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Gay Love, Identity, and Visibility in Contemporary Horror:

*The Magnus Archives (2016-2021), Hell Followed With Us (2022) and
The Last of Us (2023)*

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Table of Contents

1. Queering Reading: An Introduction to LGBTQ+ Visibility in Media, the Horror Genre, and Text Choice.....	1
2. How Did We Get Here? How Did We Get Queer?: The State of Research of the Horror Genre, Gay Representation, and (Queer) Romance Plots	11
2.1 <i>Flamboyant Frankenstein and Homoerotic Haunts: A Historical Perspective on Gay Men and the Horror Genre.....</i>	13
2.2 <i>"A Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name": The Intersection of Love and Queerness in the Horror Genre.....</i>	19
2.3 <i>Coming Out of Hiding: Queer Visibility in Horror.....</i>	20
3. "You Are My Reason": Analysing <i>The Magnus Archives</i>	24
3.1 <i>The Magnus Archives is a Horror Podcast</i>	24
3.2 <i>"I Am in Love and I Will Not Forget That": Gay Love in The Magnus Archives.....</i>	30
3.3 <i>"I Don't Know What I See When I Look at You": Identity in The Magnus Archives</i>	35
3.4 <i>"I Spy with My Little Eye; Literally Everything": Visibility in The Magnus Archives.....</i>	37
4. "This Self Won't Last Me Long": Analysing <i>Hell Followed With Us</i>.....	43
4.1 <i>Hell Followed With Us is a Horror Novel.....</i>	44
4.2 <i>"I Am Gay and Trans as Hell": Gay Love in Hell Followed With Us.....</i>	49
4.3 <i>"And I Am a Goddamn Person": Identity in Hell Followed With Us.....</i>	51
4.4 <i>"The Truth Is Beautiful": Visibility in Hell Followed With Us.....</i>	55
5. "I Was Never Afraid Before You Showed Up": Analysing "A Long, Long Time" from <i>The Last of Us</i>	59
5.1 <i>The Last of Us is a Horror Show</i>	60
5.2 <i>"You Were My Purpose": Gay Love in The Last of Us</i>	62
5.3 <i>"Don't Tread on Me": Identity in The Last of Us</i>	66
5.4 <i>"This Is You": Visibility in The Last of Us</i>	70
6. Leaving the Monster in the Closet: A Conclusion	74
Bibliography	79
<i>Primary Sources</i>	79
<i>Secondary Sources</i>	79
Statement on Plagiarism	82

1. Queering Reading: An Introduction to LGBTQ+ Visibility in Media, the Horror Genre, and Text Choice

For many of us who are LGBTQ+, queer¹ literature can provide solace, joy, a lifeline. (Abraham n. pag.)

Stories of visible queerness, of resilience, queer community, and love in the face of adversity have always been relevant. Existing as a fringe group, outside of the socially accepted heterosexual and binary gender norm, queer people have had to fight for their right to take up space. Especially in times of renewed, rampant, and public anti-queerness, queer stories must be heard and uplifted (cf. Hartless 234). For example, book bans, like in the United States, seek to eradicate queer points of view, and lived experiences from bookshelves, taking away points of identification for young queer readers and antagonising and vilifying the literary representation of queerness as a whole (cf. Schumer n. pag.). On the one hand, attempt to force LGBTQ+ media back into the closet cannot be understated in its destructive power. On the other hand, the healing properties of LGBTQ+ representation needs to be understood as well (cf. Schumer n. pag.; cf. Abraham n. pag.). According a 2022 national survey done by The Trevor Project, a US American queer charity, 89% of queer youth feel better about their identities after viewing representations of themselves on television (cf. The Trevor Project n. pag.). In "Media: A Catalyst for Resilience in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Youth", Craig et al. identify that

the overall increase in the representation of LGBTQ people (including youth) in media may have the potential to foster well-being in LGBTQ populations. Media, and the LGBTQ role models it provides, may positively influence identity formation and self-perception, as well as provide a source of both comfort and pride. (Craig et al. 257)

¹ In the last thirty years, "queer" has experienced a drastic shift in meaning away from a derogatory term for homosexuality. In the 1990s, in response to the AIDS crisis, some in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community began reappropriating the term "queer" as an umbrella term indicating membership in the community as well as offering a point of identification and means to represent those with expressions and identities outside of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender experiences (cf. GLAAD 47). I use queer and LGBTQ+ interchangeably.

Similarly, in an interview with Penguin, a UK publisher, author Mohsin Zaidi says:

Stories help shape cultures and if you hear no stories about something that is a part of you then, to my mind, that part of you can't possibly develop and mature at the same pace as the rest. [...] That's the importance of queer reading; it nurtures you, and helps every part of you grow. (Zaidi in: Abraham n. pag.)

Queer visibility is vitally important for the well-being of queer youth and adults alike. Shelley L. Craig, Lauren McInroy, Lance T. McCready and Ramona Alaggia's participation study on media being a catalyst for resilience found that participation in and consumption of LGBTQ+ media by LGBTQ+ identified young adults served four major functions:

Participants articulated four major ways in which media was a catalyst for resilience by buffering discriminatory experiences. Media provided participants with opportunities for (a) coping through escapism, (b) feeling stronger, (c) fighting back, and (d) finding and fostering community. [...] Said another way, marginalized youth that seek out supportive content despite the many negative messages they encounter are already taking a certain amount of initiative. (Craig et al. 262)

That being said, queer media is not only of vital importance for queer audiences, but also for non-queer viewers, readers, and listeners.

The media we consume holds tremendous power to construct and deconstruct norms, to normalise or to stigmatise (cf. Jacobs and Meeusen 2145). To an extent, parasocial contact with media representations of members of the queer community can act as catalysts for real-life acceptance and openness towards them (cf. Jacobs and Meeusen 2145). Despite this, in a study of over 30 years of queer representation in television news between 1986 and 2017, Laura Jacobs and Cecil Meeusen, have found that while queerness has garnered attention, this does not coincide with positive representation or even the number of queer voices made visible in media (cf. Jacobs and Meeusen 2145).

How current issues of queer visibility in media operate is not only a quantitative but also a qualitative question. What counts as queer representation may change depending on the parameters: does a character need to state their label while looking directly into the camera or is referring to an off-screen spouse in gender neutral terms enough to infer queerness? Or does an extratextual announcement suffice, even if the text itself leaves much up to interpretation? Furthermore, what queerness is shown? Most queer characters, in recent television, are white, gay, cisgender men, showing that qualitative intersectional

representation is still very much lacklustre, especially considering the diversity within the queer community (cf. GLAAD 21). In a survey by The Trevor Project, almost half the surveyed youth identified as transgender or nonbinary, and 45% were LGBTQ+ people of colour (cf. The Trevor Project n. pag.). This shows a disparity between real life queer experiences and medial representation. This disparity continues as well when genre comes into play since the place where LGBTQ+ characters are most welcome is not just anywhere, but mostly specifically tagged subgenres.

While LGBTQ+ storylines or characters may appear within any genre, the subgenre of queer romance appears as a chance for queer representation. Despite queer romance being a relatively young genre which is attributed to two novels published in 2009, which included the tagline "An M/M Romance" after the main title with the intention of signifying the deviance from the established romance genre heterosexual norm, queer romance as a subgenre flourishes (cf. Whalen 5). Nowadays, gay romance narratives can be found in many places. TV Shows like *Heartstopper* (2022-Present) and *Young Royals* (2021-Present) feature gay male relationships front and centre, and are incredibly popular, both being incredibly successful on Netflix (cf. GLAAD 12). The most recent series of *Sex Education* (2019-2023) has broadcast an exceptionally diverse cast of many different explicit sexual orientations and gender identities. In 2023, according to the Gay Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation's (GLAAD) annual report on queer representation in TV, Netflix carries original shows with an accumulative 183 queer characters, Amazon being second with 43 and Hulu and HBO sharing third with 34 queer characters featured in original shows each. While this sounds like a lot, in percentages this means that 10.6% of original tv shows on streaming platforms are in some way not cisgender and/or not heterosexual (cf. GLAAD 7-8). Analysing 98 episodes of 2005-6 primetime television shows, Dr. Sara Baker Netzley has found that 7.5% of all characters in the episodes were identified as queer (cf. Baker Netzley 979). Moreover, gay characters were shown disproportionately likely to engage in sexual activities as compared to their straight peers, with nine being gay characters and 19 lesbian characters (cf. Baker Netzley 976-7).

It could also be that the default sexual orientation for most characters on television is heterosexual, so when a gay character is introduced, they are given lines and activities that reflect that orientation. Hence, that character might be more likely to engage in sexual activities that reflect and reinforce that orientation. (Baker Netzley 979)

Dr. Baker Netzley (cf. 982) notes, that in 2005-6, queer characters in television were beginning to be allowed to have character traits besides being gay. Therefore, while there is not an immensely higher percentage of queer characters represented in television series, there appears to be a notable qualitative change in the representation that goes beyond pure visibility.

Despite this apparent rise in awareness and media representation, gay narratives are still violently stigmatised (cf. Hartless 233). Often, they fall back onto toxic tropes such as the "Bury Your Gays" trope, which, as explained by Hailey Hulan (cf. 17), is a literary trope that has seen use since the 19th century, in which one or both interested parties of a queer romance must tragically die due to the repercussions of an unaccepting society before ever being able to live their romance at all. A prolific example for this that comes to mind is the 2005 film *Brokeback Mountain* based on Annie Proulx's 1997 short story of the same name, where two men fall in love but, after a single night of passion, one of them is brutally assaulted and killed for being gay. Another example would be the more recent novel *A Little Life* (2015) by Hanya Yanagihara, about Jude's terrible traumas, his and Willem's relationship and Jude's eventual suicide. Pulitzer-winning book critic Andrea Long Chu writes about Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life* that it, like *Brokeback Mountain* and other gay narratives, is preoccupied with "trauma plot" rather than any actual character motivations or investigations of the functions of queer romance untangled from a usage as mere "life support" (Chu n. pag.). Andrea Long Chu writes that Yanagihara has a "touristic kind of love for gay men" wherein by "exaggerating their vulnerability to humiliation and physical attack, she justifies a maternal posture of excessive protectiveness" (Chu n. pag.). "Trauma Plot" and "Bury Your Gays" are two prolific and stubborn tropes that reduce gay representation to only the (genre non-specific) horrors of an LGBTQ+ identity in a homophobic society. Even the aforementioned *Young Royals* and *Heartstopper* deal almost primarily with the problems gay people face whether coming out, being forcibly outed or staying in the closet.

Conventions of realism may be restricting. What may hold narratives back from giving space to queer storylines or characters is some texts' claim to mirror the real world closely: in a world where a fictionalised society comparable to our own exists, so inadvertently do homophobia and transphobia. If they do not, this diversion tends to have to be justified with in-world reasoning. An easy justification to the absence of a society that is occupied with being homophobic is that there is something bigger and more demanding of attention within the narrative. If the world is ending, society is in shambles, who is making sure to uphold heterosexual norms

(cf. Doty 15)? In his dissertation, Eric Browning agrees as he writes that almost as a natural effect of its genre (un)conventions

[t]he horror genre became a clear space where queerness could be more openly depicted. In a genre that once stigmatized queer identities as monstrous and transgressive, queer filmmakers found a space to showcase queerness in a way that challenged and recontextualized the horror films of the past. (Browning 53)

In theory, if the main threat to the normative in a horror text is the horrible, the queer is relieved from that position it has been forced into. In horror, something horrible has already or is currently upsetting and threatening the heteronormative society, giving queer characters the space to exist without being said upsetting factor themselves (cf. Doty 15). Or at least it would work this way ideally. Historically, however, it has taken a long time to arrive at this point.

Queerness disrupts heteronormative society. This is true for real life, and it is initially true for horror. Due to pre-conceived notions of queerness as inherently disruptive, the viewer, gay and straight alike, will instinctively see the queer identity as aligned with the horrible, and understand, implicitly or explicitly, that the horrible is queer-coded (cf. Noecker 2). Even in the horror narrative, queer characters, despite the clear potential to comfortably house them as fully realised three-dimensional characters, are historically situated in the space of that which is horrible. Rather than utilise its enormous and special strength, horror tends to instead equate the horrible with the queer and vice versa. Therefore, despite horror allowing queerness from its very beginnings due to its inherent non-normativeness and ability to defy and disrupt rules about the taboo, the genre has yet to see much positive explicit gay representation, non-monstrous queers, let alone LGBTQ+ romance. It remains commonplace that in horror the queer character is used to horrify (cf. Noecker 2). This paper focuses on the exception to this, different types of representations of gay characters within the ever-developing horror genre. In my research into the topic of gay representation in horror I have come across many lists claiming to contain the "Top 10 LGBTQ+ Horror Film Must-Watches" or "Queer Romance in the Horror Genre". However, those texts' representation remains either implicit (most lists, despite their misleading titles, clarify the purely sub-textual queerness in an added subtitle), fanon (only speculative canon amongst fans), or even explicitly perpetuates homophobic stereotypes.

One example of failed queer possibility which appears as a staple amongst "queer horror media" would be *A Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge*

(1985) which is often hailed as a landmark iconic queer horror film, even called "Nightmare on Gay Street" colloquially, in which the main character is often thought of as struggling to come to terms with his homosexuality, yet

much of the discourse surrounding it — including some pro-gay discourse — is rooted in longstanding hegemonic notions of masculinity whereby gender and sexuality are collapsed together in a manner that suggests a boy who behaves like a girl is necessarily gay, weak, and less than a "real" man. (Thorn 886)

Any probability of a homoerotic reading of the relationship between the killer Freddy and the teen protagonist Jesse is overshadowed by Jesse, possessed by Freddy, killing an explicitly queer man and the fact that Jesse is ultimately saved by his girlfriend kissing him, in a metaphorical victory of heterosexuality over the monstrous homosexuality (cf. Thorn 888). Therefore, despite taking queerness out of the taboo position and making it plot relevant in some cases, this works more often than not by equating the queer identity with the horrible that is posing the threat, which is something I will focus on more in chapter 2.

For my thesis I have chosen three differing types of texts that are all situated within the horror genre, are recent, and prominently feature visible gay love between central characters. As I have stated above, there is a need for queer visibility in media both to the benefit of queer and non-queer audiences yet explicit LGBTQ+ characters are still underrepresented (cf. GLAAD 9). Previous incursions into the realm of gay representation in horror, undergone by Harry M. Benshoff for example, have focused mostly on subtextual queerness or negative monstrous queers. Therefore, I have made sure that my three texts all include gay characters whose sexual identity is not a point of debate. *The Magnus Archives* (2016-2020) podcast was chosen due to an initial interest in podcast/audio media research. The gay storyline unfolds alongside the horror one, and the protagonist Jon has an especially interesting relationship with (queer) visibility due to the podcasts symbol of the eye being ever-present. *Hell Followed With Us* (2022) was selected due to its dual focus on gay (and trans) identity and monstrousness, as it aligns with historical research into the horror genre but presents a modern twist and detangling of the two historically parallel identities as well as reclaiming some of the monstrousness in the name of queer liberation (cf. Lindenburg 11). For *The Last of Us* (2023), episode 3 features a gay couple living alongside the horror setting of a zombie apocalypse, focussing on how their love flourishes despite these less-than-ideal circumstances. Whilst thinking about the issue of visibility, their storyline

presents an especially intriguing angle: is their love maybe only possible because of the apocalypse and the subsequent vanishing of many people that may have made their relationship a tough battle for acceptance? Visibility, identity, and love in horror are all part of the three texts at varying levels of significance.

Using precise language can be an important part of representation (cf. Baker Netzley 983). Being overt about sexuality or gender identity, rather than relying on subtextual hints and vagueness, is what constitutes LGBTQ+ media. Out of my chosen media, *The Magnus Archives* and *The Last of Us*, episode 3, titled "A Long, Long Time", do not explicitly state sexuality labels for their characters. In *The Magnus Archives*, a conversation between two secondary characters gives insight into protagonist Jon's previous relationship with a woman, in which he showed no interest to engage in sexual intercourse, coding him as biromantic and asexual (cf. *The Magnus Archives* episode 106 22:47-23:20²). In "A Long, Long Time", Bill admits that the yearning love song he was performing in front of Frank was not, in fact, for a girl (cf. *The Last of Us* episode 3 00:32:12-35³). Other than these moments, it is their actions, mainly being men in relationships with men, which speak for themselves. The absence of a need to outrightly state their sexual orientation is of importance here. Having sexual orientation or gender identity be an undisputed part of the character, without an inherent struggle for (self-) acceptance or hyper-focus on its non-normativeness, serves to normalise queer identities as simply one of many aspects of a character rather than a singular focal point and reason for problems. Among my selection, only the young adult novel *Hell Followed With Us* is explicit about its characters' identity labels: protagonist Benji refers to himself as "very gay" (*HFWU*⁴ 65⁵) and Nick is also referred to by the word "gay" (cf. *HFWU* 119). Both times the label gay refers to self-identified men being attracted to self-identified men, which is why in this thesis I will be using the word "gay" not as the more popular umbrella term for many non-heterosexual identities and romances, but specifically for referring to individuals identifying as men who are attracted to individuals identifying as men. A gay relationship, in this context then, is the relationship between two individuals who

² Due to *The Magnus Archives* being my only source for which I analyse multiple episodes, I will omit the podcast title while citing timestamps.

³ Due to me only focusing on one episode of *The Last of Us*, namely the third, I will omit the television show title as well as episode number while citing timestamps.

⁴ *HFWU* stands for *Hell Followed With Us*.

⁵ Due to using the kindle mobile app version of the book, page numbers may not be the same as other formats.

each identify as a man, whether transgender or cisgender, and whether their sexual orientation includes different types of attraction is irrelevant.

I have to note that there are a few other horror stories featuring explicitly queer, central characters such as the 2014 film *Lyle*, which features a lesbian couple as its protagonists, the 2018 French film *Un couteau dans le cœur*, whose setting is the gay and lesbian porn industry, the 2017 lesbian horror film *Thelma*, or Netflix's *I am Not Okay With This* (2020) which includes a lesbian romance subplot, however as I have placed my focus on gay representation, these and others like them are unsuitable. Why there is more lesbian representation than gay representation in the horror genre could be due to multiple factors such as fetishization of lesbian relationships by historically male horror audiences or the stubborn trope of the overly masculine man as the protector (which is itself explored in horror films such as *Midsommar* (2019) or *The Invisible Man* (2020)) in the horror setting. Dr. Baker Netzley, in her research of 2005-6 television episodes depicting queer characters, poses the idea that "heterosexual men generally are more accepting of lesbians than gay men; perhaps that prejudice is reflected in the gender make-ups of the same-sex couples seen—or not seen—on television" (Baker Netzley 980). It could be interesting to explore this unequal representation more in a different project. There is also an indie horror film called *Spiral* (2020) which is only available through Shudder, an exclusively horror streaming service, which features a gay couple as its protagonist, and the serial surrealist horror comedy podcast *Welcome To Night Vale* (2012-Present) which features a queer couple as its central characters, but since the inclusion of either *Spiral* nor *Welcome To Night Vale* would have still left me in a position to look for a third source, I have decided to embrace the variety in my media choice. It is an added point of interest how similarities and disparities in the representation are due to and at the same time entirely unaffected by their inherent differences. A lot of gay romance and horror hybrid media tends to be books falling into the erotica subcategory, which is not what I am looking for.

Whilst I would wish to be more inclusive, there is a lack of intersectionality within the sources of my choice. Intersectionality is crucial in any study, and queer studies especially profit from it, as unique experiences from people of multiple marginalisation – such as Black or disabled queer people – offer valuable insight. Due to having been historically silenced, these voices in particular need to be uplifted and amplified. The only intersections I am able to access with my choices is the intersection between queerness and neurodivergence, as Nick in *Hell*

Followed with Us is explicitly autistic and Benji, also from *Hell Followed with Us*, is a gay transgender man.

My goal with this thesis is to showcase how gay romance, visibility and identity, and the horror genre can come together to create a working unit of storytelling and how gay protagonists may work as central human characters in recent horror media. I argue that the aspects of visibility and love in conjunction with gay representation in horror are serving to sever the gay characters from the role of the monster in its historical sense and towards a contemporary co-existence of humanity, monstrosity, and queerness in horror. I aim to show how gay central characters and their romance plots are represented in each of the three selected works, and how they inform and are informed by their setting within the horror genre, seeing what functions the love and queerness serve both separately and in conjunction and how they are made explicit and visible, and how horror's historical connotations as well as current shifts in queer narratives interact with each other. This thesis investigates the nuanced intersections of gay identity and queer romance and delves into multifaceted themes of the horror genre. The separation of the gay identity from the horrible moment⁶ is special here and I intend to study it closely.

