2014

Queerly Monstrous: Reading Party Monster as a Postmodern Horror Film

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Recommended Citation
Russell, Saralyn (2014) "Queerly Monstrous: Reading Party Monster as a Postmodern Horror Film," Kino: The Western Undergraduate Journal of Film Studies: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.
Available at: https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/kino/vol5/iss1/4
Queerly Monstrous: Reading Party Monster as a Postmodern Horror Film

Abstract
Russell uses theories of masquerade to investigate queer typification and the possible reclamation of anti-reproductivity as a sexual ethic. It considers the film's camp portrayal of Club Kid culture through the historical slippage of homosexuality and horror, suggesting that its moral relativism reveals aporia not only within mainstream endorsement of consumerist plenitude, but also within cinematic principles of identification.

Keywords
Queerness, Party Monster, club culture, consumerism, identification

This article is available in Kino: The Western Undergraduate Journal of Film Studies: https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/kino/vol5/iss1/4
From the mid 1980s to early 1990s, New York City was home to an intriguing and outrageous subcultural troupe that called themselves the Club Kids. The Club Kids led lives of excess that included outrageous costumes, drugs, and parties. Michael Alig was arguably the most famous of the group; he had his own record label, magazine, and popular club nights (“Party Monster”). Michael also had a serious drug addiction, and in 1997 he was convicted of murdering his drug dealer over an unsettled debt. Michael went to prison while his close friend and fellow Club Kid, James St. James, published *Disco Bloodbath: A Fabulous But True Tale of Murder in Clubland*. The book offered non-fictional account of the underground subculture, in addition to a chronicling of the murder case. *Disco Bloodbath* served as the basis of the 2003 feature film *Party Monster*, which will be the focus of the present essay. The film grossed only $742,898 worldwide and was received poorly by critics (“Box Office…”). Perhaps for this reason, no peer-reviewed journal articles or scholarly work has been published on *Party Monster* to date. The present essay addresses this literature gap by providing a queer reading of the film.

While *Party Monster* has been classified as “biography, crime, drama” (“Party Monster”) and “comedy” (“Box Office…”), in this essay I will argue that it can be read as a postmodern horror film. While the scope of the present essay does not allow for a complete explanation of postmodernity, it is important for readers to have some foundational knowledge of the concept. Pinedo offers a reasonably straightforward description:

> The postmodern world is an unstable one in which traditional (dichotomous) categories break down, boundaries blur, institutions fall into question, Enlightenment narratives collapse, the inevitability of progress crumbles, and the master status of the universal (read male, white, monied, heterosexual) subject deteriorates. (86)

Importantly, I am providing a reading of *Party Monster* as a postmodern horror film, as opposed to a classical horror film. This distinction was identified and emphasized by Tudor in his 1989 book *Monsters and Mad Scientists: A Cultural History of the Horror Movie*. Building
upon Tudor’s work, another author succinctly explains that within classical horror films, “the boundary between good and evil, normal and abnormal, human and alien is firmly drawn”, whereas within postmodern horror films the boundary is “blurred, or sometimes indistinguishable” (Pinedo 89-90). Indeed, “one of the defining features of postmodernism is the aggressive blurring of boundaries” (Pinedo 85). This blurring of boundaries and binaries is a theme throughout *Party Monster*, and it serves as the foundation for the forthcoming queer reading of Michael Alig as a postmodern movie monster.

The phrase “party monster” presumably refers to Michael, whose party lifestyle spiraled out of control and ended with a “monstrous” crime (he injected the body with Drano, chopped it into pieces, and disposed of it in a river). However, in this essay I will set aside the murder to explore the ways in which Michael – and more broadly, the Club Kids - can be read as cultural “monsters”. This is an excellent entry point into a reading of *Party Monster* as a horror film, due to “a simple and obvious basic formula for the horror film: normality is threatened by the Monster” (Woods 78). It is first and foremost the Club Kids’ eschewing of normative lifestyles that position them as threats to normality. As Michael’s voiceover informs the viewer near the beginning of the film, “one day, I realized I didn’t want to get up in the morning and go to work, I didn’t want to be like all the drearies and normals” (*Party Monster*). The Club Kids eschewed normal – in fact, they mocked normality and approached it with disdain. Denne notes that, “monster movies are a form of social problem play in that they deal with deviance from the norm” (125). What kind of “social problem play”, then, does *Party Monster* perform?

