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# Queer and Evil: The Representation of Lesbian Identities in Western Horror Film

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## **Abstract and Key Words**

Horror film can be regarded as a pioneering genre in terms of the depiction of deviant identities, particularly queer. However, the genre generally portrayed those identities in a negative way, as they were perceived as monsters and defined as the wicked other in opposition to individuals who complied with the norms imposed by heteropatriarchal discourses. Often ignored by mainstream representation and the academia, lesbian identities were conceived as “something ghostly” (Castle 1993, 28) with no real agency as carriers of meaning. When they began to be represented, their role was established in the basis of being objectified as women by what Laura Mulvey described as “male gaze” (1999), and at the same time of being queer individuals symbolically equated to monsters (Benshoff 1997). Thus, the horror genre, due to its earlier representation of queer identities, has arguably provided a realistic representation of the evolution of lesbian identities and its interpretation within the Western world, moving from negative depictions as fetishized and predatory towards more positive 21<sup>st</sup> century portrayals. This dissertation will peer at the portraits of lesbian identities in *The Vampire Lovers* (1970), *Daughters of Darkness* (1971), *Jennifer’s Body* (2009) and *The Fear Street Trilogy* (2021).

Key words: lesbian identities, gender studies, horror film, film studies, representation.

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## 1. Introduction

Being horror one of the core human responses, its film genre has awakened both physical and mental responses on spectators who thrive on the print those visceral stories leave on their psyches and bodies. As “a compound of terror and revulsion [...], horror provides entry to a made-up world where fears are heightened but can be mastered” (Kawin 2012, 3), transforming the genre into an escapism of the constricting societal norms. By offering a vent in which primal human fears can be accessed, manipulated, and exacerbated, the horror genre has been a pioneer in terms of representation of anything deviant, highlighting the premature depiction of queer identities which could not be canonically represented on heteronormative media. Film is not exempt from the hetero-patriarchal *status quo*, as it was analyzed by Laura Mulvey in her theory of the “male gaze”, in which she argues that “woman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command [...] tying her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning” (1999, 834). This perception of women as subjects contributed to the depiction of the lesbian as a ghost-like ethereal entity (Castle 1993), that held no active power or voice. As explained by Kimberlé Crenshaw’s Intersectional Theory of privileges and oppressions (1991, 1241), the lesbian identity experiences several oppressions, as in the first instance they are not only objectified and male gazed for being women, but also underrepresented as members of the LGBTQI+ community.

The representation of lesbianism has been relegated to a secondary, or even invisible plane, offering very little and rather questionable symbolic meaning to them in terms of stereotypical and heteronormative gazes. Thus, could horror films have provided a transformation of the representation of the lesbian and how she is understood by hetero-patriarchal conventional representation? The horror genre, due to its earlier representation of queer identities, has arguably provided a realistic representation of the evolution of lesbian identities and its interpretation within the Western world, moving from negative depictions as fetishized and predatory towards more positive 21<sup>st</sup> century portrayals.

The aim of this analysis is to examine four different horror films that feature non-heterosexual characters produced from the 70s onwards, and to explore the different ways in which queer females and their different identities have been represented. The films to be analyzed are: firstly, *The Vampire Lovers* (1970) which can be read as an example of lesbian sexualization; secondly, *Daughters of Darkness* (1971) which features predator behavior from an aged lesbian; thirdly, *Jennifer’s Body* (2009) which portrays a monstrous coming of age

with underlying lesbianism; and finally, *The Fear Street Trilogy* (2021) which establishes an active dialogue with systemic oppression by tackling collective trauma among queer communities. The methodology will be based off the close analysis of the specific characterizations of non-heterosexual female characters in terms of behavioral and visual representation, as well as their relevant interactions with specific characters that directly affect their performance of lesbianism.<sup>1</sup>