Outside of Remy Sumida-Tate, whose 2022 paper "Funhouse Mirror: Podcast Horror and Listener Culture in the Digital Age" partially analyses *The Magnus Archives*, neither *The Last of Us* nor *Hell Followed With Us* have existing scientific discourse published around them. Therefore, the main bulk of my secondary research will focus on gay representation within the horror genre, from which I will then conduct my own contextualisation for each text. To do that I will firstly give an overview of the horror genre's rich and inherently queer history, as well as pre-existing discourse about the intersections between horror and romance and horror and gay representation. Following this, I do close readings of my three selected works – *The Magnus Archives*, *Hell Followed With Us* and episode 3 of *The Last of Us* – in regards to the aspects of gay love, identity, visibility and horror building a framework with which to compare the three, looking at where their similarities and contradictions lie in an effort to make a prediction about the future landscape of LGBTQ+ representation within the horror genre. For *The Magnus Archives*, I will analyse scenes from the podcast by listening to them and interpreting sound design and dialogue, as well as putting into context the direct

⁶ Throughout this thesis I will be referring to the catalyst of horror as the "horrible moment". This could be a zombie apocalypse, a serial killer, a ghostly haunting or whatever disruption causes the horror to arise in the given text.

and indirect characterisations. The absence of visual or written information plays a special role here. As a novel, *Hell Followed With Us* will be analysed on both its dialogue content and the descriptive parts, choosing specific scenes which highlight moments where gay visibility, love or identity are especially in focus. Depending on whose point of view the chapter follows, these can be interpreted as direct or indirect characterisation. Lastly, selected scenes of *The Last of Us* episode 3 will be analysed by interpreting filmic choices of representation, dialogue, acting and context which goes beyond the single episode. Despite the difference in approaches, close reading all three sources will grant me insight that will enable me to compare the different aspects between the texts, so that I can conclude whether my idea of a new trend of gay representation in the horror genre is correct.

2. How Did We Get Here? How Did We Get Queer?: The State of Research of the Horror Genre, Gay Representation, and (Queer) Romance Plots

Even though my thesis deals with contemporary horror, a historical detour must be taken. Only recently has there been a shift in how queer people are represented, and the influence of past representations can still be felt. The horror genre occupies a special place in the history of queer representation. Despite its focus on pain and suffering, horror also gives a broad, affective, and relatable overview of the human experience, which can therefore more readily include diverse characters or storylines than more narrow narratives or genres that require certain stricter tropes to be fulfilled. Horror is more open to newness if certain recognisable key factors are included. In this chapter I will define what horror is as well as reconstruct the history of the LGBTQ+ representation in the horror genre.

The overall function of horror is clear: to horrify (cf. Cherry 4). However, to define genre conventions for horror is a task not easily done. There are many differences between the specific instances and reiterations of the horror genre through its long and varied history; whether it features a physical monster adversary, a deeply human monster or the protagonist's own psyche as the villain, whether the gore is overpoweringly gruesome or the absence of anything visually scary is the scariest part – horror exists in all these settings.

This absence of a true definition of horror is because genre in and of itself is fluid and hard to define as well as the fact that horror's longevity has naturally lent itself to many changes and adaptations over time, without losing earlier iterations nor excluding future ones from the ability to call itself horror. Brigid Cherry, in her 2009 book *Horror*, proposes that instead of being a single genre, horror is a term in constant flux compiled of certain styles, timely cycles, sub-genres and hybridity (cf. Cherry 3). The horror fiction genre is usually defined as "texts or narratives that aim to generate fear, shock or disgust (or a combination of these), alongside associated emotional states such as dread or suspense" where it is "[a]n eminently transmedial, transhistorical and marketable genre, [whose] horror characters and trends escape the confines of given texts" (Reyes 7) and become pieces of popular culture outside of the specific context of their first appearance. Horror, therefore, becomes highly malleable, with only a recognisable tone of "suspenseful, heart-wrenching, disturbing and confrontational exercises"

(Reyes 8) to tie iterations together under the umbrella term of the horror genre. Horror can

take on serious work and may – more successfully than social realism, constrained as it is by specific generic and taste demands – allow for veritable insights into the nature of taboo areas that otherwise remain outside the remit of the acceptable. (Reyes 9)

George Haggarty identifies this dichotomy in horror's Gothic roots as well, claiming that the real always has a shadow-presence which is a distortion of what the real should be (cf. Haggarty 9). Horror gives way for that which cannot be aptly named but that which can be experienced:

When conflated with the weird, which itself could be considered a melange of horror, science fiction and fantasy elements, horror may be defined by the terrifying moment of sublimity experienced as human consciousness is faced with its insignificant position in a vast cosmos. Here the unnameable, the thing we cannot understand or put into words, becomes the source of fear. (Reyes 8)

Therefore, another key aspect of horror is that it is a subversion of what is acceptable and what is othered, and how they interact (cf. Wood 83). The normative, which the audience is meant to relate itself to, is interrupted by the other, the horrible, which the viewer is meant to feel an innate aversion to (cf. Noecker 2). Society as we know it, is actively threatened by the monstrous (cf. Wood 83), or, as Reyes writes:

In the same way that taboos are everchanging, conventional and socially prescribed, horror continues to adapt itself to suit the needs of readers who seek it out for its promise of radical otherness. (Reyes 11)

For the purpose of this thesis, I will therefore define horror as requiring three distinct aspects in order to qualify as recent horror media. These are based on and tailored to my three chosen texts:

(1) There needs to be knowledge of a "before", that characters can strive to return to or preserve, as well as a "during"/"after" of the world governed by the horrible moment. This could look like a world ravaged by zombies and a group of characters looking for a cure, like in *The Last of Us*, or a looming doomsday scenario with a chosen protagonist having unique ability to prevent it, like in *The Magnus Archives*.

(2) There needs to be an adversary, which may or may not be synonymous with the horrible moment but is at least in some way profiting from the way the horrible moment has changed or will change the "before", in order to create conflict. In *Hell Followed with Us*, this would be the extremist and violent self-proclaimed Angels.

(3) There needs to be a single protagonist or a group of characters as a small-scale analogy for how society at large is threatened by the horrible moment. Their personal struggles, losses and moral qualms are indicative of humankind as a whole. This protagonist or these protagonists come in contact with the horrible moment.

Along this framework, what is and is not horror will be analysed. This will enable me to further analyse the other points of interest, namely gay love, identity, and visibility, their role within and around the horror genre needs to be established, which I will do in the following subchapters.

2.1 Flamboyant Frankenstein and Homoerotic Haunts: A Historical Perspective on Gay Men and the Horror Genre

So that it may be aptly grasped why positive gay representation within the horror genre is both important and recent, the history of homosexuality as it is intrinsically interwoven with the history of horror needs to be investigated, and character stereotypes and tropes identified and later compared with modern modes of representation.

George Haggerty (2), in his book *Queer Gothic*, claims that Gothic literature emerged as a genre at a crucial time in which it could function as a codified "testing ground for many unauthorized genders and sexualities" leading to a purposely queer genre. However, for the longest time, this queer subtext remains of monstrous kinds. Vampires, witches, werewolves, zombies, and the like are "shorthand for othered, non-normative identities" (Westengrad 121). This works because the queer body has been long-since demonised as non-normative, unaccepted, and monstrous. Which means that making use of these thoroughly pre-established metaphors will result in immediate recognition and familiarity for queer audiences, even if the representation itself is anti-queer (cf. Elliott-Smith 9). Cinema monsters, then, have functioned ever since as

doubles for societal views of homosexuals [...] capable of – and very interested in – destroying 'normal life' and toppling such vulnerable

institutions as the nuclear family, [...] the heterosexual paradigm, or a combination thereof (Morris 1)

The fact that the monster is usually destroyed by the end of the film offers a sense of safety and catharsis and re-affirmation to heterosexual viewers (cf. Morris 1). In his 1997 book *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuals in the Horror Film*, Dr. Harry M. Benshoff writes that

for many people in our shared English-language culture, homosexuality is a monstrous condition. Like an evil Mr. Hyde, or the Wolfman, a gay or lesbian self inside you might be striving to get out. Like Frankenstein's monster, homosexuals might run rampant across the countryside, claiming "innocent" victims. Or worst of all, like mad scientists or vampires, who dream of revolutionizing the world through startling scientific discovery or preternatural power, homosexual activists strike at the very foundations of society, seeking to infect or destroy not only those around them but also the very concepts of Western Judeo-Christian thought on which civil society is built. (Benshoff 1)

These societal fears are then translated and infused into the fears of the horror genre. This leads Benshoff to conclude broadly that "the monster is to 'normality' as homosexual is to heterosexuality" as "[t]he concepts 'monster' and 'homosexual' share many of the same semantic charges and arouse many of the same fears about sex and death" (Benshoff 3). The monster in the horror film is analogous with the image of the queer in the heteronormative world. Laura Westengrad agrees and claims that without fail

[i]n mainstream cis-heteronormative society, queer genders and sexualities have been an abjectified, "horrific" presence, and these mainstream investments represented via horror, as a mode of expression devoted to irruptions of the body, mean that the presence of queerness is often registered as an a priori spoliation of bodily norms. Indeed, the narrative trajectory of most horror texts involves monstrous creatures threatening the status quo with their very existence before finally being destroyed. Horror, then, and its Gothic rhetoric and aesthetics, is a tautology – queer and horror collapse into each other in the public imagination. Monstrous figures become a representation of anything that is "other" [...] and as such can stand in for anxieties around race, class, and ability in addition to gender and sexuality. (Westengrad 123)

Morris (2) finds a trend in horror cinema, where authority figures turn their straight victims into monsters, mirroring societal fears of predatory homosexual men "driven to 'recruit' the young and vulnerable into their lifestyle". Films such as *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* (1957), *Blood of Dracula* (1957) and *How to Make a Monster* (1958) are representations of these anxieties, in which elder queer-coded

persons transform a youth into a monster. In all three movies, the young, maladjusted victims are preyed upon by the adult due to their status as authority figures (a scientist or teacher). The power imbalance seemingly forces the young victims to obey against their will, becoming monstrous through mere interaction with the othered adults. This "converter" stereotype, as well as the one outlined below as the diseased, predatory monster queer still exist today. The continuous

stereotyping of queer people persisted far beyond the Hays Code era and is still prevalent in much of the media we consume today. This language is used to demonize, outcast, and ostracize queer people. When people minimize minority groups to their worst stereotypes and use that as representation, they do them a disservice. It prevents audiences from seeing these groups as complex, multifaceted human beings with unique stories to tell. (Lambert 13)

A few years later, Benshoff identifies another shift in how the monster in the horror medium is treated in the late 1960s when mass marketing of canon Hollywood horror films saw their monsters become increasingly consumed by younger audiences and with an attitude of adoration rather than disgust (cf. Benshoff 173). Since then, television shows like *The Addams Family* (1964-6) or *The Munsters* (1964-6) have helped to reconstruct the monster as a part of the group defined as "us" rather than a "them" to unify against (cf. West 510). As "[t]hese shows implied that the monster queer was really not so bad, that beneath his/her odd exterior, the monster was really just like everyone else" (Benshoff 174-5) which led to queer horror fans finding themselves validated and more able to be themselves, as their monstrous analogies were allowed to be. That said, rather than being liberating, these monsters appearing in nuclear family structures normalised a certain acceptable way to be queer that fits into the heterosexual norm (cf. Benshoff 175).

On the other hand, a rise in realistic horror films that forego the coding of the queer as a vampire or witch, presented the public with a more understandable and arguably more terrifying image of the homosexual; that of the sexually deviant mentally ill killer, as seen in *Homicidal* (1961), *Nightmare* (1963) or *The Haunting* (1963). This role of the gay predator stuck around for many years, including *The Hitcher* (1986) and *A Nightmare on Elm Street Part 2: Freddy's Revenge* (1985), a trope amplified by the anxieties surrounding the AIDS epidemic, leading to a conflation of homosexuality with virality (cf. Lindenburg 3). In *The Hitcher*, protagonist Jim is a cautionary stand-in for what the American gay panic-fuelled public feared may happen to their children if they interact with homosexuality in

any way, as Jim is preyed upon by the violently sadistic older man Ryder (cf. Lindenburg 3). About this, Lindenburg writes that:

Within these [monstrous] urges comes the question of his own masculinity, and how horror transforms gender. The horror monster is not an otherworldly creature like in science fiction. It is everything we, the audience and the victim, fear within ourselves. The best way to unveil these hidden aspects of humanity is by distorting the familiar. Gender roles are one of the most commonly unquestioned familiars for any person, hence why it is so unnerving when they are disregarded. (Lindenburg 4)

So, while the public came to accept the Hollywood monster that assimilated to gendered, patriarchal norms, they moved the feared queer into a similarly horrible moment role as the genre of horror evolved past the supernatural focus.

As the Hayes Code⁷ began to weaken its hold on Hollywood, a rise in explicit homosexual representation can be found in the horror film, yet it remains negative (cf. Lambert 8-9). Especially due to the AIDS crisis in the 1980s, Hollywood's gay characters were once more turned into "the source of body horror and menace to the heterosexual audience" (Browning 6). However, the queer roles appear limited to one of two opposing sides: the victim and the monster/perpetrator (cf. Benshoff 177). The victim, like in Stephen King's 1986 horror story *IT*, is often used as a vehicle to perpetuate anti-gay rhetoric. In the novel, the killing of Adrian Mellon is rife with slurs that, while represented as negative, are still written out for an audience to consume and feel affirmed by. Author Alex London, in an article for *Tor.com* writes that at least by showing Adrian and boyfriend Don as people and not as monsters, they were humanised to him, as he read *IT* at the age of 12:

Would I have liked to see gay people as more than victims? Sure, in hindsight, this narrative played right into the idea that to be gay was to be a victim and it would be a while before I was able to imagine myself as both gay and heroic, or to see that reflected in a story, and I was still terrified of what this world did to gay boys, but I no longer felt alone. I'd been shown who the monsters were, and that was the beginning of defeating them. (London n. pag.)

Queerness was either identified within the horrible moment and represented monstrous or within the queer victim that qualifies for being targeted by the horrible

⁷ The Hayes Code/Motion Picture Production Code dictated strict rules for Hollywood film production between the years of 1934-1968 and came as an answer to the 1920s film industry's lack of a code of conduct. Heavy censoring was the result of the Code, as it prohibited the representation of certain themes, including explicit sexual themes, profanity, suggestive nudity, or graphic violence. As queerness was considered sexually perverse, it was prohibited and excluded from explicit filmic representation.

moment. Either way, queer characters remained inevitably touched by the horrible moment. Visibility, then, is a double-edged sword: queer audiences find themselves explicitly existing on the screen, and yet a subtextually queer monster is less easy to identify and target than an explicitly queer one (cf. Lambert 8-9).

Most notable when talking about gay men in the horror genre is Jim Sharman's *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) (based on Richard O'Brien's stage cabaret *The Rocky Horror Show*) which reimagines the Frankenstein story in an alien and camp way. In *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, the audience follows Janet and Brad, a newlywed couple, staying at Dr. Frank-N-Furter's Gothic castle overnight, during which they discover their (bi-) sexuality. Much like in its Gothic roots where early horror films employ their queer villains having monstrous desires for one or both members of the heterosexual couple, Frank-N-Furter non-consensually seduces both Brad and Janet (cf. Benshoff 37). However, the film represents heteronormative society as restrictive and outdated, while the alien beings within Frank-N-Furter's castle, dressed in drag and expressing sexual freedom, are not bound by its shackles in a direct critique of the nuclear family, which gained the movie a queer cult following at the same time as mainstream outrage. Yet, even this cult classic is deeply problematic, as self-proclaimed "transsexual transvestite"⁸ Frank-N-Furter is revealed to be an alien, reaffirming the monstrous villainous status of queer people in (horror) media. Whilst parodying the old horror trope of the central heterosexual couple versus the queer-coded monster, through choices in representation of Frank-N-Furter as entirely alien, not understanding consent and breaking taboos of murder and cannibalism, he is far from what would be considered positive queer representation (cf. Benshoff 11). All the while, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* has remained unmoved as a corner stone of participatory queer community, as showings of the movie are never complete without people dressing up as the characters, pantomiming and singing along to the songs and throwing slices of toast, when an on-screen character demands "a toast".

Queer audiences have reclaimed *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* among much other horror media that uses queerness to horrify and stand subtextually or even explicitly parallel to the horrible moment. Whilst this is a feat not lightly

⁸ As I want to avoid, yet not exclude, outdated words such as "transsexual" or "transvestite" I will only use them in the context of this paper when absolutely necessary. For any other broad, non-specific instance, I will apply the abbreviation "trans*", unless specified as binary. The asterisk serves to include identities outside of the strict binary transgender experience of trans man and trans woman, such as genderfluid, genderqueer and nonbinary identities. All of these, at the same time, also fall under the queer umbrella, and will be present there, unless specification is contextually necessary.

disregarded, the question of the cost of this effort needs to be raised. The constant uphill battle of either ignoring or simply accepting queerphobic parts and intentions in order to find enjoyment, takes a toll on the individual. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes in chapter 4 of her book *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performance* (2003) that there are two different approaches to negative representation: paranoia, which expects and anticipates violation and therefore pre-violates the self with anxiety, and reparative reading, which seeks to extract "sustenance from the objects of a culture [...] whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them" (Sedgwick *Touching Feeling* 150-1). Finding comfort in something not designed for you is a form of resilience that LGBTQ+ folk has had to practice forever (cf. Craig et al. 256-7).

Moreover, every time something like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is shown to an audience, intended or not, it reaffirms biases and re-stigmatises rather than destigmatises. "Intent", Mia Lindenburg (2) writes in her paper "How to Make a Monster: The Homosexual Experience in Horror and Thriller Cinema", "is not the only relevant part [...] if it is accepted by the community". Intent and perception are two different entities. Which is why

[d]espite many of the intentions being harmful, any depiction of the gay experience has been eagerly digested by gay audiences not used to any representation. (Lindenburg 1)

The casual (cis-heterosexual) viewer will find themselves unsure of what to make of Frank-N-Furter's self-proclaimed identity when viewing the film in 2023, as there is no disclaimer accompanying outdated vocabulary and stereotypical representation. Why it is still eagerly consumed by audiences is a question that Westengrad answers as being:

counter-identificatory strategies of queer viewers of twentieth-century cinema, [where] queerness was often coded as insanity, predation, and monstrosity, queers recognized and gravitated toward representation in film despite its consistent association with villainy and death. (Westengrad 123)

However, the modern queer horror viewer does not need to solely rely on outdated modes of representation anymore. Nowadays, audiences are beginning to be able to instead consume some media that represents queer characters as fully fleshed out people and as protagonists that fight against the horrible moment, rather than being synonymous with it. Queer characters are more and more able to engage in

explicitly queer and meaningful relationships, so that queer audiences no longer have to take only what they can get and settle for harmfully stereotypical gay characters because it is better than nothing at all in lieu of proper and positive representation. That said, good queer representation remains the exception, not the norm.

2.2 "A Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name": The Intersection of Love and Queerness in the Horror Genre

In this subchapter I am going to show that gay identity and love can be entangled within and because of the specific parameters of the horror genre, in which deviation from the norm is not just possible but welcome. To do so, I will need to show what role romance in horror serves before the possibilities of gay romance may be explored.

In the horror setting, romance, like any other strong personal connection or interpersonal relationship, is used to drive the plot forward and keep the stakes high. The protagonist's loved one is in danger, which motivates them to keep opposing the horrible. However, romance plots can also be a point of levity and refuge in a genre that otherwise can become very heavy, especially with horror in a world like our own. For straight characters, the horror genre landscape and romance plot intersection look a bit different. Straight characters have since horror's establishment been allowed and awarded romance either as a means to motivate the characters to act and oppose the horrible moment, or to give them something to fight for or avenge, or to reward them for surviving (cf. Benshoff 116). These horror romance plots have only recently started to invite explicit queerness, even if the opportunity has been apparent for longer.

Before homosexual relationships became part of the horror genre, it was homosocial friendships that paved the way. Mia Lindenburg reminds that "[i]n a homophobic culture, it is easier to show men in their friendship rather than in a romantic or sexual relationship" but that due to horror turning "all relationships more desperate and intense" (Lindenburg 2) even these intended as purely platonic relationships turn queer-coded quickly. From there, more romantically charged relationships could exist.

Representing gay characters as capable of love is exceptionally powerful.

