MONSTROUS LESBIANS: CHARACTER CONSTRUCTION IN THE CONTEMPORARY HORROR FILM[1]

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1. THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE MONSTROUS LESBIAN THROUGH ITS CLASSICAL HERITAGE

Horror cinema provides the opportunity to depict the monstrous threat posed by lesbian desire using its stylistic devices that characterise the genre. The monster functions as the formal vessel (Navarro, 2022) of the enigma and foregrounds the difference between the human (male) —mankind— and the *Other*. Looking at a woman is a punishment for the hero (Pedraza, 1991); she is positioned as an obstacle and a boundary, as the *Other* in relation to his heroic male position. Female desire is defined in theoretical discourse as an enigma and an uncontrollable excess: "this multiplicity and plurality of female pleasure cannot be understood within a logic that is male" (Cardenal, 2012: 359). Its diversity makes it impossible to articulate a representative discourse around it (Lacan, 1990), and it is precisely the enigma of a jouissance that becomes monstrous in the construction of these characters. Creed (1993) argues that the monstrous in cinema emerges from that which threatens the patriarchal symbolic order, and that the female body is constructed as radical otherness in opposition to the male subject. The enigma of the female has been rendered monstrous under the canonical male gaze, but how does this enigma operate in the lesbian world? The horror genre offers an approach that explores this enigma through the mise-en-scène, the narrative and the use of the fantastic, presenting the lesbianism of its protagonists as a form of femininity that has no need of men and thus constitutes a monstrous threat to the androcentrism of the diegetic world.

These characters are constructed through abjection (Kristeva, 1982), whose main feature is its ambiguity: they are at once attractive and repulsive, constantly challenging social norms and the unstable boundary between good and evil, the acceptable and the unacceptable. The bodies of

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these characters are interpreted (by other characters and by the audience) as marginalised, viewed as both pleasing and menacing. Lesbian desire in cinema has been expressed as abject from the perspective of the male gaze (Mulvey, 2013), as it threatens the heteropatriarchal status quo while at the same time serving as fantasy material for the pornographic and objectifying fetishisation of actresses (Dworkin, 1981). For Kristeva, in its liminal state between life and death the monster's cadaverous body constitutes the perfect representation of abjection. The monstrous-feminine in the horror genre is an image that encapsulates male anxieties and desires in relation to women, their submission or their power (Creed, 1993: 7). Through the disruption provoked by the abject, cinema constructs its sapphic[2] (lesbian and/or bisexual) characters in terms of a difference that is either monstrously physical or menacingly psychological. This aspect of character construction is directly related to the cinematic subgenre. Based on a search of open databases and applying my own classification system for films with explicitly sapphic protagonists released in the West since the 2000s, I have identified 39 films belonging to the horror macro-genre, 27 of which are classified as supernatural horror films, while the other 12 are psychological thrillers.[3]

1.1. The Vampiress: The Primordial Archetype

The vampiress is one of the most frequently depicted and explored representations of the killer lesbian, as an expression of the monstrous lesbian archetype. As Ribes Pericàs observes, "the perception of lesbianism as something unnatural and perverse [...] has been associated in popular films with monstrosity and fantasy" (2022: 276). The lesbian vampiress is a threat to society because she represents attraction and pleasure between women (Creed, 1993: 61). The very first two films to portray the lesbian as a monster depict her as a vampiress: *Vampyr* (Carl Theodor Dreyer, 1932) and *Dracula's Daughter* (Lambert Hillyer, 1936), both of which are based on J. S. Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872), whose narrative structure would become a model for 1970s vampire films. Le Fanu's novella establishes a model for this study with its representation of the monstrous lesbian archetype: beautiful, seductive, and murderous, a femme fatale who aligns herself with *other* women and against men. In line with previous research, "it is important to identify the early 19th century as the period of the genesis of lesbian vampirism in both literature and art [...], which was placed at the service of male voyeurism" (Morales Roig, García-Catalán, Izquierdo Castillo, 2023: 802), and which would provide the basis for the construction of the archetype in cinema. These *monstrous lesbians* are constructed to contribute to the satisfaction of male fetishistic fantasies. Seduction between women stimulates male desire without posing a threat to the phallic masculinity of the canonical male audience, as men are depicted as heroes while penetration continues to be symbolically present in the stabbing death of the monster. This trope reinforces the dystopian threat of a society dominated by the female, which, in the story, will ultimately be defeated by the hero. González Requena (2006) interprets the return of figures associated with the maternal or the Goddess as a symptom of a crisis in the symbolic *Law of the Father* and the consequent disintegration of the social order, where these narratives are understood from an opposing perspective as narratives of decadence that can only be counteracted through the restoration of a masculine heroic principle that reimposes law and meaning.

