"My God, She's A Boy."

Gender Aberrations and Transness as Subjects of Horror in *Psycho* and *Sleepaway Camp,* and the
Cultural Panic Around Queers

Gender nonconformity is often utilized as a tool of discomfort in the horror film, and is done so in a way that adds a new layer of strangeness and distortion to its subjects. This can include any form within the realm of crossdressing, disguise, or personas formed around the subject's nonconformity. It provides "reasonable" explanations to the audience as to why these subjects act in the outrageous, egregious ways they do. This has become a point of contention within the horror genre, and entertainment media as a whole, with the rise of queer rights activism drawing attention to its controversial analogues to transgender people, as well as engaging in the stereotype that queers are predatory by nature. The long-running embrace of this trope has alienated and endangered many queer people throughout its lifespan and onward. It feeds into the cultural anxieties of a hidden subversive, who seeks to disorder what is seen as a functional, moral society. In a comparative analysis, I venture to examine Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) and Robert Hiltzik's *Sleepaway Camp* (1983) as reflections of their eras' cultural anxieties surrounding gender-nonconformity and the lasting impacts of this specific trope.

It is important that we first establish which figures we are examining today, as understanding their particular forms of deviance will enlighten the reader as to how they mirror the common queer. Due to the complicated nature of both focal figures' identities, I will henceforth be using the gendered terms primarily applied to these characters throughout the films for the sake of consistency. This does not reflect my personal opinions of these characters, but instead functions as a way to make them more understandable in text. Going forward, I will also be quoting outdated and/or offensive terms when necessary to understand the cultural and linguistic context of the conditions in which Hitchcock and Hiltzik made their films, and as a way of reclaiming terms that have impacted myself as a queer person and my community.

The antagonist of Hitchcock's *Psycho* is the disturbed young man Norman Bates, a character whose Freudian attachment is made physical through what appears to be a tulpa of, (Mikles & Laycock, 91) or secondary personality pertaining to, his mother. In the latter two sequences of the film, Norman reveals himself to have been crossdressing as his mother when committing murders throughout, loudly announcing, "Ayeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee Am Norma Bates!" (Stefano) before being swiftly disarmed and incapacitated by Sam, one of the conventionally masculine focal male characters. Through an internal monologue in the ending sequence of the film, it is revealed that he is convinced that she resides within his body and is capable of becoming separate, or being perceived separately, from him. An excerpt of the screenplay details as much from the dialogue during the psychiatrist, Simon's, speech:

SIMON

Not exactly. A man who dresses in woman's clothing in order to achieve a sexual change... or satisfaction... is a transvestite. But in Norman's case, he was simply doing everything possible to keep alive the illusion of his mother being alive. And whenever reality came too close, when danger or desire threatened that illusion, he'd dress up, even to a cheap wig he brought, and he'd walk about the house, sit in her chair, speak in her voice... He tried to be his mother.

(Stefano)

The script attempts to plainly state that Norman is not someone who was, at the time, considered a "transvestite," or, someone who wears the clothes worn by the opposite sex for identification or sexual purposes. However, it is still clear that he fits into this overall form of the trope of a man dressed as a woman, that exerts violence, confusion, and violation on the supposedly "normal"

others that cross his path. Angela Baker is a different take on this trope, though her actions and tendencies are similar.

We see Angela, a young, nearly nonverbal girl, enter the narrative as a traumatized innocent—she's shown to have endured the terror of losing her father and what appears to be her twin sibling in a freak motorboat accident instigated by the negligence of unruly teens. After enduring further cruelty at a summer camp years later at the hands of her peers and those who have power over her, Angela goes on a killing spree of her tormentors. Later in the film, it is not only revealed that she is the perpetrator—as it was ambiguous throughout most of the narrative—but also that past experiences of seeing her father in bed with another man and attempting to recreate such actions with her sibling have warped her mind and made intimacy difficult in a typical context. This is all compounded with the sudden reveal that Angela was the male twin that survived—revealed to have been originally named Peter—and was forced to live under the name Angela at the whims of her eccentric aunt. Described in *Sleepaway Camp*'s sequel, *Sleepaway Camp II: Unhappy Campers*'s Rotten Tomatoes synopsis as a "psychotic transsexual," and in *Sleepaway Camp III: Teenage Wasteland* as "the murderous, transgender Angela Baker" (Harrison, 2015) on the movie review forum DVDTalk, it could not be more obvious the two aspects made most notable to the viewer and other observers: her identity as a transgender woman—embraced despite the circumstances of her forced transition—and the violence she inflicts upon others.

