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## Book Review

# Andrew J. Owen, *Desire after Dark: Contemporary Queer Cultures and Occultly Marvelous Media*

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An evocative synergy exists between, on one hand, unabashedly queer identity and expression in the media and, on the other hand, the wondrous, even eagerly strange, worlds of occult-themed film and television, wherein that which is both queer and occult may be valued, explored, and enjoyed for its eccentricities. This observation lies at the heart of Andrew J. Owens's excellent and insightful book *Desire after Dark: Contemporary Queer Cultures and Occultly Marvelous Media*. Owens explores how non-normative, queer personas have emerged, evolved, and been celebrated by horror TV and film creators and fans over the past 60 years for their resistance to conformity, particularly in media focused on witchcraft and vampires. Basing his approach to queer media studies in part on Alexander Doty's influential *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (1993), Owens explores how the production and reception of queer characters broadly conceived in occult media re-center and relish that which challenges "heteronormative hegemony".

Proceeding historically in Foucauldian fashion to mine how different eras and industrial practices reveal particular cultural engagements of the occultly articulated queer, *Desire after Dark* engagingly examines cinematic and televisual vampires, witches, warlocks, and other monsters for how they challenge the "straight" world by use of their queerly eccentric powers, and the pleasure particular audiences find in such resistance.

Owens begins his analysis in the Sixties, where a convergence of shifts in culture, industry, and audiences created new possibilities for television

programming and avant-garde film. The countercultural movements of the era opened the way to anti-assimilationist attitudes, particularly among youth who were reassessing prevailing ideas about sex, traditional values, and conformity. Following the lead of more tame TV programs of the era, such as the sitcoms *BEWITCHED* (ABC, US 1964–1972), *THE ADDAMS FAMILY* (ABC, US 1964–1966), and *THE MUNSTERS* (CBS, US 1964–1966), which both celebrated the occultly strange and comically examined conventional gender roles and ideas of domesticity, “America’s first supernatural soap opera”, *DARK SHADOWS* (ABC, US 1966–1971), emerged to appeal to the countercultural youth market. Employing camp in the context of a genre whose very open-ended narrative resists stability, *DARK SHADOWS*’s vampiric storylines, centered around Barnabas Collins and other male characters, invited a fascination with the eccentric and opened avenues for queer readings. The same era saw changes in the film industry – particularly America’s elimination of the Hollywood Production Code and creation of the ratings system, and Britain’s reconsideration of its own restrictive film practices – give rise to more explicit depictions of same-sex desire explored in vampiric cinema. In this light, Owens smartly examines Hammer Films Productions’ Karnstein trilogy – *VAMPIRE LOVERS* (Roy Ward Baker, GB 1970), *LUST FOR A VAMPIRE* (Jimmy Sangster, GB 1971), and *TWINS OF EVIL* (John Hough, GB 1971) – with its focus on the female gaze and lesbian desire, celebrating its frank approach to fantasy in terms both erotic and supernatural.

Owens’s analysis then moves to the Stonewall era and the queer community’s demand for cultural recognition on its own terms, which he notes corresponds with a simultaneous rise in Satanist interests. Here, Owens connects the frankness of the queer moment with that of visual representations in the form of underground, pornographic, and arthouse cinema. That each of the concurrent “outsider” movements demanded acceptance on its own terms led to an intermingling of occult and queer themes in films such as Kenneth Anger’s *FIREWORKS* (US 1947), *SCORPIO RISING* (US 1963) and *INVOCATION OF MY DEMON BROTHER* (US 1969) and French director Jean Rollin’s *LES FRISSON DES VAMPIRES* (*THE SHIVER OF THE VAMPIRES*, FR 1971). As they did in broader culture, efforts to suppress these sexual and supernatural expressions led to censorial scrutiny. With the coming of HIV/AIDS, a discourse of sexual infection found consonance in vampire mythology, with its focus on underworld lifestyles, conversion via “contamination”, uncontainable desires, and the power to bestow both death and new life. Owens’s close reads of *THE HUNGER* (Tony Scott, GB/US 1983) in its urban setting

and *THE LOST BOYS* (Joel Schumacher, US 1987) in its rural milieu highlight provocative commonalities and contrasts in queer themes and modes of the gaze in disparately set popular films of the era.

Rounding out his study are discussions of millennial cinematic depictions of coming out as both queer and sorceress and an account of the ambivalent politics of later queer occultic cable programs. The former begins with a reflection on the role of Tumblr in forming queer and occult interests and identities for younger Internet users and how “coming out” is increasingly an action undertaken in one’s youth; that those who are Wiccan or otherwise witchy “come out” to challenge dominant assumptions about their kind and their interests creates a common experience between these groups, the queer and the occult. Owens picks up on this commonality as he segues into a read on how two turn-of-the-century youth-oriented films, the mainstream movie *THE CRAFT* (Andrew Fleming, US 1996) and the indie *LITTLE WITCHES* (Jane Simpson, US/CA 1996), capitalize on this thematic convergence: to wit, both films present women forming “homosocial bonds” as they explore various “powers” that set them apart. Finally, Owens looks at cable programming, unbounded by the regulatory strictures of broadcast TV and in need of developing competitively unique and edgy programming to attract audiences, to find more recent TV shows that explore the queer and occult. Here he examines series that aired on the cable networks Showtime and here!, providing insightful interpretations of *THE HUNGER* (Sci Fi/Movie Network/Showtime, GB/CA/US 1997–2000), *THE LAIR* (here!, US 2007–2009) and *DANTE’S COVE* (here!, US 2005–2007), with their focus on the unconventional, both sexual and supernatural. His carefully nuanced discussion shows complexities in how gay relationships are coded, particularly in relation to occult contexts, such that a central ambiguity about the stability of identities and relationships of the characters is part of the pleasure in the unconventionally empowering portrayals; indeed, this is true not only in terms of the programs’ narratives themselves but also in their relation to broader political discussions of queer representation.