Sapphic women serve as symbols of peril: the unnatural (Signorotti, 1996) and the perverse (De Lauretis, 1994). Their explicit presence on screen became prominent in popular horror films in the 1970s, where they appear as seductive killer vampiresses (Clover, 1992). Throughout the 20th century, 47 films featuring vampiresses as protagonists were released in the West; another 24 released since the 2000s make for a total of 71 films that recount variations on the story of *Carmilla*. Seven European films made in the 1960s explore the theme of the sapphic vampiress, but its peak came in the 1970s, when 26 titles were released, including *The Vampire Lovers* (Roy Ward Baker, 1970), *Daughters of Darkness* (Les lèvres rouges, Harry Kümel, 1971), and *Vampyres* (José Ramón Larraz, 1974). A notable 1980s production is *The Hunger* (Tony Scott, 1983), which takes a more modernist and less myth-bound approach to the vampiric tradition of the 1970s. In all these films, one of the female protagonists acts as a mentor who turns the other into a vampiress, as a metaphor for lesbianism. In none of them does the lesbian mentor escape death at the hands of the hero, who ultimately rescues the other woman, as she still maintains a connection to the world of men. The story thus adheres to the punitive moralising principle of early lesbian films that portray the consequences of acting on a desire defined as *other* and therefore monstrous and unacceptable, inheriting elements from both melodrama (Roig, 2025) and the "dead lesbian syndrome" (Guerrero-Pico et al., 2017).

From the mid-1970s to the early 1990s, the killer vampiress theme that had previously dominated mainstream horror became more typical of independent cinema. Although early vampiress films took a restrained approach in order to avoid being censored, these independent productions included a number of films that were sexually explicit and even pornographic, following the sexploitation film trend that emerged in the wake of the sexual liberation movement. As a result, supernatural horror lost its gravity and force as it shifted in the late 1990s towards sexual comedy, as exemplified by the *Caress of the Vampire* saga (Frank Terranova, 1996–1999). In the 2000s, a camp aesthetic—characterised by a love of the unnatural, artifice and exaggeration (Sontag, 1984)—is evident in films such as *Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter* (Lee Demarbre, 2001) and *Lesbian Vampire Killers* (Phil Claydon, 2009), in which lesbian characters serve merely as narrative accessories and objects of attraction for male heroes. This classical archetype of the lesbian vampiress is still used in contemporary horror to construct the *monstrous lesbian*, whose narrative tropes continue to be both reinforced and subverted.

1.2. The Killer Lesbian in the Psychological Thriller

The disruption of the supernatural horror genre resulting from its hybridisation with comedy opened up an opportunity in the 1990s for the reinvention of the killer lesbian in the psychological thriller. The trope thus continued to be used, although the construction of killer lesbian characters in these films generally eschewed vampiric depictions. Instead, they are extremely attractive women who continue to occupy a femme fatale role, seducing and killing the male heroes together with their sapphic partners. They thus recycle the old tale of revenge through the seduction of the male hero while eliminating the paranormal premise in favour of more realistic stories that explain the character's abjection and perversion as

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a psychological disorder. In this way, their monstrous quality is constructed through a prism that does not involve a bodily transformation but still entails violence. The protagonists of these films are unstable individuals or criminals with backstories more typical of the drama genre. These characters are explored by Ribes-Pericàs (2022) and Smelik (2004), who analyse the importance of the archetype in films of the 1990s. Some of these films are based on real events or news stories, which are incorporated into the aesthetic and narrative frameworks of the psychological thriller: in *Heavenly Creatures* (Peter Jackson, 1994), Juliet (Kate Winslet) and Pauline (Melanie Lynskey) murder Pauline's mother, the only obstacle to their obsessive relationship; in *Sister My Sister* (Nancy Meckler, 1994), two sisters develop an obsessive lesbian relationship that culminates in the brutal murder of their employer, a storyline echoed in *La cérémonie* (Claude Chabrol, 1995) and more recently in the contemporary films *Monster* (Patty Jenkins, 2004), *The Handmaiden* (Park Chan-wook, 2016), and *Lizzie* (Bryce Kass, 2018). The trope of the pair of sapphic murderers also appears in *Butterfly Kiss* (Michael Winterbottom, 1995) and *Bound* (Lana and Lilly Wachowski, 1996).