## **2. Opening the Door to the Lesbian “Ghost”: Questioning Lesbianism and its Representation in Horror Film**

The horror genre represents imaginary anxious nightmares of real and tangible fears of certain societies, which makes it obviously not exempt from ideological slants. As scholar Judith Halberstam argued, “monsters are meaning machines [that] can represent gender, race, nationality, class, and sexuality in one body” (1995, 21). This description allows a new layer of meaning applied to horror creatures that pose specific humanoid threats for the audience, contributing to the dissemination of specific discourses on certain (Othered) identities. In his book *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film* (1997), Harry M. Benshoff explores how queer characters, as individuals who subvert conventional gender binarism and heteronormativity as natural and superior (Robinson 2016, 1) and who challenge the capitalistic productive system in the Western world, are identified as monstrous objects in the horror film genre. Benshoff analysis revolves around queer-coded characters throughout the history of horror, yet only one chapter is specifically devoted to lesbianism. Thus, it can be argued that lesbian identities not only have had little representation even in this subversive genre, but also that little attention has been given by the academia, which may have in some cases overlooked the gender identity in the study of horror films. Nevertheless, the representation of LGBTIQ+ characters has been historically limited and constrained within specific stereotypes associated to diverging identities. During the Golden Age of Hollywood, sexuality and acts that were considered immoral were forbidden onscreen, with the consequence that “the appearance of overtly homosexual film characters doesn’t occur until the late 1960s and early 1970s, following the demise of the [Motion Picture] Production Code and its restrictions against the depiction of ‘sex perversion’” (Benshoff 1997, 14). It is interesting that in previous decades

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<sup>1</sup> Although the word ‘queer’ will be used preferably throughout this dissertation to refer to the identities analyzed, the label ‘lesbian’ will also be employed as an umbrella term for women loving women, even if they sometimes can be perceived as bisexual.

Europe had allowed more freedom of representation, for example as can be observed in the German film *Mädchen in Uniform* (1931) directed by Leontine Sagan and in the French 1950's short film *Un Chant d'Amour* directed by Jean Genet. However, this happened much more frequently on non-mainstream filmic productions because “the alternative cinema provides a space for a cinema to be born which is radical in both a political and an aesthetic sense and challenges the basic assumptions of the mainstream film” (Mulvey 1999, 834).

Cinema has been a historically male-dominated art, which has encouraged the portrayal of female characters from the heteropatriarchal lens. Stereotypically, horror films “are famous for portraying women as hypersexual damsels in distress who are usually murdered within the first five minutes as punishment for their indiscretions” (Murray 2022), establishing them in the collective imaginary as weak objects meant either to be saved by the male hero or slaughtered by the corrupting monster. Even if more alternative cinema has offered a new scope from where to approach female characters, with it being a male dominated genre, the male gaze prevails. This poses the question of where does the figure of the lesbian belong in horror onscreen depictions. Repressed by the intersectionality of being male gazed as women and being othered as homosexuals, lesbians were almost erased from representation. As scholar Terry Castle argues in *The Apparitional Lesbian*, their figure has been left out of the realms of representation in popular culture, because lesbianism has been constructed as “something ghostly: an impalpability, a misting over, an evaporation” (1993, 28). By understanding lesbianism as a ghost, it makes sense that their agency as active subjects is lost in the heteropatriarchal world, in which their existence serves no productive function neither for reproduction nor for satisfying male gaze. As a mixed identity, the lesbian has had to refuge herself outside of mainstream representations, and her depiction has varied and adapted to specific discourses, which will be analyzed through the specific cases of lesbian monsters in *The Vampire Lovers*, *Daughters of Darkness*, *Jennifer's Body*, and *Fear Street Trilogy*.

### **3. Early Representations:**

This section will be devoted to the analysis of two representative films for the lesbian horror genre that were produced during the 1970s. During this decade, the horror filmic genre allowed a more explicit representation of lesbianism due to the pornographic impetus driven by male gaze. *The Vampire Lovers* and *Daughters of Darkness* are to be critically analyzed in this early context both as pioneers and as carriers of negative symbolic meaning for the lesbian identity.

### **3.a. Sexualizing the Lesbian: Pornography and Fetish in *The Vampire Lovers* (1970)**

The female body is perceived as an erotic object, and as such it loses its agency of self-defining to the audience. As Laura Mulvey argues, “traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen” (1999, 838). This male gaze has constructed many of the early representations of lesbianism, constraining them to serve male pleasure and fantasies. Lesbian desire has originally been depicted from a heteronormative perspective, in which roles are assigned following the canonical conventions of male/active vs. female/passive. This is reinforced by Cherry Smyth, whose study argues that “lesbian porn [takes] on myths constructed by heterosexual patterns of submission and dominance and [fails] to recreate them in a way that comprehends and integrates lesbian passion” (1990, 158). Even when lesbianism excludes the male out of the equation, men have wanted to take part if not on an active, on a spectating role. In this context there was a rise of what scholars have named the ‘lesbian vampire film’ genre, which emerged after “the desire to capitalize on the market for pornography, since the lesbian vampire genre [could] allow nudity, blood, and sexual titillation in a ‘safe’ fantasy structure” (Zimmerman 1981).

