

THE QUEER MONSTROSITY IN GRINDHOUSE

An analysis of the queer vampire trope



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INTRODUCTION

The American cinema is most famous for its big Hollywood Blockbusters, however, in the shadows, we find a whole other genre that grew independently from the established film industry. The content of these movies was shocking to the general public and, therefore, was only shown in some theatres that the independent filmmakers rented themselves. Because these movies were not highly praised or shown on the big screen, they usually went unnoticed. Stallybrass and White argued that movies have a recurrent cultural pattern that includes, “the ‘top’ attempts to reject and eliminate ‘the bottom’ for reasons of prestige and status quo, only to discover that . . . it is in some way frequently dependent on that low-Other.” (qtd. in Schaefer 144). This pattern shows how the industry differentiates between Hollywood and exploitation films, where the latter was considered the Other. Grindhouse is a movie genre made of exploitation films that played the wild counterpart of Hollywood. While Hollywood aimed to create commercially successful movies that fit a certain narrative norm, independent filmmakers carved out a space for themselves in which they could create works that, despite financial and artistic shortcomings, were radical. They were low-budget films and independently produced, which made it possible to include queer identities, for example, the subgenre vampire grindhouse films. When delving into this world, there is an interesting connection to be made between female vampires and queerness. Movies containing such themes have often been claimed by the LGBTQ+ community as queer-coded. In the early 20th century, there was a lot of censorship regarding queerness in movies, causing the only representation to be implicit. Moreover, if queer characters were represented in movies, they were often killed off in a tragic death. This intolerance and homophobia in movies led to a skewed view of queerness. This thesis presents an analysis of the development of queer

representation in grindhouse movies in the 20th century, especially how they developed from the early 20th century till the 70s in the United States.

0.1 Literature Review

To start the research of this thesis, we need to dive into 20th-century film history and what has been previously written about the Grindhouse genre. Grindhouse is a marginal side of film history and American culture. The term Grindhouse is articulated by Eric Schaefer in his book *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!: A History of Exploitation Films* (2023). It offers a general introduction to the movie genre that counters the dominant Hollywood movie structure. In this book, Schaefer reveals how this genre of movie purveyed what the mainstream movie industry could not, which is the forbidden thrills of explicit sexual behavior. It is a well-researched and interdisciplinary study that explores the production of exploitation films that address social problems.

Afterwards, the thesis shall dive deeper into the specific trope of the lesbian vampire in American Grindhouse horror films. The book by Douglas Brode and Leah Deyneka called *Dracula's Daughters: The Female Vampire on Film* (2013) provides the insight needed. This thesis will mostly focus on the information provided in the chapter "The Lesbian Vampire Film: A Subgenre of Horror." The authors investigated the long history of vampires on the big screen and how they have symbolized sex and death. It offers a feminist insight into how gender and misogyny led to the creation of the female vampire in movies, using multiple case studies to enlighten their arguments. The book is a collection of essays that explore this cinematic trope and goes into the violence against and sexualization of women and what the implications are for audiences. Another secondary source going into the concept of the lesbian vampire trope is the book *Hospitality, Rape and Consent in Vampire Popular Culture* by Alexandra Heller-Nicholas. It offers an analysis of what the vampire creature embodies. It argues how the vampire narrative shows the monster as an oppressed being that can be seen

as the alienated Other. I will particularly draw upon the chapter “Seductive Kindness: Power, Space and ‘Lesbian’ Vampires.”, which offers more insight into the gender politics of vampires in movies. These two sources about lesbian vampires will be used to analyze the case studies. To elaborate on the othering in relation to gender, the theory of Simone de Beauvoir in *The Other Sex* (1949) will be applied to the case studies. She was a French philosopher who was fundamental in feminist studies during the second wave of feminism. In her book, she argues how the position of women in society is secondary compared to men and consequently advocates for the liberation of women.

A recurring aspect of this thesis will be the identity politics of same-gender attraction which will be based on queer theory. *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*, by Nikki Sullivan offers the information needed to provide a basis of queer theory. The book references highly esteemed writers in the cultural academic field such as Michel Foucault and Judith Butler. Queer theory is an academic discipline that provides theories on gender and sexual identities. It is a counterforce of traditional academic approaches and argues for social equality. The aim of this book is then to counteract the heteronormative knowledges and institutions (Sullivan vi). This thesis is thus based in queer film theory and the book by Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin offers an additional insight into how queerness was reflected in the movies of the early 20th century. Especially their chapter, “The Monster and the Homosexual” in *Queer Cinema, the Film Reader* (2004) gives a great explanation on how the queer character is portrayed as a monster in American horror movies. The book brings together key writings of queer theory to explore cinematic sexualities. The chapter offers an in-depth investigation of the gothic monster and references critics such as Robin Wood and the philosopher Michel Foucault to substantiate his arguments. David Martins builds on the arguments of movie critics such as Benshoff and elaborates on the queer representation in American Slasher movies. In his master’s dissertation, *From Monsters to Monsters:*

Perverted Predators and Diseased Deviants - Queer Representations in American Slasher Film of the 1980s (2016), the author goes into the portrayal of same-gender attraction in the heterosexual movie milieu and how it fits in the patriarchal society. The dissertation focuses on Slasher movies, however the theory can also be applied to grindhouse movies as they are of similar nature.

