
REVIEWS

Andrew J. Owens, *Desire After Dark: Contemporary Queer Cultures and Occultly Marvelous Media*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021. 220 pp. \$28.00.

Cait Coker

Andrew J. Owens's *Desire After Dark: Contemporary Queer Cultures and Occultly Marvelous Media* is an ambitious yet concise examination of (primarily) American supernatural media from the 1960s through 2010. This is no small task, and Owens's choices in analysis often clearly rely on his own preferences in consumption rather than on any quantitative or qualitative metric. This is not necessarily a weakness, and his authorial "I" comes through, but it does make for curious reading at times. For instance, *Dark Shadows* (1966-1971), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), and *True Blood* (2008-2014) all make dutiful appearances; the *Twilight* franchise and the long-running *Supernatural* (2005-2020) get only the briefest name-drops. In applying queer readings to these texts, Owens joins the long tradition of Gothic scholarship and popular culture criticism; what he adds to that vast corpus is not new, but nonetheless welcome. This will be a useful introduction book for junior scholars who are trying to get a grip on these vast topics in the literature themselves.

The volume consists of an introduction, five chapters, and, suitably, an epilogue rather than a conclusion. The introduction, "Blood, Sulfur, Sex, Magick" introduces Owens's wide goals in applying queer expressions and readings to popular occult texts, as well as his preference for the use of the term *magick* to distinguish occult practices from stage performances, an unfortunate choice I found a bit precious and just on the edge of offensive as both a pagan reader and a scholar of historical witchcraft. (Note: This use of terminology is specific to Owens and used as a reference to Aleister Crowley, but it is seldom used in the contemporary pagan/witchcraft community and not at all in the discourse of historical magic studies.) Owens also maintains that such readings are new despite rereading scholarship on the topic from the 1980s to the 2010s. The organization of this material would perhaps have been better presented as a historiography rather than as a thesis.

The first chapter, "Aquarian Alternatives: Midcentury Media and the Quest for Occultly Queer Histories," situates occult media against the backdrop of the sexual revolution of the 1960s. Owens combines close readings of novels, film, and television shows from the period, noting in particular the popularity of *Dark Shadows*, *Bewitched* (1964-1972), and the numerous films produced by Hammer Studios. He then backtracks to discuss Aleister Crowley's occult legacy (and yet without mentioning the numerous popular culture characters for whom he is a namesake).

The second chapter, "Le sexe qui parle du surnaturel: Supernatural Sexualities and Satanic Subcultures in the 1970s," then radically changes gears to discuss and analyze the



profusion of both art house and hardcore pornographic films from the period. This chapter would have made an excellent monograph in its own right, introducing and analyzing multiple films that are typically neglected in horror studies.

“The Blood is the Life/Death: Queer Contagion and Viral Vampirism in the Age(s) of HIV/AIDS,” the next chapter, is unfortunately the one that is most guilty of rereading well-worn material. *The Hunger* (1983) is indeed a queer classic, and many conferences will have at least one young graduate student earnestly presenting on its queer readings. This is another chapter which, like the introduction, would have functioned better if presented as a historiography rather than an analysis. Owens does some good work in tracking down early news stories from the period that discuss AIDS, as well as briefly discussing Sontag’s *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1989). But the topic of vampirism as a sexually transmitted disease both predates and postdates AIDS, and shelves of material have been written on the topic. Here, the discussion seems to hang as an anchor specifically of the 1980s.

Chapter four, “‘Now Is the Time, Now is the Hour, Ours is the Magick, Ours is the Power’: Casting as Coming Out in Millennial Media,” discusses the film and television of the 1990s, with a particular focus on the popular horror film *The Craft* (1996) and the long-running television show *Charmed* (1998-2006, recently rebooted 2018-present). Confusingly, Owens begins this chapter with a discussion of teen millennial Tumblr users in 2016 and the tagging system around occult and witchy vocabularies—confusing not least because by 2016 most millennials were in their 20s and 30s at the time. He then backtracks to discuss the Council of American Witches adopting the Principles of Wiccan Beliefs in 1974, and then segues into pop culture analysis. Owens seems to self-identify as a contemporary witchcraft practitioner, and as such this section would have benefited immensely from an autoethnographic approach rather than these other looser linkages.

The final chapter, “‘Hold Me, Thrill Me, Kiss Me, Kill Me’: The Ambivalent Queer of Occult Cable TV,” starts with a discussion of *Buffy* and network television before drifting into the evolution of US cable networks and their prestige, and often erotic, productions. For better or worse, Owens chooses to analyze Showtime’s series adaptation of *The Hunger* (1997-2006) and Here TV’s *Dante’s Cove* (2005-2007) rather than HBO’s *True Blood*, largely finishing his study in the mid-2000s and neglecting more modern works. While those shows have less scholarly material on them and so benefit from this analysis, it is a curious note upon which to conclude. The exceedingly brief “Epilogue” discusses *Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016), introducing a new text with brief analysis rather than any kind of more formal ending.

Desire After Dark is a fascinating but frustrating read. One is left with the impression that each chapter would have made an excellent article, but the individual sections, strung together as a book-length study, never quite come together into a graceful whole. In his quest to be concise, Owens at times leaves points under-explored; more than once I waited for a text to be unpacked just a bit more, or another scholar cited. Several times I felt disappointed by Owen’s choices, wishing they were more closely elucidated, or that they engaged more deeply with the wide, wide body of scholarly literature on these topics. Nonetheless, the book will hopefully be of use to younger scholars, while more established readers will find intriguing nuggets to think upon.