Just after the Production Code ceased to be valid, *Hammer Productions* inaugurated *The Karnstein Trilogy* with *The Vampire Lovers* in 1970. It was a United Kingdom and United States co-production and was first released in the US by American International Pictures. The film is a retelling of Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* (1872), and as Matthew Hartman argues it is “particularly noteworthy for its explicit depiction of nudity and blatant scenes of lesbianism” (2021). In this film Mircalla/Carmilla is introduced into society by her family as a young lady in distress in need for a place to stay; disguised in this way, she uses her closeness to the young ladies in town to enact her vampirism. From the beginning she is identified with the stereotypical representation of the *femme fatale* by using vibrant and sensual colors and lower chest coverings in comparison to the future victims, who use more childish dresses with less saturated colors and flower decorations which conveys their innocence (00:10:11). This not only establishes her Otherness from the beginning as a stranger to the village, but also suggests that her attraction to other women will have fatal consequences on the victims due to her purely wicked reasons, equating her lesbian behavior to what is morally corrupt. Following this argument, female characters are constructed in a polarized way: the stereotypes are established

by the dichotomies evil/good and experienced/innocent, in which the female vampire is portrayed as the corrupting force versus the young ladies who are corrupted and too innocent to even realize their helplessness. This dichotomy also relies on the sexual motivations of the characters, which equates sexual experience to evilness and virginity to innocence and goodness. Carmilla utilizes her sexual appeal to attract the young virgins with her experience to place herself in a position of knowledge and power. The only female character who is morally ambiguous is the governess, who wants to become a servant for Carmilla but is finally killed by the vampire. The governess experiences a double layer of exclusion as she is rejected for being a foreigner and not interesting for Carmilla's purpose due to of her maturity and lack of (sexual) innocence. By the different treatment Carmilla has for the virgins in opposition to the governess, it can be inferred that her ulterior intentions are not to attract the virgins to establish a relationship with them, but merely to use them for being easier to manipulate. Therefore, Carmilla's lesbianism will be perceived by the audience as a consequence of her evilness, not as a part of her identity. This creates a space of ambiguity in which Carmilla's vampirism is real and imaginary at the same time. The audience cannot grasp if her lesbianism springs from her need to attract and attack the young ladies, or if it is a part of her identity. This causes an ambiguous identity failed to be recognized by the other characters and by the audience, erasing almost completely her lesbianism as a part of her identity and using it as a symbol of evilness and a sexually attractiveness that directly appeals the fetishized phantasies of male gaze.

The role of men in the movie is key to understand how the male gaze shapes the representation of the female protagonists. Carmilla's active role is questioned throughout the film, as while she is the one to pursue young virgins, she does it with an ulterior purpose, a family fate imposed to her. All her actions are surveyed by the patriarchal figure of her family, who is always gazing down at Carmilla from a physically superior position (see Appendix 1). Furthermore, men are depicted as protectors: brothers, uncles, servants who control and infantilize women as passive beings. As bearers of the "morally correct" values, men allow themselves to inflict explicit violence against the female vampires, as it is justified to purify the root of corruption in the village. Not only that, but they are also established as the only forces capable of defeating the vampire; they have enough knowledge and experience to actively fight them, contrary to the oblivious ladies who fail to perceive the danger they are in. As such, the male audience is meant to identify with the male characters, whose role as protectors within heteronormative society remains untouched. However, the man watching the film intrudes the intimate private spaces generated by the female characters as an active object, an observer who acts as a voyeur of the sexualized subjects. The way *The Vampire Lovers* represents the figure

of the lesbian, not as a threat to the heterosexual male implies that they are a figure to satisfy his sexual desires. They are being considered objects by the audience, and therefore do not pose any real challenge to the *status quo* and heteronormative discourses.