The book by Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (1957), will be used to illustrate the cultural theory about the creation of cultural myths. This text can be characterised as the ‘origin of cultural studies’ (McQuillan 3) and therefore is relevant to this thesis which is rooted in cultural studies. His theory is also heavily based in the academic research field of semiotics, which is the study of signs, symbols and their signification. It is often used in literature studies; however, it is now applied on a bigger cultural scale. The theory will be used to see what the connotations of the lesbian vampire trope has meant within the history of same-gender attraction in the 20th century and how it has led to stereotypes and negative views of the LGBTQ+ community.

0.2 Research Question

In this thesis I will investigate how the lesbian vampire trope contributed towards the normalisation of LGBTQ+ characters in movies with the discussed literature above. Due to censorship in the film industry, it proved difficult to show an accurate representation of a queer character. This resulted in queer coded characters with implicit relations to having a queer identity in the movies of the early 20th century, instead of showing actual queer content. Representation has consequences and stereotypes can be damaging because culture and society influence each other. Thus, the purpose of this thesis is to research the development of queer identities in grindhouse movies and how they led to the normalisation of same-gender attraction in films. *Dracula's Daughter* (1936) and *The Vampire Lovers*

(1970) will serve as case studies in this thesis and will be accompanied with the relevant literature to answer the following research question: How does the representation of queerness, more specifically through the lesbian vampire trope in late 20th century American Grindhouse movies, reflect the societal view of the LGBTQ+ community?

0.3 Method and Structure

This thesis will base its theoretical framework in cultural studies, drawing upon queer and film writings, which will substantiate my arguments in this thesis. I will particularly investigate the following films: *Dracula's Daughter* (1936) by Lambert Hillyer and *The Vampire Lovers* (1970) by Roy Baker and do a visual analysis to show how they interpret the lesbian vampire trope. Furthermore, the films will be put into the cultural and historical context of the movie scene in the 20th century. I chose these two films as they show how representation has changed over the last few decades and are a clear example of how queerness is treated in grindhouse movies. The two movies concern the movie trope of the lesbian vampire and are both based on the novella *Carmilla* (1872) by Sheridan Le Fanu. The first chapter will explain the historical and cultural context of grindhouse movies, especially how censorship led to the othering of queerness. The second chapter will go into depth about the lesbian vampire trope using *Dracula's Daughter* as a case study to illuminate my arguments. At last, the third chapter will use *The Vampire Lovers* as a case study to show how representation changed due to social movements in the 1970s.

0.4 Theoretic Background

The red line throughout this thesis will be the concept of Grindhouse, also called exploitation films. It is a movie genre that existed from 1919 onward, in the shadows of the big Hollywood sign. During this time, "Hollywood was constructing its image as the world's premiere manufacturer of wholesome entertainment" (Schaefer 2). Independent filmmakers

decided to make and distribute their own films that did not have to abide by the rules the film industry had set up, and dealt with topics that were prohibited by the industry's self-regulatory mechanisms (Schaefer 2). Grindhouse can, thus, be seen as a form of counterculture resistant to globalised mass entertainment. The forbidden spectacle was seen as lurid movies and an embarrassment by the general public and especially by film critics. These films are considered bad movies and are in direct opposition to mainstream elite taste. So, what exactly is an exploitation film? David F. Friedman provides the following definition: "Exploitation pictures are as old as film itself, although they really began to flourish during the height of the original Motion Picture Code." (qtd. in Schaefer 3). The existence of Grindhouse Cinema is a counter reaction to the Hays Office Code that was responsible for the censorship in the film industry. Censorship was justified on the grounds of protection of the general public. Schaefer illustrates how during this time, "civic leaders and social welfare workers feared that movie viewing could incite impressionable spectators to commit crimes or other immoral acts," (138) which led to the censorship of topics that the censor boards deemed inappropriate. Thus, the essence of exploitation were the forbidden subjects.

Throughout this paper, the term 'queer' will refer to as the umbrella term for the LGBTQ+ community. According to Alexander Doty, queer refers to "a quality related to any expression that can be marked as contra-, non-, or antistaight" (qtd. in Martins 13). In this thesis queer will be used in an academic context. Queer, thus, should be understood as a theoretical approach to rethinking human sexuality that encompasses social, cultural, and historical factors that define the conditions and orientations (Benshoff and Griffin 1). Furthermore, the academic approach to queerness rejects essentialist notions of gender and sexuality, and instead views queer identity as fluid and socially constructed. The term once held negative connotations that were used to humiliate gay men and women as it historically

signified something strange (Sullivan v). However, the queer community reclaimed it and it now serves as an umbrella term and an academic term to describe the broad range of human sexualities and genders. Pelham Wodehouse also refers to queer having negative connotations that one only associates with others and not the Self (qtd. in Sullivan v). It is used to denote the difference that is seen within the sexual binary, in which heterosexuality is considered the Self. Queer theory, then, provides an academic framework that analyses how this difference situates itself in society. The exploration of this framework in cinema led to the emergence of queer film studies that analyzes non-straight sexualities in films (Benshoff and Griffin 1).

