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## **Heteronormativity and Toxic Masculinity in Stephen Dunn's *Closet Monster***

**Abstract:** Premiering at the 2015 Toronto International Film Festival to great acclaim (it won the award for the Best Canadian Feature, and was eventually included in the IFF's annual *Canada's Top Ten*), Stephen Dunn's *Closet Monster* employs monsters metaphorically, primarily in order to express the psychological damage of violent homophobia and to comment on toxic masculinity. Yet monstrosity is not merely a metaphor but also a strategy: the protagonist, a closeted teenager named Oscar, appropriates both monstrosity and heroic narratives in order to manage life as a homosexual person in a deeply homophobic environment of contemporary suburban Canada. The magic realist details which permeate *Closet Monster* – the talking pet hamster, the scenes seamlessly fusing body horror with realism – exemplify the film's poignant, almost fairy-tale-like approach to “homophobia-related violence” and the effects of PTSD initiated by Oscar's witnessing of violent enforcement of gender normativity in his childhood. This paper proposes to examine the politics of the film, in particular Dunn's deployment of monstrosity in the representation and condemnation of violent homophobia and toxic/hegemonic masculinity. As these issues are inextricable from the wider cultural context of normative gender and sexuality, Dunn's criticism of heteronormativity is discussed as well. It is in this context, also, that the film's depiction of the production, policing and elimination of “monstrous” (i.e. homosexual) bodies is examined.

**Keywords:** gender; heteronormativity; homophobia; masculinity; monstrosity; violence

### **Monstrosity (1): Monstrous bodies and heteronormative culture in *Closet Monster***

“The monstrous body”, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen writes, “is pure culture”.<sup>1</sup> At the centre of Stephen Dunn's *Closet Monster* (2015), is the body of a gay teenager whose rape the protagonist, Oscar Madly (Connor Jessup), witnesses as a child: the unidentified 16-year-old is cornered in a graveyard by three boys his age, beaten up and raped with a metal rod, which leaves him “paralyzed from the waist down”. The unambiguously phallic rod forced into a bloody and spasming body – the penetration

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, ed., *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 4.

similar to the one Lucy Westenra is subjected to in Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) – is obviously intended to defend heteronormativity and patriarchal gender order through the punishment and the elimination of those threatening them, be it Victorian high-class virgins openly desiring men, or boys openly desiring boys. As with the deadly rape of Lucy by the righteous Victorian men, moreover, it is not only hatred that can be detected in the scene, but the near-absolute conflation between (penetrative, heterosexual) sex and violence: the sexual appeal of feminine/feminized monsters, mediated through “manly” acts of physical harm. If the scene were not so excruciating to watch, it would be ironic: the boys who set out to defend heterosexuality beat up their gay peer yelling “Harder! Harder!”, aroused by the close encounter with the monstrous, law-breaking<sup>2</sup> body.

As “[t]he monster’s body is both corporal and incorporeal” and “its threat is its propensity to shift”<sup>3</sup>, the raped teenager’s body reappears at crucial moments in the film, unvaryingly interfering with Oscar’s (homo)sexual fantasies, merging with and finally becoming Oscar’s own body: alive, electrified with sexual desire, with a blood-dripping rod poking out of the belly. The superimposition of one body over another, and their final fusion – delivered in a proper horror mode – convey visually and viscerally the extent of the psychological damage done to Oscar, as well as the always-present potential for Oscar’s body to become brutalized too, because of the contents of his sexual fantasies (this despite the variety of official projects “to reduce the effects of homophobia in Canada”<sup>4</sup>). Thus, the two monstrous bodies – the rape victim’s, and the living teenager’s body on the brink of orgasm, both with metal rods – are pure culture, in the sense that they speak, most eloquently, i.e. in blood, of the violence as the foundational principle of heteronormative patriarchy. They speak, in blood, of the very production of monsters – the monsterization of sexual identity<sup>5</sup> in particular.

