

The Siren's Call for Non-Normativity: The Queering of Desire and Time Creates Horror in Robert Eggers' *The Lighthouse*

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Abstract. This theoretical paper takes a social justice lens to unpack the moral predicaments of normative society, normative bodies and reproductive linearity that pose institutional regulation and oppression to the queer or non-normative experiences of reality. Employing queer theory, I analyze Robert Eggers' maritime gothic film, *The Lighthouse* (2019), and explore how the horror genre and monstrous bodies can be used to challenge our normative understandings of psycho-somatic experiences, often ambiguous, in conflict with processes of normative categorization that bring us terror. Through Terror Management Theory, I discuss how the abject body of the mermaid, the queer temporality of the setting of Pilot Rock, and the Lovecraftian existentialism in the film implores audiences to acknowledge the reality of the 'abject' in terms of corporeality and mortality, as a way to escape from regulation and oppression. The anti-hero, Ephraim Winslow, attempts an escape from normative society through a normative body, resolutely denying his own queer embodiment, which leads to his inevitable destruction. The mermaid, read as the queer agent, challenges the barriers set in place by normative society and our conceptions of reproductive linearity so that we may embrace our queer desires and our queer 'non-normative' bodies.

Introduction

The queer monstrous body of the mermaid in Robert Eggers' maritime gothic horror film, *The Lighthouse* (2019), works to instigate, provoke and exacerbate the horror experienced by the anti-hero, Ephraim Winslow. The non-normative body of the mermaid and the queering of time and desire that she represents pushes Winslow to overcome his struggle against social regulation (symbolized mainly by the characterization of Thomas Wake) and ultimately pushes him to his inevitable destruction. The emphasis of the film on bodily horror and disgust, sexual desire and Winslow's quest for enlightenment (in the form of the light at the top of the lighthouse) creates a layered narrative of bodily horror, ambiguity and Lovecraftian existentialism. I will employ queer theory to unpack, firstly, the corporeal and, secondly, the existential horror created by the abject body of the mermaid.

The film is set on a remote island off the coast of Maine in the 1890s and portrays two lighthouse keepers, one young (Winslow) and one old (Wake), dealing with isolation and mysterious happenings while embroiled in a power struggle against each other. First, my essay will examine how the film depicts Winslow's sexual attraction to the sensual feminine form of the mermaid as threatening to his understanding of his own mortality and how his visceral desire for the fish-human hybrid binds him more closely to his sense of corporeality, causing him to commit defensive acts of aggression. Second, I will explore how the mermaid, within the abstruse setting of the remote island of Pilot Rock, queers Winslow's desire for her, queers the narrative with her non-normative body and poses queer time as an existentialist threat to the characters and the audience's sense of normative time. I will therefore argue that the queer underscore of the film threatens and challenges our conceptualization of the world through normative categories and suggests that its disintegration is inevitable. The film can thus be read as a warning against the fragility of such normative structures and as a call to embrace corporeality and the ambiguity of embodiment while asking us to reckon with our instinctive katabasis into a normative escape from regulation.

Corporeal Horror and Mortality Salience

The siren myth dates back centuries and across cultures. A seductive half-woman-half-fish lures sailors with her haunting songs to certain death. The mermaid is the original femme fatale, and her inescapable sexual allure starkly juxtaposes against and complements her deadliness, impurity and evil. Her seductiveness itself, therefore, is what makes her dangerous, and the popularity of this trope (in popular culture, religion and folklore) suggests that "women's sexual allure [is] the principal cause of sin in the world" (Landau et al., 2006, p. 130), evoking lust, temptation and contamination in the man who falls

prey to it. Landau and colleagues, using ‘terror management theory,’ suggest that ambivalence and aggression towards feminine sexual appeal in (heterosexual) men is caused by fear and distaste of their sexual desires because it “threatens to increase men’s awareness of their corporeality and thus mortality” (p. 129). The authors define this awareness as “mortality salience” (p. 129). The bodily horror of *The Lighthouse* lays sheer emphasis on corporeality and bodily disgust by littering the narrative with graphic acts of flatulence, excretion and masturbation. Still, this corporeal horror culminates through the body of the mermaid, a sexual attraction towards whom creates fear and, I will argue, increases mortality salience in Winslow.

