

David Huckvale (2020) *Terrors of the Flesh: The Philosophy of Body Horror in Film*, Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 190 pp.

In *Terrors of the Flesh: The Philosophy of Body Horror in Film*, David Huckvale traces body horror in cinema back to the writings of the Marquis de Sade, who states that a human takes pleasure and suffers pain only by means of the senses or the organs of the body (p. 1). Such a corporeal philosophy, Huckvale continues, strongly anticipates Friedrich Nietzsche, who was eager to have a positive attitude towards life despite its horrors. This book, then, aims to explore the profound anxieties we have about our own bodies and consequently of our very existence. Indeed, Huckvale observes that we often talk about our bodies as though they were our possessions, contrary to our consciousness, which we consider the “real” us (p. 3). Of course, a similar relationship can be made within the classical doctrine of dualism, in which mental phenomena are considered distinct and separable from matter. For René Descartes, a human being is not a framework of limbs called a human body, but a thinking thing (Descartes, 2008 [1641], p. 20), with dualism then being reinforced by the Copernican revolution, whereby bodies were seen as biological organisms that could be studied using various scientific methods, as opposed to mental states, which were subjected to philosophical and theological analyses. In Huckvale’s case, the opposite is done: he connects body horror with the omnipresent fear of our own mortality and philosophical theories regarding matter and existence (p. 7), and claims that the corruptibility of our flesh is one of the most common topics in works of literature and film (p. 8).

Using examples from classical literature, with Faust being the ultimate horror of unending physical torment, Huckvale draws upon Marie Guillot to argue that what we know best of all is the body since it is our sole instrument for understanding the world (p. 13). Various depictions of bodily torment in films serve to illustrate our angst when said instrument malfunctions or is destroyed, as each chapter of Huckvale’s book engages with various possible scenarios for malfunction and/or annihilation: copulation, generation, digestion, mutilation, infection, mutation, disintegration, extinction – all ways to deform, change, or annihilate the corporeal cage in which a human is imprisoned.

In the first chapter, Huckvale analyses copulation and generation as manifested in both sex and birth, which he considers the place where the horrors of the body begin (p. 19). One such example in film is the existence of vampires, who are sexually liberating, but terrifying and compelling as well, like sex itself (p. 20). Huckvale then argues that the horror of sex has never been quite so powerfully expressed as in Roman

Polanski's *Repulsion* (1965), where the life of a homicidal schizophrenic (Catherine Deneuve) revolves around sex, which soon becomes equated to death, by depicting her protection of a rabbit corpse – a symbol of a fetus that she would never allow herself to bear in her womb (p. 23). Sex is closely connected to birth, and one of the common topics in film involves babies as demonic intruders. In Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), for example, the demonic background is combined with birthing anxiety and post-natal depression (p. 27), with a subsequent trend of negatively critiquing children seeming to start with *The Omen* (Richard Donner, 1976), which Huckvale sees as a reflection of apocalyptic anxieties (p. 36). Huckvale notes that pregnancy was long considered a medical condition that ought to be hidden from public view, and hence it has been avoided in film as well.

While regard to digestion, Huckvale states that an underlying disgust with regard to food or a troubling attitude towards eating and digestion is to some extent common to us all (p. 54). One of the best body-horror illustrations is the taboo of cannibalism, which forms the basis of many films such as *Soylent Green* (Richard Fleischer, 1973), *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991) and *Hannibal* (Ridley Scott, 2001). On the other hand, *Eraserhead* (David Lynch, 1977) leads us to the subject of human waste in general and the taboo of excrement, with Huckvale also analysing *The Human Centipede* films (Tom Six, 2009, 2011, and 2015), stating that if we are so disgusted by what we generate and carry about within us before evacuating our bowels, then we are fundamentally disgusted by ourselves (p. 69). By analysing the concept of vomiting and eating too little or too much, Huckvale concludes that the relationship between life (eating) and death (prey as food) is so primitive and so essential, that it is to be expected that horror films will be fascinated by it.

Mutilation via dismemberment, Huckvale asserts, is a worse horror than death itself because it is the gateway to the profound existential crisis of identity (p. 78). Our inner desire to maintain bodily unity is contrasted with an awareness of inevitable dissolution and corruption (p. 79). The concept of mutilation is omnipresent in horror films and might seem like a quintessential property thereof. However, the author inspects a much broader idea of being trapped within our bodies – as per *The Man Who Changed His Mind* (Robert Stevenson, 1936) and Terence Fisher's *The Revenge of Frankenstein* (1958) and *Frankenstein Must Be Destroyed* (1970) – identifying not only the question of mind-body dualism using depictions of brain transplants, but, the biggest question of all, that of personal identity. It seems that a key tenet of horror films is that personal identity is related to psychological, rather than physical, continuity, meaning that our bodies might not matter after all.

Huckvale also investigates the transformation of our bodies through infection or mutation. One might immediately think of vampires, as in the case of various adaptations of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), but Huckvale also pinpoints that films often depict panic and mass hysteria in the face of infectious diseases, analogous to the current pandemic. Indeed, this obsession started in the 1950s and 1960s, when ecological issues and planetary exploration became hot topics in works of art and in science, as well as being the golden eras of science fiction film, which especially investigated the possibility of alien creatures, and the fear of the unknown that could spread like an infection. In the case of mutation, Huckvale interprets the grim fascination with abnormal or damaged bodies as a contrast to our desire to maintain corporal integrity/"normality" (p. 118). *The Island of Lost Souls* (Erle C. Kenton, 1932) and other adaptations of H.G. Wells display human-animal hybrids, while *The Thing From Another World* (Christian Nyby, 1951) steps up to present a combination of infection and mutation, combining two body-horror concepts at once. Such films, according to the author, exercise our biology, by separating us from "the other" (p. 124).

The major recurring theme is, of course, the fear of death, and many horror films end in physical disintegration (p. 127). However, Huckvale expands his analysis to include psychological illness as a way of being cut off from reality and/or of disintegrating mentally, as per Miloš Forman's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) and Werner Herzog's *Jeder für sich und Gott gegen alle/The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* (1974). Arthur Schopenhauer considers death as the true result and purpose of life, and Huckvale connects this argument with Sigmund Freud's idea of a deep subconscious drive towards a certain kind of nirvana (p. 140). This is best exemplified by *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (Robert Wise, 1951) and various other apocalyptic movies that examine not only the destruction of one individual, but which ponder the total annihilation of the human race; indeed, for Huckvale, *Melancholia* (Lars von Trier, 2011) illustrates especially well a particular state of mind where humanity is reaching its point of destruction. Horror films, Huckvale concludes, tend more toward Schopenhauer than to Nietzsche (p. 160). We are, after all, nothing more than the will-to-live, and by contrasting this with annihilation, the will-to-live becomes even more pronounced (p. 169).

Huckvale's *Terrors of the Flesh* is in the end an epitaph to Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer states that our body is given as an objective representation and as a subjective Will, and hence that the world is both the will and representation. His main goal was to reach a tranquil frame of mind, even though he was often considered a perfect example of a pessimist. Body horror and the terrors of the flesh might be superficially interpreted as a

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way to satisfy our animal instincts, but they could be better seen as a way of consoling ourselves and making inner peace with our own corporal being. This book will certainly make us look not only at our bodies in a different way, but at the genre of horror as well.

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