While Dunn’s film depicts the violence deployed against sexual “monsters” unflinchingly, it simultaneously promotes the politics of “coming out” of the closet. “Coming out” in *Closet Monster* is underpinned by dominant cultural assumptions of (young) adulthood, such as heightened sex drive and the necessity of forming one’s separate identity, yet the film, to its credit, does not attempt to negate the danger of visibility. It is precisely because he was “out”, after all, that the raped boy was not seen as a boy or human, but as “transgressive, too sexual, perversely erotic, a lawbreaker”<sup>6</sup>, thus “demanding” disciplinary measures in the form of physical violence, rape and paralysis. The dehumanization and the subsequent treatment of the rape victim are in line with Chesire Calhoun’s insight that “[h]omosexuality and lesbianism are equated

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>4</sup> The projects are listed in Bill Ryan, *A New Look at Homophobia and Heterosexism in Canada* (Ottawa: Canadian AIDS Society, 2003), 78–83.

<sup>5</sup> Cohen, *Monster Theory*, 9.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 16.

with sexual acts, especially with sodomy, in a way that heterosexuality is not similarly reduced to a set of sexual acts”<sup>7</sup>. Openly “out”, the raped boy was seen as a walking sexual act in a public space – so offensive and “unnatural” that no sympathy is extended to him. He’s even mocked for crying in the aftermath of the rape.

Additionally, by naming Oscar’s pet hamster Buffy,<sup>8</sup> and by having the three boys rape the victim at the graveyard, with a metal rod resembling a stake, Dunn explicitly calls attention to the cult TV classic, Joss Whedon’s *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003). Just like Stoker’s defenders/enforcers of Victorian femininity, Buffy, too, wields a stake and teaches the audience both the moral desirability and the techniques of eliminating “monsters”. Just like Stoker’s defenders, furthermore, Whedon’s heroine validates masculinity. Even though, as a particularly girly girl,<sup>9</sup> Buffy Summers seems as far from masculinity as possible, it is precisely her heroism – in relation to monsters – which functions as the validation of (heroic, hegemonic, normative) masculinity. This heroic masculinity operates through violence and elimination, in binary opposition with monstrosity: “[b]y way of a peculiar mix of heroic masculinity and hostile monstrosity, you’re [...] subjected to a grandiose and alluring claim for EITHER/OR”<sup>10</sup>. Heroic masculinity, which Buffy performs, thus offers elimination instead of cohabitation; a metal rod instead of acceptance; murder dressed in the discourse of righteousness. Oscar, who is exposed to these seductive heroic narratives since the earliest childhood, both appropriates their patterns and inverts their meaning – just like the film itself. In *Closet Monster*, as in *Buffy* (as in real life), there are monsters, and they must be fought, perhaps even defeated. The film, however, differs from traditional cultural narratives in what it depicts as monstrous, utilizing “the monster’s propensity to shift” to represent and condemn toxic/hegemonic masculinity in particular.

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<sup>7</sup> Chesire Calhoun, *Feminism, the Family and the Politics of the Closet: Lesbian and Gay Displacement* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 82.

<sup>8</sup> Oscar’s relationship with his pet hamster seems modelled on Bill Watterson’s classic *Calvin and Hobbes*: just like Hobbes, the stuffed tiger who comes to life when he is alone with Calvin, Buffy talks only in Oscar’s presence. The hamster, moreover, is clearly Oscar’s alter-ego: the close link between the two is established at the very beginning of the film, as in the opening credits we see the parallel scenes of a boy and a hamster being born. Buffy is an obvious stand-in for Oscar in terms of her unstable, shifting sex and gender. While Oscar, moreover, believes she is his childhood hamster, at the very end of the film, dead Buffy tells him “Your parents replaced me, like, four times”. Every time the sex of the animal was different. When Wilder comes to visit Oscar in his tree house, he examines Buffy and declares, authoritatively and correctly, “this is totally a boy hamster”. After this revelation, Buffy speaks in a male voice, confessing: “I think I’m going through a bit of a gender jam”. But after this admission, “the boy hamster” goes back to speaking in the voice of Isabella Rossellini, literally voicing the message that biological sex, a specific set of genitalia, gender and sexual orientation are by no means mutually reinforcing or interdependent.

<sup>9</sup> Indeed, according to Patricia Pender, Buffy “might justifiably be accused of subscribing to, and therefore reinscribing, commercial and patriarchal standards of feminine beauty: she is young, blond, slim, and vigilantly fashion-conscious” (quoted in Rhonda Wilcox, *Why Buffy Matters: The Art of Buffy The Vampire Slayer* (London, New York: I. B. Tauris, 2005), 179).

