

Diving Into Filmmaking: Contemporary Horror Films and the Normalization of LGBTQA+ Characters

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Speaking from my perspective as a lesbian woman, the women of Horror have always stuck out as strong, independent, undefeatable, heroic, and possibly, a little too interested in their ‘best friend’. These hints at homosexual tendencies/feelings are what I will define as ‘clues’ to the LGBTQA+ viewer. Due to the LGBTQA+ community being in the shadows, mocked, or ridiculed in film for years, looking for those clues sometimes is the only thing that keeps LGBTQA+ audiences intrigued. This is where the Horror genre is an excellent platform for progress in the LGBTQA+ characterizations to rise in a sense of normalization. In Horror, these characters do not have to spend the entire film figuring out how to ‘come out’; they are there, they are Queer, and they are ready to defeat the evil at hand. Building on the LGBTQA+ advances made by the 70’s, 80’s and 90’s Horror films such as *Alien*(1979) and *Scream*(1996), recent Horror Films such as *Suspiria*(2018) and *The Perfection*(2019) are now taking representation to the next level by further disrupting binaries in an even more forceful LGBTQA+ character normalization representation.

Queer Theory

Queer Theory is defined as *an approach to literary and cultural study that rejects traditional categories of gender and sexuality*. Judith Butler, one of the founding creators of Queer Theory published a breakthrough novel titled, “*Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*,” in 1990. This critical theory book sold over 100,000 copies internationally in multiple different languages. Breaking down barriers of gender, sex, sexuality, and masculinity, Butler wanted her readers to understand that the construct of the gendered body allows the consequences of sex to be set in place. Gendered representation physically is a performance put on by the social constructs created around each ‘defined’ gender.(Female/Male) Butler aims to break away the ties between sex and gender to allow flexibility to relax in. The idea of identity as free and flexible and gender as a performance, not an essence, is one of the foundations of Queer Theory.

Queer Theory, along with Judith Butler, was also influenced by the work of Lauren Berlant, Leo Bersani, Lee Edelman, Jack Halberstam, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Queer Theory is built upon both Feminist challenges and the idea that gender is part of essential self. While Feminism and Queer Theory have their overlapping similarities such as the view that gender-related identity is a social construct and that social order of status within the sexes is a performance, both have different main focuses. Feminist Theory revolves more around the concerning issues affecting women and women empowerment. Queer Theory then expands this primary focus of women to showcase any kind of sexual activity or identity that falls into normative and deviant categories. While normally, Queer Theory is associated with bisexual,

lesbian, and gay subjects, the theory also includes topics such as cross-dressing, intersex bodies and identities, gender ambiguity, and gender-confirmation surgery. Queer Theory's overarching focus is that "individual sexuality is a fluid, fragmented, and dynamic collectivity of possible sexualities and it may vary at different points during one's life." (*Gender Trouble*. Butler.)

Queer Theory, when focused on in cinema, allows for the viewers to break into a character's entire being to create a sense of deeper connection. Looking at the article, "Queer Horror is Having a Movement Right Now" by Ross Tipograph, Tipograph points out that "homo as Horror" has appeared in many films such as *Rebecca*(1940), *A Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge*(1985), *The Haunting*(1999), and *Insidious Chapter 2*(2013). Characters within these films are off put by their own sexual orientations to the point that it drives them mad. This madness is then represented in making these characters out to be the villain or even the monster. While we cannot erase these films from the history of Horror, we can look at them as prime examples of how not to treat the LGBTQ+ community. Tipograph states that, "As new films bring positive views of layered sexuality to Horror, the genre also attracts more unique and high-quality filmmakers." This is what the viewing audience is hungry for. We want characters that represent multiple ethnicities and sexualities. The Horror norm of a nuclear white middle class family getting haunted by ghosts is getting old. A new era of cinema is upon us.

An article titled, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," by Linda Williams breaks down the interest of how intricate and delicate female leads are placed within Horror.

Quoting Williams, "While the male victims in horror films may shudder and scream as well, it has long been a dictum of the genre that women make the best victims. "(PG. 5) A famous quote/piece of advice by Alfred Hitchcock is, "Torture the Women!" Reading this within

the article and then looking back at the original Horror Phenomenon's such as *Psycho*(1960) or *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*(1974) this trope was disgustingly true. This statement alone fuels my desire to create progressive, queer, and feminist Horror films.

