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The Queer Monster: Putting *Séance* and *Bit* in Conversation

Cameron Mumford

This video essay (<https://vimeo.com/773770197>) places *Bit* (Brad Michael Elmore, 2019, US) and *Séance* (Simon Barrett, 2021, US) in conversation with one another, demonstrating how, in their own ways, both of these queer horror films move beyond representation and investigate how the very genre of horror can be utilised to reflect ideas of queerness. To do this, I incorporate Robin Wood's psychoanalytical perspective whereby the monster reflects what society represses. He argues the idea of the 'Return of the Repressed'; the Other returns in the form of the monster to take revenge on the society which ostracised it.¹ I discuss how, unlike with the films Wood analysed in the 1970s-1980s, these modern films do not relegate queerness to subtext, but, instead, present it within the actual text. Specifically, I note the role the monster plays in the film, whether as protagonist, antagonist or bystander, and how this reflects the films' investigations of queerness.

This additional written essay expands on the context of the topics discussed in the video essay and positions it in relation to discussions of horror, queerness, and queer horror. In *New Queer Horror*, Darren Elliott-Smith and John Edgar Browning note that "the vast majority of existing academic material considering queerness in horror film... has often been focused on queer sexual difference as *sub-textual* and *symbolic*... few consider the *explicit* presentation of LGBTQ+ villains and victims alike."² Their book adopts this starting point to fill the gap in scholarship and look at a sub-genre they call 'New Queer Horror', defined as: "horror that is crafted by directors/producers who identify as lesbian, gay, bi, queer, transgender, non-binary, asexual, intersex; or work that features homoerotic, or explicitly homosexual, narratives with 'out' LGBTQ+ characters."³ The accompanying video essay finds itself within this same

scholarly gap, but with a key difference in that it focusses less on the film narratives, and centres itself instead around analysing characters and themes, and how these films used the horror genre itself.

Like the history of queer horror scholarship, many pre-2000 queer horror films have relegated queerness to simple subtext. Many of the notable queer horror films such as *Rope* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1948, US) and *Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1931, US), have based their queer readings in the films' metaphorical subtext. Even more explicit queer horror like *The Haunting* (Robert Wise, 1963, UK) still required subtlety to comply with the demands of censors. However, in recent years, with greater social acceptance of queerness, there has been an increase in films which focus on queer characters telling queer stories, such as: *Gekijô-ban: Zero/ Fatal Frame* (Mari Asato, 2014, Japan); *All Cheerleaders Die* (Chris Sivertson and Lucky McKee, 2013, US); *Låt den rätte komma in/ Let the Right One In* (Tomas Alfredson, 2008, Sweden); *Closet Monster* (Stephen Dunn, 2015, Canada); and *Titane* (Julia Ducournau, 2021, France).

It is because of this wide range of recent queer horror films that I specifically use the term “queer” when referring to *Bit* and *Séance* within the video essay, rather than lesbian or trans. My arguments regarding *Bit and Séance* can also be seen in many of these other queer horror films.

Both films shift the monster from its traditional role of antagonist, while also making it explicitly queer. *Séance* moves the monster to a side character and *Bit* moves the monster to the protagonist. In *Séance* the ghost's supernatural abilities can be read as a metaphor for queerness, and by making Kerrie the ghost queer, it allows a more nuanced approach to

queerness. The shift in *Bit*, however, has more of an impact; the film becomes a revenge tale told from the “other’s” perspective – revenge against society, against normality – thereby raising the non-normative elements of queerness. It is important to note that vampires in this film are metaphors for power, thereby Laurel’s queerness helps to ensure there is no need to juggle the vampires as two different metaphors. This subtext and the overarching revenge tale are given more depth and nuance through the characters of Vlad and Duke, who represent different positions in queerness and power; as such, highlighting the anti-capitalist nature of the film, and how it interweaves with queerness.

In both films, in shifting the role of the monster, Wood’s idea about the end of the horror film returning to the status quo is subverted.⁴ This is seen to an extent with *Seance*. The queer characters’ victory challenges the status quo. Yet ultimately, the society that created Bethany and Trevor remains. This is not the case with *Bit*, which argues that society needs to change with everyone becoming a vampire. This idea of the world becoming the monster is incredibly powerful when viewed from Wood’s perspective. The repressed Other is returning in the form of the monster, but instead of being defeated by normality after causing chaos, it wins, free to change the world for the better. The film is addressing the question: what happens when the repressed Other is no longer repressed?

A unique element we see in *Séance* is a shift in the sub-genre of horror. For most of the film, it is a supernatural horror film, with Kerrie the ghost as the assumed threat, but it shifts at the end into a slasher film when it is revealed that the humans are the killers. This shift in sub-genre allows the film itself to be read as queer, as its true genre stays hidden until the end. This almost reflects the queer experience of the closet; hiding your true self; allowing society to assume you are straight because that is the assumed norm. This reading is furthered through

the film's queerness remaining implied until the very end. There are scenes that hint towards queerness throughout, but it is not fully concretised until the very end. The film itself is "coming out".

Notes

¹ Robin Wood, "An Introduction to the American Horror Film," in *Robin Wood on the Horror Film* ed. Barry Keith Grant (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2018), p. 84.

² Darren Elliot-Smith and John Edgar Browning. *New Queer Horror: Film and Television*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2020), p. 1.

³ Elliot-Smith and Browning, *New Queer Horror*, p. 5.

⁴ Wood, "An Introduction to the American Horror Film," p. 102, 103.

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Author Biography

Cameron Mumford completed their MLitt in Film Studies at the University of St Andrews. Their MLitt dissertation expands on the ideas raised in this video essay, it looks at queerness in modern horror and how that subverts and plays with many of Robin Wood's ideas about the horror genre and its relationship to those that society represses.