<sup>10</sup> Kirk Combe and Brenda Boyle, ed., *Masculinity and Monstrosity in Contemporary Hollywood Films* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 3.

As monsters result from “a peculiarly modern emphasis upon the horror of particular kinds of bodies”,<sup>11</sup> the film also depicts the production and policing of the “horrifying” bodies, situating all these issues within the wider context of normative genders (two) and sexuality (one), which are enforced, inter alia, in children’s bedrooms, schoolyards and beloved TV shows. Homosexual bodies in *Closet Monster* – the bodies of young men – are treated as monstrous precisely because they do not conform to the gender/sexual expectations associated with the so-called “biological” males. Indeed, Dunn’s film is at its strongest when it lays bare the interconnection between gender assumptions, gender performance and heterosexuality – and, always, “regimes of visibility”.<sup>12</sup> In any heteronormative culture, men are men, after all, because they visibly want to have sex with women, and vice versa. Calhoun calls attention to this cultural conflation of gender with heterosexuality when she emphasizes that “[l]esbians and gay men are [...] pressured to closet the fact that they occupy a position between the categories ‘man’ and ‘woman’”,<sup>13</sup> and not (only) their sexuality. Needless to say, “[t]his refusal to participate in the classificatory ‘order of things’ is true of monsters generally”.<sup>14</sup>

Thus normative and non-normative sexualities, just like heroes and monsters, are locked in pairs of binary opposites, normalized via gender. “Socially compelled” and not “ontologically necessitated”<sup>15</sup>, gender order necessarily operates via rewards and punishments. It is a well-known fact that “[m]en and women act in gendered ways as they regulate their behavior in line with a valued gender identity [...] because it enhances their self-esteem and positive feeling.”<sup>16</sup> But there is an always-present threat of punishment as well, for those who “perform one’s gender wrong” – indeed, “a set of punishments both obvious and indirect”,<sup>17</sup> and it is this that Dunn’s film is more interested in. *Closet Monster* makes it painfully clear that performing one’s gender wrong – demonstrating openly that not all boys like girls, i.e. that gender is not synonymous with heterosexuality – might earn one a “heroic” penetration by a metal rod.

Cultural policing of gender performance, with the underlying threat of the violent enforcement of heteronormativity, begins in the earliest childhood, within the confines of a nuclear family. Gender, after all, “would be an empty husk if it wasn’t for its constant capture of new bodies: bodies in which turn give it life. Isn’t the first

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<sup>11</sup> Judith Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 1995), 3.

<sup>12</sup> Calvin Thomas, *Masculinity, Psychoanalysis, Straight Queer Theory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 6.

<sup>13</sup> Calhoun, *Feminism, the Family and the Politics of the Closet*, 34.

<sup>14</sup> Cohen, *Monster Theory*, 6.

<sup>15</sup> Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theatre Journal* 40, 4 (December 1988): 528.

<sup>16</sup> Wendy Wood and Cecilia L. Ridgeway, “Gender: An Interdisciplinary Perspective,” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 73, 4 (December 2010): 337.

<sup>17</sup> Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” 528.

incursion of Civilization into the life of the wild newborn always to proclaim its gender?”<sup>18</sup> It is this “constant capture of new bodies” that the film exposes in the first few, seemingly idyllic, minutes. *Closet Monster* opens with a quintessential childhood scene: a small boy is getting ready to sleep. He asks his father, Peter, for a dream, in such a way that makes it clear this is a regular bedtime ritual for the two of them. The scene is bathed in soft light, there is nostalgic music in the background; the boy’s bedroom filled with toys evokes sentimental notions about both childhood and parenting – unconditional parental love and protection in particular. Peter blows up a balloon, presses it against Oscar’s head and empties all the air from it – this being the “dream”. The gesture is gentle yet heavily symbolic: the boy’s head is being filled with the content produced by his father. Against the sentimental background of “innocent” childhood, moreover, the actual content of the “dream” Oscar is given by his father is very far from childish or innocent. “It’s a full moon and a gang of vampires are stalking throughout the graveyard. And all you have is a little wooden stake. It’s gonna be super-dangerous. It’s gonna be super-scary. And you’re gonna be surrounded by sexy ladies”. The generic horror movie scene goes hand in hand with both heteronormativity and the sexualization of children. In Peter’s mind, there is nothing problematic about “sexy ladies” being promised to a seven-year-old child (as long as that child is a boy); there is nothing wrong about the objectification of women, either. Even though sex is just hinted at, Peter’s “dream” belongs to the class of stories “in which the hero rescues a beleaguered maiden and makes her his sexual partner”<sup>19</sup>. Such stories “naturalize adolescent male fantasies”<sup>20</sup> and by extension heterosexuality, excluding everyone else.