### **3. b. Demonizing the Lesbian: Women as Predator in *Daughters of Darkness* (1971)**

Once the lesbian cannot be further sexualized by the male gazing audience, she becomes a dangerous subject and a direct threat to heteropatriarchy. By gaining agency over her own identity, her role transforms from being “a ghost” to becoming a predator of “heterosexual” women, normally young and vulnerable. This is particularly relevant in relation to the notion of the “Recruitment Myth”, that refers to queer individuals who seduce heterosexuals to convert them, particularly targeting children due to their incapability to reproduce (Krinsky 2000, 737). This stereotype gave a justification not only to spread hate against the community, but also to deter them from gaining civil rights. The representation of queer aged women as predators is reinforced by Linda Hess in *Queer Aging in North American Fiction* (2019), in which she argues that

aging as a narrative element serves to articulate and reinforce a fear of deviation from the heterosexual norm for both sides of the binary. The older predator occupies an undesirable and lonely position, while the young victim (or potential victim) has to be permanently vigilant about her choices and possible dangers in order to avoid the fate of one day growing into an older predator herself. (36)

This insight provides a departing point for the queer woman portrayed as a morally corrupt entity in horror film, and as an active object who wrongs society rather than a subject repressed by societal laws and heteropatriarchal order.

The Belgian-French-German co-production *Daughters of Darkness* was directed by Harry Kümmel and released in 1971 in the US. The main character is based on Elisabeth Báthory, a famous Hungarian countess responsible for torturing and murdering hundreds of women during late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries (Pallardy 2021), whose figure inspired many films during the rise of the lesbian vampire film, such as *Countess Dracula* (1971) or *Immoral Tales* (1974) (Baker 2012, 554). The film has been highlighted by many critics for its potential positive reading as a feminist queer story. Previous analysis has focused on the relationship between the countess and the newlywed wife, which is based on their mutual affection and revengeful attitudes toward the husband. As critic and scholar Bonnie Zimmerman argues, “the ending of the film emphasizes the power of woman and the attractiveness of lesbianism, [...]”

suggesting that lesbianism is eternal, passing effortlessly from one woman to another” (1981). As such, the countess’s lesbianism is part of her role as a liberating force from her toxic relationship with the sadistic heterosexual man. The climactic scene of the Christ-like murder of the mortal husband (see Appendix 2) symbolically equates his sacrifice to Christ’s dying for their sins as it contributes to female liberation by allowing the evilness and lesbianism to enter his wife’s body through him.

However, even if the protagonists’ relationship has been read as positive, the dichotomy drowned by Hess’s argument between the older spinster versus the younger preyed is particularly interesting in *Daughters of Darkness* and the complex relationship dynamic established between the countess and her secretary Ilona. The notion of the Myth of Recruitment is embodied in their relationship and carries negative meaning for both characters. Being more mature and the original vampire, at the beginning of the film the countess adopts a role of protector and instructor of Ilona. In her role of guider, she is the provider of the relationship, offering Ilona the tools to survive together as outcasts from the law (embodied by the policeman) and from heteronormative societal norms. Ilona is trapped in the relationship as her only hope to survive and must serve it unconditionally. Nonetheless, this devotion is unidirectional and dangerous for Ilona’s physical and mental integrity. Once the countess finds a new victim, Ilona transforms into a mere recursive element who must overcome her own emotions for the sake of the commander. She is totally subordinated to the countess’ power, symbolized by the recurrent use of tied elements around Ilona’s neck, highlighting her role as a servant. In their last scene together, Elisabeth puts a pearled necklace around her neck (see Appendix 3), a white element that represents both her purity delivered to the sadistic husband, as well as her pulling out a white flag of surrender to her fate of becoming an eternal servant. Her tragic ending is left ungrieved, reinforcing the predatory nature of their relationship and the ruthlessness of the countess’s exploitation of the young girl’s body and soul. Hitherto, it was neither the first nor the last sacrifice of the curse, being it lesbianism or vampirism.

#### **4. 21<sup>st</sup> Century Representations**

This section will be devoted to the analysis of *Jennifer’s Body* and *The Fear Street Trilogy* as significant queer horror films produced in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Their realistic approach towards coming-of-age as a queer individual and the consequences of collective trauma offers a positive space for the development of lesbian identities in the realms of representation.