*Party Monster* is, at its core, a film about the pleasures and dangers of excessive indulgence. The Club Kids sought fame and pleasure with complete disregard for society’s ‘rules’. Woods notes that, “the definition of normality in horror films is in general boringly
constant: the heterosexual monogamous couple, the family, and the social institutions (police, church, armed forces) that support and defend them” (79). The Club Kids posed a threat to all of these entities; they eschewed normative family units in favor of queer webs of social relations, and they disregarded any moral, legal or religious laws. In addition, they were promiscuous and non-heterosexual, a fact that is significant in the context of movie monsters. Woods’ definition (“the heterosexual monogamous couple”) positions all modes of queerness as threats to normality, and it alludes to the fact that the monster and the homosexual have been often conflated in public consciousness. It is perhaps unsurprising that “[homosexuals] are often filtered through the iconography of the horror film”, because “homosexuals supposedly represent the destruction of the procreative nuclear family, traditional gender roles, and … ‘family values’” (Benshoff 1-2). But were the Club Kids homosexuals? While the viewer originally assumes Michael is gay because he has a boyfriend, he later obtains a girlfriend without much ado. As one reporter in the film notes, the Club Kids have “no particular sexual preference”. With that said, the link between the homosexual and the monster is still quite relevant, because the Club Kids did support and value open expressions of homosexuality. Many of them are openly gay, such as James St. James and Richie Rich. Others, such as drag queen RuPaul, do not identify as “gay” but are certainly queer in some respects. Michael Alig himself was open about his attraction to both men and women, and he actively subverted gender norms through his own gender presentation. Michael represents the New Queer Monster, a figure that is even scarier than the traditional homosexual monster. The New Queer Monster is not decidedly homosexual, nor decidedly heterosexual; it runs amok and resists definition. This blurring of binaries could conceivably horrify heterosexual viewers who are accustomed to clear cut (sexual) characterizations – in film, and in “real life”.
Indeed, viewers prefer binaries to be upheld; they also prefer to be reassured that the monsters they are watching in films do not pose them a threat in “real life”. Gifford examines this phenomenon in his book about classic movie monsters, specifically in his discussion of “the mask” (34). He argues that, “filmgoers clearly prefer their freaks to be fakes – there is comfort in knowing that the monster is only a man in a mask of makeup” (34). The idea of men in make-up being classic monsters is incredibly telling; it alludes to the fear that drag queens and gender non-conforming male bodies elicit in the mainstream public. Indeed, part of what fascinated and repulsed the general public about the Club Kids’ identities was their embrace of make-up, costuming, and gender play. In one scene, James St. James sports a costume that includes rubber breasts. In another, Michael wears dresses as a zombie woman. A recurring female character in the film, Superstar Christina, was actually played by singer Marilyn Manson – a cisgender man who embraces gender play in and out of Party Monster. In addition to these obvious examples, Michael frequently wore lipstick and “female” clothing; like the other Club Kids, he relied heavily on make-up to complete his outrageous costumes.

Beyond the significance of makeup on men as queer, Gifford’s quote has another implication in relation to Party Monster. On the one hand, the Club Kids were “just” men in masks of make-up, so logically viewers should feel comforted by their adherence to the “freaks as fakes” paradigm. On the other hand, the Club Kids described their make-up and costumes as external representations of who they were “inside” (free spirits who eschew normativity). Thus, even when the Club Kids took off their “masks”, their challenge to normativity remained. In this case of the film’s main characters, make-up revealed the monster rather than constructed it – a truly postmodern take on Gifford’s mask.
When considering Gifford’s point about how audiences “prefer their freaks to be fakes”, it is significant that the film’s monster was not a “fake.” The film was notoriously based on a true story, a fact emphasized by white text on a black background at the beginning of the film ("BASED ON A TRUE STORY"). Interestingly, the film’s directors, Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato, had released a documentary on the same subject material five years prior. Entitled *Party Monster: The Shockumentary*, this documentary created a buzz that the 2003 *Party Monster* capitalized on. The films’ almost identical titles combined with their shared directors and subject material understandably led to some confusion among viewers; was *Party Monster* a documentary or a feature film? The opening scene of *Party Monster* added to this confusion, as it was framed as a mockumentary with Seth Green (playing James St. James) speaking directly to the camera, participating in an ‘interview’ about the ‘story’ of Michael.