Winslow is not only horrified at the discovery of the mermaid but also at his own desire for her abject body, which appears recurrently in his sexual fantasies. When Winslow first discovers the mermaid, he is initially transfixed by her human body but staggers back in terror as his hands trace down from her torso and onto her fishtail, letting out an inhuman scream that combines with the mermaid’s (*The Lighthouse*, 50:20-50:45). Her half-human-half-fish body draws intensified attention to her hybrid corporeality as well as Winslow’s own corporeality when he fantasizes about having sex with her. In this scene, lingering emphasis is laid first on her human breasts (1:07:42) and right after, on her fish genitalia (1:08:04), while simultaneously, Winslow is shown masturbating vigorously. This hybridity emphasizes horror and mortality salience, as we see Winslow desperately trying to “distinguish human[s] from [other] animal[s]” (Landau et al., 2006, p. 131) and failing. His failure to arouse himself also suggests that his mortality salience has caused an aversion to “pleasurable physical sensation” which the authors note occurs in individuals with higher levels of neuroticism (p. 131). Corporeal horror is accentuated in scenes where the mermaid’s body seems to entwine with Winslow’s as he imagines them having sex (*The Lighthouse*, 1:08:14) and later, when her body switches with Wake’s (1:33:49-1:34:04), as emphasis is laid upon the body and ambiguity between the characters and the monstrous body of the mermaid.

Regulation, Resistance and Refuge

Winslow and Wake’s struggle for power is central to the film’s narrative, but as Winslow struggles against Wake’s oppressive leadership, he reveals a desire for liberation from a deeper type of oppression, which is that of regulation. Landau and colleagues discuss that to protect oneself from mortality salience caused by sexual desire, socio-cultural constructs are created to assign symbolic value to the carnal act of sex, in an effort to “obscure the link between sex and death” (p. 131). Wake’s character, therefore, represents and provides regulation and systemic barriers to Winslow’s growing desire for the carnal. The clearest way this happens is through the power dynamic between the two. Wake is older and more experienced, and the script only refers to the characters as ‘Old’ and ‘Young’

rather than their names, which emphasizes this dynamic (Eggers & Eggers, 2019). More importantly, Wake holds more knowledge about the past of the island and the keepers that came before Winslow. He also knows what the light at the top of the lighthouse is, and refuses to share that knowledge with Winslow, who becomes increasingly desperate for it. Through the veteran-subordinate relationship, Wake prevents Winslow from, according to Wake, reaching for more than he can cope with by constantly reprimanding him for insubordination but also protecting him from the dangers of the island by warning him.

The veteran-subordinate relationship takes center stage throughout the narrative of the film, and as the plot progresses, Winslow gets more and more frustrated with Wake's constant assertion of superiority. The very first night at supper, it reveals that regulation works differently on the island. As Wake offers Winslow a cup of alcohol, Winslow politely declines, suggesting that it is against regulation, "from them's manual" (*The Lighthouse*, 07:46). However, Wake rejects Winslow's suggestion and states: "then y'do as I say. That's in yer book too" (07:46-08:02). Wake's reaction reifies that Winslow has entered his territory, and what he says or orders Winslow to do, takes precedence. Through the film, Wake also asserts and reasserts his dominance by calling Winslow "lad" and "dog." This treatment evidently displeases Winslow, who does not appreciate being dehumanized in that way and objects multiple times. In a scene that forebodingly mirrors the climax scene between Wake and Winslow, Wake reprimands Winslow for neglecting his duties and calls him a dog, at which Winslow is obviously angered, and speaks out but is shut down (25:55-27:55). In a later scene, Winslow "musters a little courage" (Eggers & Eggers, 2019, p. 29) and tries to correct Wake:

OLD: Thankee, lad.

YOUNG: Winslow.

OLD: -?

YOUNG: Ephraim Winslow. These last two weeks, I'd... Well, I'd like it, sir, if you'd call me by my name.

