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Horrors that Matter: Deconstructing Binary Conceptualisations of Sex/Gender
and the Body in four ALTER Body Horror Short Films

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INTRODUCTION

Where questions of horror film and questions of gender intersect, ambivalences, ambiguities, and polarities reign. Depictions of gendered violence coexist with potentially empowering undertones; the stereotypical equation of ‘woman=victim’ is juxtaposed with depictions where ‘woman=monster’ (Creed, *Monstrous* 7-10). Perhaps due to this polarising effect of horror films on audiences and scholars alike, academic inquiry into this cyclically evolving tradition (Conrich, *Horror Zone* 1) has been abundant. So abundant that some may question the viability of yet *another* dissection of films of the genre, such as the endeavour proposed by this thesis. As David Diffrient notes, the vast body of existing scholarship poses a challenge to scholars akin to digesting some of the “notoriously disgusting” (1) horror films produced in the last decade. However, despite the saturation of research on classic horror films, there seems to remain a significant blind spot in horror film scholarship: the neglect of academic inquiry into short films (Felando 2). While contemporary media culture has seen a surge in short-form content across platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and Vimeo, scholarly attention to the short film has been limited (Felando 41-42). This gap is particularly pronounced in the horror genre, where sustained academic research into horror short films is virtually non-existent, with only a few exceptions.¹

Using this gap in the literature as a starting point, this thesis explores four horror short films from a feminist deconstructive perspective. In addition to providing an essential gap in the existing literature, the short film format (Walde, “Brevity” 234) is particularly suited to this research question. Their short duration and focus on singular themes, along with the deprioritisation of character and plot development (Felando 45), allow an in-depth exploration of individual aspects and motifs. For instance, from the four films analysed, the film *Retch*, depicts almost exclusively the protagonist’s transformation, with minimal attention to interpersonal dynamics, character development, exposition or worldbuilding. Similarly, *The Relic* centres on a simple premise and situational context, deprioritising narrative complexity to explore the moment’s unique “intensity” (Felando 49). These examples illustrate Cynthia Felando’s observation that the short film, much like the short story, often presents a “slice of life” that is “unbound by the demands of causality” (48). In the context of short films, the motif of body horror becomes more pronounced. The ‘slice of life’ depicted is intricately connected

¹ The exception is a recent special issue of the scholarly horror journal *MONSTRUM*, which published an issue on the horror short form (not short film) in 2022 (Lupher and Thain 3).

with the film's portrayal of body horror, making it a central theme rather than a peripheral effect in terms of screen time and narrative construction.

However, the primary focus of this thesis lies in its interest in studying the relationship between the deconstruction of sex/gender and the body and the motif of body horror, with the short film providing the ideal format for such an exploration. The term body horror initially emerged in the 1980s to describe a new development in the horror genre to describe explicit depictions of bodily decay, disintegration, and damage, emphasising the vulnerability of bodily functions and structures, often accompanied by the introduction of new physiological arrangements and changes to bodily anatomy (Brophy 8; Cruz 161, Wells 121). Central to body horror is thus the theme of people experiencing a loss of control over their bodies (Boorman, "Body Horror" 41). In the context of this thesis, body horror serves as a lens through which to study the relationship between the categories of sex/gender and the body. Specifically, this thesis investigates the main research question: *How does the motif of body horror deconstruct binaries of sex/gender and the body in four ALTER horror short films?* To approach this question, I provide close readings of the four short films *Progeny*, *When Susurrus Stirs*, *The Relic* and *Retch*, examining the films' respective depictions of bodily transformation and invasion.

Given that ideas about the body and biology, including specific traits associated with masculinity and femininity, are deeply intertwined with notions of sex/gender, the portrayal of bodies undergoing transformation and invasion prompts a confrontation with the instability of these naturalised categories. Based on a theoretical framework rooted in poststructuralist feminist approaches to sex/gender and the body, I argue that the depictions of body horror in these films—from the inside out—deconstruct essentialist and binary conceptualisations of sex/gender and the body by revealing the artificiality of these assumedly fixed categories. Taking into account the specificity of the medium film, I consider the audio-visual depiction of these processes an integral part of these processes. Thus, to answer the research question and substantiate the above claims, my close readings will focus on the detailed analysis of specific filmic details and expressions and the examination of narrative aspects.

The relevance of such a research endeavour, which criticises essentialist and binary conceptualisations of sex/gender and the body well into the 21st century, several decades since the initial emergence of poststructuralism and poststructuralist feminism, lies in the pervasiveness of essentialising and biological determinist ideologies of sex/gender and the body, which lead to the continued oppression and discrimination of women based on their assumed 'biological' differences from men as well as those people which are rendered

intelligible according to the limiting and limited conceptualisations of legitimate expressions of sex/gender and the body (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 4-5). Contemporary movements such as post-feminism (McRobbie), anti-abortion campaigns, and trans-exclusive feminist movements are concrete examples of how the oppressive impact of essentialist ideologies.

The approach to close reading to answer this question is rooted in deconstruction. Deconstruction, first developed by French philosopher Jacques Derrida, is based on the observation that the history of Western philosophy and thought is riddled with hierarchically structured binary dichotomies (Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* 17). To challenge these binaries, Derrida suggests viewing texts from a deconstructive perspective. This approach to (close)

reading, discussed in more detail in the following theoretical chapter, is characterised by its aim not to generate reproducible results but rather to approach each text “as if it were unique” (McQuillan 5). This thesis takes on a similarly flexible approach, allowing the close readings of each film to produce unique readings which are able to hone in on the specificity and singularity of each film, and “allowing the text to speak before the reader, and listening to what the text imposes on the reader” (McQuillan 5). One way to envision this approach is through the metaphor of a ball of yarn. If we think of cultural texts as akin to such a ball, deconstruction would resemble pulling on a thread from this ball. However, in different balls of yarn (and cultural texts), pulling on the same thread is impossible, and even if attempted, the ball would never look the same afterwards, even when viewed from the same perspective. Thus, echoing Martin McQuillan, we can understand deconstruction as “the singular act of reading itself, not a method applied to the text to produce the reading” (6).

Consequently, the analyses from these four close readings follow along the lines of *what* these films say and *how* they say it, resulting in several different answers – even within individual films, deconstruction is bound to happen in various ways. The theoretical framework established for such an endeavour must be accordingly flexible. Therefore, throughout the theoretical chapters of this thesis, the thoughts, texts, and concepts covered aim to provide a solid foundation and analytical orientation for the following close readings without aiming to offer a universal schema according to which each film will be analysed.

This thesis consists of six main chapters (excluding introduction and conclusion). In Chapter 1, I discuss the foundational concepts of this thesis, beginning with a discussion of the discursive production of sex/gender and the body (1.1) and the formation of a working definition of the body rooted in the thought of Judith Butler and Elisabeth Grosz (1.2). The last subsection within this chapter on the theoretical framework introduces deconstruction as a mode

of reading. It establishes a metonymic approach to close reading, which will be used to approach this thesis' study of filmic scenes and techniques (1.3). The second theoretical chapter consists of a literature review of relevant perspectives in the field of feminist and gender approaches to horror film (2.1 and 2.2) as well as a discussion of the term body horror which concludes by suggesting a narrow working definition of body horror as body-internal processes of bodily change as well as it suggests viewing body horror as a motif that can traverse genre boundaries (2.3).

In Chapter 3, I trace some questions at the intersections of theory and methodology, addressing how the lack of research into short films provides not only a starting point for this thesis but also necessitates a careful selection process to avoid random comparisons between random films (3.1). The chapter concludes with a delineation of the process of categorising and selecting the films from an initial corpus of 40 films. This process involves delineating the two central motifs of the invaded and transformed body, which serve as the primary categories of body horror analysed in this thesis (3.2).

Following this, two analytical chapters are organised around the two primary motifs of body horror, defined as bodily transformation and invasion. Chapter 4 focuses on the motif of the transforming body. This chapter presents close readings of selected scenes and filmic aspects from two films: *The Relic* (4.1) and *Retch* (4.2). Chapter 5 follows the same structure, with one subsection dedicated to each of the films *Progeny* (5.1) and *When Susurrrus Stirs* (5.2). Notably, the close readings of these films each constitute singular moments; the deconstructive close readings aim at "listening to what the text imposes" (McQuillan 6) and focus on their respective specificity. Through these close readings, four distinct forms of deconstruction of binary conceptualisations of sex/gender and the body emerge, as each text constructs these binaries differently within the narrative structure, cinematography and the diegesis of the films.

Finally, Chapter 6 offers a joint discussion of all four films, evaluating them within the context of the research question. This section acknowledges that despite the focus on the deconstruction of gender, a broader comparison between the two groups of films reveals an underlying tendency of these films to reiterate binary conceptualisations of sex/gender and the body within their narrative structure (6.1). The section concludes by considering the insights from the comparison between the different films in the context of the 14 films from the corpus categorised as invasion and transformation films, detecting similarly gendered tendencies in the invasion and transformation body horror films overall (6.2). Having established the roadmap for this thesis, a few final remarks regarding its language use and readability are necessary.

Firstly, given the thesis's theoretical framework rooted in poststructuralist approaches to sex/gender and the body, the distinction between sex and gender is viewed as a cultural construct. Consequently, the terms 'male' and 'female' are recognised as reiterating the notion of 'sex' as a biological basis for gender. To reflect this understanding, the language used to refer to sex/gender is purposefully adapted. I avoid using these terms in my own discussions of characters; however, I use them when discussing theoretical perspectives and do not alter them in quotations from other scholars. When referring to 'sex' in my analysis, I place the terms in single quotation marks to denaturalise them, highlighting their constructed nature and neutralising essentialist connotations. Direct quotations from literature, however, retain the original terminology without adaptation. Secondly, to enhance readability, film titles will be shortened to avoid redundancy and lengthiness. For instance, the titles *Progeny* and *Retch* will remain unchanged, while *When Susurrus Stirs* will be shortened to *Susurrus* and *The Relic* will be shortened to *Relic*.

CHAPTER 1

De/constructing Sex/Gender and the Body

The historical roots of contemporary ideologies about sex/gender and the body can be traced back to ancient philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle. These thinkers portrayed the body as a biological entity distinct from rationality, thus establishing a dualistic view of mind and body (Mercer 183), a perspective that was further developed by “foundational figures of modern thought” (Pasnau, “Aquinas”) such as Thomas Aquinas and culminated in the oppositional construction of mind and body through the model of the Cartesian mind/body dualism. This Western philosophical tradition has frequently portrayed the body as a biological entity within the broader context of nature, distinct from rationality and seen as an instrument and a potential disruption to control (Lennon and Fischer, “Feminist Perspectives on the Body”). Thus, these enduring philosophical perspectives have profoundly shaped contemporary ideologies about sex, gender, and the body, reinforcing a dualistic framework that continues to influence modern thought and societal norms.

Notably, the mind/body dualism is intricately intertwined with notions of femininity and masculinity. As Kathleen Lennon and Clara Fischer explain, the mind-body opposition has been linked to a male-female dichotomy, where women are viewed as being deeply connected to their bodily existence, casting doubt on their ability to achieve rationality (Lennon and Fischer, “Feminist Perspectives”). Men, on the other hand, are associated with the mind, and thus with rationality. Elisabeth Grosz further elucidates this point, stating that “[w]omen are somehow *more biological, more natural than men*” (14, original emphasis). The dichotomies of mind/body and rationality/irrationality are thus intricately interconnected with essentialist notions of ‘female’ and ‘male’ biology (King 41). These binary pairs reinforce each other, relying on the artificial construction of their oppositional nature, with each side of the opposition being linked to other qualities. Fiona Carson supports this argument, noting that “[w]hile men lay claim to the supposedly ‘superior’ category of mind, the biological processes—menstruation, gestation—are writ large upon the surface of the female body, and thus become the means by which ‘woman’ is defined” (Carson 94). The intertwining of mind/body dualism with gender constructs perpetuates essentialist notions of femininity and masculinity, reinforcing societal norms that define women and men based on their perceived

biological traits and capabilities.

Although feminist thought often relies on a clear distinction between sex and gender (Cleary 2), the discussion above illustrates why this distinction risks reinforcing essentialist, biologising views of femininity (Schor 278). By treating sex as a naturalised category and gender as a cultural construct, there is a risk of perpetuating the binary notion that “biology is destiny” (Allegranti 394), which provides the objective and static root of gender. As a result, the body remains a central site of essentialist and oppressive discourses in contemporary societies, politics, and cultures, which maintain that there is an assumedly natural and self-evident biological basis for gender (Cleary 2). Such thinking forms the basis for constructing men and women as hierarchically structured opposites, aligning male/female with the corresponding genders of man/woman and the attributes of masculine/feminine, all reinforced by the attached binary pairs such as culture/nature and mind/body. Through this process, qualities associated with femininity, women, the body, and nature are devalued while those associated with masculinity, men, the mind, and culture are praised. This discussion underscores the importance of feminist and gender theory approaches that challenge and deconstruct these ideologies, questioning the “myth of an unmediated access to nature, to the body” (Schor 264).

Since the late 1980s, feminist and gender scholars have employed deconstructive tactics to challenge the entrenched binary model embedded in the male/female dichotomy and develop alternative frameworks to situate sexed and gendered subjects. Drawing (sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly) from Derridean theory, these scholars contend that binary systems inevitably favour one side of the binary over the other, such as privileging the male over the female and privileging culture over nature and mind over body. Rather than seeking to invert this hierarchy to elevate the feminine above the masculine, as traditional emancipatory feminism has aimed for, these feminists endeavour to disrupt the underlying structures that sustain binary thinking (Phoca 46).

This thesis adopts such an approach by examining the deconstruction of binary conceptualisations of sex/gender and the body through a cultural studies lens, focusing on the representation of bodily processes on screen. To establish an adequate theoretical foundation for these analyses, the following subsections provide an account of the broadly poststructuralist theoretical underpinnings that inform this thesis’ approach to feminist and gender theory. First, subsection 1.1 discusses in more detail the deconstruction of the sex/gender distinction as famously theorised by scholars such as Judith Butler. Secondly, subsection 1.2 focuses on the role of the body in the intricate interplay of cultural and performative construction. Lastly,

subsection 1.3 provides a working definition of deconstruction and this thesis' metonymic approach to detecting the deconstructive power of body horror.

1.1 The Discursive Production of Sex/Gender

As mentioned above, this thesis adopts a broadly poststructuralist approach to sex/gender (and the body). Specifically, the foundational assumptions guiding my approach to film and gender are marked by their shared challenging of the sex/gender distinction. Although the scholarly tradition in which the deconstruction of sex/gender binaries is theorised should be viewed as a "complex tapestry of interwoven thought traditions rather than a linear analytical thread" (Cleary 1), Judith Butler's work on gender, in particular, influences the theoretical framework of this thesis. Consequently, this subsection draws extensively on Butler's work to establish the theoretical framework.

The widespread influence of Judith Butler's work on feminist and gender theory is not unique to this thesis. Marlen Bidwell-Steiner underscores the impact of Butler's work on the emerging field of gender studies, noting that women's and gender studies have been assuming, at the latest since Judith Butler, that gender is discursively constructed (9). Butler's ideas challenge essentialist views of gender by arguing that gender identity and roles are not inherently predetermined by biological factors but rather are shaped and defined by societal norms, language, and cultural practices. Drawing on insights from Derrida, Foucault's discourse analysis, and psychoanalytic theories influenced by Freud and Lacan (Griffin, "Gendered Cultures" 82). Butler's "creative appropriation of poststructuralist and psychoanalytic theory" (Vasterling 17) in the 1990s introduced a framework that challenged the conventional understanding of gender as immutable, suggesting instead that gender is a fluid, performative identity constructed through social and cultural performances. However, the implications of the work of scholars such as Judith Butler, who question 'sex' as a natural, pre-discursive category, are even more far-reaching than the present paragraph might suggest.

As indicated above, in contrast to earlier feminist scholars in the tradition of thinkers such as Simone de Beauvoir, scholars from the late 1980s onwards questioned not only the viability of the category of 'gender' as a social and cultural construction but also that of 'sex'. For instance, Butler highlights that femininity attributed to 'female' bodies is a product of the same societal norms that shape gender (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 10). Similarly, Donna Haraway suggests that "[t]here is nothing about being 'female' that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as 'being' female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices" (Haraway 14). Within this constructed

framework, gender identity is tethered to biological sex, defining women by ‘female’ genitalia and feminine traits. The stability of the binary categories of sex/gender and the body is thus predicated on a notion of the body as a stable, immutable entity since femininity is connected so closely to the body’s assumedly natural biology.

Butler challenges these assumptions, arguing that gender is not merely a cultural inscription on sex but the very apparatus that establishes sex categories (Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 7). By acknowledging the historical contingency of the categories sex/gender as well as ‘female’ and ‘male’ or masculine and feminine, Butler emphasises the artificiality of these constructs (*Gender Trouble* 10). This fluidity is underscored by Thomas Laqueur’s historical analysis in his 1990 book *Making Sex*. Laqueur demonstrates that until the Middle Ages, ‘female’ bodies were seen as lesser variations of ‘male’ bodies, lacking full recognition as anatomical or political entities (Laqueur 63). It was only through advancements in medical techniques from the 17th century that the contemporary model of binary sex emerged (Preciado, *Monster*, 46). Such a historical contextualisation challenges the notion of a fixed and universal truth about sex and gender, demonstrating the malleability of these categories. By revealing the historical contingency of sex/gender, the work of these scholars deconstructs the idea of ‘natural’ binary sex/gender. Given that ‘sex’ is typically regarded as a biological ‘truth’ manifesting in and on the body, the body itself becomes central to understanding the social construction of sex/gender.

1.2 From Discourse to Corporeality

While the previous section focused primarily on the social and cultural construction of the binary conceptualisation of sex/gender, the present section moves into a more detailed discussion of the body, drawing on Butler’s work on the body as well as the thought of Elisabeth Grosz on the body as suggested in her book *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*.

