

HELSINGIN YLIOPISTO

## **‘Drag, Filth, Horror and Glamour’**

Queer Horror Spectatorship, Disidentification, and Reparative Retrospection

*in The Boulet Brothers’ Dragula*

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## Abstract:

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**Abstract:** *The Boulet Brothers' Dragula* is a drag reality TV competition featuring subversive drag acts that draw inspiration from horror cinema. The Show itself, constructed around the horror-host drag persona duo The Boulet Brothers, portends to represent transgressive drag that is marginalised within the contemporary popular drag scene in the United States. This thesis proposes that *Dragula* is a manifestation of an ongoing discourse centred on queer affinity for horror as a source of subversive self-determination. It hypothesises that increased representation in mainstream media, including horror, has prompted the queer community to evaluate how this representation and unprecedented visibility affects them. *Dragula* turns to the canon of American horror cinema and a dark past of queer life in the United States to return a sense of autonomy to queer representation, particularly to drag.

With a theoretical framework based on *Disidentifications: Queers of color and cultural performance* by José Esteban Muñoz and *Queer retrosexualities: the politics of reparative return* by Nishant Shahani, this thesis uses the lenses of disidentification and reparative retrospection to approach a better understanding of queer affinity for horror and the subversive potential to be found in camp approaches to the genre. In addition, Heather O. Petrocelli's empirical research on queer horror film spectatorship, *Queer For Fear: Horror cinema and queer spectatorship* is consulted to support analyses.

The method used is a close reading of two spin-off episodes from the franchise, *Halloween House Party* from *Titans* (2022) and *Resurrection* (2020). The analysis is divided into three parts, beginning with a brief summary of *Dragula's* background and the series as a whole, then proceeding to analyse *Halloween House Party* and how it creates an alternative 'past' with the use of set design and contrasting imagery between monster drag and Americana. The analysis of *Resurrection* and its more documentarian narrative sheds light on the self-awareness of queer horror fans and the importance of recorded media as legacy. I argue that the allusive mise-en-scène of the episodes shows that *Dragula* deliberately creates conflicting nostalgic images of the present to explore queer visibility, and problematise the mainstream conception of 'good' representation.

The main findings point to *Dragula* using a camp approach to American horror film history and iconography, so that it could, through disidentification and reparative nostalgia, envision a future in which mainstream representation of the queer community would not be determined by normative conceptions of commercial viability. Moreover, the way that *Dragula* operates suggests that the iconography and associated feelings of nostalgia and self-determination function as a form of tertiary memory for the queer horror fandom, supporting the development of a sense of community.

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### Muita Tietoja:

**Tiivistelmä:** Tämä tutkielma tarkastelee drag reality -televisio ohjelmaa *The Boulet Brothers' Dragula* ja kuinka siinä esiintyvä amerikkalainen kauhuelokuva- ja popkulttuurikuvasto ilmentävät queer - yhteisön suhdetta kauhuelokuvaan ja representaatioon. Tutkielma kysyy kuinka camp disidentifikaatio ja korjaava nostalgia ilmenevät lähestymistavassa ja mitä *Dragula* saavuttaa sillä. Teoreettisen viitekehyksen pääteoksina toimivat José Esteban Muñozin *Disidentifications: Queers of color and cultural performance* ja Nishant Shahanin *Queer retrosexualities: the politics of reparative return*. Edellämainittujen lisäksi tutkielma hyödyntää Heather O. Petrocellin empiiristä tutkimusta queer kauhuelokuvakatoisuudesta, *Queer For Fear: Horror cinema and queer spectatorship*. Tutkimusmenetelmät ovat queer-luennan väritystä lähiluku ja intertekstuaalinen analyysi.

Analyysiosuus jakautuu kolmeen osaan. Aloitan lyhyellä tiivistelmällä *Dragulan* taustasta ja analysoin sarjaa kokonaisuutena. Etenen analysoimaan jaksoa *Halloween House Party*, joka luo vaihtoehtoisen 'menneisyyden' retro sitcom-koti lavasteilla ja haastaa katsojan ajattelemaan drag-hirviöiden läsnäolollaan aiheuttamaa ristiriitaa amerikkalaisen normatiivisuuden tyyssijassa. Toinen analyysini keskittyy *Resurrection* spin-off -jaksoon, joka dokumentaristisemmalla narratiivillaan valaisee queer kauhuharrastajien itsetietoisuutta identiteettinsä vaikutuksesta heidän samaistumisessaan genreen. Argumentoin että jaksosten viittauksellinen ja formaatteja näennäisesti sekoittava mise-en-scène osoittavat että *Dragula* luo tarkoituksellisesti ristiriitaisen nostalgisia asetelmia, jotta queer kulttuuria ylläpidettäisiin subversiivisena ja 'hyvän' representaation määrittelyä voitaisiin moninaistaa.

Keskeisimmät tulokset osoittavat että *Dragula* käyttää campia lähestymistapaa viitatessaan kuvastoon amerikkalaisesta kauhuelokuvahistoriasta ja pop-kulttuurista, jotta se voisi disidentifikaation ja korjaavan nostalgian kautta hahmottaa tulevaisuuden, jossa queer yhteisön representaatio valtavirrassa ei olisi normatiivisen kaupallisen kannattavuuden määrittämä. Tämän lisäksi, tapa jolla *Dragula* hyödyntää kuvastoa ja siihen liittyviä nostalgian ja itse-määrittelytunnetta, antaa vaikutelman siitä että kauhuelokuvat toimivat tertiäärinä muistina (tertiary memory) yhteisön historiasta, vahvistaen yhteisöllisyyden tunnetta.

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## 1. Introduction

*'Why do you think gay people love horror so much? Because we do.'*

*- 'Oh! I know why! I know why. Because we love seeing straight people get killed.'*

Drag queens Trixie Mattel, Katya<sup>1</sup>

Popular *Ru Paul's Drag Race*<sup>2</sup> alumni Trixie and Katya providing commentary on horror films for Netflix's Youtube channel is only one example of a wider phenomenon happening in mainstream horror and the discussion surrounding it. As LGBTQ+ visibility has increased and proven itself commercially viable in the United States' film and television industry, so has audience awareness and scrutiny towards the nature of representation and reception. The relative democracy of the internet and fragmentation of audiences has allowed for a prolific culture of discussion regarding horror and identity to emerge online, to the point where mainstream networks and production companies have picked up on the phenomenon. This thesis was born of my awakening to this awareness and examines the intersections of queer horror spectatorship, camp, disidentification, and aesthetic nostalgia within this contemporary media context. It is to be argued that while corporate awareness of queer commercial viability has progressed the wider conversation around queer identity and status in American society, it restricts the subversive potential that queer art has historically had in the name of profit. My analysis of drag reality television competition *The Boulet Brothers' Dragula*, and its self-aware dissection of this phenomenon, finds that using a camp mode of engagement with American horror cinema, particularly its past and the queer representations within, reorganises a sense of queer disorientation and increased desire for self-determination that have come about under

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<sup>1</sup> *Drag Queens Trixie Mattel & Katya React to #Alive and Cargo | I Like to Watch Horror | Netflix, 2020.*  
Accessed via: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CZTGrBAju3c&list=PLWHaMOGE0GaqMUe5EYId8IBeg-6xcz-rE&index=4>

<sup>2</sup> *Ru Paul's Drag Race. 2009- Logo TV, VH1, MTV*

neoliberal media culture, into an affective televisual exploration of queer worldmaking and contemporaneity.

At the time of writing, the amount of research and discourse to be found on queer people discussing queerness in horror has increased noticeably. There are many podcasts (*Attack of the Queerwolf*, *Horror Queers*, *Girls, Guts and Giallo*, *The Boulet Brothers' Creatures of the Night*, among others) dedicated to horror cinema, run by, and with a clear focus on, queer audience members.<sup>3</sup> Essay anthologies such as *It Came from the Closet: Queer Reflections on Horror* and *Divergent Terror: At the Crossroads of Queerness and Horror* as well as groundbreaking academic studies such as Heather O. Petrocelli's exceptional spectatorship study *Queer for Fear: Horror Film and the Queer Spectator* have all been released within two years of each other.<sup>4</sup> In television, Horror is having a queer renaissance in the mainstream, with Don Mancini's queer coming of age revisiting of his franchise, *Chucky* in its third season, and *Yellowjackets* and *The Last of Us* making a splash at awards shows.<sup>5</sup> In the realm of cinema, trans actors Morgan Davies and Jamie Clayton were cast in the *Evil Dead* franchise's latest instalment *Evil Dead Rise* and *Hellraiser* respectively to critical acclaim.<sup>6</sup> Lauded horror director Jordan Peele's *Nope* features a lesbian protagonist, Emerald, played by Keke Palmer, and Netflix's *Fear Street* trilogy centred a lesbian love story.<sup>7</sup> Even in a clumsy corporate attempt at queer horror like *They/Them*,<sup>8</sup> queerness is addressed directly, and centred in the narrative, no matter how ineptly. Documentaries such as *Scream, Queen! My Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Queer for Fear* examine queer experiences of horror cinema both within the

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<sup>3</sup> Kennedy, Bever, Klein, *Attack of the Queerwolf*, 2018-2022. Accessed via:

<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/attack-of-the-queerwolf/id1436152776>

<sup>3</sup> Lipsett, Thruman, *Horror Queers*, produced by Bloody Disgusting, 2019-. Accessed via:

<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/horror-queers/id1449041559>

<sup>3</sup> Malamet, *Girls, Guts and Giallo* 2019-. Accessed via: <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/girls-guts-and-giallo/id1461424698>

<sup>3</sup> The Boulet Brothers, *The Boulet Brothers' Creatures of the Night*, produced by Studio 71, 2020-. Accessed via: <https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/the-boulet-brothers-creatures-of-the-night/id1511057761>

<sup>4</sup> Vallese (ed.) *It Came From the Closet Queer Reflections on Horror*. La Vergne: Saraband, 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Jordan (ed.) *Divergent Terror: At the Crossroads of Queerness and Horror*. Off Limits Press LLC, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Petrocelli, Heather Oriana. *Queer for Fear: Horror Film and the Queer Spectator*. Cardiff, Wales: University of Wales Press, 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Syfy, 2021-.

<sup>5</sup> Showtime, 2021-.

<sup>5</sup> HBO, 2023-.

<sup>6</sup> dir. Cronin, 2023.

<sup>6</sup> dir. Bruckner, 2022.

<sup>7</sup> dir. Peele, 2022.

<sup>7</sup> dir. Janiak, 2021.

<sup>8</sup> dir. Logan, 2022.

industry and among audience members.<sup>9</sup> A sense of confrontational queer sensibility is visible in the aesthetics and themes of films such as *Skinamarink*, *Swallowed*, *We're All Going to the World's Fair* and *Huesera: The Bone Woman*, among others.<sup>10</sup> This list's purpose is not to deny queer horror, or its examination, of preceding decades, but rather to illustrate how the contemporary horror landscape has changed. Having such widespread visibility is a watershed moment in a genre that has been both ambiguously hostile and welcoming to queer people from its inception.<sup>11</sup>

So, why *do* so many gay people love horror, and how and why are we collectively dissecting this appetite now? As a queer horror enthusiast myself, I have a personal interest in these questions. As long as I can remember, I have experienced an affinity with monsters and the macabre, dressing up as a vampire bat for Halloween at age five, ravenously researching ghosts and demons from around the world as soon as I learned to read, and telling my classmates creepy stories. I have fond memories of reading Wikipedia synopses of horror films that I was too scared to watch and being delighted by them once I found enough courage to press play. I felt instinctively at home with the things that go bump in the night, and as I developed, so did my analytical perspective as to why this might be. In his seminal work *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film*, Harry M. Benshoff argues that queer spectators of horror cinema accede more readily to the cinematic monster's subjective position, identifying with the figure symbolically as it is often quite literally placed in opposition to the cis-normative, heterosexist status quo.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, as Katya asserts in the opening quote, watching horror film has, by and large, been about seeing straight people get massacred and terrorised in a panoply of creative ways, as the default protagonist has been just that: cisgender and heterosexual, not to mention white. In the canon of Hollywood horror, queer representation has historically been mostly textually non-existent, or heavily sub-textually implied at most, due to the Hays code decreeing 'sexual perversion' unsuitable for the screen.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, the coded queerness has generally been positioned in narratives as threatening, lurking at the fringes of society, in

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<sup>9</sup> dir. Jensen, Chimienti, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Shudder, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> dir. Ball, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> dir. Smith, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> dir. Schoenbrun, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> dir. Cervera, 2023.

<sup>11</sup> McAndrews, Mary Beth. 'We're Living In The Age of Queer Horror'. *Dread Central*, 1 June 2023. Accessed via: <https://www.dreadcentral.com/editorials/455384/were-living-in-the-age-of-queer-horror/>.

<sup>12</sup> Benshoff, Harry M. *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film*. Inside Popular Film. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997. p.12

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.* p.6.

the bedroom doorways of innocent cisgender and heterosexual victims to be corrupted by some alien ‘other’ who is by nature unsuitable for the established paradigm of normalcy.

Acknowledging this exclusion jokingly, as Katya does, implicates her engaging in a queer camp appreciation of horror film. A joking, light-hearted, yet knowledgeable awareness of the genre and where one, as a queer audience member, stands in relation to it is a substantial part of queer horror fandom and community.<sup>14</sup> This sentiment of queer self-awareness is present throughout this thesis, both in my interpretation of the source material and the theoretical framework I apply to it. I begin with introducing my theoretical framework and methodology, which rely on José Esteban Muñoz’s theory on disidentification within BIPOC queer art, and Nishant Shahani’s writing on queer retrospection and its reparative potential. Additionally, I explain how I make use of Heather Petrocelli’s empirical research into queer horror spectatorship, both on choosing the theme of this thesis, and bolstering my findings from the close readings of *Dragula* episodes, which is my method of research. I also include a brief clarification on the lens through which this thesis and the primary source engages with drag conceptually. I then move on to state my thesis and research questions in conjunction with prior research on my source material to elucidate how my approach differs with it. While prior research has largely focused on the performance aspects of *Dragula*, I approach from a film and television studies point of view, prioritising the televisual framing of the performers with scripted sequences and their mise-en-scène. The term mise-en-scène, as used in this thesis, refers to the positioning of all elements in the frame, derived from the French origin of the term translating to ‘put into the scene.’<sup>15</sup> Following this lead-in to my work, I provide a brief primer on the cultural background for queer connections between horror, camp, and drag, reflecting on how the theoretical lens can be applied to my findings with this background. From then on, I move on to close readings of two episodes of the *The Boulet Brothers’ Dragula*, exploring themes and mise-en-scène in relation to the literature. Finally, I conclude with my findings and speculation on potential for further study.

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<sup>14</sup> Petrocelli, 2023.

