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978-1-009-56516-5 — Contemporary Body Horror
Xavier Aldana Reyes
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1 Body Horror, Then and Now

1.1 History and Context

'Body horror', loosely defined as a subgenre of horror concerned with the maiming, destruction, transformation or grotesque exaggeration of the human body, is not a recent phenomenon. Despite the popular association of body horror with the 1980s, a period that did in fact coin the term and produce the first influential theorisations of spectacular corporeality in horror films, the primary concerns of this subgenre can be traced much further back.[1] First-wave Gothic novels and fin-de-siècle canonical texts, especially Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and Robert Marsh's *The Beetle* (1897), already delved into many of the concerns that would become the province of body horror – physical difference as a source of abjection, anxieties about contagion and degeneration, and the loss of a stable sense of human identity – and thereby turned the body and mind into concerted loci of fear.[2] And before the narrative techniques of what would eventually come to be marketed as 'horror' in the twentieth century began to formalise in the shape of the Gothic romance and the nineteenth-century penny dreadful, a discourse of exceptionality and caution had already surrounded accounts of monsters and mythical beasts in ancient classical literature and poetry.[3] It is therefore plausible to conceive of the intricacies of body horror as constant and universal, if simultaneously time-sensitive and culturally bound, anxieties that permeate the broader art of terror for entertainment. Worries over beauty, body shape and myriads of other corporeal markers that affect human relations and underpin economic, medical, linguistic and judicial exchanges exist across countries and continents, and prejudices such as ageism, disablism, racism or misogyny are widespread.

The very porosity of body horror means that it customarily bleeds into the wider genre, as social taboos tend to concern bodily boundaries and notions of appropriateness, cleanliness and purity set in opposition to decay, dirt and death.[4] The reveal shock of the corpse at the end of *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) derives part of its force from the fact that Norman Bates has taxidermised his mother, in contravention of Western interment practices that separate the living from the dead

[1] Brophy (1986) is typically seen as the academic inception, not least because the article appeared in a *Screen* issue titled 'Body Horror' also including important research by Barbara Creed and Pete Boss. It is worth pointing out that Brophy's contribution was a reprint of a piece that had first appeared in Australian magazine *Art & Text* in 1983. Although *Screen* did not hyphenate the word, it appeared as 'Body-horror' in both versions of Brophy's article.

[2] See, among others, Halberstam (1995), Hurley (1996), Morgan (2002), Aldana Reyes (2014) and Mulvey-Roberts (2016).

[3] See Cueva (2024).

[4] See, for example, Douglas (2009).

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and understand burial as a respectful way of laying the remains of loved ones to rest. Hannibal Lecter, the refined criminal antagonist of Thomas Harris's novels and their successful adaptations, is well known for his cannibalism, an unlawful practice that objectifies human bodies. Mainstream classics such as *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973) and *Carrie* (Brian De Palma, 1976), not typically considered body horror, cannot help but rely on some of the tropes of the subgenre. Their heroines embody the 'monstrous-feminine' (Creed, 1993: 1–15), whose threatening otherness is defined by amplified female reproductive difference, the expression of which is necessarily corporeal and revels in ejecta like menstrual blood. Due to their connection with the emergence of monster movies and the mad science tradition in cinema, classics like *Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1931), *Doctor X* (Michael Curtiz, 1932) and *Mad Love* (Karl Freund, 1935) are not generally labelled 'body horror' either, despite boasting storylines revolving around corporeal nightmares like corpse reanimation (Figure 1), synthetic flesh experiments and defiant transplantations. Since the very notion of the modern, post-Enlightenment medical monster is steeped in the assignation of 'pathological meanings to certain bodily and behavioural traits' (Smith, 2011: 2), it is fair to suggest that body horror became embedded in the language of cinematic horror to the point of perpetuating eugenic and ableist prejudices. The pervasiveness of