After Butler’s initial work on sex/gender in *Bodies that Matter*, their subsequent publication, *Bodies that Matter*, places greater emphasis on the body’s materiality. Butler reconceptualises ‘sex’ not as a pre-existing bodily given upon which gender is artificially imposed, but as “a regulatory ideal, a forcible and differential materialization of bodies” (*Bodies* 33). According to Butler, cultural norms and expectations surrounding sex/gender not only influence our perception of the body (how we ‘read’ it), but these norms actively shape the body. Following this line of argumentation, the body is not a static, pre-discursive entity but is actively produced and constituted through discourse, language, and cultural practices.

By this reasoning, the body becomes a site where social norms are manifested through repeated acts and performances. Notably, such performances and the bodies they materialise do not only involve incorporations of existing norms. Instead, Butler emphasises how, through embodiment and subversive gender performances, individuals can challenge and destabilise the “norms that govern contemporary notions of reality” (*Undoing Gender* 29). By exploring dynamic and fluid possibilities for performing and embodying sex/gender, Butler suggests that the body may become a locus of transformation and resistance. In contrast to the view that a person is born ‘with’ a certain sex, Butler’s theory enables an understanding of the body “as an ageing process, a mode of becoming that, in becoming otherwise, exceeds the norm, reworks the norm, and makes us see how realities to which we thought we were confined are not written in stone” (*Undoing Gender* 29). In the context of this thesis, Butler’s examination of sex/gender and the body and its malleable materiality offers a valuable lens through which to view the deconstructive potential of the representation of bodily processes in challenging traditional binaries. By highlighting the complex interplay between embodiment, performance, and social constructions, Butler’s theories can be applied to examine how the motif of body horror can serve as a vehicle for disrupting and reimagining entrenched notions of sex/gender through their cinematic destructions, deconstructions, and reconstructions of the body.

Elisabeth Grosz’s contributions offer further theoretical insight into the fluidity and adaptability of the body. In *Volatile Bodies*, Grosz presents a theory that questions the commonly held belief in the body’s inherent biological and pre-cultural nature, arguing that it is not immune to influences from cultural, social, and historical contexts. She radically challenges notions of the body as inherently fixed, unalterable, inert, and passive (Grosz x). Instead, she advocates for a paradigm shift in our conceptualisation of the body, asserting that “[b]odies are not inert; they function interactively and productively” (Grosz xi). By conceptualising the body’s active and unpredictable biological and material capacities, Grosz challenges traditional views of corporeality and opens a discussion of the body as dynamic and generative.

Therefore, Grosz does not rely predominantly on constructionism, as other poststructuralist feminists do. Instead, she uses the physical reality of the body to challenge constructivist views and rejects essentialism, biological determinism, and naturalism by presenting the body as an active and generative entity (Linderman 141). Grosz considers the body’s biology as “open materiality” (191) and stresses its ability “to generate what is new, surprising, unpredictable” (Grosz xi). While she acknowledges the biological limits imposed onto the body, Grosz highlights the uncertainty surrounding the extent of these limits, asserting

that their flexibility remains unknown: “The body is constrained by its biological limits – limits, incidentally whose framework or ‘stretchability’ we cannot yet know, we cannot presume” (Grosz 187). Such an understanding provides a robust theoretical foundation for exploring how bodies can be understood as sites of continuous transformation. Transformations which defy static conceptualisations of sex/gender and emphasise how, by revealing the body’s malleability, fluidity and permeability, illuminate the artificiality and constructedness of these categories.

Based on the broadly poststructuralist theories of Grosz and Butler, I propose a working definition of the relationship between sex/gender as the body as follows: Drawing from Butler’s theories, this thesis challenges prevalent constructions of the body as a natural, pre-discursive entity on which natural, biological sex can ostensibly be read. Instead, binary sex, encompassing the categories of ‘female’ and ‘male’ and accompanying qualities of femininity and masculinity, is understood as produced, constructed, and reiterated through a multitude of social, cultural, discursive and performative practices. Central to this understanding is the recognition that the body’s biology and purportedly ‘natural’ sex are not inherent qualities but produced through the same frameworks through which gender is constructed.

1.3 Thinking Through and About Deconstruction

While the preceding sections have established foundational theoretical assumptions regarding the constructedness of binary conceptualisations of sex/gender and the body, this section delineates on a more general level how these binaries operate and how deconstruction is employed and thought within the context of this thesis. As previously discussed, deconstruction posits that much of Western thought is built on binary dichotomies (Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* 17). This observation applies across various domains of the Western philosophical tradition, including philosophy, art, literature, and culture, where conceptual material is categorised into pairs like man/woman, black/white, voice/silence, and speech/writing. However, deconstruction contends that these pairings are not genuine opposites where each term complements the other equally. Instead, one term within each pair (typically the first term listed) is consistently favoured or privileged over the other (McQuillan 10). This privileging, as Derrida suggests, is not reflective of reality but is instead a construct of Western thought. Over time, these binaries become ingrained through repetition and habituation and are presented as natural or inherent (McQuillan 9). The following discussion of deconstruction caters to the specific needs of this thesis, whose broadly poststructuralist approach to sex/gender and the body might be thought of as a feminist deconstructive reading. Aligned more closely

with feminism and gender theory than with the philosophical work of Derrida and deconstruction, the following subsections echo Diane Elam's perspective that certain strands of feminist and gender theory are inseparable from deconstruction. Thus, as Elam contends, "feminism already 'is' deconstruction, and deconstruction 'is' already feminism" (Elam 19). Consequently, extensive debates regarding the relationship between deconstruction and feminism or in-depth philosophical discussions will be bypassed in favour of establishing a solid approach to close reading for the later analytical chapters.

1.3.1 What is 'Doing Deconstruction?'

According to Jonathan Culler, the process of 'doing' deconstruction involves revealing that an opposition is a construct rather than natural or inevitable (140). The aim of deconstruction, as Culler argues, is not to destroy these oppositions but to demonstrate their constructed nature and reshape and redefine them (140). In essence, deconstruction can be understood as a process of "undermining the notion of polarised essences" (Sullivan qtd. in Hite 12). This involves exposing the value judgements inherent in these oppositions and demonstrating how the text itself undermines the binary structure upon which it is constructed. Unlike a conventional methodology, deconstruction does not approach a text with a preconceived formula or prescribed practices (McQuillan 5). Derrida himself is insistent on this fact, maintaining that "deconstruction is neither an *analysis* nor a *critique*", and "not even an *act* or an *operation*" (*Japanese Friend* 285, original emphasis), but it simply "takes place" (*Japanese Friend* 285). Thus, deconstruction cannot be understood as a separate entity or something imposed on a text. Instead, deconstruction should be thought of as something that unfolds within it. Drawing on Martin McQuillan's definition of deconstruction, I view deconstruction as a dynamic process of reading responsive to each text's unique qualities (5). Thus, each instance of deconstruction is unique and shaped by the particularities of the text being analysed (McQuillan 5). Since deconstruction operates without fixed rules or criteria, the readings it produces are inherently singular. Derrida explains:

The movements of deconstruction are not interested in [*solliciter*] structures from the outside. They are not possible and effective, they cannot take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures. Inhabiting them *in a certain way*, because one always inhabits, and all the more when one does not suspect it. (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 25)

This inhabiting of a text from the inside arguably causes what McQuillan describes as deconstruction's inevitable singularity. McQuillan describes: "Derrida's reading of Blanchot is different from his reading of Hegel and his reading of Blanchot's novel *The Madness of the*

Day is different from his reading of Blanchot's novel *The Death Sentence*" (McQuillan 5). Accordingly, the readings of the short films in the following sections develop their unique trajectories based on their respective specificities. These close readings will 'inhabit' the selected films and approach them not from the outside but from within. This methodological approach aligns well with the scarcity of literature on horror short films, as articulated in the introduction and further expounded upon in the subsequent section. In such a context, a deconstructive reading directly engaging with the primary material emerges as a fitting strategy, bypassing the absence of secondary literature on the selected films.

In this thesis, I focus on examining the deconstructive dynamics arising from a close reading of filmic depictions of body horror. I argue that despite the horror genre's reputation for misogyny and its reinforcement of patriarchal or hegemonic norms, body horror serves as an intrinsic element within each of the films themselves that challenges the binary structures prevalent in the genre as well as in specific films. Regardless of its placement in the text – whether suppressed by narrative, convention, or normativity, which aims to relegate it to the margins forever, cast out as the abject and resolved, abjected, literally left to rot – body horror as a recalcitrant element cannot be left to rot. Its smell is bound to become so overpowering that it cannot be ignored.

1.3.2 *Deconstruction, Feminism, Metonymy*

Having established the theoretical framework rooted in deconstruction, what remains to be addressed in this subsection is how this thesis approaches the deconstructive reading of film. In formulating this approach, I draw extensively on the contributions of Sarah Dillon. Dillon's approach, which emphasises close reading and careful attention to singular elements within a text, provides a valuable model for deconstructive film analysis. She advocates for close reading as a deconstructive approach to film criticism, arguing that "the singular functions metonymically" (Dillon 33). This means that analysing specific elements within a film can reveal broader thematic and structural tendencies² Informed by Dillon's approach to metonymical close reading, this thesis departs from traditional film analysis based on narrative and symbolism. Instead, it prioritises the examination of filmic details and their metonymic potential, viewing such attention to detail as a "feminist act" (Dillon 34). Metonymy, a linguistic concept wherein one thing is substituted for another based on contiguity or association, facilitates the transfer of meaning by linking commonly associated attributes.

² Due to the scope of this thesis, a detailed discussion of the relationship between deconstruction, feminism and film has been omitted. For a valuable overview see Sarah Dillon's *Deconstruction, Feminism, Film*, or Peter Brunnelle's and David Will's *Screen/Play: Derrida and Film Theory*.

This thesis employs metonymic reading in several ways. Firstly, selected scenes are closely analysed using stills as metonymical representations of entire scenes, allowing for in-depth analysis of individual images. This approach enables an in-depth analysis that is not always available during continuous viewing. Secondly, these scenes are considered metonymically in relation to the entirety of the film, inviting readings that may transcend the closure of narrative and plot. Specifically, I focus on the form and function of the element of body horror, delineating how it unfolds a metonymic deconstructive function in these films, particularly regarding binaries of sex/gender and the body. Through deconstructive metonymic reading, I examine how the body on screen is depicted in various stages of transformation and invasion to argue that these depictions, in turn, dissect and infect the stability of the whole narrative as well as attached binaries of masculinity/femininity, man/woman and 'male/female'.³ Metonymic reading is particularly well-suited to this thesis because it supports the conceptualisation of body horror as a motif rather than a subgenre. While I will explore the debate surrounding the classification of body horror as a motif versus a genre later in this thesis, it is crucial to note that applying a metonymic approach to film analysis provides a robust theoretical foundation for selectively considering specific filmic instances. This approach allows for a focused examination of how individual elements can reflect and inform the broader themes and structures within the genre.

While the theoretical terms and concepts discussed in this section provide this thesis with a foundational understanding of the construction and deconstruction of binary conceptualisations of sex/gender and the body, these terms, theories and concepts cannot single-handedly provide an adequate basis for approaching the primary material. Therefore, the subsequent chapter reviews relevant literature in gender, feminist, and horror studies to identify concrete perspectives and concepts that will inform the later analysis of the primary texts. This transition moves from deconstruction as a mode of reading to the study of the filmic de(con)struction of bodies in horror cinema.

³ Metonymy is not a new concept applied to horror film. Noël Carroll has explored how 'horrific metonymy' is used to emphasise the repulsive nature of a creature by associating it with reviled objects like vermin and filth (Carroll 52). Expanding on Carroll's insights, Sharon-Jane Mee in *The Pulse in Cinema: The Aesthetics of Horror* argues that metonymy, as a "representational discourse that opens to something else", is able to provide an "opening to the quasi-physical or an opening of signification to the whole (of the world)" (140), underscoring the importance of metonymy in the horror genre. Metonymic operations as the 'opening' of identity to the quasi-physical and that which elicits a continuous, because 'contagious', affective experience" (Mee 138). While Carroll and Mee's insights on metonymy in horror cinema are valuable and relevant within the context of horror aesthetics and affective experiences, this thesis takes a different approach by utilising metonymy as a critical tool for deconstructing narratives and ideologies in film, particularly within the realm of body horror and bodily transformation.

CHAPTER 2

Gender, Horror, Film

The horror genre can be counted among the most provocative and controversial film genres, owing to its portrayal of excessive and explicit violence and depiction of the most horrific scenarios imaginable. From films such as *The Brood* (Dir. Davin Cronenberg), where the protagonist undergoes experimental psychotherapy that causes the externalisation of trauma through the creation of murderous, deformed children, to occult horror films such as *The Exorcist* (Dir. William Friedkin), which hinges on a young girl's demonic possession and more contemporary interpretations of the theme such as *Hereditary* (Dir. Ari Aster), to infamous low-budget slasher films such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Dir. Tobe Hopper), which follow their protagonists as their lives are threatened by ruthless killers – horror films have held a (more or less) secure place in contemporary media landscape since the middle of the 20th century.

Despite – or perhaps especially – due to the countless controversies surrounding horror film, it has enjoyed a rich scholarly discussion over the last decade, resulting in profound analyses demonstrating the genre's thematic, ideological, or filmic density. Especially discussions regarding women's representation in horror film has fuelled the emergence of a considerable body of literature dedicated to this subject (for an overview see Holland et.al; Grant *Dread*). The abundance of such studies is unsurprising, given the prominence of themes lending themselves to feminist critique in horror cinema. For instance, among the aforementioned list of horror classics, one film explores themes of pregnancy, and another portrays a girl's possession during a pivotal transitional stage from childhood to becoming a woman. In contrast, others depict gendered violence inflicted upon victims by male antagonists, as depicted in slasher films like *Scream* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.

However, gender and feminist discussions of horror film are not merely constricted by limiting views of the horror genre. Especially throughout the last decades, approaches to horror film have diversified, going beyond a “simplistic understanding of the relationship between representation and social reality” (Lindner 12). Instead, feminist and gender approaches to horror film encompass nuanced discussions ranging from the dissolution of binary spectatorial positions (Clover, *Chain Saws* 154) to rebellious modes of femininity (Creed, *Return* 29, 32), or studies of the relationship between cinematic bodies and audience bodies (Powell 4; Reyes

Affect 3). This thesis is broadly located within this field, assuming a poststructuralist deconstructive approach to sex/gender and the body in horror film. While my approach does not follow directly from any of the concepts and techniques introduced above, it draws on them substantially to create an adequate basis for the later analysis of the four short films *Progeny*, *Susurrus*, *Retch*, and *Relic*.

2.1 Exploring Seminal Concepts in Feminist Horror Criticism

The emergence of horror film studies as a recognised academic discipline owes much to the pioneering work of scholars in the 1980s and 1990s, who elevated the genre from neglect to a subject of serious scholarly inquiry. While scholars like Robin Wood laid the groundwork for the academic study of horror films (Brock, “Horror Criticism” 97), feminist and gender theorists such as Barbara Creed and Carol Clover initiated a focus on challenging traditional interpretations of gender dynamics in the genre. Despite the passage of over three decades, the concepts and theories introduced by these scholars continue to shape contemporary discussions in the field, as evidenced by the extensive citation of their work and ideas in recent scholarship (see Harrington 2017; Uusher 2006; Creed 2023; Vachhani 2014; Pulliam 2014; Chare et. al. 2019; Wilz 2021).

In her 1982 book *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, Carol Clover calls for the “critical and political interrogation” (*Chain Saws* 19) of typical horror film criticism, challenging the notion of horror as “straightforward sadistic misogyny” (19). Her analysis of evolving character types and roles of women in 1980s slasher films underscores the frequent portrayal of women as victims while identifying the emergence of a new character archetype, which she titles ‘The Final Girl’ (Clover, *Chain Saws* 43). Clover contends that The Final Girl embodies both heroism and victimisation, collapsing traditional categories of feminine and masculine into a single character who is “anatomically female and whose point of view the spectator is unambiguously invited [...] to share” (*Chain Saws* 61). Based on this analysis, Clover argues that horror films understand gender “less as a wall than a permeable membrane” (“Himself” 23). While Clover’s insights offer a valuable theoretical orientation for this thesis, particularly in revealing how filmic characterisations may disrupt hegemonic constructions of masculinity and femininity, her analysis overlooks a critical examination of the specificity of the filmic medium for these sex/gender and body constellations. Her emphasis on character types and spectatorship dynamics, particularly evident in her analysis of how The

Final Girl instigates “cross-gender identification” (Clover 54) in viewers, sidesteps discussions around the significance of on-screen representations of bodily processes which lie at the center of this thesis’ research interest.

Focusing on horror film spectatorship and issues of representation, Barbara Creed coined the term ‘Monstrous-Feminine’ in her 1993 work *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, feminism, psychoanalysis*. Drawing on Julia Kristeva’s influential text *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*,⁴ Creed equally challenges dominant readings of women in these films as mere victims (*Monstrous* 16). She decries the lack of differentiated academic explorations of “women as monsters in popular film” (Creed, *Monstrous* 19), revealing the, at times, “deeply sexist” (Creed, *Monstrous* 20) underpinnings of existing literature concerned with monstrous women in horror that focus excessively on female passivity (Creed, *Monstrous* 19-24).⁵ Instead, Creed demonstrates that horror film is populated with depictions of monstrous women, arguing that what is considered monstrous and horrifying in women is typically linked to their reproductive bodies and abject bodily fluids (*Monstrous* 26), and thus marks the “importance of gender in the construction of monstrosity” (*Monstrous* 3).⁶ In the context of this thesis, Creed’s considerations of the monstrous-feminine are particularly relevant to Chapter 5, which focuses on the invaded body. Representations of the invaded and penetrated body are culturally associated with femininity due to the hegemonic link between women and attributes like softness and penetrability. Conversely, men and their bodies are often constructed through connotations of hardness and impenetrability (Harrington 105). Despite the innovative nature of Creed’s project, Creed’s emphasis on the narrative and symbolic significance of abject bodily processes overlooks a detailed examination of the form and function of specific filmic representations and techniques central to the present research that warrants an examination of her updated work on the monstrous-feminine.