The sapphic killer archetype has become a recurring feature of the psychological horror subgenre throughout the 21st century, although in some cases, instead of killing others, these characters end up committing suicide or harming themselves in fits of delirium or psychotic episodes. Examples of this can be found in *Mulholland Drive* (David Lynch, 2001), *Chloe* (Atom Egoyan, 2010), *Black Swan* (Darren Aronofsky, 2010), and *Thelma* (Joachim Trier, 2017). Although these films all belong to the horror macro-genre, the terrifying nature of their protagonists is depicted not in the bodily abjection of their sexual difference[4] but in their psychological instability, constructed through the story around the female as a mystery to be solved.

2. THE APPROPRIATION AND SUBVERSION OF THE ARCHETYPE

The monstrous lesbian archetype has functioned as a meaningful site for exploring the complexities of female desire, and queer creators have appropriated monstrosity as a form of vindication. Not only have these characters served as representations of terror and seduction, but they have also facilitated the articulation of the sapphic experience in a medium and a historical period largely dominated by heteronormative narratives. Their implications and connotations have evolved thanks to feminist perspectives, lesbian film theory, and the legacy of the new queer cinema (NQC) movement that first emerged in the 1990s. NQC marked a break with the identity-based paradigm of the gay and lesbian films of previous decades. In addition to its alternative storylines, it proposed a provocative formal exploration dominated by hybridity and pastiche (Rich, 1992), characterised by the reappropriation of sexualised and homophobic stereotypes from 1970s cinema, as well as by their inversion as a radical response to the depiction of normative sexuality in mainstream films. However, it also posed a challenge for lesbian filmmakers, as "most of the products identified as 'new' and 'queer' were [...] overwhelmingly male" (Pick, 2004: 105). With the arrival of the new millennium, more queer women had the opportunity to write, direct and produce films, building on a long-standing tradition established by mavericks such as Dorothy Arzner, Barbara Hammer and Su Friedrich. This led to a reconstruction of the archetype that explored the (re-)appropriation of the female on a symbolically powerful level in conflict with lesbian desire itself. The character arc of these femmes fatales shifts towards climactic endings that do not involve punishment or death, and although the politics of desire remains central to the story, it is articulated not through a normative romanticism but through a disruptive, transgressive, and often violent force.

Supernatural horror, which dominated the genre in its early years, appears in hybrid form in contemporary cinema, combined with comedy, as in *Jennifer's Body* (Karyn Kusama, 2009), *The Carmilla Movie* (Spencer Maybee, 2017) and *Bit* (Brad Michael Elmore, 2019). Since 2018, the killer lesbian character has been further hybridised with body horror, psychological horror and the supernatural, adopting a perspective that hearkens back to dramatic horror and contains elements of the slasher. These films depict killer lesbians with none of the vampiric constructions or the sexualisation of their bodies for voyeuristic pleasure. They are anti-heroines with complex psychologies who make questionable decisions, but who do not end up facing the expected punitive fate. Examples include *Knife + Heart* (Yann Gonzalez, 2018), *The Perfection* (Richard Shepard, 2018), *Bodies Bodies Bodies* (Halina Reijn, 2022) and *Love Lies Bleeding* (Rose Glass, 2024).

3. ANALYSIS OF AN EVOLVING ARCHETYPE

Textual analysis with a semiotic-discursive and psychoanalytic approach (Metz, 1974; Font, 2002; Casetti, 1991), combined with insights from feminist and queer theory, can reveal how audiovisual language positions these characters in a recognisable location for the spectator through specific modes of representation: the construction of the gaze, the positioning of the camera and the development of characters and archetypes. Serge Daney suggests that "the body is at the service of the story and appears in film as a vampiric entity" (quoted in Font, 2002: 127), because to achieve the visceral effects demanded of the image in postmodern cinema it is the actress who must feed on the character to become an agent of historical mutations, finding the character's gestures, gazes and desires. There is something intrinsically monstrous in character construction, as it cannot be understood without identifying with the performer who gives the character her body, voice and gestures. This construction necessarily involves the processes of casting and direction, through which layers of meaning are inscribed onto the body by the screenplay and the subjectivity of the performer as an active agent. Through an analysis of the text and the construction of the characters in three paradigmatic films from each decade of the twenty-first century, this study explores how lesbian protagonists in contemporary horror cinema reinforce and subvert the traditional archetype: Jennifer in *Jennifer's Body*; Thelma in *Thelma*; and Jackie in *Love Lies Bleeding*.