OLD: Listen to ye, giving orders, lad.

YOUNG: Winslow. (*The Lighthouse*, 31:06-31:25).

As this scene suggests, Winslow expresses resistance against Wake's oppressive treatment of him and does so throughout the narrative. From the onset, Wake forbids Winslow to go to the top of the lighthouse and handle the light – something that Winslow wants more and more as the film progresses. The first time Winslow asks about the light, Wake immediately dismisses him, stating: "the light is mine" (09:34-09:55). Later, we see Winslow struggling to reach the top of the lighthouse dragging a huge oil tank. When he reaches for the hatch, he is interrupted by Wake, who tells him, "you don't go in there!" (19:00-19:03). Winslow then notices that Wake keeps the hatch under lock and key (19:38). In the same scene, Wake abuses Winslow, calls him a "dullard" and dismisses him, to which Winslow responds with an "aye, sir" and we see him display a menacing and vengeful smile (19:44-19:56). This moment is integral to the narrative as it captures

the exposition of Winslow's eventual downward spiral into frustration and madness and sets up his character for a deadly struggle against Wake's authority in the climax. It is also a key moment in the film when Winslow realizes what his true objective on the island is – the light.

Winslow and Wake's friction is established from the start and builds gradually through three key scenes. First, Wake takes it upon himself to warn Winslow of the horrors of the island (I will speak to Wake's warnings separately), and suggests that he drink alcohol to protect himself: "the only medicine is drink," but Winslow dismisses his words as "tall tales" and argues that alcohol keeps the keepers "stupid" (21:13-21:43), asserting his autonomy. Second, Winslow finds a mermaid trinket in his bed as soon as he arrives (06:06), which begins to haunt him, especially after he meets the real mermaid. The idea of the mermaid then begins tormenting him, and Winslow thinks of himself as under some kind of "sea spell" (1:20:08-1:20:15). In the scene where he is fantasizing about the mermaid, holding on to the trinket and trying to get off, he finally breaks down, failing to have an orgasm, and destroys the trinket, continuing to stab it with his knife (1:07:39-1:09:33).

This scene exemplifies the tension in Winslow, who has been resisting the sea spell. The trinket, which clearly acts as a regulator and imposer of the sea spell, is also connected to Wake's presence in Winslow's life. He first finds it in their shared bedroom, and the destruction of the trinket occurs right after Winslow almost attacks Wake with the same knife he later uses to stab at the trinket (1:05:45). This connection becomes explicit later when Winslow accuses Wake of making his predecessor mad "with the charm" (1:20:01) in the same way he makes Winslow mad. Third, is the climactic grisly fight to the death between Winslow and Wake, where the power dynamic finally flips as an argument between the two escalates and leads to Winslow beating up Wake and reducing him to the status of a dog. He then makes him bark and buries him alive (1:35:00-1:39:02), finally overcoming him.

Wake's character is almost like the physical structure of the lighthouse itself, standing erect on Pilot Rock, a concrete regulator in the midst of the stormy sea (which I will later explain also represents horror) and atop the mysterious island with its mysterious creatures. However, not only do they regulate, but they also protect. While the lighthouse provides structural protection from the elements and animals of the island, Wake consistently forebodes terror and warns Winslow to be obedient. It begins with fortune, as he tells Winslow how it is "bad luck to leave a toast unfinished" (07:31-07:34) and repeats passionately that it is "bad luck to kill a seabird" (23:14). In the latter scene, Wake is visibly "terrified," "shaken," and "a shell of himself" (Eggers & Eggers, 2019, p. 21) right after he has delivered an impassioned cautionary tale about the previous lighthouse keeper:

OLD: Aye, went mad, he did. First a strangeness. A quietude. Then wild fancies

struck him. Ravin' 'bout sirens, merfolk, bad omens and the like. In the end, no more sense left in him than a hen's tooth. He believed there were some enchantment in the light (p. 20).

Wake not only identifies the threat of the mermaid but also foreshadows the threat of the allure of the light. We may also read this as a complement to Wake's possessiveness about the light, and ask if he was really just protecting Winslow by pushing him away from it.