In her 2022 publication *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine: Feminist New Wave Cinema*, Creed updates her work on the monstrous-feminine and identifies a radical shift in monstrous-feminine representations in feminist new wave cinema, which portrays the male

⁴ Although Kristeva’s text does not directly analyse horror films, its exploration of the concept of abjection has significantly influenced feminist perspectives within the field. Scholars such as Barbara Creed employ Kristeva’s theories to examine how horror movies evoke feelings of disgust and otherness, particularly in their portrayal of the female body. By scrutinising the boundaries between self and other and the societal constructs surrounding them, Kristeva’s work provides a theoretical framework through which feminist academics analyse gender representation, sexuality, and power dynamics in horror cinema.

⁵ For example, according to Stephen Neale and other researchers, horror movie monsters are often characterised as male, with women serving as their primary targets. They suggest that the real focus of horror cinema is the exploration of women’s sexuality, which makes them appealing to men but also poses a potential threat (Neale 61).

⁶ The citations from Creed’s *Monstrous-Feminine* refer to page numbers in the ‘ePub’ version of the book.

protagonist as the “abject, violent other” (Creed, *Return* 9). Particularly relevant to this thesis are Creed’s insights regarding the “female cannibal” (Creed, *Return* 128); not because of the relevance of cannibalism to this thesis, but rather due to Creed’s acknowledgement of how this figure “symbolically eats/destroys the patriarchal order by devouring her male victim’s body” (*Return* 128). This perspective suggests the potential for deconstructive power to emerge from such depictions of horror, which her original work might have deemed oppressive representation and can be valuably applied to the later readings of the four short films which similarly investigate how deconstructive, rather than conservative power of horror film. However, in Creed’s lens, the act of cannibalism becomes a metaphorical action through which the female character challenges and undermines the patriarchal order. Thereby, her analysis is focused on the symbolic meaning of the process, using cinematic bodies as an illustration of abstract societal concepts instead of directly examining the inherent deconstructive value of these bodily processes. Accordingly, questions regarding the form and function of the representation of the fictional body on-screen remain similarly marginal to the argumentative thread of this newer publication.

Although, in a way, the body tends to be a topic of concern in most major approaches to horror film considering the centrality of corporeal threat throughout the history of horror cinema (Reyes, *Affect* 30), I argue that although these scholars take the ‘female’ body as a conceptual starting point of their criticism, their analyses themselves remain relatively devoid of discussions of the bodies on screen. Instead, the work Clover and Creed focus on “the complex imbalances of gender and power” (Powell 16). Obscured by discussions of the body as an object to be looked at in a specific identificatory way or as a carrier of metaphoric significance, the cinematic body often remains out of sight, and so does the specificity of the filmic medium as it manifests in stylistic expressions such as framing, editing, cinematography and sound. Consequently, a critical examination of the cinematic body itself, as proposed by this thesis, remains largely absent from their analyses. Thus, while the work of Clover and Creed can be instructive in grasping certain complexities of horror films’ politics of representation, their analyses do not provide an adequate toolkit to adequately answer this thesis’ research question.

To bridge this gap, the following subsection reviews feminist and gender approaches to horror film that place the cinematic body at the centre of their analyses. This review aims to establish a more comprehensive toolkit for exploring the portrayal and significance of the body in horror cinema.

2.2 Horror and the Body on Screen

The previous section has examined how the body has mattered in the works of Creed and Clover, demonstrating that while their work takes its starting point in the representation of bodies on screen, the specific forms of these representations have been left largely underemphasised in their respective publications. Thus, although their studies can provide valuable reference points and orientations for the later close readings, their studies do not provide a framework for the analysis of the form and filmic specificity of these bodily representations. However, this thesis's research question and hypothesis regarding the centrality of the depiction of bodily processes in the deconstruction of binary conceptualisations of sex/gender and the body necessitates such close attention to filmic details. The publications discussed in this section provide such close analyses, focusing affirmatively on the disruptive potential of horror film. The sections are divided broadly into those studies acknowledging horror film's transformative potential (2.2.1), while the publications in the second subsection focus on the deconstructive power of the analysed texts (2.2.2).

2.2.1 *Deleuzian Approaches*

While the previous section examined two seminal concepts in feminist and gender approaches to horror film, the present section provides a literature review of affirmative approaches to horror, which argue for horror film's transformative potential. Such academic endeavours are often marked by their theoretical underpinnings rooted in Deleuzian affect theory (Jelaca 466). Although this thesis does not engage with questions of affect itself, several aspects of the Deleuzian-inflected tradition of feminist horror scholarship can provide valuable additions to the theoretical framework for the later close readings.

Firstly, there is a notable affinity between the poststructuralist philosophies of Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida. Most notable, perhaps, is their shared pursuit of a non-dualist metaphysics (Patton and Protevi 4; Nealon 171). Hence, a subtle similarity between the Deleuzian-oriented publications in this section and this thesis can also be detected. Secondly, the relevance of the scholarship introduced in this section to my thesis is grounded in its underlying epistemological approach. Scholars such as Powell, Harrington, and Hawkins provide valuable insights into the technical and medium-specific depictions of bodies on screen, analysing how horror films manipulate cinematic elements to evoke visceral responses in viewers and impact their bodies (Reyes, *Affect* 3). This shared interest between the Deleuzian strand of feminist horror studies and my thesis lies in conducting in-depth analyses of specific filmic forms and expressions. Building on the observations of these scholars, this thesis applies

their insights to the analysis of the primary material. However, rather than speculatively focusing on the affective impact of these scenes and filmic details, I reframe their insights from a feminist deconstructive perspective. This approach allows for a reading of how these cinematic elements deconstruct traditional binary conceptualisations of sex/gender and the body in horror cinema.

Anna Powell's nuanced publication *Deleuze and Horror Film* provides valuable insights for understanding how specific filmic scenes and details can challenge traditional perceptions of bodily integrity and monstrosity. Her analysis of the embrace scene between Ripley and the alien in *Aliens*, illustrates the value of close readings of specific filmic scenes in horror films. Through a detailed examination of the scene's technical elements, including strobe lighting, stirring music, and slow editing rhythms, the author demonstrates how specific filmic scenes in the film transcend mere shock and fear to create surprising alliances between that which we are so used to considering monsters and the film's protagonist (Powell 76). Powell's close reading demonstrates how, against the narrative construction of Ripley and the alien as opponents, involved in the binary of 'hero' and 'monster', the scene's filmic depiction evokes a profound notion of intimacy and connection between Ripley and the alien, portraying their embrace as an epiphany of species recognition and fusion which disrupts the binary opposition between human and monster (75). Powell's examination of body horror can be particularly relevant to this thesis. Focusing on the films *Hellraiser* (Dir. Clive Barker) and *Aliens* (Dir. Ridley Scott), Powell notes that these films often hinge on "the body's incomplete embodiment and fragmentation" (88). She argues that horror films insist on revealing our skeletons, veins, organs, and muscles, which deconstructs the fantasy of a unified, controlled body (Powell 88). Building on Powell's insights, my research explores how body horror not only disrupts the notion of a unified, stable self but connects the disruption of bodily integrity to sex/gender and the body. Through the poststructuralist framework established in Chapter 1, I argue that since the notion of 'sex' is intricately intertwined with and dependent on the body as a stable, immutable biological entity, body horror's deconstruction of the body inevitably affects sex/gender conceptualisations as well.

To deepen the analysis of how filmic elements can function as deconstructive elements in horror film, Sunny Hawkins's work on *Deleuze and the Gynesis of Horror* is instructive. Also providing a close reading of a scene from the *Alien* franchise (albeit the third instalment) Hawkins highlights the interplay between narrative content and filmic expression. Instead of emphasising the gruesome spectacle of Ripley's death, Hawkins draws attention to the serene

and resolute expression on Ripley's face, juxtaposed with gentle music and ethereal imagery of smoke and steam:

[...][W]e are presented with a lingering medium-close-up of Ripley's face. Her expression is peaceful, resolute, free of fear. Positioning itself behind her, the camera then watches as Ripley falls backwards with her arms spread—in slow motion, not as though she has jumped but as if she has simply leaned back, letting gravity take her. The camera then moves to look down on her from above, as she falls toward a lava-like CGI fire. (Hawkins 63)

The quote above exemplifies Hawkins's emphasis on the complex interplay between narrative and filmic expression. Through a close reading of Ripley's fall into the flames, Hawkins is able to demonstrate the subversive potential of filmic form. This detail sets apart Hawkins' text other analyses discussed so far, as she explicitly recognises the power of camera movements, timing and editing in developing a layer of meaning that can function independently of narrative while foregrounding the body's role in the analysed audio-visual material. Hawkins's analysis of the scene underscores the importance of considering filmic techniques alongside narrative content in understanding the subversive potential of depictions of the body in horror film. This recognition of the power of filmic expression to unsettle supposedly fixed ideologies and assumptions is central to my own analysis of horror film.

This thesis builds on Powell's and Hawkins's insights by exploring how the cinematic depiction of body horror motifs can have a deconstructive effect that may function independently from the narrative. While aiming for a similarly detailed analysis of the form and function of bodily depictions and filmic techniques, this thesis departs from the affective approach of these scholars. Instead, it focuses on the analysis of the structures of the moving images in the analysed horror films and asks, 'What does the text, and how does it do it?' This approach emphasises the mechanics and implications of the representational politics of horror film imagery, moving beyond the emotional impact on viewers to explore how body horror constructs, deconstructs, and conveys meaning through visual and technical as well as narrative elements.⁷

2.2.1 *Deconstructive Approaches*

Having discussed selected approaches Deleuzian approaches to horror film, this subsection examines the work of film scholars who focus more explicitly on the deconstructive

⁷ The choice not to consider affect is partly due to the tendency of affect theory to tend towards universality, theorising affect as a "a content-neutral, universal capacity" (Ahern 103). For a critique of affect from such a perspective see Tyrone Palmer, who focuses on affect and blackness and argues that affect lacks the language to address the "sensorial dimensions of ontological negation" (51).

(rather than the transformative) potential of horror film and its representation of bodies on screen. This thesis argues that the motif of body horror offers the potential to challenge, deconstruct and reconstruct supposedly fixed societal truths – particularly those ‘truths’ connected to binary conceptualisations of sex/gender and the body. While the approaches introduced above consider this aspect only marginally, the present subsections discussed two works particularly pertinent to this thesis’ approach to the deconstruction of binary conceptualisations of sex/gender and the body. Although the two works of Jack Halberstam and Jay McRoy to be discussed in the present section differ in their theoretical orientations, they share one central argument with this thesis: Both stress the disruptive potential inherent in filmic depictions of bodily disintegration.

McRoy’s study of the splatter film in his essay “Parts is Parts: Pornography, Splatter Films and the Politics of Corporeal Disintegration” provides a discussion of the splatter film, which is, in many places, instructive for answering this thesis’ research question. In his essay, McRoy argues that the filmic depiction of the body in parts, specifically in the ‘splatter’ subcategory of the horror film, “whether achieved through extreme close ups, or by way of extended medium shots” (199) splatter films remove the depicted bodies “from their prior corporeal and gendered context” (198). While McRoy’s analysis highlights the deconstructive potential inherent in horror films’ filmic techniques, he does not extensively explore the implications of his findings from feminist or gender perspectives. Building on McRoy’s observations, I examine how the cinematic depiction of transformation and invasion body horror not only removes the bodies on-screen from their previously gendered contexts but argues that such a removal also actively contributes to the deconstruction of the assumedly fixed categories of sex/gender and the body by audio-visually abstracting the biological body which is, as discussed through Chapter 1, assumed as the natural origin of ‘sex’.

In contrast to McRoy, Jack Halberstam’s approach to splatter film and bodily disintegration is explicitly aligned with gender theory and the implications of corporeal disintegrations for sex/gender conceptualisations. His readings, especially in two chapters in the latter half of his monograph *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*, provide important arguments pertinent to this thesis. His readings trouble horror films as necessarily conservative and instead highlight the deconstructive potential of these cultural products (Halberstam 167). For instance, Halberstam argues that despite Carol Clover’s valuable work on the Final Girl, her theory retains a certain “gender lock” (Halberstam 143), since “[t]he world of female victims and male monsters remains intact in Clover’s reading” (Halberstam 143). Contrasting Clover’s analysis, Halberstam argues that “Stretch’s lethal

performance of gender with an edge is not high drag but an intense blast of interference that messes up once and for all the generic identity codes that read femininity into tits and ass and masculinity into penises” (160). Halberstam’s reading of *The Final Girl* reclaims the horror genre as a site of resistance and subversion against binary conceptualisations of sex/gender and the body to find new (queer) non-binaristic possibilities – not only through shifting lines of identification but much more radically through detecting the inherent stability of rigid theories of sex/gender.

In his subsequent reading of Jonathan Demme’s *Silence of the Lambs*, Halberstam argues that the film reveals the fluid and constructed nature of gender identity. Focusing on the character Buffalo Bill, Halberstam argues that Buffalo Bill’s portrayal challenges conventional notions by viewing gender as an external attribute rather than an inherent quality (Halberstam 176). This perspective leads Buffalo Bill to “[rip] gender apart and [remake] it as a suit or costume” (Halberstam 176-177), disrupting heterosexist and misogynistic constructions of gender. Importantly, Halberstam detects this deconstructive potential not only in Buffalo Bill’s gruesome murders, but also in the film’s camerawork, arguing that the film’s camera perpetuates similar violence against identity. Particularly important to the framework adopted in this thesis is his analysis of the film’s autopsy scene, which reveals how the camerawork serves as a “site of trauma” (170) within the film’s narrative about gender. Through the camera’s dissection, bodies are degendered and transformed into a mere “fiction of the body” (Halberstam 170), stripping away internal life and reducing victims to objects (Halberstam 170). Through this analysis, Halberstam demonstrates not only the narrative deconstruction taking place through Buffalo Bill’s actions but also the deconstructive potential inherent in the cinematic forms and techniques employed to capture body horror.

Notably, both McRoy and Halberstam predominantly concentrate on filmic examples associated with the ‘splatter’ genre, which often revolves around depicting violence upon the body by antagonistic characters like serial killers. While Halberstam occasionally and loosely employs the term ‘body horror’, McRoy distinctly categorises the splatter film as the epitome of body horror, albeit without providing a precise definition of the term. Although their analyses thus offer valuable insights into understanding the dynamics arising from depictions of the ‘splattered body’, their research diverges from this thesis’ specific definition of body horror, as outlined in the introduction and elaborated upon in the following section. Moreover, the fact that their publications do not delve into the themes of bodily mutation, invasion, or transformation further emphasises the existing gap in dedicated feminist and gender research concerning filmic representations of body horror and its deconstructive potential.

2.3 Body Horror: Definitions, Categories, Challenges

As I demonstrated above, academic perspectives on horror film underwent a significant shift from the 1990s onwards, moving away from previous studies focusing on representation, symbolism and disembodied spectatorship towards a survey of the horror film from a more body-centred approach. This change was not developed in a vacuum but was deeply influenced by broader developments within the genre. For instance, changing censorship laws in the United States in the 1960s (Plantamura 81), accompanied by technological innovations in practical and special effects, began to increasingly enable the portrayal of explicit violence (Brophy 5). In his 1986 contribution to the film studies journal *Screen*, Philip Brophy discerns an evolving trajectory in horror film, highlighting that “[t]he contemporary Horror film tends to play not so much on the broad fear of Death, but more precisely on the fear of one’s own body, of how one controls and relates to it” (8). To encapsulate this emerging trend, Brophy suggested the term ‘body horror’, which subsequently came to be widely used. Body horror is generally used to describe the “explicit display of the decay, dissolution and destruction of the body, foregrounding bodily processes and functions under threat, allied to new physiological configurations and redefinitions of anatomical forms” (Wells 121). Alternatively, it may be defined as involving the detailed depiction of human bodies that are in some way beyond the control of their owners (Boorman, “Body Horror” 41). The increasing prevalence of horror films employing a “showing rather than telling” (Brophy 7, original emphasis) approach requires analytical methods capable of understanding the explicit audiovisual representations of change, transformation, and mutation, as identified by Brophy, which characterise body horror. However, as the following subsections argue, the term body horror is riddled with ambiguities that constrain its precise delineation and understanding.

2.3.1 *The Problem with Broad Definitions of Body Horror*

Despite the seemingly clear-cut definition of body horror introduced above, there is substantial ambiguity surrounding the term ‘body horror’ in academic literature, which not only presents a challenge to scholars attempting to engage with the topic but also raises questions about the coherence and direction of research within the field. Xavier Aldana Reyes acknowledges this ambiguity, noting that “[b]ody horror is probably one of the loosest and most ill-defined terms in gothic and horror studies” (Reyes, *Body Gothic* 52). According to Reyes, the common usage of the term thus emerges as such: If a text evokes fear through depictions of abnormal bodily states or attacks on the body, it can be categorised as body horror (*Body Gothic* 52). In the context of the horror genre, such a definition of body horror would then include

almost every single theme, motif, or trope covered in horror – from depictions of the bleeding bodies of a slasher’s victim to torture, (self)mutilation or dismemberment, a violent demonic possession, or the gory aftermath of a monster attack or inexplicably transmutating bodies– all of these could be identified as body horror.

This broad classification is evident in various scholarly works on body horror. For instance, David Huckvale’s 2020 monograph *Terrors of the Flesh: The Philosophy of Body Horror in Film*, defines its scope as “a kind of autopsy of those films that explore the profound anxieties we have about our own bodies and consequently of our very existence” (3), echoing Brophy’s foundational definition of the term. However, despite his implicit recourse to Brophy, Huckvale’s approach does not adhere to Brophy’s original definition of body horror. Instead, Huckvale’s book is structured into broad categories, ranging from explorations of filmic mutilation and dismemberment (76) to apocalypses and societal extinction (147). Similarly, Ben McCann in his essay in the edited volume *To See the Saw Movies* defines *Saw*’s ‘torture porn’ as body horror, thus collapsing many forms of excessive external violence into his definition of body horror (45). McRoy’s and Halberstam’s use of the term body horror to refer to splatter and slasher films, which also hinge on externally inflicted violence, further illustrate this phenomenon. Overall, these examples illustrate Reyes’ observation of the ambiguous use of the term body horror.