“When the girl victim finally grabs the phallic knife or ax, or chainsaw to turn the tables on the monster-killer that viewer identification shifts from an “abject terror gendered feminine” to an active power with bisexual components. A gender-confused monster is foiled, often symbolically castrated by an androgynous final girl.”(PG. 7) Williams goes on to explore the very essence of where my own personal views of Horror are coming from. “The last girl” is often an individual that represents themselves incredibly gender fluid or androgynous within the film. Examples being Ripley from the Alien Franchise, Laurie Strode from the Halloween Franchise, Nancy Thompson from the original Nightmare on Elm Street(1984), and Sidney Prescott from Scream(1996) to name just a few. These characters may have had heterosexual interests within the films/franchises, but radically took a turn in the end that resulted in the women saving the day. This made viewers see them as more of a gender fluid character rather than the interpretation of the ‘female victim’ Alfred Hitchcock so rapidly raves about.

Looking into, “The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis” by Barbara Creed, she quotes critic Gerard Genette, “In his view, woman exists in the horror film primarily as victim. ‘Perfect as a tearful victim, what she does best is to faint in the arms of a gorilla, or a mummy, or a werewolf, or a Frankensteinian creature.’”(PG. 4) Creed yearns for the respect and representation of women in Horror that has been there for countless years. Yet, this yearning for any kind of respect and rightful representation has been drowned out by male directors with that same viewpoint as Genette and Queer Phobic tendencies.

To connect my research through physical evidence, Richard Shepard's *The Perfection* (2019) does the justice Queer Horror and women in Horror deserves. This film allows the audience to be enraptured by two leading Queer women that are focused on coming together to defeat their greatest evil.

The Perfection (2019) dir. Richard Shepard



The Perfection is a 2019 released Horror Film on Netflix that blew up on the social media site Tumblr within twenty four hours of its release. As mentioned previously in this paper, LGBTQA+ audiences eat up representation quicker than piranhas. We are ready for our new favorite Queer characters to steal our hearts. What started out as a viewing to see actual representation, turned into the discovery of an incredible piece of Queer Horror Cinema.

To start out this analysis, director Richard Shepard creates the perfect illusion of what this film is going to be. Within the first ten minutes of the film, the audience is introduced to Charlotte Wilmore and Elizabeth Wells, the two main Queer women of the film. During this ten-minute introduction, not only do the characters meet, there is also a great spark of sexual

tension. Just observing the opening alone, I would not have realized this was going to be a Horror Film. Being someone that is interested in the genre, I was thrilled at the realization; but that is not the case for each viewer.

I believe this strong introduction was specifically created to allow the LGBTQA+ audiences to slowly be introduced to this Horror film without Horror being the first thing they witness. A film that comes to mind that does the complete opposite is *Us* (2019) directed by Jordan Peel. In this film, not even a minute into the introduction, the audience already knows they are about to be witness to a nightmare. This is definitely not the case with *The Perfection*. With Queer Horror being a new genre, directors need to take this slowly in order to integrate these new viewers to the genre. This newer integration of openly Queer women specifically being the role models, and the leading roles in Horror is something that audiences around the world are ready for. We just have to make sure that non Horror fans do not turn away from the film due to it being Horror.

This is why I believe Shepherd does an amazing job of introducing audiences to this genre. Within the first ten minutes you are already hooked even before the intense core Horror starts to happen. Once a viewer is hooked, they have to see it through. As the film progresses, Shepherd does an incredible job of camera work. Working closely with his cinematographers, Shepherd creates scenes that showcase the women and the characters in a way that is not always sexualized and not always about the women's bodies. Even during the 'love scene', the scene is not created for pleasure, but rather, to showcase the intensity of love these two women feel for each other. This scene focuses on their hands, and how their bodies integrated together.

To go deeper into the horror of *The Perfection*, the monster in this film is someone that so many women are terrified of. To avoid giving away any spoilers, the overall arching monster(s) in the film are rapists. This monster isn't like Jason Voorhees from *Friday the 13th* or even a more common creature like a werewolf that you normally see in Horror; this is a monster that blends into society to the point that their crimes, terror, and their obscene behavior is often forgotten in the shadows. This is a monster that is given social power in our society and can get away with the torture and rape of women. You can pinpoint Micheal Myers from ten miles away, but it is near to impossible to spot a rapist without having the facts. Men are seen as powerful, correct, intelligent, and brave in the correct social status of money. That is what makes the subplot of this film so terrifying. *The Perfection* highlights how men with power will completely brainwash the women they have control over to the point that the women think that what the men are doing is okay. These students, young girls, pay these men money to torture them until they are good cello players. But *The Perfection* also highlights how when women come together, they can overcome this greatest fear.