<sup>15</sup> Doughty, Ruth, and Christine Etherington-Wright. *Understanding Film Theory*. Second edition. Macmillan Education. London: Palgrave, 2018. p.5

## 1.1 Theoretical Framework & Methodology

I gravitated to Heather Petrocelli's study *Queer for Fear: horror cinema and queer spectatorship*,<sup>16</sup> as a foundational basis for my research, as her work tackles a lot of the questions I was asking myself while preparing for this thesis. Petrocelli interviewed 4,107 queer horror fans of varying backgrounds and ages about their relationship to the genre and how their identity informs their enjoyment of it, an unprecedented method in the field of queer horror studies. I employ Petrocelli's findings specifically regarding the connection between queer enjoyment of horror and camp. There seems to be a consensus among the participants that queer embodied experience provides queer horror fans with a unique perspective on horror narratives and their heightened depictions of victimisation and violence. This is connected to the inherent queerness of horror cinema and the queer language of camp that is used to engage with said queerness within the community. As Petrocelli remarks, 'The intersection of horror and camp is forged *through* the queer spectator.'<sup>17</sup>

Though Petrocelli's research was a starting point and is present throughout the thesis, the theoretical framework through which I approach my source material is made up of two core texts, the first of which I discovered in Petrocelli's work. José Esteban Muñoz's *Disidentifications: queers of color and the performance of politics* provides an interpretative approach predicated on disidentification as a mode of self-reflexive engagement. Muñoz's study of queer BIPOC artists in the United States advances the theory of disidentification as a form of queer worldmaking unique from other forms of identification that operate within hegemonic paradigms of understanding construction of identity, such as cross-identification or counter-identification, among others.<sup>18</sup> Creating an identity within a space that elides the marginalised, the disidentificatory subject 'tactically and simultaneously works on, with and against a cultural form.'<sup>19</sup> I expand on Petrocelli's application of disidentification by compounding it with theory on queer nostalgia as a reparative historiographical practice, which is alluded to by Muñoz, but expanded by my other core text.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Cultural Studies of the Americas, v. 2. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. p.12

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

Nishant Shahani's book *Queer Retrosexualities: The Politics of Reparative Return*<sup>20</sup> and the following article "Between Light and Nowhere:" *The Queer Politics of Nostalgia*<sup>21</sup>, serve as my primary references for understanding and applying queer nostalgia and retrospection in my analyses. Shahani explores post-Stonewall queer fiction set in the past, in both film and literature, to analyse the reparative potential of queer retrospection and nostalgia for queer historiography. In particular, Shahani focuses on works set in the 1950s and proposes that they, among others, construct a vision of the 1950s to serve as a kind of primal scene of post-Stonewall understanding of queerness in the United States that questions the Stonewall riots as 'the singular epistemic moment of gay liberation.'<sup>22</sup> They do this by imagining queer life in 'the dirty-dark -secret'<sup>23</sup> past in a way that problematises prior retrospective understanding of that time as meek and assimilationist. Shahani posits that the act of queer retrospection can be understood through disidentification, rethinking the shame of pre-Stonewall persecution and secrecy to create something reparative going forward, exploiting the potential that a neither strictly oppositional or acquiescent return could have. By this, he means that 'by tactically embracing its [the 1950s] injurious logic'<sup>24</sup> disidentification allows for a redeployment of stigma for a new purpose, in a different context.<sup>25</sup> 'Queer retrosexualities,' refers then, to the notion that contemporary queer thinking is informed by a retrospective logic that functions through a sense of nostalgia towards certain elements from periods of toxicity and oppression towards the queer community, because they can elucidate the feelings involved in contemporary understanding of queerness.

Muñoz focuses primarily on the ambiguous nature of disidentificatory political performance and how it manifests in the performances he studies. Some of them involve, or even demand, looking back at historical periods of secrecy and shame to have a concrete cultural artefact to disidentify with, but their retrospective action is not the priority of *Disidentifications*. Shahani, in turn, traces *Retrosexualities*' theoretical genealogy to Muñoz's writing and disidentification, but chooses to focus specifically on the retrospective aspects of such cultural engagement. Both deal with the queer community's propensity for recycling and redeploying representations of themselves in an often irreverent, self-reflexive way. Combining Muñoz' and Shahani's

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<sup>20</sup> Shahani, Nishant. *Queer Retrosexualities: The Politics of Reparative Return*. Lanham: Lehigh University Press, 2012.

<sup>21</sup> Shahani, Nishant. "'Between Light and Nowhere": The Queer Politics of Nostalgia'. *The Journal of Popular Culture* 46, no. 6 (December 2013): 1217–30. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpcu.12085>.

<sup>22</sup> Shahani, 2012. p.25

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p.37

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p.17

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p.18

intertwining theories on navigating a continuum of misrepresentation, I argue that *Dragula* manifests the unique disidentificatory camp approach to horror cinema that queer audiences possess, by creating or displaying a queer nostalgic embodiment of disidentification with American popular culture.

Though the artform of drag itself is not the focus of this thesis, I think it pertinent to lay a foundation for how drag plays into queer reinterpretation of cultural artefacts as camp, which is integral to this thesis. Conceptualising drag as solely either female or male ‘impersonation’ is a reductive notion that has been questioned and problematised repeatedly, notably in Judith Butler’s seminal work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*,<sup>26</sup> and Esther Newton’s *Mother camp: female impersonators in America*.<sup>27</sup> To quote Butler: ‘-- Drag is an example that is meant to establish that “reality” is not as fixed as we generally assume it to be—to expose the tenuousness of gender “reality” in order to counter the violence performed by gender norms.’<sup>28</sup> The ‘reality’ that Butler refers to is the cisnormative social construct of gender being inextricable from sex that is falsely divided into a strict binary of male and female. This binary has been normalised particularly in Euro-American conceptions of gender and sex to a problematic extent, since it prevents fruitful progress in understanding gender within a social context.<sup>29</sup> For instance, the strict adherence to binary conceptions of gender, when confronted with gender-explorative art such as drag, begets the question of whether or not drag is degrading to women. This question operates under the assumption that drag is definitively a parody of womanhood performed by cis men, and overlooks the existence of drag kings, not to mention non-binary drag artists and cis women performing as queens.

As with any artform, certain drag performances or performers can be misogynistic, but claiming that the art itself is inherently sexist is based on cissexist notions of gendered power dynamics stemming from behaviour conducted by someone ‘with the wrong parts,’ so to speak. In the preface to *Queering Drag: Redefining the Discourse of Gender-Bending*, Meredith Heller recalls an NPR interview with *Ru Paul’s Drag Race* alumnus Miz Cracker, wherein the topic of popular drag (such as is featured on the show) is brought up as being exclusionary to

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<sup>26</sup> Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. First issued in hardback. Routledge Classics. New York London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015.

<sup>27</sup> Newton, Esther. *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*. Phoenix ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979.

<sup>28</sup> Butler, 2015.

<sup>29</sup> DuBois, L. Zachary, and Heather Shattuck-Heidorn. ‘Challenging the Binary: Gender/Sex and the Bio-logics of Normalcy’. *American Journal of Human Biology* 33, no. 5 (September 2021): e23623. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajhb.23623>. p.4

more radical, or marginalised approaches to the art.<sup>30</sup> This brings up the question of whether the popularity of the drag in question is contingent on its adherence to the accepted gender binary. Since the drag featured in *Dragula* does not adhere to a binary understanding of drag as ‘impersonation’ or even parody of binary gender stereotypes, I too approach drag as a gender diverse, often satirical and camp exploration of arbitrarily gendered aesthetics and behaviours un beholden to the gender identity of the performer themselves. As Petrocelli cites Newton regarding drag, there is a distinct sense of ‘revealing *all* gender as parody’<sup>31</sup> within the show, particularly in the looks and performances that exaggerate gendered anatomy to such an extreme degree that it is only symbolically interpretable as being human anatomy at all (see figure 1). I believe that this is related to the anti-establishmentarian ethos of *Dragula*, which I will discuss further in due course.

My objects of study are two episodes from *The Boulet Brothers’ Dragula* franchise: episode 1 of *The Boulet Brothers’ Dragula: Titans* titled *Halloween House Party*,<sup>32</sup> and *The Boulet Brothers’ Dragula: Resurrection*,<sup>33</sup> a standalone episode. I also include a brief analysis of *Dragula*’s parodic take on the reality television pageant format and coronation ceremony tradition of replicating the prom blood bath from *Carrie*,<sup>34</sup> as a preface to the episode-specific readings. *Dragula* is a competitive drag reality television series that premiered on the Youtube channel Hey Qween! in 2016 and is at the time of writing past its fifth season and accompanied by the spin-offs *Resurrection* and *Titans*, as well as the *Halfway to Halloween TV special*<sup>35</sup> revue of 2023. It is hosted and produced by the Los Angeles-based drag performance and nightlife promoter duo known together as the Boulet Brothers, Dracmorda and Swanthula individually. The show has inhabited multiple platforms and is currently hosted on the horror focused VOD streaming service Shudder, which is owned by AMC networks. A cast of drag artists of various backgrounds partake in pageant-like floorshow challenges to showcase their skills in costume design, makeup, and performance. Typically to reality television, the challenges are framed with ‘confessional’ interviews and ‘produced’/scripted interpersonal conflict between the contestants as they plan and execute their challenge looks and performances. Each episode, a contestant is eliminated by a panel of judges comprised of the

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<sup>30</sup> Heller, Meredith. *Queering Drag: Redefining the Discourse of Gender-Bending*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2020.

<sup>31</sup> Lloyd in Petrocelli, 2023. (italics included in the original quote)

<sup>32</sup> AMC, 2022.

<sup>33</sup> AMC, 2020.

<sup>34</sup> Dir. De Palma, 1976.

<sup>35</sup> AMC, 2023.

hosts and celebrity guests, until a top three is left and the winner can be crowned. To accompany the reality TV trappings, *Dragula* typically bookends its episodes with scripted sequences featuring the Boulets that references horror tropes and genre imagery. My method of analysis will be close reading of the episodes through the lense of Muñoz's theory of disidentification and Shahani's theory on queer retrosexualities, bolstering my findings with Petrocelli's data on queer horror audiences. I analyse the aesthetic choices and intertextual references made within the mise-en-scène and themes of the series' scripted sequences and challenges themselves, and how they correspond to the literature.

## 1.2 Thesis statement and prior research

The goal of this thesis is to examine the relationship between nostalgia, disidentification, horror cinema and queer camp engagement in an American cultural context through a case study of *Dragula*. I aim to theorise on potential reasons for the contemporary proliferation of analytical queer media dissecting the phenomenon of the queer community's affinity for horror cinema. My research questions are as follows:

1. How does *Dragula* approach the iconography of American horror cinema?
2. What does this approach communicate about the connection between horror cinema and queer culture?
3. How do camp and queer nostalgia factor into this approach?
4. What does *Dragula* accomplish by putting queer horror spectatorship on display in the way that it does?

I ask these questions, because I believe they have potential to illuminate how queer camp operates within and against cisheteronormative culture through disidentificatory nostalgia. Petrocelli references prior scholarship on camp and horror, particularly Jason Lagapa's term, the camp-horror nexus,<sup>36</sup> and explains how her empirical study on queer horror spectatorship expands on this research by asserting the active role spectators play in the mediation of this proposed nexus. Lagapa's term originally referred to a particular aesthetic he identified in the poetry of Frank O'Hara and John Yau, fusing 'campy stylistics and Gothic motifs into a single aesthetic that invokes B-movie horror to achieve humorous, mannered and uncanny effects.'<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Lagapa, Jason. "Parading the Undead: Camp, Horror and Reincarnation in the Poetry of Frank O'Hara and John Yau." *Journal of Modern Literature* 33, no. 2 (2010): 92–113. <https://doi.org/10.2979/jml.2010.33.2.92>.

p.93

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. p.93

I agree with Petrocelli that the embodied experience of the queer spectators informs the relationship between all three parties of audience, horror, and camp. I argue that the camp-horror nexus, as it is employed in *Dragula*, is a deliberate reflection on the queer community's self-awareness of its connection to horror.

Further, I argue that this is a worldmaking project by way of disidentification and queer nostalgia. In this way, horror film functions as a form of affective tertiary memory for the queer community. I refer to Bernard Stiegler's development of the notion that recording technology allows for 'tertiary retention' of memory, a prostheticisation of consciousness achieved through industrial production of temporal objects, such as music or film.<sup>38</sup> For instance, Steve Choe, in his article 'Melos in the World of K-Drama', applies the concept to what he refers to as the 'affective interlude' in South Korean television drama.<sup>39</sup> He proposes that the affect communicated repeatedly through melodramatic motifs and simply 'the movement from episode to episode, and... the seemingly endless series of available K-Dramas'<sup>40</sup> function as prostheses to human memory. K-Dramas with their reiterative affective interludes enable even non-Korean viewers to feel part of a collective 'we' experiencing the same affective motifs together, identifying with images of 'Korean-ness' without ever having visited the country.

I propose that *Dragula* creates a similar experience of imagined togetherness by way of familiar imagery from American horror film and popular culture that is associated with a past of ostracization. By disidentifying with the cinematic queer-coded monster and nostalgising a time of collective hardship, it carries on the legacy of the culturally subversive status held by earlier generations of queer people in a hostile society. This is why *Dragula* deliberately emphasises the foundational role that horror has played in the lives of the competing artists by both directly interviewing them about it and placing them in an audiovisual framework that centres their transgressive art.

*Dragula* has been examined within the context of sociology and queer performance and monstrosity by Adam Reedy, Aaron Stone, Russ Martin and Kai Prins.<sup>41</sup> This is why my

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<sup>38</sup> Stiegler, Bernard. *Technics and Time. 3: Cinematic Time and the Question of Malaise*. Meridian. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2011. p.4

<sup>39</sup> Choe, Steve. 'Melos in the World of K-Drama'. *Korea Europe Review: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Politics society* (27 December 2022): No. 3 (2022): Transnational Korea and the Korean Cinematic Imagination. <https://doi.org/10.48770/KER.2022.NO3.18>.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. p.16

<sup>41</sup> Reedy, Adam. "The Monster as Queer Opportunity: Monstrous (Re) Construction, Embodiment, and Approbation on The Boulet Brothers' Dragula." PhD diss., Northern Illinois University, 2021.

approach, from a film & television studies perspective, will focus on examining audiovisual aesthetics as a tool for queer reclamation, deconstruction and reconstruction of artefacts from a cisheteronormative culture. As a necessary accompaniment to the aforementioned topics, I include the study of queer camp in relation to queer enjoyment of horror cinema.

## 2. Horror and American Queer Culture

Before embarking on analysing *Dragula*, I think it pertinent to briefly look into the wider associations between queer camp and horror, to better understand the relationship between the two. This chapter provides a brief look into the history of horror's queer appeal and its ties to drag, as well as the distinctly retrospective slant that a lot of the queer performance culture employs in regard to horror. I begin with examining retrospective views on gothic literature and subsequent horror film culture having inherent connections to queerness as a lived experience, particularly in thematic interpretations and re-evaluations of gothic authors' identities. I then move on to the 20<sup>th</sup> century ties between American drag culture and horror cinema in live cinema events and avant-garde art, examining how they operate within a camp mode of engagement. This includes a short explanation of how I perceive camp in the context of the topic, referencing earlier research on the concept of camp. Finally, I tie the concepts of queer camp and queer horror together with queer nostalgia. I note that much of the camp engagement that queer people partake in with horror involves nostalgia through reference to classic Hollywood cinema aesthetics.