3.1. Comic Subversion of the Classical Vampiress

The protagonist in *Jennifer's Body* is a teenage girl who is transformed into a succubus (a variation on the vampiress archetype) as a result of a bungled demonic sacrifice. From a heteronormative perspective, the film does not conform to the conventions of scopophilic cinema, as it does not satisfy the desire to turn the woman into an object of the male gaze. Despite being played by Megan Fox, Jennifer is not portrayed for fetishistic enjoyment. Lesbian cinema engages with a visual legacy in which the female body has historically been constructed as an object for scopophilic consumption; however, the quality of *"to-be-looked-at-ness"* (Mulvey, 1975) operates ironically in the construction of Jennifer's character, shifting and problematising this logic from a queer perspective. The casting of the monster—in this case, a character whose body and name gives the film its title—is by no means insignificant. Megan Fox starred in the first instalment of the *Transformers* franchise (2007) as Mikaela Banes, and subsequently topped the list of the Top 100 Sexiest Women published in 2008 by *FHM*.[5] With this objectified status, Fox's body is displayed in the film as inaccessible to the men in the story—all of whom she seduces solely in order to devour them—as her desire is directed towards Needy Le-

snicki (Amanda Seyfried). The film evokes abjection through its combination of fetishism with the repulsion provoked by the character's behaviour towards men. Although realistic performances in postmodern cinema function as a device for diminishing the presence of the actress, in the construction of mainstream archetypes the signifier cannot be separated from the body. Fox acts as the iconic modern femme fatale and as an object of the audience's desire marked by a diabolical, vampiric status, with the aim of both satiating and contradicting the spectator's pleasure.

The film begins with Needy's crazed face looking directly at the camera, revealing on the level of the enunciation what we will later understand to be a confirmation of the transfer of the monstrously female aspect of lesbian desire from one protagonist to the other. Needy, who is the narrator, introduces us through a flashback to Jennifer and their shared story of terror and transformation. At the film's climactic moment, Jennifer, like her vampiress precursors, does not escape death, but her murderer's justification for killing her constitutes a significant paradigm shift. Needy tries to restrain Jennifer's monstrous desire, but it proves uncontrollable. The two women confront each other in hand-to-hand combat. In the struggle, Needy straddles Jennifer and slashes her body with a knife, but Jennifer regenerates. The wound—a symbol of the cavity, of *lack* in its psychoanalytic sense—serves as a reaffirmation of phallic desire. Jennifer takes pleasure in the penetration and bites Needy's neck, evoking the vampiric legacy of conversion and the transfer of powers (Figure 1). The monster's death comes only once Needy rips off the heart-shaped pendant she wears, symbolising their love for one another: "BFF" (best friends forever). Jennifer's power is weakened when the pact of love that binds them is broken. Needy plunges the knife into Jennifer's heart. Now that their love is dead, the knife wound is fatal and the monster dies along with the woman. Yet her monstrous legacy lives on in Needy, as suggested by the movement of their bodies in the shot, reflecting the transfer of powers. Needy thus serves both as the monster's lover and as the final heroine.



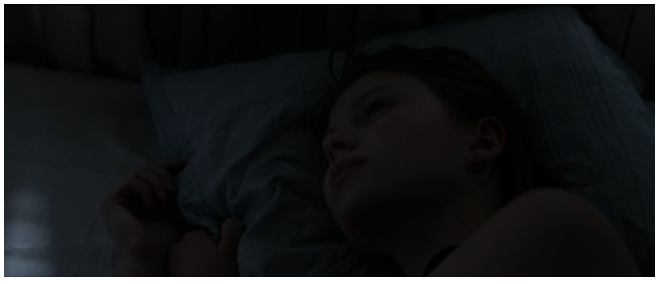
Image 1. The transfer of powers through the bite