Wake, therefore continuously maintains a boundary between Winslow and his closeness to the mermaid and the horror that she represents. In fact, a key motif is the 'contaminated water' that Wake and Winslow drink in the form of alcohol, water from the dirty cistern and ultimately turpentine. I will speak about the function of water later, but it is important to note here that Wake reminds Winslow that alcohol is medicine and asserts the need to drink: "I won't take no for an answer," he tells Winslow (*The Lighthouse*, 43:19). Wake also utilizes disbelief to create a barrier between Winslow and the horror. He tells him that the old keeper went mad, shrouds things in myth (seabirds and siren songs) and even warns and curses Winslow through the use of myth, almost as if he were possessed (1:00:52-1:02:50). However, in mythologizing the past and restricting the light from Winslow, he inadvertently pushes Winslow towards it. The regulator regulates, but his presence constantly reminds Winslow of what he cannot have, and, therefore, only encourages Winslow to struggle against it.

The Mermaid's Body as the Queer Agent

The mermaid's body acts not only as a monster, emphasizing the link between sexual desire and death, but also as a queer agent. 'Queer' must be defined here, according to Cooper (2018), as "not necessarily a specific sexuality or a person" but "an umbrella term for anything non-normative" (p. 2). In terms of bodily excess in horror, Cooper asserts that, particularly in the horror genre, bodies that are non-normative are "therefore deemed monstrous" (p. 2). The non-normative queer body is deemed monstrous because it "poses a threat to heteronormative society" (Cooper, 2018, p. 4), where 'heteronormative' might refer to binary conceptions of interaction and inter-relatedness and normative societal structures and institutions. Cooper argues, "the queer body does not conform to the prescribed "truths" of heterosexuality and instead demands to be accepted as it exists" (p. 4), thus actively posing as horror to our notions of normative society simply by existing.

I will analyze how the body of the mermaid is non-normative by comparing it to Cooper's (2018) analysis of the vampiric queer body. Firstly, vampires are "relegated to the realm of night, without being able to traverse into daylight" (p. 6) which renders their bodies non-normative, much like the body of the mermaid, who is relegated to the

realm of the sea. The mermaid's inability to walk on land 'disables' her body, and this is emphasized in the film when Winslow first discovers her and runs away from her, as she screams out to him, helplessly unable to move on land as her fishtail flails about (*The Lighthouse*, 50:29-50:40). Secondly, the body of the vampire, is "not as human" as it may initially appear with "pale skin" sensitive to the sun, "sharply pointed fangs," and unnaturally coloured eyes (Cooper, 2018, p. 6). The deception of the vampiric body as somewhat human upon first impression makes it more frightening and more monstrous, as it is close to a normative body, but inevitably is different. This familiarity makes the threat of the monster more realistic, brings it closer to the human subject and presents a secondary threat of contamination. In a similar vein, the mermaid has the beautiful, inviting features of a human female, but as Winslow traces his hands along her human torso, he doubles back in horror when he discovers her scaly lower half and fishtail (*The Lighthouse*, 50:14-50:23). The closeness of the monstrous body to a normative human body makes the body more subtly non-normative, exacerbating these differences and making the horror through discovery more potent.

There is a duality to how the non-normative body of the mermaid affects Winslow and therefore becomes the primary instigator of the struggle that he goes through. On the one hand, one would expect that the queering of the mermaid would create a break from heteronormative neurosis and obscure corporeality and thus act as a protection against mortality salience. However, on the other hand, we see that the emphasis on the mermaid's body actually intensifies through her queerness, instead, increasing mortality salience in Winslow. The mermaid's dichotomous half-fish-half-human body brings attention to corporeality instead of obscuring it, as I suggested before. In fact, the film works to entangle the body of the mermaid with Winslow's, and also Wake's at one point. The wrapping of her body with Winslow's, how their cries become one and his inability to tell her apart from Wake's body all contribute to how a fixation on the mermaid's body augments Winslow's sense of his own.

