and monstrous, fitting perfectly in the vein of those sadistic monks and abbesses of eighteenth-century Gothic convents. Notably, Nurse Ratched is also a lesbian. In a nod to the cinematic history of the treatment of lesbians as unhinged, obsessive, (often vampiric) fiends, Nurse Ratched’s queerness paired with her icy, calculating demeanor certainly evokes queer-coded figures such as Countess Marya Zaleska in Lambert Hillyer’s *Dracula’s Daughter* (1936), Mrs.

Danvers in Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940), Miss Holloway in Lewis Allen's *The Uninvited* (1944), and of course Miriam in *The Hunger*. The controlled and withholding demeanor of these characters is distinctly at odds with their unorthodox and uncontrollable appetites, making them uncanny figures. Sigmund Freud writes that the uncanny is an uneasy feeling that occurs when something that "ought to have remained secret ... has come to light," creating a sense that something once familiar and knowable has become strange (225). Uncanny figures in horror are perhaps the most frightening because they seem familiar and are even invited into the narrative, but eventually their hidden desires come to light, shifting our understanding and giving us "that weird feeling," to quote a promotional poster for *Dracula's Daughter*. Like its Gothic predecessors, the appearance and eventual destruction of the uncanny lesbian figure in twentieth-century horror cinema "generally titillates audiences with transgression and then returns to the comfort of normative values in the end" (Westgard, 13).

The queer coding of the uncanny lesbian comes together in *Ratched* with a specifically medical form of institutional power and the horror of the vulnerable body, penetrated and desecrated either intentionally or by indifference or human error. As in the finale of Kesey's novel, Nurse Ratched is fond of the lobotomy as a tool to further her purposes. The "Ice Pick" episode features several scenes of experimental lobotomies being demonstrated in the medical theater for the "cure" of conditions such as "juvenile distraction, mania, memory loss, [and] lesbianism." While Nurse Ratched eventually realizes that she, as a lesbian herself, could be subject to this inhumane procedure, she is immediately fascinated by the ease of erasing both memory and personality by inserting an ice pick through the orbital cavity to scramble the brain's frontal lobe. We see her apply this skill with a hotel room ice pick upon a person whom she wishes to silence. This scene combines the horror of a medical procedure developed to erase all forms of nonnormativity with the queasy crunch of its misapplication in the hands of one using it as a tool to access unfettered power and control. Nurse Ratched's explicit lesbianism provides some dimensionality to a classically evil character and has the potential to disrupt the historic queer coding of lesbians as perverse and uncanny. However, adding an explicit lesbian backstory in order to explain Nurse Ratched's heartless acts while still reveling in their institutional and corporeal horrors does more to replicate than to disrupt the association of queerness with depravity and sadistic appetites.

The comic book series *SfSx* (*Safe Sex*) integrates the themes of institutional Gothic horror with intersectional complexity and nuance and provides an example of how contemporary horror might utilize the queerness inherent in

Gothic tropes to challenge and remix their potentially problematic and conservative histories. The dystopian series includes elements of horror – torture, gore, frantic pursuit – set in a near-future “draconian America where sexuality is strictly bureaucratized and policed” following an “ongoing take-over of American civil life by the ultra-conservative religious organization known as the Party” (Horn, back cover, 1). The creators tellingly define dystopia as “institutional horror,” characterized by oppression and control via tedium, surveillance, and red tape so that its depiction is simultaneously “vivid and upsetting and mundane” (Hickman, 24).⁸ For example, the Party gives citizens a “purity score” maintained by filing paperwork every time they have sex, and all sex toys, pornography, and kink-related materials are strictly prohibited. Notably, the series flips traditional Gothic horror tropes by framing the members of the sexual and racial underclass – queer people, sex workers, and members of the kink and leather communities – as heroes rather than villains. These characters employ superhero-level power merely by turning to their subcultural skill sets as they fight for their right to express nonnormative genders and sexualities as well as to form communities and friendships around those queer preferences. Like *Nurse Ratched*, Party leader Judy Boreman self-righteously and cold-heartedly pursues her agenda in the form of the “reformation program,” which kidnaps and tortures those who commit “self-objectification, deviance, exploitation, pandering, and perverting others against God’s law” (Horn, issue 1, 3). Rather than lobotomies, however, Boreman’s program has developed a variety of technologies to mutilate and reprogram queer bodies and desires, including tattoo removal, genital electrocution, urethral sounding, and device implantation. The series depicts these medicalized torture tactics in all of their gory, visceral detail, driving home the materially destructive power of repressive regimes and giving readers a taste of body horror along with the bureaucratic horrors of its dystopian world.

In addition to the violation of vulnerable bodies by a sadistic agent of an all-powerful, government-sanctioned institution, another particularly Gothic element of this series is its depiction of ghostly, subterranean spaces as both subcultural location and site of physical reclamation. The heroes of the story work and play at an underground collective and sex club called *The Dirty Mind*. After the Party raids *The Dirty Mind*, it turns the club’s space into the center of its operations, and the underground club goes more deeply (and literally) underground, relocating to the cavernous, abandoned underground chambers of a “blighted bathhouse” (Horn, issue 2, 4). Bathhouses, it should be noted, are historic sites of queer cruising and public sex that were largely shut down during the panic around HIV in the 1980s.⁹ While ghosts in Gothic novels such as *The Castle of Otranto* are often ancestral ghosts of the

patriarchy emerging to warn of the effects of impropriety and to reestablish order, the superhero sex workers of *S/Sx* function as the ghosts of past freedom haunting and disrupting the machinery of fascism. The Party colonizes the club's old space, but the ghosts of *The Dirty Mind* linger, haunting both the subterranean "blighted bathhouse" and the halls of their past home, now a site of surveillance, torture, and control, as they use their queer ancestral knowledge of the building and its new inhabitants to infiltrate its underground passages and rescue those being tortured there. Paulina Palmer notes that the "spectre and phantom," as "key signifiers of the uncanny, carry connotations of 'excess' since their appearance exceeds the material, and this is another concept that connects the uncanny with 'queer'" (7). In the horrifically mundane world of *S/Sx*, the surface houses the state-sanctioned corrective torture of queer bodies, and in the subterranean passages and corridors, the queer heroes are sites of excess because they linger beyond their "appropriate" time, becoming powerful specters, making the space they haunt uncanny, and promoting the messiness of antinormativity by attacking the machinery of oppression and control.