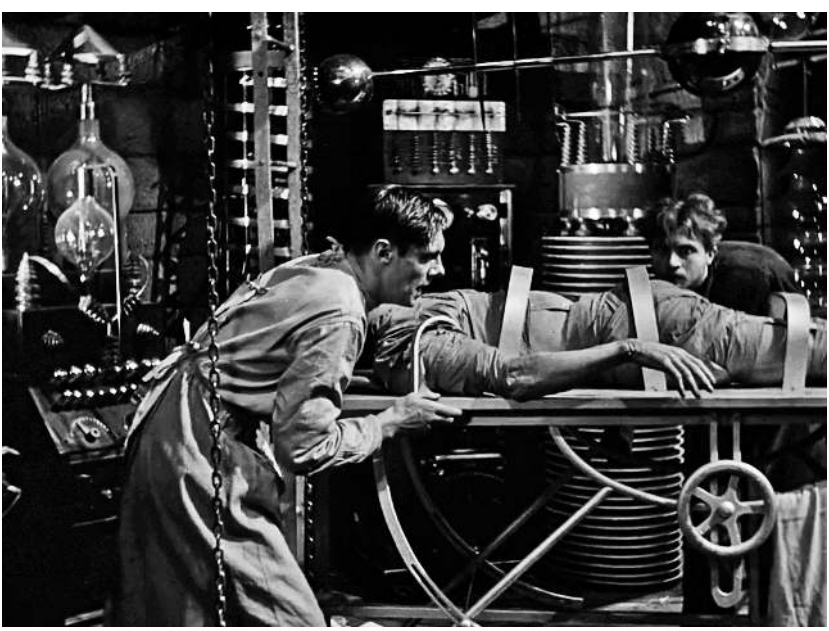


Figure 1 Some classic monster films can be seen as body horror *avant la lettre*.
Source: *Frankenstein*, directed by James Whale (Universal Pictures, 1931)

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body horror, as well as the difficulty in delimiting what it defines, means that it has received less attention in Horror Studies than more demarcated subgenres like the slasher, folk horror or zombie films and been theorised more tangentially.[5]

There are good reasons why body horror is linked in the popular imagination with the late twentieth century. Some of its best-known examples were released or published between the end of the 1970s and the early 1990s: the earlier work of David Cronenberg, especially *Shivers* (1975), *Rabid* (1977), *The Brood* (1979), *Scanners* (1981), *Videodrome* (1983), *The Fly* (1986) and *Dead Ringers* (1988); *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979) and the art of H. R. Giger; Sam Raimi's *The Evil Dead* (1981) and *Evil Dead II* (1987); *The Thing* (John Carpenter, 1982); Frank Henenlotter's *Basket Case* (1982), *Brain Damage* (1988), *Basket Case 2* (1990) and *Frankenhooker* (1990); *Altered States* (Ken Russell, 1980); *The Stuff* (Larry Cohen, 1985); Peter Jackson's *Bad Taste* (1987) and *Braindead* (1992); Stuart Gordon's *Re-Animator* (1985) and *From Beyond* (1986), which were followed by Brian Yuzna's *Society* (1989) and *Bride of Re-Animator* (1990); *Street Trash* (J. Michael Muro, 1987); Clive Barker's *Hellraiser* (1987), as well as the stories in his *Books of Blood* (1984–1985) and the wider 'splatterpunk' movement they were seen to engender (including fiction by David J. Schow, John Skipp and Craig Spector, Joe R. Lansdale and Shaun Hutson); Japanese cyberpunk classics like *Akira* (Katsuhiro Otomo, 1988), Shinya Tsukamoto's *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* (1989) and *Tetsuo II: Body Hammer* (1992), and *964 Pinocchio* (Shozin Fukui, 1991); and gore films like *Naked Blood* (Hisayasu Satō, 1996) and *Organ* (Kei Fujiwara, 1996). As this by no means exhaustive list shows, body horror was predominantly a visual artistic subgenre, even though novels like Robin Cook's *Coma* (1977), Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* (1977) and *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), Iain Banks's *The Wasp Factory* (1984), Katherine Dunn's *Geek Love* (1989), Dennis Cooper's *Frisk* (1991) and Poppy Z. Brite's *Exquisite Corpse* (1996) trod similar ground. The rise of body horror fiction must also be understood within the market context of the horror paperback boom, which saw novels such as James Herbert's *The Rats* (1974) and *The Fog* (1975) or Gregory A. Douglas's *The Nest* (1980), to name only three, resort to gross, anatomically detailed displays of violence that mirrored the rise of cheap kills in slasher films.

[5] Apart from a few articles and chapters, monographs have thus far dealt with broader adjacent genres like 'splatter', 'gore' or the 'gross-out' film; have approached distinct subareas, like the transplantation trope, from a Medical Humanities perspective; or else considered body horror as part of larger studies of the body or biology in the horror genre. The exceptions are Badley (1995; 1996), who explores body horror alongside ghost films and slashers between the mid-1970s and mid-1990s, and Huckvale (2020), who reads body horror alongside existentialist philosophy. At the time of writing, there is no comprehensive history, academic or popular, of the body horror subgenre.