#### 4.1. Queer Coming of Age in *Jennifer's Body*

The 1990s *New Queer Cinema* described by Ruby Rich (2004, 53), follows the upcoming wave of queer cinema publicly screened during Film Festivals in Canada and the US, which were relevant for “[giving] voice to marginalised gay and lesbian individuals who felt hemmed in by reinforcement of prevalent gay stereotypes” (Baker 2015, 46). This offered an opportunity for queer creators to expose their firsthand experiences, allowing them to speak up their own voices and stories. As a consequence of this rise in the representation of queer stories during the 1990s, the early 2000s opened the door for gay characters on mainstream film productions. Films such as *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) or *Mulholland Drive* (2001) featured gay protagonists whose stories are certainly affected by their queerness. However, these early representations exposed potential problems when they entered the mainstream genre, as most gay characters were caricatured stereotypes of queer individuals and their experiences. As a reaction to this stereotypical approach the notion of the ‘hetero media gaze’ appeared. Critically analyzing Mulvey’s conceptualization of the ‘male gaze’, Christopher Pullen theorizes on the pervasive ‘hetero media gaze’ that functions as a panopticon to regulate homosexual representation based on coding their ghostly presence within their absence (2016, 40). Hence, by providing a queer sub context, mainstream film allowed their representation by joining both extremes of the dichotomy: heterosexual gaze could ignore the subtle queer hints while non-heterosexual individuals gazing at the film could mirror themselves with the queer coded details. This was detrimental for the queer audience who had to actively seek for their reflection on real representation, deepening the Othering of the community.

Within this context, Karyn Kusama’s horrific comedy *Jennifer's Body* (2009) was released in the US. Much attention has been drawn lately to the film by feminist and queer scholars and it has become a popular cult classic thanks to online forums who have reclaimed the film as a feminist manifesto (Colangelo 2022). The socio-cultural context in which the film was released directly affected its reception. Megan Fox was deemed as a sex symbol for male audiences after her role in *Transformers* (2006), causing that “the audience’s expectations of the actor and the way her character manifests her sexuality – using her body as a weapon – enhance the feeling of hypersexualization and objectification” (Murguía et al. 2020, 182). However, the film did not fulfill the male’s audience expectations, which together with a poor marketing management caused to film to remain in the shadows for almost a decade. The interest on *Jennifer's Body* grew due to its reading as a monstrous allegory of women’s trauma. Barbara Creed’s notion of the “monstrous-feminine” is particularly appealing for *Jennifer's*

*Body* criticism, which highlights the “significance of gender in the construction of female monstrosity [...] through the abjection of her sexuality and reproductive bodily functions” (2016). The film deals with Jennifer’s coping with the trauma of being raped through her transformation on man-slaughterer monster who consumes and shreds the bodies of young male victims as a source of subsistence, becoming a castrating threat to one’s identity (Chusna and Mahmudah 2018, 12). She utilizes her sexual allure as a source of power against males who embody the patriarchal perpetrators of the whole system that perturbed her existence.

In addition to the castrating nature of the monster that challenges heterosexual reproductive practices as a response to trauma, the film also deals with queer female coming-of-age as an underlying theme. Salvador Murguía argues that “the motives of the characters revolve around competitiveness, possession, jealousy, and revenge” (2020, 183); notwithstanding, that is rather a simplistic approach to the protagonists’ complex relationship. The latent homoerotic connection established between them is especially appealing to young women coming to terms with their own sexuality. When representing queer girlhood, “queer desire is made visible as a temporary (and juvenile) departure from the linear path toward heterosexual adulthood [contributing to the] it is *just a phase*” (Monaghan 2019, 101) rhetoric. Jennifer and Needy’s relationship falls under this convention, because it fails to be acknowledged in terms of the real emotional deepness they share. However, the references to lesbians’ slurs used against them (“you’re totally lesbi-gay” 00:06:21 and “God, you’re butch” 1:35:56) evidence the perception of their queerness from the outside but show how it fails to be acknowledged as something belonging to them. The making out scene between Jennifer and Needy (00:58:53) is particularly revealing of its hidden meaning when compared to Needy’s sexual relationship with her boyfriend. The heterosexual sexual act feels disrupted (00:53:46): he fails to interpret Needy’s distress believing it to be sexual climax, while Needy is visioning bloody depictions of Jennifer’s monstrous actions. The contrast of images shows the abstract connection felt by the two protagonists, which transcends physicality and temporality. Additionally, after the making out scene Jennifer says “we can play boyfriend-girlfriend like we used to,” highlighting their misrecognized romantic nature perpetuated by heteronormative relational roles. Even if the romantic relationship is never openly addressed, Needy’s murder of Jennifer by ripening their BFFs necklace (see Appendix 4) evidences that their relationship transcended the realms of friendship. The only one that could end Jennifer’s curse was Needy, who inherits part of the monstrosity. This establishes intertextuality with previously analyzed *Daughters of Darkness*, highlighting the potentially perennial nature of lesbianism.