3.2. The monster from a psychological perspective

The protagonist in *Thelma* (Eili Harboe) is unaware of her own monstrous nature, representative of her lesbian desire. She possesses supernatural powers that her parents fear and seek to control, as hinted at in the film's pre-credit sequence. In this scene, she is shown as a child lost in a forest, threatened by her father with his hunter's shotgun. The nature of her desire constitutes an intolerable threat. The film's next scene begins with a wide aerial shot, like the view of a crow stalking its prey, which slowly zooms in on Thelma in the middle of a university campus. She is now a young woman and is entering a new, uncontrolled environment, leaving behind the home where her mother kept the monster contained. Horror films about monstrous teenage girls often portray the process of sexual maturation as painful and perilous (Renner, 2016). It is a process closely associated with self-actualisation and acceptance, and with the destruction of the female body resulting from the awareness of desire (Wittig, 1977). This abject deconstruction of the body is absolutely necessary to articulate the new lesbian body-subject. Thelma's acknowledgement of her desire unleashes her uncontrollable superhuman powers,

which haunt her throughout the film's second act. Her body becomes deformed in the absence of maternal protection. Gestures convey pain and dissatisfaction, life and death, strength and weakness (Guzmán, 2018). The monster manifests itself through epileptic psychotic seizures in which her body shakes, turns rigid and loses control—symptoms triggered whenever Anja (Kaya Wilkins) is near her, exposing her desire for the *Other*. For her Catholic mother, the anxiety caused by the uncontrollable nature of desire necessitates the monster's captivity, but when Thelma leaves the house, her body reacts, unleashing her desire and exposing her condition: whatever Thelma desires deep down becomes a reality. Alcohol, drugs and pleasure join Thelma's and Anja's together in the shot. The choreographed movement, the continuity of the camera and the editing present them as though they were a single body divided in space and time, until Thelma's desire becomes so powerful that it draws Anja towards her (Image 2 -3).





Images 2-3. The attraction of bodies in the editing

Thelma's sexual desire is expressed in the contortion of her body, but it is only when she finally manages to control it that her powers manifest themselves. Gestures intervene in the image and portray the interactions between the two characters, imbuing the narrative arrangement of the action with intention while leveraging the camera's violent, stifling position in extreme close-ups that confront the body with its alterity. The mise-en-scène and the framing reduce the body to an abject, compressed and constrained space set apart in a wide shot filled with menacing lines in the composition and a dark, vast depth of field that diminishes its presence in the shot. Thelma's contact with Anja is captured in extreme close-ups that are not constrictive, with staring eyes, half-open mouths, detail shots and hands delicately sliding over the body, followed by blurred pans inscribed with desire, shaking and clouded shots, evoking the trend of haptic lesbian cinema (Marks, 1998). When Anja touches her, Thelma tries to control her spasms, which cause movements and noises that are almost orgasmic, but when Anja kisses her, she runs home to take refuge under the shelter of religion. Her desire is so repressed that her supernatural powers make Anja disappear in her attempt to suppress her pleasure. With the confession of her otherness, she regains her position and spatial presence in the frame, the camera now following the movement of her body rather than the other way round. Inscribed in her glances and gestures is the power of a sexuality overflowing with *desires*, which attempts to express her trauma and drive symptomatically through a form of jouissance that is intrinsically sensory.

3.3. Excessive Monstrous Body

Love Lies Bleeding begins with an aerial tracking shot over a rugged cliff. The camera movement, the music and the red light flooding the lens plunge us into an abyss. Through a dissolve, at the bottom of the cliff —a dumping ground for corpses— what awaits the camera is not death but a worm's eye view of a starry night sky, which serves as the backdrop to the opening credits. The camera then tilts downward to reveal the hometown of the film's protagonists, stretched out under a clear night sky that foreshadows the hopeful

ending in which love sets the monster free. From the first scene in the gym, this film plays with the codes of the body horror subgenre, showing bodies straining, sweating and stretching, while at the same time it transgresses those codes through a mise-en-scène that prioritises the haptic pleasure elicited by the image and a perspective grounded in body worship, excess and overstimulation.

The monstrous lesbian has traditionally been constructed based on a canonically sexualised, attractive archetype, characterised by highly feminised qualities that are socially accepted as desirable. In *Love Lies Bleeding*, the construction of both protagonists breaks with the convention of displaying the female body, instead revealing two women who push at the boundaries of heterosexual norms. Lou (Kristen Stewart) is first shown from behind, following the opening credits, as a figure set in contrast to her diegetic world, a world from which she is alienated but to which the other protagonist clearly belongs. She is crouched over a toilet bowl, reaching into it in an effort to unclog the drain, thus plunging her hand into a hole whose symbolic value signals her status while also foreshadowing a subsequent scene in which she penetrates Jackie (Katy M. O'Brian) with her fingers, producing a jouissance that unleashes her monstrous nature. Her androgynous appearance, constructed through the presentation of her body, clothing and movements, situates her in a phallic role understood as a symbolic function rather than an identification with masculinity. Throughout the film, the representation of this role discourages any essentialist reading: in contrast to the gym setting, Lou does not embody domination or aggression; instead, she appears vulnerable and pensive in response to her father's violence, revealing that this phallic role is defined in relational terms rather than in terms of identity. The editing brings the future lovers together in a form of bodily symmetry in a sequence where Lou masturbates face down on a sofa, which cuts to Jackie completing a transactional sexual encounter in a car with JJ (Dave Franco), in the hope that he will give her a job (later, in her monstrous form, she will kill JJ as punishment for abusing his wife).