Ghosts also appear in less institutional settings, most famously in the domestic sphere of the haunted house. Shirley Jackson's Gothic horror novel *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) tells the story of Eleanor Vance, a woman who is prone to fantasy and magical thinking and whose sickly and demanding mother has just passed away, leaving her to find her way in the world now that she is no longer occupied by her all-encompassing role as caretaker. Unlike the institutional setting of the asylum or hospital, Eleanor's journey of haunting seems to begin once she steps away from the medicalized space of long-term care. However, Dr. John Montague invites Eleanor and a handful of others to participate in an experiment at a stately old mansion that is said to be haunted. In other words, Eleanor moves from the medicalized space of domestic caregiving and into another medicalized domestic space in which she is now the experimental subject. Eleanor quickly forms a bond with the modern, independent, probably psychic, and possibly lesbian Theodora. As the novel progresses, Eleanor's fascination with Theodora grows along with escalating paranormal occurrences that all seem to center around Eleanor. The confusion around her unacknowledged queer desires and the guilt around her mother's death seem to swirl together and erupt as externalized hauntings. As her grasp on reality loosens, collapse and confusion run rampant, and Eleanor's desire for Theodora becomes inextricable from her desire for her lost mother as well as the urge not simply to *have* Theodora but to *become* her. Additionally, her psyche becomes increasingly enmeshed with the house as a suffocating maternal entity, slowly enveloping Eleanor in its sticky folds.

Though the house does not, ultimately, collapse, there is an atmospheric nod to Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839) as Eleanor, who is no longer in control of her own mind and actions, psychologically collapses under the weight of unspoken desires. In this text, the very concept of haunting is queered as the reader is left to question if it is the house or Eleanor herself who is haunted. If Eleanor is the true cause of the occurrences, then she epitomizes what Terry Castle calls the "ghost effect" of lesbian depiction in literature and culture (2). "The lesbian," she explains, "is never with us, it seems, but always somewhere else: in the shadows, in the margins, hidden from history, out of sight, out of mind, a wanderer in the dusk, a lost soul, a tragic mistake, a pale denizen of the night" (2). Eleanor seems to be there at times, but as the lesbian subtext develops, she shifts out of view, blending and melting away from subjecthood and merging with that which surrounds her – a fantasy, a friend, a lost mother, and ultimately Hill House itself.

Queer horror has seen many permutations across media and across centuries and its treatment of queerness has been variable, from the dehumanizing use of gender and sexual nonconformity as marks of deviance and monstrosity to more nuanced and empowering depictions and the murky spaces between. Regardless of the intention or mainstream reception of queer content and queer coding in horror, queer creators and consumers have often identified and embraced the presence of queerness through a kind of reclamatory, knowing, and empowered lens. This chapter has focused specifically on the use of tropes, metaphors, and aesthetics arising from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gothic fiction as they appear in American horror texts. I have argued that the Gothic is inherently queer, and because of this, much of the queer content in horror is conveyed through Gothic tropes. Starting with Radcliffe's early attempt to establish the binary distinction between horror and terror, people have attempted to parse notoriously complex and slippery genres into clear binaries. The Gothic, however, disrupts such neat distinctions, and in its queer "resistance to regimes of the normal" Gothicism circulates throughout American horror texts addressing sexual and gender nonnormativity.

NOTES

1. Scholar Heather Petrocelli is currently completing the "largest ever qualitative/quantitative study of the habits, tastes, and experiences of queer fans of horror film" and presented this research at the Gothic Manchester Festival Conference in 2019. The preliminary results indicate that 44.3 percent of queer viewers identify with both the monster and the victim in horror films.

2. The *Jeepers Creepers* films, as well as other horror films by gay director Victor Salva, are an example of a queer director's deployment of monstrosity to stand in for homoeroticism. However, Salva's documented history of child abuse shifts the reading of monstrous predation from one of potential reclamation to an eerie repetition of the conservative conflation of queerness with pedophilia. For more on DeCoteau and Salva, see Benshoff.
3. See Cocks.
4. Stoker's working papers indicate that he originally placed the Count in Styria, the same location in which *Carmilla* was set (see Frayling).
5. The *Norton Critical Edition of Dracula* includes several critical essays exploring the nonnormative sexuality and gender at work in the novel, including Christopher Craft's "'Kiss Me with Those Red Lips': Gender and Inversion in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*" and Talia Schaffer's "'A Wilde Desire Took Me': The Homoerotic History of *Dracula*."
6. While the LGBTQ+ community has largely moved away from the terms "transsexual" and "transvestite" in part due to their association with pathologizing medical discourse of the twentieth century, they were in wider circulation the 1970s when the movie was written and released. For more on these terms, see *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly's* issue on Postposttranssexual Key Concepts for a Twenty-First-Century Transgender Studies.
7. See Berglund; McClintock.
8. Horn and Hickman have also collaborated on a short story in the queer horror comic anthology, *Theater of Terror: Revenge of the Queers*.
9. For more on the "misguided witch hunts of AIDS hysteria," see Rubin (226).

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