Other ways of building protective barriers between oneself and one's perception of their own mortality, can be ascertaining symbolic value to acts of sex, such as "symbolic immortality" achieved through reproduction – as an offspring would carry on the legacy of its parent (Landau et al., 2006, p. 142). Sex with the mermaid, however, cannot offer Winslow this because there is no chance of an offspring as miscegenation and reproduction are biologically not possible. The film's lingering focus on the mermaid's genitalia in this shot (*The Lighthouse*, 1:08:04) draws attention to that anxiety and the contradiction it poses to Winslow's need to search for something beyond simply his carnal desire. He is not able to penetrate the mermaid's body, which is a reminder of the mermaid's non-normativity. As the mermaid alternates between being animal and human, her bestiality and, particularly, her fish genitalia bring Winslow closer to his corporeality and farther away from his exalted humanness.

Moreover, the mermaid consumes Winslow's body discernibly (1:33:54), and as her

own body becomes ambiguous with the sea, the grotesque imagery of the dead keeper in the lobster trap crawling with sea insects (1:09:40) parallels Winslow's body enmeshed in the kelp, tentacles and insects as well as the seawater in the previous sequence (1:08:09-1:08:33) which further functions to connect sex with death, increasing mortality salience. The fear, anger and aggression in Winslow, therefore, seem to be triggered by this awareness of his own mortality. As Winslow believes that Wake has cast a sea spell on him, he turns his aggression towards Wake. The queer body challenges Winslow to face his more visceral and carnal side, increasing mortality salience and thus defensive acts of aggression, so Winslow fights against his regulator.

The duality of this, of course, is not as simple as a queer body obscuring corporeality and is represented in how Winslow's desire for the queer body queers desire itself. Because Winslow is attracted to a non-normative queer body, his attraction for it is queer. Winslow's failure to get off after fantasizing about the mermaid in the masturbation scene is pivotal (1:08:34) because it reveals that he does not actually desire the mermaid's body for sex, and his struggle is not driven simply by sexual tension but rather, it appears that her body frustrates him because it queers his desire, challenging his perception of himself and his normative body. Winslow's inability to get pleasure from this physical sensation, on the one hand, might be affected by his increased mortality salience, but on the other hand, it might suggest that Winslow does not desire sex with the mermaid at all, but rather, what that sex represents.

The film does not focus on the mermaid, it focuses on what she brings out in Winslow and therefore draws attention to Winslow's desire. This desire takes precedence and demands to be acknowledged. This queer desire challenges not only normative regulation but also Winslow's own fear of corporeality and mortality. It even poses this fear against Winslow's desire to break free from normative regulation, posing the mobilization of this fear as a way for Winslow to find liberation from regulation instead. Queering of desire thus demands that corporeality and mortality be acknowledged and, by extension, also demands an acknowledgement of ambiguity and the dynamic and fluid nature of personhood. The emphasis on queer desire implores Winslow to focus on what is present within and without his body, challenging the binaries that prevent or protect him, placed by Wake, but also his own normative body. As it is clear that Winslow desires liberation from Wake from the onset and before his discovery of the mermaid, the mermaid's monstrous body pushes Winslow to *acknowledge* his desire to escape from the regulator rather than entirely *causing* it. This shows that the regulator's position is fragile and needs to protect itself regardless of the monster. The queer body, on the contrary, is not there to harm Winslow but instead pushes him to liberate himself. We may then pose the question: is the fear of mortality, therefore a representation of a normative understanding of who we are and how we must value ourselves?

Queer Temporality

The presence of the queer body not only queers desire but also indicates the presence of queer time which can be understood by the normative subjects as a threat and in active opposition to notions of heteronormative time. In *Gender Trouble* (1999/2002), Judith Butler critiques the “self-justification of a repressive law” that erects itself upon the essentiality of a “unilinear narrative” (p. 48). A teleological “authoritative” conception of history, within the bounds of a Lacanian dialectic, thus enables a law or such a formulation of time to be seen as a “historical inevitability” (p. 48). This postulation of history then restricts the formulation of not only other imagined histories but also restricts the imagination towards multiple futures. Butler argues that such a conceptualization becomes problematic when it constrains the future to uphold an “idealized notion of the past” and when it subsequently allows a reification of harmful essentializing binaries, specifically the essentialism of gender within a patriarchal feminine-masculine dichotomy (p. 49). Understanding time in such a dichotomous and binary sense that reifies an essentialized and authoritative history calls for a need to move away from patriarchal or heteronormative time and to move more towards a queering of time and structure.