Jackie's movements, clothing and behaviour are all explicitly feminine, but her bodybuilder's physique goes beyond heteronormative boundaries. She confesses that she wants her body to be even more excessive, and Lou assists her with her goal by administering a dose of steroids, thereby inscribing Jackie's body in a logic of chemical-political prosthesis characteristic of a pharmaco-pornographic era in which desire and identity are produced and regulated using biochemical technologies (Preciado, 2008). The penetration of the needle is followed by a kiss initiated by Jackie and a sex scene that awakens her mutating monstrous muscles (Images 4, 5).





Images 4–5. The needle and sex as triggers for the monster

Jackie trains, copulates, bites, kills, licks and vomits with a savage intensity. She drinks a dense, reddish protein mixture that resembles blood. Her monstrous body is not vampiric, demonic or bewitched, but what is monstrous about it is the strength of her muscles, which are antithetical to the feminine stereotype. A *mise-en-abyme* positions her as gigantic while her muscles continue

to grow, and the *mise-en-scène* depicts her as increasingly monstrous. Her body challenges gender norms and frames her as a threatening figure capable of extreme violence.

By the end of the film, both women have been labelled as "monstrous" by their families: Jackie by her mother and Lou by her sister. Lou rescues Jackie from her father's attempt to kidnap her, but he then tortures Lou, which triggers the mutation of Jackie's body into its final form (Image 6). Love provokes the ultimate transformation of her abject, gigantic, monstrous body, a mutation sparked by excess, forged out of repressed rage and rendered beautiful beneath the same stars shown in the opening credits. Her body has become irrepressible and she is possessed by a primordial force that places her on the boundary between the human and the indomitable, the supernatural and unbridled desire. Yet the visuals present this excess as beautiful, and the monster is revealed to be simply a female body at the limits of the normative, surrounded by the beauty of the cosmos, inscribed into a shot-reverse-shot from Lou's point of view.



Image 6. The body transforming

4. CONCLUSIONS

Horror films about sapphic women can be classified into two subgenres, both of which are directly related to the construction of their characters: the psychological thriller and supernatural horror. The corpus analysed here reveals how these films redefine the political realism of desire proposed by new queer cinema through body horror and an aesthetic of excess, while embracing the fantastical elements of their classical heritage in order to reinterpret filmic spaces of symbolic and sensory creativity. In keeping with Judith Butler's call to "conceptualize the body in the field of politics" (2011: 385), the lesbian body of the contemporary monster is constructed as a political territory through the affirmation of the subject in her position of alterity and through the excess of desire. These films reinvent the horror genre at the narrative level, where the source of the terror is no longer the *Other* but the internal fracture of the self and the consequences of confronting it. Their protagonists are queer women who are not trying to love according to the conventional model; instead, they are consumed and exalted by a desire that overflows. The body becomes a surface for the inscription of desire, but also trauma, jouissance and the collapse of identity. The lesbian perspective interrogates the female character as a territory of autonomous desire rather than reducing her to an object of the male gaze or a mere fetish, and thus the use of the monstrous body explicitly involves both the camera and the narrative, not to victimise or demonise it, but to celebrate its contradictions and to hold it accountable for them.

The three paradigmatic films analysed here present the monstrous lesbian liberated from remorse or coercive correction. Rather than being subjugated to the moral position established by hetero-masculine power, the monster accepts the *otherness* of its unbridled sexuality in order to inhabit its own narrative. Instead of deliberately attempting to normalise the protagonists' homosexuality, these films integrate this aspect of the character in a transversal and organic way. The queer female body is thus not just a site of political struggle but also an opportunity to embrace the monstrous, the magical and the sublime through a vulnerable psychological alienation that collapses under the weight of desire and accepts it without regret. This collapse suspends the normative

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frameworks that organise subjectivity and the body, allowing excess to be inscribed as a form of agency rather than as a moral failing (Leo Bersani, 1995; Lee Edelman, 2014). In this way, the monster is neither corrected nor punished; instead, it inhabits an experience of jouissance that breaks down the disciplinary logic of the narrative and enables a queer conception of the body as a site of transformation, risk and affirmation of the *Other* (Barbara Creed, 1993; Julia Kristeva, 1982). Through horror, lesbian stories are told not merely through confession or discovery, but through eruption and the catharsis of excess, through an uncontrollable, magical desire.