This thesis will particularly focus on the lesbian vampire trope within grindhouse cinema. A trope is a significant and recurring theme in narrative media. Ames Monaco explains in his book, *How to Read a Film: Movies Media and Beyond* how this concept stems from semiology. He explains how within literary criticism, a trope means a ‘figure of speech,’ which is “a turn of phrase in which language is bent so that it reveals more than literal meanings” (Monaco 73). These hidden meanings are created by a collection of codes that can be recognized by the audience through the use of repetition. The lesbian trope came into existence due to a collection of codes that had been repeated throughout films in the 20th century. One of the earliest examples of this trope is seen in *Dracula's Daughter* (1936), however it was popularised in the 1970s as the censorship of the Hays Code Office slowly came to its end.

In the thesis I would like to highlight the use of the gaze in this trope. Grindhouse is known for its violence and sexual content, which usually has a woman as victim at the centre of the movie. This is a result of societal views and the male gaze of the film industry, which usually resulted in the objectification of women. ‘The gaze is a term stemming from feminist film criticism. According to the film critic Laura Mulvey:

Women then stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, or meaning (15).

Mulvey further argues how men hold a dominant position which leads to them having the power to impose their point of view (15). The mise-en-scene and narrative conventions give the spectator a view that reflects the dominant ideological concept of the cinema (16-17). This view is also called the 'male gaze.' Historically, this male gaze manifested itself in films by having the role of the women as a passive and exhibionist role that is there to be looked at. This created the leitmotif of the woman as an erotic spectacle that signifies male desire (19). The male gaze especially manifested itself in exploitation movies, because as the term suggests, they would exploit the female sex. The gaze creates a binary opposition between the man and the woman, in which the woman is seen as the Other. So far, we can already tell two binary oppositions between the man and the woman in the male gaze and the representation of heterosexuality and same-sex relationships. In this thesis I will apply the theory of othering to queer representation in Grindhouse cinema as there is a binary in sexuality, in which a queer identity is seen as the Other.

The phenomenon of Othering is a concept rooted in cultural studies and has previously been applied to colonialism and race. Simone de Beauvoir applied the theory to gender in her book, *The Second Sex* (1949). She argues the use of othering in the context of gender, which seeks to examine how identities are constructed. She argues how there is a binary between men and women, in which the man is positioned as the Self who represents the positive and the neutral. Whereas the woman represents the negative, only defined by lacking the factors of being a man (15). In her essay *The Second Sex* she writes "thus humanity is male, and man

defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being” (De Beauvoir 15). This means that the woman is defined and differentiated by the man. Thus, according to De Beauvoir, the man is the Subject, and the woman is the Other (16).

I would like to use the theory about myths by Roland Barthes to explain how the lesbian vampire trope signifies queer relationships in movies. According to Barthes, a modern-day myth is a “type of speech,” or a system of communication that can convey a message that is perceived as a mode of signification (107). He continues to argue how a myth is historically and culturally determined and supported by representation in not only written discourse but all kinds of cultural practices, like the cinema, that all serve to support mythical speech (108). This theory has its foundation in semiology, the science of signs originated by Ferdinand de Saussure that suggests a relation in which the signifier expresses the signified, that will be united in the sign. The signifier is the mental image and the signified the concept that accompanies it. Together they represent the sign, which is the concrete entity, for example a word (Barthes 112). Barthes uses this system in a comparable way to deconstruct myths. He writes how myths:

suggests an inversion in signification that occurs during Mythology in which the sign itself (the conjunction of a signifier and signified in language) is appropriated entirely as the signifier of the myth that retains a hidden signified as part of its ideological action (McQuillan 36).

Thus, Barthes explains, by the creation of myths that this system is expanded by the ‘second-order semiological system,’ in which the sign becomes the signifier (113). This results in the naturalisation of the concept in which the reader processes the signifier and the signified as having a natural relationship, instead of a culturally constructed one. The myth is now

consumed as fact. Barthes concludes this notion by saying that, “we reach here the very principle of myth: it transforms history into nature” (128).

FIRST CHAPTER: QUEER REPRESENTATION IN GRINDHOUSE MOVIES

Before having an in-depth look at the representation of queerness in a case study specifically, we will contextualize queer representation in movies generally. For a long time, LGBTQ+ individuals had to downplay their queerness in public life. Therefore, queer people turned to the big screen to find representation. Movie theatres, however, could only show a glimpse of queer identities. In their book, Benschhoff and Griffin explain how the scenes on screen had to abide by the rules set by Hollywood Production Codes and societal views concerning the LGBTQ+ community (*Queer Cinema* 7). Thus, “The frightening images created on screen were crucial to the public’s imagination concerning the roles and lifestyles of queers in American society” (Martins 9). The horror genre holds a strong connection to images of queerness and how they cemented these ideas in the American mindset. The harassment and discrimination of the minority were translated into frightening images (9). According to Benschhoff and Griffin, American movies of the early 20th century contain a “heterosexual procreative monogamy” (*Queer Cinema* 1). This means that classical Hollywood coupling was usually heterosexual. An important facet of the classical Hollywood system is how it shows a narrative system that insists on heterosexual romance, which excludes any other sexual identities (*Queer Cinema* 63). This chapter will discuss this in more detail and analyze this narrative system that Hollywood tried to uphold in the 20th century. Furthermore, it will go in-depth about how queer identities were represented within the movie discipline by discussing censorship and the use of othering.