Despite all of these suggestions that the subject material was real, it can be argued that the film’s cinematic campiness resulted in a sustained sense of fantasy in the viewer. The actors speak in exaggerated accents, the colors are all a bit too bright to seem “real”, and many of the staging choices feel ‘fake’ (which could be mistaken for ‘cheap’, but the film budget of five million dollars (“Box Office…”)) suggests that this aesthetic was a purposeful choice). This could conceivably leave some viewers in an uncertain state of un/believing, because the film embraces camp as opposed to striving for realism. The aesthetic choices elicit a cognitive tension in viewers, who may struggle to remember that they are viewing ‘real events’, and then feel horrified upon the re-realization. Importantly, Pinedo identifies the blurring between reality and fiction as a characteristic of the postmodern horror film: “nothing is as it seems in the postmodern horror film … the referent of ‘reality’ is gone” (94). Thus, I argue that the film’s employment of camp support a reading of it as postmodern horror.
Camp claims a complicated position within queer aesthetics. In his work on camp and the “gay sensibility”, Babuscio identifies four aspects of camp: irony, aestheticism, theatricality, and humor. *Party Monster* takes all four of these qualities to the extreme, a fact that further solidifies it as a film with a “gay sensibility”, or a certain queerness about it. Interestingly, one of the most well known examples of camping horror is *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, a queer film that is literally about heterosexuals being “horrified” upon encountering a queer subcultural space. Tellingly, when Michael and James St. James have their first extended conversation in the film, the script almost immediately contains a reference to *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. The characters bond over their affinity for the cult classic, with Michael stating that it is his favorite movie. One reading of the script would understand this *Rocky Horror* reference as a self-aware nod to the work that *Party Monster* performs. Such celebration of camping horror extended to the film’s marketing; the theatrical release poster is a good example of this (see fig. 1). The poster depicts Michael’s girlfriend eating his brains with a fork, while he lays lifeless next to a hammer drenched in blood (in keeping with the blurring of un/reality, this poster depicts a scene and plotline that never occurs in the film; Michael is not murdered, he *commits* the murder. The poster aims to capture the films’ tone, a mood, feeling…not its story). Also of note, despite the scene’s gruesomeness, the poster’s colors are neon and cheerful. This juxtaposition is campy and purposeful, possibly alluding to Michael’s character’s lack of concern for the seriousness of his crime. The text reads: “Good. Evil. Fun.”, a phrase that actually served as the film’s marketing tagline (“Party Monster”) - further advancing the slippage between evil and pleasure.

The slippage between evil and pleasure has had longstanding ties to public perceptions of queer sexuality as corruptive and wrong. Since queer sex is (usually) not procreative, it has been perceived as hedonistic, overindulgent, and selfish. In 1977, the “Save Out Children” campaign
drew upon this kind of rhetoric, and also advanced the notion of homosexual recruitment as a threat. Anita Bryant, a homophobic bigot who spearheaded the campaign, made the following statement in 1978: “As a mother, I know that homosexuals cannot biologically reproduce children, therefore, they must recruit our children” (Bryant). Statements like this fueled social anxieties around queerness as “catching”. As one author noted, many conservatives, “understand homosexuality as a Disease-of-the-Devil that sinful people accept and willfully spread to innocent victims” (Benshoff 242). This slippage between recruitment and contagion/disease intensified with the emergence of HIV/AIDS five years after the founding of “Save Our Children”. AIDS was immediately linked to gay sexuality in American public consciousness, as it was named “Gay-Related Immune Deficiency” (GRID) upon initial discovery in 1982. Popular discourse around the issue was clear: the result of gay sex was that bodies became diseased, disfigured, and monstrous. Interestingly, the rise of Club Kid culture coincided exactly with social panics around HIV/AIDS. From the mid 1980s to the early 1990s, the American public watched and read about the Club Kids at the same time that they grew to fear HIV/AIDS and associate it with queer bodies. While the film Party Monster never mentions HIV/AIDS, the disease almost certainly affected the group’s members because they were entrenched in the queer arts scene of New York at that particular historical moment. Notably, viewers of Party Monster see Michael inject himself with drugs and speak openly about gay sex, two of the most common modes of transferring HIV/AIDS. I therefore argue that discourse around HIV/AIDS could affect viewers’ perceptions of his character, working to further construct him as a monstrous body.