## 4.2. Amending the Past in *Fear Street Trilogy*

Since the 2010s till nowadays there has been a steady increase in the presence of queer artists involved in the creative process of filmmaking, providing resisting forces against heteronormative and stereotyped conventional representation. In 2016, *Moonlight* became the first LGBT-themed film awarded in the Oscars with Best Picture Award, surprisingly entering the mainstream awards as a queer independent film (Davidson 2017). Furthermore, the GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) conducted an annual study which showed that “films from major studios included more LGBTQ characters onscreen for longer amounts of time in 2020 compared to the year prior” (Powell 2021), quantitatively measuring the rise of queer representation. However, Kimberlé Crenshaw critically analyzes how identity politics fail to recognize intragroup differences by introducing the concept of Intersectionality, which provided meaning to merging oppressions. By analyzing “the race and gender dimensions of violence against women of color” (1991, 1242), Intersectionality acknowledges the interaction of different identities within an individual and the specific effect they have on their oppression against the classist male dominated hetero ableist world. This network of oppressions has had a direct impact on how the representation of queer identities has been configured. In fact, a study conducted in 2015 showed that in the US “on broadcast networks, 69% of the characters are white, 19% are black, 7% are Latino and 6% Asian” (Moylan 2015). This causes a power imbalance among queer identities existing, perpetuating hegemonic white Western values that often transfer into homosexual relationships developing heteronormative dynamics.

In 2021, streaming platform Netflix launched *The Fear Street Trilogy* directed by Leigh Janiak, which can be regarded as a resisting force against the previously mentioned status of queer representation. The story begins in a city divided in two parts: one without any kind of distress, and the other that appears to be strike by a witch’s spell which turns recurrently and arbitrarily young adolescent into mass murderers. The trilogy sets off with one of the protagonist’s possession by the curse in *Part One: 1994*, then moves back in time to *Part Two: 1978* to peer at the childhood of a survivor to a mass murder’s attack, and finally discloses the origins of the curse in *Part Three: 1666*. The film’s lesbian romance acts as a catalyzer of the allegorical critique to systemic oppression within the split city. Systemic oppression can be defined as “the intentional disadvantaging of groups of people based on their identity while advantaging members of the dominant group (gender, race, class, sexual orientation, language, etc.) (National Equity Project n.d.). This notion elucidates *The Fear Street Trilogy*’s meaning within its US context by offering a sharp critique to systemic racism and heteropatriarchy.

Janiak's decision to have an African American butch lesbian (Deena) as the heroine (New York Times 2021) has clear political implications. The myth of Sarah Fier, the witch that allegedly put the spell in the city, is challenged for the first time by love of the two protagonists in *Part One: 1994* when Sam is possessed by the murderer and tries to kill her friends. It is Deena's love for Sam what motivates the ending of the curse in *Part Three: 1666*, in which she is able to embody the soul of the witch and disclose the origins of the curse. This self-identification happens due to their shared lesbian identity, that allows them to challenge the linearity of time through shared experiences, ensuing Sarah Fier's redemption and giving closure to her tormented life. The culmination of the plot reveals in the end that the true source of all evils in the city was caused by the white policeman, adding the critical layer that challenges *status quo*. This applies specifically to issues of systemic racism in the US, yet it can be universalized to hegemonic Western discourses rooted on colonialism that have shaped the configuration of present day globalized neoliberal capitalism. By giving the power to challenge this systemic oppression to a protagonist with several layers of intersecting oppressions, the hopeful message relies on younger generations and minorities as active forces capable of finding solutions against hegemonic practices.

*The Fear Street Trilogy* does not only put forward the issues of systemic oppression, but also its subsequent consequences, most importantly collective trauma. The film deals with the trauma of the whole community facing inequality for economic distress and overall insecure living in a superficial context, but it also takes a deep insight on queer collective trauma both from historical and contemporary perspectives. Jeffrey Alexander described that "cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (2004, 1). As aforementioned, gender and sexuality play a key role in the configuration of the characters as it enables the protagonist to mirror herself with the historical struggles endured by Sarah Fier and put an end to the curse. According to a study conducted in 2020 on a queer community in Portland "queer community confirm existing research on collective trauma that has shown that external traumas, involving violence and discrimination, have the potential to create lasting impacts on communities" (Kelly et al. 2020, 1539). Queer collective trauma is evidenced in the film through Sarah Fier's being murdered by her own community due to her lesbianism and the consequences it triggers on the lives of the protagonists, representing one of the worst imaginable fears for members of the queer community. It is also evidenced on Sam's choice of potentially harming irreversibly her relationship with her family to embrace her true queer