It is no accident that both of these aberrations are those of assigned males at birth—a deranged young man, a boy forced to live as a girl—in feminine roles. Transgender women and transfeminine people in general are some of the most targeted subjects of this demonization. (Hartless, Hughes et. al) It perpetuates the idea that "trans people are trans because we're abused, and we're probably dangerous to boot." (Fleenor) Examining the eras in which these ideas became

especially politically pertinent is important to understanding the true nature of these two films and their focus on genderqueer anxieties. Starting with *Psycho*'s era, the Lavender Scare was a panic composed of idea of queer people working in and against the government of the United States of America, especially in collaboration with communist countries such as Russia or China. Befittingly, and by design, the Lavender Scare's span was overlapping with the era of the Red Scare during the Cold War. (Adkins) The panic made its way into the minds of the American public through "explicitly characterizing homosexuality as a trait of the Communist enemies." (Shibusawa, 725) This was done with regards to any other act at the time conflated with moral or sexual perversion, most of which were in reference to different facets of the queer community. Anti-homosexual screenings (Shibusawa, 728-730) took place in various sectors of the work force, employing what ranged from loose to vigorous criteria as to what sort of person posed a security risk to the USA. When queer people resisted this discrimination, certain tactics were employed: "they were called perverts and sexual deviants. They were portrayed as sexual predators who wanted to corrupt young men and boys." (Felger) This brings us now to the way the entertainment industry participated in the blocking of "immorality" and societal subversion. The Motion Picture Code of 1930, or as it's more often referred to, the Hays Code, is a policy whose lifespan overlapped with and responded in kind to the Red and Lavender Scares, beginning in 1934 and ending in 1968. This code imposed strict rules upon what was meant to be put to film. The following are excerpts from the code itself:

> "No picture shall be produced that will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin... The sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home shall be upheld. Pictures shall not infer that low forms of sex relationship are the accepted or common

thing... XII. Repellent Subjects. Such subjects are occasionally necessary for the plot. Their treatment must never offend good taste nor injure the sensibilities of an audience."

("Complete Nudity Is Never Permitted": The Motion Picture Production Code of 1930)

Through its vague, Christian terms of "evil, or sin," and the culturally paranoid context in which it was formed, it becomes clear that it mirrored the anti-homosexual walls (Shibusawa) that pervaded the professional world at the time. *Psycho* was released during the latter half of the Hays Code's lifespan, and so its portrayal of Norman Bates as a crossdressing killer, even if intended to be sympathetic, was unlikely to be such, as the code detailed above regarded that which violated a cis-heteronormative society (Jones) as "low forms of sex relationship" and the ever-vague "repellent subjects" that sought to "lower the moral standards of those who see it."

In the same way as *Psycho* was brought up in the era of the Red and Lavender Scares and the Hays Code, *Sleepaway Camp* was created during a similar era approximately twenty years later. Enter: the Satanic Panic. In 1983, the release year of *Sleepaway Camp*, the USA was locked in its well-known era of anxieties surrounding "devilish" music, Dungeons & Dragons, and the ritual abuse and sacrifice of children by satanists, empowered by this aforementioned media and the devil within it. (Romano A.[2], Daw S.) This idea spread due to mass hysteria regarding what is typically referring to as "satanic ritual abuse" perpetuated by a "global cabal" of child sex predators (Romano[1]) (which is a conspiracy often stemming from antisemitic and queerphobic ideas of the world, and so this author would like to assert that, even with the revelations of the Epstein files becoming more and more public knowledge, those conspiracy theorists were *not* correct). *Sleepaway Camp* relied on these anxieties to discomfort and uphold the beliefs held at the time about queer peoples' immorality. It would be imprudent to neglect mention of the AIDs crisis that took place during this time, an epidemic that massively affected the queer community due to the

negligence of a government that believed it was a holy retribution against the "degeneracy" of queers. (Morris) This meaninglessly cost the lives of thousands, nearly wiping out a generation's worth of queer cultural context and knowledge, leaving the queer generation of the twenty-first century without elders, texts, or proofs to turn to that explained and accepted their lives as whole and worthy, and has contributed to the increasingly ahistorical and misinformed hostility (Austin) between different groupings under the queer umbrella.

