

# THE PERFECT ONTOLOGICAL NIGHTMARE: UNDERSTANDING ALEX DA CORTE'S *SLOW GRAFFITI* AS MONSTROUS DRAG

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As part of his 2017 exhibit at the Vienna Secession, Alex Da Corte presented a film entitled *Slow Graffiti*. This work is a recreation of Jørgen Leth's 1968 film *The Perfect Human*, with some notable alterations. The film features Da Corte dressed as actor Boris Karloff, and Karloff's performance as Frankenstein's monster from the 1931 film. In *Slow Graffiti* Da Corte's characters re-enact the tasks Leth's actors perform, but with a grotesque and humorous twist. The film shows Da Corte as the Monster rolling on the floor with spaghetti and a giant fork, smoking a tube of black lipstick, and spray-painting his shoes vibrant orange while a voice-over provides commentary on these increasingly bizarre acts. In this paper, I examine how *Slow Graffiti* engages with *The Perfect Human* in order to both question and build upon its progenitor's themes and motifs. In order to situate the film, I analyze Da Corte's incarnation of Frankenstein's monster in relationship to Mary Shelley's novel and Boris Karloff's famous performance as The Monster in James Whale's film. I argue that Da Corte's role in 'Slow Graffiti' should be understood as a drag performance, which subversively plays with multiple ontological categories.

## CREATING THE PERFECT MONSTER

Da Corte's film is a shot-for-shot remake of Danish filmmaker Jørgen Leth's experimental film *The Perfect Human* (Det Perfekte Menneske) (1968). Da Corte first came across Leth's work as a student in an experimental film class, and it made a significant impression on him.<sup>1</sup> Years later, it sparked an idea for a film, and Da Corte approached Leth, who was excited by the idea for the project. Leth even contributed some of the voice-over for Da Corte's version.<sup>2</sup> In an interview, Leth describes their complementary interests in repetition and art that responds to existing art.<sup>3</sup> In *The Perfect Human* script, Nissen's declaration of "today, too, I experienced something I hope to understand in a few days," is what Leth calls "a modified loan" from Ian Fleming's James Bond novel *Moonraker*.<sup>4</sup> Da Corte's work is part of this history of borrowing and building upon art that has come before.

*The Perfect Human* depicts a man and a woman performing a series of mundane tasks in a white space. These characters sit at a table and eat, walk back and forth, shave, dance, jump, fall down, and lie on a bed as Leth describes the actions of "the perfect human[s] functioning."<sup>5</sup> The actors, Claus Nissen and Majken Algren Nielsen, are conventionally attractive people. They stroke parts of their body, as Leth asks in an ethnographic manner, "[h]ow is it to touch the perfect human? How is the skin? Is it smooth? Is it warm? Is it soft? Is it dry?"<sup>6</sup> Both the camera and the narration fetishize the actors. This fetishization is part of a fascination with the surface of the skin and the human body. In an interview discussing the film, Leth describes his fascination for 'surfaces'. He explains: "I look at the surface. I want to see what things look like. How

the surface is treated. I'm interested in the sensual and the tactile."<sup>7</sup> His intensive focus on surfaces is at the heart of the film, as the majority of the film focuses on the surfaces of the human actors, with only hints at their interiority. Nissen's quietly singing a melancholic song to himself as he eats his food is suggestive of the character's emotional state, yet the film is less interested in the interior than it is on the exterior.

*The Perfect Human* is also a perfect performance of heteronormativity. The attractive couple are a man and a woman and both wear clothing appropriate to their gender. One shot of the film shows them naked in bed together. Significantly more of the film is spent observing Nissen, who speaks to the camera on several occasions. He is the more active of the couple. In contrast, Nielsen is largely docile and passive, barely even making contact with the camera. This film constitutes a perfect performance of the allotted gender roles in a heterosexual couple. In a suggestively Frankenstein-ish manner, Leth calls the empty white cube in which the actors exist a laboratory.<sup>8</sup> As if the space is a laboratory where he created his own perfect human.