The pedagogy concerning monsters implicit in this scary-and-sexy-yet-somehow-child-friendly dream proves to be toxic as well. The tableau painted by Peter is replicated, in a proper horror mode, in the scene of a rape, which also takes place on the graveyard; which is also “super-dangerous” and “super-scary”. Eight-year-old Oscar watches the abuse of the unhappy teenager from his hiding place wide-eyed, muttering to himself “[d]o something. Help him”, and is depicted as taking his toy wooden stake out of his jacket. Yet, being paralyzed by fear, he does nothing with it. He’s not the hero his father’s dream painted him to be; he’s not Buffy the Vampire Slayer. As opposed to the unattainable heroism, however, the danger, the fear and the horror – exciting when contemplated from the relative safety of the bedroom, on TV or in a dream<sup>21</sup> – are fully realized, and they stay with Oscar for a very long time. Once internalized, the horror Oscar witnessed locks him in the closet and keeps him there. The internalization is quite graphically represented: the moment Oscar sees the rape he grabs his own belly, which is a gesture he will repeat consistently throughout the film, whenever he experiences arousal as a young adult. It is in those scenes that

<sup>18</sup> Baedan, “Against the Gendered Nightmare: Fragments On Domestication,” <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/baedan-against-the-gendered-nightmare>, acc. July 10, 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Margery Hourihan, *Deconstructing the Hero: Literary Theory and Children’s Literature* (London, New York: Routledge, 1997), 158.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

<sup>21</sup> “The fear factor excites me”, as Oscar’s hamster, Buffy, explains.

the film slips into a proper horror mode, conveying the psychological damage of violent homophobia, both witnessed and internalized. But “[t]he monster’s propensity to shift” has to be noted in the rape scene as well. In the eyes of the three assailants the victim is monstrous and sub-human (which would make them heroes according to that lethal cultural equation involving monsters); from Oscar’s – and any moral person’s – perspective, it is the three young men who are irredeemably monstrous.

Beginning in home, the policing of gender/sexuality, the unquestioned cultural normalization of “adolescent [heterosexual] male fantasies” and the attendant “monsterization”/punishment of sexual difference, continue in the schoolyard. One of the most memorable scenes in the film depicts two little girls inspecting their school friends’ sexual orientation, identifying and trapping “the deviant” by trickery. “Inspect your nails,” they say to an unsuspecting boy, explaining, later on, that “[w]hen boys check their nails, they’re supposed to hold their hand in a claw, like this. But if you check your nails from behind, it means that you’re probably gonna grow up to be gay”. Oscar, of course, fails this test of heterosexuality, performed by schoolchildren. And though one of the girls, having accused Oscar of homosexuality, immediately adds, “it’s not a big deal”, the trauma that the viewers have already witnessed through Oscar’s eyes suggests the opposite: that it is in fact a huge, life-or-death kind of a deal.

Several days later, Oscar’s father watches the news of the graveyard assault. Not knowing that his son has witnessed it, Peter only comments that Oscar should have his hair cut, as the boy’s longish, bleached blonde hair might give someone the wrong impression that he’s gay too. The comment is initiated by Oscar’s crucial question: “*Why* did they do that to him?” (italics added). His father replies, “[w]ell, he’s gay. That’s why I keep tellin’ ya, you gotta get rid of this hair, buddy”. It is Peter’s casual answer that reveals the full horror of heteronormative culture for those who “do not quite inhabit” said norms<sup>22</sup>; the assault is not condemned but normalized. In Peter’s mind, the boy had it coming for being (so openly) gay – the conviction which Peter obviously shares with the assailants. Instead of showing an ounce of sympathy for the victim or expressing a desire for justice, moreover, Peter only wants his son to look like a proper heterosexual – *at the age of eight* – lest he should be confused for one of those “deviants”.