1.1 Queerness in Movie History

To understand the role of queer identities in movies, knowing how queerness was perceived in the American societal context is essential. Beshoff and Griffin wrote how the meanings of words such as gay or lesbian have changed over time, and their definitions were often associated with gender identity (*Queer Cinema* 3). This is seen in early 1900s movies, where queerness was closely related to the gender binary. Beshoff and Griffin argue how “feminine men (commonly referred to as ‘sissies’ or ‘pansies’) or masculine women (sometimes referred to as ‘butches’ or ‘bull dykes’) quickly became the stereotypical clichés of queer representation” (*Queer Cinema* 6). For most of the twentieth century, homosexuality was considered as something distasteful and not to be talked about, let alone to be acted upon.

1.2 Censorship

The motion picture industry was characterized by a period of harassment following the second world war as box office receipts were falling (Schaefer 137). More sex hygiene films were being made, which prompted more censorship in The United States. The movie theatres were visited less, which led to more competition between moviemakers. The motion picture industry was careful about what they wanted to show in movies, on the grounds of protecting impressionable spectators, like children. Civic leaders and social welfare workers feared that viewing a movie containing violent content would lead viewers to commit immoral acts (138). The first censorship law was passed in Chicago in November 1907, which meant that filmmakers had to issue a permit before they could be shown (138). A critique that was made against censorship laws was the call for education in movies. Sensitive and hard topics in exploitation movies could educate the young and impressionable on difficult topics that mainstream movies did not allow to show. Exploitation movies, then, often toed the line between education and entertainment. The censorship in The United States entailed ‘Thirteen Points and Standards,’ which codified the exclusion of certain topics and got a lot of backlash

due to these critiques. However, the Hollywood scandals of 1921 and 1922, generated an outcry to force the industry to embrace self-regulation, which was pioneered by Will Hays in 1922 (143). The censorship would later also be named the Hays Code.

Due to censorship, it was difficult to include queer characters; however, filmmakers still managed to leave marks that could indicate a character having a queer nature. In 1930, a Hollywood Production Code was written that laid out the rules on what was allowed to be shown in movies. This code enforced a rule that said that explicit representation of queerness was banned from Hollywood movie screens. Independent moviemakers tried to defy these rules, by hinting at a character having a queer identity, yet not explicitly showing anything. In 1961, the administration of the Production Code finally allowed to show queerness in movies, but only if it was done following their rules. It could only be shown if the queer characters were portrayed with “care, discretion, and restraint” (Benshoff and Griffin, *Queer Cinema* 9) and most importantly if the characters were condemned in the plot of the movie.

1.3 The Sexual Other

Before the 1960s, films could only hint at characters having a queer identity. Benshoff and Griffin describe queer film study as a framework that tries to understand how these cinematic sexualities are complex and nuanced (*Queer Cinema* 2). They do this by analyzing historical media to find traces of queer characters. Queer film theory allows us to research how queer discourse in the media has affected societal structures and, in return, how societal structures have influenced the discourse in media. During this time, when a queer character was depicted, it usually meant that these characters were relegated to having a minor part that existed to reinforce the heterosexual love story (*Queer Cinema* 6). This creates a binary of a Self and the Other which was described by de Beauvoir in the context of gender. Othering is a fundamental characteristic of human thought, and this binary can be seen in other minorities

as well, like sexualities. The sexual binary is constructed as heterosexuality being the self and homosexuality being the Other. This binary is, then, reflected in the media, such as movies which reinforce this binary over and over again.

Motion picture technology was developed during the same time wherein concepts of homosexuality in cultural studies were more discussed because of the rise of queer film studies (*Queer Cinema* 6). Film can, thus, provide a record of how human sexuality has been understood and represented during the last century. Movies emphasize the normative heterosexual structure and are fundamental to the formula of storytelling. Thus, because heterosexuality was normalized in movies, queerness took the role of something abnormal. The righteous male perspective was centralized in movies, whereas the female sexuality and desire were its unambiguous Other (Heller-Nicholas 205). There was a binary that reinforced the idea that one was normal and one the Other. The insertion of queer characters in movies was seen as a disruptive force against the patriarchal status quo. The narrative form of the Hollywood movie scene was inherently heterosexist, which means that they always contained a male-female romance at the center of the storyline (Martins 11). David Martins argues in his dissertation that “the supposedly non-procreative queer Other, who traditionally stands in contrast to the reproductive family-oriented heterosexual, thus poses a threat to fundamental heteronormative institutions such as marriage or the nuclear family” (11). Thus, queerness in the media is defined by the dominant force of heteronormativity, therefore making queer characters the sexual Other. The next chapter will show how Grindhouse movies turned this concept of Othering into a myth.