Imagination for social change, as well as the mobility for it, erupts out of envisaging and experiencing temporality as queer and non-patriarchally teleological. Freeman (2019) builds on Du Bois’ shift from linear anthropological teleology towards a conception of human existence as “effectively rhythmic” (p. 171). The dynamic between “law, rule and rhythm” according to Du Bois, creates space for an “indeterminate force” that renders “agency possible” (p. 171). In this sense, it is imperative for such a ‘queer’ deconstruction of linear teleology to affect the movement of human identity and relationality. If what is a social fact, in Durkheim’s terms, is seen as an ‘object’ and normativity as unmoving, then deviance cannot, and morally should not, be imagined, and in this case, would not serve a societal function. However, following Gusfield’s assertions that modern social movements require a “conception of societal change as a constant, pervasive and tangible possibility” (p. 130), there is room to think of transformation as inevitable, and viewing temporality as ‘rhythmic’ allows for this. The subversion of order not only causes immediate effects that may or may not be reprimanded but also “disturbs” the illusion of order, opening up the possibility to “carry out the absurd” and thus for change (p. 135).

Cooper (2018) explains that queer temporality “focuses on the elimination of boundaries” (p. 8). By operating “outside of binaries,” queer temporality deconstructs normative categories put in place by a heteronormative society (p. 8). By presenting the monstrous as a non-normative queer body, the horror genre “queers time” and therefore threatens our familiarity with the temporal world as we are used to seeing it (p. 10). What makes this significantly threatening is that if queer temporality challenges our conception of time and linearity itself, it challenges all the structures we build over such a normative conception of time, many of which, as Butler warns, are built on oppressive formulations of history.

If the body of the mermaid challenges heteronormative time, it also challenges illusions of order that maintain normativity as fact, and can thus open up imagination for change. We can identify the existence of queer temporality in the film through the mermaid's challenge of reproductive linearity, her transient nature and the dissolution of time and space within the setting.

The body of the mermaid is a 'transtemporal' body, "as connoting unstable, transient or in-between" while simultaneously involving "transformation, development, creativity, reorganisation and reconstruction" suggests Zigarovich (qtd. in Stuart, 2018, p. 221). In Stuart's analysis of the literary characters, the Beetle and Dracula, he discusses how a transtemporal monster "violates taxonomic, aesthetic and temporal categorization" (p. 221) and through these "trans-potentialities," rebukes normative ideas of linear time and regeneration (p. 222). In the case of the mermaid, she violates the taxonomic by being a hybrid creature, the aesthetic by being monstrous and while she does not as much violate the temporal, she does violate the spatial by becoming ambiguously interchangeable with water (which I will discuss later). The most significant threat posed by the mermaid in this context is her taxonomy and how the desire to have sex with her is not in order to reproduce because this cannot be done. In this way, "sex, understood as procreative, cannot progress" (pp. 223-224), and the desire to have sex with her challenges normative ideas of temporal duration and progress through heterosexual reproduction. Moreover, her animal-human hybrid body also presents an element of bestiality which interferes with a normative understanding of reproductive time and therefore represents a "degeneration so advanced" (p. 222).

