

*Queer for Fear: Horror Film and the Queer Spectator*

by **Heather O. Petrocelli**

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*Queer for Fear*, a continuation of Heather O. Petrocelli's dissertation work ('Horror Film and the Queer Spectator: an Empirical Study of the Spectatorial Relationships between Queerness, Genre, and Drag Performance,' Manchester Metropolitan University) takes a strong, queered approach to mixed-methods empirical research. Petrocelli's text sets out to 'craft the first cohesive portrait of horror-loving queers,' (80) surveying 4,107 queer horror fans and conducting in-depth oral history interviews with fifteen 'narrators.' Petrocelli builds on a significant body of research in four areas, devoting a chapter to each: theoretical/ontological approaches to horror as a queer genre, mixed-methods analysis of the study findings, connections between the queer concept of 'camp' and its relation to queer trauma (drawing on trauma theory), and the significance of live cinema events hosted by drag performers.

Each section is impressively and thoroughly researched, and when Petrocelli takes bold stances (such as moving away from Freudian analysis of horror films), the scholarly 'lineage' for doing so is clearly evidenced. The study's large number of participants (4,107) leads to a significant representation of the queer horror-viewing audience, though it does skew young, English-speaking, and white. It's difficult to find fault with this, however, given that this undertaking was achieved by one scholar; further, it feels unfair to ask the first study of its kind and scale to do everything. Petrocelli is very transparent with their scholarly approaches and any areas of potential critique or 'missed opportunities.' When bold steps are

taken, they are thoroughly backed up both through in-text citations and in extensive notes.

The work in its entirety is airtight and rigorous. Great care regarding marginalized populations is taken throughout; Petrocelli begins their text with a land acknowledgement and devotes their prologue to a brief discussion of language, acknowledging the fast pace of change in the queer community and how quickly terms become outdated.

The first chapter is the most radical from the perspective of the average horror scholar. Petrocelli argues against the commonly used Freudian/Lacanian psychoanalytic approach to scholarly investigations of horror, prioritizing instead the queer, embodied experience of the audience. Petrocelli's survey participants showed a conscious awareness of the interplay between their queer identity and their love of horror films, working against Freud's (and later writers like Lacan, Kristeva, and Creed's) emphasis on the subconscious. A queer theorist approach further de-centers Freud; the history of psychoanalysis paints a homophobic, misogynist picture that is at odds with queer theory's margin-to-center approach. The research is, by scholarly standards, radical and crucial. To many queer fans of horror, the findings appear blatantly obvious – horror as a genre 'ontologically, subtextually, and allegorically engages with and connects to queer alterity.' (131) Despite this 'obviousness,' Petrocelli's argument is proven by the fact of its existence; it took until 2023 for queer horror fans to be academically recognized. The text fills a crucial gap in horror scholarship, directly linking queer lived experience and the themes of horror. Survey data and statistical analysis are consistently paired with relevant studies or theories when applicable, situating the argument largely within queer theory/gender studies while taking a necessary transdisciplinary approach. Given the often-myopic lenses of previous studies (Brigid Cherry focusing only on women, Harry Benshoff's focus on gay cisgender men, etc.), Petrocelli's widely varied participants and willingness to dabble outside the scope of their study better encapsulate the myriad identities held under the umbrella term 'queer.'

The second chapter places the study within the wider fan studies and horror studies milieu, narratively analyzing the quantitative results of the study. This work is done in an admirable combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis; there are enough graphs and confidence intervals to satisfy quantitative scholars, while the more numerical analysis is thoroughly explained in narrative style familiar to the qualitative scholar. Each chapter's notes are extensive and invaluable to the novice scholar as well as the scholar interested in feminist research practice, mixed methodologies, and ethics of care. Notes on language choices, research design, data preservation, and extensive scholarly citations are again crucial for newer scholars. Survey participants are treated with great care and respect, and a great deal of work went into ensuring they were not misrepresented. Each chapter is structured the same way, which gets a bit repetitive as the reader proceeds: each begins with a theoretical synthesis of the subject, followed by statistical analysis of survey results, followed by narrative analysis.

The third and fourth chapters deal with queer trauma and camp as a reaction to trauma, including drag performances at queer live cinema events. Camp is a difficult concept to quantify, but Petrocelli's rigorous literary research again shines through. The author works through a truly impressive number of references – in defining camp on page 145, there are twelve separate in-text citations. The arguments made ring 'true' to this queer horror scholar; the over-the-top gratuitousness of horror, especially slashers, is perfectly in line with over-the-top camp or drag personas. Petrocelli re-reads Carol J. Clover's extensive work into the slasher's 'Final Girl' trope, framing the Final Girl as a symbol of overcoming queer trauma rather than as an androgynous 'not-girly' character for male audiences to identify with. The final chapter, on live queer horror nights helmed by drag 'horror hostesses,' is, like the first chapter, seemingly obvious to the queer horror fan; queer concepts such as the lineage from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* to Elvira to Peaches Christ's *Midnight Mass* are well

articulated and backed by extensive research. Live queer horror events are a haven for queer horror scholars to practice their fandom in a space free of hetero male gatekeeping, a space where both 'queerness and their shared love of horror' (216) can be celebrated. A throughline in Petrocelli's work is their finding that queer viewers 'read' horror films differently than straight male audiences, indicating another poorly researched niche for future scholars. The live queer cinema event, like Petrocelli's book, joyfully holds space for these alternative readings.