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Body horror is partly a child of the golden age of practical effects, prosthetics and animatronics championed by great artists like Rob Bottin, Stan Winston, Rick Baker, Alec Gillis and Tom Savini, who had witnessed human atrocity at close quarters during his time as a combat photographer. Among many other noteworthy events, the 1980s was a decade when horror, and the body horror subgenre in particular, won Oscars for 'Best Makeup' (John Landis's *An American Werewolf in London* in 1981; *The Fly* in 1986 (Figure 2)) and 'Best Visual Effects' (James Cameron's *Aliens* in 1986). It also produced some of the most impressive and limb-cracking cinematic transformations in *The Howling* (Joe Dante, 1981), *An American Werewolf in London* and *The Thing*. Some scenes, like the head explosion in *Scanners* or the chest-bursting scene in *Alien*, are so emblematic that they have been parodied and imitated ever since. The first issue of *Fangoria*, a magazine that became the epitome of gory cinema and special effects during the 1980s, was first published in 1979, boasting a richly illustrated article on Savini's work for *Dawn of the Dead* (George A. Romero, 1978).[6] *Fangoria* would go on to report on, and give cover treatment to, many of the films that today emblematise body horror. Even distinguished magazine *Sight and Sound* devoted part of a full feature on 'Movie Nightmares' to body horror in 1993, an indication that the term had by then travelled beyond



Figure 2 Body horror is associated with special and make-up effects.

Source: *The Fly*, directed by David Cronenberg (Brooksfilms and SLM Production Group, 1986)

[6] As Kendrick (2009: 158) notes, *Fangoria* first marketed itself as a fantasy magazine, but by the seventh issue (August 1980) had already narrowed its scope to horror.

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Figure 3 Horror had grown visibly more violent and gruesome by the end of the 1960s.

Source: *Night of the Living Dead*, directed by George A. Romero (Image Ten, 1968)

academic and fan subcultural communities and entered general parlance.[7] As might be expected, the language in the article highlights the luridness and visually striking elements of the subgenre.

Body horror's parades of metamorphosis and carnage, and even the idea of corporeal havoc as anything other than morally unjustifiable, gratuitous and in bad taste, had been made possible by seismic changes in the 1960s, chief of which was the weakening and eventual replacement of the American Production Code, in place since the 1930s, that had prohibited 'brutal killings' from 'being presented in detail' (quoted in Doherty, 1999: 355). The loosening of regulations issued forth a new era defined by explicitness, the 'New Hollywood', spearheaded by *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967) and *The Dirty Dozen* (Robert Aldrich, 1967), both released during 'a breakthrough year for extremely violent films' (Krämer, 2005: 51). Comparable developments in the UK, Italy, France and Spain, countries responsible for much of the often independent horror cinema that flooded theatres during the 1960s and 1970s, heralded the arrival of directors like Herschell Gordon Lewis, whose colour-saturated *Blood Feast* (1963) has been hailed as the birth of 'gore', or George A. Romero, whose game-changing *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) birthed the cannibal zombie (Figure 3). Films like Terence Fisher's *The Curse of Frankenstein* (1957) and *Dracula* (1958), *Peeping Tom* (Michael Powell, 1960), *Eyes Without a Face* (Georges Franju, 1960), Mario Bava's *Black Sunday* (1960) and *The Whip and the Body* (1963), *Mill of the Stone Women* (Giorgio Ferroni, 1960), Riccardo Fredda's *The Horrible*

[7] See Williams (1993). The first mention of the term was in 1991, in an article on Arnold Schwarzenegger, and was applied to describe the short *The Big Shave* (Martin Scorsese, 1967), a Vietnam allegory, in 1992.

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Dr Hichcock (1962) and *The Ghost* (1963) or *Horror Castle* (Antonio Margheriti, 1963) pushed the envelope of what the horror genre could be, increasingly upping the erotic and violent antes and leading to the heady cocktails of nudity and blood typical of the films of Paul Naschy (Jacinto Molina) or the 'horrotica' of Jesús (Jess) Franco and Andrea Bianchi. By the end of the 1970s, horror exuded an aura of transgression; it had become a receptacle for risky material that would have hardly found a footing in more realistic cinema. The bombastic corporeal spectacles of body horror were directly affected by this recent history and by the gradual expectation that horror should be raw and confrontational.