Both of these eras' anxieties were specifically characterized by the cis-heteronormative, Christian angle of their dichotomies between normal and subversive. (Shibusawa N., Morris B.) Unfortunately, this is still an anxiety that our society frets over, and it is possible that we see a re-emergence of media disseminating ideas of the violent queer as we enter and weather a new era of conservative rhetoric surrounding the "grooming" of children at the hands of the queer community. (Romano[2]) Echoes of the Hays Code are heard in parents believing that their children will be indoctrinated into the "gay lifestyle" or "groomed" into "gender ideology" (Romano[1]) by their simple witnessing of living, breathing, queer individuals in literature, film, or reality.

Due to the relatively small population that falls under the umbrella of transgender or gender diverse, "fictional media representations of trans women in film and television may be one of the few ways that many individuals receive information about and form impressions of this population," (Solomon & Kurtz-Costes, 34) and so the history of villainization results in deeply skewed and dehumanizing public opinion. As a society, we have made efforts to move past this trope in horror and thriller, with queer activism desperately attempting to degrade the stigmas constructed and reinforced by past misconceptions of transgender identity. Sadly, in the supposedly progressive modern era, we still have stories like *Troubled Blood,* a mystery novel written by influential author J. K. Rowling. *Troubled Blood* is an instalment in the *Strike* mystery series, and

itself is a story surrounding the acts of a serial killer who elects to dress in feminine clothing whilst committing heinous crimes. This kind of narrative is a perpetuation of this stereotype of the "violent man in a dress" in the modern era. The already disenfranchised community of trans women—especially of colour—who experience a higher mortality rate through interpersonal violence than any other queer demographic (Hughes et. al) are inaccurately, cruelly portrayed by characters like those in *Strike*. S. E. Fleenor writes in their article on the repercussions of portrayals like that in *Troubled Blood:*

> According to the Human Rights Campaign analysis of the United States, "2020 has already seen at least 26 transgender or gender non-conforming people fatally shot or killed by other violent means," and in 2019, "23 trans women were murdered, at least 91 percent of whom were Black trans women." Those numbers are important to note, especially when you notice the gap between popular cultural depictions of trans women as predators when the reality   is   that   they   are   often   murdered   like   prey. (Fleenor)

This sort of negative portrayal of transgender and gender-nonconforming people has to end in our contemporary world of horror as we move forward in accepting gender diversity and transition. This may, however, be a difficult task to achieve in the face of a new and rising moral panic that US-American politics has engaged itself in (Daw S., St. James E.) and whose shockwaves and anxieties leak into the lives of many a North American (Logan). I implore readers of this essay to acknowledge the importance of gender-affirming care for young transgender people, as this encouragement of the embrace of their identities leads to a drop in suicidal ideation and an increase in quality of life. (DeVires et. al) Acceptance is suicide prevention. I propose now that there is reason to believe that the world of horror cinema, and these narratives of gender aberration and

nonconformity, may have a life on the academic stage as tools of education, as originally proposed by Jamie Hartless's "Horror as a Pedagogical Tool for Teaching Sexualities." Alongside properly educating students on the progress and panic around queer rights and history, the supplementary implementation of horror films as part of queer educational curricula can be used as a form of demonstrative education as to how queer people are versus how they are portrayed by media interpretations of queer identity (Hartless). *Psycho* and *Sleepaway Camp* reflect the anxieties of eras preoccupied with the deviance of the common queer, but they can be used as learning materials that may create a better future for cinema and beyond, even if their figures were objects of abject horror.

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