The lost vulnerability of the lesbian bodies consumed and murdered in 1970s horror cinema is translated in contemporary films into the experience of victims of the system, who are resignified through monstrosity to avenge the violence inflicted by men and by society upon women, to protect themselves and to create a space for pleasure. In this sense, jouissance not only exceeds the normative economy of enjoyment but also activates a potentially queer dimension in its ego-dissolving nature, entailing a suspension of the integrity of the self (Bersani, 1995) by associating queer negativity with the death drive and resistance against reproductive regimes of meaning (Edelman, 2014 [2004]). While desire suggests a logic of lack and displacement, jouissance, in its Lacanian sense, points beyond the pleasure principle to an experience of excess that destabilises the subject. Queer bodies are simultaneously victims and weapons, objects of control and subjects of transformative violence. For Carol J. Clover, "the archetypal female monster is embodied in the figure of the rape-avenger. This character appears as the protagonist of the rape-revenge narrative structure, which usually depicts the transformation of a normal and defenceless woman into a ruthless murderer" (1992: 95). Since the vast majority of avenging female monsters are constructed from the perspective of the male gaze, Clover argues, they continue to perpetuate standards of sexualisation and spectacularisation of the female body through the representation of fetishised characters, as their discursive construction is based on the depiction of the fetishised actress's individuality (Holmes, 2005: 10). As Domènec Font suggests, "one of the most excruciating exercises in personality torture offered by cinema in recent decades is [...] the condition of the automaton as a frequently invoked trope in modern cinema, straddling the line between the pure state of the actor's body and the impossible anatomy of the character" (2002: 148). This is why the abject body of the monster in *Jennifer's Body*, *Thelma* and *Love Lies Bleeding* is constructed with an awareness of the star system and supported by the queer bodies of cast members such as Kristen Stewart and Megan Fox. The visible personal narratives of the actresses' sexuality outside the films become inscribed within them, acquiring symbolic value both for the characters and for the storylines. The body serves as a medium between the visible and the invisible, the rational and the uncontrollable.

The storyline constructs the body from the perspective of a female gaze that appeals to an awareness of and pride in abjection as a vessel of pleasure. The jouissance of the haptic is a particular feature of lesbian cinema, expressed in bodily contortions and skin textures, in the montages, dissolves and blurred images that characterise feminist art more broadly, but that acquire a particular resonance in lesbian art, articulated through metaphors for the body taken to the extreme, such as

demonic possession, supernatural repression and religious ecstasy. Bodies twist, vomit or levitate, swelling with a jouissance written as contrary to the hegemonic norm; rather than being displayed for voyeuristic desire, they are constructed haptically with detail shots showing them dismembered and stitched together, but never objectified. With these strategies, filmmaking becomes a tool of resistance, memory and the (re)imagining of the queer experience from the perspective of the abject and the monstrous. These films transform the archetype and challenge previous cinematic traditions that either rendered lesbians invisible or hypersexualised them as *Other* to turn them into fodder for fantasy. They acknowledge their cinematic heritage but do not require the explicit articulation of social conflict in order to construct their narratives, shifting it instead into a symbolic perceptual register of the image, articulated using formal and narrative techniques that operate on the body. The queer female body is thus constructed as political while at the same time challenging and breaking the normative boundaries of fantasy that attempt to contain it. ■

NOTES

1 Funding: "Las creadoras en el audiovisual y sus redes. Un estudio de los vínculos como elemento de transformación y consolidación en la industria" [Women Audiovisual Creators and Their Networks: A Study of Bonds as an Element of Transformation and Consolidation in the Industry], Valencian government grant, PI: Jessica Izquierdo-Castillo, Code: 25I449.01/1.

2 An umbrella term derived from Sappho of Lesbos, covering the sexualities of cis and trans women who are attracted to other women: lesbian, bisexual and non-binary.