It is also worth noting that body horror has also been understood in terms of the profound impact of the representation of bodily disintegration on viewers. This interpretation can be traced back to Clover’s observation that the purpose of horror film is “specifically devoted to the arousal of bodily sensation” (Clover, “Himself” 189). Building on Clover’s insights, Linda Williams introduced the concept of ‘body genres’, emphasising the films’ ability to elicit physical responses in audiences (Williams, “Film Bodies” 279). More recently, scholars such as Sharon Jane Mee refined this concept by synthesising Williams’ notion of body genres with Clover’s definition of the visceral aspect of horror cinema. In her formulation, Mee defines body horror as the “excessive portrayals of the body in pornography and horror that produce effects of sensation on the body of the spectator” (Mee 14). This appropriation expands the scope of body horror even further, to encompass not only the depiction of bodily processes on screen but also the affective impact of these representations on viewers.

Despite the insightfulness of these scholars’ analyses of cinematic representations of the body, the analytical value of the term body horror diminishes if any horror film affecting the body is classified as such. Such a lack of differentiation between different bodily processes and representations sidesteps the details of Brophy’s definition, which focuses on the difference

between the fear of death and the fear of one's own body (Brophy 8). While mutilation, torture, and slasher films share body horror's constitutive "mode of *showing*" (Brophy 7, original emphasis), they do hinge on the "fear of one's own body" (Brophy 8), which has gone out of one's own control (Boorman, "Body Horror" 41), but much more generally on the fear of death or even the fear of "other people" (Wells 22).

The ambiguity and vagueness surrounding the term body horror in academic literature pose significant challenges and implications for scholars in the field. Firstly, its lack of precision undermines its utility for categorising and analysing specific aspects or subsets of horror films. With such a broad definition, the term loses its ability to delineate a distinct subgenre or thematic focus within horror cinema, as any film featuring a depiction of the body or evoking bodily sensations in viewers could be labelled as body horror.⁸ Moreover, the analytical value of the term diminishes when it becomes overly inclusive. When the boundaries of the term are vague, comparisons between individual films categorised as body horror risk becoming arbitrary. For example, under this broad definition, one could compare the "body horror" in the sci-fi/horror hybrid *Alien* with that in the torture-porn franchise *Saw*, simply because both depict graphic bodily violations. However, such comparisons overlook the vast stylistic and thematic differences between these films, rendering the validity and utility of such comparisons questionable. In academic discourse, comparative analyses highlight similarities, differences, and patterns within specific film sets. However, when the term lacks clear boundaries, the criteria for comparison become nebulous.

To refine the definition of body horror and avoid overly broad interpretations, this thesis adopts a more focused approach. Unlike broader definitions that encompass any horror featuring graphic violence or extreme bodily effects on both characters and audiences, this study aligns with scholars like Cruz, Brophy, and Reyes in defining body horror specifically as the portrayal of transformation, mutation, and contagion and invasion experienced by the film's central characters. By narrowing the scope to these body-internal threats of protagonists, this definition excludes broader interpretations that encompass external forms of bodily destruction seen in genres like slasher, monster, or torture porn films. This refined definition allows for a more precise analysis of the thematic and narrative elements unique to body horror narratives.

⁸ Particularly notable is the dearth of clear definitions and established scholarship dedicated to the concept, especially for those whose focus extends beyond the work of David Cronenberg, whose filmic investigations of transformation, mutation, and technology encapsulate many of body horror's central themes (Riches 92). Despite Cronenberg's centrality in body horror scholarship, the present discussion will not provide an in-depth discussion of his work. For a pertinent study of Cronenberg, see Simon Riches' 2012 publication *The Philosophy of David Cronenberg*.

In pinpointing body-internal processes as the locus of body horror, another dimension to the deconstruction of sex/gender and the body becomes apparent. While scholars such as Halberstam and McRoy examine how the body is manually or mechanically deconstructed, depictions of body internal disintegrations constitute a deconstruction of the body from within. These are bodies that deconstruct *themselves*. Body horror, defined in this way, thus grasps phenomena which exaggerate and radicalise the assertions regarding the body made in Chapter 1.2, which underscored the body as eternally mutable, malleable, and permeable. Consequently, this approach provides analytical and academic advantages beyond the thesis's specific focus and aligns theory with primary material, establishing a robust foundation for subsequent close readings.

2.3.2 *Transcending Genre: Body Horror as a Motif*

The ambiguity surrounding the definition of body horror extends beyond its scope; it also encompasses questions related to its classification within the system of literary criticism. While body horror is frequently invoked across a broad spectrum of horror film scholarship (see, for instance, the discussed works of Hawkins, Harrington, Powell, or Halberstam), its precise parameters remain elusive. Despite its recurrent usage, scholars rarely clearly delineate its specificity, nor do they engage in discussions regarding questions of differentiation between the categories of genre and motif. Among the few scholars who explicitly define body horror as a genre is Melanie Rapoport, who asserts its status as an “official subgenre” (Rapoport 16). However, this designation raises questions about the criteria for such categorisation, considering the lack of concrete generic features outlined in Rapoport's discussion. While she references the themes of mutation, contagion, and infection as defining characteristics of body horror as a subgenre (620), her analysis lacks a clear and comprehensive survey of other potential generic elements such as style, dialogue, music, or shared narrative and dramatic content (Grant, *Film Genre* 10-16).⁹ While overlap between genres is not inherently harmful, loose differentiation may blur lines to the extent that sub-genres become indistinct and challenging to define.

⁹ Beyond visual aspects, bodily responses are sometimes considered integral to defining the horror genre. Building on Linda Williams's concept of ‘body genres,’ Barry Keith Grant observes that horror, pornography, and comedy are defined by their intended emotional impact on viewers (Grant, “Film Genre” 23). However, restricting the definition of body horror to its viewer effect again risks oversimplification, as graphic displays of violence in torture-porn, splatter films, and mutilation films can evoke similar bodily and emotional responses of disgust, nausea, sweating, or increased heart rate. Consequently, such broad categorisations fail to adequately narrow down the scope of the investigation.

Given that genre is conventionally characterised by shared features of form and content, which facilitate its recognition and categorisation within the literary system (The Oxford Classical Dictionary, “Genre”), body horror’s absence of clearly defined generic features complicates its viability as a subgenre. While it’s generally acknowledged that genre films often blend elements and defy rigid categorisation (Grant, *Film Genre* 23), exclusively defining body horror through specific iconography, such as unique bodily imagery, proves insufficient for delineating (sub)genres. Defining body horror as a subgenre of horror only by the presence of the element of corporeal disintegration or (potentially fatal) bodily destruction of any kind risks rendering the category of the subgenre ineffective in identifying similar sets of films.

To address these limitations, I propose a definition of body horror as a motif. In contrast to genre definitions, which typically require broader classifications and rely on generalisable features and elements, the concept of the motif is more flexible.¹⁰ It commonly denotes “a situation, incident, idea, image, or character-type that is found in many different literary works, folktales, or myths; or any element of a work that is elaborated into a more general theme” (The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms, “Motif”). Considering this definition of the motif, it becomes apparent that the definitions of body horror as a subgenre seem to rely almost exclusively on the motif of body horror as a distinguishing characteristic. Examples where one might detect the motif of body are plentiful across many major film genres and intended audiences. Take, for instance, the classic movie adaptation of *Harry Potter and The Prisoner of Azkaban*. In this film, one character undergoes a werewolf transformation, showcasing explicit and horrifying bodily changes such as dilated pupils, claw-like fingers, and a shifting skeletal structure. While these elements evoke body horror themes, they also raise questions about the boundaries of the genre and its applicability to diverse cinematic contexts. Another illustration can be found in French director Julia Ducourneau’s works, which are noted for her extreme and graphic depictions of bodily processes, which appropriate elements of body horror (Majewski 13). This traversal of genres highlights the flexibility of body horror as a motif and raises questions about the analytical value of the sub-genre distinction in the case of the term body horror.

Understanding body horror as a motif allows the analysis to move beyond rigid genre classifications and engage in a more dynamic and flexible analysis of its cinematic

¹⁰ It is important to note here that this discussion of questions of genre could be expanded significantly. However, due to the scope of this thesis, this discussion is left rather brief. For an influential and thorough discussion see Andrew Tudor’s *Theories of Film*.

manifestations across genres. Viewing body horror as a motif permits its identification in films that straddle multiple genres, like the sci-fi horror hybrid examined in this thesis, *Progeny*, as well as those that blend horror with other genres, such as the adventure film, like *Relic*. This approach facilitates a deeper comprehension of how body horror operates as a narrative tool, cinematographic element, and potentially a deconstructive agent within cinema.

Thus, in the context of this thesis, a narrow definition of body horror will be employed which understands body horror as a flexible filmic motif determined by its depiction of horrific body-internal processes including transformation, invasion, mutation or contagion. With this clarified understanding of the term, the following chapter will address the difficulties associated with writing about and selecting short films before transitioning into the analytical chapters.

CHAPTER 3

Selecting Horror Short Films

As this chapter's title suggests, this chapter covers topics at the intersections of theoretical and methodological considerations. While previous chapters have laid the groundwork by establishing a theoretical foundation (Chapter 2) and providing an overview of relevant literature in the field of feminist and gender approaches to horror film (Chapter 3), this chapter marks a final move into more specificity by discussing the selection of primary material for analysis.

3.1 Navigating an Uncanonised Field

Film viewing is no longer confined to the cinema. Instead, it now encompasses a variety of solitary experiences, accessible within the comfort of our homes with screens of various devices such as smartphones, tablets, or computers (Dillon 32). The rise of on-demand content, facilitated by platforms such as YouTube, Vimeo, and, more recently, TikTok, has transformed the landscape of film consumption and distribution (Felando 41). As audiences get more comfortable and conversant with new forms of media consumption, the places and contexts in which we consume media and the kinds of media we consume change.

However, in the case of the study of short film, accessibility is an issue which affects how it can reach audiences. As short film scholar Laura Walde notes, the reach of short films beyond the limited timeframe of the short film festival context, which is (in contrast to feature films) the only possibility to see and get access to short films (Walde, "Kurzfilm" 68). This exhibition context does not only limit public access to short film but is an issue that includes film and media scholars and academic context, where Walde suggests it might be neglected due to its elusiveness ("Kurzfilm" 68). In the field of gender and feminist horror film studies, where such vast amounts of scholarship exist that some authors may question the need for more publications (Diffrient 1), the disproportionate lack of academic inquiry into short films (Felando 12; Walde, "Brevity" 234) provides a valuable opportunity to study a corpus of work situated at the margins of academic scholarship. Compared to horror film classics such as *Alien*, *The Brood* or *Rosemary's Baby*, which the literature review in the previous sections has demonstrated their thorough academic reception, none of the films discussed in this thesis have

received any scholarly discussion. In fact, to my knowledge, none of the films in the 40 films of ALTER films have been subject to academic criticism.

In addition to the increasing popularity and relevance of online platforms and the comparable lack of sustained research on the topic of the (body) horror short film, two main reasons make the short film a valuable choice for this thesis. Firstly, the short duration of short films allows for the feasible viewing and close reading of films in greater detail compared to feature films. Consequently, when working with short films, studying a more extensive corpus and a greater variety of films is possible. The manageable duration of short films allows for detailed viewing and analysis, facilitating comparisons across a larger corpus and enabling broader conclusions about the relationship between the motif of body horror and the deconstruction of binaries of sex/gender and the body. Secondly, as Walde suggests, short films are also characterised by their specific format (Walde, “Brevity” 234) characterised by not only their short duration but their specific format. Felando echoes such observations, underscoring the short film’s condensed narrative and a reduced emphasis on character and plot development, instead prioritising specific ideas and concepts (Felando 45). In the case of body horror short films, those “ideas, concepts and situations” centre around bodily de(con) construction and change – both in terms of screen time and narrative construction. Thus, in making body horror short films (instead of feature films), my primary material enables me to work with a medium in which my main research interest is congruent with the films’ formal specificities and central themes.¹¹

3.2 Selection of Primary Material

While the preceding subsection has delineated the field of short film studies, the present subsection introduces the broader corpus of films from which the four films for analyses were selected. Referring back to the problems identified in establishing short film studies as a legitimate area of academic inquiry, the advantages of choosing from the selected short film platform are elucidated.

Before discussing the selection process itself, I will first introduce the corpus and explore the significance of the broader corpus within the context of this thesis. The primary films for analysis for this thesis were chosen from a YouTube playlist created by the independent film studio ALTER. ALTER is a subsidiary of the independent film studio

¹¹ While a detailed examination of how the short film format impacts the significance, form, and function of body horror depictions unfortunately is beyond the scope of this thesis, it presents a promising area for future study. For studies of short film format see the works of Laura Walde or David Joselit.

Gunpowder & Sky, which specialises exclusively in horror films. The playlist under the title ‘Body Horror Movies’ comprises films produced by ALTER and independently produced shorts later acquired by the platform, offering a diverse array of artistic voices while maintaining thematic coherence. With over 3.1 million subscribers as of April 2024 and substantial viewership for each video uploaded, the ALTER channel provides a highly relevant and accessible platform for on-demand horror films, thus bypassing the limited screening opportunities discussed by Walde (“Kurzfilm” 68). Notably, despite its popularity and accessibility, no scholarly literature is currently available on either the platform or the films it features.

The 40 films in the broader corpus include those published by ALTER up to the period where this thesis’ research question was devised – resulting in films published until the 1st of May 2022 being considered for the closer selection process. By choosing from this curated list, the thesis avoids the collection of random or arbitrary selections, ensuring that the selected films collectively contribute to a cohesive exploration of body horror themes. In contrast to randomly choosing body horror shorts from YouTube or other platforms such as Vimeo, this narrows down the selection instead of randomly choosing from an almost endless selection of films available online. This approach is especially valuable given the absence of academic or popular canonisation in short films (Felando 15), which otherwise increases the risk of arbitrarily selecting films for analysis. However, the curated playlist offers more than just a collection of individual films; it contextualises the films in a specific manner, inscribing cultural and societal meanings into the curation. The films are already connected within the playlist, revealing trends in representation and potentially meaningful information and societal tendencies above the level of individual film meaning, thus adding another potentially valuable layer to consider in the subsequent close readings as the curation is arguably itself indicative of cultural and societal tendencies.

The four short films analysed in this thesis are selected from a corpus of 40 films sourced from the independent short film platform ALTER, accessible via a curated YouTube playlist dedicated to body horror. The selection process involved five main steps, detailed in Table 1. Initially, all non-Anglophone films were excluded from further consideration to align with the MA programme’s focus on “Anglophone Literatures and Cultures.” This step resulted in the elimination of six films (films 35 to 40 in the table in Appendix 7.1). Next, films were categorised based on their alignment with the thesis’s definition of body horror. As noted in the previous section, the term “body horror” lacks a precise definition in horror film scholarship, often leading to academic discussions characterised by vagueness (Reyes 52). This ambiguity

	Process steps	1	2	3			4	5
Nr.	Films	English	body horror	trans-formation	parasite	zombie	visual depiction	final selection
1.	<i>Posies</i>	X	X	X				
2.	<i>Pete's Putrid Peas</i>	X	X	X				
3.	<i>The Relic</i>	X	X	X			X	X
4.	<i>Darkness Comes</i>	X	X	X				
5.	<i>Nova</i>	X	X	X			X	
6.	<i>Retch</i>	X	X	X			X	X
7.	<i>Eddie</i>	X	X	X				
8.	<i>Daughters of Virtue</i>	X	X	X				
9.	<i>Undress Me</i>	X	X	X			X	
10.	<i>Smear</i>	X	X	X				
11.	<i>Progeny</i>	X	X		X		X	X
12.	<i>I am Not a Monster</i>	X	X		X		X	
13.	<i>The Stomach</i>	X	X		X		X	
14.	<i>When Susurru Stirs</i>	X	X		X		X	X
15.	<i>Kissed</i>	X	X			X		
16.	<i>Point of view</i>	X	X			X		

Table 1: Extract from the Selection Process.

is reflected in the ALTER playlist corpus, where 17 films focus on corporeal disintegration through violent acts like torture, mutilation, or cannibalism (see films 17 to 35 in the table Appendix a.). To ensure terminological clarity, a narrow definition of body horror was adopted for this thesis, as discussed in section 3.1. Consequently, films depicting externally inflicted violence or featuring traditional horror film monsters as antagonists were excluded from further consideration. Step two presents the films that met the criteria and were categorised as body horror for this thesis.

After the two initial steps of the selection process, 24 out of 40 films were excluded, leaving 16 films aligned with the narrow definition of body horror adopted for this thesis, as illustrated in Table 1. In the third step, the remaining 16 films were categorised based on their thematic focus on one of the three categories: transformation, bodily invasion, or zombification.¹² Although the current table visualisation does not fully capture this categorisation, as overlap is inevitable between those categories, the table attempts to capture

¹² This categorisation results from the initial film screenings as well as the literature review, with definitions of body horror and Barbara Creed's typological considerations of the different forms of representations of the monstrous body. Of course, a much more detailed differentiation between motifs could be established; however, due to the notable similarities between the categories and the overlap that inevitably exists between them (Creed, *Carnavalesque* 141), this thesis benefits from a less fragmented classificatory typology.

this by depicting the crosses without separating lines between them (Step 3). The resulting categories reflected the main themes of transformation, invasion, and zombification, with transformation being the most prevalent (10 films) followed by invasion (4 films). Given that only two films fell under the category of zombification, the subsequent selection steps focused exclusively on those 14 films in the transformation and invasion categories.