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<sup>41</sup> Stone, Aaron. "Performing Queer Abjection in the Boulet Brothers' *Dragula*." In *2021 MLA Annual Convention*. MLA, 2021.

<sup>41</sup> Martin, Russ. "Dragula and the Expansive Queerness of the Drag Supermonster." In *Interdisciplinary Essays on Monsters and the Monstrous: Imagining Monsters to Understand our Socio-Political and Psycho-Emotional Realities*, p.103-120. Emerald Publishing Limited, 2022.

<sup>41</sup> Prins, Kai. "Monsters Outside of the Closet: Reading the Queer Art of Winning in The Boulet Brothers' *Dragula*." *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 8, no. 2 (2021): 43-68.

<sup>41</sup> Prins, Kai, and Florian Zitzelsberger. "Towards a posthuman turn in drag: Will the queer ever be human?." *Queer Studies in Media & Popular Culture* 8, no. 1 (2023): 3-13.

## 2.1 Gothic horror and its queer legacy

A notable, exceptionally empathetic, example of queer coding in Hollywood horror can be found in 1936's *Dracula's Daughter*,<sup>42</sup> in which the titular daughter, Countess Marya Zaleska (Gloria Holden), desperately wishes to rid herself of her vampirism. A melancholy figure, she is acutely aware of her position in society, unable to interact with public life due to her vulnerability to sunlight and her insatiable lust for blood. She seeks the help of a psychiatrist to cure her after realising that the death of her father has failed to break the vampiric curse of her bloodline. In a pivotal scene, she gives into her instinct after a period of abstinence and hunts for prey, luring a beautiful young woman to an empty Chelsea flat with the pretence of needing a model to paint. Overtaken by her bloodlust, she asks her to disrobe, hypnotising her with a magic ring, and descends upon her as the camera cuts away from her terrified scream. This is only one of two sapphically suggestive scenes in the film that ends with Countess Zaleska being shot through the heart with an arrow, unable to free herself of her plight. Righteous heterosexuality prevails upon her death, as the leading man rescues his helpless love interest from her castle, restoring the status quo. Beyond the countess's vampirism being a thinly veiled allegory for lesbianism, Gloria Holden's performance and costume evoke a sense of glamour and melodrama not far from the shade of camp reiterations of classic Hollywood femininity seen in drag. *Dracula's Daughter* thus brings together all the elements of a queer gothic horror experience: cultural anxiety, heightened emotion and empathy for the monster.

The roots of horror's queer appeal lie in what could be argued is the conception of Euro-American horror itself; its retrospectively camp sensibility, and themes of transgression and otherness. Lagapa points out in his article that Susan Sontag herself, in her foundational essay 'Notes on Camp,' identifies 18<sup>th</sup> century Gothic fiction as an origin site of camp taste.<sup>43</sup> She cites the period's appreciation of artifice as tasteful, the construction of fake ruins, presumably Gothic novels' romanticisation of such aesthetics that harken to the past as something sentimental. She asserts that camp taste regards the past with extreme sentimentality.<sup>44</sup> Regardless of whether or not Sontag's definition of camp is immutable as a whole, there is an appeal to recognising the aesthetic excess and symbolism of Gothic horror as contributing to contemporary understanding of horror as a camp genre predicated on artifice and extremes.

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<sup>42</sup> dir. Hillyer, 1936.

<sup>43</sup> Lagapa, 2010. p.92

<sup>44</sup> Sontag, Susan. '2 "Notes on 'Camp'"'. In *Camp*, by Fabio Cleto, 53–65. Edinburgh University Press, 2008. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474465809-006>. p.56

Aside from the camp potentials of Gothic horror aesthetics, the genre's themes call to queer experiences. The pervasive fear of some secret 'other' quietly infiltrating white, heterosexual, cisgender Christian society established in Gothic literature remains massively influential both in aesthetic sensibility and the way that horror narratives have been constructed throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the present. The gothic mode of storytelling revolves around transgression and otherness under 'the Victorian regime' that enforced class, gender and race restrictions amid escalating industrialisation and imperialism.<sup>45</sup> According to William Hughes and Andrew Smith, queerness is integral to the Gothic, 'characteristically as being poised astride the uneasy cultural boundary that separated the acceptable and familiar from the troubling and different'.<sup>46</sup> For example, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1895) explores anxieties around sexuality and miscegenation, particularly tied up with anti-Semitic attitudes.<sup>47</sup> Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus* (1818) meditates on the consequences of upsetting the 'natural order,' and the perils of playing God.

Adding to the allegories for cultural anxieties, there has been discourse among scholars pertaining to the queer identities of the authors of many canonised works of gothic fiction.<sup>48</sup> The pre-Victorian *The Castle of Otranto*, widely considered the first gothic novel, can be interpreted as reflecting Horace Walpole grappling with his queer identity.<sup>49</sup> The queer readings of *Dracula* and John William Polidori's *The Vampyre* (1819) have typically been bolstered by accounts of the authors' personal lives and connections to queer behaviours. Polidori is frequently described as having written his novella as a scathing attack on Lord Byron, who was widely considered among other things a "drunkard, serial seducer and sodomite"<sup>50</sup> and Bram Stoker has been characterised as a closeted, or repressed homosexual.<sup>51</sup> Oscar Wilde and

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<sup>45</sup> Haeefele-Thomas, Ardel. *Queer Others in Victorian Gothic: Transgressing Monstrosity*. Gothic Literary Studies. Cardiff: University of Wales press, 2012. p.2

<sup>46</sup> Hughes, William, and Andrew Smith, eds. *Queering the Gothic*. Paperback edition. Manchester New York: Manchester University Press, 2011. p.1

<sup>47</sup> Davison, C. *Anti-Semitism and British Gothic Literature*. Place of publication not identified: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. p.120-157

<sup>48</sup> Benschoff, 1997. p.36

<sup>49</sup> Walpole, Horace, and W. S. Lewis. *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story*. The World's Classics. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.

<sup>49</sup> Punter, David. *The Literature of Terror. 1: The Gothic Tradition*. 2. ed., Transferred to digital print on demand. London: Longman, 2009. p.43

<sup>49</sup> Townshend, in Hughes & Smith, 2011. p.15 Fincher, Max. 'Guessing the Mould: Or, The Castle of Otranto?' In *Queering Gothic in the Romantic Age*, by Max Fincher, 45–64. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2007. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230223172\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230223172_3). p.45

<sup>50</sup> Wassif, M. (2018). Polidori's the vampyre and byron's portraits. *The Wordsworth Circle*, 49(1), 53-61. Retrieved from: <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/polidoris-vampyre-byrons-portraits/docview/2188664301/se-2>

<sup>51</sup> Schaffer, Talia. "'A Wilde Desire Took Me': The Homoerotic History of Dracula." *ELH* 61, no. 2 (1994): 381–425. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2873274>.

Robert Louis Stevenson are, of course, also considered canonised queer Gothic authors.<sup>52</sup> This is to say that there is a metatextual retrospective understanding of gothic motifs stemming from queer experiences and the anxieties accompanying them, bolstered by accounts of authors' queer lives.

As exemplified by *Dracula's Daughter* earlier on, the tragedy and resulting exclusion of disrupting the staunchly set paradigm of social normalcy is a potent driving force of a horror narrative. American horror cinema, emerging in the 1930s, owes a significant debt to Gothic literature, particularly the Universal horror cycle, which comprised almost entirely of works either directly adapted from, or inspired by, Gothic works, such as *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, *Murders in the Rue Morgue*, and *The Raven*.<sup>53</sup> Symbolically scrutinising the liminal state between the normative and 'troubling' became hardwired into the horror genre, making it act as a space to examine taboo and difficult subjects. Like *Dracula's Daughter*, James Whale's *Frankenstein* presents a tale of tragedy rooted in exclusion and monstrosity foisted upon someone by powers beyond their control. Additionally, it provides a pertinent example of Gothic horror's legacy of queer authorship continuing into cinema. Whale being an openly gay man in 1930s Hollywood<sup>54</sup> arguably impacted his work with the embodied experience of being queer in a hostile environment. Even more importantly, the records of his identity being known have potentially impacted the interpretation of his films retrospectively, as with the queer re-evaluations of classic Gothic novels.

Though my examples of queerness in horror so far have related to sexuality, it does not mean that trans identities have been absent from horror. On the contrary, transphobia in horror cinema can often be identified without reading between the lines. Villains have been explicitly shown to cross-dress to suggest insanity and deviance in numerous films such as *Psycho*, *Dressed to Kill*, *Sleepaway camp*, and *Silence of the Lambs*.<sup>55</sup> Additionally, I would be remiss to omit the most famous cross-dressing villain of them all, Dr. Frank-N-Furter (Tim Curry) of *The Rocky*

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<sup>52</sup> Hughes, Smith, 2014. p.2

<sup>53</sup> dir. Whale, 1931.

<sup>53</sup> dir. Browning, 1931.

<sup>53</sup> dir. Florey, 1932.

<sup>53</sup> dir. Landers, 1935.

<sup>54</sup> Benschhoff, 1997. p.36<sup>54</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Waldron, Abigail. *Queer Screams: A History of LGBTQ Survival through the Lens of American Horror Cinema*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2022. N.d. p.35

<sup>55</sup> dir. Demme, 1992.

<sup>55</sup> dir. Hitchcock, 1967.

<sup>55</sup> dir. De Palma, 1980.

<sup>55</sup> dir. Hiltzik, 1983.

*Horror Picture Show*<sup>56</sup>, particularly because he satirises this very trope, brazenly mocking American anxieties regarding sexuality and gender presentation in a camp mode. *Rocky Horror*'s tongue-in-cheek approach to 1950s b-movie tropes is aesthetically a far cry from the aforementioned films, given its humorous and parodic musical nature. However, it is exactly its irreverent attitude that allows for an examination of the hyperbolic culmination of American social anxieties with roots in Gothic sensibilities. He is, after all, an invading foreign sexual deviant, corrupting the pure youth of the nation with his degenerate ways. White middle-class America's bogeyman: a transsexual alien in fishnets and heels with a hunger for the ideal man.

## 2.2 Queer horror fandom, camp and drag

Aside from non-normative gender and sexuality being well-established themes in horror, the act of including horror aesthetics in the subversive and camp artform of drag is strongly tied to queer horror culture and live cinema events in the United States.<sup>57</sup> A notable early instance of horror or monster drag can be found in connection to the San Francisco drag collective The Cockettes. They held a series of performances titled *Les Ghouls* from October 29th to 31st of 1970 that were accompanied by a screening of George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*.<sup>58</sup> The accounts of the show vary in detail, but archival material in the 2002 documentary *The Cockettes*<sup>59</sup> shows dancing tombstones, and two brides of Frankenstein eloping in a lesbian union, while another is carried off by the creature itself (see figure 2). Irreverently reassembling the iconic characters in their own drag image, The Cockettes create a playful queer riff on the iconic imagery.

Over two decades later, the 1990s saw the formation of The Blacklips Performance Cult, an avant-garde drag theatre troupe that operated from 1992 to 1995 on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. They organised weekly original plays that resembled 'a cheap sci-fi flick with moral underpinnings, or a pulpy mystery that couldn't be solved.'<sup>60</sup> The Blacklips were known to incorporate 'gore' into their performances, such as 'a stew of chicken livers, tempera paint

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<sup>56</sup> dir. Sharman, 1975.

<sup>57</sup> Petrocelli, 2023.

<sup>58</sup> Varrati, Michael. 'Les Ghouls: The Cockettes and the Creation of the Modern Drag Monster'. [horrorpress.com](https://horrorpress.com/editorials/4352/les-ghouls-the-cockettes-and-the-creation-of-the-modern-drag-monster/), 23 June 2023. <https://horrorpress.com/editorials/4352/les-ghouls-the-cockettes-and-the-creation-of-the-modern-drag-monster/>.

<sup>59</sup> Dir. Romero, 1968

<sup>59</sup> Dir. Weber, Weissman, 2002.

<sup>60</sup> Als. "'Goings on about Town'". *The New Yorker*, 15 January 2024. <https://www.newyorker.com/goings-on-about-town/an-my-le-between-two-rivers-01-15-24>.

and tripe'<sup>61</sup> as they paid 'homage to Jean Genet, popular horror film, and queer icons of the past.'<sup>62</sup> The tense political climate amid the escalation of the AIDS crisis injected an urgency and rawness into the transgressive drag of the period that may not have been as pronounced during the Cockettes' time of operation in the early 70s. This is visible in the jaggedness and purposeful shock value of The Blacklips' performances that, despite being often camp and humorous, carried the weight of keeping queer art alive during a time that saw death in devastating numbers within the community.

As the 1990s progressed, the natural successor to these horror drag events came with Peaches Christ (Joshua Grannel out of drag), legendary San Francisco drag performer and film director, starting Midnight Mass live cinema events in 1998.<sup>63</sup> Screenings of cult horror films from various decades past would be accompanied by a variety of drag acts, similarly to the Les Ghouls shows almost three decades prior. Grannel has stayed a relevant figure in the queer horror community, having directed the 2010 film *All About Evil*, and hosting a horror film podcast also named *Midnight Mass*, as well as appearing as a guest judge on *Dragula* season two. The podcast features Peaches and her co-host, writer Michael Varrati, interviewing guests related to the film of the episode and discussing their own experience of horror cinema as queer individuals. There seems to be a particular emphasis on how they, as queer viewers, can make any text queer through their own embodied experience.<sup>64</sup> Additionally to *Midnight Mass*, Petrocelli mentions Portland's *Queer Horror* live cinema events run by drag artist Carla Rossi (Anthony Hudson) since 2015 that operate on a similar double feature format of drag performance and a film. The performances tend to comprise of stand-up comedy and lip-syncing in reference to the film being screened, with an often politically satirical element to their attitude.

These live cinema events act as a haven of togetherness and expression for many queer horror fans in opposition to non-queer horror spaces that can be exclusionary.<sup>65</sup> Though not every queer spectator of horror is necessarily a fan, this history of queer horror spectatorship linked to community activity suggests that fannish behaviour and fandom are closely related to the queer experience of horror film. Petrocelli cites a 2015 Nielsen data measurement report that

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<sup>61</sup> 'Backstage Drama', archive, blacklips.org, accessed 10 February 2024,

<https://web.archive.org/web/20130204203149/http://www.blacklips.org/backstage/backstage.html>.

<sup>62</sup> Shahani, 2013. p.1219

<sup>63</sup> Petrocelli, 2023.