Transtemporality is most well-established through the obscure time-space setting of Pilot Rock which creates isolation and separation between its human inhabitants, Winslow and Wake, and heteronormative time. As Cooper (2018) suggests, "queer time destroys heteronormative conceptions of time and the markers that create it" (p. 7), by separating the two normative subjects from the rest of the world, in the middle of a stormy sea, on a remote island, the film already starts to dissolve the markers that distinguish normative time. Further, the film plays at the subjects' as well as the audience's conception of time through the use of unreliable narrators in Winslow and Wake. After they wait for the tender, who does not come, and a storm falls on the island, the following exchange occurs where they discuss time:

YOUNG: Look, maybe the tender, maybe she did come. We missed her, is all.
 I can take the dory out—
 OLD: Weeks, Winslow.
 YOUNG: What?
 OLD: What d'ye mean, what?
 YOUNG: Weeks?
 YOUNG is beginning to feel confused, afraid.
 OLD: Weeks, aye. Weeks.

YOUNG: We slept in. Dead drunk.

OLD: It's been weeks ago since we missed her, Winslow. And I've been askin' ye to ration fer weeks now, too, and you've kept barking at me like a mad dog, sayin' you can "take the dory out"— (*The Lighthouse*, 53:20-54:04).

This ambiguity is fundamental to the narrative as it sets the tone for horror and mystery on the island created through the uncertainty of time. The significance of time is foreshadowed in one of the first scenes when Wake toasts "to four weeks" (07:27). This uncertainty is integral to Winslow gradually losing his mind, threatening his conceptions of normative time.

While the remoteness and isolation of Pilot Rock dissolve the categorizations of time, the mermaid's abject body dissolves the categorizations of space through the motif of water. The mermaid's relegation to the sea, the way she appears in Winslow's visions, often submerging him beneath the water and her emergence as a monster that has come out of the sea connect her to it, even making her identity ambiguous with the sea. The mermaid, therefore, represents a pull. Winslow is lured out to sea through her song and then sees himself drowning in her waters, immediately after which, the mermaid first makes an appearance, connecting her body to the threat posed by the sea (13:24-13:48). Furthermore, in the context of Dracula's transtemporal body, Stuart (2018) argues that Dracula's seduction reveals deeper anxieties that "the temporal and sexual disruptions embodied by the vampire may pervade the heteronormative public" (p. 225), suggesting that what is more frightening than having a queer monster in one's vicinity is the threat of contamination. The motif of water consistently poses a threat of contamination. The island is surrounded by the sea and is almost lost within it. The stormy weather causes damage to the structure that protects the normative subjects and floods it. The water interferes at every point and is ubiquitous. Wake and Winslow know of this threat and respond to the mermaid's contamination of the water on their own. Water contaminated by Wake and Winslow acts as a regulator to protect the normative subjects from the spatial-temporal dissolution brought upon by the queering of the waters. Wake is always drinking alcohol and persuades Winslow to do the same. Even the water that Winslow first acquires is unclear because of the dirty cistern it comes from (08:48), and Wake is aware of this. At the end of the film, Winslow ultimately gives up on water and starts drinking turpentine, indicating the aggravation and the defensive impulse in Winslow that the mermaid's queer contamination of time and space has caused.

The Abject and the Enlightenment

Winslow's struggle with himself, his own normative body and Wake's regulation has so far pushed him to resist Wake and normative barriers that interfere with his desires; de-

sires that have been brought to focus by the queer agent through the queering of this desire. Winslow, therefore, destroys Wake in order to liberate himself. However, he still continues to operate from his normative body and is not able to truly recognize and reconcile with the reality of the island which pushes him to embrace his corporeality. The mermaid's presence does not enlighten Winslow, instead, all it does is frustrate him and drive him insane because not only does it cause Winslow to struggle against Wake, but it also causes an internal struggle with his own normative body. This is exacerbated through the time-space setting and the transtemporality of the mermaid, which queers time and creates ambiguity and terror, suspending Winslow's notions of time and structure and therefore driving him to his own inevitable destruction.