Peter’s automatic compliance with the heteronormative/homophobic culture and implicit justification of violence lead us to the conflicting politics of visibility and coming out in relation to LGBTQ people in general, not only in this film. While “queer subjects may [...] be asked not to make heterosexuals feel uncomfortable, by not displaying any signs of queer intimacy”,<sup>23</sup> there is also cultural insistence on coming out, which basically asks young and vulnerable people to submit to the heteronormative culture’s “regimes of visibility”.<sup>24</sup> Ironically, while being represented as liberation, as the embracing of one’s proper identity, or an act of vital activism, the coming

<sup>22</sup> Sara Ahmed, “A Sinking Feeling,” <https://feministkilljoys.com/2014/02/03/a-sinking-feeling/>, acc. July 10, 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas, *Masculinity, Psychoanalysis, Straight Queer Theory*.

out leaves so many (young) people at heightened risk of their bodies being turned into a “spectacle of violence”<sup>25</sup> in a lethal assertion of heterosexuality. Nor is violence the sole threat. “To refuse to be heterosexual is simply to leap out of the frying pan of individual patriarchal control into the fire of institutionalized heterosexual control over both the public and private spheres.”<sup>26</sup> Gail Mason, additionally, warns that:

visibility can operate to ‘trap’ the many women and men whose sexual desires and practices deviate from this benchmark (for example, gay men and lesbians, sex workers, or those who engage in sado-masochistic sexualities) not only because it restricts their sense of sexual subjectivity, but also because it brings with it the threat of social or legal sanctions, including discrimination, incarceration, violence or personal rejection.<sup>27</sup>

On the other hand, as both the film and numerous recent studies<sup>28</sup> clearly demonstrate, staying in the closet is not necessarily a safer alternative, especially in terms of one’s mental and emotional health. In *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), for instance, Kosofsky Sedgwick discusses “the radical uncertainty closeted gay people are likely to feel about who is in control of information about their sexual identity”;<sup>29</sup> a teenage Tumblr user expresses it in these terms: “omg i always forget how many people want to claim closeted people don’t experience homophobia. wild. why do you think they’re closeted bro and do you think the closet is a fun happy place of psychological well-being and freedom from trauma because i’ve got some news for you.”<sup>30</sup>

A distinct absence of “psychological well-being” associated with the closet is conveyed in the film most vocally by Buffy. When Oscar puts Buffy in a (literal) closet at his workplace, the hamster, who is voiced by Isabella Rossellini, protests in no uncertain terms: “It smells awful in here. Let me out! I can’t breathe. Let me out!” That Oscar’s workplace is a hardware store is not insignificant either: a tiny and helpless being, trapped in a suffocating box and surrounded by punishment-promising metal, is a striking metaphor of Oscar’s position as a homosexual person in a homophobic environment of contemporary suburban Canada.

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<sup>25</sup> This is the title of Gail Mason’s 2002 book.

<sup>26</sup> Calhoun, *Feminism, the Family and the Politics of the Closet*, 31.

<sup>27</sup> Gail Mason, *The Spectacle of Violence: Homophobia, Gender and Knowledge* (London, New York: Routledge, 2002), 81.

<sup>28</sup> See, for instance, Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman, *Against the Closet: Black Political Longing and the Erotics of Race*. (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2012); William N. Eskridge, *Gaylaw: Challenging the Apartheid of the Closet* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); Anne Balay, *Steel Closets* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

<sup>29</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), 79.

<sup>30</sup> <https://enoughtohold.tumblr.com/post/135115633961/omg-i-always-forget-how-many-people-want-to-claim>, acc. July 10, 2018.

## Monstrosity (2): Toxic masculinity

Near the end of the film, in the middle of a violent argument with Oscar, it is Peter who is forcibly pushed inside a closet. The camera lingers on Peter inside the closet, covered in his ex-wife's clothes (which he refuses to return to her, a decade after the divorce), making it abundantly clear who the titular monster is. It also becomes clear why, in the very first minute of the film, the-as-yet-unidentified-boy is depicted attacking his father playfully with a stake. The game, of course, foreshadows their subsequent turbulent relationship, but Peter's association with monsters is unmistakable: he even wears fake vampire teeth. Peter, played convincingly by the bearded and mustached Aaron Abrams, at first seems to embody only the casual terror of heteronormativity, especially when he implicitly justifies a boy being raped and paralyzed for being "gay". As the film progresses, as Oscar moves from childhood to young adulthood, Peter comes more and more to exhibit toxic masculinity, in terms of his abusive language, and his emotional and then literal violence directed at family members, which culminates in the killing of Oscar's hamster. As the film progresses, also, Peter loses his fake vampire teeth, and becomes "a deadbeat dad", but is no less monstrous for it – though the film merely hints at rather than explore the intersection of masculinity and class.