The connection between movie monsters, queerness, and sex is also significant in other respects. Building upon the notion of queer sex as non-procreative and therefore evil, one might ask: what does queer sex (re)produce in Party Monster? In her work on science fiction horror
films, Barbara Creed argues that, “one of the major concerns...is the reworking of the primal scene in relation to the representation of other forms of copulation and procreation” (4). Since Creed’s book focuses on the “monstrous-feminine”, her discussion of alternate procreations understandably centres on mothers (what she calls “archaic mothers”) (4). A queer(er) reading of this would consider the ways in which non-maternal forms of procreation can exist; procreation outside of heterosexual intercourse, and outside of traditional conceptualizations of familial and/or social relations. I argue that the formation of Club Kid culture depended upon a (re)production of queerness, primarily through the recruitment of new members. The Club Kids were quite famous in their heyday; they were regularly covered in newspapers and toured the talk show circuit, including a special appearance on Joan Rivers’ show (Romano). One scene in *Party Monster* shows Michael and James St. James on a talk show, actively promoting and endorsing drug consumption and excessive partying. In another scene, Michael and his posse travelled to Dallas to promote their subculture. They end up casually recruiting two new Club Kids, snatching them from their wholesome southern town and corrupting them back in New York. In this way, Michael and the kids (pro)created new Club Kids and consequently evoked the notion of queer recruitment. As the Club Kids pushed their levels of pleasure to the absolute maximum (more sex, more drugs, more parties), their numbers grew. Thus, as they copulated (indeed, they speak frankly about having frequent sex), their subculture birthed new members. Creed, writes that, “the central characteristic of the archaic mother is her total dedication to the generative, procreative principle. She is outside morality and the law” (20). This statement is applicable to *Party Monster* because Michael’s character is obsessed with expanding and improving his brand, his parties, his costumed personas…and his posse. He works tirelessly to generate publicity and fame, completely unconcerned with the moral implications of his actions.
He then committed murder and speaks about it offhandedly to James St. James, implying that he is “outside morality and the law”. Indeed, Pinedo states that postmodern horror challenges “the nature of the moral universe” (94), further supporting a reading of *Party Monster* as a queer postmodern horror film.

In his widely cited book *Skin Shows*, Halberstam examines the figure of the monster, particularly in relation to the gothic genre. He argues that obtaining pleasure from fear of the horror film is:

possible only by fixing horror elsewhere, in an obviously and literally foreign body … both Dracula and Hyde are characters with markedly foreign physiognomies … by making monstrosity so obviously a physical condition and by linking it to sexual corruption, such fictions bind foreign aspects to perverse activities. (13)

Michael’s physiognomy offered no ‘clues’ of his monstrosity, because his body was quite normative - male, white, blonde, handsome, and able. This is because Halberstam was considering the “classic” horror film monster; Pinedo explicitly lists both *Dracula* and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* as “classical horror films” (89). In contrast, it is fitting that a postmodern horror film would offer up a monster that ‘looks’ normal, except when he chooses to ‘reveal’ himself through a purposeful application of make-up and costuming. In addition to his normative physiognomy, viewers may also fail to read Michael’s body as foreign because of the actor cast to play his character. Michael was played by Macaulay Culkin, an actor best known for his starring role in the *Home Alone* film franchise. For the majority of Western viewers, Culkin is immediately recognizable as the adorable blond child at the centre of a bustling all-American family. Thus, the actor embodying Michael Alig appears familiar to mainstream viewers; they set out understanding him as safe and “one of us”. I argue that this created a tension for viewers who may struggle to reconcile the familiar Macaulay with the monstrous Michael, who they would prefer to perceive as foreign.
These factors raise the question: what happens when the monster is not foreign, but rather quite familiar? By many accounts, the character of Michael qualified as a ‘normal’ American. Near the beginning of the film, a voiceover states that he grew up in the Midwest. This is followed by a scene in which the viewer is introduced to his mother – also white, thin, blonde, and impeccably groomed. Interestingly, many of the Club Kids had quite normative identity markers; one ethnographic study found that the subculture mainly attracted middle to upper class Americans (Perrone). In fact, in some cases their most marked abnormality was their privileged economic status (for example, James St. James was a socialite with a trust fund to finance his lifestyle). The notion that Club Kids were rich white people may make the film even scarier for mainstream audiences who claim those identity markers. In a culture of individualism that celebrates ‘treating yourself’, were the Club Kids queer monsters or simply over the top New York partiers? Were the Club Kids doing anything wrong by reveling in their excessive consumption?