<sup>64</sup> Midnight Mass Podcast episode 59 – Hello Mary Lou: Prom Night II (10.05.2023) Accessed via:

<https://open.spotify.com/episode/0DjXZdBnEf057m0YCArCUd>

<sup>65</sup> Petrocelli, 2023.

states that, in comparison to non-LGBT moviegoers, LGBT moviegoers were 50 per cent more likely to name horror as a favourite genre, with 43 per cent of responses naming the genre as a favourite to see at the cinema.<sup>66</sup> In her own survey, Petrocelli asked participants to answer on a scale of 0-5 how much they consider themselves to be a horror fan with 0 representing ‘not a fan’ and 5, ‘massive fan.’ Out of the participants, 89.6 per cent ( $n = 3,645$ ) responded within the range of 3-5, with 66.6 per cent ( $n = 2,709$ ) recognising themselves as corresponding to 5 or 4.<sup>67</sup> Additionally, 77.8 per cent ( $n = 3,190$ ) of participants follow horror accounts on social media with 65 per cent ( $n = 2,664$ ) reporting to participate in ‘fan forums, fan websites, online blogs and/or Facebook groups about horror’ either actively or passively.<sup>68</sup> Petrocelli’s research thus points to fandom having a significant role to play in embodied queer horror spectatorship. Participation and engagement through events, forums, podcasts, documentaries and the like, are essential to building an identity-based, collective sense of community as queer horror fans, united by a unique perspective on the genre.

The relationship between the queer community, drag and horror is cemented with camp as a mode of engagement. ‘Camp’ has historically been notoriously difficult to define and has been interpreted as both political and apolitical, quintessentially queer and related to, but detached from, queerness.<sup>69</sup> My approach to camp aligns itself with Petrocelli’s findings in relation to queer horror spectatorship. Petrocelli argues that queer people’s relationship to horror is prominently camp, and that the communal understanding of camp as a queer insider language facilitates the collective enjoyment of the genre.<sup>70</sup> She refers to camp as ‘a distinctly queer manner and method of relating to the world’<sup>71</sup> and cites Muñoz to identify camp as a political practice of disidentification, a survival strategy for dealing with the oppression of a hegemonic culture, by transforming its products to meet one’s own needs.<sup>72</sup> The survey responses and interviews affirm that queer horror fans in particular make a strong connection between their queer enjoyment of horror and camp, and that ‘camp is deliberately disseminated and acquired,

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<sup>66</sup> In Petrocelli, 2023: Nielsen, 2015. ‘Proudly Setting Trends: The 2015 LGBT Consumer Report’. New York: Nielsen. Access via: [www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/report/2015/proudly-settingtrends-the-2015-lgbt-consumer-report/](http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/report/2015/proudly-settingtrends-the-2015-lgbt-consumer-report/)

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Meyer, Moe, ed. *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*. London: Routledge, 1994. p.1, 11

<sup>69</sup> Brooks, Daphne A. *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2012. p.274

<sup>69</sup> Meyer, 1994. p.1

<sup>69</sup> Sontag, in Cleto ed. 2008. p.54

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Petrocelli, 2023.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

making it an explicitly political queer relationship to cisheteronormative hegemonic culture.<sup>73</sup> Petrocelli approaches camp as removed from cis gay man-centric views of the past espoused by academics such as Richard Dyer, Susan Sontag, Andrew Ross and Moe Meyer, opting for an inclusive, diverse view of camp confirmed by the answers of the survey participants.<sup>74</sup>

According to the results, the majority of participants expressed an enjoyment of camp regardless of their identification labels. Additionally, survey participants who identified as genderqueer on average had a slightly stronger affinity for camp than cisgender participants, contradicting the previous belief of camp primarily being the domain of the cis gay man. Additionally, while scholars such as Moe Meyer and Richard Dyer have defined camp as a solely or predominantly gay sensibility,<sup>75</sup> it is counterproductive to not take into consideration camp as a tool for BIPOC disidentification practices, regardless of whether or not it intersects with queer identities. Daphne Brooks describes camp as ‘a politically disruptive tool in the process of marginalized identity production’, and ‘that it is an equally significant element in the negotiation of African American identity construction.’<sup>76</sup> Petrocelli compounds on Brooks’ argument by citing the popularity of camp horror among the large BIPOC proportion of her survey participants. Camp is therefore queer, instead of simply gay, and it is political in that it allows for marginalised people of intersecting identities to take ownership of cultural products that demonise and/or exclude them.

### **2.3 Queer retrospection and nostalgia**

Looking at the history queer horror culture in drag and live cinema events, there emerges a regular pattern of retrospection. The figures and aesthetics of classic Hollywood horror are prominent in dedicated queer viewers’ favourite films and the live cinema events’ programmes and performances. Shahani examines the potential for a reparative rearticulation of the past in queer art referencing or examining bygone eras of culture. He asserts that despite nostalgia’s reputation for being conservative and revisionist in its approach to the past, queer nostalgia can be a reparative tool for examining the queer community’s place in society, and how it has changed.<sup>77</sup> The connections to American queer culture have thus been visible in American

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Dyer, ‘It’s Being so Camp That Keeps Us Going’, In *Camp*, by Fabio Cleto, 110–117. Edinburgh University Press, 2008. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474465809-006> p.110

<sup>76</sup> Brooks, 2012. p.256

<sup>77</sup> Shahani, 2012. p.15, 41, 60

horror cinema since its early days, throughout the formation of its tropes and the queer origins of the literature that preceded it. Horror has provided a space to understand one's own identity as it has been configured without one's consent and develop something from within that imposition on one's selfhood, particularly looking back at older horror films. *Dragula* engages in both queer nostalgia and queer disidentification with hegemonic nostalgia, by reconfiguring pop culture icons in a queer image with agency, while relishing in the shared nostalgia of collectively finding solace in its themes and aesthetics. *The Boulet Brothers' Dragula* is a culmination of all these facets of queer history being intertwined with horror literature and cinema into a camp celebration of transgressing norms by way of looking back at them to understand the present and imagine the future.

### 3. The Boulet Brothers' Dragula

Before I proceed into the episode-specific analyses of the show, I would like to briefly examine *Dragula* as a whole, with focus on its stated attitudes and motivations and how they correspond with the theoretical framework. *The Boulet Brothers' Dragula* is a televisual extension of the horror-themed queer party and performance culture that lived concurrently with Peaches Christ's *Midnight Mass* and *Queer Horror's* film screenings. In the 2000s and 2010s The Boulets started organising alternative drag parties in Los Angeles. This was partly in response to the diminishing of the alternative drag scene which had begun in late 1990s New York City under then mayor Rudy Giuliani's gentrification efforts.<sup>78</sup> The Boulets themselves are originally from New York, and sought to bring some of the city's dwindling subversive drag scene to Los Angeles, whose own suffered from a 'creative void', in their view.<sup>79</sup> One of their recurring parties, called 'Dragula,' would host themes like the "ugly ball," where patrons were asked to look their worst, as opposed to conforming to expectations to "look right" for a night out at a more mainstream gay club.<sup>80</sup> The Boulets, and other alternative drag artists on the show, as well as outside of it, often talk about how they have felt marginalised within the queer community for their style of drag. Therefore, *Dragula* is an opportunity to celebrate something that they are shunned for. As Swanthula mentions in regard to their parties in a Drag Con (a drag convention begat of *Ru Paul's Drag Race*) panel in 2015: 'That's our reaction to West

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<sup>78</sup> WOW Presents on Youtube, 'Club Kid Panel w/ James St. James, Milk and Boulet Brothers at RuPaul's DragCon 2015'. Accessed via: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ejTq7AcFohA>.

<sup>79</sup> Lecardo, Lina. 'The Boulet Brothers Keep L.A.'s Gay Nightlife Weird'. *La Weekly*, 9 September 2016. <https://www.laweekly.com/the-boulet-brothers-keep-l-a-s-gay-nightlife-weird/>.

<sup>80</sup> Hoke, Harry. 'Bleaching: Hierarchy and Commercialization in Contemporary Queer Club Culture.' 2017.

Hollywood and what we experience. You don't want to let us in? We don't want to sit with you anyways.'<sup>81</sup>

This divide between drag subcultures transfers directly to televisual representatives, illustrated in the noticeable difference in popularity between *Dragula* and the aesthetically less abrasive *Rupaul's Drag Race* (*RPDR* from here on out). One might argue that drag artist Ru Paul's rise to fame in the 1990s from New York's changing drag scene is reflected heavily in *RPDR*'s insistence on only casting drag queens over its multi-season run, avoiding less culturally recognised artists, such as kings. Additionally, the camp featured on *RPDR* is of an adjacent, yet decidedly less shocking variety than that present in *Dragula*. It is fun and colourful, accessible to audiences with a cursory understanding of popular American gay culture and easier to turn into what Andrew Ross would deem 'Pop camp' motivated by capitalism.<sup>82</sup> Though I am not attempting to pit forms of camp against each other as more or less 'legitimate' than the other, it would do to note that the camp of *Dragula* is a harder sell, so to speak. In comparison to *RPDR*'s comedy-forward variety approach, *Dragula* is dark and draws on the grotesque and painful sides of the queer experience with the use of horror aesthetics. The darkness of the camp approach, however, does not make it any less camp. *Dragula* luxuriates in the comedy inherent to the act of taking as heightened a genre as horror seriously, while being entirely sincere about the importance of the genre to queer identity and expression.

The self-aware, cheekily dark camp of the show begins with its approach to the reality TV format itself. The series can be interpreted as a shock art camp disidentification with early 2000s reality series *America's Next Top Model* (from here on out *ANTM*).<sup>83</sup> This is directly referenced in the mission statement of the show to find 'the world's next drag supermonster,' (as opposed to America's next top model) as well as the structure of the episodes built around a smaller and bigger challenge that result in a judging at the end of each episode and an elimination. What makes *Dragula*'s use of the format particularly disidentificatory, even within queer television, is that it is effectively a reconfiguration of an earlier parody. *RPDR* was originally a drag parody of *ANTM*, which is considered a camp staple of early 2000s television in its own right.<sup>84</sup> Whether or not *Dragula* is an intentional parody of *RPDR* is not made explicit.

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<sup>81</sup> WOW Presents on Youtube, 2015.

<sup>82</sup> Ross, Andrew. 'Uses of Camp', Cleto, Fabio, ed. *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject ; a Reader*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2008. P.308-330

<sup>83</sup> *America's Next Top Model* UPN, The CW, VH1, 2003-2018.

<sup>84</sup> Moylan, Brian. 'America's Next Top Model Was the Only Reality Show That Understood Camp'. *Vulture*, 4 December 2015. <https://www.vulture.com/2015/12/americas-next-top-model-camp.html>.

*ANTM* featured two challenges per episode, the lesser to grant immunity to a competitor, or provide them with some other advantage, such as sponsored goods. This multiple challenge format is parodied in *RPDR* with ‘mini’ and ‘maxi’ challenges in each episode, where the mini challenge would function to similar effect.

While *RPDR*’s eliminations are determined by a snap lip-sync performance after judgement, on *Dragula*, the bottom two contestants of each episode undergo an ‘extermination challenge,’ a *Fear Factor*<sup>85</sup>-esque test of psychological and physical endurance, to determine which contestant remains in the running. These challenges have included skydiving, bungee jumping, eating raw animal intestines and being covered in live maggots and crickets while being locked into a coffin. On *Titans*, the extermination challenges are exchanged for ‘fright feats’ to be taken part in by all contestants as a twisted reinterpretation of the mini challenge. The grotesque nature of these challenges emphasises in the contestants an ability to make suffering and humiliation into entertainment through embracing the ugly and uncomfortable by taking it in their stride. An extreme rendering of both *ANTM* and *RPDR*’s pageant shows, *Dragula* makes a concerted effort to subvert the representation of queer camp that is exclusionary to the more abrasive sensibilities of the artists on *Dragula*. In this way, *Dragula* disidentifies itself with a commercially viable form of popular queer camp. It keeps popular elements, such as the pageant format, the tongue-in-cheek references to popular culture in the choices of themes and aesthetics, but curbs all of this with the extremity of the extermination challenges and the encouraging of shock art in the performances. For instance, Hollow Eve on season three incorporated dermal piercings with needles and hooks into their performances, and Melissa B Fierce seemingly extracted a crucifix out of her ‘bloodied’ nether regions while dressed as a nun in season one, not to mention Vander von Odd throwing up on stage and consuming the vomit in the same season. The provocation of *Dragula* intentionally provokes feelings of discomfort with horror elements, such as breaching bodily boundaries, to challenge the aesthetics of popular camp.

The retrospective, even nostalgic, parts of *Dragula* lie in two facets of the show’s makeup, intersecting with the camp elements. First, in the constant references to classic Horror films of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in a self-aware, purposeful way, both in theme and mise-en-scène. It thus evokes a nostalgic feeling towards eras of American history that were particularly hostile to queer people and refashioning them with a disidentificatory approach. Each episode (aside

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<sup>85</sup> NBC, MTV, 2001-2018.

from some episodes in seasons one and two) opens with a scripted, tongue-in-cheek segment in which the Boulets commit some heinous act or simply skulk about scheming in a setting relevant to the episode's theme. These encompass vampires' lairs, witches' cabins, mad scientists' laboratories, or desolate frontier towns complete with tumbleweeds and stagecoach. The theme is then relayed to the contestants who plan out an outfit and floorshow in accordance with the theme and are judged on the basis of its execution. Once the judgment has been passed and the victor of the extermination challenge is determined, the eliminated contestant is creatively 'murdered' by the Boulets in another scripted sequence to tie up the episode, returning to the setting from its opening.

Second, the nostalgia is apparent in the pointed effort to express the subversive value of transgressive drag, harkening to the days before its mainstreaming. As mentioned earlier, the Boulets have repeatedly spoken about *Dragula* being a way for them to return some of the non-conformity and anti-establishmentarian artistry that they feel has been sidelined with the popularisation of drag. It showcases, in their words, 'unapologetic queer artistry,'<sup>86</sup> which is affirmed with the opening line of each judgement sequence: 'We are not here to judge your drag because drag is art and art is subjective.' The last seasons of *RPDR* have been accompanied by discourse surrounding expectations for drag 'quality' rising and increasing the financial burden of participating, potentially making it inaccessible to some drag performers.<sup>87</sup> *Dragula's* standards of what constitute 'good' drag do not necessarily require high budgets or shows of talents such as song or dance, privileging artistic vision and reinterpretation of established imagery. This is not to say that it is entirely without financial barrier, but some contestants, such as Orkgotik of season five, emphasise working with accessible materials such as packing tape and fabric scraps being integral to their drag, and this is encouraged and embraced verbally on the show.

To provide an understanding of *Dragula's* overall constitution regarding a nostalgic disidentificatory approach to horror, I now present a brief analysis of the coronation ceremony performed on the final episode of regular seasons. The finale episode of a *Dragula* season features either three or four final contestants, and it challenges them to execute three floor

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<sup>86</sup> Holden, Steve. 'Halloween: How the Boulet Brothers' *Dragula* Blends Drag and Horror'. *BBC*, 31 October 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-54712624>.

<sup>87</sup> Miller, Rachel. 'Shantay, You Pay: Inside the Heavy Financial Burden of Going On "Drag Race"'. *Vice*, 15 April 2021. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/y3dmav/what-does-it-cost-to-go-on-rupauls-drag-race>.