On the subject of masculinity, *Closet Monster* is at its most subversive when it demonstrates, via Peter, that toxic (monstrous) masculinity overlaps significantly with normative/hegemonic masculinity – "a culturally idealized form", which is "exclusive, anxiety-provoking, internally and hierarchically differentiated, brutal and violent. [...] pseudo-natural, tough, contradictory, crisis-prone, rich and socially sustained. [...] Fragile it may be, but it constructs the most dangerous things we live with."<sup>31</sup>

The instances of "the most dangerous things we live with" – moral monstrosity, homophobia, violence and murderous tendencies – are numerous in the film, ranging from the seemingly "innocent" ones to the destruction and killing of an animal, who is an obvious stand-in for the family member. As the representative of patriarchal toxic/hegemonic masculinity, for instance, Peter believes that he owns his wife. When she decides to divorce him, he refuses to give her back her clothes – "technically, those clothes are mine". Over the years, "all mom's junk in my closet", as Oscar refers to it, becomes the visible embodiment of the burden of divorce and the gender order premised on ownership and domination, which Oscar's mother, just like Oscar, rejects. In contact with women other than his wife, Peter is the same. When watering the lawn, he playfully sprinkles Oscar's best friend, Gemma (Sofia Banzhaf). Though Peter wrongly believes that they are a couple, he still cannot refrain from half-aggressive displays of affection and/or attraction, as if he were entitled to every woman's body or attention. It is worth noting, also, that when the boy Oscar is attracted to, Wilder (Aliocha Schneider), comes to visit, in an identical scene Peter soaks him with water

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<sup>31</sup> Mike Donaldson quoted in Richard Howson, *Challenging Hegemonic Masculinity* (London, New York: Routledge, 2005), 3.



in a much more aggressive way. Sensing that his son might be gay, Oscar's father is quite literally policing the boundaries of "proper" gender and sexuality. The two identical scenes with radically different amounts of aggression, moreover, make it easy for the viewer to understand how such "playful" behavior can lead to the graveyard rape.

Peter's possessiveness and the sense of entitlement when it comes to women's bodies/attention are highlighted in the scene where Oscar stumbles upon Peter's latest girlfriend, Christine, taking a shower. The first question Peter asks her is, "What did he see?". Later, when Christine is dressed, and the three of them are sitting in the kitchen, Peter comments patronizingly that "Christine, here, she's even sweeter with her clothes on" and proceeds to inquire about his ex-wife's fiancé, referring to him as "that queer". Christine is obviously uncomfortable with this, but Peter continues relentlessly, provoking an altercation with Oscar which ends in Peter's splashing milk in Oscar's face. The excuse he offers is, "I had a really hard week". In this scene, it is Oscar, as the only remaining family member, who is obviously assigned the role of a wife – someone who is required to perform the emotional labor of lightening the burden of hard weeks.

As already noted, Peter consistently uses homophobic slurs as the preferred mode of insulting. In addition to "that queer", he refers to the Friday the 13th Monster Mash party that Oscar wants to go to as "the faggot costume party". This aggressive assertion of masculinity, virtually indistinguishable from homophobia, is evident in his parenting style as well. In the early minutes of the film, the viewers watch young Oscar and Peter building a tree house together, as an exercise in homosocial bonding and the performance of masculinity. Peter turns Oscar's red baseball cap around, to make him look more obviously like a boy – the masculine tree house building is undercut by deliberately wide shots of a child's genderless face. Peter's gesture is indicative of the aforementioned "constant capture of new bodies" in the traps of gender: it also summarizes socialization as forcing certain costumes on (reluctant) children. But red is still too feminine: in the very next shot, a slightly older Oscar is wearing a blue baseball cap and trying to climb a rope. Peter shouts encouragement which further equates masculinity with homophobia:

You can do it buddy! Don't be a wimp!" The rope climbing is important, both as a metaphor and an actual practice, since "the images of male bodies engaged in sporting activities constitute one of the main ways in which the superiority of men becomes 'naturalized', and the media, in their reporting of sport, conspire in naturalizing hegemonic masculinity."<sup>32</sup>

Needless to say, Oscar fails at not being "a wimp"; the boy loses his grip, falls onto the ground and is transformed into the young adult we follow in the rest of the movie. The fall functions the perfect metaphor for Oscar's being propelled into young adulthood under pressure of performing gender properly – i.e. performing

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<sup>32</sup> Gail Mason quoted in Hourihan, *Deconstructing the Hero*, 15.

heterosexual masculinity – yet failing to do so. Since one of the facets of toxic/hegemonic masculinity is that the son is a reflection of the father, Peter cannot help: he would much rather assume that Oscar and Gemma are dating.

As a “real man” and not a “wimp”, Peter is, moreover, a carnist – he casually invites Gemma to a dinner consisting of “chicken and waffles” – and an actual animal destroyer. After Oscar decides to go the “faggot costume party” in his mother’s jacket and her beaver hat, Peter thrashes the boy’s room and kills Buffy. Rather than showing the act directly, Dunn opts for the version in which Oscar finds the tiny dead body amidst the debris of furniture and clothes. As the two are linked from the beginning of the film, the lethal aggressiveness Peter displays towards the animal is unsettling. It is, indeed, a textbook example of toxic masculinity, inseparable from violence and murder as instruments of domination and self-assertion. At the root of the problem, needless to say, is the constructedness of gender; this structure that is not “ontologically necessitated” and thus requires constant reinforcement. Psychologist Terry Real offers a valid perspective: “Because men’s self-esteem often rests on so shaky a construct, the effort to preserve it can be all-consuming. Avoiding the shame that’s left when it is peeled away can drive some men to dangerous ends.”<sup>33</sup> Utilizing the discourse and tropes of monstrosity, horror and fantasy, Dunn’s film offers a similar insight: an effort to preserve such a shaky construct as masculinity renders some men physically dangerous – and downright murderous.

## Conclusion

*Closet Monster* explores, and condemns as monstrous, toxic masculinity and violent homophobia, depicting them both as inseparable from patriarchal heteronormativity. The film is at its strongest when it demonstrates that toxic masculinity overlaps with hegemonic masculinity, and when it exposes how heteronorms are reinforced in the socialization of children and in (pop) culture’s mythology of monsters and heroes. Appropriating, occasionally, the conventions of horror, Dunn’s film also gauges the extent of the psychological damage of “homophobia-related violence”<sup>34</sup> and PTSD, which result from the protagonist’s having witnessed particularly brutal enforcement of gender/sexual normativity in his childhood. On the issue of homophobia-related violence, what we see in the film corresponds to Mason’s assessment that “homophobia itself [is] infused with assumptions about gender”<sup>35</sup>: the raped boy is mocked for crying and punished for what is perceived to be his gender transgressions, and not only the sexual ones.

<sup>33</sup> Terry Real quoted in Kali Holloway, “Toxic Masculinity Is Killing Men: The Roots of Men and Trauma,” <https://www.alternet.org/gender/masculinity-killing-men-roots-men-and-trauma>, acc. July 10, 2018.

<sup>34</sup> Mason, *The Spectacle of Violence*.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

As for the general politics of the film, it is centered on growing up and coming out. Contrary to Gail Mason, who warns that “[t]o be closeted about one’s sexuality can be a form of both acquiescence and control” and that “it is never possible to be completely safe from homophobia related violence”,<sup>36</sup> *Closet Monster* ends on a hopeful note. Childhood and its “gender jam”, both embodied in a dead hamster, are left behind; sexual identity is revealed; the closet monster is defeated. In this, Dunn’s film seems to be the product of an earlier (though in fact quite recent) historical moment of optimism and hope regarding non-normative sexualities. Such optimism and hope, arguably, do not mix very well with the neoconservatism of gender and sexual roles associated with neoliberalism,<sup>37</sup> and with the return of the repressive and punitive mechanisms targeting LGBT people – including, but not limited to, gay concentration camps in Chechnya, opened in 2017. Monsters, indeed, shift.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 95.

<sup>37</sup> See Alison Phipps, *The Politics of the Body: Gender in a Neoliberal and Neoconservative Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014).

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