[...] [L]ove has so often served to consecrate the kinds of social relations that are already approved and admired, it has posed a persistent problem for queers. Queers have not had access to love, either as a representation

or as a form of life. Or, rather, they have had access to it only at the expense of their own queerness; love has offered an escape — often desired, sometimes despised — from the abnormality of being queer. (Halperin 397)

This claim by Halperin, that love is bound intrinsically to a heterosexual norm is why I see an opportunity in the horror genre to break with this expectation which, as Wood states, is one of the key functions of horror (cf. Wood 83). Both queerness and love and specifically queer love exist on the fringes of heteronormative society. In his 1993 book *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, Alexander Doty then calls for a queer reading of horror, as its norm-disruptiveness is reminiscent of queerness. Harry M. Benshoff, four years later, answers said call with *Monsters in The Closet* and claims that horror is inherently queer:

Since the demands of the classical Hollywood narrative system usually insist on a heterosexual romance within the stories they construct, the monster is traditionally figured as a force that attempts to block that romance. As such, many monster movies (and the source material on which they draw) might be understood as being "about" the eruption of some form of queer sexuality into the midst of a resolutely heterosexual milieu. (Benshoff 118)

This demand for romance and upset of said romance by the horror is therefore traditionally answered by inserting a heterosexual couple and having them be threatened by, separated by, and motivated by the horrible moment (cf. Benshoff 11-2). If, as stated before in chapter 2.1, that horrible moment is analogous to homosexuality, romance and gayness in horror occupy two sides of the spectrum, as established: the norm and the other, respectively (cf. Benshoff 118). Their interaction is that of a threat and a (possibly mutually assured) destruction.

By infusing the norm with queerness and placing a homosexual couple within the romance plot of the horror, the horrible moment becomes unlinked from inherently queer analogies. The queer romance in the horror medium is therefore the most effective and complete way of combatting the coupling of the horrible moment with queerness.

2.3 Coming Out of Hiding: Queer Visibility in Horror

Moving onto visibility, one must first regard the Motion Picture Production Code's historical and contemporary influence on Hollywood and Western media in general. Then a critique of the commodification of queer visibility will be done, and

how it is the horror genre that can easiest create a place for LGBTQ+ characters to flourish.

Upon viewing science fiction speculative stories, Chris West found a similar sense in his primary texts: homosexuality, if represented at all, tends to be done so by employing subtextual signifiers (cf. West 504-5). This is a result of the Hayes Code, which made the depiction of homosexuality impossible and therefore preferred representation through connotation, metaphors, and signposting (cf. West 505).

With the Motion Picture Production Code's taboo-making, "[h]omosexual subtext was born out of necessity, not a desire for cinematic subtlety" (Lindenburg 2). Yet even once the Code was declared unconstitutional in 1952, the beliefs it reinforced stayed present long after its legalities, continuing the tradition of the closet even into the next century. Its effects are especially staggering where homosexuality was previously visible in Hollywood: Benshoff identifies pre-Hayes Code movies with (stereotypical) gay and lesbian representation. These modes of representation were eradicated, alongside popular queer-coding signal-words such as "fairy" or "pansy" which had previously enabled overt representation to still remain somewhat subtextual (cf. Benshoff 35). New ways of sneakily representing queerness had to be invented and horror cinema, itself a genre of subversion and perversion, offered the ability to reproduce the un-reproducible, to show the un-showable, to make visible the invisible.

[W]hen a male monster approaches a male victim and the film cuts away from the scene, the audience is left to speculate upon the precise manner of the attack: is it sexual, violent, or both? For a spectator predisposed towards a queer reading protocol, these narrative ellipses open up a range of possible meanings. And as censorship became more pronounced after 1934, this only increased the connotative queerness of the genre. "Unspeakable" (or unseen) horrors and the "love that dare not speak its name" moved into closer proximity through the silences imposed by the Production Code Administration. (Benshoff 36)

Once filmmaking became a more accessible art form in the early 1990s, so called "New Queer Cinema" emerged as a movement, describing independent (queer) filmmakers' (queer) movies such as *Go Fish* (1994), *The Watermelon Woman* (1996), and *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) (cf. Browning 23). New Queer Cinema is a direct response to the AIDS crisis' re-demonisation of LGBTQ+ people, aiming to show cheaply, quickly, and without restriction by the Hayes Code, queer people's politicised struggles. Whilst not usually situated within the horror genre, New Queer Cinema would "rely heavily on the tropes and visual motifs of the horror genre to

convey queer trauma in a gritty and unapologetic manner" (Browning 24) as it tackles previously taboo themes of homophobia, the sex industry, mental illness and, prominently, AIDS in gritty, candid, and oftentimes harrowing ways,

Since the early monsters of horror cinema, representation of homosexuality has come a long way. Overtly visible representation in horror may still employ monstrosity as a vehicle, however in a self-aware manner:

Queer characters are still the villains, but they make a statement and prove a point. Queer characters still die in dramatic ways but are somehow revived and live to tell their story. Queer horror has not only broken free from many stereotypes but has also become more representative of the community. (Lambert 19)

That said, Sarah Batsheva Bonder (cf. 1) reminds that celebrating queer visibility due to increased capitalist interests distils the very complex matter of representation down to a question of profit. This process, rather than furthering inclusionary progress only leads to a watering down of social politics into a question of economic gain (cf. Whalen 30). The reciprocal relationship between capitalism and queerness as a political identity is multi-faceted: whilst on the one hand inclusion in media helps bring awareness and wide-spread surface acceptance, "representational media successfully absorbs queerness into the capitalist system that many queers continue to be negatively affected by" (Bonder 2). Even the very first publisher of gay romance Running Press claimed in an *LA Weekly* article that they recognised the monetary gain connected to "M/M romance" (cf. Whalen 6). However, a means in which queerness is not necessarily linked to commercial success is within the realm of fanfiction⁹ (cf. Whalen 7). Essentially a sub-culture of fandom, fanfiction exists on the fringes of the internet on a "know-where" basis. There, outside of regulations, publishing rules, market research, and capitalist orientations, gay stories have been told for as long as fanfiction has been around (cf. Whalen 7-8). Therefore, there seems to be more to gay representation in media than a purely monetary gain perspective, especially with *The Magnus Archives*, as a free-to-listen-to podcast with optional donations.

Many queer narratives rely on the vehicle of the coming out in order to make queerness visible. In the real world, coming out is often a necessary yet painful process. Representations of gay romance focused on coming out, such as

⁹ Fanfiction is literary work created by fans of a text borrowing characters, settings and themes and creating their own expansions on the world. Fanfiction tends to be published online and is free to read for other fans, if they know where to find it. Fanfiction presents a grey area within copyright law, as it is transformative, yet may use copyrighted material such as character and place names directly.

that of the movie *Love, Simon* (2018), often fall short of their intended purpose of normalisation and instead lean towards tokenisation and virtue-signalling (cf. Bonder 1). This type of coming out progress has therefore been heavily criticised for being flat and non-nuanced, as well as overly focused on heterosexual reaction to the homosexual struggle for acceptance, rather than homosexual self-realisation (cf. Sedgwick *Closet* 71). Omitting the coming out can lead to a more streamlined and natural queer representation, in which the queerness is simply allowed to exist without having to first beg for a space within the heterosexual norm. Therefore, to have representation move past the point of virtue signalling, a level of complexity is necessary when engaging with queer topics. Neither *The Last of Us* nor *The Magnus Archives* centre their characters' gay identities but rather present them as integrated and primarily unstated parts of them. There is no focus on an emotional coming out scene to attract viewership through drama or an engagement with homophobia as a plot point. While *Hell Followed With Us* focuses very much on Benji's trans and gay identities, it is done so in a nuanced way that appreciates the many levels in which identity is constructed, re-affirmed and even weaponised. Bonder identifies that "[w]hile transgender narratives are more visible than ever in media, the transness that is produced is a woefully narrow one stripped of its identificatory complexities" (Bonder 23-4) and that representation of

"[s]ameness" [of all trans* narratives] produces stereotypes even if they are not necessarily negative: the trans person struggling with their gender identity is not inherently negative or untrue, but gender struggle is not the only experience that a trans individual encounters. (Bonder 23-4)

Due to horror's genre fluidity, as discussed in the beginning of this chapter, different modes of representation are necessary, actively hindering "sameness" in its reproductions of identities. Horror invites those creating content within the realms of its genre to think outside of the box and create new and boundary breaking narratives that only must serve the function to horrify and nothing else in order to qualify. It is because of this that horror remains as a welcoming vehicle for visibly queer representation, not just subtext or code.

Having looked at the history of gay representation and visibility in horror media, as well as having established the importance of three-dimensional queer characters, I will now analyse three such instances of recently published overt gay representation: *The Magnus Archives*, *Hell Followed With Us* and episode 3 of *The Last of Us*, with special focus on their individual approaches to gay love, identity, and visibility in contemporary horror.

3. "You Are My Reason": Analysing *The Magnus Archives*

The Magnus Archives is an audio-only serial fiction podcast available on streaming services like Spotify. It is distributed by Rusty Quill, written, and performed by Jonathan Sims and directed by Alexander J. Newall. What starts out as an anthology podcast morphs into a more linear plot-driven narrative with multiple characters interacting and an overarching storyline revealing itself after the first twenty or so episodes. The podcast ran from 2016-2022, with a sequel under the name of *The Magnus Protocol* which released in January 2024. *The Magnus Archives* follows Jonathan Sims, newly appointed Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute London, an institution which researches the unexplained and the horrifying. Over the course of five seasons, the episodes include horror anthology parts, where Jon narrates other people's statements about them encountering the supernatural, as well as plot happening to the characters themselves as they try to figure out what exactly is going on with the Magnus Institute, and how the horrible accounts of statement givers are linked. As it turns out, the world has been home to eldritch entities feasting on people's fears for hundreds if not thousands of years and it is on the characters to try and stop these entities from performing apocalypse rituals and taking over the world. The fifth and final season follows Jon and Martin as they trek through a newly apocalyptic world after failing to stop the entity known as the Eye from completing its apocalypse ritual. To banish the fear entities from the world once and for all, Jon, who has become an avatar of the Eye, must sacrifice himself to save everyone else. His and Martin's fates are left open to interpretation, as the audience is merely given a glimpse into the world returned to normal, with no trace of either man, dead or alive.

In my analysis of *The Magnus Archives*, I will focus on different aspects of the podcast: its horror, its representation of gay love, of (gay) identity, and its handling of the topic of visibility. To do so, I will focus on a few select episodes as well as the podcast as a whole, to give further context to characters and plot development. What I aim to show is that *The Magnus Archives* occupies a special place amongst my chosen media due to its inherent properties as an audio-only medium.

3.1 *The Magnus Archives is a Horror Podcast*

So that I may showcase how *The Magnus Archives* is situated within the horror genre, I will firstly use my own definition of what makes horror and then

focus on two more aspects: the special narrative structure and atmosphere created through audio and sound. This will show that *The Magnus Archives* works as horror not in spite of but specifically because of its limitations from being a podcast.

Using my own definition of horror from chapter 2, *The Magnus Archives* certainly qualifies. The horrible moment is the apocalypse, therefore the "before" is any episode prior to episode 160, even whilst they already deal with the build-up towards the apocalypse, they serve to construct a previous state of the world which the characters yearn to return to. Even in season 2, as the head of the institute Elias Bouchard begins to exhibit manipulative behaviour, real evidence for the horrors can be produced and Jon starts to suspect a conspiracy against him, side characters Tim Stoker and Sasha James lose their lives in connection to the eldritch fear entities, we are still technically situated in the desirable "before". Episodes 160-200 are set "during" the horrible moment itself, showcasing a world ravaged and controlled by fear entities sucking the life out of the people on earth. Only the epilogue of episode 200 allows a glimpse into an "after"; the sound of birds singing, using sounds of nature to signify safety in stark contrast to the eerie sounds of the apocalypse ravaged world (Episode 200 22:05-24:21)¹⁰ heralds in a return to a normal that may not even have existed in episode 1 but even before that.

The imminence of a horrible moment caused by one of the fear entities is omnipresent from the moment Jon and the other characters realise its possibility. They spend each episode trying to figure out which entity would next attempt to rise and how to stop it. The horrible moment's agents Elias Bouchard, Peter Lukas, Jane Prentiss, Nikola Orsinov, and other avatars are antagonists which are stand-ins for their respective entities, attacking the institute, kidnapping Jon, or otherwise attempting to prevent the main characters from stopping their respective apocalypse.

Jon and Martin, as the main characters, and Jon as the protagonist, are stand-ins for humanity, as they fight to end the horrible moment, especially after episode 160. Their hero's journey from Scotland to London and through the fear domains provides listeners access into the horrible moment and by extension the collective struggle of all the people left alive. This experience of global suffering is exemplified with Jon narrating "statements" from the people they pass by; compelled by his own entity, the Eye, he knows about every single person suffering

¹⁰ Due to changes in pre-show advertisement on Spotify episodes, timestamps at the time of writing and the time of reading this thesis may not entirely align. Furthermore, quotes from the podcast are made in transcript form by me as no official script is available to use.

within the fear domains and relays their stories to the listeners. With a focus on Jon and Martin as central characters, the narrative sees their personal struggles elevated to metaphorical height as humanity struggles with life-threatening horror. In the end, Martin and Jon both confront the horrible moment directly and, whether to their own detriment or not, win back the world.

Now that the benchmarks of horror have been identified, I will move on to the specific aspects that make *The Magnus Archives* an especially effective horror medium.

Even on the level of narratology, *The Magnus Archives* manages to be horrifying by playing into the vagueness inherent to an audio-only text. *The Magnus Archives* follows a unique two-pronged narrative structure, where the chronologically unfolding diegetic storyline functions primarily as a framing device around the hypodiegetically performed statements that make up the bulk of most episodes, in which Jon acts as the heterodiegetic reader of a homodiegetic anterior experience log (except for very few statements which are recorded in situ either as a dialogue between Jon and the statement giver, or previously by someone else). For the first four seasons, these statements are given in written form by people visiting the Magnus Institute and recount supernatural encounters and are read into a tape recorder by Head Archivist Jonathan Sims in an attempt to modernise the archives. Recurring characters of these non-linear statements interlink with the overarching plotlines at points, as statements serve as foreshadowing devices or in-universe explanations for certain phenomena. Both levels of storytelling are recordings on the archivist's tape recorder, meaning that in-situ narration is oftentimes incomplete, cut-off or missing, leaving certain parts of the story up to be anteriorly recounted through character dialogue rather than experienced simultaneously or even remain entirely inaccessible to the listeners. Remy Sumida-Tate in an analysis of audio horror's audience participation writes that

[t]hough never addressed, podcasts like *Alice Isn't Dead* and *The Magnus Archives* through their presentation as things someone could simply pick up and hear – the former's narrator broadcasting over her truck's handheld radio and the latter existing on physical tapes – create an implied listener body for the real-world listener to inhabit. (Sumida-Tate 49)

This means that the audience identifies as being spoken to, which creates "the idea of space and sensation through the audio medium, the narrative body is given a full sensory experience; the narrative body moves, sees, touches, and *hears* within the fictional world all through the use of sound" (Sumida-Tate 49-50; original

emphasis). There is no "safe space" away from experiencing the horror, no looking away from the screen or the page, as the audio is an almost "invasive experience" (Sumida-Tate 50).

Having almost the entire the story in some way narrated by Jonathan Sims adds another layer of "missing" to some of the context, as Jon is an unreliable, homodiegetic narrator, who, especially in season two, comes to his own conclusions due to paranoia sparked by his (still unknown to him) avatar status giving him an instinctual knowledge of something "being off". Despite working for the Magnus Institute, a place for people with paranormal encounters to come to and report them, Jon starts out not believing in the supernatural, rather blaming external and logical reasons for the statements. Therefore, when context is provided in the later seasons, and the horrors previously told by statement givers are unequivocally verified, Jon retroactively appears highly unreliable in his narration. However, this unreliability does not affect the actual statement parts of episodes since Jon only reads them and does not change their contents. Each statement therefore varies in reliability based on the specific statement giver and their belief in the supernatural.

Jon's imperceptive narration also influences character relationships and how they are portrayed. Up until the point that the audience hears from Daisy and Basira that Martin has a crush on Jon, most information about Martin has been relayed by Jon, who is standoffish and rude about his assistant, even going so far as to present him as to be "discarded" as he is "unlikely to contribute anything but delays" (Episode 1 04:28-31). Jon's imperceptibility as well as unreliability are in stark contrast to his supernatural abilities to know everything he wishes to, which creates tension in his character. Moreover, getting to know characters through others' dialogue, or catching snippets of conversations between characters after statements are concluded brings the audience closer to them, creating a sense of looming dread at the thought of possible death:

This intimacy cultivated with the characters, as the listener hears them bicker and joke with each other throughout the season, causes the harm that befalls them to feel more personal. (Sumida-Tate 58)

It is not then only the characters that deeply feel for each other, but the listener also feels for them, due to having created a parasocial bond through the immediacy of the podcast medium. Thus, giving some intimate sense of character interactions yet leaving a lot of the story vague or unexplained with only mere audio cues to give hints at what is happening adds to a feeling of uncertainty and constant threat

which horror generally aims to elicit (cf. Reyes 7). The listener never knows when something may happen, as the beginning of a situation may be omitted in favour of throwing the listener in medias res into the horrible action taking place. As an example, in episode 21, while Jon is finishing up reading and talking about the episode's statement, he is interrupted by the sound of a door being opened followed by diegetic wet squelching and squirming and the archivist inquiring "My god! Martin?! What... What the hell is –? What are these things?!" (Episode 21 18:16-21) before the episode ends on a cliff-hanger to be explained in episode 22. The pure audio experience of the squelching worms is effective in signalling a shift in the narrative, opening it up to real-time experiences rather than just the anthology of statements, as it has been in the 21 episodes leading up to that point. This play with vagueness is where the audio medium as a vehicle for horror can truly shine:

Horror fiction may more readily disturb the minds of readers by engaging with their imagination. For this reason, a significant number of horror stories leave their monsters relatively unexplained or vague; as we have learnt, suggestion is often enough to ignite fearful feelings. Horror has to work harder to create a sense of atmosphere, as it uses words (sometimes illustrations), but it can also, equally, get by on very little – just what may be needed in order to disconcert or disturb, in fact. It is this creative and imaginative potential that, for this writer, makes horror such a personal experience. In this light, horror fiction may be best understood as the literature that actively, and predominantly, seeks to create a pervasive feeling of unease and which, consistently, although not necessarily always successfully, attempts to arouse the emotions and sensations we would normally ascribe to feeling under threat. (Reyes 9)

This "sense of atmosphere" as Reyes (9) calls it, is very strong in *The Magnus Archives*, as unsourced background music of haunting string instruments, the constant diegetic crackle of the tape recorder and disgusting diegetic audio choices for breaking bones, squirming maggots, and ripping flesh invite the audience to supplement "missing" visuals themselves in the most uneasy ways. All these mood devices create a horror atmosphere, as Robert Spadoni (cf. 154) recognises it. In a similar vein, Sumida-Tate writes that

[t]he listener must "believe" in the immersive danger of the drama in order to be scared by it, and the sonic environment created – even those that are acoustically simple – adds to the believability of the story being told. If one can hear it happen, even quietly, one can imagine and fear it as well. (Sumida-Tate 50)

More so than even film, a podcast's limited scope of elements to convey story and atmosphere to the audience leads to a strong bond between the two:

[... A]tmosphere should not be thought of as separable from narrative. Nor is it sufficient to say that they exist in a tightly integrated relationship, and that the line dividing the two can be fuzzy. (Spadoni 155)

Accordingly, *The Magnus Archives* plays with the horror of the invisible. Something that cannot be seen or known is inherently horrifying. Moreover, without direct parameters within which to imagine scenes or characters, the audience themselves decides how unsettling they wish to visualise certain things.

If you have ever heard a footfall when you were sure of being alone, or a strange sound in the dead of night, or a voice with no discernible source, then you know the horror that sound can bring. Although often conceived of as a background or supporting feature of Gothic and horror fiction, sound carries its own distinct narratives, potentials and aesthetics of terror. (Hancock and McMurtry 2)

Specific instances of audio design that are the same throughout the podcast allow listeners to recognise them and realise connections where certain sounds appear (cf. Sumida-Tate 49-51). The tape recorder's constant crackle is at both times diegetic background noise and "texture", an "authenticity" marker for the recording and an unsettling reminder of the constant surveillance of the narrative by the Eye, and by extension, the audience (cf. Sumida-Tate 55). In episodes 158 and 159, the Lonely Domain's sound design is that of a windy beach with waves crashing in the background. Both Peter Lukas' and Martin's voice are echoing, as they're speaking in their domain. Jon's voice remains unchanged, showing that he is untouched by the Lonely's power. Any time a Lonely Domain is entered, the echo returns to Martin's voice, as does the wind in the background, giving listeners just enough recognition to tie places together, but not enough to imagine a fully realised space, playing with invisibility as a mode of horror.