	Process steps	4	5		
Nr.	Films	Visual depiction	Take: no	Take: yes	Why?
1	<i>Posies</i>	<u>No</u> , body horror only towards the end of the film.	X		Excluded due to marginal depiction of body horror.
2.	<i>Pete's Putrid Peas</i>	<u>No</u> , body horror only towards the end of the film.	X		Excluded due to marginal depiction of body horror.
3.	<i>The Relic</i>	<u>Yes</u> , body horror present throughout the film.		X	Selected for its sustained audio-visual depiction of transformation body horror.
4.	<i>Darkness Comes</i>	<u>No</u> , body horror only towards the end of the film.	X		Excluded due to marginal depiction of body horror.
5.	<i>Nova</i>	<u>Yes</u> , body horror present throughout the film. Focus on degenerative transformation.	X		Excluded due to depiction of degenerative body horror rather than transformation.
6.	<i>Retch</i>	<u>Yes</u> , body horror present throughout the film. Element of dark comedy.		X	Selected for its sustained audio-visual depiction of transformation body horror, comedic elements do not interfere.
7.	<i>Eddie</i>	<u>No</u> , body horror only affects the protagonist towards the end of the film.	X		Excluded due to marginal depiction of body horror in the protagonist.
8.	<i>Daughters of Virtue</i>	<u>No</u> , body horror only towards the end of the film.	X		Excluded due to marginal depiction of body horror.
9.	<i>Undress Me</i>	<u>Yes</u> , body horror present throughout the film. Focus on degenerative transformation.	X		Excluded due to depiction of degenerative body horror rather than transformation.
10.	<i>Smear</i>	<u>No</u> , body horror as dark comedy.	X		Excluded due to depiction of body horror only marginal due to focus on comedic aspect.
11.	<i>Progeny</i>	<u>Yes</u> , body horror present throughout the film.		X	Selected for its sustained audio-visual and narrative depiction of invasion body horror.
12.	<i>I am Not a Monster</i>	<u>Yes</u> , body horror present throughout the film.	X		Excluded due to thematic focus on mental health, body horror as a metaphor for schizophrenia. Body horror as genetic.
13.	<i>The Stomach</i>	<u>Yes</u> , body horror present throughout the film.	X		Excluded due to body horror and bodily invasion as genetic.
14.	<i>When Susurrrus Stirs</i>	Yes, body horror present throughout the film.		X	Selected for its sustained audio-visual and narrative depiction of invasion body horror.

Table 2: Detailed Visualisation of Steps 4 and 5.

Step 4 is constituted by a focus on the visual depiction of body horror as a criterion for inclusion or exclusion. As this thesis's research interest lies not primarily in the narrative and discursive deconstruction of binaries of sex/gender and the body but also in the audio-visual representation of these binaries, a crucial quality of the films for close reading is their explicit

filmic depiction of body horror. Thus, as illustrated in Table 2, those films which did not meet this criterion were excluded from further consideration. As is evident in the column “Process step 4”, eight out of 14 films demonstrated significant depictions of on-screen body horror, resulting in the exclusion of six films. Thus, there were 8 films left which met the criterion for being English-language productions, passing for this thesis’s narrow definition of body horror and depicting body horror to a substantial amount on-screen. Those films were *Relic*, *Nova*, *Retch*, *Undress Me* from the transformation category (films 1-10 in Table 2) and *Progeny*, *I am Not a Monster*, *The Stomach*, and *Susurrus* in the invasion category (films 11-14 in Table 2).

Since a close reading of eight films exceeds the scope of this thesis, another criterion was introduced which aimed at excluding those films which had considerable thematic overlap with other main themes and motifs except invasion or transformation body horror. This step, illustrated in ‘Process Step 5’, resulted in the exclusion of four more films. Following the completion of the fourth categorisation step, the films selected for in-depth analysis are as follows: In Group 1, which centres on depictions of transformation, the chosen films are *Relic* and *Retch* (see ‘Process step 5’ in Table 1 and Table 2). In Group 2, which focuses on invasion, the films *Progeny* and *Susurrus* were chosen.

After completing the fourth step of categorisation, the final selection of films for in-depth analysis includes the following: In Group 1, which focuses on depictions of transformation, the selected films are Initially, the plan was to analyse three films for each category, adding up to a total number of six films. However, through initial readings and revisiting the literature during the cyclical phases of writing and analysis, it became apparent that including six films in the analysis would exceed the scope of this paper. Given the metonymical deconstructive approach employed (discussed in detail above), analysing four films provides sufficient insights while simultaneously enabling an adequate analytical focus and attention to detail for each film.

CHAPTER 4

The Transforming Body

Within the horror genre, the topic of transformation stands as a pervasive motif. From a scientist's gradual transformation into a human-fly hybrid in David Cronenberg's classic *The Fly* to the werewolf narrative or other shapeshifting entities that surpass bodily boundaries altogether as in *The Thing*, the horror genre is densely populated by filmic depictions employing the motif of transformation body horror. To stretch and grow, skin must be pushed to or over its limits and shed to accommodate the new tissue, the freshly manifesting corporeal form. To grow into new shapes, bones must first crack and break. Transformations challenge bodily borders and boundaries; they dissolve illusions or hopes of stability and integrity. Drawing on the work of Jack Halberstam and Jay McRoy, this chapter examines how as bodies contort and mutate, they inevitably challenge those "modernist myths of organic wholeness" (McRoy 200) upon which much of Western thought continues to be built. What is more, through the camera's dissection, bodies are degendered and transformed into a mere "fiction of the body" (Halberstam 170). Whereas the work of Halberstam and McRoy refers to films which depict external threats and disintegrations, the films analysed in this thesis depict reconfigurations of the body from the inside out.

Thus, the present section explores how the transforming body depletes the human form from its pre-conceived, normative meanings, as they no longer fit within those new corporeal forms in two ALTER horror short films, categorised as transformation body horror, as the previous chapter outlined. While classic horror films such as John Carpenter's *The Thing* have been interpreted as deconstructions of human existence, plunging viewers into "an irresolvable uncertainty" that extends to questions of masculinity and gender roles (Addison 156), and scholars such as Linda Williams have observed that in the films of David Cronenberg, "anatomy is anything but destiny" (Williams, *Masculinity* 29), the short films under discussion in this thesis have not received any scholarly reception. Thus, the previous investigations into the representation of the horror body on screen will be applied to these lesser-studied texts

The subsequent sections examine distinct processes of body horror as depicted in the two short films *Retch* and *Relic*, selected for their notable emphasis on the theme of transformation. Each film depicts distinct transformations, ranging from spontaneous metamorphoses (*Retch*) to bodily unknowability and shapeshifting (*Relic*). Despite their

disparities, these films share a common thread: the spectacle of transformation takes precedence, often eclipsing (other) narrative elements.

In chapter 4.1.1, the close readings commence with an exploration of *Relic*, a film centred on uncertainty, mystery, and supernatural phenomena. The film unfolds as four adventurers encounter an ancient object and a mysterious man in the Tibetan mountains (4.1.2), leading to the climactic transformation of one crew member, revealing them as having been impersonated by an ancient, powerful creature (4.1.3). Throughout, this section on *Relic* investigates the pervasive theme of uncertainty throughout the film, which manifests not only narratively but also on an audio-visual level. It focuses on how the body in *Relic* emerges as thoroughly unknowable beneath the skin's surface. Chapter 4 concludes with an exploration of the film *Retch* in subsection 4.2, focusing on the protagonist Sonya's transformation, which serves as the film's central element. This section discusses the form and function of the depicted body horror, including, amongst others, camera techniques, colour grading and the use of coloured lighting (4.2.1). Attention is given to the unexpected comedic resolution at the film's conclusion, which subverts conventional horror expectations, prompting questions on the significance of the transformation within the film (4.2.2)

4.1 *The Relic* – Representing Unknowable Bodies

A group urgently enters a remote mountain cabin amidst a snowstorm, setting the tone for the opening scenes of *Relic*. The narrative unfolds through fast-paced editing, heated dialogue, and an intense musical score. Upon their arrival, the group becomes entangled in a tense confrontation regarding the fate of an enigmatic man they discovered in the mountains, near death and drenched in blood. As they strive to identify him and assess his condition, the unexpected return of Kayla, a previously missing crew member, introduces heightened stakes and tension, as Kayla's arrival is marred by shocking injuries that have left her face bloodied. In a panic, she accuses the unnamed man, prompting Jacob – a member of the crew – to deliver a fatal blow to the man's head, revealing a disturbing revelation beneath his skin. Amidst the group's fascination with this unexplained discovery, Kayla discreetly retrieves a backpack, forgotten amid the chaos, containing an allegedly 900-year-old relic they found on their exploration. Smiling devilishly for a moment, Kayla's body enters a grotesque transformation. The film crescendos into chaos as the monster which had impersonated Kayla inflicts agonising death upon the characters. The film eventually concludes with a haunting final shot—a glimpse of the monster wearing the mask that had set the calamitous events into motion.

It is challenging to locate the common element in *Relic* amid chaotic occurrences, mysterious bodily revelations, tense and uplifting film scores, and the disorienting use of only diegetic light provided by flashlights. However, a close examination reveals a pervasive element of body horror and bodily dread, epitomised by Kayla's climactic transformation. While her metamorphosis is the most overt manifestation of this theme, subtler instances throughout the film contribute to a sense of bodily uncertainty and unknowability, challenging our Western confidence in understanding and interpreting bodily processes. Unlike the deterministic and medicalised view often propagated by modern science, *Relic* portrays bodies as inherently unpredictable, capable of producing new and surprising forms (Grosz). For instance, scenes depicting unusual bone-like structures underneath the mysterious man's forehead or the dynamic, punctual lighting fragmenting the characters' bodies and the fragmentation imposed by the frame underscore this theme. *Relic* thus disrupts binary conceptualisations of sex/gender and the body by representing the body and its biology as inherently unknowable and endlessly stretchable. It deconstructs the privileged position of rationality and logic in Western thinking by unsettling fundamental biological principles, thus challenging the foundations on which the sex/gender and body binaries rely.

The following subsections explore the different manifestations of filmic and bodily uncertainty through selected techniques and scenes. First, I examine how the film's lighting establishes a general sense of uncertainty through its use of lighting (4.1.1). Building on this foundation, I explore the ambiguity surrounding the unnamed man and his body (4.1.2). Finally, I examine Kayla's body and the film's climactic transformation, discussing how the introduction of shapeshifting embodies the overarching theme of bodily uncertainty (4.1.3).

4.1.1 *Casting Doubt: The Use of Lighting*

Throughout *Relic*, diegetic lighting, primarily emanating from the protagonist's flashlights, creates a sense of unrest and disorientation. The dimly lit interiors of the mountain cabin, illuminated only sporadically by the beams of flashlights, create an atmosphere of visual chaos and fragility explicitly directed towards the film's protagonist. This lighting technique conceals large portions of the film's mise-en-scène, causing objects, interiors, and bodies to fade in and out of visibility as the beams fail to illuminate the surroundings adequately. The resulting shots possess an anxious quality by creating a foundational sense of unrest and

instability around which the remainder of the film – including the ensuing scenes of body horror – are constructed.¹³

Notably, the flashlights predominantly illuminate the film's characters instead of their surroundings, thus highlighting specific body parts, particularly the face, and abstracting them from their corporeal context. This visual tendency, which limits visibility to fragmented body parts, contributes to the abstraction and deconstruction of the protagonist's bodies within the confined setting of the cabin. In a space where full-body shots are rare and medium close-ups prevail, the spotlighting further exacerbates this fragmentation, distorting and fragmenting the bodies of the protagonists. This effect echoes Jay McRoy's observation of the 'splattered body' in extreme close-ups, where previously cohesive bodies are transformed into a collection of fragmented pieces. Particularly in the climactic transformation scene of *Relic*, lighting plays a central role in depicting and representing body horror. As demonstrated in Figure 1, this scene employs the spotlight function of the flashlights, underscoring the inadequacy of the light beams and the resulting exacerbated fragmentation of the depicted bodies.

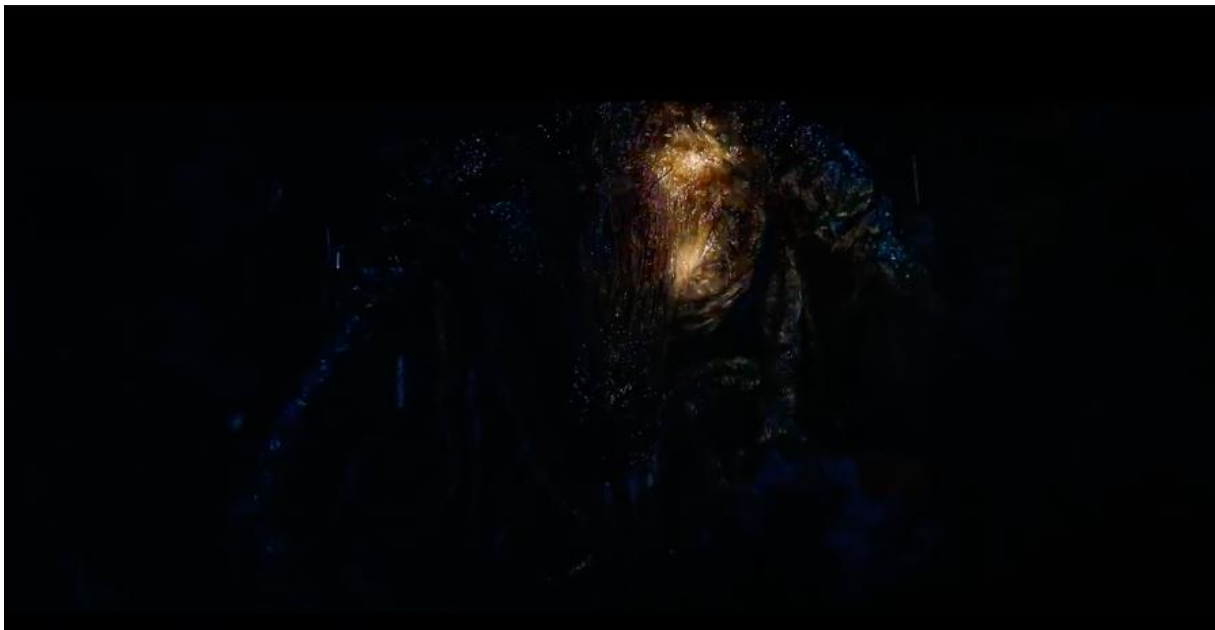


Figure 1: *Relic* – Flashlights pointed at the creature (0:10:56).

Similarly to McRoy's notion of the splattered body as "a corpus in the process of continual de/re-construction" (199), the transforming and visually abstracted body in *Relic* disrupts conventional perceptions of the body as static and immutable. Instead, it is revealed to be endlessly malleable, fluid, and posited beyond rational understanding. Lighting exacerbates this process by obscuring the outlines and borders of the transforming and transformed body.

¹³ Lighting is one of several techniques employed to create this impression. The actor's dialogue delivery, the fast cuts, and comparably close framing also contribute to this effect.

The bodily abstraction and fragmentation discussed above are not the only relevant use of lighting in *Relic*'s deconstruction of binary conceptualisations of sex/gender and the body. The dynamic and sporadic lighting also takes on other functions in the film. For instance, in scenes such as the confrontation with the unknown man, the direction of the flashlights continually jumps between characters, incessantly drawing and redirecting attention. Echoing Halberstam's observation about the cinematography in *Silence*, the lighting in *Relic* dissects and fragments bodies and ultimately creates a "fiction of the body" (Halberstam 170), as no bodies are truly depicted in *Relic*. Instead, there are implications of bodies whose physicality and materiality are obscured by darkness. Through this abstraction and fragmentation, the lighting in filmically *Relic* disrupts the connection between the body and sex/gender.

As the film progresses, the use of lighting technique evolves, particularly evident in a high-tension scene where Kayla desperately urges the group to kill the mysterious man they found while returning to the cabin. In this moment, illustrated in Figure 2, the two flashlights previously illuminating Kayla and Sadie abruptly shift towards the silhouette of the man lying on the table. Despite shifting focus to the background, the shot's framing remains unchanged, with the two women positioned prominently in the foreground. At the same time, the man becomes the new centre of interest in the background. A manipulation of light and spotlight underscores this displacement of the narrative focus. By disrupting the traditional hierarchy between foreground and background, the film creates a dynamic interplay between foreground and background, simultaneously drawing and diverting attention. This dynamic and unstable construction reflects a broader theme throughout *Relic*, where bodies and their significance are constantly in flux.

The recurrent use of focused light in the background dismantles hierarchical relationships within the frame, offering a fragmented portrayal of bodies that defy fixed categorisation. These cinematic arrangements obscure particularities of the body and disrupt established frameworks reliant on understanding the physical and narrative body as a unified entity (McRoy 195). In this fragmented setting, bodies emerge as mutable entities, shifting between visibility and invisibility, eluding complete comprehension. This portrayal disrupts binary conceptualisations of the body as static and stable, signalling a related instability of sex/gender categories, which themselves depend on assumptions of bodily stability. While lighting instigates this underlying instability, the subsequent chapter delves into how these tendencies are reinforced through other audio-visual elements.



Figure 2: *Relic* – Kayla urges the group to kill the man (0:07:24).

4.1.2 *The Mysteries Underneath the Skin*

While the body horror and the filmic deconstruction of the body are only symbolic in the film's use of lighting, the character of the unnamed man in *Relic* unifies several themes and topics related to body horror and uncertainty. In fact, in this character, body horror and uncertainty or unknowability are intricately intertwined. As the group encounters the man, half frozen to death and bleeding inexplicably, his worsening condition sets the stage for the recurring importance of the mysterious and inscrutable human body within the film. Even the presumably simple task of diagnosing the source of a bleeding wound becomes an insurmountable challenge. One of the most memorable scenes of body horror in *Relic* occurs when, after an emotionally and filmically charged and intense scene, where Kayla implores the group to kill the man for their safety, Jacob, in his state of overwhelm, eventually gives in. Shortly after Jacob delivered a fatal blow to the man's head, another group member discovers a biological anomaly concealed underneath the man's skin. This section focuses on this scene, investigating its audio-visual depiction and its form and function.