The abject othered body of the mermaid is there to protect Winslow. Kristeva defines the abject as "what of ourselves we distance from ourselves to create an identity" (qtd. in Cooper, 2018, p. 9). Abjection appears as "a rite of defilement and pollution," as "exclusion," and as "a threatening otherness" but always remains "nameable" and "totalizable" (Kristeva, 2020, p. 107). Beyond the abject, Kristeva (2020) describes a Lovecraftian sort of horror: "A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of nonexistence and hallucinations, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me" (p. 96). In the film, this horror appears as the light at the top of the lighthouse. Throughout the film, Winslow considers this as forbidden fruit and constantly reaches for it. In an attempt to overcome his struggle, Winslow sees the light as a way to achieve a higher purpose and enlightenment – one that will finally separate him from the bestial and ascend his body, finally achieving an ecstasy that will sever him from his mortality. This is portrayed in the climactic moment when Winslow finally discovers the light, and the film lingers on his disconcerting disembodied screeching in its penultimate shot (*The Lighthouse*, 1:43:07-1:44:53).

At the "edge of nonexistence," Kristeva (2020) argues, "abject and abjection are [the] safeguards" (p. 96). Wake knows the truth about what lies in the light but restricts Winslow in order to protect him. While Wake represents normative time and regulation, he also represents queer time by othering himself from it and constantly fighting it, therefore acknowledging and validating its existence. While it appears that the abjection of queer temporality is the true horror because it drives Winslow to madness and there simply is no escape from it, it is, instead, only the rejection of our non-selves. The true *terror* still lies in what is beyond ourselves. By forbidding Winslow from the light, Wake inadvertently draws him closer to it and once he is gone, after having defeated the buffer provided by regulation, Winslow is able to 'achieve this enlightenment,' but it destroys him. Winslow does not, in the end, acknowledge and accept queer temporality and his own queerness, which is the abject. Without the abject, the self erupts. Winslow searches for an escape, and in his Promethean quest, he ends up helplessly sprawled naked on the beach, writhing in pain and getting his entrails eaten out by seabirds (*The Lighthouse*, 1:45:33).

Conclusion and Future Directions

The struggle instigated in Winslow by the queer agent, that is, the mermaid is inevitable. The development of Winslow and Wake's relationship indicates that the struggle driven by queer desirability is not *created* by the monstrous body but is simply brought to light and *revealed* by the monstrous body. The abject body of the mermaid, then, is not creating horror and is not a monster in the sense that she subjects Winslow to pain, but her body is there to remind Winslow of his own corporeality so he may reckon with his deepest anxieties and challenge them. Winslow's inability to identify the queer desire within himself (where queer connotes to his non-normativity) as well as his inability to understand the queer temporality of Pilot Rock as the abject of himself and his inability to accept it and his mortality, leads him on a Promethean quest for enlightenment. While Wake has survived so far through the *rejection* of the abject, Winslow *denies* it. Neither *accepts* this temporality, so they succumb anyway, but at least, Wake is aware of it, which is why the light does not destroy him. Through this denial of his reality, Winslow, in his normative body, attempts a normative escape; but a normative escape is no escape at all.

My reading of *The Lighthouse*, thus, raises questions about the acknowledgement of the abject in terms of corporeality and mortality. In rejecting our monstrous, othered and abject non-selves, we still recognize them, but does the mermaid implore us to do more by challenging the barriers set in place by normative society and our conceptions of reproductive linearity so that we may embrace our queer desires and our queer 'non-normative' bodies? Imagining temporality as unfixed and 'rhythmic' is both an imperative to unhinge ourselves from patriarchal, teleological and oppressive histories and consequently also a way to allow ourselves to conceive of and make room for social change. Further, if transformation is seen as fundamentally inevitable and a constant part of social interaction, then temporality itself may be more suited to be seen as queer, invalidating the existence of a rigid linear temporality. Finally, while the focus of this essay is on corporeality in terms of terror management, the use of the mermaid's body as revelation and the focus of the film on bodily horror can also be connected to both Audre Lorde and Elizabeth Freeman's ideas of the uses of the erotic, where they argue the importance of 'sensation with feeling' and mobilizing somatic experience and the erotic as a way of learning and understanding. Connecting Lorde's arguments of realizing the erotic as a site of empowerment to Butler's push towards deconstructing binary experiences of expression offers us a way to imagine multiple futures through queer temporalities. Further analyses of the film could consider how the mermaid's body not only provides an imperative to transition to non-normativity but also provides avenues and processes to make this transition.

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