The sound design choices reflect the plot and vice versa, creating atmosphere and reinforcing the horror (cf. Whittington 175; cf. Spadoni 154). As a podcast, *The Magnus Archives* offers only limited clues to its listeners as to what is happening around the characters and plot, employing theatre-of-mind and relying on audience participation to interpret audio cues and description-bereft settings. With this audio-only approach to horror, the fiction horror podcast "potentializes a Gothicization" (Hancock and McMurtry 3) of the real world through the ability to listen to the podcast in whatever everyday setting imaginable:

The podcast liberates the audio horror experience from its analogue tethers, allowing listeners to alter any space at any time. Indeed, the mobility of podcast Gothic and horror extends beyond the simple ease with which a mobile audiodevice may be transported — it relates also to the seeming autonomy with which new material uploads itself (generally for free) to such devices through the podcast's RSS stream, and the capacity of new audio players to hold vast amounts of audio content. (Hancock and McMurtry 3)

Due to its specific sound design (or absence thereof), coupled with the unreliable, imperceptive narrator and a near constant incompleteness of scenes and cliff-hangers, *The Magnus Archives* claims a spot in a long tradition of Gothic modes of horror (cf. Hancock and McMurtry 3; cf. Whittington 174).

3.2 "I Am in Love and I Will Not Forget That": Gay Love in *The Magnus Archives*

Gay love in *The Magnus Archives*, while represented directly and positively, is oftentimes utilized to further the horror factor of certain situations, upping the stakes for the main characters, or making them use their supernatural, monstrous abilities (cf. Benshoff 116). To analyse how and why this is done, and to determine whether it results in a less or possibly even more positive representation of gay love in horror or not, I will examine episodes 158, 159, and 170 specifically to scrutinize the portrayal of Jon and Martin's relationship.

Jon and Martin's gay love for one another develops slowly over the course of almost 160 episodes. All the while, the plot does not centre their romance nor their respective queer identities, but rather assumes their relationship as just one part of what creates their character dynamic. There is no coming out scene, the co-workers' gossip in episode 106 does not concern itself with Jon or Martin's sexuality, and none of the antagonists comment on their relationship either. The only time it is addressed in somewhat of a mildly hostile way is when the monstrous Flesh entity avatar Jared Hopworth makes the joking remark "who's this? Your boyfriend?" in referring to Martin, to which Jon simply replies "yes, actually" (Episode 171 00:03:28-35), ending the conversation there. Bonder (cf. 22) argues that queerness simply as an aspect of a character or relationship is a more positive, high quality and progressive model of representation rather than a central focus on it would be. Gay love, therefore, is not viewed as something abnormal or alienating in *The Magnus Archives*, but just as love (cf. Episode 106 22:45). However,

viewing the podcast through a historical lens reveals the significance of a gay central couple. That said, Jon and Martin's love does explicitly play a plot-relevant role in *The Magnus Archives* and is used at times to keep the plot moving forwards as well as set the stakes for the horrors. Remy Sumida-Tate writes about the special interest that listeners take in Jon and Martin's well-being:

Later in the series, assistant Martin becomes one of the leads alongside Jon, and both he and Jon remain fan favorites on social media – especially amongst queer fans, as the two become romantically involved in the final season. As the podcasts include intimate and person details about their characters (a few "tapes" in *The Magnus Archives* begin with excerpts of Martin's poetry, for example), the listener is placed on the same personal level as the characters are with each other; encouraged by the intimacy of the position the listener has – silent and unacknowledged as they may be – fans come to view the character as something closer to friends than impersonal subjects. (Sumida-Tate 59)

The audience cares for Jon and Martin and their relationship. Due to it being a gay relationship, certain expectations are placed on it, such as defying stereotypes and tropes such as "Bury Your Gays" (cf. Hulan 17). Listeners may therefore suffer alongside the characters and fear for their gay relationship as Martin succumbs to the Lonely – the antithesis to love – or as Jon fears he might have to give his life to save the world (cf. Episode 199).

Self-sacrifice is a recurring theme in *The Magnus Archives*. In episode 158 Martin reveals his reason to fight, his willingness to give his life to be protecting Jon:

MARTIN: And then... Jon came back, and... and suddenly I had a reason I had to keep your attention on me. Make you feel in control, so you didn't take it out on him. And if that meant drifting further away, so what? I'd already grieved for him. And if it meant now saving him, it was worth it. (Episode 158 19:54-20:16)

Martin's wish to protect Jon eventually leads to defiance against Peter Lukas (cf. Episode 158 19:45-20:28) and his subsequent banishment into the Lonely Domain (cf. Episode 158 21:14-21:21). The Lonely, for which Peter serves as the avatar of, is the entity of loneliness, isolation, and invisibility, especially interpersonally. All of these are feelings that Martin experienced while assuming that Jon was dead (cf. Episode 158 19:22-19:53), showing why he was able to be lured by Peter in the first place; a first link between (the loss of) love and (the loss of) identity is established, which I will analyse in chapter 3.3. In an exchange between Jon and Peter, once he has followed Martin into the Lonely Domain to save him from being

consumed by it, Jon acts self-aware about his role in Martin's decision making, showing remorse for the position he put the man in, deciding between his own and Jon's safety:

PETER: [echoing] I tried to tell you. He's gone. He made his choice. And it wasn't you.

JON: It was for me, though. I'm the reason he... I did this to him as much as you.

PETER: Yes. I suppose you did. (Episode 159 4:45-5:06)

Martin was transported into the domain of the Lonely and by staying there, will lose himself as the entity consumes his biggest fears; being forgettable, being unimportant, being unwanted and unloved. Linking self-sacrifice and love yet again Elias, as an avatar of the Eye himself, supernaturally knows of Jon's feelings for Martin and weaponizes them accordingly to steer Jon into the Lonely Domain after his love interest:

ELIAS: Maybe. And I'm sure in another circumstance, you would be more than happy to take your chances for a shot at revenge. But... But for Martin, time is very much of the essence.

JON: Where is he?

ELIAS: Peter Lukas has cast him into the Lonely, and with every passing moment he gets further away from you. (Episode 158 22:59-23:20)

This link provides a sense of urgency that persists throughout the podcast. The intensity of the need to protect loved ones is due to the horror setting's need to continuously raise the personal stakes. Returning to Andrea Long Chu's piece on Hanya Yanagihara and the presumed sanctity and spectacle of gay male death seems to suggest that Jon and Martin's self-sacrificial tendencies in regard to one another serves to leave them represented as weak and to be consumed by listeners with pity (cf. Chu n. pag.). However, due to the special place of the horror genre, I interpret Jon and Martin's show of love through sacrifices differently; it humanises them. Jon, as the harbinger of the horrible moment and avatar of the Eye, and Martin with his strong connection to the Lonely could both easily be represented as monsters within the horror narrative. Monstrous gays, as I have written about in chapter 2, are common in the horror genre, even nowadays. However, by imbuing Jon and Martin not only with their monstrous aspects but also their gay love and a deeply human willingness to lay down their lives for one another – much like other, non-gay characters in the podcast – they end up more human because of it.

Outside of this self-sacrifice, Jon and Martin's love is therefore also linked with keeping one another human. Jon and Martin's connection tends to be described as them "anchoring" one another to humanity, making their relationship something that keeps them from being fully consumed by the monstrous. When first introduced to the idea of an anchor to the world, Jon interprets it as something he has a deep connection to (cf. Episode 131 08:04-25). Through a deal with an avatar of the Flesh, Jon has a rib removed and uses it as an anchor. However, it is revealed what anchors him is not this part of his own body but something he has an even stronger human connection to than a part of his physical self: Martin, who tries to help Jon by placing tape recorders on the coffin (cf. Episode 134). Another instance in which Martin is described as an anchor for Jon's humanity is in episode 167 when Jon recalls that without a reason, previous Head Archivist Gertrude Robinson would not have been as willing to fight against all odds (cf. Episode 167 20:58-21:32). Jon knows that so as to not give in to what the fear entities promise – unlimited power, eternal life, unparalleled knowledge at the price of becoming a monster – one needs a reason to cling to humanity. Martin and Jon function as each other's reasons to keep defying the entities, to stay alive, to be anchored to humanity:

MARTIN: [coy] So... If you say Gertrude wouldn't have been able to go on without a reason –

JON: [fondly] Yes, Martin, you are my reason.

MARTIN: Just wanted to make you say it! (Episode 167 22:04-13)

An example of the threshold which Jon and Martin's connection must overcome the hold of entities is found in episode 159, wherein the Lonely's grasp on Martin is broken by Jon assuring him and leading him back to himself by reminding Martin of his feelings for Jon as well as the fact that Martin is Jon's reason. Their love for each other is presented as deeply human-making, strong enough to defy the Lonely's un-making:

JON: Listen, I know you think you want to be here; I know you think it's safer, and well – well, maybe it is. But we need you. [desperately] I need you.

MARTIN: No, you don't. Not really. Everyone's alone, but we all survive.

JON: [cutting off Martin's echo] I don't just want to survive!

MARTIN: I'm sorry.

JON: Martin. Martin, look at me. Look at me and tell me what you see. (Episode 159 23:32-55)

The diegetic squeal of the tape recorder signifies Jon using his horrible power of compelling in order to make Martin look at him (cf. Episode 159 23:32-55). Martin's echo vanishes from his voice, signifying the loss of control by the Lonely, and he exclaims:

MARTIN: I see you, Jon. [chuckles, echo goes away.] I see you.

JON: [relieved] Martin.

[Martin breathes faster and faster. He sobs, his voice breaks. Clothes rustle as Jon and Martin embrace.]

MARTIN: I... I was on my own. I was all on my own.

JON: Not anymore. Come on. Let's go home. (Episode 159 24:12-26)

The horrible and the romantic exist in the same space in this scene, as Jon uses his ability bestowed upon him against his will by the horrible force of the Eye, yet he uses it to save the man he loves and to open Martin's eyes to that love before him. It is their love, with horror as a catalyst, which triumphs over the horrible fear entity the Lonely, and Jon and Martin are able to return to their reality unharmed.

This use of Jon's monstrous power in the name of love is an act of reclamation of his role within the narrative; he is not a monster because he is gay, like the genre's roots would suggest, but he is gay and has monstrous abilities that he can use so that he may protect him and his gay love interest (cf. Westengrad 125; cf. Benshoff 118). Loving another person more than oneself, or by extension, more than the entity one serves, is represented as severely human (-ising) and an effective means of opposing corruption by the horrible moment. Being a loving person is constructed as an identity that directly opposes that of the monster. Love versus monstrous corruption as a trope appears in other horror media too, especially in those that are also part of other genres. The horror romantic comedy *Warm Bodies* (2013) for example, follows the de-zombification of central character R due to his love for human girl Julie, which re-instates his humanity previously lost to the horrible moment of the zombie apocalypse. Whilst *The Magnus Archives* is not a romantic comedy, its central romance between Jon and Martin works similarly. However, the difference is that R and Julie are a straight couple, whereas Jon and Martin are gay, and while there are more (straight) examples beyond R and Julie, there are very few (gay) examples like Jon and Martin. *The Magnus Archives* therefore does not follow in horror tradition's footsteps of demonising its queer monsters, but rather focuses on the human aspects of Jon and Martin, namely their love for one another as something deeply healing and humanising.

3.3 "I Don't Know What I See When I Look at You": Identity in The Magnus Archives

Focusing on how identity is handled in the podcast, I will further delve into how it serves to keep its gay characters from being monsters, by looking at how the characters are (or are not) described and by whom and how this (in-) forms the identity of the characters.

There is no official depiction of the characters on merchandise, promotional material or any visual companion media, only widely accepted fan interpretations based on the limited knowledge that can be gleaned from in-Podcast dialogue about appearances. Identity is hence not linked to outward appearance. In her analysis of the HBO show *Euphoria*'s trans* representation, Sarah Batsheva Bonder criticises the focus on appearance when it comes to LGBTQ+ characters, especially the issue of cis-passing¹¹, which can be related to other sexualities and gender identities, where "looking a certain way" is stereotypically linked with "being a certain way":

In this sense, her ability to 'pass' definitely reflects the show's efforts to repel attention from Jules's gender narrative, which begs questioning whether the quietness, regarding Jules's gender, is only so quiet because Jules passes as a cisgender woman. Her appearance, as conventionally beautiful and 'passing,' is arguably why she is so desirable both to the characters on the show and to the show's audience. Jules, while representative to many reviewers as a sign of progress, is only progressive in a world that favors a 'passing' appearance, or perceives a 'passing' appearance as the end goal of gender transition. (Bonder 24-5)

By omitting physical descriptions for the characters of *The Magnus Archives*, any link between appearance and sexual or gender identity is severed. Instead, the focus is placed on exhibited behaviours and intrinsic motivations for actions, which stands against the commodification and aestheticization of sexual and gender identities (cf. Bonder 27).

The Magnus Archives does not use identity labels for its characters. Jonathan Sims is popularly headcanoned¹² as biromantic by fans, as he has been in a relationship with both Georgie Baker, a woman (cf. Episode 106 23:17-20), and later Martin Blackwood, a man. He can also be inferred to be asexual (cf.

¹¹ "Passing" is a term used to describe a trans* person's ability to appear as their desired gender to an outsider. "Cis-passing" refers to a binary trans* person's passing as cisgender of their desired gender. Passing as a mark to measure the success of a transition has been criticised as limiting, binary and heteronormative.

¹² A "headcanon" describes a fact that is accepted as canon/true by one or more fans yet exists only in their head. The headcanon may be based on textual evidence or entirely made up.

Episode 106 22:47-23:03) as can be gleaned from a conversation between two secondary characters Melanie King and Basira Hussein where Melanie says that "according to Georgie, Jon *doesn't*" (Episode 106 22:53-6; emphasis by me). Martin's own feelings for Jon are first directly addressed by him in episode 118, although equally hinted at in the same conversation between Melanie and Basira (cf. Episode 106 22:24-45) as Basira concludes about Martin that "he's got it bad" (Episode 106 22:45). These direct characterisations by homodiegetic secondary characters elevates Jon and Martin's relationship from subtext to simply text. By having Jon and Martin's feelings for one another revealed both through actions as well as characterisation through other characters' dialogue, *The Magnus Archives* manages to forego the use of a coming out scene to reveal their sexualities. This serves to construct them as three-dimensional characters that happen to be gay rather than characters whose whole purpose and identity is being gay (cf. Bondar 61; cf. Sedgwick *Closet* 71). Yet what is part of Jon and Martin's identity, as I have identified in chapter 3.2, is love.

The fact that love is identity-constructing (and re-affirming) in *The Magnus Archives* is shown also in the absence of love, which is represented to cause the crumbling of identity once constructed on the basis of it. One instance is in episode 170, although this time he is able to save himself from it by reminding himself of his love for Jon and vice versa, further showing the connection between (gay) love and identity through conflating forgetting Jon with Martin forgetting himself:

MARTIN: I-I fell behind. I was – I was too slow, and, and, and the fog caught up; I was following. Al-Always following, never leading. Never leading. Why did he leave me behind? D-Did he? Who are – Wh – Who are you? Who am – ? [realization, movement] J-J-Jon.

[Static.]

MARTIN: Jon, Jon. Yes. Jon, I remember him. I need to, I need to keep him here. If he can find me, I – he, he knows enough; surely he knows enough to find me, but I can't – If I forget him, if, if I forget – me – maybe – maybe there's nothing left to know. No one to find.

[Creaking movement.]

MARTIN: Talking helps. I got you all here to listen; Just, just don't stop talking. You – You are Martin Blackwood. Yes. You, you didn't choose to be here. Jon is coming. I am Martin Blackwood, and I am not lonely anymore; I am not lonely anymore. I want to have friends; I – no, I have friends. I-I'm in love. I am in love, and I will not forget that; I will not forget. I am Martin Black –

JON: [far off, calling] Martin!

MARTIN: Wai – wh – Jon?

JON: [getting closer] Martin! Martin?

MARTIN: Jon! Jon, over here!

[Static growing louder] (Episode 170 23:22-24:39)

Love and loneliness, visibility and invisibility, are polar opposites in *The Magnus Archives*, as identified directly by Martin himself in multiple instances (cf. Episode 159 4:45-5:06). If Martin succumbs to the Lonely and forgets his love, he will become undone on the level of his identity: "If I forget him, if, if I forget – me – maybe ... maybe there's nothing left to know. No one to find" (Episode 170 23:54-24:02). But Jon and Martin's connection of love with one another is shown to be stronger than the horrible moment's pull; their identity built on love stronger than the entity that seeks to unravel it. Martin's identity is not synonymous with the Lonely, with being a monster, but with being a gay man in love:

MARTIN: It's the Lonely, Jon. It's me.

JON: Not anymore.

[Martin makes a pleased sound.]

MARTIN: No. [long inhale] No, not anymore. (Episode 170 23:35-46)

Neither Jon nor Martin can therefore be monsters while in love; Martin is not the Lonely, Jon is not the Eye. They are humanised by gay love. With this, *The Magnus Archives* not only does not participate in the genre tradition of villainising gay men by turning them into antagonistic monsters but goes further and allows its central characters to be in a gay relationship within the horror narrative without either invalidating the other.

3.4 "I Spy with My Little Eye; Literally Everything": Visibility in The Magnus Archives

Visibility in *The Magnus Archives* cannot be untangled from its counterpart invisibility. Both are important for the medium of podcast itself as well as the plot and characters. I will look at how this binary is established and treated within episodes 158, 172, and multiple instances of Jon and Martin (in-) visibly anchoring each other to humanity. This will make clear how important it is to consider the aspect of visibility when talking about the non-monstrous gay horror representation of *The Magnus Archives*.

Horror is not the only aspect that profits from the fact that the podcast is an invisible medium. As discussed in the introductory chapter, LGBTQ+ people experiencing themselves within media representation is exceptionally important for identity formation, self-acceptance, and broader social acceptance as well (cf. Craig et al.). Bruce Drushel (cf. 69) argues that podcasts are uniquely positioned to foster queer audiences that are otherwise alienated by traditional radio

broadcast audio media, due to its availability, portability, lack of external content restriction, sustainability, and demand. Podcast then not only has a special place within horror discourses but within queer discourse as well and it is especially their invisibility and intangibility that make it so. As a podcast not actively geared towards LGBTQ+ audiences but including queer representation, *The Magnus Archives* brings Drushel's observations to a point, both in its format as well as its content.

The Magnus Archives interacts with the topic of visibility by establishing a dichotomy of visibility and invisibility in its central gay couple: Martin, linked to the Lonely, and feeling invisible, and Jon, an avatar of the Eye, having the unique eldritch power to know and see and make visible that which is secret or hidden. Already, as it is a podcast, *The Magnus Archives* inadvertently plays with modes of (in-) visibility, as analysed in 3.1. The horror experience of the "invisible" podcast medium is heightened due to the lack of visuals, leading the listeners to interpret sound and atmosphere in their own ways, deciding how horrible they wish for things to appear in their mind's eye (cf. Reyes 9; cf. Hancock and McMurtry 2). From the way that characters' physical appearance remains unstated, to the sporadic in situ recordings that leave much open to imagination, the horror abilities of what is seen and what is left unshown is explored thoroughly:

How a podcast is typically listened to innately charges the horror podcast form with new aspects of intrusion upon the everyday. From Freud's Unheimliche on, the Gothic has been recognized to implicitly disrupt and engage with the "ordinary" world. Podcast horror is a Gothic mode, which permeates the everyday experience in a manner arguably more effective than any other Gothic form. This facet develops from the podcast's mobile, privatizing, acoustic properties. Unlike other Gothic forms, the horror podcast moves with us, occludes the external aural world, and speaks to us wherever we may go: a companion for traversing a mundane world. The podcast's role as a portable, "invisible" acoustic alter-world is paramount. (Hancock and McMurtry 3)

More than a book or television show or other tangible, visible media, podcasts' portability, and ease of access (oftentimes being free to listen to on streaming services) makes for a more immediate experience. The horror is allowed to engage with mundanity; listening to the podcast on the way to work or in the comfort of one's own home – there is no hiding from it, once invited, which makes podcast's invisible mode of horror delivery highly effective and engaging. Yet invisibility is not only relevant for the horror of *The Magnus Archives*, but also in a more direct way it informs its characters and their relationships.

Over the course of the podcast, and the course of Jon and Martin's relationship, a lot of the character development happens off-screen – or rather off-tape (such as the lunch that Jon invites himself to in episode 53). As is later revealed, the tape recorder itself is a sort of eldritch being – though unexplained – and therefore only records what it deems relevant to its cause, unless the record button is actively hit by a character. The budding romance between the Eye's avatar and his archival assistant is not of interest to the eldritch being though; the audience only catches glimpses of the relationship's formation. A lot of their relationship is defined indirectly, or through anterior modes of representation and what is kept invisible. There is almost a sense of reclaiming privacy in these absences, that directly opposes the threatening aspects that come with being visible as a couple.

