



# Queer Representation in Horror Films

A retrospective on the queer icons  
of horror

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# Thesis

Because the Hays Code prohibited the representation of queer characters, many villains in Hollywood horror films were queer-coded. Although the Hays Code was lifted in 1968, many of the mannerisms for queer-coding characters can still be seen in horror films today. Despite the limited amount of positive queer representation in the history of the horror genre, many queer audiences have reclaimed queer-coded characters as queer icons.

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# What is the Hays Code?

The Motion Picture Production Code (aka the Hays Code) was a set of censorship guidelines all films were required to abide by. It prohibited explicit depictions of profanity, excessive violence, nudity, and "sexual perversion." The Hays Code was implemented by the Hollywood film industry itself in 1934, in anticipation of even stricter government censorship laws. It would later be lifted in 1968.



# Where the Queers Come In

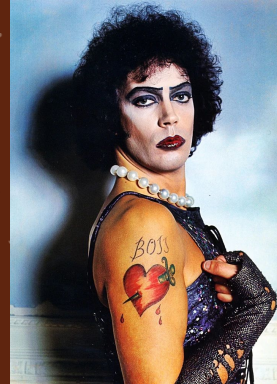
The main guideline that affected depictions of queerness in film was that if a character was implied to engage in “sexual perversions”, they **MUST** be punished for it. Therefore, the hero of the story was required to possess cisheteronormative ideals. This is where the trope of queer-coded villains began.



# Queer-Coded vs Queer Characters

## Queer- Coded

Queer-coded characters are not explicitly stated as queer. They have attributes that a good amount of the queer community identifies with.



## Canon Queer

Canon queer characters actually identify as queer. There's no debate, they just are.

# Hays Code Era Villains

One of the most infamous queer-coded Hays Era characters is Dracula's daughter, Countess Zaleska. The following scene caused a huge uproar at the Hays Production Office. There were originally more lesbian scenes in the script before Hays interfered.



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# Hays Code Era Villains (cont.)

The Wolf Man (1941) is more of an allegorical queer-coding rather than the character exhibiting queer characteristics. This is more so the idea of not wanting to be seen as a monster along with the fear of coming out.



# Hays Code Era Villains (Hitchcock Edition)

Hitchcock's 1948 film, *Rope*, does not hold any punches when it comes to queer coding the main characters of the film. If the innuendos weren't enough, the movie is said to be based on a real murder committed by two gay men.



Hitchcock would make an iconic film in 1960 called *Psycho*. The main antagonist, Norman Bates, can be seen as queer-coded as he is a more gentle, soft spoken man who dresses up as his dead mother. Bates is played by homosexual actor, Anthony Perkins.



# Queer-Coded Horror Villains Post-Hays Code

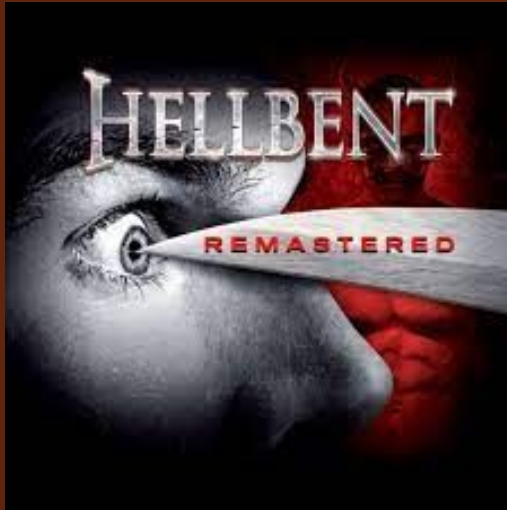
After the Hays Code, the visual mannerisms used for identifying “sexual deviance” or queerness in a character remained, especially in villains of horror films. .

This visual short-hand for queerness in film characters is what became known as “queer-coding.”

Despite the stereotypical nature of queer-coded villains, the constant inclusion of these queer-coded characters in horror films were embraced by many in the queer community.



# "First" Queer Horror Film



ADMIT ONE

# Hellbent

Queer films have a lot of potential in the horror genre and direct towards Hellbent being identified as the first all-gay slasher film, or a queer film. Despite the opinions and theories towards Hellbent, they refuse the political and oppositional input of queerness but does identify the movie as being the first all-gay slasher/horror film.



# Cautious Production

Being the first horror film to include a gay character, there were many precautions made during and after the film was produced because their intentions had to be clear that no one was being targeted because of their sexuality nor was this specifically a gay film.



# Before Release

Informing viewers was recommended because it might be too gay for some audiences which can lead to heavily disturbing some of their viewers if they were unaware. It was also important for viewers to know they weren't being targeted because of their sexuality, and being gay is considered a social norm in this film don't direct everything towards it.



# Additional Canon Queer Characters

Dr. Frank-n-Furter from the cult musical, Rocky Horror Picture Show is one of the first canonically queer characters in horror. This musical would be the subject of many gay awakening stories.



# Don Mancini's Characters

Known as the creator of the Chucky franchise, Don is an openly gay man who includes tons of queer representation into his works, especially in the new Chucky series. The main character of the television series is a gay boy, Chucky's kid (Glen/dā) is genderfluid, and there are many instances of Chucky transferring his soul into a woman's body.