<sup>87</sup> Sim, Bernardo. 'Here's How Much Money "Drag Race" Queens Spent to Compete on the Show'. *Out.Com*, 1 June 2023. <https://www.out.com/drag/drag-race-prize-money>.

shows, thematically corresponding to the tenets of the show: Filth, Horror, and Glamour. The ‘Filth’ floorshow is intended to showcase the contestants’ capacity for grotesque performance art that appears extreme, or disgusting, while ‘Horror’ is an opportunity to create a look and performance that is as chilling as possible. Finally, the ‘Glamour’ floorshow puts heavy emphasis on dressmaking ability and make up artistry. The drag monster with the most consistently well-rounded performance in all categories, is crowned as the new ‘supermonster.’ The finale episodes thus encapsulate the subversive ethos of the show, and with it a camp love for horror integral to queer horror fandom. This is evident in the referential nature of the coronation ceremony’s practice to douse the winner in fake blood, calling back to the iconic prom scene in Brian De Palma’s *Carrie*. As Darren Elliott-Smith examines in *Queer Horror Film and Television: sexuality and masculinity at the margins*,<sup>88</sup> *Carrie* has a camp queer following that has resulted in various appropriations of the character. He argues that *Carrie*’s coming-of-age narrative centering a bullied teenage girl can be read as a coming out story, and that it has a camp allure ‘for the gay male spectator’<sup>89</sup> deriving from its stylistic excess and mostly female cast. He also suggests that there is an empathetic appeal to identifying with *Carrie* that provides fertile ground for queer readings.

With this preface, he interprets ‘Carrie drag’ parodies of the film, performed by cis male drag performers as containing layers of anxiety and shame for gay men performing a camp failed femininity. He cites failed gender performance to be a strong point of identification for the gay male spectator.<sup>90</sup> These performances parody *Carrie*, with a strong emphasis on deriving jokes from menstruation and recreating the prom scene in all its bloody glory. Elliott-Smith’s interpretation positions the drag appropriations of *Carrie* as a literalizing of Mulveyan and Cloverian trans-gender identification with the final girl trope and a process of re-masculinising the emasculated cis gay male identity via ‘contradictory, multiple dis-identifications [*sic*] with both femininity and masculinity.’<sup>91</sup> He comes to the conclusion that these particular instances of *Carrie* drag operate within parameters of patriarchal misogyny that makes femininity abject and monstrous, considering that the drag shows exclude cis female performers and derive humorous content from performative disgust regarding menstruation. While potentially accurate in its critique of these particular performances, Elliott-Smith’s binaristic approach to

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<sup>88</sup> Elliott-Smith, Darren. *Queer Horror Film and Television: Sexuality and Masculinity at the Margins*. Library of Gender and Popular Culture 11. London New York: I.B. Tauris, 2016.

<sup>89</sup> Elliott-Smith, 2016. p.23

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. p.51

<sup>91</sup> Ibid. p.54

drag in this context is quite cis-centric overall, and therefore lacks nuance regarding queer identification and/or anxieties regarding femininity. This lack of nuance is particularly interesting when contrasted with *Dragula*'s treatment of the same scene with the understanding that drag within *Dragula* is not assumed to operate within a cis-normative binary conception of gender and all that it entails.

*Dragula*'s appropriation of the prom blood shower is more referentially subtle than the parodic drag performances that Elliott-Smith examines, as it is not intended as a direct repetition of the scene and is tonally very different. Unlike in Elliott-Smith's analysis and De Palma's film, the blood shower does not serve to humiliate the receiver of the bucketful, but rather to celebrate their triumph as a queer artist. The corn syrup blood descends upon them in close-up, and they pose with their crown and sceptre, luxuriating, caressing themselves ecstatically, sometimes letting out a victorious scream or their most powerful villain laugh (see figure 3). This practice is a disidentification with Carrie's lack of queer characters in a literal sense, a latching-on to Carrie's coded queerness and otherness among her peers that consider her monstrous. It is nostalgic for a very particular time in American youth culture, prom or the school dance, an archetypal site of queer exclusion in the heteronormative cultural consciousness. The coronation refashions a moment of American cultural dis- and identification in a way that is silly, yet also utterly serious. It asks the question, 'what could have happened, had Carrie embraced herself in that moment?' The bloodbaths in *Dragula* are only one example of queer imaginary worldmaking within American society, driven by both self-aware ironic repetition and sincere love for a medium that, despite representing a hostile culture, has offered solace and community. A collective memory of shared otherness is present in the core of the show with its meditations on quintessentially American imagery that has been organised anew.

### **3.1 Halloween House Party**

*Halloween House Party* is the first episode of *The Boulet Brothers' Dragula: Titans*,<sup>92</sup> an 'all stars' season, in which contestants from previous seasons return to compete for a second chance to win a \$100,000 grand prize. The challenge of the episode is to create an original interpretation of a 'classic American Halloween costume,' such as Frankenstein's creature, a pumpkin head, a mummy, a pirate, a vampire and so on. It serves as a starting point for the season that places the cast into groups and presents them all in juxtaposition to one another.

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<sup>92</sup> AMC, 2022.

This subsection touches upon two pertinent sequences of the episode, the introduction and the floorshow challenge itself, and how their mise-en-scène corresponds to Muñoz's theory of disidentification and Shahani's theory of queer retrospection, with reference to data from Petrocelli's survey responses.

To begin, Halloween is prominent in this episode and the *Dragula* franchise overall, with seasons 1, 2, and 5 premiering on October 31<sup>st</sup> of their respective release years of 2016, 2017 and 2023, and the theme has reoccurred in episode challenges throughout its airing. This comes as no surprise, as the Boulets are known for hosting 'one of the largest and most infamous' Halloween Galas in the world.<sup>93</sup> Additionally, 2023 saw the release of their *Halfway to Halloween TV special*<sup>94</sup> comprised of a series of horror comedy sketches featuring popular horror actors such as Felissa Rose (*Sleepaway Camp*) and Matthew Lillard (*Scream*<sup>95</sup>). The Boulets have linked themselves closely with the stereotype that queer people have a particular affinity for the holiday. The stereotype is not unfounded, as Halloween has often been jokingly referred to as 'Gay Christmas' or 'Queers' Christmas' within American queer culture<sup>96</sup>, to the point that Petrocelli refers to it as 'an anecdotal truism'<sup>97</sup> to state that Halloween is beloved amongst the queer population. This is quantified, at least in regards to queer horror fans, in her study, which saw 74,7% ( $n = 2,950$ ) of participants affirmatively answer to having an interest in Halloween, Samhain or Day of the Dead.<sup>98</sup> Halloween has traditionally been a site for more free gender expression among queer Americans, as one night a year, social rules loosened in the name of celebration, allowing for 'cross-dressing' and experimentation without the same fear of arrest as usual.<sup>99</sup> Halloween therefore has a respected position in the American queer consciousness as a cultural institution that allows play with self-expression tied to 'spooky' aesthetics. Moreover, the fond childhood memories associated with the holiday are likely to have impacted many queer horror fans' enjoyment of the genre and its surrounding imagery.

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<sup>93</sup> Guerrero, Desiree. 'The Boulet Brothers on Their History of Spooky Drag'. *The Advocate*, 21 July 2022. Accessed via: <https://www.advocate.com/exclusives/2022/7/20/boulet-brothers-their-history-spooky-drag#toggle-gdpr>.

<sup>94</sup> AMC, 2023.

<sup>95</sup> Dir. Craven, 1996.

<sup>96</sup> Let's Get Physical: A Quantum Look at the Queer Space-Time Continuum By: Joseph Goodwin, *New Directions in Folklore* 4.1: March, 2000. p.3

<sup>96</sup> 'They Want Candy.' *Advocate*, 00018996, Nov 2009, Issue 1032.

<sup>96</sup> Skal, David J. *Halloween: The History of America's Darkest Holiday*. Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2016. p.124

<sup>97</sup> Petrocelli, 2023.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Doig, Will. 'HALLOWEEN: IS THE PARTY OVER?' *Advocate*, 00018996, 11/6/2007, Issue 996.

<sup>99</sup> Gonzaba, Eric, 2022, twitter.com. Accessed via: <https://twitter.com/EGonzaba/status/1585690121956782080>

The episode opens with a black and white, shaky point-of-view shot. The camera swoops through an ominously locked door and descends along a stone staircase into a long dark hallway replete with prop skeletons, chains, tattered curtains billowing in an eerie breeze, candles and copious amounts of dry ice fog (see figure 4). The audience is whisked towards a hopeful light emanating from an ajar door, only for it to slam closed and force the camera into the Boulets' boudoir, while cracks of thunder punctuate a dramatically escalating organ score, evocative of gothic horror film tradition. The Boulets are posed languidly on a chaise longue, in matching *Bride of Frankenstein* -inspired towering wigs and flowing gowns, lit like golden age Hollywood starlets with backlight halos and glamorously diffused complexions. The set is littered with occult props such as a scrying bowl, pipes, skulls, completed with two gothic arched windows through which flashes of lightning emerge periodically. The Boulets address the audience directly, with humorously creepy statements suggesting that they have entered the depths of hell with little hope of escaping (see figure 5). They introduce the new season as if it were a hellish game that they, two higher beings of the underworld, have chosen to orchestrate, by resurrecting the contestants from oblivion for their amusement. Their lines are accompanied by the occasional cut to an exaggerated quick zoom on a prop or one of the windows, with a Dutch tilt for camp dramatic effect, emphasised with reverb sound effects and musical stings evoking classic Hollywood horror cinema (see figure 6).

The scene is arguably an homage to television's horror host programmes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that were effectively introductions for old horror film reruns on late night television, the hosts providing humorous commentary between films. Some of these hosts were arguably drag queens themselves, perhaps most notably the earliest example, Vampira. During her short reign as TV's glamour ghoul in 1957, Vampira, or Maila Nurmi, can be said to have brought 'the dark side of camp'<sup>100</sup> to television, developing the character as a subversive parody of idealised American womanhood.<sup>101</sup> Her sharp, dramatic makeup and tight-laced waist made a striking image of desirable femininity taken to such an extreme that it became unnerving to the uninitiated. The sinched corset was intended to communicate the absence of a womb,<sup>102</sup> pointedly divorcing Vampira from the ideal wife and mother archetype of 1950s United States. Her show would invariably begin with her creeping into frame and letting out a drawn out scream, followed by outrageously direct jokes about her own sexuality and womanhood that

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<sup>100</sup> Poole, W. Scott. *Vampira: Dark Goddess of Horror*. Berkeley, CA: Soft Skull Press: Distributed by Publishers Group West, 2014. P.29

<sup>101</sup> *ibid.* p.68

<sup>102</sup> *ibid.* p.99

‘drag’ conceptions of American femininity. In her own words, Vampira was ‘Pola Negri, Marie Antoinette, Marilyn Monroe, Norma Desmond and Tallulah Bankhead rolled into one.’<sup>103</sup> She embodied a camp drag-spirited appropriation of Hollywood glamour icons of feminine excess that became staples of American queer culture. It is not surprising that her spiritual successor and perhaps the most successful horror host of all time, Elvira (Cassandra Peterson), is a self-professed drag queen and appears as a guest judge on season five of *Dragula*, which cements the reverent relationship between the Boulets and horror hosts.

The Boulets have been referred to as ‘modern-day horror hosts’<sup>104</sup> themselves, and the lovingly referential aesthetic execution of the episode’s opening communicates a nostalgia for the days of horror hosts, and furthermore, for being a queer youth discovering horror on late-night television. Gilad Padva states that queer nostalgia ‘highlights the need for joyful recall and therapeutic recollection of queer personal and communal experiences.’<sup>105</sup> A common theme in queer horror fandom is how important a position horror has held since childhood, a phenomenon that is corroborated by Petrocelli’s research, which finds 66.4 percent ( $n = 2,599$ ) of survey participants considering themselves to have been horror fans as far back as they can remember.<sup>106</sup> On queer horror podcasts such as *Midnight Mass*, hosts and guests within the queer horror cultural sphere often talk about the feelings of rebellion and self-recognition that came from secretly watching horror films too young, being enamoured with the Horror VHS tapes available at video rental stores and scrounging for leftover posters. Naturally, these experiences are not limited to queer horror fans, but there seems to be a particular commonality of them shared within the community, making space for a collective nostalgia toward the era.

Looking at Petrocelli’s survey responses, the top 25 favourite horror films of the participants range from the 1960s to the present day, with a significant number having been made prior to the year 2000. The top three are *Alien* (1979), *Halloween* (1978) and *Scream* (1996), in that order. This would seemingly suggest that most survey participants had grown up around that time, having memories of these films’ impact on them at an early age. This assumption is disproven when looking at the respondents’ ages, with 56.9 per cent between the ages of 18-29 ( $n = 2332$ ), therefore, born after the year 1993.<sup>107</sup> This, in turn, suggests that queer horror culture’s nostalgia is less to do with individual recollections of seeing certain films in the

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid. p.13

<sup>104</sup> N/A. ‘Boulet Brothers’. shorefire.com, n.d. Accessed via: <https://shorefire.com/roster/boulet-brothers>.

<sup>105</sup> Padva, 2014. p.230

<sup>106</sup> Petrocelli, 2023.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

context of their original run, but rather with a collective memory that places certain films in places of prestige. Access to horror cinema from the 20<sup>th</sup> century is wider than ever before due to the digital and online technology of today. As Petrocelli quotes Mark Fisher, ‘cultural time has folded back on itself, and the impression of linear development has given way to a strange simultaneity.’<sup>108</sup> This access, combined with the opportunity of online community building has created a collective canon of horror within and without the queer community. The shared readings of films and the experience of loving horror since childhood is thus associated with a certain bygone era of horror hosts, drive-in b-features and video rental stores. It is worth noting that many of the recognised voices in contemporary queer horror media, including the Boulets themselves, *are* of the generation that would have grown up with such facets of American culture and harbour nostalgic feelings for them.

Moving on from the opening sequence, the contestants, having been creatively murdered by the Boulets at their eliminations from previous seasons, are ‘brought back from the dead’ as they each arrive in a casket surrounded by wilted, funereal floral arrangements. They then enter the work room to greet one another, which is intercut with individual ‘confessional’ interviews about their feelings regarding the upcoming season and their fellow competitors. True to *ANTM* fashion, once the competitors have arrived, they are summoned to watch a video message from the Boulets, where the challenge of the episode, and new aspects of the spin-off season are revealed to them. The challenge itself consists of a choreographed lip-sync performance in a suburban home set reminiscent of family sit-coms of the latter half of the twentieth century. I say latter half, because though the décor of the set is decidedly ‘vintage,’ it is not distinctly of any particular decade, containing elements from a variety of periods in American suburban interior design and leisure activities associated with the disposable income of a home-owning family. The living room part of the set has a 1970s colour palette ranging from warm browns to yellows and oranges on patterned textiles and a shag wall hanging. The furnishings and props include a 1950s television set and radio, red and blue cardboard 3D-glasses referencing the brief 1950s 3D film craze<sup>109</sup> and a rattan peacock chair. Halloween decorations invoking images of Americana get close-ups to showcase their vintage flair, paper decals of skeletons, witches, and pumpkins accompany wisps of fake cobwebs slung over lamps. The other rooms in the house set (bedroom, kitchen, and bathroom) are decorated in a similarly multi-decade

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<sup>108</sup> Fisher in Petrocelli, 2023.