SECOND CHAPTER: THE VAMPIRE LESBIAN TROPE IN GRINDHOUSE MOVIES

The vampire is a common recurring character in the horror genre, most famously in the various renditions of *Dracula*, based on Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula* (1897). The novel was famously adapted into a movie by Tod Browning in 1931. This chapter will discuss the lesser-known sequel *Dracula's Daughter* (1936) by Lambert Hillyer, which was vaguely based on the novella by Sheridan Le Fanu called *Carmilla* (1872). This was the first book to portray a lesbian vampire, and *Dracula's Daughter* was the first movie to portray such a character in the cinema. Therefore, paving the way for this trope of lesbian vampirism in exploitation films in the 20th century. In this chapter, I will discuss queer representation in Grindhouse films and specifically discuss the movie *Dracula's Daughter* (1936) and how the female vampire is interpreted.

Dracula's Daughter (see Figure 1) is a story about a female vampire, Countess Marya Zeleska, the daughter of Count Dracula. The movie shows a complex storyline, where Zaleska is presented as the villain of the story, however, also calling for the spectator's sympathy. The story begins where the film *Dracula* (1931) by Tod Browning left off. Unlike Count Dracula, Zeleska is not happy with her



Fig. 1. "Film Poster," Lambert Hillyer, *Dracula's Daughter*, 1936

affliction. She wants to destroy the cadaver of her father as she believes it will save her.

When this does not help, she turns to the psychiatrist, Dr. Jeffrey Garth. She does not tell him exactly about her vampirism but translates it to a psychological condition that remains vague to the doctor. When he grows to distrust her, he distances himself from her. Zeleska tries to convince him to join him in Transylvania and when he refuses her, she kidnaps Dr. Garth's assistant and love interest, Janet. Zaleska takes her to Transylvania, where a final battle takes place between Dr. Garth and Zaleska.

2. 1 *The Difference of Queer Representation between Grindhouse and Hollywood Films*

There is a difference between how queer identities were represented in Grindhouse movies compared to movies originating in Hollywood. This is because, as stated by Benschhoff and Griffin, “Films made outside Hollywood often had a more complex take on human sexuality” (*Queer Cinema* 6). We can, however, see something interesting happening in movies made by independent filmmakers who operate outside this binary. The movies usually did not have a positive representation; however, they did show queer content unlike Hollywood movies, which the Production Code restricted. The exploiters extended the movie content into a domain of desire that was constructed as lower than pre-or extramarital sex, which included sexual acts like homosexuality and other forms of desire that were not considered “normal” (Schaefer 210). Regular theatres did not allow to show Grindhouse films, due to Hollywood’s control over the film industry. Thus, as Benschhoff and Griffin write, they were usually screened in specialized urban theatres, film clubs, or “road show” formats (*Queer Images* 108). Within these challenging censorship statutes of Hollywood, according to Benschhoff and Griffin, these underground movies helped to “change the cultural understanding of sexuality in general, contributing ways to the so-called sexual revolution of the 1960s, when for a brief period sexuality was celebrated as a revolutionary force.” (*Queer Images* 10). The production code explicitly forbids certain topics, such as drugs, criminal

atrocities, and out-of-wedlock pregnancy. This led exploitation films to veer into these forbidden topics such as queer territory, which mostly took place in the horror genre.

2.2 *Queerness in The Horror Genre*

According to Benshoff, there are links to be found between cinematic horrors and queerness, which is based on Freud's theory about repression (*Queer Cinema* 64). Benshoff and Griffin argue that queerness in movies is represented as monsters that experience an eruption of repressed sexual desire. The Freudian model is a fundamental tenet of psychoanalysis, in which humans repress a part of themselves from their conscious thought (64). This dynamic view of mentality, where some mental contents are denied access to conscious thought, became a fundamental tenet of psychoanalysis (Boag 74). Thus, the negative societal views of homosexuality in the 20th century resulted in queer identities having to repress their sexuality. Michel Foucault provides another analysis, in which sexuality is not repressed by society, but is constructed through a series of discourses by institutions that are responsible for the exclusion of queerness in the public sphere (*Queer Cinema* 65). This results in the dehumanization and monsterization of sexual identities. The repressed sexual desires that are constructed could manifest themselves in numerous ways. The film industry translated this tenet of psychoanalysis to represent queerness in their movies. Especially in one particular genre, the horror film, played a key role in cementing the images of queerness as predatory, dangerous, or contagious in the American mindset" (Martins 9). The monster that represses its sexuality is a recurring theme in movies of the American 20th century. Three important variables of the horror genre in the 1970s are normality, the other and the relationship between the two (Benshoff, *Queer Cinema* 63). They continue to argue how the monster in the movie is defined by its relationship to the story's hero, in which the monster is constructed as being racially, ideologically, or sexually different. Without the Other, you cannot clearly portray what is supposed to be the image of

normality, therefore society needs the sexual Other who is usually cast in the role of the monster. The monster is typically positioned as someone who tries to block the heterosexual romance that is positioned at the center of the story. Benschhoff identifies the monster as the Other as being someone, “repressed by society, sociopolitical and psychosexual others are displaced onto monstrous signifier, in which form they return to wreak havoc in the cinema” (“Queer Cinema” 65). The queer monster often presented itself as a lesbian vampire in horror grindhouse films in early 20th century America, which over time turned into a trope.