In *The Magnus Archives*, visibility is treated as a multi-faceted topic: being known can lead to being threatened, but knowing can also be identity forming and healing, as I have analysed in chapter 3.3. This is what K.G. Barnhurst calls the "visibility paradox": coming-out and being visible is supposedly a freeing experience, yet may lead to being ostracised, while invisibility may offer safety but also solitude (Barnhurst 1-2). In episode 158, as well as episode 117, it is Elias' uncanny, supernatural abilities to see and to know that poses a threat to the livelihood of the main characters. Jon and Martin's romantic feelings for each other are non-consensually made visible by Elias' status as an avatar of the Eye. Being able to be seen by Elias, having their respective feelings made visible, is a threat to Jon and Martin, as they can be used to control the other. The focus set by Elias on Martin getting away from Jon in episode 158 is indicative of him knowing that Jon reciprocates Martin's feelings, which he was revealed to be in the know of ever since episode 117. Without hesitation Jon asks how he can save Martin, and it is told to him that he too must travel into the Lonely to reach him, to which Jon asks if this is Elias' plan to rid himself of Jon by sending him into the Lonely. Elias replies that it is not him but Jon who wants to do this, that he is driven enough to walk into almost certain death for Martin (cf. Episode 158 23:28-38). Using his own eldritch horror abilities in the name of gay love, audio static spiking, Jon follows Martin into the Lonely's domain, and the episode ends. All because Elias sees through Martin and Jon's hidden feelings and knows how to weaponize them. Both visibility's negative aspect and positive possibility is showcased here in episode 158.

The Magnus Archives plays on a very specific fear that the queer community is plagued by: the fear of being seen, hence the power of the construct of the closet (cf. Sedgwick *Closet* 71). For queer people, being truly known can

mean being truly in danger (cf. Craig et al. 255). An episode in the podcast even specifically deals with this; after the apocalypse brought on by a ritual for the Eye, the whole world is being overtaken by fear. The different eldritch fear beings have created domains and split up the world and its people to torment them. One such domain is that of the Web, associated with the fear of not being in control or being manipulated. In episode 172, Jon and Martin travel through a Web Domain and Jon is overcome with the urge to narrate a statement, to see and make visible, due to his being the avatar of the Eye. He tells the story of Francis, who goes by they/them pronouns, and is under the Web's control, performing the 48,067th act of a repetitive play in which they are puppeteered against their will. Francis has to listen to friends and family sneer at them and eventually relapses into their drug addiction, before the scene ends with them consumed by spiders only to start anew, everything reset once more. Francis' queerness is weaponised in order to humiliate them by making a spectacle out of them (cf. Chu n. pag.). The diegetic audience's concerns like Francis' mother saying "We want what's best for you, even if you can't see it. I'm sure you'll grow out of it" (Episode 172 05:27-32) can be applied both to their addiction as well as their queer identity. Furthermore, the written trigger warning accompanying the episode says "implied queerphobia / transphobia", further pointing to the fact that Francis' plight does not only stem from their drug abuse, but also from neither their friends nor family understanding or supporting their queer identity. According to Craig et al., bullying, harassment and victimisation by peers and adults may lead to LGBTQ+ people engaging in risk-taking and self-detrimental behaviours such as self-harm and drug abuse (cf. Craig et al. 255-6). Episode 172 therefore illustrates how an unaccepting social circle may affect trans* people, by shining a light on the possibly horrible repercussions through the lens of horror. By removing Francis' fear of not being accepted from a real-life context and instead making it visible through the vehicle of the Web's puppet show, it becomes abstracted yet at the same time more accessible. Through artistic means of representation, audience members are more able to see themselves in Francis, as the whole situation is different to real life, not just Francis' gender identity. (cf. Parsemain 10) This experiencing along with the (podcast) character, as stated in chapter 3.1, closes a gap between audience and fiction and creates real emotional bonds and feelings, which in turn can lead to more openness towards real people with a likeness to the character. (cf. Jacobs and Meeusen 2145) The listener identifies with the character, and therefore develops an understanding of their identity and, in the case of Francis, their struggle with visibility.

Martin and Jon's conversation at the end of the statement deals with the Web's plan on a content level, but due to its tie to Francis, metaphorically deals with the difference of being tolerated as LGBTQ+ versus being truly accepted:

JON: Knowing... Seeing... i-it's not the same thing as... understanding. Every time I try to know what the Web's plan is, if it can even be called a plan, I see a hundred thousand events and causes and links, an impossibly intricate – [announcer starts up again] – pattern of consequences and subtle nudges, but I, I can't – I can't hold them all in my head at the same time. There's no way to see the whole, the, the point of it all. I can see all the details, but it doesn't – provide – context or – [small sigh] intention. (Episode 172 21:07-44)

In terms of queer media visibility, this means that while one might see an LGBTQ+ character or storyline in media, they may still lack an understanding of them/it, as it is different from merely seeing. This is why a certain depth and nuance is needed when approaching queer topics in furtherance of making them accessible to understand for audiences, rather than just surface visibility. *The Magnus Archives* adds this depth and authenticity to its queer characters by not focusing on their queerness as defining characteristics, but making the resulting loving relationships deeply humanising in contrast to monstrous urges that may arise (cf. Sumida-Tate 58).

Visibility, both seeing and being seen, is hence represented as a powerful tool and intrinsically humanising. As an avatar of the Eye, Jon himself is directly linked to the question of visibility, as the Eye's associated fears are to do with being seen and being known. The act of seeing and being seen is represented as something intimate that connects the pair deeply. Instances of this can be found throughout the podcast: The exchange from episode 159 analysed in chapter 3.2 between Jon and Martin while in the Lonely Domain is a perfect example of this. Martin remains corrupted by the Lonely (his voice echoes) until he actually sees Jon, not just with his eyes but he understands him and recognises him and his feelings for Jon:

MARTIN: I see you, Jon. [He chuckles, echo goes away.] I see you. (Episode 159 24:49-56)

Giving a monstrous ability of knowing to a character implicitly linked to being afraid of being known, is a subversion and a type of reclamation, much like Westengrad (cf. 121) claims regarding transgender audiences relating to monsters in horror. I will explore this thread more in my analysis of *Hell Followed With Us* in chapter 4,

which leans even further into the idea of reclaiming the monster queer. Jon, over the course of four seasons, is slowly corrupted by the eldritch Eye and turns into someone that may see and know whatever he wishes, whenever he wishes. During season five he is barely recognisable as human, sleeping with his eyes open, having access to supernatural powers like being all-knowing, the ability to smite his adversaries and sustaining himself purely by consuming other people's fear. In episode 187, Jon is even told that he is a monster, to which he does not object. This is not, however, like its Gothic roots, done in a way to demonise queerness or equate being gay with being a horrible moment, but it happens because Jon is the protagonist. He does not become monstrous and evil and loses control, like Freddy Kruger in *Nightmare on Elm Street*, but rather uses his powers to keep himself and his boyfriend safe in a world governed by the horrible moment. As I said in the beginning of this thesis, a confrontation between the protagonist and the horrible moment must happen to raise the stakes or to lead to a satisfying climax. The two parties must meet. That said, by linking its two gay, central characters to an inherently queer fear – that of being seen – and turning it into a means of staying alive and protecting their gay love, *The Magnus Archives* is in a position of making a statement about the possible positives of queer visibility.

To sum up, visibility is the most prevalent aspect when it comes to *The Magnus Archives*. From the symbol of the Eye/eye to the constant, supernatural recording and the weaponization of knowledge, many negative aspects of visibility are looked at. However, visibility can also be healing and anchoring, and stands in direct opposition to aims of dehumanising Martin and Jon. Seeing, the unseen and being seen are also intrinsically linked to issues of queer representation (cf. Barnhurst 23-4). By inscribing its main character with the ability to see and know, *The Magnus Archives* gives Jon the means to reclaim visibility as a means of protection, when it is constantly attempted to be used to corrupt him. His and Martin's love is closely linked to visibility and seeing one another, truly understanding each other, gives them the reason to keep fighting the horrible moment until the bitter end.

4. "This Self Won't Last Me Long": Analysing *Hell Followed With Us*

In a similar vein to yet more intensely than *The Magnus Archives*, *Hell Followed With Us* plays with the historic overlap of queerness and monstrosity by imbuing its LGBTQ+ protagonist with the certainty that he will, in time, transform into a monster, and there is nothing he can do to stop it.

Andrew Joseph White's 2022 debut novel *Hell Followed With Us*, is a teen and young adult horror fiction with very graphic elements. *Hell Followed With Us* features a post-apocalyptic world where most of humanity was culled by a virus called the Flood, named for the Old Testament wrath of God, released by an extremist Evangelical cult, calling themselves Angels, two years prior. The Flood remains as the horrible moment in the present, still threatening with infection and destruction. Protagonist Benji, where the book opens, has just fled said cult after growing up with them and being infected with a specific strand of the Flood which will ultimately turn Benji into a bioweapon named Seraph, after the biblical angel. Seraph was created to help destroy the last remaining humans that survived the Flood. Sixteen-year-old trans boy Benji finds refuge amongst queer teenagers hiding and resisting from within the abandoned Acheston LGBTQ+ Centre, the ALC for short. Whilst trying to keep his agonising transformation into the Seraph secret, Benji helps the ALC Watch's – the name the teenaged rebels gave themselves – plans to take out the cult in their stronghold, New Nazareth. All the while Benji finds himself drawn to the Watch's leader Nick, but Benji's fiancé, Theo, back with the Angels, remains on his mind until Theo weaponizes their love as a distraction for the cult to attack the ALC in Benji's absence. Once he has realised that nobody in the cult is good for him, Benji, whose time as a humanoid is running out, allows himself to confess his feelings for Nick in chapter 25. Together, the ALC with the fully realised Seraph take on New Nazareth, which Theo defends by transforming himself into Dominion, another biblical creature. Seraph defeats Dominion and New Nazareth is destroyed. The book then ends with Benji hoping that whatever happens next, the family he has made within the ALC will remain intact.

As a young adult novel, *Hell Followed With Us* is aimed at teenagers around the same age as its protagonist, Benji, who can relate to his struggles of self-acceptance, growing up somewhere he was not respected, and needing to figure out who is worthy of receiving his love. Love serves many uses in *Hell Followed With Us*: there is familial love between the members of the ALC, religious

love for God within the cult, Benji's sympathy and understanding for the Graces (people that mutated from the Flood and are used by the cult as bloodhounds), self-love and the lack thereof, romantic love between Benji/Theo and Benji/Nick, and a love for humanity which ultimately preserves Benji's humanity within the Seraph vessel.

In order for me to analyse the book, I will move from a broader to a more specific analysis, looking firstly at the specific way the book and its chapters are constructed, and then moving on to shift my focus onto Benji, Theo and Nick respectively, as well as their relationships with one another. I will delve into the novel's representations of gayness, love, visibility, and horror in order to crystallise how *Hell Followed With Us* positions these to build the horror novel. Since the book is relatively recent, there has yet to be research published on it at the time of writing.

4.1 *Hell Followed With Us is a Horror Novel*

In this subchapter I will focus on what makes *Hell Followed With Us* a horror novel. I will be referring back to my own definition of horror, based on my research, and analyse three key aspects of *Hell Followed With Us*' horror experience: religion, gore, and narrative closeness.

In *Hell Followed With Us*, knowledge of the "before" is presented to the readers in multiple ways. The chapter headings include snippets of the past, before the horrible moment of the Flood, consisting of quotes from the ALC website or promotional material for the Angel cult. A clear "during" is created in situ, by showing the world through Benji's eyes as he is actively experiencing it. An "after" is hinted towards at certain points throughout the book, be it characters dreaming of a future or Benji's closing internal monologue in the last chapter. At all times, the choice of the present tense as the main narrative tense helps create the clear distinction of what is, what was, and what will be.

The adversary of *Hell Followed With Us* is clear: New Nazareth and the cult of Angels. However, while the cult is not synonymous with the horrible moment, there is a close relation due to them having engineered the Flood, therefore being responsible for billions of humans perishing and the current state of the apocalyptic world. The heroes are the ALC, as they not only resist New Nazareth, but plan to overthrow them and stop their genocidal fantasies. Benji's personal struggles are a heightened version of that of the world at large; succumb to the Flood or fight it, give up or use the position he was put in as Seraph for good. His decision is one

between self-preservation and the greater good. Outside of my generalised parameters for horror, *Hell Followed With Us* represents horror in more specific ways.

In a way, engaging in horror can be a religious experience. Bryan Stone writes in his paper, "The Sanctification of Fear: Images of the Religious in the Horror Film", that the experience of profound terror may be not too dissimilar to what theologian Rudolf Otto calls "the numinous":

When horror is at its best, it satisfies our curiosity about both the metaphysical and the psychological unknown while, at the same time, casting an unsettling light on the shadow elements both of the human condition and of the cosmos. (Stone 4)

Hell Followed With Us focuses on "the shadow elements of [...] the human condition" (Stone 4) by having a genocidal religious cult at the centre of its horrible moment. In doing so, the book occupies a special position in the history of the relationship between religion and horror. Horror has utilised religion ever since the first ventures into the genre itself; vampires able to be fended off with Christian crosses, the unholy creation of zombies from corpses, cultic rituals, and even biblical apocalypses. There is a point to be made that (almost) all Western horror always reproduces Christianity in a way by creating a "good vs. evil" dichotomy very reminiscent of heaven and hell (cf. Stone 3). *Hell Followed With Us* becomes part of this ancient tradition. However, it subverts this by taking the traditional way to utilise religion and horror and portraying it in a way where the devout Christians are the evil, and the non-believers are the good. *Rosemary's Baby* in 1968, followed by *The Exorcist* in 1973 and *The Omen* in 1976, paved the way for the religious to find its home among the horror explicitly; devil worship, satanic rituals, and demons from hell became staple pieces of supernatural horror. In *Hell Followed With Us*, the horror setting of the apocalypse is married to biblical aspects in an almost antithetical way; the biological weapon the cult came up with is called the Flood, like in the Old Testament, turning people into Graces, the cult members call themselves Angels, and they turn Benji into what they call a Seraph, a type of biblical angel. Stone writes that contemporary horror features

an increasing marginalization of more traditional forms of the religious, and perhaps even the subversion of traditional religious symbols as an adequate cultural form for addressing questions of self, world, meaning, and values. (Stone 24)

This subversion of classical good versus evil binaries of the Christian church and the devil and its worshippers is what makes *Hell Followed With Us* a poignant critique of Christianity. Even its title is a reference to Revelations 6:8, referring to the horseman Death, referencing both the horrible moment and Benji as Seraph.

Additionally, a significant number of chapter sub-headings also refer to religion. The novel's 36 chapters all start with quotes tailored to the narrating character. They consist of quotes from fictional, diegetic religious figures, real life bible verses, notes from book character Sister Kipling's studies on the Flood and Seraph, other references to the Angelic Movement from before the Flood, and more. This shows the constant influence of religion on the development of the situation as well as Benji, who acts as the focaliser for the majority of chapters. Over the course of his chapters, Benji's chapter headings grow more precise, telling a story of someone discovering the cult (chapter 1-2) and then learning about it through promotional material (chapter 3-4), before joining the cult and learning more about it from within (chapter 5-9), the world's last ditch efforts to stop the inevitable (chapter 10), the cult preparing to release the Flood (chapter 11-13), the world battling the Flood (chapter 14), the cult members reckoning with the Flood and humanity's demise (chapter 15-19), a shift in the narrative that begins to question the need for the Flood (chapter 20-23), and finally, desperate pleas for there to have been reason for the destruction as well as peace beyond it (chapter 27-36). Chapters where Nick is the focaliser instead show more variation: before the reveal of his own previous affiliation with New Nazareth, the quote is from the Acheston LGBTQ+ centre's website, the latter two chapters post-reveal, however, are headed by quotes from the general of New Nazareth, under which Nick served. Benji's chapter 24 equally borrows from the Acheston LGBTQ+ centre's website, signifying what is important to Benji in that moment, as the chapter deals with his plan to sacrifice himself and give himself over to the Angels in order to save the ALC from destruction. However, instead of martyrdom, Benji believes that the ALC will be able to save him (cf. *HFWU* 278). Theo's chapter has a question that is answered by himself, though it is not accredited to any source. It is still formatted the way the other quotes are, yet shares no similarity with neither Benji nor Nick's chapter headings:

Do you believe in God? —I do, please stop, there's so much blood (*HFWU* 295; original emphasis)

Just a look at these introductions to chapters shows how closely the horror and religious aspects are linked in this novel. Moreover, they bring the reader close to the inner motivations and thoughts of the narrating characters.

Hell Followed With Us is written in present tense with simultaneous first (and sometimes third) person narration, giving the reader a sense of immediacy, which heightens the tenseness of certain scenes and adds to the horror factor. The homodiegetic narration is shared between Benji (first person), Nick and Theo (both third person, except for Theo's title quote), although Benji narrates most chapters, with Nick narrating three and Theo one. The changes in focalisation are strategic in order to explore the characters without revealing everything to the protagonist Benji. For example, Theo's inner workings are hidden from Benji in the church and Nick's conversation with Erin in chapter nine, which delves into Nick's overlapping struggles as a teenage leader and autistic man, remain unknown to Benji. This leads to Benji's decisions being unable to be influenced by being privy to every single thought of the two men he loves. Benji also does not know about Nick's neurodivergence until later on. Characters' motives are therefore hidden from one another, allowing for tension. Moreover, the plot is driven by forces beyond Benji's control: he only has so long until he transforms into Seraph and needs to figure out a way to avoid becoming the destructive weapon the Angels have wanted him to be for years. All of these factors, from the present tense to the hidden motives and reveals which occur at later points of the narrative, to the ticking clock of Benji's transformation lead to a fast-paced horror experience while reading.

The tone of the story is influenced by the focalisation, therefore, when Benji is the narrator, the tone is personal and introspective, including swear words and memories and quotes from situations before the book begins, giving the idea of a wider scope of existence beyond the pages. Benji tends to think about situations at hand and describes them in detail, focusing on things that matter to him personally, including the gory details of his transformation into Seraph and his thoughts and feelings about it. Benji is open to the reader about his acceptance of Seraph. It is not the transformation he fears, but the loss of his humanity, which is more linked to the cult than his traditional monstrosity, yet Benji's narrative tone, despite his gruesome transformation, remains mostly optimistic:

I bare my teeth. Even though it's behind the mask, even if he can't see it, it feels right. Showing my teeth like a Grace, like Seraph. (HFWU 92)

As I will look at in chapter 4.4, human identity as represented through love is not something that belongs to the cult of Angels. By losing his visible humanity, Benji therefore fears that he might turn into more of what the cult stands for. All the while, the reader is allowed to get very close to Benji's thoughts and motivations like in chapter 8:

Seraph, though, is slow and meticulous. It has a vision in mind, and it's going to do it right. I get to see the stages play out perfectly, all in order, ticking off each box as it goes. I watched it happen to the failed Seraphs before me, and now I get to watch it in the mirror. This is the second stage. Sister Kipling had a specific word for where it happens: the blood-brain barrier. (HFWU 81)

Benji's identity both as Seraph and as a gay trans man are therefore very openly discussed as nothing that Benji thinks is ever hidden to the reader, leading to a strong association with him as the protagonist. Even when his horror experience is not that of someone turning into a biblical bioweapon, but that of a young trans person, the narrative closeness makes his struggle relatable:

I try to twist him off but, God, why are cis boys so much stronger, it isn't fair, I remember when Theo held me down almost just like this and I hate it, I hate it. "Motherfucker!" (HFWU 93)

When Nick is the narrator, the tone differs depending on his opinion of Benji. In chapter 9 he only refers to him as the Seraph, rather than his name, not allowing him humanity. However, his relationship with Benji develops, so that the second time he narrates, in chapter 23, he calls Benji by his name.

Theodore's language choice is affected by his religious beliefs, leading him to choose certain words and interject prayer into the narrative in italics:

Forgive my unforgivable trespasses. Cleanse me from unrighteousness. (HFWU 297; original emphasis)

Hell Followed With Us' horror appears very up close and personal, due to its protagonist being directly affected by the horrible moment. The biblical aspects appear as a criticism of Christianity, especially in terms of identity suppression (as experienced by Benji and Nick), white supremacy (cf. HFWU 53), and a disregard for life that does not fit their specific ideals. This commentary is fictionalised in the horror narrative, yet clearly visible in the divide of good as represented by the ALC versus evil as represented by the Angels. *Hell Followed With Us* appears to almost entirely detangle the identity monster, as the horrible moment, and queer person.

4.2 "I Am Gay and Trans as Hell": Gay Love in *Hell Followed With Us*

To analyse gay love in *Hell Followed With Us* means to analyse two couples: Benji and Theo as well as Benji and Nick. To do so, I will also have to closely read the spaces in which the characters appear: the ALC and New Nazareth, and how these places are linked to the issue of (gay) love.