The iconic Chucky “genda flood” scene

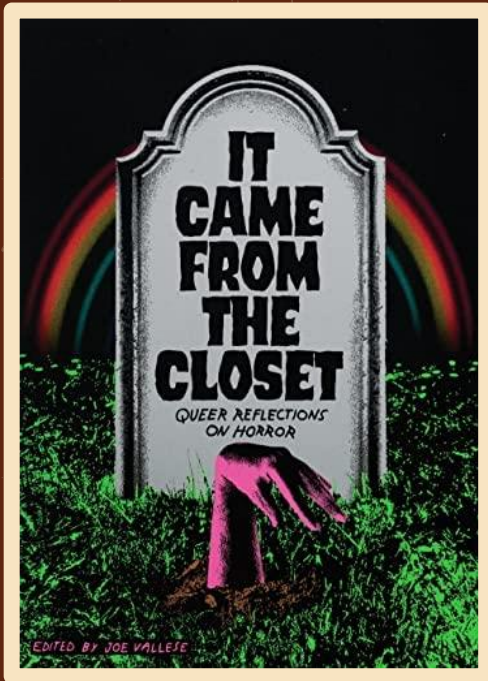


# Queer+Horror

- Since our zine was based on queer horror, I chose to separate the two and bring them back together again for the collage I did.
- I chose queer couples from various television shows or movies I like and am connected to that are not in the horror genre, like Brittany and Santana from *Glee*, Yorkie and Kelly from the *Black Mirror* episode “San Junipero”, & Eric and Rahim from *Sex Education*.
- I combined these non-horror characters, in their most vulnerable, loving moments, with little aspects of spooky horror like blood, beating hearts, and skeletons.
- I did this because I was interested in making it into a sort of metaphor.

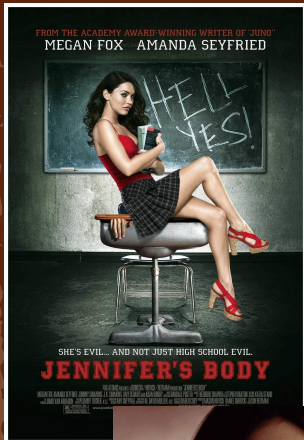


# A look into Queerness you've never noticed



The book, *It Came From The Closet: Queer Reflections of Horror*, contains essays from various LGBTQ+ writers. All the essays have a common theme of how each author came to know queerness depicted in film. They individually express how this has been able to shape each of their identities in different ways.

Some express how these movies depicted queerness in a way that can be seen as hurtful yet inspiring because it was the only representation they had, while others express some criticism and analysis on movies that can be read as Queer. These authors also speak on certain movies that had big impacts on them and how their experiences were amplified despite the many controversies these movies contained. Overall, each essay is filled with opinions, feelings, and countless insights into the minds of queer writers and how they feel about queer representation in film that has become desensitized, comical, and unimportant in the eyes of so many.



# Jennifer's Body

Carmen Maria Machado explains how people would always deem *Jennifer's Body* as a Queerbating movie but expresses that she always comes back to this movie because it shows a specific view into growing into sexuality as well as discovering it with the people around you. In the movie, Needy and Jennifer dive into bisexuality which always seems to be lacking in film or immediately deemed as “Queerbating, fake, attention seeking, and performative.” Machado pushes the idea that the false accusations of Queerbating are really just judgments and prejudice towards bisexuality.



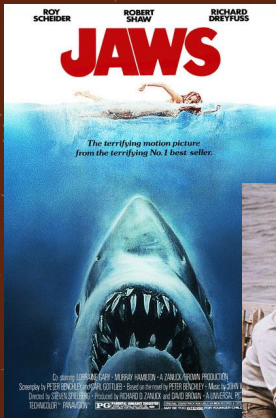
thought you only murdered boys



i go both ways



We can play boyfriend-girlfriend like we used to.



# Jaws



Jenn Carrigan expresses how she related her own Queerness to the movie *Jaws*. Though basically never seen as a queer movie or a movie with queer-coded characters, Carrigan explains how it is a straight film that can be read as Queer. She explains that her Queer reading revolves around the gaze and innocuous touch, which are both classic indicators of desire. The intimate and erotic feelings she took from the relationships between the 3 main male characters show a sense of eroticism and possibilities of Queerness. These men are isolated and share intimate touches and moments, Carrigan says that this is what she loves about the movie. There's inbetweenness and ambiguity (Are they gay? Are they not gay?) that she has felt about herself all her life. She relates to this and the idea that labels and sexuality do not need to be outright and explicit, but can simply be anything (one thing, two things, neither).

# The Wolf Man

Tosha R. Taylor refers to *The Wolf Man* as a movie that shows the horror that is being the “other”. To Taylor, the “other” represents Queerness and the way so many people deem it as disgusting and a “monstrosity”, just like the man who turns into a wolf. Throughout her life she has learned that her sexuality should terrify her and was taught to keep it a secret to not break the hearts of those around her.

Taylor found a way to read *The Wolf Man* as a look into the struggles of being Queer and relates to the idea of being ostricised and feared because of something you cannot help but be. She expresses that this is why so many Queer individuals see themselves in horror characters, because they are almost always being othered and misunderstood.



# Queerness in Horror Films Today



Compared to previous decades, contemporary horror has had a surge in depictions of explicitly queer characters on screen.

While queer-coded villains in past horror films provided a necessary catalyst for the evolution of queer representation in the horror genre, it is refreshing to see canonically queer characters as protagonists of their films and as sympathetic villains.



Audiences must continue to create demand for the inclusion of more complex queer characters on screen who take on more diverse roles, thereby, furthering the dissociation of queerness and villainy in Hollywood films.