2.3 *The Hidden Queer Vampire*

The lesbian vampire movies belonged within the horror and exploitation genre, as it showed the subconscious fear of men and their hostility towards the sexuality of women (Brode and Deyneka 31). This fear is signified in these movies as vampirism. One of the first examples of this trope is the film *Dracula's Daughter* (1936) by Lambert Hillyer. The cinema was dominated by the male gaze, since the film is written from a man's perspective and the women are consequently the object of desire. The lesbian vampire trope breaks through this relationship by placing the woman as the agent for female desire, which includes a “dangerous, excessive, lesbian desire” (Brode and Deyneka 33). They further argue that the movie is considered one of the first movies to portray a lesbian vampire. At this point the queer representation is still implicit in the viewer's eye. A queer film theory lens however, shows a different perspective of this movie. The lesbian vampire trope is based on a stereotype generated from the subconscious fear that men have towards women but also portrays a complex and ambiguous character that both symbolizes death and an object of desire (23). The vampire shown in this movie portrays herself as feminine to be able to “pass” as heterosexual, therefore will not be identified as a lesbian or vampire, as these two characteristics are intrinsically linked. Brode and Deyneka describe the trope as having a specific narrative formula that included a lesbian vampire and a mortal man competing for a

woman (28). Furthermore, the trope always ends with heterosexuality triumphing over lesbian vampirism. The final scene in a lesbian vampire film usually concludes with the man killing the lesbian vampire, thereby destroying not only the clear threat but also everything that she represents.

Zaleska seems to be in love with Garth, however there has been speculation by queer film critics that the film bares queer connotations. It can, thus, be argued that Zaleska is an example of the lesbian vampire trope. To show this a particular scene in the movie will be discussed, in which Zaleska seems to seduce a woman (see Figure 2). This scene shows Zaleska's



Fig. 2. "Seduction Scene," (36:56) Lambert Hillyer, *Dracula's Daughter*, 1936

butler picking up a woman who is trying to commit suicide from the street. He brings her back to his boss' house where Zaleska is waiting for her with wine, food, and the question if she can paint her. She asks the woman to take off her blouse to be able to paint her accurately. The woman becomes distrustful of this strange proposition but feels compelled to do so, as she is offered safety from the streets. When she wants to leave, Zaleska uses her ring to compel the woman to stay, which scares the woman. The scene ends with the camera zooming in on



Fig. 3. "The Silent Attack," (18:03) Lambert Hillyer, *Dracula's Daughter*, 1936

the woman, while Zaleska creeps closer. Later, the woman turns up in the hospital in a

confused state and drained of blood (*Dracula's Daughter* 34:07 - 37:28). This scene can be compared to another scene in which Zaleska attacks a male victim (see Figure 3). She follows a man in the streets hiding her face. The camera zooms in on her ring, which alludes to her using the ring to compel the man. The scene then fades out, without showing the attack, however, it suggests the fact that she attacked him as the man is later found dead (17:31 - 18:18). These two scenes show two different attacks: the one with the man goes by fast without any personal contact, whereas the other with the woman shows great detail. Zaleska tries to make the woman comfortable, talks to her, and almost seems to seduce her before attacking her. Thus, while the man is quickly attacked, the scenes with the woman are sexually prolonged.

This movie shows the beginning of the lesbian vampire trope. Barthes argues that a myth is historically and culturally determined and that representation supports the creation of a myth. The recurrence of this trope in movies led to a vampire myth with queer connotations. Barthes theory is supported by semiology which explains the relationship between the signifier and the signified. In this trope, the image of the female vampire is the signifier and the connotation attached to that image is the signified, which creates the sign of the vampire lesbian. The concept is normalized by it being culturally constructed which seems to create a natural relationship between the signifier and signified, and thus creating a myth. Hollywood films tend to make movies about the American ideal of homogeneity, whereas exploitation films were constructed on the basis of difference (Schaefer 13). As Schaefer further argues, “in exploitation films, we find our society constructing many of its myths about “the Other”” (13). Thus, through the concept of Othering as described by Beauvoir, exploitation films managed to create a myth. In the next chapter, the Other will have gained new connotations through changes in the social realm.

CHAPTER 3 THE EMANCIPATION OF THE QUEER VAMPIRE

This myth was continued and changed during the 1970s, when queer scholars became more active in trying to change the media representation of queerness, and slowly the entertainment industry started to show a more well-rounded representation of queer characters. Social protests have played a great part in changing how queer identities are perceived in movies. A crucial factor in the growth of representation is how it was perceived by queer communities. As they grew and evolved, they created a subcultural practice that challenged the dominant heterosexist culture (*Queer Cinema* 6). In the 1960s, the demand for fair and equal treatment rose due to more activism. This chapter will go more in-depth about these changing times and how they are reflected in movies. Especially the movie *Vampire Lovers* (1970) by Roy Ward Baker, which will be used as a case study to showcase the arguments.