Love is a prerequisite between the members of the ALC. All queer, all survivors of the horrible moment, they encounter each other with love and understanding and acceptance (cf. *HFUW* 38). By creating a stronghold of queer love at the centre of its narrative, *Hell Followed With Us* positions itself against the tradition of the dehumanisation of LGBTQ+ characters in the horror genre. On the other hand, loving one another is something that the cult of Angels in New Nazareth do not do. Instead, Nick and Benji recall being taught to love pain:

"Learn to love the pain. It is a cleansing pain. It is a glorious pain. Love it the way Jesus loved the nails through His palms, the thorns upon His brow. It is not a soft love; it is not a gentle love, but it is a perfect one. [...] Your love must be strong enough that it becomes fearsome! It is fear that brings the unfaithful to the Lord. It will be fear that saves the nonbelievers. It will be fear that teaches heretics the truth of our Almighty God." (*HFUW* 135)

Love, as the Angels see it, is equated with devotion and pain. Not exactly self-sacrifice like in *The Magnus Archives*, but martyrdom. To feel pain is to love God. And to love God is to be devout (cf. *HFUW* 135). One means by which the Angels show their devotion is by causing pain to others; this is why they created the Flood and the Graces, which are humans twisted by the Flood virus. The Angels treat the Graces with "no love", merely "breaking and building" (*HFUW* 350) them, something that Benji cannot bear.

Benji sees himself as "like a Grace, like Seraph" (*HFUW* 92), feeling a familiarity with them heightened by the fact that Benji can feel the Grace's emotions if he supernaturally reaches out to them. Therefore, because he recognises their ability to feel and sees himself as one of them, he treats the Graces with kindness, sympathy, and love:

As soon as the general turns his back, I pull the Grace into my arms and let them curl around me. Even as much as I've changed them, they're still so bright. They were a person once. I want to hold them here forever. They're purring, Jesus Christ, they're purring, I swear if I could cry, I'd be sobbing. We are the same. Do they know? Can they tell? (*HFUW* 351)

Benji humanising the Graces is a parallel to his wish to be humanised as Seraph as well. Whilst Jon and Martin are able to escape their monstrosity, Benji will turn into Seraph eventually. He can only hope that he may cling to humanity on the inside, like the Graces are able to. He treats them with love, the same way he would like to continuously be treated. In comparison with the Angels' loveless, hateful, violent behaviour, Benji's love presents a stark contrast, especially since he has been infected with a virus meant to make him incredibly violent (cf. *HFWU* 81). His love is active resistance to the dogmas of the Angels and their brutal ways, as well as the Flood infection's intended design.

Gay love in *Hell Followed With Us* is an act of defiance. When Benji loves his transness and gay sexuality, he defies the cis-heteronormative roles enforced within the cult (cf. *HFWU* 173). Furthermore, when he falls in love with Nick, he defies the rules of the Angels even more, as he is engaged to Theo. Since the cult sees Benji as a woman engaged to a man, his gay love for Nick is of special importance (cf. *HFWU* 131-2). When Benji tells Nick that he likes him, it is in defiance of what the cult has planned for Benji; to become a monster not worth loving:

"But what if I lose you?"

Now I'm echoing him. Oh. *Oh*. What if he loses me. What if I lose him. What if all of this goes to hell, and we end up with bullets in our heads, and the Angels standing over our bodies. What if it all goes right, but I turn into a monster that isn't worth loving. What if all of it is for nothing? (*HFWU* 287; original emphasis)

This scene takes place right before Benji goes to infiltrate the Angels. The looming threat of his monstrous transformation is a real one, and he worries that becoming Seraph may make him unworthy of love (cf. *HFWU* 287). However, as I will look at in subchapter 4.3, Benji does not lose his humanity, especially not to Nick, making his worries and hesitation unfounded. At the end of the novel, despite the completion of his transformation into Seraph, Benji is welcomed back to the ALC and loved by Nick regardless of his appearance:

[Nick] pulls me in until our foreheads are pressed together again, and I don't realize how much I'm shaking until he holds me tighter just to keep me still. This is home.
I am alive, these are my friends, this is my *family*. (*HFWU* 398)

While love is enough to convince Nick to see Benji's humanity, even when he is outwardly monstrous, Theo's love for his cult and God take priority over his

love for Benji, as can even be seen from his chapter heading as analysed in subchapter 4.1. Even if Benji tries to speak "Theo's language" he cannot reach him:

His name comes out of me like a prayer, like reminding him he's human will snap him out of this. "Theo, please."
"All because you don't like it." He laughs, and his pale, pretty face twists into something more like Dominion than the boy I fell in love with. (*HFWU* 384)

"His name comes out of me like a prayer" places Benji in Theo's world of religion, yet even there his love for Theo is not enough to "remind him he's human" (*HFWU* 384). Whilst Benji and Nick are set up as mirrors for each other, Benji and Theo act as foils. They are created by the same cult, and betrothed, however Benji is motivated by love for people (former or current), whereas Theo is motivated by love for God (cf. *HFWU* chapter 35). For Theo, Benji not loving Seraph the way the Angels designed is blasphemous. Benji appropriates Seraph as something almost queer, something that he makes his own, much like his gender identity, against the wishes of the cult and by extension God. Theo, represented through internal monologue and chapter subheadings as thoroughly devout, is bound to not understand that there is (self-) love which ranks higher than devotion, making him incapable of understanding either of Benji's transitions.

In *Hell Followed With Us*, love within the LGBTQ+ community is stronger than hate, which is why the reader is introduced at length to the ALC so they may serve as a direct opposition to New Nazareth. The ALC and the people within it act out of love: Nick's recognising of Benji as a "monster worth loving", Benji's acceptance of Seraph, his love for the Graces, and his rejection of Theo's false love. All of these are acts of resistance against the narrative of dehumanisation attempted by the Angels, making *Hell Followed With Us* a story of queer resilience through love.

4.3 "And I Am a Goddamn Person": Identity in *Hell Followed With Us*

To analyse how identity is represented in *Hell Followed With Us* I will be focusing on Benji's identity as a gay trans man, Benji's identity as Seraph, and Nick's identity as autistic, closely reading selected scenes in which all three identities are interconnected.

Several conflicts of identity appear throughout the novel. The main conflict between the human survivors of the Flood and those who conceived it is signified by the ALC and New Nazareth as two opposing forces; the ALC as queer teenagers being the symbol of resistance and resilience, and New Nazareth as the Angels' stronghold, which serves as a visualisation of evil. Smaller conflicts like Benji's identity as a gay trans man, which is not respected within New Nazareth but is immediately understood and related to in the ALC is mirrored by Benji's identity as a former cult member and the Seraph, for which he is praised and loved by the Angels but shunned and misunderstood by some ALC members. Benji's relationships with Theo and Nick respectively work within the novel to signify Benji's status of being in between the ALC and New Nazareth, humanity and those who seek to eradicate it. Theo cannot accept that Benji would abandon the Angels and not utilise his saviour-esque status as the Seraph, and his devotion to the cult ultimately leads Theo to infect himself with Dominion, which leads to his demise. On the other hand, Nick does not see Benji as human, due to his role as the Seraph, and only once he gets to know him does he start to like and respect him:

"Why you were scared. Why you were calling me *it*. Why anything."
"I was scared of you. And what you meant. I thought it'd be easier if you weren't you."
If I weren't me?
"I wanted to pretend you weren't a person," he says. (HFWU 241; original emphasis)

Only by dehumanising Benji can Nick not feel empathy for him. He does this in order to protect himself and the ALC, the humans. He knows first-hand how dangerous the Angels are and cannot risk letting his emotions and feelings get in the way of his role as a leader and protector. A clear distinction of human and non-human is made. All three characters, due to their upbringing and personal stakes, understand humanity differently, which informs their actions. Ultimately, it is this separation between Benji's status as a queer human and a monstrous weapon that keeps him from being fully identified with the horrible moment of the Angels' apocalypse, rather siding with the survivors and at the end winning the fight. Nick's acceptance of him as inherently human, no matter his outward appearance, plays an important part in this.

Nick and Benji are set up as mirrors of each other; two gay men who have had to purposely deconstruct a monstrous identity placed upon them by circumstance. While their struggles are different, they are both motivated by a need to hide an unchangeable part of themselves – Nick's autism and Benji's Seraph.

Their similarities clash at first as Nick sees himself in Benji. In order to keep his distance from him, as Benji might pose a threat to the ALC that Nick is in charge of, Nick deconstructs Benji's identity as monstrous. This means that in turn the love that grows between Benji and Nick is a distinctly humanising moment, much like in *The Magnus Archives*. Chapter 23 is written from Nick's perspective, waking up to Benji gone and trying to find his now-friend. When he finds him, Benji is barely recognisable as he takes out six full grown Angels with just his teeth and claws. When Nick reveals himself Benji jumps at him. Despite being aware that Benji, who is teetering on the edge of Seraph, could kill him too, Nick recognises Benji's humanity and addresses him as such. This leads to Benji remembering himself as well. This exchange is reminiscent of episode 159 of *The Magnus Archives*, where it is the act of recognising Jon that frees Martin from the corruption of the Lonely.

"It's me," Nick says. "I'm here now. It's okay." It's not a lie. He makes a mental list of everything they'll have to do to get Benji into the bank without raising suspicion. Clean the blood off his face. Get him into new clothes and a mask. Soothe the curled-up cramping thing his hands are doing. Cover his arms.

Just make sure he gets home. (HFWU 266)

"It's not a lie" (HFWU 266) is especially important, as it reveals that Nick truly sees Benji as human, even if this is the moment, he appears the least human outwardly and through action. When Nick recognises Benji, so does Benji recognise Nick, and he reclaims his human consciousness. Both boys recognise each other deeply:

Benji's shoulders sag, and another sad little noise crawls up his throat, and his eyes finally focus.

"Nick?" he whispers.

They've lost the Vanguard, but Nick hasn't lost Benji. There is no way in hell Nick could have brought himself to give Benji over. How had he even thought he could? God, what is wrong with him? How could he?

"There you go," Nick says. "Thought we lost you for a second." Even though he wants to cry, Thank God, thank God, thank God, and Nick hasn't thanked God for anything in years. (HFWU 266)

Being a human monster is one facet of Benji's identity that is closely linked to a man he loves. Another is his identity as a trans gay man.

In the beginning of the novel, neither Theo nor Nick appears to have any problem with Benji's identity as a gay trans man, which indicates a distinct separation between Benji's role as a monster and queer character within the novel that stands in contrast to the traditions of the horror genre to represent gay

characters as monstrous due to their sexuality (cf. Benshoff 3). Theodore, while Benji was part of the cult, Theo is shown to have accepted Benji's identity as a trans man, even if the rest of the Angels did not:

Men. I'm a man. Theo has seen me as a man from the moment I told him. I've always been his boyfriend, his fiancé, his future husband. Always Benjamin. Always me.
All that gets reduced to an elegant, "Gayyy."
"That's kind of the point," Theo says. (HFWU 212; original emphasis)

However, the verity of his acceptance is called into question when Benji rejects Theo's offer of re-joining the cult to be together once more. *Hell Followed With Us* plays on a real fear of trans people: the worry that those that claim to love and accept them do not genuinely do so. In *Hell Followed With Us*, Theo says the following to his ex-fiancé Benji:

"You've never liked anything about yourself, have you? Always trying to change it. You've never accepted what you've been given by God." He was the one who told me being trans wasn't a mistake, that God made me trans on purpose. Did he never actually believe it? (HFWU 384-5)

The fact that Theo's hate is in direct speech while Benji's defence of him is not means that Theo's action occupies a preferred spot in the hierarchy of the narrative. Benji's defence is also in the past tense and has not been directly witnessed by the reader, whilst Theo's words are being directly presented to them. Theo is therefore an unreliable character, as his present and past actions and words do not align. His love for Benji, then, which he claims was not influenced by Benji's identity nor his leaving the cult becomes questionable too. Both Theo and Nick mirror parts of Benji's character: Theo is who Benji might have been if he had truly believed in the cult. Theo also becomes a biblical angel, much like Benji, although he does it to himself and uses his potential power for evil. When Benji has to fight Theo and triumphs over him, it is both a physical as well as metaphorical end to their relationship and Benji's ties to the cult.

The values followed by Benji, the protagonist, and the Angels and Theo, as antagonists, are misaligned, dooming their relationship. Theo's motivations are aligned with the cult, which fosters inherently anti-human sentiments, such as loving pain, inciting martyrdom, and causing the Flood. Because the human element belongs to the ALC, Benji is immediately and thoroughly accepted as a man:

"I'm so sorry. Today's been hell, I can't think straight. I'm Erin, and I use she/her pronouns. Sal told me you were excited to meet another trans person, so I hope meeting a second makes your day a little better." She's trans. *She's trans too*. "What name and pronouns do you want me to use for you?"

I can say whatever I want. And that's what she'll call me. No questions asked.

"Benji, short for Benjamin. He/him." It tastes so sweet that it almost wipes the memory of blood off my tongue. I would have smiled if I didn't have more important things to worry about. I collect myself. (*HFWU* 38; original emphasis)

As discussed in my introductory chapter, queer representation, not just in media, but also in real life, is important (cf. Craig et al. 262). For Benji, meeting another trans person is affirming to him in regard to his own identity. At the ALC, he is accepted the way he is because the LGBTQ+ people of the ALC share similarities with him. Benji's happiness about meeting another trans person and being seen as his desired self is described as "so sweet that it almost wipes the memory of blood off [his] tongue" (*HFWU* 38), meaning that love and acceptance of his trans identity is stronger than hate and the Seraph identity forced upon him. *Hell Followed With Us* therefore goes beyond the "LGBTQ+ person being LGBTQ+" aspect that many contemporary queer narratives focus on, where coming out is the main struggle, by making acceptance and freedom of expression and identity an inherent part of living with the ALC (cf. Bonder 61). Benji's trans identity is not viewed as a problem and even Seraph is accepted amongst his queer peers who are used to being seen as monstrous themselves due to their sexuality or gender identity.

Hell Followed With Us blurs the binary distinction between the monster and the human, and by extension, the queer and the accepted, of the horror genre even further than *The Magnus Archives* does (cf. Westengrad 121; cf. Morris 1). By having protagonist Benji as a gay trans man fully accept his monstrosity and transform into Seraph without a means or wish to turn back into a visibly human boy, *Hell Followed With Us* makes a statement about the possibility of reclamation of a previously thoroughly degrading representation.

4.4 "The Truth Is Beautiful": Visibility in *Hell Followed With Us*

Identity and visibility are linked very closely in *Hell Followed With Us*, especially when it comes to Nick and Benji, as Nick seeing Benji for who he is makes him realise his humanity. In this subchapter I will be analysing how Nick's

autism and Benji's Seraph are made visible to one another and what the consequences for the characters and their relationship are.

The issue of being seen, both literally and figuratively, appears throughout the novel at multiple points and is intrinsically linked with the issue of identity. Benji is not out as trans to the Angels, it is only Theo who knows (cf. *HFWU* 212). Benji has to hide his trans identity while with the Angels in order to keep himself alive. Once he is with the ALC he can be free in his gender expression. However, with the ALC, he needs to hide the Flood infection he suffers from.

I can hide the vomiting and the pain, but by the end of February, there will be no hiding anything.
Nick said I would be okay. Erin said I would be okay. They promised. I know that.
Right? (*HFWU* 57)

The ALC and New Nazareth therefore are both places where Benji cannot be fully himself and has to hide some part of his identity. In the novel, hiding parts of one's identity is a theme that appears on many levels of the narrative: in order to differentiate the ALC and New Nazareth, in order to create tension between Benji and Nick, and to raise the stakes as Benji's place amongst the ALC is threatened. Once Benji is able to be seen as human by Nick, the leader of the ALC, the issue of visibility as a threat within the ALC becomes nullified:

"If it's about the Flood, we can figure something out. If you want to tell everybody, we can do that. They'll accept it, I promise. Nothing bad is going to happen." (*HFWU* 276)

This elevates the ALC as a place to fully live one's identity, both queer and feared.

Similarly to Benji initially keeping Seraph hidden, Nick hides his autism from the ALC (cf. *HFWU* 64). His autism is something that Nick knows others might use as leverage against him:

Being autistic was just another thing his parents could hold over his head, could carve into his skin as they reminded him what a failure he was. (*HFWU* 97)

In this sense, Nick's autism and Benji's Seraph virus are likened to one another as parts of their identity that they cannot change and have been negatively connotated, yet to not truly make them less human. When Benji learns of Nick's autism, he thinks about how the neurodivergent identity is not talked about

amongst the Angels, but when discussed it is stigmatised in New Nazareth as something to be killed over (cf. *HFUWU* 57). Even though he is not visibly monstrous like Benji, Nick, too, struggles with the idea of not being seen as human:

Hadn't he spent years begging to be seen as anything but a horrific collection of fuckups? That he wasn't just the mistakes he was made of and his parents' condescending pity and God, *I'm a person, I'm a person too?* (*HFUWU* 261; original emphasis)

It is secondary character Erin who points out Nick and Benji's similarities. In the scene below, Nick explains to Erin why he does not call Benji by his name and uses it/its pronouns for him, however Erin reminds him that dehumanisation is an experience that both Benji and Nick share:

"I do. But this is different. Seraph isn't a person."

The words snag on the way out. He tamps down how Seraph looked at him under the pavilion, the way it sagged in relief when Nick offered a little bit of himself in return — *I'm autistic* — to ease the tension in its shoulders. It looks like a teenager, it sounds like a teenager, it acts like a boy exactly his age, reflecting his worst nightmare back at him, desperately grasping for a friend, and Nick cannot be that.

Nick can be anything else. He can be cruel. He can build an entire personality out of violence and disconnection, convince everyone that he is unfeeling and uncaring, but he will not betray a friend. He has never gone that low, and he never will. The moment he does, he will be no better than the sons of bitches that burned this world to the ground.

Therefore, Seraph cannot be human.

Erin snuffles. Nick never knows what to do when people cry. It scares him. She says, "He reminds me of you." (*HFUWU* 104-5; original emphasis)

Both boys therefore struggle with being seen as human, which is what they truly are. Thus, they hide parts of themselves – Nick's neurodivergence and Benji's Seraph – in order to be more palatable and welcome in their community. Visibility appears as dangerous. But at the same time seeing oneself in one another, recognising similarities, can lead to survival.

Nick realises that by dismissing Benji's humanity, he is repeating abuse he has gone through himself: "Pretending Benji isn't a person when so many people have done the same to him" (*HFUWU* 260-1) is not a solution. This is similar to how *The Magnus Archives* handles the topic; Martin and Jon need to be able to see *each other* as human in order to stay human. And so do Benji and Nick:

Benji. So instead he says the name over and over. Not Seraph. Benji. He, him, his, not *it*. Benji's real name comes so much easier than any other name ever did, and it is a relief to let go of the wrong pronouns. The actual

ones are a blessing because they are the truth, and as much time as Nick spends lying, the truth is beautiful. (*HFWU* 259-7; original emphasis)

Once Nick trusts Benji with the fact that he is autistic, Benji trusts him more in return and once Nick allows himself to see Benji as human, he is able to trust him more. Only once their whole selves are visible to one another, vital information is shared and together they come up with a plan to harness Seraph in order to destroy New Nazareth and the cult of Angels from within.

Being different is not a marker of monstrosity, despite characters' insecurities about it, but something that links them to one another and ends up humanising even the visibly monstrously Benji in Nick's eyes. With this, *Hell Followed With Us* stands against a tradition of demonising queer characters by turning them into monsters and instead reclaims the status of monster as something positive, if wielded by someone good, someone human, and Benji the gay trans man is exactly that.

5. "I Was Never Afraid Before You Showed Up": Analysing "A Long, Long Time" from *The Last of Us*

Originally a Naughty Dog video game released in June of 2013, HBO's *The Last of Us* TV adaptation was first broadcast in January of 2023, ten years later. The episode titled "Long, long time", in reference to the Linda Ronstadt song of the same name, present multiple times within the episode as diegetic music, is the third episode in the HBO instalment. With a runtime of 76 minutes, the third episode is the second longest episode, after the first one. The other seven episodes are all below the one-hour mark, making these two stand out.

The Last of Us follows the story of Ellie (Bella Ramsey), a fourteen-year-old girl who is somehow immune to the cordyceps fungus that runs rampant in the world, causing infected people to mutate and become violent zombies. Given into the care of grizzled apocalypse veteran Joel Miller (Pedro Pascal), who lost his daughter at the very beginning of the apocalypse 20 years prior, Ellie is on a mission to seek out scientists said to be able to produce a cure based on her blood. Despite Joel's initially tough exterior, him and Ellie develop a father-daughter relationship over the course of the episodes. So much so that, when Joel realises that the scientists would have to kill Ellie and dissect her brain to possibly distil a cure, he kills all of the staff at the research facility to "rescue" Ellie. At the end of the season, he keeps their daring escape a secret from her, knowing she would have chosen to sacrifice her own life for the greater good.