identity, which is one of the most realistic fears young queer individuals face after coming out. These different experiences that have harmed and traumatized the community throughout history are transformed into an active dialogue among the generations, offering a positive opportunity to tackle shared trauma. It is through collective heartache and grieving that empathy and bonding are achieved (Morris et al 2022, 13), which allow productive conversations that help heal the convoluted past.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis of these four films has elucidated how lesbian identities have been developed in the horror filmic genre. Their evolution as intersecting identities has been closely dependent on contextual factors and stereotypes associated to them in each historical period, but their depiction on film has been a pioneer on many levels. Their earlier explicit appearance onscreen was rooted in fetishizing and sexualized tropes, that once overcome by the male gazing audience evolved into predatory attributes. More recent productions have offered a positive approach to lesbian identities that have established dialogues with contemporary struggles both of being women and queer in a heteropatriarchal society. As it was originally argued, the horror genre has given space for improvement in its treatment of lesbian identities, allowing the evolution of its representation from rather questionable origins to an overt force against of *status quo*. The first thing to highlight is the non-exclusivity of the different assumptions over lesbianism in the characters, as most of them partake in more than one of the associations ascribed to it. For example, in *The Vampire Lovers*, the predatory nature of the vampire co-exists with her sexualization by male gaze similarly to *Jennifer's Body*, as well as *The Fear Street Trilogy* sets off a debate with the past as well as engages on a political denounce. What is clear is that there has been a tendency to depict more comprehensive versions of the lesbian identity, which has been probably motivated by the entrance of both female and queer gazes in cinematographic productions. The first two films analyzed were directed by men while the last two were directed by women. *Jennifer's Body* and *The Fear Street Trilogy* offer a more humanized approach to the depiction of female characters, in opposition to the sexualization endured by them in *The Vampire Lovers* or *Daughters of Darkness* contributing to the role of female gaze as a critical resisting force to patriarchal portrayals of the female body. For instance, in *The Vampire Lovers*, their bodies are objectified for and from male gazing aesthetic pleasure; however, in *Jennifer's Body* Megan Fox's sex appeal is used both to highlight the

inner power of femininity as a source of evilness, as well as to criticize the patriarchal symbolic and physical violence inflicted on the female body, specifically on teenage girls.

Lesbians have left the ghostly realm of representation and have evolved into active objects within their own stories. As such, it may be perceived that the role of the lesbian in horror film has evolved from satisfying titillating imaginary desires, towards becoming a denouncing tool of patriarchal institutions. By taking up more public spaces and improving the portrayal of their existence, which occurs outside the realms of heteronormativity and patriarchy for their non-necessity of men, debate and political activism arises. Notwithstanding, the lesbian identity as such does not only rely on the symbolic value as a denouncing tool, but on its mirroring effect with the lesbian audience that can feel validated by their presence onscreen. As Stuart Hall describes, representation is “an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture” (1997, 15). The importance of representation is rooted in offering validation and comfort to the audience that may identify with the characters. Delivering a more positive and realistic representation enables this self-identification that normalizes those deviations from the norm and creates a space for bi-directional empathy between the characters and the audience.

All in all, the horror genre has been a pioneer in the representation of divergent identities, and as one of them, of lesbianism. The importance of representation as a tool for the normalization of oppressed identities adds important meaning in the horror film by giving those individuals a chance to manifest their own fears. In opposition to previous films in which monsters represented certain identities as evil, the possibility of imagining oneself as the protagonist and not as the perpetrator disseminates a hopeful message among new audiences and generations. An aspect that still needs room for improvement (not only in the horror genre) is the lack of portrayal of queer aged women on any realm of representation. The exploration of the old lesbian identity in the horror genre has the potential of dealing with many nuances of human fears. And lesbians of all ages deserve at least to recognize their image onscreen, but that choice is for future filmmakers to explore.

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## 7. Appendixes



Appendix 1 (00: 14: 50)



Appendix 2 (1:31:39)



Appendix 3 (00:56:20)



Appendix 4 (01:35:36)