3 The information used to categorise the films has been taken from open databases [*IMDB*, *Filmaffinity* and *Letterboxd*]. Despite the theoretical disparities in relation to subgenres, it was decided to use the categorisations of these databases as a homogeneous source. For the classification, thematic lists have been used with labels such as LGTBIQ+ films featuring Sapphic women (lesbians and/or bisexual women), which have been verified with viewings, and from which the following data was extracted: year of release, genre, direction, production, earnings and nationality. The database compiled contains feature films released in the West (North America and Europe) in the years from 2000 to 2025. The three paradigmatic films chosen for the analysis were selected because they are more mainstream/accessible in terms of production, earnings and audience data taken from these databases and because each one was made in a different decade out of the three decades covered by the corpus.

4 "Sexual difference" is understood here to encompass non-male otherness and alienation due to homosexuality.

5 A magazine targeting a male readership that published an annual list of "The Sexiest Women in the World" based on subscriber surveys.

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MONSTROUS LESBIANS: CHARACTER CONSTRUCTION IN THE CONTEMPORARY HORROR FILM

Abstract

The *monstrous lesbian* archetype has evolved over course of the history of the horror film genre. Contemporary lesbian filmmakers engage with this heritage at a certain distance. The approach to this archetype depends on the subgenre: in supernatural horror it appears as a monstrous villain in the tradition of the vampiress of 1970s cinema, while in psychological thrillers it is depicted as a murderous femme fatale. In horror films, the construction of sapphic protagonists reflects an evolution of the archetype based on creative self-awareness and influences from cultural studies. Through the textual analysis of three paradigmatic films—*Jennifer's Body* (2009), *Thelma* (2017) and *Love, Lies, Bleeding* (2024)—with an interdisciplinary perspective combining lesbian film theory, aspects of queer film theory, psychoanalysis and film theory, this article examines the dynamics of narrative and character construction that establish the female body of the monster as a site of transgression, abjection and power. The construction of the monstrous is posited as a reflection of an internal break with the feminine, where the abject nature of the body involves the rejection of desire, with protagonists who subvert the traditional narrative and redefine the limits of their agency.

Key words

Lesbian archetype; Film analysis; Character construction; Monstrous lesbian; Queer Cinema.

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Article reference

Morales Roig, Ll. (2026). Monstrous Lesbians: Character Construction in the Contemporary Horror Film. *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, *42*, 208-220. https://doi.org/10.63700/1342

LESBIANAS MONSTRUOSAS: LA CONSTRUCCIÓN DEL PERSONAJE EN EL CINE DE TERROR CONTEMPORÁNEO

Resumen

El arquetipo de la *lesbiana monstruosa* se ha construido a lo largo del cine de terror. El cine lésbico contemporáneo lo hereda desde cierta distancia. Se encuentra, dependiendo del subgénero del film, en el terror sobrenatural como una villana monstruosa, heredera de la vampira de los años 70 o en el thriller psicológico como una *femme fatale* asesina. En el cine de terror, las protagonistas sáficas se construyen evolucionando el arquetipo desde autoconsciencia creativa e influencias de los estudios culturales. A través del análisis textual de tres películas paradigmáticas: *El cuerpo de Jennifer* (2009), *Thelma* (2017) y *Sangre en los labios* (2024), con una perspectiva interdisciplinaria desde la teoría fílmica lésbica, que combina aspectos de la teoría fílmica *queer*, el psicoanálisis y la teoría fílmica, se examinan las dinámicas narrativas y de construcción de personajes que configuran el cuerpo femenino del monstruo como un espacio de transgresión, abyección y poder. Proponemos la construcción de lo monstruoso como reflejo de una escisión interna con lo femenino, donde lo abyecto del cuerpo pasa por el rechazo al deseo, con figuras protagonistas que subvierten la narrativa tradicional y redefinen los límites de su agencia.

Palabras clave

Arquetipo lésbico; Análisis fílmico; Construcción de personaje; Lesbiana monstruosa; Cine Queer.

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Referencia de este artículo

Morales Roig, Ll. (2026). Lesbianas monstruosas: la construcción del personaje en el cine de terror contemporáneo. *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, *42*, 208-220. https://doi.org/10.63700/1342

recibido/received: 22.09.2025 | *aceptado/accepted:* 15.01.2026

Edita / Published by

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ISSN 1885-3730 (print) /2340-6992 (digital) **DL** V-5340-2003 **WEB** www.revistaatalante.com **MAIL** info@revistaatalante.com