In comparison to Leth's monochromatic exploration of the beauty of surfaces, Da Corte's video is a descent into the monstrous and bizarre. In the same manner as Leth, Da Corte sets his characters in an empty white void, except his film is full of garish colours and absurd props (Figure 1). While Da Corte recreates the activities performed in Leth's film, there is a distinctly strange twist to each frame. Much of Da Corte's film wholly embodies Freud's notion of the uncanny (*unheimlich*) in which there occurs a disturbing transformation of the familiar into the unfamiliar.<sup>9</sup> This is especially evident in the dining scenes in each work. In Leth's film, Nissen and Nielsen eat a meal of salmon and potatoes at a delicately decorated table. Meanwhile, Da Corte's monster sits at a velvet-covered table.<sup>10</sup> The Monster pours fluorescent orange soda over a table covered in real and toy food, which he proceeds to eat with his hands. In another scene, a shot of Nissen scratching his neck is recreated with Da Corte's fingers covered in vibrant green slime (Figure 2). Da Corte's velvet-covered table and slime covered hand create a creeping sense of unease in the viewer. These choices and the decision to incorporate Frankenstein's monster effectively de-familiarizes Leth's film to create a wholly strange and uncanny world.

Frankenstein's Monster as a Gothic queer-coded monster has theoretical potential in Da Corte's film. George Haggerty defines the Gothic as "[offering] a historical model of queer theory and politics: transgressive, sexually coded and resistant to dominant ideology."<sup>11</sup> *Frankenstein: or, the Modern Prometheus* (1818) tells the story of a scientist in conflict with his own terrible creation. As part of their analysis of the monsters of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Professors Abigail Lee Six and Hannah Thompson mark *Frankenstein* as representative of a shift in understanding of monstrosity from external to internal, and from the physical monster to the moral monster.<sup>12</sup> Monster Theorist Jeffrey Cohen argues that the monster is "a harbinger of category crisis, [a] disturbing hybrid whose externally incoherent bod[y] resist[s] attempts to include them in any systematic structuration."<sup>13</sup> As a re-animated corpse, Frankenstein's monster confuses the binary between dead and alive. As a horrific mixture of disparate body parts, the Monster is also a terrible hybrid. Anthropologist Yasmine Musharbash also explains how monsters "manifest locally, and [...] reveal how people understand themselves, their world, and their position within it."<sup>14</sup> And, Frankenstein's monster is fundamentally an embodiment of the anxieties of the gothic era.

Frankenstein's monster has been interpreted as a manifestation of the fear or anxiety in regard to a wide variety of subjects: the racial other, homosexuality, monstrous reproduction, or rapidly advancing scientific technology. In this As Gender and Queer Theorist Jack Halberstam states, Frankenstein's Monster "can never be one thing, never represent a singular anxiety," because it is threatening in so many ways.<sup>15</sup> Frankenstein's monster carries the anxieties he represents within himself, and these ideas are the inheritance that any subsequent reincarnation must reconcile and negotiate.

Da Corte's incarnation of Frankenstein's Monster grapples with its literary and cinematic progenitors, borrowing elements from both personifications of the creature. In Shelley's novel, the Monster tries to fit in with the society that rejects him for his hideous appearance, and he grows increasingly isolated. Quarantined in an empty space, Da Corte's Monster is isolated in a more abstract sense. It is an isolation not just from society or company, but from reality. The setting of Da Corte's film embodies Shelley's Monster's alienation and loneliness. However, while Shelley's novel introduced audiences to Frankenstein's monster, it is Boris Karloff's depiction which solidified his visual appearance. Karloff's version retains the enormous size of the creature described by Shelley, but is also heavily scarred with metal stitches and bolts.<sup>16</sup> It is this stitched-together form which becomes the aesthetic most associated with the Monster, and it is this aesthetic that Da Corte chooses to appropriate for his own project.