In the context of the show, episode 3 comes after the second episode's death of secondary character Tess (Anna Torv), whose previous relationship with Joel is revealed in episode 3. Episode 3 opens with Ellie and Joel dealing with the repercussions of Tess' untimely passing, and hands the narrative back to them at the end as they discover Bill (Nick Offerman) and Frank's (Murray Bartlett) empty house. The main conflict in *The Last of Us* is the cordyceps infection and apocalypse. However, this conflict barely interacts with Bill and Frank outside of the occasional looter. Overall, in the small town they have made their home, Bill and Frank are mostly shielded from the goings on in the world and effectively live outside of the main narrative conflict.

I will be looking at the horror of *The Last of Us*, focusing especially on episode 3 and how the main horrible moment is somewhat absent from it, despite the threat remaining. I will then move on to the representation of gay love, which is especially interesting as this is the main change that has been made from the source material. Looking at identity and visibility will be my last steps in the

analysis. As there is no literary research published on *The Last of Us* yet, I will refer to other secondary sources that deal with generalised topics instead.

5.1 *The Last of Us is a Horror Show*

The Last of Us' horror lies primarily within the horrible moment of the zombie apocalypse. Everything and everyone are affected, by either being infected with the cordyceps fungus themselves or having lost someone they love. I will analyse how Bill and Frank are able to live and love relatively undisturbed without sacrificing the horror of the show. As "[t]he horror genre is one of the most expressive in terms of how visual imagery, sound design, and the overall atmosphere are utilized to concoct a sense of dread and fear within the viewer" (Browning 29), I will describe the scenes in depth, analysing what atmosphere is created and which reactions are elicited from an audience.

Firstly, my benchmarks for horror must be identified. A "before" is not established in this episode but in episode 1. However, due to the non-chronological timeline of the episode, Bill and Frank live in the past whereas Ellie and Joel are in the present. This means that, despite the horrible moment already being present, for Joel and Ellie it is Bill and Frank's story that is the "before". Especially so, the scene with Joel and Tess at Bill and Frank's house can be seen as a desirable yet lost past, as Tess has died in the episode prior to this one. What is interesting here, is that Bill and Frank do not construct a distinctive "after" yet are able to live in the horrible moment without truly needing to move past it.

The adversary for this episode is not necessarily just the cordyceps zombies but also the human monsters the horrible moment creates: looters, thieves, and murderers. All of them both suffer under yet profit off the horrible moment's destruction of law and order. The theme of humans as antagonists is very present throughout the whole show, and especially this episode.

Finally, the protagonists of the episode are Bill and Frank who stand in, not for those suffering, but for the lucky few that survived due to preparation and working together. All the while their small struggles are elevated to distinctly human conditions: qualms about wasting paint on the house, trading ammo for strawberry seeds, hosting dinner parties in the garden as an introvert. Their storyline is one so deeply human that it presents a stark contrast to the suffering omnipresent in the rest of the show which is focused on Joel and Ellie.

The scene that leads directly into Bill and Frank's storyline sets the tone for the episode, primarily concerned with humans instead of cordyceps zombies. The

camera, in a long shot, pans down into a ditch next to the road, revealing tens if not hundreds of human skeletal remains, some still wrapped in clothes or blankets, as well as car parts strewn across the grass. Joel explains the scene to Ellie and the viewer, giving a timeline of the horrible moment:

JOEL: About a week after Outbreak Day, soldiers ... went through the countryside and evacuated the small towns. Told you you were goin' to a QZ¹³, and you were ... if there was room. If there wasn't ... (00:14:41-00:14:59)

The camera angle changes to a low angle showing Joel and Ellie blurred from where the skeletons lie, focusing particularly on a skeleton in a floral blue tattered fabric next to a much smaller skull next to a dirty blue fabric printed with rainbows (cf. 00:15:26). This angle places the viewer with the skeletal remains, foreshadowing the connection that the audience will form with the past over the course of the episode. The camera zooms in on the rainbow fabric before it pulls away, to the fabric now clean and the sound of a fussing baby (cf. 00:15:26-33). The camera zooms out further into a closeup of a Black woman wearing the very same floral dress seen in the ditch, holding an infant wrapped in the blue rainbow fabric. They are surrounded by a group of people, and a military transport car can be seen over her shoulder (cf. 00:15:34). A non-diegetic text appears in the lower right-hand corner of the screen, reading: "30th September, 2003" (00:15:35). From Joel's timeline explained a few minutes earlier, it is known that Friday the 26th marked the beginning of the horrible moment, where during the evening and night the first people turned rabid with infection (cf. 00:13:20). Situating the episode four days after Outbreak Day, puts them within that week's timeframe of evacuation which Joel mentioned to Ellie as well. This paints a grim picture: everyone seen loading into the trucks in the flashback to September the 30th will end up dead, becoming the skeletons that Ellie finds twenty years later. This difference in knowledge between character and viewer creates a feeling of helplessness and terror in the audience which is a key component of horror storytelling (cf. Stone 4). Robert Spadoni writes about this feeling that

[i]n the case of the horror film, [the] outcome is often the death at the hands of a monster or other stalker waiting somewhere nearby in the darkness. In its most conventional configurations, the threat is unseen, and manifests itself in things like indeterminate off-screen noises and shadowy

¹³ QZ is an initialism for Quarantine Zone, spaces created by the military under martial law that are (predominantly) free of cordyceps infected.

movements in the out-of-focus background. This is dread, which again is a form of suspense. (Spadoni 157)

This looming of a threat is a constant throughout the episode, scenes of violent looters, perimeter fences and Bill's obsession with guns serving as reminders for the state of the world within the horrible moment. The characters the viewer sees and relates to on-screen are never safe. The woman and her baby are just one example for this truth that is revisited all throughout *The Last of Us*.

The horror of episode 3 specifically comes in the form of visual storytelling partnered with a difference in knowledge between characters and audience. Empty, abandoned buildings, a crashed plane, the remnants of people in a ditch show, instead of tell, the audience about the horrors of the post-apocalyptic world, while the framing of the episode provides context that the bulk of it lacks; namely that Bill and Frank are dead and the viewers are witnessing their lives leading up to their passing. By showing the viewer the people that once were, such as a dirty piece of cloth over bones transforming into an infant in a onesie, a human stake is achieved in the episode: items become possessions, ruins become homes, skeletons become people. This humanising of fatalities continuously builds until the point when Bill meets Frank; when he should have killed him or at the very least sent him away, he instead takes him in. In a world that is horrible, where people kill people, infected or not, episode 3 of *The Last of Us* is concerned with the humanity of one gay couple.

5.2 "You Were My Purpose": Gay Love in The Last of Us

Bill and Frank's love is established as a potent antithesis to the topic of loss that is both present in the overarching story of *The Last of Us* as well as this specific episode. Moreover, the characters' love, which would have led to them being ostracised or worse, as the apocalypse happened in 2003, is no longer a threat to their existence. I will analyse how Bill and Frank's gay love is represented through maintaining a sense of "normalcy" during the horrible moment as shown in the strawberry scene as well as the final scenes leading up to their deaths.

Bill and Frank's love is not only revolutionary for the horror genre, but for televised gay representation in general. Rarely are adult men shown to be in healthy, loving relationships outside of the gay romance genre (cf. Whalen 75). To insert an entire episode focused on the growth of love between two gay adults in a TV show not marketed to audiences as primarily LGBTQ+ is a noteworthy

departure from the norms of the genre. "To get almost two full decades with someone you love is a gift, and to get it in a time of so much death and destruction feels even more special, so it's really nice to see it happen for gay people" (Andrew n. pag.), fan of the show Valerie Ann told *CNN Entertainment*. With this choice to represent two adult gay men in a popular video game adaptation on a streaming service with millions of users, *The Last of Us* is the clearest diversion from the tradition of conflating gayness and monstrosity that has been prevalent in the horror genre since its conception. One especially moving instance of Bill and Frank's love during the horrible moment of the apocalypse is the strawberry scene.

The strawberry scene is one that brings love and loss extremely close. Six years into their relationship, the scene opens with two long shots of the perimeter fence, including rusted cars stacked on top of one another to keep infected out, metal creaking (cf. 00:41:55-42:00). Despite this reminder of the horrors outside, the next shot shows Bill and Frank jogging along the street, with Bill struggling to keep pace, while Frank beckons him to follow as he has something to show him (cf. 00:42:01-19). In a medium long shot the setting sun shows pollen in the air as Frank, holding Bill's eyes closed, leads them into the backyard and towards a patch of strawberries (cf. 00:42:20-40). The sun is a symbol for openness in *The Last of Us*, and especially in this episode it is a recurring motif which I will touch upon more in subchapters 5.3 and 5.4. By placing Bill and Frank in the sunlight, the scene is contextualised as one of openness, revealing secrets and communicating. From the beginning of Bill's storyline in the episode, the audience remembers that while he does grow his own food, it appears limited to vegetables, his luxuries limited to wine. Frank says that he traded seeds for a gun with Tess and Joel, a clash of Frank's dual identity of the prepper and the emotional connoisseur I will explore more in subchapter 5.3 (cf. 00:42:42-45). Despite Bill's initial reaction being to inquire which gun had been given away, his prepper paranoia flaring up to interject the scene of love, he is quickly returned to happiness over the surprise as Frank pulls him onto their knees in front of the strawberries, the camera movement tracking their faces (cf. 00:42:46-57). Frank picks a red strawberry in an extreme closeup of his hand, while soft, non-diegetic music starts playing. They tap two strawberries together like drinks and eat, laughing out of joy at the taste neither has been able to indulge in over ten years (cf. 00:42:57-43:44). Strawberries have been a signifier of nostalgia for an old world in a time of terror since J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* Trilogy (1954-1955), in which Samwise tries to appeal to Frodo's indomitable spirit by reminding him of the strawberries back home in the Shire (cf. Patches n. pag.). In 2021, *The Matrix Resurrections* uses

the strawberry symbol as well when Neo indulges in a recreated strawberry (cf. Patches n. pag.). Strawberries stand for something that cannot be had anymore, in the time of the apocalypse. Having one anyway is an act of defiance against reality, much like gay love is. Together, the golden hour high key lighting, the non-diegetic music, and the emotion create an atmosphere more fit to the romance genre than the horror one. However, rather than alleviating the dread of the horror genre, the stark contrast only serves to deepen it. Audience members that are familiar with the game which the television show is based on know that when encountering Bill in the video game, Frank has passed away. And while the episode already deviates from the game's source material, the knowledge of what could be cannot be shaken. As Bill and Frank sit by the strawberries, Bill addresses the audience's anxieties:

BILL: I'm sorry.

FRANK: For what?

BILL: Gettin' older faster than you.

FRANK: Ah, I like you older. Older means we're still here. What?

BILL: I was never afraid before you showed up. (00:43:45-44:13)

After six years of relative safety, Bill addresses the fact that there is still the horrible moment outside their fence, which has been placed back on the audience's radar at the beginning of the scene. In the following scene, raiders attempt to break into the town and Bill is wounded, leading to a reversal of the fear of losing one another voiced previously as Frank frantically tries to apply pressure to the wound and Bill reminds him to call Joel, as Frank cannot be on his own and survive (cf. 00:44:38-47:48). When there is much to love there is much to lose.

The theme of love and loss is established early on in the episode when Ellie sees an old broken arcade game reminiscing that she "had a friend who knew everything about this game" (00:05:59-06:11). This friend is later revealed to have been a girl that Ellie had a crush on and even kissed, who broke into an abandoned mall with Ellie. In episode 4, "Please Hold My Hand", it is hinted that Ellie had to kill Riley, which is confirmed in "Left Behind", the seventh episode, a flashback episode of Riley and Ellie's mall break in and subsequent infection with the cordyceps, in which Ellie discovers her immunity and has to kill Riley when she transformed into a rabid zombie. Through repetition and the likening of situations, the stakes for this episode are established as exceptionally high; not just death, but the death of a loved one.

In "Long, Long Time", this death comes in the form of Frank's illness. Directly after the scene with the looters, the audience is falsely led to believe that the man in the wheelchair on the porch in the establishing shot is Bill, still hurt from having been shot (cf. 00:47:52-48:06). However, this is revealed to be wrong in the long shot through the open front door from within the house, showing Frank, visibly unwell, in the wheelchair and Bill moving him, with the non-diegetic text in the left-hand corner reading "Ten Years Later 2023" (cf. 00:48:08). Whether or not Bill and Frank's passing plays into the "Bury Your Gays" trope, as both Bill and Frank die by ingesting sleeping pills, may be debated, however, as they are able to live and love for seventeen years before they die, and as they never once experience homophobia, Bill and Frank's episode does not qualify for the trope (cf. Andrew n. pag.). Especially so, the montage of the hours leading up to Frank's self-chosen death does not focus on the tragedy of the death but celebrates their life and love with a marriage (cf. 00:55:32). Set to the non-diegetic instrumental song "On the Nature of Daylight" by Max Richter, Bill takes Frank on one last walk through their town, showing pansies by the side of the road, a sign that they were planted there by the couple, a sign that they were there (cf. 00:55:09). The exchanging of the wedding bands is framed in a closeup of the two men sitting by the piano, where Bill and Frank initially realised their feelings for one another. In contrast to the earlier scene, both are illuminated by the setting sun falling through the window, rather than just Frank, which I will be explaining further in the next chapter (cf. 00:55:43). A handheld camera gives an even more intimate feeling to the scene. Halperin writes on queer love and marriage that

[g]ay marriage makes queer love—love that is socially inapt, that threatens, rejects, ignores, or simply fails to correspond with established forms of social life—all the more marginal, perverse, elusive, and unrepresentable. (Halperin 397)

Representing Frank and Bill's love with a wedding ceremony is especially powerful in the battle to destigmatise gay relationships, to understand them as not norm disrupting but normal and welcome (cf. Halperin 396-7). It is important to note that in the timeline of *The Last of Us*, gay marriage was never legalised in the U.S., which makes Bill and Frank's wedding ceremony all the more of a potent symbol. Moreover, the entire montage, including the wedding ceremony has no diegetic sound, giving privacy to the moments they share, much like the privacy that Jon and Martin are allowed in *The Magnus Archives* in the moments between the tape recordings. In the horror of the cordyceps outbreak, Bill and Frank find a space to

live together and love one another. A gay love that would not have been possible without the horrible moment yet managed to stay almost entirely untouched by it for seventeen years.

5.3 "*Don't Tread on Me*": Identity in *The Last of Us*

Bill has two distinct and seemingly at odds identities that he displays in episode 3 of *The Last of Us*: that of the conspiracy theorist prepper, and that of a wine-loving connoisseur of the finer, artistic things in life. More simply put, he has both a rational side concerned with necessity, and a fancy side that likes to express itself. Frank brings out the latter side in him. In this subchapter I will analyse Bill's character introduction, Bill and Frank's first meeting, and when they host Joel and Tess, as these showcase Bill's two sides, especially focusing on character dialogue as well as the symbol of guns and wine.

Bill's identity of the prepper is represented by his underground bunker. While he is first introduced, a closeup shot shows rows upon rows of handguns, rifles, shotguns, and more being illuminated, as well as shelves filled with ammo and magazines and books with titles such as "Guns & Ammo" and "Gun Digest". Also shown are canisters of Sulfuric acid – which, if put into contact with water, can combust into flames and be used for firebombs, which Bill is later seen using to deter looters and infected (cf. 00:16:46-55). This show of arms characterises Bill as thoroughly prepared for a horrible moment. In a montage spanning many months, Bill drives his pickup truck around his recently abandoned town, loots stores for supplies, turns on the mains gas network that had been turned off, and fortifies his homestead with a highly defendable scavenged fence and self-made traps like pitfalls, tripwires tethered to guns and flame throwers, as well as gardening and pulling homegrown carrots from the ground, feeding chickens, and even butchering an animal carcass (cf. 00:19:37-59). These first minutes of the episode shows Bill, the prepper, in his element (cf. 00:17:50). In his initial introduction he appears as a stereotypical cisgendered, white, American horror movie protagonist; but, because he is gay, Bill also undoes the stereotype at the same time (cf. Benshoff 7). He does not give up his queerness in order to be a horror movie protagonist and apocalypse survivor, and he does not give up his prepper identity to be queer (cf. Benshoff 7). With this, *The Last of Us* resists both horror genre stereotypes of gay characters as monsters, and general stereotyping of gay men as effeminate (cf. Benshoff 7). That said, Bill's identity is not one dimensional either and not only focused on being a prepper.

Despite a sense of necessity to his looting, Bill also stops at "Lincoln Wine & Spirits", taking a box of spirits from there. A minute later it is shown that Bill enjoys cooking and has a talent for it as he prepares a complex almost gourmet steak with carrots, onions and potatoes from his garden and a bottle of red wine to drink with it (cf. 00:18:46-20:13). As he eats, Bill has a napkin placed on his lap and nearby wall sconces look like lit candles, giving the room he is in a warm tint (cf. 00:20:17-20). The wine symbolically appears in opposition to the gun: the gun for the prepper, the wine for the softer parts of his character.

After this back and forth between the prepper and the lover of the finer things in life, a scene which directly combines the two follows. Down in his bunker, Bill is soldering a firetrap. Diegetic music is playing on a radio, hinting at the co-existence of Bill's artful side (enjoying music) together with his practical prepper one (making a trap). To further showcase that Bill is both in one, merging seemingly separate identities, a flag on his bunker wall is used. A closeup shot shows a yellow flag with a rattlesnake by a rack of guns which reads "Don't Tread on Me". This is the Gadsden flag, which is associated closely with American libertarianism. In the 1990s it was co-opted by queer self-defence groups, placing the snake on a rainbow background. This flag serves as a link between Bill's identity as an anti-Government, pro-liberty prepper and a (closeted) gay man.

Meeting Frank is yet another moment where Bill's two identities collide. Frank has fallen into one of Bill's pitfall traps (cf. 00:21:59). In the following exchange, the man, who introduces himself as Frank, tries to appeal to the humanity in Bill, saying how he has not eaten in two days, even joking that it "doesn't sound very long out loud" (00:23:53-59). Frank, still trying to appear not as a threat but as a human person to Bill, jokes and smiles once more:

BILL: If I feed you, then every bum you talk to about it is gonna show up here lookin' for a free lunch, and this is not an Arby's.
FRANK: Well, Arby's didn't have free lunch, it was a restaurant. (00:23:59-24:19)

In a closeup of Frank's face, he scoffs and smiles both hopefully and defeatedly at Bill, as his eyes are trained on the man in front of him in a search for human connection, pleading for help with everything but words (cf. 00:24:34-42). They are both unlikely survivors of a worldwide horrible moment, an apocalypse that has been continuously spreading and claiming lives for four years. Frank's past, having travelled together with a group after living in a Quarantine Zone, may give him a more positive attitude towards the human urge to help one another, but the fact

that Bill has let him live thus far, even helped him out of the pit means something. A reaction shot of Bill shows his facial expression softening ever so slightly, (cf. 00:24:43-9) which Frank reads correctly. Bill's identity as a paranoid prepper is being undone by Frank's belief in his warmth and humanity, by showing him warmth and humanity, joking with him, and smiling at him. In other words, Bill is un-othered in front of Frank. However, while the othered identity would usually be synonymous with a queer identity, since both Frank and Bill are gay, it is the prepper identity that is other, and the gay identity that is same (cf. Benshoff 6).

Once Bill's identity as a prepper begins to crumble, that of the gourmand takes its place. In a long shot of the dining table, Bill places a plate of gourmet rabbit and vegetables in front of Frank. He even rotates the plate in front of Frank to where it sits perfectly (cf. 00:26:34-8). While Bill opens some wine, Frank starts eating in a medium shot, clearly enjoying the taste as he exclaims "what the fuck?" (cf. 00:26:56-27:06). As can be inferred from food shown in other episodes, Frank would be used to low quality food, if any, so is understandably taken aback by the quality and care in the food presented to him, especially in the context of their first meeting. Due to his characteristics marking Bill as a loner, it is unlikely that he ever cooked for someone other than himself either and he does not take the compliment, instead rebutting that "everything tastes good when you're starving" (00:27:10). However, the compliment emboldens him to serve the wine to Frank in an overtly fancy way, the camera tracks Bill's hand holding the bottle in a closeup as he pours the red wine into the glass (cf. 00:27:23-8). An exchange about the choice of wine ensues that holds a lot of weight for the further storyline:

FRANK: A man who knows to pair rabbit with a Beaujolais.

BILL: I know I don't seem like the type.