Vampire Lovers (see Figure 4) is a gothic horror film directed by Roy Ward Baker. Just like *Dracula's Daughter*, it was based on *Carmilla* (1872) by Sheridan Le Fanu. *The Vampire Lovers* (1970) tells the story of a vampire named Marcilla who stays as a houseguest at the General's house. Marcilla soon starts to have a close relationship with the General's daughter, Laura. Over time, Laura gets sick, unaware that she is being drained



Fig. 4. “American Theatrical Release Poster,” Roy Ward Baker, *The Vampire Lovers*, 1970

of blood by Marcilla. The doctor diagnoses her as being anemic and she dies soon after. When suspicion rises about vampires in the village, Marcilla flees to a different household and changes her name to Carmilla. Just like last time, Carmilla gets closer to the daughter Emma, who lives in the house. She also starts getting sick, and the cycle repeats all over again. The General swears to take revenge with the help of vampire-expert Baron Hartog and the doctor. In the end, they manage to kill the female vampire. This follows the trope that the monstrous queer vampire always has to die in the end, in order to destroy the threat she represents (Brode and Deyneka 31).

3. 1 The Queer Rights Movement

Grindhouse films also included a section of sexploitation films in which queerness played a huge part. The representation might not always have been friendly, but it dared to show more than typical Hollywood films did in the early 20th century. In the 1960s, social protest led to a sexual revolution of queerness that can be seen on the movie screen. Young and queer activists were inspired by the social rights movement of people of color and began to demand equal treatment for queerness. The Stonewall Riots were of significant importance to the modern gay and lesbian civil rights movement and are said to be the start of the modern queer rights movement (*Queer Cinema* 4). The Stonewall Riots took place on June 28th, 1969. The evening had begun as a routine police raid on the Stonewall Inn in New York, which marked the rejection of complacent attitudes the police state had towards queer public spaces. This tension-filled atmosphere that moved towards the street led to an angry crowd that challenged the abusive police force as a show of resistance. This riot led to more awareness of the situation of queer individuals in American society and as a consequence more awareness in the cinema. According to Benshoff and Griffin, this led to a growing concern for the study of gay and lesbian cinema and because of this queer film studies took hold. As a result, Queer academics became more critical of the media representation of

queerness and started lobbying for more and better representation (10). This subconsciously led to the emancipation of the queer vampire.

3.2 *The Pornographic Appeal of The Lesbian Vampire*

A difference compared to the movie that was discussed in the previous chapter is that they were now more lenient with explicitly showing queer content, while still condemning it by making the queer character a villain who dies in the end. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, lesbian sexual behavior was more commonly and graphically depicted in exploitation films, according to Brode and Deyneka (25). This change in representation can be explained by the gradual relaxation of the strict censorship laws that ruled the movie scene in the early 20th century in the United States (25). *The Vampire Lovers* establishes a new narrative formula that defines a new genre that is based on exploiting the pornographic value of the relationship between the female vampire and her victims (25). This pornographic appeal helped produce more movies of this genre as it showed more female and queer representation, although it still upholds the male gaze. This means that in early cinema women were simply used to be looked at by men. This shows the concept of Simone de Beauvoir that the woman is seen as the sexual Other, and therefore as something less than the man. The lesbian vampire, however, breaks through this cinematic relationship as the female vampire becomes an agent of female desire herself while still being an object of male desire (Brode and Deyneka 33). Heterosexual men were threatened by the rise of female sexuality in movies, as they felt threatened these tropes would enter their household. The lesbian vampire trope has its links to men's subconscious hostility towards women's sexuality. Brode and Deyneka explain this anxiety by arguing that "the lesbian vampire provokes and articulates anxieties in the heterosexual male spectator, only for the film to quell these anxieties and reaffirm his maleness through the vampire's ultimate destruction" (260). However, as the lesbian vampire is presented as an object of sexual desire, the character is accepted by the public as it feeds

into something men can fantasize about safely in the cinema (260). Marcilla is culturally out of place, as she is a “woman who responds incorrectly through violent strategies of queer seduction to the social norms and mores expected of one who accepts an invitation to be a house guest” (Brode and Deyneka 215). Thus, Marcilla does not follow the social norms made up for women and changes the sexual binary. She is the monstrous Other typified by the trope of the lesbian vampire. Films featuring this trope had their peak around the 1970s as they combined the grindhouse features of “art, horror and soft-core pornography” (Heller-Nicholas) like we had not seen before. This trope became common due to the subconscious fear of men seeing the rise of lesbianism in the media and in real life.

3.3 *The Romance of The Female Vampire and her Victim*

Similar to *Dracula's Daughter*, Marcilla attacks men in a quick manner, while her female victims are seduced and treated with care, which still eventually leads to their deaths. There is only one scene in which Marcilla is seen attacking a man (see Figure 5). In this scene, the doctor stands in the way of her relationship with Emma and attacks him violently in the woods (*Vampire Lovers* 1:04:48-1:05:51). Marcilla has two female love interests in the movie, which are not only sexual but have a romantic nature. After her supposed mother leaves her in the care of a family as she has to hurry back home, the female vampire falls in love with the daughter in the household. Her first relationship with Emma is short-lived and intended to show the viewer the method of the female vampire. She repeats this same method and starts living in the house of Roger Morton and his daughter Emma. Especially her relationship with Emma, her second victim, is well established in the movie. There