The musical environment surrounding the murder of the wounded man is marked by a high degree of constant change, mirroring the sense of uncertainty created through the use of diegetic lighting. A series of substantial changes is evident in the film score. First, the rapid tempo of the dramatic orchestral composition reaches a crescendo, abruptly halted by Jacob's aggression, leaving a few moments of pause before transitioning into a slower, anticipatory rhythmic percussion section. This shift establishes an anticipatory atmosphere, heightening the film's tension. Following a brief exchange among the characters, Marcus's realisation of an

anomaly within Jacob's inflicted wound triggers another musical change. These newly introduced chords introduce dissonance and tension ascending in half-tone steps of a minor scale. At the same time, the inclusion of high-pitched tremolo strings conveys a pervasive sense of threat and eeriness typical of horror scoring (Halfyard 127). The frequent fluctuations in the musical motifs propel the film through varying intensity and mood, transitioning from intense horror motifs with high-tremolo strings to rhythmic, tense percussion and later descending cello motifs before culminating in a grand orchestral arrangement. The music does not settle into one solid state or rigid style; Like the protagonists' bodies', it goes in and out of sight, ultimately remaining unknowable and elusive.

Notably, the moment the group starts to investigate the anomaly found in the man's open wound is significant from the perspective of sound and score. As Marcus first hesitantly reaches into the man's wound, slowly pulling it away from the skull, the film score momentarily resolves into a melodic, orchestral arrangement, with varied instrumentation and an ascending melodic motif in primarily major chords. On a musical level, the classical genre differentiations are often associated with "ideas of orchestration, melody, rhythm, harmony and deployment" (Brownrigg 39). As *Relic* moves out of the musical genre conventions of horror film by departing from traditional sharp or dissonant tones or mournful minor chord progressions (Tompkins 191, 196) and into a soaring melodic progression in a major key, the terrifying mood of the horror film is momentarily suspended to allow for an atmosphere of wonder and intrigue to arise. By musically relation the visual action on-screen with such positive qualities, the scene disrupts the associations conventionally expected from such a graphic scene. Instead, the scene suggests that although an inexplicable biological mystery has been discovered under the man's skin, the biological difference is not necessarily bad.

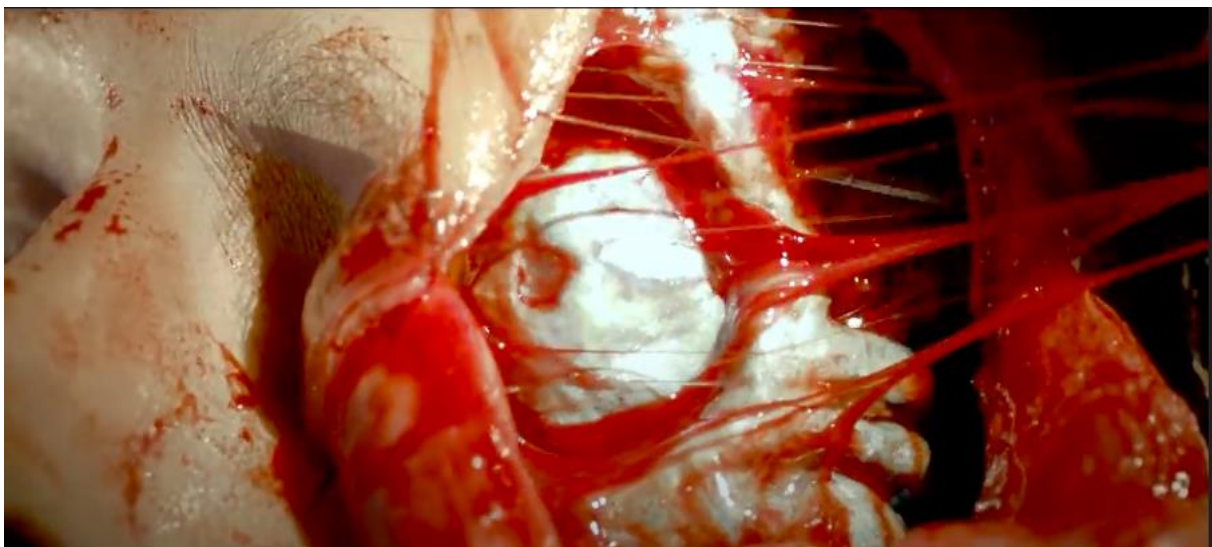


Figure 3: *Relic* – Marcus investigates the wound (0:07:58).

The scene's sound design further removes the scene's horrific qualities. Despite its visually graphic nature, the scene's sound design does not match the explicitness of the image. In horror films, including those discussed in this thesis, when a character touches a sticky fluid, blood, or other organic tissue, the sound design often aims to intensify the images depicted on screen (Whittington 169). These sounds are typically characterised by squelching, squishing or slurping noises and a wet, moist texture, illustrating the image to make it more impactful. However, unlike films such as *Progeny* and *Susurrus*, where such effects are frequently used, *Relic* makes little use of this strategy. The expected unity of sound and image, and sound as more or less directly resulting from the images on screen, is notably absent in the film. For instance, there are no sounds of skin tearing or the sticky and wet sounds associated with Marcus touching gooey blood and skeletal tissue (Figure 3), rendering not only the depiction of body horror less visceral but diminishing the extent to which the scene functions to horrify. Instead, the uprising orchestral music discussed above overpowers most other sounds, leaving no sonic room for such sound design. In this sense, sound design (or the lack thereof) and film scoring create an underlying atmosphere for the images based on marvel and intrigue instead of terror and fear.

While not overtly engaging with the deconstruction of binaries related to sex/gender and the body, the soundscape and musical score collectively establish an affirmative tonal environment. Within this milieu, deviations from normative corporeal manifestations such as that of the man are not reflexively associated with terror and apprehension; instead, they emerge as potential sources of fascination and inspiration. Given that this tonal shift coincides with the revelation of the man's inexplicable bodily form, the musical score invites a reading of the depicted body horror as a possible site of creative innovation. Mirroring Elisabeth Grosz's proposition that the body possesses an innate quality of "[generating] what is new, surprising, unpredictable" (xi), the film subverts traditional (body) horror conventions by reframing bodily anomalies as sources of inspiration rather than of threat. By dismantling the hierarchical dichotomy between the normal and the abnormal or monstrous, the film fosters an ambiguous terrain conducive to multiple interpretations and play. Having established the sonic environment within which the visual depiction of body horror unfolds, the foundation is laid for a subsequent analysis of the visual techniques employed to convey this scene.

Visually, the scene is significant for the deconstruction of the binary conceptualisation of sex/gender and the body for several reasons. First, the scene marks the first and one of the only extreme close-ups of a human body throughout the film, imbuing the scene with a differentiating characteristic. "There's something in there" (0:07:50), group member Marcus

exclaims, as the film cuts to an extreme close-up of the man's face. Due to the camera's proximity to the head, only about a quarter of the man's face is visible, focusing the image on the rounded wound on his forehead. In the scene's close framing, the man's body, previously abstracted and fragmented through lighting, is now additionally dissected by the camera's gaze. As Marcus investigates the tissue, reaching into the layer of skin, the skin seems elastic and rubbery, as it is easily pulled in each direction. The skin, usually understood as the primary barrier between body and environment, is revealed as penetrable with blunt force and much less violent acts, the body's natural wholeness much more easily disturbed than we might wish to see and think.

By examining the scene through the lens of Elisabeth Grosz's argument on the incomprehensible nature of the human body's biological limits (187), the finding inside the man's skull can be read as proof of the fallibility of the human knowledge of the body, drawing attention to the constructedness of assumedly foundational scientific beliefs surrounding the body. The discovery of biological differences underneath the man's skin challenges such notions of bodily normalcy. The fact that the man is depicted as distinctly human rather than monstrous further emphasises the fluidity and complexity of bodily biology and subtly stretches the normative limits of biological expression. In this way, the obscure skeletal difference represented in the scene functions as a metonymic device, deconstructing entrenched beliefs about the homogeneity of human corporeality. By challenging these assumptions, the scene prompts a re-evaluation of binary conceptualisations linked to fixed biology, ultimately contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the dynamic interplay between body, biology, and sex/gender.

4.1.3 *Shapeshifting and Bodily Uncertainty*

After Kayla's return, the death of the unknown man and the subsequent obscure discovery of something underneath the skin of his face, the film moves into its final climactic twist. During a monstrous transformation, Kayla is revealed to have been impersonated by a powerful shapeshifting creature. By studying the implications of the transformation and the film's premise of shapeshifting, I demonstrate that *Relic* deconstructs notions of bodily integrity and assumptions of natural bodily essences. In this sense, *Relic*

As the transformation sequence commences, Kayla's jaw drops to the floor, only for a horrifying process of metamorphosis and biological possibility to be revealed under the skin of her body. This process reveals the body as a hollow shell which can no longer be related to any assumption regarding the essence of identity, such as sex/gender being directly related to the

body's exterior. Instead, the human body is here, nothing more than a dress to be put on by a supernatural being. Echoing Halberstam's observation that throughout *Silence*, identity is revealed to be "only skin-deep" (175), *Relic* reveals how all projections or assumptions of essential identity made based on outward appearances are deceiving and fallible. Similar to Buffalo Bill's violent quest for transformation in *Silence*, the revelation of Kayla's transformation separates sex from gender and nature from gender, reshaping the human condition as a layer of dress (Halberstam 176). As Kayla's body disintegrates and simultaneously, new forms and biological possibilities emerge from the organic remains of the "bodysuit" (Halberstam 176), the intricate relationship between the categories of sex/gender and the body are disrupted, making room for new relationships between the psychical outside and psychological inside to arise.

In contrast to *Silence*, where sex/gender binaries somehow persist despite identity disruptions, the threat in *Relic* stands outside such dichotomies. Unlike *Silence*'s Buffalo Bill and Clarice Starling, whose characters remain entangled with hegemonic notions of masculinity and femininity (Pelish 60), the monster in *Relic* transcends these conventional poles. Instead, the creature's god-like powers and ancient origins defy categorisation within human norms such as sex/gender. The creature's ability to shift between different corporeal forms at will undermines the assumed fixity of biology and sex, presenting a nihilistic perspective on human identity. This depiction echoes the shapeshifting alien creature in *The Thing*, which undermines conventional human systems of meaning by deconstructing human existence and rendering it into irresolvable ambiguity (Addison 156). Thus, the portrayal of the monster and its shapeshifting abilities in *Relic* dismantle modernist values of human exceptionalism and challenge the unity and integrity of the body while stressing the inevitable fragility of human existence and epistemology.



Figure 4: *Relic* – Close-up of the climactic transformation (0:10:46).

The transformation sequence, with its seemingly endless processes of tumorous growth as illustrated in Figure 4, lends itself to a discussion through Ronald Allan Cruz's concept of biological horror. In his article "Mutations and Metamorphoses: Body Horror is Biological Horror", Cruz argues that part of what drives body horror is how "it goes against what is considered normal anatomy and functioning in biological species (not limited to humans)" (161). From this perspective, the ancient creature in *Relic* becomes a threat to human systems of rationality and knowledge because it defies the fundamental biological principle of differentiation: Unlike all known organisms on Earth, which all undergo cellular specialisation to form distinct organs and tissues, this entity's cells refuse to commit to any structural and functional congruence (Cruz 164). Accordingly, the trajectory of its transformation unfolds through a terrifying unpredictability, featuring a grotesque proliferation of limbs and organic material that defies any existing norms of corporeality and materiality. This biological horror disrupts and transcends what would have previously been considered normal, thus once more revealing the fallibility of human systems of knowledge production and modern science.

The analysis of three selected aspects of the film's representation of body horror serves to highlight the central role of uncertainty as a thematic element in *Relic*, ultimately challenging established systems of knowledge production and rationality. By disrupting fundamental biological and philosophical principles that underpin not only perceptions of normalcy and monstrosity but also conceptualisations of the relationship between sex/gender and the body, the film effectively deconstructs the very basis upon which knowledge about these categories is constructed and replaces them with an all-encompassing sense of uncertainty, and mutability, and possibility.

4.2 Retch – Remaking and Reconfiguring the Norm

Kier Siewert's *Retch* is the second film to be analysed in the transformation film category. The shortest of the four films analysed, *Retch* starts in medias res, as its protagonist, Sonya, is having an intense seizure that includes trembling and retching and causes her to scream in pain. After her friend manages to transfer her to an abandoned warehouse, Sonya enters a gruesome and visceral transformation, which causes her to rip off her skin and hair in anguish, continually vomiting and groaning in pain. At the end of the transformation sequence, which makes up most of the film, Sonya's transformation is revealed, depicting her not as a horrifying and monstrous creature but as a still humanoid figure. After watching her friend peel off the outer layer of her, losing all her hair, Sonya's friend, with a shaky voice, asks her if she

is okay. A surprise twist ensues as Sonya merely spits out some fluid left in her mouth, nods, and says casually, “Yeah, I feel better” (0:04:03).

The subsequent analysis of *Retch* follows two main trajectories. First, a close reading of the transformation sequence is provided to investigate the influence of the motif of transformation body horror on binaries of sex/gender and the body, focusing on how the visual strategies techniques employed emphasise the profundity of Sonya’s transformation, while simultaneously depicting the transformation as surprisingly clean and soft; almost intimate and aesthetically pleasing. The second part of the close reading focuses on the form and function of the film’s revelation of the transformation’s outcome and the twist, delivered as comedic relief. I examine how the scene speaks to the notion that this changed bodily shape has not caused detrimental physical and psychological effects. Although the body’s borders, its insides and outsides, have turned inside out, this had a rather advantageous outcome, indicated in the protagonist’s feeling better afterwards. Through a Butlerian lens, I contend that Sonya’s apparent “departure from the human” (*Undoing Gender* 3) signals a process of “remaking the human” (*Undoing Gender* 4), inherently imbued with deconstructive undertones. This process redefines the boundaries of humanity (Sonya, unmistakably human in attitude and demeanour), ushering in a subtle reconfiguration of norms as she seemingly shrugs off the impact of her transformed corporeal form, even expressing feeling “better” (0:04:03).

4.2.1 *The Transformation Sequence*

The present section focuses on two main sites of deconstruction in *Retch*’s transformation sequence. First, it explores how the protagonist’s body is visually and ideologically fragmented through the use of camera and editing techniques before moving on to a discussion of how the graphic depiction of the transformation itself creates a deconstructive dynamic.

From the film’s outset, Sonya’s body undergoes visual deconstruction and abstraction through the filmmaker’s lens. As the film begins in medias res with Sonya’s violent convulsions and retching down on the floor, only extreme close-ups are employed to capture her body. Due to this, only glimpses of her body and features are revealed. For instance, only a fragment of her face is captured in the film’s opening shots, and only one of her eyes is visible amidst a few strands of damp hair. The film then quickly cuts to a shot of her trembling hands. The dampness on her hands mirrors that on her face, signalling her distress. Additionally, the trembling of her hands on the floor is accentuated by the film’s slightly accelerated pace, intensifying the erratic nature of her movements. Echoing McRoy’s observations about the splatter film, the opening

shots of *Retch* use extreme close-ups to emphasise not a specifically sexed/gendered body but rather the “immediacy” (McRoy 198) of the processes occurring in this body.

The camera’s proximity to Sonya, complemented by some camera pans to follow the protagonist’s movements, creates a subtle unity between the camera and the body on screen. For instance, one of Sonya’s roaring screams seems so forceful that it causes the water surface of a small puddle to ripple and curl and even causes a trembling in the entire warehouse as dust rises after the earthquake-like incident. The other woman shields her hands from the forceful blast. Rendered in blurred focus, the camera conveys a struggle to record these occurrences, a battle to recover from the incident and resume the position of observation and documentation it is supposed to take on. Instead, the camera’s objective, its rationality, is disrupted by the profundity and power of the onsetting transformation.



Figure 5: *Retch* – Sonya screams (0:02:30).

Through the camera’s apparent failure to focus on Sonya, which underscores the impact and force of her screams, the images and the documentation of her transformation become increasingly fragmented. Having previously created this notion through extreme close-ups, the film now abstracts the close-up of her face even more. Figure 5 shows such an instance, where the outlines of the abstracted blurred face of Sonya are broken up by a stream of light, reminiscent of a lens flare which visually cuts into her face, opening those boundaries the blur of the outline of her face and had already affected by creating visual cuts into the outline. The disruption becomes explicit after the symbolic disruption of the body’s integrity and

impermeability, when the film depicts shots of Sonya's hair falling off and Sonya sheds her skin.



Figure 6: *Retch* – Sonya pulls off her skin (0:02:55).

Despite Sonya's deafening and pained screams, which curl through the film's sonic landscape and exert a seismic influence on the diegetic lighting, the corporeal depiction of her transformation itself is not marked by excessive display of blood and gore. Contrary to the anticipation of a gruesome spectacle, invited by Sonya's cries, the process of shedding skin is represented as almost aesthetically pleasing. As depicted in Figure 6, the shedding of Sonya's skin lacks the expected carnage. Instead of torn flesh and blood, only a thin, practically transparent layer of skin is shed and gently pulled away, evoking the imagery of a snake shedding its old skin to make way for a new form. The positioning and posture of the hands in this scene further contradict Sonya's agonising scream

s and the shocked reaction of her onlooker. Despite the intense emotions portrayed, the hand delicately pulling at the skin exudes elegance. Enhanced by strong vignetting, which darkens and blurs the edges of the frame, the visual layer takes on an intimate and soft quality. In a way, the scene depicted in Figure 6 directly reflects Carol Clover's observation that in horror films, "gender is less a wall than a permeable membrane" ("Himself" 208). In *Retch*, the skin, serving as the primary boundary of the body, manifests as such a membrane, yielding to the character's transformation and giving rise to a new form of sexed/gendered embodiment.