FRANK: No, you do. (00:27:28-32)

The wine holds a lot of symbolic meaning. It is the first indulgence that Bill is shown to allow himself in the looting montage, and it will be the last one him and Frank share before their passing. Beyond that, the exchange holds a hidden, subtextual meaning, too. "I know I don't seem like the type" (cf. 00:27:28-32) does not only refer to Bill's interest in gastronomy which clashes with his perceived and portrayed identity as a gunslinging prepper, but it also refers to his non-normative sexuality as it appears to clash with his very straight coded interest in guns, marking him as just as the archetypal heterosexual male protagonist of a horror film, like Joel. Frank, himself a gay man, appears to be able to see through Bill's outward performances and into his hidden identities. This is not to say that Bill's identity as

a prepper, or a libertarian is invalid, but that there are other identities that can also be ascribed to him, such as the label of gay man. This seemingly stubborn gun-loving identity is signified by Bill's struggle to sit down across Frank, as his gun holster gets stuck on the chair's armrest (cf. 00:27:40-3).

Three years later, after a short fight, about Frank's wish to spend time and resources on keeping their house and neighbourhood looking nice, Frank reveals to Bill that he wishes to have and host friends (cf. 00:37:52-7). In a reaction close-up shot, Bill retorts that they cannot have friends, to which Frank replies that he has already started making one.

BILL: We don't have friends, Frank. We will never have friends. Because there are no friends to be had.

FRANK: Well, I've actually been talking to a nice woman on the radio. (00:37:57-38:11)

While Bill seems content with being understood as more than the paranoid prepper by Frank, he is shown to be uncomfortable around other people who perceive the multiple facets of his identity. In a scene where Bill and Frank host Joel and Tess in their garden, Bill and Joel are both tense while Tess and Frank are socialising comfortably. Bill's identity as a prepper is mirrored by Joel's experience of the loss of his daughter, having created similarly paranoid and overprotective men. Frank and Tess appear as mirrors of each other in this scene, as do Bill and Joel. Two couples, one outgoing and concerned with the importance of connections, the other pre-occupied with concerns of safety. This also foreshadows Frank's death, as the previous episode ended with Tess'. Upon realising the link between Tess and Frank, and therefore their possibly mirrored fates, a feeling of dread is elicited from the viewer (cf. Spadoni 157). Frank removes himself and Tess from the scene and, now alone, Joel asks if Bill had been a prepper, to which Bill counters that he was a survivalist (cf. 00:40:07-9). Despite Bill's wish to keep his emotional side hidden, Joel has seen it. This becomes clear at two points: once, when Joel talks about understanding Bill's discomfort and says "If my, uh... if mine brought strangers into our situation" (00:39:22-31) as well as saying that the upgrades for the perimeter fence he could supply would not just last Bill for the rest of his life, but for the rest of both their lives with a nod to the house where Frank is showing Tess around (cf. 00:40:40-5). Bill and Joel are mirrors of one another:

Through Bill, we see an alternate path Joel's life might have taken, if Joel were able to open himself to the people who care about him. Bill is utterly

transformed by his love for Frank – and the two keep each other alive in more ways than one. (Andrew n. pag.)

Bill's full identity cannot be hidden due to Joel's similarity in situation. Much like how Frank knows Bill is gay because he sees himself in him, Joel knows that Bill would do whatever he can to protect Frank, because he would do the same for Tess (even if he is bound to fail). Bill is made visible through love, and his love for Frank makes hidden parts of Joel's identity more visible in turn.

5.4 "This Is You": Visibility in The Last of Us

While Bill and Frank do serve as an analogy to Joel and Tess, they "don't exist solely to lend the series' heterosexual protagonist greater depth" (Andrew n. pag.). The importance of visibility as a marker for closeness, as well as something fundamentally shared between LGBTQ+ people is represented in *The Last of Us* episode 3 through symbols; Frank's identification of "Long, long time" with Bill's homosexuality, and windows/light as symbols for truth/openness. I will analyse how these symbols function within a selected scene, showing how Frank coaxes Bill out of the closet by seeing him for who he truly is.

After their first dinner together, at Bill and Frank's initial meeting, a scene centred on a piano and Bill's sexuality takes place. When Frank asks, "Is it antique?", regarding the piano, he sees worth in its age, even though Bill pragmatically replies that it is currently worth nothing, due to the ongoing apocalypse and thorough collapse of capitalism (00:28:58-29:04). This difference in perception can both be applied to the piano's worth and the worth of what the piano symbolises: Bill's homosexuality. Bill sees no worth in living his truth, because there are other things more important than his LGBTQ+ identity that need his attention: namely survival and his prepper identity. Frank, despite only barely having made it this far, is much more comfortable in his gay identity and has an optimistic outlook on the worth of people and things, even in times of mere survival. Frank's ability to make visible hidden truths about Bill is shown when he makes visible the hidden sheet music, and correctly identifies which music Bill likes. As Frank opens the seat to rummage through sheet music, he comments on the classical music claiming: "These aren't yours", showing a deep understanding of Bill despite how little time they have spent together (00:29:10). Frank already sees through Bill's facade of the prepper into a deeper layer of his identity that enjoys fine wine, cooking, and gardening. This is furthered when Frank finds a book of

pop song sheet music titled "The best of Linda Ronstadt", the musician of the song of the episode's title, showing it to Bill saying: "This is you" (00:29:13).

Windows and light, throughout the entire *The Last of Us* franchise – both video game and TV show – have strong metaphorical connotation. Closed windows with drawn curtains stand for hiding and secrets (like Bill's house throughout the beginning of the episode), open windows for letting go (like at the end of the episode or the end of the second game), and broken windows for upcoming or reminiscing danger (like the starting screen of the first game). The fact that the sheer curtains before the window by the piano are the most open any window has been in the whole episode so far means something; the piano is important to Bill as a character, much like the bunker is important, as I have stated in 5.3, as it represents his prepper aspects. As Frank plays Linda Ronstadt's "Long, long time" exclaiming that it is his favourite he is in high key light while Bill in the background remains in low key light, signifying their difference in self-acceptance of their queer identities (cf. 00:29:17-34). "Long, long time" was Ronstadt's breakout hit, peaking at 25th on the Billboard Top 100 in 1970 and was hailed as one of the most beautifully haunting ballads of its time with themes of longing, loneliness, love, and loss. The raw vocals and straight forwards lyrics accompanied by a melancholy melody focus on unrequited affection, a parallel to Frank and Bill's situation, where Bill's own unwillingness to step into the light and come out (to himself) is holding him back from what Frank has to offer. During the second line of the song, the angle changes to Bill in a medium shot in the doorway, wringing his hands together, caught in a moment of indecision (cf. 00:29:50). At the lyrics "but there's no one at my side" the camera is in an extreme closeup shot of Frank's hands playing the piano, lit by sunlight (00:29:57-30:01). When Frank stands up from the piano bench to invite Bill to play instead, both men and the piano are hit by the sunlight in a long shot of the room where Bill is stood directly in front of the slightly open curtains of the window (cf. 00:30:11-3). Both the light and the window signify that this scene is of importance to Bill's character, that it reveals something deep and hidden about him. Therefore, when Bill sits down by the piano, he does not open the sheet music back up but plays and sings the song by heart, which shows its importance to not just Frank whose "favourite song" it is, but also to Bill (cf. 00:30:43). However, the revelation of Bill's truth in this scene is no coming out in the classical sense. There is no fear of loss of safety, only truth to be gained, symbolised by the sun in the scene (cf. Barnhurst 1-2). Because both men are gay, there is no coming out to a straight person that would lead to an inherent othering of the gay person, but it is instead a recognition of similarity and familiarity between

two members of the same community, similarly to when Benji joins the ALC in *Hell Followed With Us*. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick criticises the coming out as a moment forced upon queer identities by heteronormative societal structures, which use the closet and being in the closet as means of oppression and alienation (cf. Sedgwick *Closet* 71). A coming out in this way only serves to supply the heterosexual norm with more power as it continuously keeps the closet existing. Narratives focused on coming out are more for the heteronormative society than they are for the queer persons. Which is why truly queer or queer-positive narratives tend to not focus on coming out struggles and instead represent the queer character as a rounded multi-faceted character outside of heteronormative pressures that push to announce oneself as "other" or stay hidden.

The (not) coming out scene culminates in Frank asking: "So, who's the girl? Girl you're singing about?" (00:31:55-32:11) In a closeup shot of Bill's face, his facial expression is somewhere between embarrassed and terrified, and he avoids looking up or even at the piano as he confesses: "There is no girl" (00:32:12-8). Frank's arm comes into frame, as he places a hand on Bill's shoulder and says: "I know" (00:32:19-25), confirming that he has had suspicions about Bill's sexuality for at least a while, if not the first time they locked eyes. The scene is reminiscent of the wine at the table, as well as Frank knowing which piano notes are Bill's. All three are scenes in which Frank truly understands something about Bill, that is hidden away. Frank, a gay man, is able to see Bill, a gay man, in full. The camera moves with Frank in a closeup shot as he bends down to where Bill is sitting at the piano and they kiss (cf. 00:32:26-33). In the almost extreme closeup of the two men's faces, tears are visible under Frank's eye, rolling down his cheek as they break away from each other and Frank asks: "What's your name?" (00:32:43-59).

Knowing one deeply is therefore not linked to superficial knowledge. Due to their shared experiences, a deep understanding between Bill and Frank is possible without knowing each other's names. Whilst knowing Bill's name may have given Frank a superficial understanding of the man, seeing his actions, hearing him sing, and sharing a kiss gave him a much deeper understanding, due to their shared gay identity. This calls to mind the quote from *The Magnus Archives* episode 172 (21:07-44) about the difference between knowing something and truly understanding it, as well as in *Hell Followed With Us* and Benji's relief upon meeting a second trans person at the ALC (cf. *HFWU* 38). In the survey done by The Trevor Project, LGBTQ+ people who lived in accepting communities reported lower risk of suicide (The Trevor Project n. pag.). This shows just how important

community for queer people is, and that representing queer connections as such is something positive.

It might be due to a similar history of being closeted gay men growing up in the 70s, or just Frank's empathetic ability to read Bill and gaze past his exterior presentations of toughness. Together, visible to one another, the two can happily and safely live together for seventeen years even while the horrible moment ravages the world around them. In their home and in their gay relationship, Bill and Frank find a way to build a safe place within the horror genre.

6. Leaving the Monster in the Closet: A Conclusion

Whether *The Last of Us*' Bill and Frank's happy years of gay love, *The Magnus Archives*' open-ended tragedy, *Hell Followed With Us*' marriage of the monster and the human, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*'s aliens in drag, or *The Addams Family*'s subtextual family queerness, horror and the LGBTQ+ identity's deep historical entanglement continues into the present day. "For many of us who are LGBTQ+, queer literature can provide solace, joy, a lifeline" writes Abraham (n. pag.) and queer representation in horror can be one such a lifeline. Much like how *The Munsters* arrived as a counter-tradition, humanising the on-screen monster in the 1960s, shows like *The Last of Us* hold the potential of depicting queer people in ways that humanises them to the broader public, who may not have had many dealings with the LGBTQ+ community (cf. West 510; Benshoff 174-5) as well as offering points of identification for queer audience members to see themselves represented positively and properly (cf. Parsemain 11). The horror genre, therefore, has set historic precedent for flipping traditions around and giving audiences new (queer) characters to sympathise with.

Multiple reasons for the allure of the horror genre in terms of queer representation have been named: the horrible moment as something "distracting" that provides an opportunity for queerness to exist unquestioned, a historical affinity to indirect modes of representation and the inherent queer-coding of monsters as gay and lesbian through a tradition of othering members of the LGBTQ+ community (cf. Wood 83; cf. Westengrad 121; cf. Morris 1). The centring of cis-heteronormative stories in society appears as a hurdle which LGBTQ+ narratives have to overcome; they have to fight for their place at the table, for their place in media, for their right to be included. Nowadays, despite the rise in awareness about diversity needs for media, there is still a surprising lack of queer representation that goes beyond the spectacle of the coming out (cf. Bonder 61). Whether *The Last of Us*, *Hell Followed With Us*, and *The Magnus Archives* mark the beginning of another shift within the horror genre towards positive, three-dimensional LGBTQ+ representation remains to be seen, although from my research, which spans about seven years of content, it seems to be that representation is only getting better.

I found that aspects of gay love, visibility and identity are beginning to exist in more complex ways within the horror genre, without being necessarily tied to evil monsters and horrible moments. The gay characters' humanity stands front and centre and, while questioned, is never truly lost. Struggles with monstrosity

have nothing to do with gay identity but rather, gay love is represented as a deeply human condition that can aid in staying human and resisting the horrible moment. The gay characters' ability to engage in romantic pursuits that are both driven and threatened by but also only possible due to the horrible moment shows that queer representation has become more well-rounded. LGBTQ+ characters are allowed to occupy spaces where historically only cisgender and heterosexual characters have previously been found (cf. Benshoff 36-7). The existence of gay characters and gay couples in the horror media I have analysed is not called into question.

Throughout my analysis I have looked at the representation of each aspect of this thesis as it appears in the media. All three are undoubtedly part of the horror genre, as I have applied my own parameters of genre convention to each text, as well as serve the generalised function of being horrifying (cf. Cherry 4; cf. Reyes 8). *The Magnus Archives* podcast especially, as the newest medium, occupies a special place in the analysis of horror media due to its ability to pull listeners into the plot more immediately and thoroughly:

"Living" within fictionalized bodies, crafted (apparently) for them alone, fans are able to exist within narrative worlds that are, even without the intimacy of inhabitation, emotionally important to them. Horror as an audio drama genre allows the listener, through their new narrative body, to safely experience terror. With the relatively large percentage of queer fans and fans of color within Tumblr's podcast fandom communities, horror podcasts like *Night Vale* and *The Magnus Archives* grant these audiences narrative outlets for existential anxiety within stories focused on characters whom fans may feel are truly representative of themselves. (Sumida-Tate 68)

Horror is the reason why any of the gay relationships even exist in the media; it is the catalyst for it. Bill and Frank would not have met if not for the cordyceps fungus and the decay of society which allowed them to live as openly gay. Without the apocalypse, Nick and Benji would not have met. In *The Magnus Archives*, Jon and Martin even directly address that they would not have gotten together if it had not been for the horrible moment, even if they did already know each other:

JON: Sometimes... I imagine if none of this had happened. If we had just... met. Been together, without... all of this.
MARTIN: [Softly] Me, too. But we wouldn't have, would we? Been together, I mean.
JON: Huh? W-What do you mean?
MARTIN: Well, we had that, didn't we? Almost a year of just working a normal job together, and you hated me.
JON: I didn't 'hate' you.
MARTIN: No, no, no, no. I listened to those tapes. At one point you explicitly said you'd be fine with me being chopped up by that old jigsaw lady.

JON: Oh god, Angela! Ha! She's still about, you know? Lording it over a nasty little Flesh domain. Anyway, I didn't explicitly say it. I... implied it.

MARTIN: Face it, John, it took almost two years of crisis and trauma to even make us compatible. And that sucks. But here we are. And I don't want it to be for nothing. I won't let it.

JON: That's very sweet of you, Martin. Sort of. Thank you. (Episode 199 16:14-17:28)

That said, outside of the horror aspect, each medium appears to be especially concerned with one further aspect of analysis over the others, especially when compared to what I have found to be the main way these parts are usually represented in horror, the three texts I have analysed are revolutionary.

For *The Magnus Archives*, the main focus is on visibility:

While horror historically focuses on what is invisible, *The Magnus Archives* asks the question of what the horror of visibility can be. This is especially significant in episodes 158/9 as well as episode 172. Moreover, the main antagonist of *The Magnus Archives* is the Eye; the eldritch fear entity of knowing, seeing, making visible and revealing secrets. As a prominent symbol, the eye/Eye functions within the podcast as a constant reminder that visibility is omnipresent. A constant pull of the supernatural, the monstrous, on both Jon and Martin continues throughout the podcast. Their identity as human is constantly questioned as the story progresses. Martin's link to the Lonely especially can be severed by visibility, though, fostering a strong connection between the two topics. Similarly, what keeps Jon human, his anchor to humanity is his love for his boyfriend Martin. Gay love, in *The Magnus Archives*, conquers horror. And while Jon and Martin sacrifice themselves in the end to banish the entities from their world, no bodies are found, leading most to believe that Jon and Martin, too, have ended up elsewhere in some parallel universe where they are now safe and free to live a life together, romance without the horror, no longer forced into visibility.

For *Hell Followed With Us*, the main focus is on identity:

As a novel, *Hell Followed With Us* with its (mainly) first person homodiegetic narrator brings the reader close to the plot and the character and his motivations. Its constructions of identity therefore work through direct means of characterisation through inner monologues of the protagonist or other focalisers. While horror historically links the monster to the queer identity due to a villainization of queerness, Andrew Joseph White's novel reclaims the monster and turns it from something evil into something good. Moreover, while the monster and the human are polar opposites in most horror media, in *Hell Followed With Us* this strict binary becomes a spectrum. Seraph is outwardly a monster, however Benji remains

human in thought and feeling. This is even recognised by Nick, who spends half the novel attempting to convince himself that Benji is a monster and not a human:

Consciously, Nick — hiding in the shadow of a pickup truck and digging his nails into the corner of his eye to calm down, just *calm down* — knows this thing is Benji. This thing has Benji's hair, Benji's tiny body, Benji's clothes. This thing looks like Sister Kipling took out all of Benji's insides and sewed a wolf under his skin, and it's only now that Nick is seeing it for the first time. It's not him, but it is, and Nick is transfixed. (HFWU 262; original emphasis)

Whilst *Hell Followed With Us* features a monstrous gay character, Benji is by no means monstrous because he is gay. In fact, it is his gay identity and his love for his queer peers that anchor him to humanity in the end, and while his body becomes monstrous, his mind and heart stay distinctly human. Positive gay representation in horror does not need to mean a representation entirely removed from monstrousness, as *The Last of Us* has done. But *Hell Followed With Us* shows the potential of reclaiming the monster and making it a home for queerness, rather than something it is forced into. Andrew Joseph White opens the novel with a dedication befitting my findings: "For the kids who sharpen their teeth and bite". In *Hell Followed With Us*, after having been told that being gay already meant being a monster, Benji turned into something strong and horrible enough to defend himself, a subversion of his role both in the narrative of the novel, as well as the tradition of monsters in horror media.

For *The Last of Us*, the main focus is on gay love:

While horror historically utilises tropes such as "Bury Your Gays" or "Trauma Plot" — if it even includes non-monstrous gay characters at all — *The Last of Us*' Bill and Frank remain fully human, happy, and alive throughout the seventeen years of their relationship. In a space usually occupied by the "traditional happy heterosexual couple who accidentally enter a world of horror" (Benshoff 44), *The Last of Us* instead places two gay men. Moreover, they have access to love, which for so long has not been allowed for queer characters, at least not without it being at the expense of their own queerness (cf. Halperin 397). Bill and Frank are unapologetically queer and in love. They live and die on their own terms. They never lose their humanity. Choices of music, camera angles, motifs of sunlight, the symbol of the strawberry, and the ability to be gay whilst being visible all work together to create a love story spanning seventeen years nestled comfortably within the overarching plot of the apocalypse.

The Last of Us features the most drastically different, new, and needed gay representation in contemporary horror to date. Whilst *The Magnus Archives* and

Hell Followed With Us concern themselves with humanising their monstrous queer characters, *The Last of Us* does not let them become monstrous. As their entire world is affected by the horrible moment, turning people into zombie monsters as well as monsters of a different kind, looting and killing fellow survivors, Bill and Frank get to live human lives, proving once and for all that there is nothing less horrible than two gay men in love.

For further research I would recommend broadening the topic to include more diverse queer narratives within the horror genre. As mentioned in my introduction, many lesbian horror texts exist that can be looked at and compared to their gay counterparts. The intersection between disability representation and queer representation is interesting due to the similarities in demonisation of both communities, both historically and recently. Looking at specific sub-genres, like I have done with supernatural horror, would shine an interesting light on the representation of queerness in horror in places where supernatural monsters do not exist such as psychological horror or splatter/slasher films. For the latter, I would recommend looking at the "Final Girl/Boy" trope and reading secondary literature including Carol L. Clover's "Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film", as it shines a light on the inherent queerness of the trope. Other supernatural horror could also be looked at, while focusing on specific monsters such as vampires (e.g. an analysis of *Dracula's Daughter* (1963) and the implied queerness of blood during the Hays Code era of cinema), or zombies (e.g. analysing the representation of contemporary (gay) zombies in *In The Flesh* (2013-2014) in comparison to Romero-era zombies), or even horror media specifically marketed and celebrated as being queer (e.g. an analysis of *American Horror Story* (2011-present), *Welcome to Night Vale* (2012-present) and online LGBTQ+ fan culture). It will be interesting to follow the developments of queer representation within the horror genre over the next few years to see if gay characters continue their trend of becoming more and more three-dimensional and being allowed human identity, visibility, and love.

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(M. Goy)