This is where Queer Theory comes into place. This film abolishes the gender conformity of the societal norms to allow two Queer women to regain power and defeat their abusers. Male Masculinity is no longer a barrier, yet a driving force for their fight for freedom. The performance of the 'male gender' disguising the abusers true nature has had its last act. No longer are these women seen as small, unintelligent, blind, or even brainwashed, they are seen as everything 'the male gender' is categorized to be. This disrupting of barriers is the main theme of Queer Theory.

Although this film is not a typical type of Horror film audiences are used to seeing, *The Perfection* encapsulates Horror in a new way. While jump-scares do great in getting the screams, the lifelong fear rapists put into their victims is something that is far more terrifying. That monster is real. What I enjoy best about *The Perfection* is how Shepard created this love story, but then completely threw these characters into a nightmare that did not focus on the fact that the characters shared a deep connection. Charlotte Wilmore and Elizabeth Wells are in this movie to defeat their monster. It is just an added bonus for LGTBQA+ audiences that these women are proud about being Queer.

Suspiria (2018) dir. Guadagnino



Branching off into another Horror film that I believe captures the meaning of Queer Horror is *Suspiria* (2019) directed by Luca Guadagnino. I do not believe that this film hit American theaters at all, rather it was shown at the Venice Film Festival and had a release on Amazon. While this film does not feature openly Queer women such as *The Perfection* does, the reason I am including this film in my research of Queer Horror Cinema is due to it being subtly Queer.

Susie Bannion, the main character of this film, goes to Germany to become part of a highly prestigious dance academy. The moment she auditions for the company, Madame Blanc, the head of the company gives her a spot on the dance team immediately. What Susie does not know, is that this dance academy is run by a cult of witches who are looking to bring new life to their head witch. The only way to do this though, is through a ritual that brings death to the chosen victim. As the film unfolds, while it is full of terrifying one shot scenes, visuals that will haunt viewers for years, and tons of blood; there is also a subplot of a love story between Susie and Sara. Through my first couple viewings of the film I had missed this subplot completely. This is why this film is important to include because the placement of these Queer interactions is so subtle that most audiences would overlook it. There are so many films out there that feature heterosexual romances in the background, it is nice to finally see a subtle romance that seems natural between two women. Naturalness, flexibility, and freedom are key components in Queer Theory.

To further expand on this love connection, there are multiple scenes throughout the film where Susie and Sara are very close, they dance together in a way that is different from the other girls, and they even show a scene where Sara kisses Susie on the cheek while none of the other dancers kiss their partners. Yes, this dance school is all women but their connection is different from the other women. There is not a single character throughout this film besides Madame Blanc that Susie even shows this kind of interest in. The connection between Madame Blanc and Susie is one that I struggle with as defining as sexual or a motherly connection, truly it could be seen as both.

Luca Guadagnino is a very good director when it comes to human interaction. *Call Me By Your Name* (2017), Guadagnino's other film, features two Queer men who fall head over heels in love with each other. I am not surprised that when Luca Guadagnino was given the opportunity to direct a horror film that he almost secretly planted a love story in it to excite Queer audiences. Guadagnino is actually a Queer man himself. Going back to the article by Tipograph I discussed earlier, with film companies being more open, directors like Guadagnino can make it in the industry.

Overall, *Suspiria* is not a film about Queer women. Rather it is a film that features Queer women without it being even a main subplot. This is also an extremely important factor within Queer Horror to showcase that a homosexual romance is just as normal as a heterosexual romance. *Suspiria* features these clues and just embraces the fact that Susie and Sara share a deep admiration for each other. By having this strong connection even amidst the Horror of the Dance Academy, there is a subtle comfort for the viewer that things will be okay.

Conclusion

Suspiria (2018) and *The Perfection* (2019) are now taking representation to the next level by further disrupting binaries in an even more forceful LGBTQA+ character normalization representation. There are many other films out there that are starting to showcase Queer women in the way that these films are, yet these are the two that have recently struck me. We need films to strike people; we need films to light that spark within an interested film director to create films that speak to the world rather than just one ethnic group or sexuality. This research into Queer Theory, Horror, and Feminism has provided the foundations for what representation like this in

cinema means. It means richer content, deeper connections, and empowerment to those that have had their voices shut out for years. Queer individuals go through a lot more in life than just ‘coming out’, we get haunted by demons, chased by monsters, and have a battle to the death with aliens too. The world could not be more ready for Queer Horror to be a mainstream film genre.

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