4.2.2 *De- and Reconstructing Sex/Gender and the Body*

As the protagonist undergoes a gradual shedding of hair and skin, *Retch* reaches its graphic climax with a series of harrowing screams. The almost telekinetic blasts that accompanied

Sonya's transformation recede, marking the calming down of the process, symbolised by the neon lights switching back on to provide a stable source of cool-toned light. While suspense surrounds Sonya's new form, the precise nature of her transformation remains concealed. The film initially presents only a shot of Sonya's backlit outline, prolonging the anticipation. When her face is finally revealed, her features, still recognisably human with only minor changes, evoke an almost anti-climactic response. Even as her eyes open to reveal monochrome white pupils and irises, the outcome aligns with the earlier interpretation of Sonya's transformation as subtly altered rather than monstrous.

Sonya's concluding line, stating that she feels "better" (0:04:03), significantly alters the trajectory of the film. This realisation of the twist provides explicit confirmation of the earlier interpretation, challenging genre conventions by rejecting the notion of transformation as inherently evil or horrifying. Instead, the film suggests that the transformation is inconsequential. This notion is reinforced by Sonya's nonchalant demeanour, steady tone, and relaxed body language, indicating her unaffected state despite the ordeal. By portraying Sonya's resilience in the face of pain and suffering, including skin peeling and hair shedding, the film subtly disrupts binary differentiations between normalcy and monstrosity. The brevity of the phrase "I feel better" allows for various interpretations, some of which open up deconstructive possibilities. For instance, the grammatical structure of the comparative form of the adjective "good" implies a reference point, such as a temporal marker like "than before." However, due to the lack of explicit reference, this moment remains ambiguous—it could mean feeling better than during the transformation or allude to feeling better than before the transformation. This linguistic imprecision holds deconstructive potential, relating to the ongoing exploration of normative and deviant modes of being and the potential benefits of deviating from norms. Drawing on Butler's notion of intelligibility as discussed in *Undoing Gender*, the film's resolution can be seen as a vital departure from a normative framework. Butler argues that:

There are advantages to remaining less than intelligible if intelligibility is understood as produced as a consequence of recognition according to prevailing social norms. Indeed, if my options are loathsome, if I have no desire to be recognised within a particular set of norms, then it follows that my sense of survival depends upon escaping the clutch of those norms by which recognition is conferred. (Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 3)

Quoting at length from *Undoing Gender* here creates an intriguing connection between *Retch*'s resolution after the transformation and Butler's influential writing on social recognition and the divergence from social norms. Through this lens, Sonya's transformation signals a departure from the norm, manifesting through harrowing physical changes. However, despite the pain endured from this process and the visible markers of difference it inscribed on Sonya's

body, her new form appears to be a less ‘loathsome’ choice than remaining within the normative framework of corporeality, as implied through the phrase “I feel better”. Although Sonya now falls out of the normative framework necessary for social recognition due to her changed appearance, which constitutes a certain “departure of the human” (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 3), the process nevertheless initiates a “process of remaking the human” (4), as Sonya nonetheless remains human in demeanour, voice, and body language and largely humanoid in corporeal form. Thus, normative conceptualisations of the boundaries between what is human and what is not are deconstructed and subsequently reconstructed.

A crucial part of being recognised as human is related to one’s ability to conform to social norms governing valid expressions of sex/gender. Butler probes these boundaries, posing questions such as, “If I am a certain gender, will I still be regarded as part of the human? Will the ‘human’ expand to include me in its reach?” (*Undoing Gender* 2). In *Retch*, another step is added to the string of questions and conclusions, asking: If my body is shaped/ (or shaping) a certain way, will my gender remain recognisable? And then, if not, as Butler asks, “will I still be regarded as part of the human?” (*Undoing Gender* 2). Through embracing her transformation and deviation from social norms, Sonya challenges restrictive and binary categories, reflecting the “potential revolution inherent in any process of transition” (Preciado, *Monster*, 32). This affirmative portrayal of transformation, both on the visual and the narrative level, reflects the potential inherent in body horror to deconstruct binary conceptualisations of sex/gender and the body by stretching and reconfiguring the body and, with it, the limits of normative and ‘normal’ sexed and gendered embodiment.

CHAPTER 5

The Invaded Body

Every day, our bodies encounter a multitude of bacteria and microorganisms, contributing to an ecosystem within us that extends far beyond our conscious awareness. While often invisible and imperceptible, hosting such parasitic life forms can provoke a profound sense of unease, as it plays on our bodies' inherent vulnerability to be invaded and overtaken by a foreign entity. As Ian Haig states, "[t]he parasite sees the confrontation of our own bodies as a key source of body horror – an internal reminder that we carry within us the potential seeds of our own destruction." (Haig 89). In the horror film, this discomfort is amplified through narratives of bodily invasion, where fears of parasitic, alien organisms manifest into depictions of gruesome and life-threatening internal terrors and dangers (Creed, *Carnavalesque*, 145). This motif of bodily invasion in horror films has persisted for decades, with classics such as *The Thing* (Dir. John Carpenter) or *Shivers* (Dir. David Cronenberg) spectacularly exploring the human body as a site of intrusion, manipulation, or infection, vulnerable to forces within the boundaries of our bodies yet helpless against them.

As becomes evident in the subsequent analysis of the two films *Progeny* and *Susurrus*, certain similarities exist between the films in the category of transformation discussed in the previous chapter. Primarily, these similarities concern the changing outward appearance of the protagonist's body, which is often altered by parasitism in a way that might be reminiscent of the transformations and bodily changes discussed in the previous chapter. However, the focus on invasion as a distinct category allows for a nuanced analysis and comparison of the twofold breaching of bodily borders, which is uniquely constitutive of films depicting bodily invasion: first, these boundaries are breached through the intrusion of the parasite, and as a result, these borders may metamorphose to accommodate the parasite. Building on affirmative readings of horror films, such as Jack Halberstam's and McRoy's respective analyses of deconstructive filmic and narrative elements in depictions of splatter, or Sunny Hawkins's analysis of the *Alien* franchise, I argue that bodily invasion serves as a catalyst for destabilising binaries of sex/gender and the body in distinct ways. As the parasites infiltrate the respective body's barriers and induce corporeal changes, the once-singular bodies are rendered unfamiliar and no longer conform to normative scripts according to which bodies are generally sexed/gendered.

Invasion and parasitism, at their core, negotiate questions of the penetrability of the body and its borders, concepts strongly imbued with gendered connotations. As Erin Harrington, building on Barbara Creed's work on the monstrous-feminine, observes, classic depictions of bodily invasion and parasitism are often related to notions of hegemonic femininity and masculinity (Harrington 105). While invasion is connotated with the binary conceptualisations of femininity as open, soft, and irrational, masculinity is constructed in accordance to qualities of hyper-rationality and hardness (Harrington 105). Consequently, in horror films, the dynamic of invasion as an extreme form of penetration is often constructed as distinctly feminine, as seen in classics such as *Rosemary's Baby* (Dir. Roman Polanski) and *Demon Seed*, where it is precisely the women's "female openness" which allows intrusion and violation in the first place (Harrington 105). By association, cultural representations of the male invaded or penetrated body are often associated with femininity, or the equation suggested by Jonathan Mark Kemp that "penetrated male body = feminine body" (Kemp 14). However, building on Kemp's observation that this binary logic may be unsettled by cultural text by rending it "unstable and 'illogical'" (Kemp 15), I argue that the models of masculinity (and peripherally, femininity) which arise from such depictions of the invasion and penetration of the body's borders, also have an inherent deconstructive momentum.

The subsequent subchapters offer deconstructive readings of the motif of invasion body horror in the two selected short films *Progeny* (Dir. Justin Daering) and *Susurrus* (Dir. Anthony Cousins). By examining the filmic depictions of the protagonists' loss of bodily singularity and integrity, these readings explore the foundational binaries underpinning ideologies of bodily stability and the implications of bodily invasion. While the previous chapter on the films *Relic* and *Retch* focused on the motif of transformation, examining spontaneous metamorphosis and reconfiguration, this chapter emphasises invasion, highlighting changes in bodily composition affected through the penetration and destabilisation of bodily boundaries.

Beginning with a close reading of *Progeny* in section 5.1, I investigate the implications of gender reversal and pregnancy on binaries of sex/gender and the body. I discuss the promise of gender reversal in the film, detecting a crisis in masculinity affected through this premise. I argue that while on a narrative layer, the fragility of the concepts of masculinity and femininity is highlighted, the film's depiction of body horror deconstructs the basis of binary sex/gender altogether.

Finally, my close reading of *Susurrus* in subchapter 5.2 follows the degenerative transformation of its protagonist and his increasing mental control by a parasite he ingested on a routine jog. This subchapter studies the protagonist's willing cultivation of the ancient parasite

Susurrus, leading to a gradual fusion of their bodies. Through this narrative premise, the filmic depiction of the protagonist's willing incorporation of the alien organism into his body and, ultimately, his mind, *Susurrus* subtly challenges notions of individual subjectivity and implies the possibility of plural subjectivity and diverse embodiment. The gradual fusion between host and parasite suggests a fluidity of identity that transcends binary categorisations.

Despite their differences in the function and depiction of the body, these films share two central similarities. On the one hand, the motif of body horror in both films functions to deconstruct binary conceptualisations of sex/gender and the body by representing the human body as a site of intrusion and penetration, presenting bodies as sites of fluidity and hybridity rather than fixed, biologically determined entities. On the other hand, these films deconstruct representational conventions in broader society and genre-specific conventions of horror film.

5.1 Progeny – Deconstructing Masculinity through Bodily Invasion

In feminist science fiction scholarship, writers have often argued for the genre's potential to challenge conventional notions of gender and sexuality (Hollinger 23). Justin Daering's science-fiction-horror hybrid *Progeny* exemplifies this potential by constructing alternative societal dynamics. Given *Progeny*'s genre hybridity, it is useful to define body horror not as a genre but as a motif. As I discussed in Chapter 2.3, defining body horror as a subgenre risks making it overly flexible and broad, diluting its distinctiveness and risking losing the analytical and definitional rigour necessary to draw viable comparisons between individual films. However, viewing body horror as a motif allows it to transcend genre boundaries and appear in various genres, including science fiction. *Progeny*, while a hybrid film, clearly employs body horror through its graphic depiction of bodily invasion and the associated fear and threat, making body horror a central motif of the film. Given the centrality of body horror and the narrative premise of gender reversal in *Progeny*, the subsequent analysis focuses on these two main aspects of the film.

In *Progeny*'s universe, humans and humanoid aliens coexist on Earth in a societal hierarchy where aliens hold higher social status. In this universe, humans and aliens coexist on Earth within a societal hierarchy, favouring aliens with a higher social status. Within this world, humans willingly become hosts for alien offspring, a tradition steeped in the belief that these aliens are descendants of Jesus. Based on this belief, becoming hosts is seen as an "opportunity" (0:13:16) to elevate their social standing. The film centres on Tanner and Emily, a married couple whose lives are upended when Tanner is unwillingly implanted with his boss's alien child during a hunting trip. Determined to remove the parasitic fetus, Tanner asks his wife to

help him carry out an illegal operation to remove the parasite. Emily, initially hesitant, ultimately assists in the risky procedure. The film concludes with an intense confrontation between the couple and Tanner's boss, Mr. Walton, who, aware of their actions, confronts them, resulting in a violent conflict that ends in Walton's death at Emily's hands.

While scholars such as Barbara Creed have emphasised monstrous femininity in classic horror film's depiction of invasion such as in *The Brood* (Dir. David Cronenberg) or *Rosemary's Baby* (Dir. Roman Polanski), Linda Williams observes that these films "[set] the agenda for a future mode of body horror in which men can get pregnant too" (*Masculinity* 36). Notably, in Williams' reading of Cronenberg, she stresses the possibility of reading male pregnancy or bodily invasion as something other than feminising the male body it affects (Williams, *Masculinity* 36). Instead, she suggests that it is "also possible to read the metaphoric relationship between inhabitation and pregnancy as signalling a wider sexual breakdown. Rather than inhabitation feminising the invaded subject as a consequence of its likeness to pregnancy, the aberrant pregnancies of body horror might be just one way in which inhabitation expresses itself" (Williams, *Masculinities* 36).

First, subsection 5.1.1 provides an analysis of the film's narrative premise by comparing the two main constructions of femininity and masculinity in the film's couples. This analysis reveals two competing models of sex/gender dynamics: one that feminises Tanner due to his reproductive capacity, and another that suggests hypermasculinity as a defence against the emasculation effected through the penetrability of the male body which is at the core of *Progeny's* worldbuilding. Building on the deconstructive poststructuralist approach to sex/gender and the body developed in Chapter 1, this section highlights the fragility and artificiality of binary ideologies linking reproduction to femininity and maintaining essentialist gender constructs. Through a subsequent close reading of the depiction of body horror in subsection 5.1.2, I demonstrate how body horror metonymically unsettles the ideology of invasion, penetration and effeminacy. Drawing on McRoy's analysis of the filmic techniques applied to depict splatter, the analysis shows how the film's audio-visual depiction of invasion body horror shifts the focus from sexed/gendered qualities to the inherent vulnerability of the human body. The section concludes by discussing the implications of these findings at both the narrative and metonymic levels. Beyond the deconstruction of assumedly fixed norms of masculinity and femininity, the motif of invasion body horror disrupts the foundational ideologies underpinning the narrative's oscillating construction of masculinity between effeminacy and hypermasculinity. This offers a deconstructive potential to "disidentify" and

“debinarify” (Preciado, *Monster* 30¹⁴), providing an escape from rigid societal structures and norms of sex/gender and the body.¹⁵

5.1.1 *Between Effeminacy and Hyper-Masculinity*

As outlined above, *Progeny*’s premise of the reversal of sex/gender roles surrounding reproduction within a horror-sci-fi narrative results in the circulation of two models of masculinity, both of which seem deeply intertwined with the feminisation of bodily invasion and penetration. By exploring these models, this section argues that *Progeny* exposes the constructedness and fragility of these binary gender ideologies.

The main construction of masculinity (and oppositional femininity) in *Progeny* is evident in the married couple Tanner and Emily, who function as the film’s protagonists. In their relationship dynamic, the film’s premise of sex/gender reversal seems most clearly fleshed out. Tanner, who in the course of the narrative experiences abuse and rape, is from the film’s onset characterised as timid, shy and passive – attributes typically connotated with femininity, appears to be feminised solely through the possibility in the universe of *Progeny* to be implanted with an alien offspring. In Tanner’s character, the complex relationship between conceptualisations of impenetrability and masculinity (Kemp 159) is strongly evident. By depicting Tanner as clearly uncomfortable with typically masculine skills and traits, the film inevitably feminises Tanner, even before the attack during the hunting trip. For instance, Tanner’s inability to handle and assemble the shotgun in preparation for the hunting trip subtly feminises him, especially when he subsequently hands the gun to his wife, Emily, before he starts taking care of dinner. Not only does this imply Tanner as an effeminate character, but it also constructs Emily, who confidently handles the gun, as his polar, masculinised opposite. This characterisation implies a connection between biology and character, reinforcing the notion that it is impossible to disentangle reproductive capacities from essentialist notions of femininity.

Tanner’s feminine-coded passivity can be further identified through the indirect characterisation provided before his attack on the hunting trip. In conversation with Walton, Tanner reveals that it has been seven years but does not take the opportunity to actively and directly seek out a promotion. Even when Walton asks him if he is “looking for a promotion” (0:06:10), Tanner answers that he does not “wanna be pushy, no” (0:06:11), although having

¹⁴ Page number refers to ‘ePub’ version of Preciado’s book.

¹⁵ By addressing both the narrative premise and the metonymical potential of body horror, I do not intend to create an artificial opposition between the two. Rather, I aim to demonstrate how the form and function of body horror can extend and deepen the deconstructive potential inherent in the narrative.

confessed to Emily to hoping he would get his promotion during the trip. Tanner is thus represented as decidedly timid, as he seems continually anxious to make a wrong move. Overall, this portrayal suggests that in the world of *Progeny*, the social expectation for and capacity of men to become hosts to alien progenies impacts their masculinity. The looming ‘threat’ of bodily invasion challenges the conventional notions of masculine toughness, invulnerability, hardness and impenetrability. This potentiality for bodily penetration, whether voluntary or involuntary, subverts hegemonic gender structures, placing men in a position historically constructed as feminine – marked by notions of vulnerability, openness, and penetrability (Harrington 105). Observing such portrayals, Ian Conrich argues bodily invasion “threatens masculinity itself by taking over the male body, penetrating its very being” (122). As masculinity has been founded upon the “repudiation of the feminine” (Kemp 5), the attribution of these qualities onto men’s bodies, exemplified in Tanner’s case, engenders a process of feminisation.

However, a contrasting construction of hypermasculinity emerges when examining the portrayal of secondary male characters in *Progeny*. This hypermasculinity, defined as an “exaggeration of masculine stereotypes” (A Dictionary of Gender Studies, “hyper-masculinity”), will be discussed with a focus on Tanner’s co-worker, Darryl, who embodies a contrasting model of masculinity to Tanner’s. For instance, in *Progeny*’s workplace introduction scene, a notable interaction unfolds between Tanner and his colleagues Darryl and Clint, highlighting the contrast between Tanner’s effeminacy and the hypermasculine behaviour of the other men.

DARRYL	Taking a nap?
TANNER	Hey, Darryl, no I was just focused.
DARRYL	Relax, I’m just fucking with you... Shit, Clint, I guess you’re gonna have to do some actual work around here instead of jerking off all day.
CLINT	So that’s what you were doing on your paternity leave, huh?
DARRYL	Wouldn’t you like to find out, shithead.
TANNER	Hey, how is the little guy? (0:01:52-0:02:15).