Da Corte explains his decision to embody Boris Karloff because he was thinking about "people who take on [...] transitional bodies."<sup>17</sup> Karloff had once called Frankenstein's monster "the best friend he'd ever had," something which resonated with Da Corte.<sup>18</sup> In a reflection on this sentiment, Da Corte asks, "How could you *fall in love* with this thing that seems so distant from you, but also within yourself?"<sup>19</sup> Da Corte's categorization of the relationship between Karloff and The Monster as love echoes the relationship which existed between Victor Frankenstein and The Monster in Shelley's novel. Both are between creator and their creation, however, while Victor's relationship with the Monster is characterized by an intense anxiety and fear of homosexuality, the bond between Karloff and his creature is one of genuine affection and love. And Da Corte's statements about Karloff in relation to 'transitional bodies' has additional meaning when conceiving of Frankenstein's monster as a constructed body.

Susan Stryker compares the body of Frankenstein's Monster to the transgender body, which she describes as "flesh torn apart and sewn together again in a shape other than that in which it was born."<sup>20</sup> Stryker proclaims her 'deep affinity' with the monster, as she too "is often perceived as less than fully human due to the means of [her] embodiment."<sup>21</sup> This transitional body can also be seen in Da Corte's film. The shots featuring the artist in a transitional phase between bodies/identities show the progression and construction of the new body/identity. The Monster's connection to trans identity adds an additional layer of complexity to Da Corte's performance, and further emphasizes the constructedness of identity.

## SLOW GRAFITTI AS DRAG PERFORMANCE

I propose that Da Corte's embodiment of Karloff and Frankenstein's monster should be viewed as a drag performance that works to trouble normative ontological categories. A conventional definition of drag involves the appropriation of gender signifiers of one gender by the other. As defined by Gender Theorist Judith Butler, drag involves a performance of gender, one which in its performance reveals the artificiality of that which is being performed.<sup>22</sup> It is the repetition of gender codes that work to question categories.<sup>23</sup> For Anthropologists Justine Egner and Patricia Maloney, "studying drag can present us with a unique perspective because, through examining how gender boundaries are broken, we can examine how drag performers construct gender and sexuality and gain a better understanding of not only drag constructions of gender, but traditional gender constructions as well."<sup>24</sup> I argue that Da Corte is working in a similar fashion by purposefully appropriating visual codes as part of a subversion of a normative system.

Butler argues that drag reveals the 'artificial nature' of gender and its associated codes.<sup>25</sup> While Da Corte quite faithfully resembles both Karloff and the Monster, his film draws direct attention to the artifice of the performance. The crisp quality of the camera makes it impossible to miss the prosthetics that make up Da Corte's artificial face as both of the characters. The camera often zooms into his face, and on one occasion Da Corte stuffs deli meat under a flap of his prosthetic skin. Da Corte also appears several times in an in-between stage, between Karloff and the Monster, prosthetics attached but not painted, standing out starkly against his skin (Figure 3). He is not quite monster but not quite human. This draws further attention to the artifice of the performed identity, by showing the in-between stages of transformation.

This focus on the artifice of the costume and mask keeps with Leth's focus on surfaces in his film. While Leth's surfaces are perfectly smooth and fetishized for their beauty, Da Corte's plastic and peeling surfaces are celebrated for their monstrosity and imperfection. This focus and fascination with surfaces echoes the importance of surfaces to drag performance. Drag is in large part the manipulation and transformation of the surface, which (to varying and arguable extents) challenge ideas about how these surfaces function in gendered contexts. Additionally, Jack Halberstam, who focused on the visual nature of Frankenstein's Monster's monstrosity, observes that "the Monster is the obscenity of the surface."<sup>26</sup> Da Corte uses the obscene surface of the monster to recreate a film obsessed with the perfect surface. The perfect human, like the plastic drag monster, also consists of layers of artifice and performance. Thus, Da Corte's recreation of 'The Perfect Human' deconstructs the artifice of perfection glorified by Leth's film. The new performance reveals the artificiality of the original. There is no perfect human, only the perfectly constructed and depicted human. For Butler, gender is "an imitation for which there is no original."<sup>27</sup> Da Corte's work manifests this notion—there is no perfect human, and this false original is exposed by its monstrous and grotesque copy.