<sup>109</sup> Lewis, Maria. ‘The 50s in the Third Dimension’. acmi.net.au, 8 July 2020. <https://www.acmi.net.au/stories-and-ideas/50s-third-dimension/>.

fashion, with various items distinct to certain decades intermingling with each other to create an effect of ‘the past’ which functions as a backdrop for the drag artists to occupy (see figures 7, 8, 9 and 10.)

The floorshow begins with the host, Astrud Aurelia as a recognisable creature from the Black Lagoon, preparing for the arrival of her guests by placing a vinyl record on the turntable of a small portable record player and checking herself in a mirror until she is startled by the doorbell announcing the arrival of her friends. Each contestant receives their own introductory individual shot introducing them with their name and their classic costume choice in a retro font in a sequence resembling the opening credits to various family sitcoms, such as *Happy Days* and *Full House*.<sup>110</sup> Each contestant has a short gag they perform for the camera, which ends in a pose. The song they lip-sync to is the humorous *I was a Teenage Monster* by the Keytones, telling the story of a ‘monstrously’ teenage boy falling for a perfectly angelic girl.<sup>111</sup> The song itself is a tongue-in-cheek reference to 1950s teenage exploitation films, such as *I Was a Teenage Werewolf*, *I Was a Teenage Frankenstein*, and *I Was a Teenage Ape Man*.<sup>112</sup> Teenage movies were a staple of exploitation films in the 1950s. They were a transparent effort to get rebellious teens into drive-in cinemas, addressing social issues and topics that were interesting to them without the moralising tone of exploitation cinema of years past, heralding an emerging youth counterculture.<sup>113</sup> As the contestants lip-sync and dance to the track, they engage in a variety of Halloween activities such as carving pumpkins, watching horror films, and playing with a Ouija board. Eventually, the music pauses with a record scratch sound effect and the track and lighting change to dark contemporary electronic dance music and a flood of red. The camera movement becomes erratic, and cuts increase in frequency, jumping from contestant to contestant as they dance and pose threateningly to the more sinister sound of the new track (see figure 11). The change in lighting and sound disrupts the predominantly humorous mood of the challenge, reminding the audience that they are watching drag monsters figuratively plunder twee American imagery for their own transgressive means.

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<sup>110</sup> ABC, 1974-1984.

<sup>110</sup> ABC, 1987-1995.

<sup>111</sup> “I was a Teenage Monster,” Spotify, Sid Tepper, Roy C. Bennet, The Keytones, EMI Mills Music, 1961. Accessed via: <https://open.spotify.com/track/6Ugyz2hPI4vY1clzh4zzQ4>

<sup>112</sup> dir. Fowler, 1957.

<sup>112</sup> dir. Stroock, 1957.

<sup>112</sup> dir. Glut, 1959.

<sup>113</sup> Clark, Randall. *At a Theater or Drive-in near You: The History, Culture, and Politics of the American Exploitation Film*. London: Routledge, 2014. p.42

Though the challenge demands that they recreate classic Halloween costumes with their own flair, it is implicit that despite the pointed domesticity of the set, the monsters themselves are not costumes worn by ‘normal people,’ but rather drag embodiments of the classic Halloween figures. As ‘disidentificatory subjects’<sup>114</sup> the *Dragula* contestants produce a disidentification with an American cultural institution that contains nostalgic memories of childhood, queer joy and quintessential ‘American-ness,’ a double-edged sword of both conformity and liberation. They embrace the role of ‘monster’ as something that runs deeper than a costume to be donned one night of the year, while inserting that transgressive self into a setting that has excluded queer people in the past. The traditional sitcom family Halloween is ‘scrambled’<sup>115</sup> in a way, the nuclear family ousted from its cultural space and replaced with a party of those previously left out of the picture. Disidentification according to Muñoz is applied readily by Petrocelli when examining the camp angle of horror spectatorship. As Petrocelli states: ‘The queer spectator’s camp relationship to horror uses camp as a political tool of disidentificatory practice.’<sup>116</sup> Disidentification is, in effect, the practice of finding yourself in a culture that elides your identity by way of various forms of self-identification ‘with and against a cultural form.’<sup>117</sup> The cultural forms in question in *House Party* are the family-oriented institutions of the sitcom and Halloween.

Muñoz states that ‘To disidentify oneself and one’s own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to “connect” with the disidentifying subject... is the reworking of those energies that do not elide the “harmful” or contradictory components of any identity.’<sup>118</sup> The artists do not attempt to deny their abject position in society, nor do they accept it uncritically and thus perpetuate the violence enacted against them. As the contestants are all shown partying together in wide shots, perfectly at home in a set steeped in American nostalgia, the scene looks back on an alternate experience of Halloween; not as the one night a year when a costume allowed queer Americans to feel free to express themselves, but rather one that signifies a utopian reality in which the celebration is simply a party. However, the retrospective aesthetic nostalgia may also cater to a genuine longing for a reinstatement of transgressive power found in monstrosity, as the ethos of the show would suggest. Muñoz comments on Marga Gomez’ performance *Marga Gomez is Witty, Pretty, and Gay*, specifically a sequence in

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<sup>114</sup> Muñoz, 1999. p.12

<sup>115</sup> Ibid. p.31

<sup>116</sup> Petrocelli, 2023.

<sup>117</sup> Muñoz, 1999. p.12

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

which Gomez references her childhood awakening to lesbianism, watching disguised lesbians being interviewed on the *David Susskind Show* in the 1960s. She monologues about a wistful longing for that time of being queer, where gay reality was painful and clandestine, to the point that disguises were needed on television. Muñoz writes that her romanticisation of pre-Stonewall gay America should not be read as a nostalgic yearning for days gone by, but rather a ‘redeployment of the past that is meant to offer a critique of the present.’<sup>119</sup> Gomez is critiquing the contemporary assimilationist politics of the queer community, by remarking on its blandness and loss of subversive force with the second advent of assimilationist politics driving queer liberation through neoliberal viability. She wishes for a sense of drama and danger to return to identifying as queer, in the sense that how living as openly queer was a threat to the status quo to the extent that in-community it was referred to being ‘in the life.’<sup>120</sup> Muñoz interprets Gomez’s work as longing for ‘the life’ to be ‘a critique of a sanitized and heteronormativized *community*...when gay politics is conflated with (and dulled through) the glories of domestic privacy and neo-liberal “promise.”’<sup>121</sup>

*Dragula* communicates a similar perspective of reclaiming the edge of abjection that results from social exclusion, to imagine a future in which heteronormativity and neoliberalism would not continue to subsume and subsequently neutralise the radical potential of queerness. *Halloween House Party* is, therefore, a similarly reparative look at United States popular culture and tradition, with a camp focus on the queer love for Halloween and horror, without being necessarily ironic or satirical in tone. On one hand, the challenge presents a utopian imagining of a ‘past’ in which the marginalised drag monsters are perfectly at home within its middle-class, nuclear family trappings, the main characters of their own family sitcom, but on the other, it is a simulacrum of ‘the life’ before Stonewall. After all, it is a house party, away from the prying eyes of the public, just slightly less in danger of a police raid than in a club or bar. The implication of placing these drag monsters into a recognisable domestic setting from the American 20<sup>th</sup> century is that reaching for the effect of finding oneself monstrous is a means to feeling like one still has disruptive power in taking ownership of otherness. This is emphasised with the inclusion of various iterations of horror film icons that reflected the fear of otherness within a society of cisheterosexual homeowners and cinema goers of that time.

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<sup>119</sup> Muñoz, 1999. p.33

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid. p.34

<sup>121</sup> Ibid. p.28

The opening sequence, with its reference to black and white classic horror films and homage to horror hosting, looks back at a feeling of belonging and self-recognition with the camp subversiveness of horror that feels familiar and safe. The floorshow presents a camp reconfiguring of ‘the life,’ both speculating on a hypothetical history, had things been different, and imagining a present that resists the all-subsuming commercial normativity of neo-liberal capitalism by emphasising the comically different aesthetics between the contestants and the set. The episode is, to quote Shahani, ‘committed to the future horizon of politics even in returning to a past moment of debasement and exile.’<sup>122</sup> Creating this call-back to the exile of the past is an antidote to a potentially destructive trajectory of the current present’s venture into the future that threatens to suppress queerness with ideological disarmament.

### 3.2 Resurrection

*The Boulet Brothers’ Dragula: Resurrection* is a standalone, feature film length, Halloween special episode of *Dragula* shot and released during 2020, amid the global COVID pandemic restrictions. It differs from previous and succeeding seasons of the show by opting for a more in-depth documentarian approach. The contestants are presented as individuals in their home environments and outdoor locations, due to the prohibition of large gatherings that prevented in-studio shooting. It features former contestants from previous seasons, and similarly to the season finale episodes, is divided into three floorshows that the Boulets refer to as ‘legacy challenges,’ from earlier seasons. These challenges are creating an original take on the figures of the witch, the ghost and the vampire. The main three themes of the special, pertinent to this thesis, are drag being considered a reparative artform, queer legacy, and the disidentificatory retrospection it demands to endure. These themes are communicated through the focus on the contestants’ personal perspectives on drag and horror through candid interviews, and evocative editing, set design and dressing that include references to *Halloween III: Season of the Witch*.<sup>123</sup>

True to the *Dragula* format, the special opens with a scripted sequence that sees the Boulets embody classic Hollywood glamour drag in a dramatically lit, dilapidated mansion set decorated for Halloween with jack ‘o lanterns, candles, fog, and liberal amounts of blood dripping down walls. They are dressed in matching ensembles of statement jewellery, strapless bodices and feather trimmed marabou robes; their wigs sculpted into 1930s waves. The conceit for the special is similar to that of *Titans*: Dracmorda and Swanthula are bored sinister beings

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<sup>122</sup> Shahani, 2012. p.22

<sup>123</sup> Dir. Wallace, 1982.

that decide to resurrect the ‘dead’ competitors of previous seasons for their amusement. This occurs amidst their usual debaucherous pastimes involving indulgent encounters with, and torture of, muscular, scantily clad henchmen. The camera creeps into their space, cutting to atmospheric closeups of the décor and isolated body parts of the henchmen, as if the audience were inhabiting the role of a spirit floating into the house. The movement is interrupted as Swanthula notices the camera’s presence, hissing and sending it running up the stairs with a dramatic gesture, as erratic music escalates. Dracmorda awaits upstairs in a study, absorbed in disparaging photos of previous *Dragula* contestants viciously stuck to a wall with knives, surrounded by occult paraphernalia. A henchman sits in a chair off to the side, bound and gagged, as he is forced to watch whatever is being projected from a whirring film projector, a reference to *A Clockwork Orange*.<sup>124</sup> The camera cuts to an over-the-shoulder shot to reveal the projection to be an image of a flashing jack ‘o lantern (see figure 12), drawing from *Halloween III: Season of the Witch*, a reference which will be returned to in due course. It becomes apparent that Dracmorda is formulating a plan to return the contestants, as the camera zooms in on the word ‘resurrection’ in an arcane-looking tome. In a moment of clarity, she jolts up from her desk and tears down a swathe of pictures, leaving only those of the competitors on *Resurrection*, before rushing downstairs.

The camp theatrics of the opening sequence have set the stage for *Resurrection*, and the Boulets introduce the season to the competitors via ‘video call’ in an ornate theatre. Swanthula explains that the competitors are being given a new chance ‘to enter the land of the living’ and that they have been summoned to ‘discuss the future.’ This alludes to the season’s prize being a guaranteed spot on the upcoming season four of the series along with a \$20,000 cash prize. The introduction sequence transitions via analogue television static and sound effects evoking a VCR player, into a travel montage of nighttime scenes. The montage is accented with jerky zooms and unsteady camera movement associated with digital camcorder home video footage and found footage horror cinema to create an unsettling atmosphere. The editing cuts quickly between a dark country road, highways, distant cityscapes, closeups of trees and the night sky, some clips slightly sped up for eerie effect. The transitional footage pauses outside homes before cutting to interviews of competitors introducing themselves out of drag, creating the effect of traveling across the country. The nighttime footage is used as consistent transitional b-roll throughout the special, heavily outweighing the scant moments of daytime featured, resulting in an effect of almost perpetual night. It effectively places the drag monsters in a

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<sup>124</sup> Dir. Kubrick, 1971.

recognisable reality, while the other seasons are contained mostly within studio sets, with very little footage of the contestants interacting with the outside world (see figures 13, 14 and 15).

The Boulets themselves are also out in the world, skulking around cul-de-sacs, peering from behind trees and generally behaving ominously. While the transitional b-roll of the contestants' hometowns and neighbourhoods are rendered in camcorder aesthetics, or contemporary high definition, the clips featuring the Boulets are a combination of audiovisual formats associated with the past. Each floorshow is prefaced with a short sequence of the Boulets in theme-appropriate drag, acting out occult rituals, haunting doorways and stalking the streets of the French quarter and cemetery in New Orleans. The sequences open with a cut to CRT television static and a combination sound effect of a cassette being inserted into a VCR followed by a film projector whirring to life. There is a digital celluloid film grain filter over the footage, with dust and scratches, as well as a sliver of the strip perforations at the edge of the frame. The witch and ghost sequences' 'celluloid' catches on fire and melts for effect (see figure 16). The celluloid aesthetic is, however, disrupted by a small digital camcorder 'REC' icon in the lower right-hand corner, additionally to the incongruous VCR sound effect at their beginning (see figure 17). This combination of analogue and 'retro' digital filmmaking effects amalgamated with contemporary digital means creates an uncanny collision of two nostalgic mediums. It is as if the audience is watching either a digitised film reel on an analogue television, or a digital recording transferred onto film via projector. It is intentionally unclear which it is supposed to feel like, if either.

The interviews in *Resurrection* make an effort to humanise the contestants in contrast to the sensationalised reality drama of the other seasons, though *Resurrection* isn't void of snarky comments either. The interview settings show the audience glimpses of the contestants' homes and studios, some of them shown with their partners, as they recount how they came to do drag, what they were like as children, or how they overcame hardships in their lives (see figure 18). They discuss the present, how they view the evolution of their drag in comparison to the last time they were on *Dragula*, and what troubles they face as marginalised artists and individuals. As the special nears its end, the interviews highlight the future, and what each contestant hopes to achieve or leave behind as a legacy. Halloween and cinema play a prominent role in the contestants' stories. For instance, Frankie Doom recalls falling in love with drag, watching late-night cable television as an unsupervised only child, seeing *Female Trouble*<sup>125</sup> and

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<sup>125</sup> Dir. Waters, 1974.

subsequently coming to idolise Dawn Davenport, played by legendary drag icon Divine. Victoria Black divulges having loved spooky costumes and Halloween since early childhood, when she took to building her own haunts in her family's attic for locals to visit as a holiday attraction. Victoria and Frankie's professions are revealed to be horror SFX makeup artist and theme park scare actor, respectively, emphasising how large a part horror and performance have played in their lives as individuals.