Yet, important as technique and industry were to the honing of body horror on screen, reducing its emergence to a matter of practical innovation, disinhibition and provocation would fail to account for the profound changes that had revolutionised the social landscape between the late 1970s and the 1990s. The most consequential of these was the rise of identity politics that grew out of mid-century social activism and built a shared sense of citizenship that channelled attention into matters of race, gender, sexuality and class, and raised issues of inequality, oppression and repression. Although individual struggles have their own timelines, it is helpful to see the 1960s and 1970s as a period in which the post-1950s civil rights movement, second-wave feminism, post-Stonewall gay liberation movements and New Left activism galvanised into new analytical frameworks that encouraged empathy and the understanding that human bodies are always caught in the crossfires of social processes of valuation and curtailment of freedoms. A good indication that the corporeal begins to be seen as thoroughly constructed by culture and political–legal processes is surely the coining of 'intersectionality' by Kimberlé Crenshaw, a concept intended to shed light on how 'dominant conceptions of discrimination condition us to think about subordination as disadvantage occurring along a single categorical axis' (1989: 140). The writings of Martin Luther King Jr, Betty Friedan, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Georges Bataille, Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser came to challenge apparently inherent, but in actuality thoroughly artificial and biased, ideas of identity and citizenship and, by extension, the external elements that mark a body as different from the white, patriarchal, monogamous, heterosexual, middle-class and Christian norm. This turn to the inscription of ideological forces onto the body can also be traced in Film and Literature Studies, with, for example, film journal *Cahiers du cinéma* explicitly embracing Marxism from 1968 to 1973 or the publication of Laura Mulvey's article on the male gaze in 1975; the emergence of a string of foundational feminist literary studies by Kate Millett, Ellen Moers, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, and Elaine Showalter; or the appearance of key books on the

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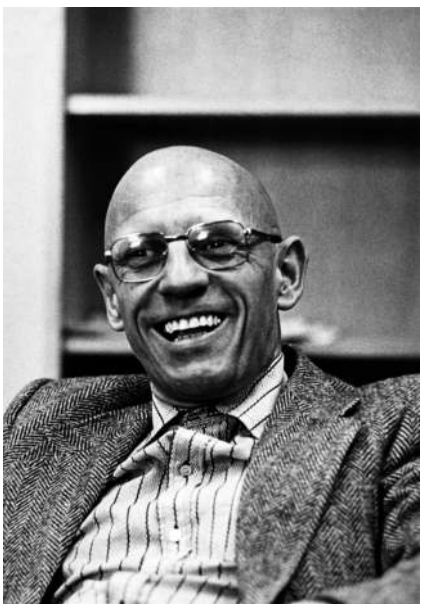


Figure 4 Influential philosopher Michel Foucault coined the term 'biopower' in the 1970s.

Source: Bettmann / Contributor / Getty Images

relationship between racism and cinematic representation like Donald Bogle's *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks* (1973).

Michel Foucault's writings on 'biopower' were crucial in advancing the notion that, much as Althusser had argued about the complicity between educational and cultural institutions and the disciplinary nature of the state, there is a direct correspondence between medical and legal discourses as well as between expressions of identity and their wider policing and punishment (Figure 4).[8] Foucault speculated about a gradual shift in the seventeenth century from the pre-eminent punitive right of the sovereign to exercise power by '*tak*[*ing*] life or *let*[*ting*] live' (1998: 136, italics in original) towards biopolitical strategies through which the 'biological came under State control' (2004: 240) and power was 'exercised at the level of . . . the species, the race, and the large-scale phenomena of population' (1998: 137). Embedded within this new state of play was the type of controlling, monitoring, and organising bodies to which the statistical society is heir. For Foucault, biopower operated by '*foster*[*ing*] life or *disallow*[ing] it to the point of death' (138, italics in original), with the right to

[8] His famous article 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)' was first published in the journal *La Pensée* in 1970 and appeared in English translation in 1971.