Da Corte's performance as Boris Karloff and Frankenstein's monster is a complex act. *Slow Graffiti* shows Da Corte, a queer man, performing as a straight man performing as a queer-coded character. Furthermore, this is not simply a queer-coded character, but a queer-coded *monster*. Jeffrey Cohen argues that monsters "[defy] easy categorization."<sup>28</sup> He describes them as "disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any specific structuration."<sup>29</sup> Their

liminality and hybridity make the monster dangerous, their refusal to fit into an organizational system or category make them a highly subversive creatures. Frankenstein's Monster, as a being between life and death, a terrible fusion of disparate body parts, carries in its body the ontologically incoherent liminality and hybridity. Drag works as an act which transgresses and disrupts categories and boundaries. Da Corte is performing an act which carries with it the potential to trouble boundaries, as a character that defies definitions and borders.

There are also less traditional forms of drag which do not seek to simply reverse the traditional gender binary but instead occupy "hybrid identities."<sup>30</sup> Eve Shapiro argues that "taking on queer critiques of identity and stability" in drag performance "has the potential to allow simultaneity of identity."<sup>31</sup> This takes into account not just the different identities performed, but the importance of the lived identity of the performer. It is significant that Da Corte, a queer man, is performing as a queer-coded monster. Shapiro asserts that "drag does not require the dissolution of identity or boundaries, but rather cultivates, performs and opens up space for multiplicity of identities."<sup>32</sup> Da Corte's work in relationship to Shapiro's theorization of drag emphasizes the manner in which his characters are constructed of layered identities borrowed from past works. Da Corte's Monster is constructed with Karloff's performances of the character, but also Nissen's performance in Leth's film, with the words Leth borrowed from Fleming. All of these identities exist simultaneously in the body of Da Corte's monster. Susan Stryker ends her meditation on Frankenstein's monster by telling the reader "you are as constructed as me."<sup>33</sup> In this, Stryker encapsulates the essence of Da Corte's multi-layered performance. By being able to embody so many transgressive identities/bodies simultaneously, Da Corte reveals their utter artifice and constructedness.

## A MONSTER, AN ACTOR, A GOD

The title, *Slow Graffiti*, is a reference to graffiti as a transgressive act.<sup>34</sup> This points to the intent of the work to be a subversive project. Drag, like graffiti, is a rebellious act. Towards the end of Da Corte's film, as The Monster eats soda-soaked deli meat as the narrator proclaims, "He is a monster. He's just an actor. He is a God."<sup>35</sup> The narration makes clear that the figure on screen contains a multitude of identities stacked on top of each other. Da Corte is the Monster, but also the actor portraying the Monster. He is the Monster that has escaped death in his life, as well as the creator of his monstrous form. Da Corte's performance as both Boris Karloff and Frankenstein's monster should be seen as a of drag performance—one that appropriates codes not of gender, but of several ontological states of being. Da Corte's performance is the ultimate deconstruction of the perfect heteronormative, stable-bodied human because in addition to performing and inhabiting multiple levels of identity, he exposes the normative identities themselves to be artifice and performance. Rigby observes that "like queer theory, the Gothic is a discursive space concerned with difference, otherness, marginality, and the culturally constructed boundaries between the normal and the abnormal."<sup>36</sup> Da Corte's choice of one of the most significant monsters from Gothic fiction, one already embroiled in a discourse troubling boundaries, with a long queer history, makes his use of the character as part of a drag performance a highly effective and subversive one. His performance in its appropriation of the artifice of normative bodies and identities both draw attention

to their constructedness and disturb them. At this point, categorization of the performed identity, or identities, is impossible. Da Corte's multi-layered drag performance creates the perfect ontological nightmare.

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## LIST OF FIGURES



©Alex Da Corte

Figure 1: Alex Da Corte, *Slow Graffiti*, 2017, video, colour/sound; runtime 13:00. Image courtesy of the artist.



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Figure 2: Alex Da Corte, *Slow Graffiti*, 2017, video, colour/sound; runtime 13:00. Image courtesy of the artist.