The empowering effect of drag is particularly emphasised in Saint's interviews, in which she speaks about finding family and community in other queer people through drag, after enduring abusive experiences in childhood. She also mentions the burden and the stress of being Black in America. She recounts the aftermath of George Floyd's murder at the hands of the police in 2020 and how nervous she felt raising awareness to the issue at events, while feeling a strong sense of duty to use her platform as an artist for good, particularly to show other Black queens that they do not have to do drag in any particular way, referencing *Dragula*'s alternative drag ethos. She finishes her interview emotionally talking about how drag has allowed her to become who she wanted to be when she was younger, and how she wishes that others could 'see her create' and find the courage to create themselves. Her wish to inspire others is present in others' interviews as well, as Dahli remarks that he chose to name himself after Salvador Dalí, 'knowing damn well' he would never fill his shoes, in the hope of leaving a similarly aspirational legacy for future artists. Additionally, Priscilla Chambers, who speaks about her transition as a trans woman, says that she wants to 'take what the show is' and keep progressing, hoping that the world can transition with her as she evolves going forward. The importance of horror cinema, and the acknowledgement of the contestants' subversive art empowering them to imagine a futurity by leaving a legacy, are compounded in the vampire floorshow.

The vampire floorshow is set to Kim Petras' song 'In the Next Life,' from her Halloween-themed album *TURN OFF THE LIGHT*.<sup>126</sup> The song choice is significant to the themes of *Dragula* in general and especially to the vulnerable tell-all attitude and desire for legacy of the special itself. Petras is an openly transgender woman, and the lyrics are about transformation and liberation so potent that its effects are impactful even 'in the next life.' This can be interpreted as a tongue-in-cheek reference to literal monstrous rebirth while also referring to

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<sup>126</sup> "In the next Life," Spotify, track 15 on Kim Petras, *TURN OFF THE LIGHT*, Amigo Records LLC, 2020. Accessed via: <https://open.spotify.com/album/6uqXwF2cBNS3V4fw8YM575?si=805810fabd3e4b71>

the metaphorical rebirth of transitioning into one's true self. The opening lines of the song suggest awakening into empowerment and being present, senses heightened in a way never experienced before, as if feeling truly alive for the first time:

*First time in my life, I, I'm not afraid  
First time I remember feelin' anythin', anythin'  
There's no turnin' back now, I can't be saved  
And in the next life they'll remember me, remember me*

It is fruitless to attempt undoing whatever transformation the song's protagonist has undergone, as they cannot be 'saved,' because they do not want to be. The verse transitions into statements of common transphobic and homophobic views of queer people as ill, contagious and satanic, while simultaneously stating that they are 'the greatest God created.' The juxtaposition of the god-like jubilation and hostile sentiments is a disidentificatory reclamation of the abject labels placed on queer people in cisheteropatriarchal society.

*I'm a demon, power trippin'  
On the mission and vindictive  
Suffocatin', exterminatin'  
And I love that every second  
Full of hatred, irritated  
Cut you open for entertainment*

The song's bridge is in German, Petras' native language, which threatens the listener, standing in for a hostile society. '*Deine zeit is abgelaufen*' (Your time has run out), '*Sag jetzt deine letzten worte*' (say your last words now) and '*Ich krieg' immer, was ich wollte, Ich bin das ende deiner tage*' (I always get what I want, I am the end of your days), tauntingly lean into the condemning hyperbolic language touted by conservative members of society. Their enemies cannot run nor hide from queer individuals asserting their right to exist in society freely, regardless of their attempts to paint them as sick or defective, as it simply gives them more power.

Throughout the episode, culminating in the vampire floorshow and Kim Petras's lyrics, there is a theme of leaving a legacy behind for posterity. Using the moment they are in to deploy their art for a future that they and others will construct together. There may not be any turning back to be done, but we will be remembered in the next life, as we look back and remember those in 'the life' before us. Keeping the subversive force of the legacy of those long gone is

simply a part of the continuum of futurity based in the present. The desire for legacy rooted in a sensibility derived from the collective memory of past abjection calls for, if not bringing back, then at least acknowledgement of how we were in the past, ‘the old ways.’ This is where the *Halloween III* reference at the beginning of the episode becomes relevant. A callback to the opening sequence’s flashing pumpkin torturing the henchman, the winner of *Resurrection* is announced in a sequence where the contestants are ‘sent’ a VHS tape each (see figure 19). The camera cuts from the contestants ‘watching’ the tape to the jack ‘o lantern and clips of the Boulets shown earlier in the special, while Orville Peck’s ‘Dead of Night’<sup>127</sup> plays in the background. The losing contestants watch in horror and begin reacting as if they are being killed by the tape, with fake blood running out of their noses, tears slowly streaming down cheeks, eyes rolling back into heads, spitting blood and foaming at the mouth (see figures 20 and 21). Only the winner, Saint, remains unscathed, as she smiles at the camera posing as her television set before it cuts to black.

The villain of *Halloween III*, Conal Cochran (Dan O’Herlihy), is an Irish immigrant novelty mask manufacturer who has stolen a part of Stonehenge, having discovered that it has magical properties. He hatches an elaborate plan to place fragments of the stone into computer chips attached to Halloween masks, which are then sold in droves with the promise of a chance to win something special in a Halloween giveaway driving the sales. The plan is to then beam the henge’s power into the chips through a hypnotic advertisement spot that ‘reveals the winners of the giveaway,’ killing all wearers of the masks, and making a swarm of insects and snakes erupt from the corpse, that then proceed to kill all in the vicinity. All this in service of resurrecting the ‘old Celtic Samhain tradition’ of human sacrifice for a favourable winter.

Though *Halloween III* comes off primarily as a critique of consumerism and a blatant disregard for society’s well-being in the pursuit of profit, one could interpret the Boulets positioning themselves as the Mr. Cochran of *Resurrection*. They symbolically ‘make sacrifices’ of the runners-up to find the drag artist among them that best represents the subversive potential that *Dragula* is intended to promote. Someone who reminds them of the ‘good old days’ of drag being a little more dangerous, embodying the politically subversive potential of the artform. There is also a clear sense of passing on a torch of some kind, simply in the choice to show Dracmorda cooking up the scheme in the opening sequence of the special. The tied-up henchman being shown the Boulets’ version of *Halloween III*’s killer broadcast signposts the

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<sup>127</sup> ‘Dead of Night,’ Spotify, track 1 on Orville Peck, Pony, Sub Pop Records, 2019. Accessed via: <https://open.spotify.com/album/3950FHVErciNW3tjRgjeBQ>

intentions of *Resurrection* to be as potent an influence on its audience. The collision of older digital camcorder aesthetics with celluloid film suggests that *Resurrection* is an attempt to create contemporary drag media that does not forget its roots in resistance and transgressing normative values, while making sure to uphold that sensibility with the present concurrently. The message of the narrative, built throughout the special, is one of queer people leaving a mark on the world with their art, to be immortalised and remembered ‘in the next life’ of film and television. It is not insignificant that the final frame of the episode is Saint watching her tape. She sits on the floor of a darkened living room awash in the familiarly flickering blue glow of a television set, with a small smile on her face (see figure 22). Aside from the reference to *Halloween III*, the setting conjures the nostalgic image of a child or teenager secretly watching the late-night reruns of horror films that comes up in the episode itself, from Frankie Doom, but also within queer horror fandom as well, as mentioned in the analysis of *Halloween House Party*. *Resurrection* positions the television set as a nostalgic look at the past that enmeshes the near and far history of being a spooky queer. It also riffs on the conservative rhetoric that paints queer art in the mainstream as an insidious force intent on destorying society, jokingly suggesting that the plan is indeed to platform drag so shocking that it kills at first sight. This is a disidentification that can be seen as utilising what Olivia Oliver-Hopkins refers to as an ‘ideological defence – a “calling-out” of one’s own perceived foibles’<sup>128</sup> to defuse the oppressive rhetoric.

As the television set functions as a figurative portal into the past of spooky queerness, it also mirrors contemporary attitudes towards queer people in the representations it displays. The contrast of the documentarian footage rooted in reality and the camp monstrosity of the contestants is a disidentificatory look at the history of queer people being represented as degenerates. The episode as a whole endorses embracing the abject as a form of empowerment, accepts the monstrous status of queerness, while simultaneously countering it by showing the artists out of drag, literally building the monster they use to assert their presence, humanising them. The excitement and love for horror films that the contestants have as they prepare to transform themselves into archetypal Halloween monsters demonstrates a complex relationship with queer representation. *Resurrection* disidentifies with the monstrous queer, disavowing ‘good representation’ in the act of making oneself a caricature on purpose. Mainstream representations of queerness have proliferated in American television since the mid-2000s, as

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<sup>128</sup> Oliver-Hopkins, Olivia, “I’s Got to Get Me Some Education!”: Class and the Camp-Horror Nexus in *House of 1000 Corpses*’ Drushel, Bruce E., and Brian M. Peters, eds. *Sontag and the Camp Aesthetic: Advancing New Perspectives*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2017. p.163

can be seen in GLAAD’s ‘Where We Are on TV’ reports, which purport an increase from under 2 per cent of LGBTQ+ ‘series regular’ characters in scripted television in 2005-2006 ( $n = 10$ ) to 10.6 per cent ( $n = 70$ ) in the 2022-2023 season.<sup>129</sup> This is a sevenfold increase and a noticeable change in a relatively short period of time, especially when taking into account the changes in the nature of representation evolving from pejorative or shallow depictions to, at least seemingly, more positive representations.

Like Muñoz cites Gomez’ critique of assimilationist queer politics, Shahani quotes Sarah Schulman’s critique of contemporary queer visibility, in which she describes a feeling of disorientation resulting from having gone from complete invisibility in the public sphere to ‘being told to buy rainbow tumblers.’<sup>130</sup> The dissonance of one’s own childhood memories of shame and fear surrounding queer identity being so far removed from the contemporary effort to portray queerness as a socially viable existence is immense. Schulman, and many of the other artists Shahani discusses, were born in the 1950s and 60s, undoubtedly experienced the shift differently than succeeding generations. However, the recent changes in visibility have still radically impacted the presence of queer people in the American public consciousness. Though the politicisation of queer representation was already in effect in a different way from how Schulman’s generation experienced the shift, there has been a change in discourse about what constitutes ‘good’ representation. For instance, William Friedkin’s controversial 1980 film *Cruising* is going through a reappraisal of sorts in queer film discourse, from being condemned as offensively homophobic upon its initial release to being treated as a complex work ahead of its time.<sup>131</sup> With positive depictions few and far between, the mainstream media representations of gay culture in 1980 were vastly different from what they are today, understandably causing anxiety within the community to prevent further ‘damage.’ As protests against *Cruising* in 1980 were concerned with the potential violence from mainstream audiences seeing underground leather culture paired with violence and seedy images of New

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<sup>129</sup> GLAAD Media Institute. ‘Where We Are on TV Report: 2005 – 2006 Season’, n.d. Accessed via: <https://web.archive.org/web/20161204220723/http://www.glaad.org/files/2005-06%20Where%20We%20Are%20on%20TV.pdf>.

<sup>129</sup> Deerwater, Raina, and Megan Townsend. ‘Where We Are on TV 2022-2023’. GLAAD Media Institute, n.d. Accessed via: <https://glaad.org/wherewearontv22/>.

<sup>130</sup> Shahani, 2012. p.147

<sup>131</sup> Wilson, Alexander. “Friedkin’s *Cruising*, Ghetto Politics, and Gay Sexuality.” *Social Text*, no. 4 (1981): 98–109. Accessed via: <https://doi.org/10.2307/466278>.

<sup>131</sup> Turner, Kyle. ‘Nowhere to Run: William Friedkin’s “Cruising” On Fascism, Homonationalism, and America’. *Medium.Com*, 23 November 2022. Accessed via: <https://tylekurner38.medium.com/nowhere-to-run-william-friedkins-cruising-4ce8c7dd669d>.

York, discourse today leans towards redeeming the previously ‘unseemly’ imagery as an important part of queer history.

*Dragula* tasks itself with complicating the definition of ‘good representation’ in its own social context. It does this by disidentifying with the contemporary ‘liberal “acceptance” that is predicated on a politics of homonormativity and homonationalism’<sup>132</sup> prominent in queer representation from the 2000s and 2010s. Examples of this wave of acceptance-forward queer media visibility are the reality television program *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (and its 2018 successor *Queer Eye*) and family drama *The Fosters*.<sup>133</sup> While both were significant steps forward in diversifying the range of queer narratives on American television, their focus was on portraying queer people as cosmopolitan, middle-class experts on neoliberal self-improvement by the former, and altruistic lesbian foster parents with respectable professions (police officer and vice-principal) by the latter. The effort to normalise queerness in the zeitgeist with assimilationist politics that conflate positive American citizenship with reproduced heteronormative, neoliberal norms is oftentimes only functional at a surface level. The material realities of a vast number of queer Americans do not reflect the image they are implicitly required to live up to in order to be ‘good queers,’ rendering this strain of ‘positive’ representation ‘the illusion of normalcy without the fact of normalcy.’<sup>134</sup> This is not to say that such depictions of queer people and life do not exist at all, only that the prioritisation of this image may not be as liberatory as advertised.

*Resurrection*, with its back and forth between the heightened aesthetics of the floorshows and the contestants’ domestic spaces and workshops framed with montages of travel footage creates an image of ‘normal’ queer people across the United States who actively choose to draw from outdated, ‘bad representation’ to express themselves. The episode simultaneously makes an effort to show the contestants as ordinary human beings with homes, romantic lives and aspirations, yet also prevents this image from becoming entirely homonormative by showing these same people engaging in queer art that, in the framework of liberal ‘acceptance’, could easily be categorised as ‘too much’, or even counterproductive to the advancement of acceptance within society. Muñoz interprets Jean-Michel Basquiat’s repetitions of trademarks, copyright symbols and brand names in his paintings as a disidentificatory strategy of opening

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<sup>132</sup> Schulman in Shahani, 2012. p.148

<sup>133</sup> Bravo, 2003-2007.

<sup>133</sup> Netflix, 2018-.

<sup>133</sup> Freeform, 2013-2018.

<sup>134</sup> Shahani, 2012. p.148

up a space in consumer capitalism ‘where a subject can imagine a mode of surviving the nullifying force of consumer capitalism’s models of self.’<sup>135</sup> While Basquiat straddled the line between bourgeois pop art displayed in galleries and radical graffiti art, he grappled with his position as a Black artist within a racist consumer society by drawing attention to himself as a conflicted proprietor of a brand. He neither rejected, nor fully accepted his place in the consumer public sphere. *Resurrection* and *Dragula* as a whole disidentify with the models of queer self promoted by American consumer capitalism in the non-threatening queer of the 2000s onwards, as well as the unmentionable deviants of Hays Code era Hollywood, and thus create a space with a similar purpose of enabling survival.