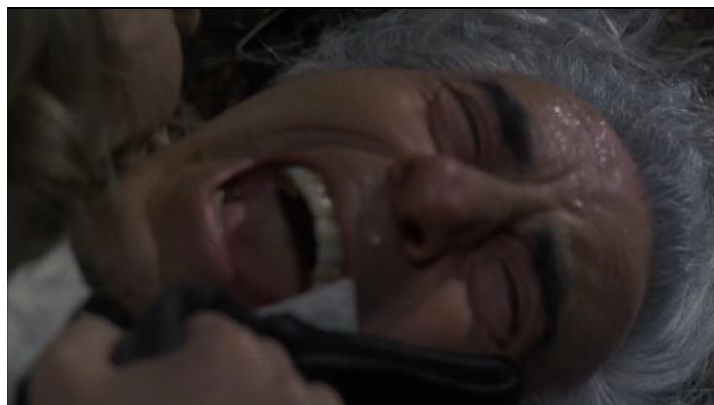


Fig. 5. “A Brutal Attack,” (1:05:25) Roy Ward Baker, *The Vampire Lovers*, 1970

is a scene in which Emma knocks on the door, finding Marcilla bathing naked (see Figure 6). They try on dresses, play around the room and end up falling in the bath, gazing into each other's eyes (00:31:46-00:33:31). This is a clear example of the male gaze that plays into the fantasy of the heterosexual man. This scene contrasts with a scene later in the movie that shows a different side of the relationship (see Figure 7). It begins with Emma brushing her hair while Marcilla is reading her a romance book. Marcilla ridicules the man in the book, disregards the idea of ever wanting a man for himself and discourages Emma from finding one. They have a discussion about death, as it is an uncomfortable topic for the

female vampire. Emma calls her sensitive, and Marcilla admits she can be sensitive sometimes, but mostly due to Emma. She then proclaims her love for her and admits her jealousy for the young man who wants to marry Emma. Marcilla begs Emma, "I want you to love me for all your life," and they hold each other closer until they are interrupted by the governess (*The Vampire Lovers* 40:40- 42:35).

This scene shows how the queer character can be something more than just the violent monstrous Other. The

movie ends with Emma crying out when Marcilla dies, as their connection meant something more than her being a victim of the vampire. Therefore showing that queerness can be a human and real romantic connection.



Fig. 6. "A Playful Evening," (33:20) Roy Ward Baker, *The Vampire Lovers*, 1970



Fig. 7. "A Romance in Disguise," (42:13) Roy Ward Baker, *The Vampire Lovers*, 1970

CONCLUSION

This thesis set out to gain a better understanding of queer representation in Grindhouse films and to answer the research question: How does the representation of queerness, more specifically through the lesbian vampire trope in late 20th century American Grindhouse movies, reflect the societal view of the LGBTQ+ community? To answer this question, we have looked at two case studies, *Dracula's Daughter* (1936) and *The Vampire Lovers* (1970) and used queer film theory based on cultural studies. The literary research showed how, in the early days of the 20th century, the norm in American film is that the narrative revolved around a heterosexual romance and thus excluded and ridiculed any other sexual identities. Censor boards made sure this oppressive narrative system was upheld. However, daring independent filmmakers tried to maneuver through the rules to create movies with what were considered scandalous topics. One of these topics was same-sex relationships, as movies follow the societal notion that they should be dismissed and not shown in public nor the media. Grindhouse was a form of counterculture, which meant it had a small but strong cult following in which people could find quick thrills of a different nature than they were used to in their normal lives.

A close study of the film *Dracula's Daughter* showed how there is an implicit connotation that the main character could have a queer identity, and therefore is considered a queer movie by the public. However, it did not show anything explicit. It was made during a time in which the censor boards had a huge influence on the movie industry. The movie is an example of how a queer character is painted as the monster of the story in horror films, which reflects the societal view of the LGBTQ+ community at the beginning of the 20th century. A second study of a film showed how, during the time that *The Vampire Lovers* was being made, the movie scene had changed. In the late 1960s, there was an outcry for more equal

treatment of the LGBTQ+ community, and because of the heavy backlash the censor board got, the rules became more lenient. This meant movies were able to show more explicit queer content. Thus, there is a change in the societal view of queerness. *The Vampire Lovers* shows a relationship between Marcilla and her female victims. They show explicit sex scenes and scenes with a romantic nature, something that was unheard before in the early days of this decade. The film is an example of how it toed the line between women breaking away from societal norms regarding sexuality and how it still was written from the male gaze and his fantasy. This movie paved the way for more lesbian vampire movies in the 1970s and can still be seen today. Further research can be done on how we see this change in the 21st century and how the lesbian vampire trope lives on. Nowadays, movies are able to show a more well-rounded representation of queer characters, even though content can sometimes still be based on queer stereotypes. Another interesting path could be to research how queer grindhouse movies had their effect on society at that time, in which sociological and empirical research would be needed. This thesis provides a deeper understanding of how we can look back at our film history and how a lack of representation influenced the way a minority can be viewed by the general public. There is, thus, a cultural exchange between societal opinions reflected in movies and how representation in movies influences the general public.

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