Owens’s book is well-written and well-conceived. His approach to the films and TV programs examined is to consider these within well-balanced discussions of contemporaneous developments in culture, media industries, and LGBTQ+ history, together with insights gleaned from horror studies, cultural studies, and queer theory. Especially regarding queer theory, those familiar with the literature will appreciate the range of theorists Owens weaves into his analysis. His subject matter, focusing as it does on the una-

bashedly eccentric, will particularly interest those whose politics embrace anti-assimilationist approaches to LGBTQ+ identities and popular imagery. In demonstrating that the queer, both sexual and otherwise, has been central to the success and historical development of the horror genre in popular, pornographic, and avant-garde media, Owens makes a clear case for why studies of sexuality, such as he undertakes in *Desire after Dark*, are important and even integral to media studies broadly conceived. Owens's book is an engaging exploration of how occult horror films and television shows eagerly explore taboos, queer pleasures, the supernatural, and life on the margins, set within the theoretical context of queer media studies.

Given the strengths of his analyses, some may wish Owens had included more media to review. Such readers would appreciate the insights Owens might bring to interpretations of other films and TV programs that meet his focus. Owens himself states that *Desire after Dark* is not intended to be comprehensive, noting that his choice of media is set amidst a much broader field of pertinent films and programs. Even so, there is room for expanded discussion. For example, although Owens acknowledges having excitedly waited for the TV series *BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER* (The WB [seasons 1–5] and UPN [seasons 6–7], US 1997–2003) to air, celebrates its engagement of queer subject matter and appeals, and highlights its importance in television's focus on gay characters and themes, he affords it minimal attention. Other relevant shows, such as HBO's popular *TRUE BLOOD* (HBO, US 2008–2014), also receive limited focus, and readers who appreciate Owens's highly skilled examination of other texts may wish he had afforded more programs similar engagement. Broadened examples might also lend greater weight to existing discussions, such as that of the chapter on "coming out" in millennial media, which examines one major studio release (*THE CRAFT*) and one independent film (*LITTLE WITCHES*). Including more texts for consideration – perhaps contemporaneous warlock-centered films for comparison and contrast with female-focused ones – would add breadth to the discussion. The book might also benefit from an all-encompassing conclusion, to reflect upon the broader significance of the more focused chapters as well as to suggest avenues for further scholarship. None of this diminishes Owens's expert analysis of the texts and historical moments considered; his consistently piercing study may just leave readers wishing for more.

Owens's *Desire after Dark* makes clear and important contributions to existing literature on queer theory, media studies, and the horror genre. His insightful, focused study will interest both fans of the TV programs and

films examined and scholars in various disciplines who will appreciate how adeptly Owens incorporates well-balanced discussions of culture, industry, genre, reception, and representation in compelling reads of the media reviewed.

## Bibliography

Doty, Alexander, 1993, *Making Things Perfectly Queer. Interpreting Mass Culture*, Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press.

## Filmography

BEWITCHED (Created by: Sol Saks, ABC, US 1964–1972).

BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER (Created by: Joss Whedon, The WB [seasons 1–5] and UPN [seasons 6–7], US 1997–2003).

DANTE’S COVE (Created by: Michael Costanza, here!, US 2005–2007).

DARK SHADOWS (Created by: Dan Curtis, ABC, US 1966–1971).

FIREWORKS (Kenneth Anger, US 1947).

INVOCATION OF MY DEMON BROTHER (Kenneth Anger, US 1969).

LES FRISSON DES VAMPIRES (THE SHIVER OF THE VAMPIRES, Jean Rollin, FR 1971).

LITTLE WITCHES (Jane Simpson, US/CA 1996).

LUST FOR A VAMPIRE (Jimmy Sangster, GB 1971).

SCORPIO RISING (Kenneth Anger, US 1963).

THE ADDAMS FAMILY (Created by: David Levy, ABC, US 1964–1966).

THE CRAFT (Andrew Fleming, US 1996).

THE HUNGER (Tony Scott, GB/US 1983).

THE HUNGER (Created by: Jeff Fazio, Sci Fi/Movie Network/Showtime, GB/CA/US 1997–2000).

THE LAIR (Created by: Fred Olen Ray, here!, US 2007–2009).

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TRUE BLOOD (Created by: Alan Ball, HBO, US 2008–2014).

TWINS OF EVIL (John Hough, GB 1971).

VAMPIRE LOVERS (Roy Ward Baker, GB 1970).