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kill only exercised to exterminate perceived threats – for example, as justification for colonial massacres. Achille Mbembe would eventually extend this notion through his work on 'necropolitics', or 'contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death' (2003: 39–40), in his writings on the structures of power in the plantation and the colony. For Foucault, disciplinarian techniques of punishment and control, once represented by institutions of power as instruments of the government, did not vanish, but gradually began to work in tandem with, even become subsumed by, more abstract regulative methods or '*techniques* of power' like social contracts and the normalising, hierarchising and segregationist effects of demographic calculations (1998: 141). In short, we see a move from the exertion of power upon individuals (bodies) to human masses (the body politic). Implicitly, biopower becomes internalised; citizens are ideologically interpellated by biopolitical imperatives and reproduce (or challenge) them in their personal behaviours and judgements. Foucault thus provided the scaffolding upon which countless critiques of the 'normative' would be built. In fact, Robin Wood's seminal piece 'An Introduction to the American Horror Film' (1979: 7–28), responsible for applying the 'return of the (socially) repressed' theory to horror cinema, can be helpfully re-imagined as a continuation of the intellectual advances of the 1970s. Many body horror texts are shot through with analytically disapproving, if not reformist, messages about the position of the body in modern society.

Finally, it is important not to overlook the valence of postmodernism, debates about which characterised the 1980s and foregrounded new artistic forms defined by their 'empirical, chaotic, and heterogenous' qualities (Jameson, 1991: 1). On a superficial level, body horror displays the 'self-awareness' indicative of postmodernity, offering a 'spectacular display' of excessive and curious what-if scenarios sometimes undercut by humour and 'comic transgression', most evident in 'gross-out' scenes that draw attention to special effects, emphasise affect over meaning, and toe the line between the revulsive and the physical excess of slapstick (Grant, 2007: 355). For some critics, like William Paul, horror from the 1970s and 1980s was marked by a 'playfulness' (1994: 423) observable in its narrative beat (a series of horrific numbers close to comedy that had its most direct predecessor in the EC comics of the 1950s) and 'the end of closure' (416) of films like Alfred Hitchcock's emblematic *The Birds* (1963). In its insistence on mixing Bakhtinian explosions of bad taste with deeper considerations of the status and positionality of certain human bodies, body horror also partakes of the melding of high-brow and low-brow orders that is another cognate of postmodernism's irreverence and lack of regard for neatly designated categories. This roguish flirtatiousness is also detectable in body horror's intergeneric tendencies (its absorption and repurposing of elements

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from science fiction, horror, comedy, melodrama and romance), which offers an explanation for the historical difficulty in demarcating the subgenre.

The plasticity and elasticity of postmodernism translated into conceptions of corporeality, with the self perceived as 'incomplete' and always 'in process' (Sarup, 1996: 47) and identity as fractured. The Western body began disintegrating following challenges to its cohesion from psychoanalysis, which had complicated the relationship between the conscious and the unconscious in the early twentieth century, and then post-structuralism, which revealed corporeality as a process of legibility and medical, legal and cultural inscription that brought to the fore the lack of ownership and control we have over its freedoms and meanings. The body also became ever more metamorphic and polymorphic as subjectivity grew external and accessorial, built upon 'individual hyperconsumption' (Jameson, 2009: 72) in mainstream channels, or else extreme modification in countercultural communities like the Modern Primitivism of the late 1980s. Historical contingencies contributed to the decentring and perceived pliability of the human body, so that we can speak of its unmooring from the sacred sphere and re-rooting into materiality and the promises of biotechnology. Genetic engineering underwent a period of intensification between 1958, the first time DNA was made in a test tube, and 1996, the momentous cloning of Dolly the Sheep (news of which drew on Frankensteinian metaphors), raising fears about replication and forms of genetic selection redolent of eugenics. Patrick Gonder writes of 'a shift in the discourse of embodiment' through which the body became imbued 'with a somatic unconscious, an invisible aspect that governs physical form' (2003: 34). Commensurate milestones in robotics, ranging from sensor technology that gave machines autonomy of movement (1949) to the first pioneering use of AI (early 1970s), renewed anxieties over the mechanic replacement of the human. The same commingling of technology and flesh was responsible for the rise of transhumanism (a term coined as early as 1957) and an interest in the feminist possibilities of the cyborgian body.[9] The detonation of the atomic bomb and subsequent nuclear destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, commonly taken as the beginning of the Atomic Age, brought worldwide attention to the effects of radiation on the human body, its external branding of cellular damage. The AIDS crisis, compounded by the media focus on tell-tale lesions like Kaposi's sarcoma, once again placed the spotlight on the exteriorisation of the internal life of the body. Advances in science yielded the first contraceptive pill, issuing forth a new age of sexual freedom with repercussions beyond the strictly reproductive. By the late 1980s, the 'interrogation of cultural, historical, and philosophical constructions of

[9] See Huxley (1957: 13–17) and Haraway (1985).

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