I argue that the film’s depiction of gross hedonism and pleasure creates a simultaneous repulsion and longing in the mainstream viewer characteristic of the gothic genre. Halberstam writes that the gothic, “inspires fear of and desire for the possibly latent perversity lurking with the reader herself” (13). Similarly, Woods argues that viewer ambivalence may arise from a secret desire to break normativity like the monsters themselves. He writes, “central to the effect and fascination of horror films is their fulfillment of our nightmare wish to smash the norms that oppress us and which our moral conditioning teaches us to revere” (80). While viewers of Party Monster are ‘supposed’ to be repulsed by Michael’s complete disregard for authority and the law, many of them may have been drawn into it (something encouraged by the film’s bubbly campiness). This forbidden desire to smash norms further destabilizes the binary of self/other by
making the viewer question their repulsion at Club Kid culture and grapple instead with their
desire for this non-normative mode of being. The fact that watching Michael elicits this desire
fits with Benshoff’s discussion of “the monster queer,” a new figure in horror films. According
to Benshoff, monster queers, “permit their audiences the pleasures of identifying with the
monster queer, and not the traditional normative pose of heterosexuality” (259). Again, we see
that Michael’s character can be read as a queer movie monster.

Observant readers will note that this brings us back to this essay’s first point: monsters
challenge normativity. A queer(er) fear, here, is not the fear of the non-normative but rather the
fear of the desire for the non-normative. The only quality necessary to become a Club Kid is the
desire to be a Club Kid; as Michael notes, “we don’t do anything, we just are”, and “anyone can
be one of us!” Thus, viewers may be especially disturbed by their desire for the non-normative,
because possessing that sentiment literally serves as the foundation of the troupe’s difference.
What is the difference between the viewer and the Club Kid, other than a leap of faith? The
answer to that question lies at the crux of the horror that mainstream viewers may experience
upon watching the film.

Fittingly, the final point that this paper will discuss is the film’s conclusion. Pinedo writes
that, “in the postmodern horror film either the monster triumphs or the outcome is uncertain”
(100). While Michael Alig did end up in jail, it can still be convincingly argued that he
triumphed. His character is obsessed with achieving fame and glory; at one point in the film, he
stands in front of an audience and begins chanting the following mantra: “Money, success, fame,
glamour!” (Party Monster). If this was Michael’s goal, then he succeeded. His story launched a
popular book and two films, garnering him even more fans. Perhaps ironically, it was Party
Monster itself that “truly immortalized Alig, reigniting his celebrity and turning his gruesome
crime and victim into little more than an afterthought for those who worshipped him” (Paul). This further supports a reading of Michael as Benshoff’s “monster queer”; Benshoff writes that, “the monster queer is really the center of attention, indeed is the ‘hero’ of many of these films” (259). To some members of the public, Michael is indeed a hero. Fans run blogs and Facebook pages dedicated to him. Furthermore, Michael interacts with fans by dictating his tweets over the prison telephone, since he is not allowed Internet access to use Twitter himself (Paul). He keeps his followers up to date on his life and “chronicles his relationship with his prison boyfriend Mike, as if Twitter were a very low-budget camera on his imaginary reality show” (Paul). Thus, while Michael is currently imprisoned, his story continues and his cultish following has not disappeared; he has not been “defeated”.

The films ends with white credits over a black background, with the song “Everything Good is Bad” playing. Five times, the following lyrics are repeated: “Everything good is bad/And everything bad is good”. This phrase captures Pinedo’s point about how the postmodern horror film blurs the “boundary between good and evil”, often rendering it “indistinguishable” (89-90). As viewers, are we supposed to be happy or sad that Michael was jailed? Are we supposed to desire him, desire to be him, or fear him? The line is blurred. Ultimately, a reading of Party Monster as a postmodern queer horror film is possible, especially with Michael Alig at the centre - a Club Kid, a murderer, a queer man, and a postmodern movie monster.
Fig. 1. American Theatrical Release Poster for Party Monster.

Works Cited