It is evident that *Resurrection* imagines a futurity, because it endeavours to capture a complicated present for an unknowable posterity. Shahani references Lee Edelman’s controversial theory of the queer death drive in his work *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*.<sup>136</sup> Edelman criticises specifically the child as a symbol of heteronormative reproductive futurism, rendering queerness as an abject future-negating position that he thinks should be embraced for its subversive power. That is to say that Edelman suggests queer people should eschew conventional understanding of futurity that would involve, for instance, developing current existing forms of political action and social order for a better queer future. Rather, a gleeful destruction of such avenues of progress and the rejection of centring pursuit of ‘social viability’ would be more beneficial.<sup>137</sup> Since the heteronormative status quo of a nuclear family-centric futurism positions queerness as a space of hopeless futurelessness, why not embrace it? While Edelman rejects queer futurity and associated social good or positive functionality,<sup>138</sup> he asserts that a certain queer jouissance is accessed through the negativity of the queer death drive ‘turning the force of queerness against all subjects.’<sup>139</sup> Shahani believes that Edelman’s rejection of futurity is beneficial to understanding the reparative function of retrospection, despite some conflicting thoughts between the two theories.<sup>140</sup> Shahani examines how an embracing of negativity à la Edelman need not be incommensurate with imagining a future in society. He emphasises how the negative can be used as a resource for a reparative assembling of collective memory for the construction of a future.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Muñoz, 1999. p.47

<sup>136</sup> Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.

<sup>137</sup> Edelman in Shahani, 2012. p.21

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid. p.20

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid. p.22

*Resurrection* and *Dragula* as a whole revel in a nostalgic cinematic retrospection of the abject and place the competing queer artists and the Boulets themselves into its continuum. The dual referencing to passé recording technology, the VCR, camcorder footage and CRT television set harken back to both nostalgic memories of childhood exposure to an abject reflection of the queer self on cable television, and with it, a time when that abjection was reflected in the surrounding world more apparently. Simultaneously, it challenges its contemporary paradigms of what constitutes good queer representation by disidentifying with the normalised image of non-threatening homonormative queerness of the past two decades. The horror film imagery signified as an image of the past through the film/VHS references is brought to live alongside a representation of the present within the documentarian aesthetics.

#### 4. Conclusions

With this thesis I embarked on an examination of *The Boulet Brothers' Dragula* to better understand the queer community's affinity for horror cinema and the recent proliferation of self-aware, in-community discourse surrounding it. I set out to answer the following questions:

1. How does *Dragula* approach the iconography of American horror cinema?
2. What does this approach communicate about the connection between horror cinema and queer culture?
3. How do camp and queer nostalgia factor into this approach?
4. What does *Dragula* accomplish by putting queer horror spectatorship on display in the way that it does?

In searching for answers, I identified that *Dragula* engages with iconography from American horror cinema and popular culture in a nostalgic and disidentificatory fashion that speaks to a long history between the queer community and horror film. With a queer theory framework based upon José Esteban Muñoz and Nishant Shahani's work, supported by Heather Petrocelli's empirical study, I hypothesised that *Dragula's* invocation of horror iconography, which lands on the camp-horror nexus, is a deliberate meditation on the community's engagement with horror and drag in the past and present. Furthermore, I suggested that this mode of engagement renders the referenced horror films and imagery as a memory prosthetic, allowing for the history of feeling to be retained and communicated onward to younger generations, creating a strong sense of community around the genre. I found that *Dragula* is a

result of shifting social attitudes and unprecedented access to audiovisual media informing the formation of a community.

In my analysis of *Halloween House Party*, I pointed out that the stylistic homage to horror host television programming in the introduction evoked an era of bygone television and nostalgia for the feelings of discovering horror as a queer child or youth. Analysing the sitcom setting of the floor show presented a deliberate exploration of contrasting images, literally inserting monstrously queer artists into the trappings of quintessentially American popular culture that they have been historically excluded from. Moreover, the heightened drag looks of the contestants emphasise that when queer people *have* been included in the picture, they have been actively assimilated into it with homonormative ideals. *Resurrection* presented a disidentificatory look at queer monstrosity that showed the contestants as regular human beings that choose to embrace monstrosity to express themselves, demonstrating that there is an incongruity to stating that good representation should be positive according to the ideals of society at large. Finally, I connected the amalgamation of older audiovisual formats used in the episode to a similar nostalgia as in *House Party*, with the addition of emphasising queer legacy as a way to go forth into the future.

I argued that the unique relationship that queer audience members have with horror cinema is built upon a shared feeling of nostalgia accessible through the communal association of memories with horror films and the media through which they were consumed. This nostalgia extends to cultural memory and expresses a yearning for the subversive power resulting from exclusion and demonisation by cisheteronormativity. I demonstrated instances of disidentificatory uses of imagery from American horror film and popular culture overall and applied Shahani's insights on reparative retrospection to speculate upon the potential they have for elucidating queer awareness of the community's status in contemporary American society. *Dragula* creates an amalgamation of an American past that encapsulates feelings of queer struggle in American society and reconfigures them for the contemporary context of queer visibility. It organises fragments and part-objects of queer history into a contemporary understanding of queer representation through the affective tertiary memory of film and television, redeploying the stigma immortalised in them for a liberatory purpose. *Dragula* is camp and fun, but it contains the memory of fear attached to the images that it references as well. There is no erasing of discomfort or fear within the show or its ethos, but rather an embracing of it that encourages empathy and community, however loosely defined it may be.

This mode of engagement requires disidentification as a practice of worldmaking that is imbued with agency otherwise inaccessible in the mainstream.

It is thus that the traditionally queer-coded horror movie monster and its surrounding aesthetics have come to represent an alternative, more autonomous form of queer representation when compared to more normative mainstream depictions of queer Americans popularised over the past two decades, on television in particular. The TV set and home video appear in the analyses as a figurative portal to the history of ‘bad’ queer representation in horror cinema that has with time become preferable to the impossible task of trying to fit the multitude of queer experiences under the narrow, homonormative conception of what has been publicly deemed ‘good’ representation. I provided a contemporary example outside of *Dragula* in the current reappraisal of *Cruising*, and how its reception has changed with the representative landscape around it. So, even though many queer horror fans active in the community do not have personal memories of pre-Stonewall queer life, or even video rental stores, they are familiar with the images and affect related to these memories within the community. The knowledge of the community’s history is also more accessible than it has ever been before, due to the connectivity of the internet, prompting the sharing of personal stories related to the genre, *Dragula* included. *Dragula* embraces the history of American horror cinema and pop culture iconography to imagine a different contemporaneity in which freedom and peace do not come at the cost of subversive power. It communicates a fondness in the queer community for camp horror that is predicated on a shared sense of otherness, taking ownership of a toxic and harmful past with a nostalgic camp attitude that reconfigures the oppression it represents into empowerment. It sets out to protect queer futurity from being overtaken by consumerism that would allow the exile of the past to be re-enacted anew by way of ideological subsumption into capitalism. It documents the present resistance as a legacy to be preserved for those who will continue resisting assimilationism in the future. ‘Good’ representation changes with context, and *Dragula* demonstrates that it will always be constructed in relation to the past.

Considering the limited scope of this thesis, only the surface has been scratched regarding the role of horror cinema and television in marginalised community building and assertion of identity. The perspective of disidentification in regard to queer representation could add to the discourse surrounding the need for identification in media. *Dragula* presents an image of American queer people consuming and creating film and television specifically from a disidentificatory point of view, thereby becoming figures accessible to queer identification.

What is the direction that American queer media presence is moving in? Will disidentification continue to be a source of subversive worldmaking and identity building in the fluctuating cultural landscape, and to whom? A further look into the podcasts and online community conversation around the topic of queer horror fandom would be of merit to the study of genre cinema as a tool for reparative artistic self-determination. Seeing that this thesis and its object of study focus heavily on North American queer affinity to horror, it could be productive to widen the cultural and geographical scope of research regarding the queer consumption of the genre. Do camp and nostalgia play as big a part in other cultures when it comes to queer horror fandom? Do these potential queer horror fandom enclaves relate to the American scene, or can they exist outside the sphere of American cultural influence entirely? Are American cultural norms and structures integral to the camp practice of disidentification? How does this affect queer horror fandom globally? Finally, I think future research could benefit greatly from the study of queer horror content produced by the community, about the community. The essay anthologies, podcasts, YouTube video essays and documentaries that explicitly approach horror from a queer perspective are very valuable primary sources on understanding queer spectatorship of horror and genre cinema overall. How do the creators of these examples of media approach spectatorship? Why do they create content the way they do, and would they recognise nostalgia and disidentification as relevant to their approach?

I believe that my analysis has shed some light on the prominence of disidentification and nostalgia in the queer horror community, and how the contemporary conception of ‘good’ queer representation is being challenged. I hope that my examination of *Dragula* can deepen understanding of why queer people have an affinity to horror, and how that affinity can illuminate navigating contemporary society as a queer person having to deal with pre-conceptions of how one should be. As the wave of 2020s conservative backlash continues introducing racist and anti-LGBTQ legislation in the United States,<sup>142</sup> holding onto community and self-determination grows ever more important.

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<sup>142</sup> Shaw, Ari. ‘What Anti-LGBT Politics in the U.S. Means for Democracy at Home and Abroad’. [williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu](https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/anti-lgbt-politics-democracy/), June 2022. Accessed Via: <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/anti-lgbt-politics-democracy/>.

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### **Image Sources**

Figures 1,4-5, 6-11: Screen captures from *The Boulet Brothers' Dragula: Titans*. Episode 1 'Halloween House Party' 2022 Shudder, AMC

Figure 2: Weber, Bill, Weissman, David, dir. *The Cockettes* (United States: Grandelusion, 2002)

Figure 3: *The Boulet Brothers' Dragula season 5* Episode 10 'Finale Episode' Shudder, AMC still from The Boulet Brothers' Instagram account @bouletbrothersdragula 17.01.2024 Accessed via: [https://www.instagram.com/p/C2NjZp6PZIG/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link](https://www.instagram.com/p/C2NjZp6PZIG/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link)

Figures 12-22: Screen captures from *The Boulet Brothers' Dragula: Resurrection*. 2020 Shudder, AMC

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## **Videography**

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## Image Appendix



*Fig. 1 Drag artist Yovska dons plush pumpkin breasts in *Halloween House Party**



*Fig.2 The brides elope*



*Fig.3* Nio Huru X is crowned winner of season 5



*Fig.4* A corridor in the underworld



*Fig.5* The Boulets' Boudoir



*Fig.6* Skull props in dramatically askew close-up



*Fig.7* The living room



*Fig.8* Close-ups on décor



*Fig.9* Erika Clash answers the phone in the bedroom



*Fig.10* Yovska and Victoria Black carve pumpkins in the kitchen



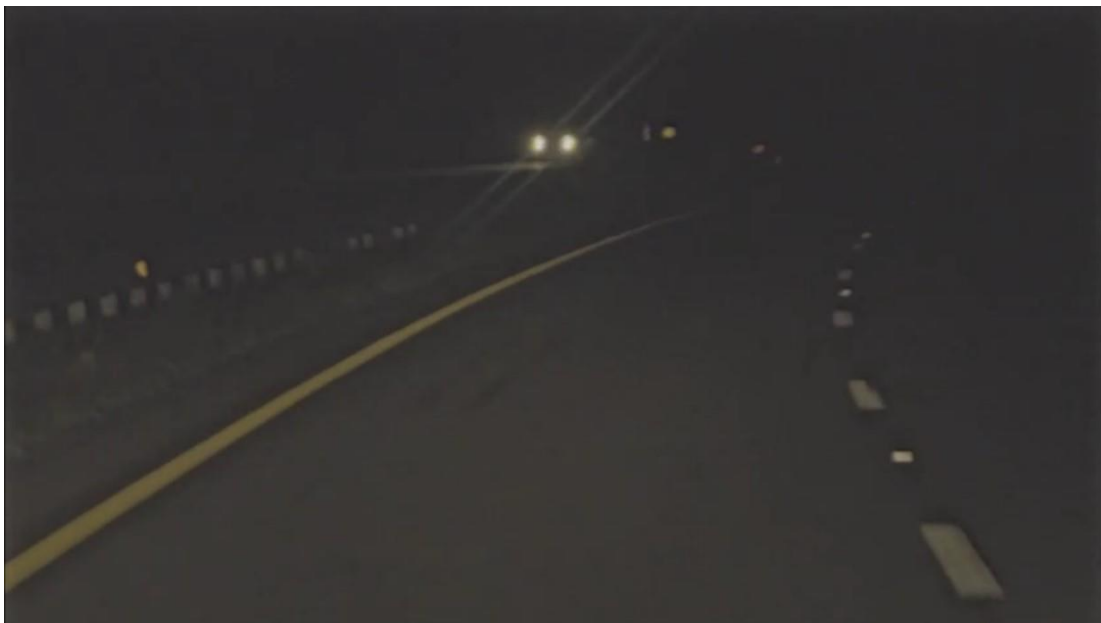
*Fig.11* The lighting changes to red



*Fig.12* The Jack 'o lantern flashes menacingly



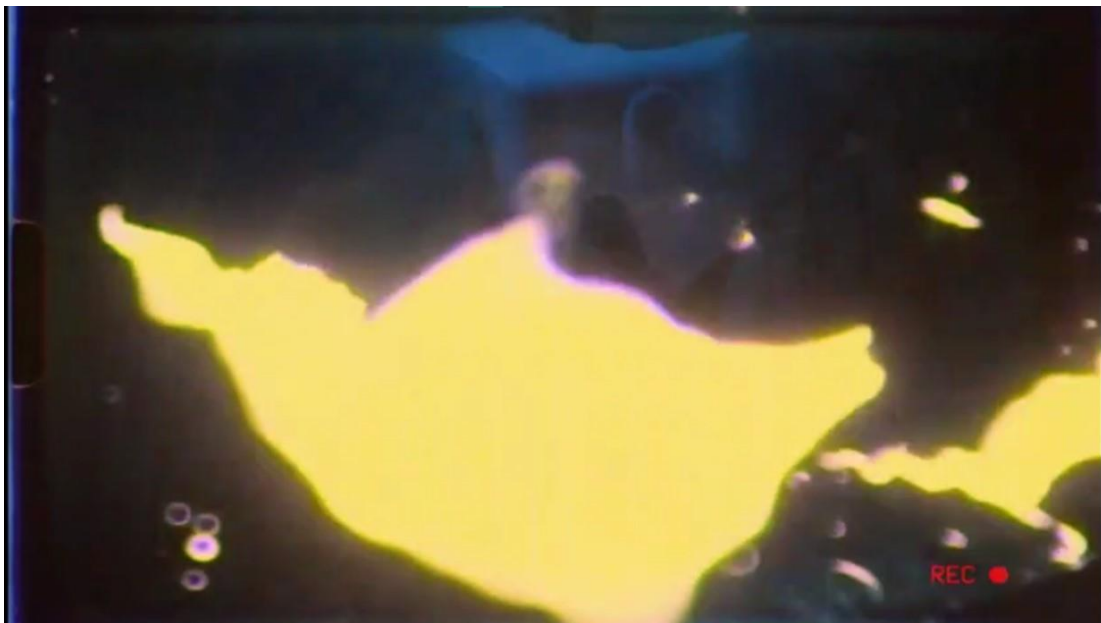
*Fig.13* Countryside



*Fig.14* Highway



*Fig.15 A destination*



*Fig.16 The 'celluloid' melts*



*Fig.17* Dracmorda peers from behind a tree on digital celluloid



*Fig.18* Victoria in her home kitchen



*Fig.19* Victoria inserts her VHS tape into the player



*Fig.20* Priscilla Chambers' nose bleeds as she succumbs to the tape



*Fig.21* Frankie Doom foams at the mouth



*Fig.22* Saint, watching her tape