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Figure 3: Alex Da Corte, *Slow Graffiti*, 2017, video, colour/sound; runtime 13:00. Image courtesy of the artist.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Louisiana Channel. "Jørgen Leth & Alex Da Corte Interview: The Perfect Monster." Louisiana Channel, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, January 19, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Leth, Jørgen, *The Perfect Human (Det Perfekte Menneske)*, 1968.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Paulina Palmer. *The Queer Uncanny: New Perspectives on the Gothic*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012, 2.

<sup>10</sup> The artist also remarked that he felt that velvet was 'extremely queer' (Personal Communication April 5, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> Mair Rigby. "Uncanny Recognition: Queer Theory's Debt to the Gothic." In *Gothic Studies*, 11:1 (2009), 47.

<sup>12</sup> Abigail Lee Six and Hannah Thompson. "From Hideous to Hedonist: The Changing Face of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Monster," In *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, edited by A.S. Mittman and P.J. Dendle, 237-255. (London & New York: Routledge, 2013), 239.

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- <sup>13</sup> Jeffrey Jerome Cohen. *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*. Minneapolis, Minn; London: University of Minnesota, 1996, 6.
- <sup>14</sup> Yasmine Musharbash. "Introduction: Monsters, Anthropology, and Monster Studies." In *Monster Anthropology in Australia and Beyond*, edited by Y. Musharbash and G.H. Presterudstun, 1-25. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 2.
- <sup>15</sup> Jack Halberstam. *Skin Shows: gothic horror and the technology of monsters*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1994, 36.
- <sup>16</sup> Jeffrey Johnson suggests that the aesthetic of the Monster as a stitched-together, scarred body may have originated out of the legacy of the horrible disfigurements that resulted from the First World War, as its director James Whale was a veteran (Johnson 301). Johnson argues that the Monster's "stitches, scars, misshapen head, and bolted neck resonated as a maimed and mentally incapacitated veteran of the First World War, then only thirteen years gone." (Johnson 301)
- <sup>17</sup> Louisiana Channel, *Jørgen Leth & Alex Da Corte Interview*.
- <sup>18</sup> Vienna Secession. "Alex Da Corte in conversation with Kim Nguyen." Vienna Secession, July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2017.
- <sup>19</sup> Louisiana Channel, *Jørgen Leth & Alex Da Corte Interview*, italics added.
- <sup>20</sup> Susan Stryker. "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage." In *GLQ: Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 1:3 (1994), 238.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 238.
- <sup>22</sup> Niall Brennan. "Contradictions Between the Subversive and the Mainstream: Drag Cultures and RuPaul's Drag Race." In *RuPaul's Drag Race and the Shifting Visibility of Drag Culture: The Boundaries of Reality TV*, edited by Niall Brennan and David Gudelunas, 29-43. (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 31.
- <sup>23</sup> Emma White. "Starved by Society: An Examination of Judith Butler's Gender Performance and Society's Slender Ideal." In *Feminist Theology*, 23:3 (2015), 320.
- <sup>24</sup> Justine Egner and Patricia Maloney. "It Has No Colour, It Has No Gender, It's Gender Bending": Gender and Sexuality Fluidity and Subversiveness in Drag Performance." In *Journal of Homosexuality*, 63:7 (2016), 877.
- <sup>25</sup> White, *Judith Butler*, 319.
- <sup>26</sup> Halberstam, *Skin Shows*, 38.
- <sup>27</sup> Egner and Maloney, *Drag Performance*, 879.
- <sup>28</sup> Cohen, *Monster Culture*, 6.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 6.
- <sup>30</sup> Eve Shapiro. "We're all genderqueer performers": Drag performance and (trans)gender identity." Conference Paper. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 2005.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid*,
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>33</sup> Stryker, *My Words*, 241.
- <sup>34</sup> Vienna Secession Interview.
- <sup>35</sup> Da Corte, Alex. *Slow Graffiti*. 2017 and Sam McKinniss, *Slow Graffiti Script*, 2017.
- <sup>36</sup> Rigby, *Monstrous Desire*, 1.