The conversation between the men demonstrates how Tanner’s shyness and insecurity clashes with his coworkers’ immature, hypermasculine behaviour. Despite having just come back from his “paternity leave” (0:02:08), neither Darryl nor Clint addresses the alien progeny at all, instead roughly joking around about masturbation, unable to even communicate with each other without emphasising their masculinity through their choice of wording or topic. Tanner, on the other hand, after being spatially excluded from the conversation for a few moments, as evidenced in Figure 7, attempts to re-enter the conversation by asking after the progeny. Figure 7 depicts Tanner’s exclusion and hesitation to speak up in the hypermasculine conversation. Even when he does re-enter the conversation, his question disrupts the other men’s immature

banter, forcing them to change topics and talk about the alien child to which Darryl and his wife Nancy have become hosts.



Figure 7: *Progeny* – Tanner talks to his coworkers (0:02:15).

Darryl's exaggerated hegemonic masculinity also becomes apparent in the lack of paternal responsibility he takes on throughout the film. Firstly, as the discussed scene above illustrates, he promptly returns to work after giving birth to the alien progeny, presumably leaving his wife Nancy to assume all caretaking responsibilities. This observation hints at a hegemonic relationship dynamic that expects men to be the rational and hard-working bread earners of the family while women are responsible for caring for the children. This notion is further strengthened through Darryl's participation in the hunting trip, where it seems self-evident that he does not take care of the child and instead is out drinking beer. In Darryl's case, it does not seem as if his bodily invasion or the penetrability of his body in general has had a feminising effect. Instead, his character seems to suggest that even in a world where men and women can assume similar biological roles, men are less capable of taking adequate care of the children. In this sense, the examination of Darryl's character demonstrates that the relationship of Tanner and Emily is not the only model of femininity and masculinity at work and that in addition to a feminised masculinity such as that of Tanner, a hypermasculine model exists in Darryl and his wife, where hegemonic masculinity and femininity seem to remain firmly in place.

The viability of the comparison between Darryl's and Tanner's enactment of masculinity is strengthened due to their similar predicament: As it turns out throughout *Progeny*, Darryl had experienced the same abuse at the hands of their boss, which makes a comparison between the two characters even more insightful. Both characters seem to experience a crisis in their masculinity based not only on the overall societal emasculation that is effected through the disruption of the rigid expectations for masculinity as hard,

impenetrable, and naturally rational, but also presumably through their experienced rape. However, through the process of bodily invasion and penetration, this image of ideal masculinity is put into crisis, as men are faced with those misogynist minimisations usually only women experience, such as their actions and feelings being outside of their control due to the influence of “hormones” (0:14:06). Although this rhetoric relies on hegemonic ideologies of sex/gender and the body, it reveals a crisis in the conceptualisation of binary conceptualisations of sex/gender and the body as the biological foundation of these beliefs are destabilised through the practice of becoming hosts.

5.1.2 Primary Vulnerability¹⁶

Examining *Progeny*'s constructions of sex/gender dynamics, especially its construction of masculinity, the previous subsection has examined how the reversal of reproductive roles puts binary conceptualisation and masculinity in crisis. The present subsection conducts a thorough examination of the scenes leading up to and encompassing Tanner's rape by his employer, Mr Walton, during their stay at the hunting cabin, arguing that through the filmic depiction of body horror metonymically unsettles this underlying ideology of invasion, penetration and effeminacy. Thus, my close reading of the assault itself focuses on the filmic depiction itself to argue that from an audiovisual perspective, the binary is not only reversed but instead disrupted altogether.

Although the scenes leading up to Walton's attack on Tanner are characterised by the suspenseful construction of a hierarchical dynamic where Tanner appears inferior, the depiction of body horror is removed from such dynamics. As Walton initiates his attack and abruptly seizes Tanner, thrusting him to the ground, the cinematography and camerawork reflect the escalating tension and unrest. Departing from the slow-paced camerawork that the film has exhibited before, this sequence uses unconventional angles to heighten the gravity of the conflict. Shot from a low angle at floor level, Figure 8 depicts Tanner and Walton during the attack, emphasising Tanner's helplessness as he falls face-first to the ground. When he eventually lands, the camera flips and thus creates an alliance between Tanner's body and the camera, setting it up as the scene's central focus.

¹⁶ The term 'primary vulnerability' is taken from Judith Butler's writing about the body in *Undoing Gender* (22-28). I provide a definition of the term in the course of this subsection.



Figure 8: *Progeny* – Walton attacks Tanner (0:06:39).

The moment of the attack signifies an essential shift in the film's soundscape, marked by discernible changes in both foley, sound effects, and the film score to emphasise Tanner's bodily state. Previously, the sonic landscape during the stay at the hunting cabin had predominantly featured ambient sounds of nature, including birdsong and cricket chirping. As Tanner is attacked, the ambient sounds suddenly disappear, replaced by a high-pitched ringing that gradually increases in volume. Simultaneously with Tanner's fall, a low bass note descends in a glissando, mirroring the trajectory of Tanner's fall to the ground. This auditory motif, coupled with an additional pulsating drone sound, is another instance where focus is placed on Tanner's body. The pulsating ostinato of the drone, in particular, functions as a reference to corporeality, subtly reminiscent of the sound of an artificially altered heartbeat. As the scene progresses, the rhythm intensifies, accelerating in tandem with the escalating tension and amplifying the impending threat of bodily invasion. This reference to corporeality is further complemented by the film's use of hyper-realistic sound effects.¹⁷ The sounds of skin ripping and tearing, added to the subtly corporeal sounds of the drone, further evoke the fragility and malleability of the human body.

It is important to note that the assault scene in *Progeny* does not completely align with the narrow definition of body horror I proposed in Chapter 2.3. Therefore, a brief explanation of why this film is included is warranted. Although the assault scene technically depicts external violence on the protagonist's body—an aspect excluded from my narrow definition of body horror—*Progeny* is horrifying not necessarily because of the violence inflicted on Tanner's

¹⁷ In motion picture sound design, hyperrealist sound design uses Foley sound effects to enhance realism by crafting synthetic elements for a meticulously constructed illusion of reality. Despite being divorced from their original context, these artificial sounds seamlessly blend into the film's audio landscape, often perceived as more authentic and immersive than on-set recordings (Puronas 181).

body. Nor does it evoke a "fear of other people" in the way slasher films do. Instead, the horror arises from the prospect of something entering the body and growing uncontrollably, a process central to the film's terror. This interpretation is reinforced by the depiction of the assault as shown in Figure 8. The wound on Tanner's neck opens into a clean cut, devoid of blood, which shifts the focus to the body's vulnerability and openness. This detail, showing multiple layers of skin, emphasises the unsettling idea of intrusion rather than the graphic violence typically associated with body horror.

Eventually, the sounds recede and are replaced by a more realistic-sounding heartbeat. This use of sound design could be categorised, following Michel Chion, as objective-internal sound (76). Chion defines this kind of sound in his book *Audio-Vision* as one that originates from within the narrative world but "corresponds to the physical and/or mental interiority of a character" (76). As such, the heartbeats (both artificial and realistic renditions) centre on one of the most universal human experiences: the beating of the heart, which is a function of the human body regardless of any sexed/gendered or biological connotations and conceptualisations. In addition to the pulsating sounds of the heart, which anchor the attack in the shared human experience of fear, the skin, as another shared marker of humanity, is conjured in *Progeny*. The skin, as an organ which is supposed to function as a protective layer and barrier or even border against external threats (Conrich and Sedgewick 183-184), thus emerges as critically vulnerable to invasion by parasitic organisms and unwilling contamination in *Progeny*. This scene accentuates the vulnerability of human skin, typically regarded as a protective barrier against external threats to enter (Conrich and Sedgewick 183-184).



Figure 9: *Progeny* – Tanner's neck is sliced open (0:06:47).

Notably, in *Progeny*, conception does not occur through a specifically gendered body part. Instead, the only biological requirement for conception appears to be the host's neck – a distinctly ungendered body part. The framing further removes any gendered connotations from

the scene. As depicted in Figure 9, the shot is conducted as an extreme close-up, showcasing only a fragment of the back of Tanner's head. By capturing the neck in an extreme close-up, the corporeal and gendered connotations are even further extracted (McRoy 198). In refraining from portraying Tanner's body or actions through a gendered lens, the filmic expression of the scene depicted in Figure 9 underscores the universal vulnerability of the human body to instability and invasion, irrespective of its sexed biological characteristics.

As Tanner's skin yields effortlessly to the alien's blade-like appendage, the scene underscores the inevitability of human fragility. Through such "primary vulnerability" (Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 23) as defined by Judith Butler, the body and the self are recognised as constituted by a "porous boundary, given over to others" (25).¹⁸ By emphasising this primary vulnerability through the close-up depiction of the opened skin and its layers, *Progeny* shifts the focus of invasion body horror. It moves away from correlations between invasion sexed/gendered biology and the corresponding connotations of femininity, highlighting instead the self's shared containment by only a "porous boundary", "given over" (Butler *Undoing* 25) not only to others but also to the threat of invasion and infestation. This finding is particularly relevant in the context of the previous section, which detected a sense of masculinity put in crisis through the reversal of penetrability and the instilment of a certain reproductive capacity in men in *Progeny*. While my analysis of the narrative structure in *Progeny* demonstrated that masculinity seems to be put into crisis through the reversal of certain biological roles which have been historically associated with the 'female' body and with femininity, the filmic representation of the body horror motif itself cannot be so easily connected to binary notions of sex/gender and the body and femininity and masculinity. Instead of "[threatening] masculinity" (Conrich 122), the assault and subsequent opening up of the body threatens the human body on a much more general level.

Through its narrative, *Progeny* initially sets up a crisis in the binary understanding of gender by portraying two oppositional modes of masculinity in crisis due to the disruption of some of the foundational differences Western societies have constructed between masculinity and femininity since antiquity. However, through the motif of body and horror, *Progeny* reveals the fragility of those assumedly fixed categories and radically disrupts the foundational underpinnings of the conceptualisation of invasion as inherently feminising and emasculating. Instead, the universality of the body's openness and its penetrability is foregrounded, providing

¹⁸ Although Butler's essay primarily addresses violence, war, and the importance of recognizing that "there are radically different ways in which human physical vulnerability is distributed across the globe" (Butler 24), her terminology is valuable in this context. Applying her concepts helps to avoid generalising ideas of vulnerability by using the term 'universal'.

a means to “disidentify” and “debinarify” (Preciado, *Monster* 30) the rigid norms imposed by hegemonic and patriarchal structures

5.2 *When Susurrus Stirs* – The Masculinisation of Invasion

Anthony Cousin’s *Susurrus* is the last of two ALTER short films centred on the invaded body examined in this thesis. It tells the story of a man who becomes the host to an ancient creature named *Susurrus*. Through the parasite’s gradual infiltration and assimilation into the protagonist’s body, he undergoes a profound physical, biological, and psychological metamorphosis.

The subsequent close reading of the film primarily focuses on two main aspects of the film. First, section 5.2.1 explores the notion of willing infestation and invasion, arguing that through depictions of bodily fusion and transformation, the film renders fluid the body’s boundaries along with binary conceptualisations of biology and, thus, the categories of sex/gender. Secondly, section 5.2.2 discusses how the eventual fusion of parasite and host through Judith Butler’s notion of performativity, arguing that through the eventual fusion of the protagonist’s subjectivity with that of the parasite, traditional conceptualisations of bodily and psychic integrity and gender as a mental expression of biological sex are deconstructed.

5.2.1 *Cultivating Invasion*

Parasitic infestation – even when it does not include imaginary monsters, alien lifeforms or monstrous transformations – might be a fear that is buried deeply in many people, even if only subconsciously. However, the primary goal upon discovering such an infection is usually the same, whether in horror films or our real lives: getting rid of it. However, in *Susurrus*, the premise of parasitic invasion plays out somewhat differently. Upon ingesting a seemingly inconspicuous insect on a routine jog, the film’s unnamed protagonist quickly notices the presence of the parasite in his body – and begins “cultivating” (0:01:20) the organism in his body.

The protagonist’s and *Susurrus*’s fusion is prominently portrayed on an audiovisual level, particularly the practice of blending multiple image layers. This visual strategy is exemplified in Figure 10, which serves as a significant early instance of using this technique in the film. The still depicts how the scene blends multiple image layers, achieved through opacity adjustments to depict the relationship between the protagonist and the creature inhabiting his body. Comprising three distinct layers, the shot depicts the protagonist seated in a meditation pose, overlaid with an image sequence resembling a spinal column. Positioned atop the image layer of the protagonist’s seated figure, the second image layer obscures the man’s facial

features, abstracting his presence within the frame from an individual human being to a human body. Instead of showing this body, however, the focus of the image shifts to the abnormally moving and pulsating spine. Despite introducing a third image layer, rather than redirecting attention back to the man's figure, the close-up of his mouth and nose further abstracts the image. The hyper-realistic sound design draws attention even further away from the protagonist, using scratching sounds to underscore the perceived physicality of the spine's movement. The resulting noises evoke the sonic quality of the crawling of an insect. Through these audiovisual techniques, the spine, typically associated with stability and integrity, emerges as one of the first body parts to begin to accommodate the parasite through the transformation of its conventional human form and physicality.

With the wriggling spine in the centre of the frame obscuring the protagonist's face and the focus placed on the movement of the spine through the sound design, the protagonist's diminishing centrality within the narrative and his own changing body emerges as a subtle motif. Nevertheless, the visual depiction of this process does not connote terror or horror but feelings of wonder. The protagonist's description of how he imagines the creature slowly travelling through his organs and nervous system, envisioning his body in turn reaching out to the parasite, adds further depth to the shot depicted in Figure 10.



Figure 10: *Susurrus*-Three blended image layers (0:01:32).

Accompanied by first-person voiceover narration, the protagonist reflects on his connection with the entity, remarking: “Susurrus wasn’t always in my brain. I’ve been cultivating him. I named him Susurrus after the analogue that accompanies his voice as he creeps through my nervous system. When I meditate, I imagine the fibres of my spinal cord stretching out towards him.” (0:01:20). As he speaks, the scene remains fixed on the blended-over image sequence, with him in a meditation pose, reinforcing the sense of calm confidence conveyed through the voiceover. This calmness and lack of terror or fear in the voiceover’s tone

are also mirrored in the sentence's semantics. The protagonist's naming of the parasitic entity is notable for several reasons. Firstly, his statement that there is an "analogue that accompanies [Susurrus's] voice" (0:01:20) implies that the parasite is internally communicating with the protagonist, suggesting it possesses reason, language, and logic rather than being a mindless entity. Additionally, while the protagonist names the parasite, he himself remains nameless, creating an unusual dynamic that further highlights the protagonist's obscured presence both within the film and his own body. This hierarchy is further indicated by the fact that, although the protagonist names the parasite, the parasite essentially names himself by speaking to the protagonist in the first place, distinguished by his unique "voice" (0:01:20). This dynamic mirrors the visual composition depicted in Figure 10, where, despite being centred in the frame, the protagonist appears to be hiding in plain sight, as highlighted by the visual overlay of image layers.

The protagonist's voluntary "cultivation" of Susurrus, which eventually leads to the creature's infiltration into his brain, departs from typical invasion narratives like *Progeny* or horror classics such as *The Thing* or *Alien*. Unlike these films, where such parasitic invasion and growth are portrayed through a predominantly negative lens, the protagonist of *Susurrus* expresses pride and fascination with the process, suggesting a sense of purpose and connection. The notion of a symbiotic relationship between parasite and host is further strengthened by the visual aesthetic of the images (see Figure 10), with their neon-lit colours evoking a sense of wonder and marvel. In fact, it seems the invasion is enabled only through the protagonist's willing contribution.

The protagonist's inclination to participate in the parasitic invasion and his willingness to let his body be penetrated, permeated, and ultimately controlled by the parasite is intricately connected to dynamics of sex/gender and the body as well as conceptualisations of femininity and masculinity. As discussed in the previous chapter on *Progeny*, the concept of bodily invasion and the penetration of the body and its borders is typically associated with femininity. However, in *Susurrus*, this invasion explicitly goes the route of masculinity. It is precisely through the path of logic and choice and even stereotypical masculinity that the invasion takes place, as the parasite coos the protagonist by suggesting he just lean back in a luxurious limousine, in a "soft leather chair" (0:00:20), and "turn the internal weather control to 'perfect'" (0:00:25). Through this rhetoric, *Susurrus* disrupts the binary underpinnings of classic horror depictions of bodily invasion, where the invasion often seems to be enabled by the respective characters' "female openness" (Harrington 105). In *Susurrus*, this conceptualisation is challenged, and it is paradoxically through archetypal symbols of masculinity, such as the status

symbol of the luxurious car, and the reasoning through logic that bodily invasion, so often conceptualised as an inherently feminine experience, occurs. Thus, as the film's audio-visual expression establishes the borders and boundaries of the protagonist's body as permeable and his body invaded, the film's voiceover intricately connects this experience of body horror to the protagonist's masculinity, disrupting the binary pairs of penetrability/impenetrability and feminine/masculine by suggesting that it is precisely through masculinity that invasion is allowed and cultivated.

5.2.2 *The Performativity of Bodily Invasion, Infestation and Singularity*

Building upon the parasite's centrality in the frame and the voiceover in the previous subsection, this section examines the performative dimension of the bodily invasion depicted in *Susurrus*.

Mirroring the paradoxical representation of the protagonist as a secondary character despite his significant presence within the film's frame, the scene depicted in Figures 11 and 12 further reinforces the film's construction of co-presence and implies *Susurrus*'s dominance. As the protagonist investigates his mouth at the beginning of the parasitic infestation, symbolised by a scratching sensation in his throat (Figure 11), the camera transitions from a medium close-up of him facing the bathroom mirror to a frog-level view from below his eye level, seemingly shot from within his oral cavity (Figure 12). Notably, the shot in Figure 12 implies a point-of-view shot from *Susurrus*'s perspective, granting agency to the parasite. While point-of-view shots typically provide insight into a character's inner thoughts, in this case, the shot highlights *Susurrus*'s presence and influence over the protagonist. This visual and narrative construction creates tension, further explored in the previous subsection, where the protagonist's naming of *Susurrus* reflects both agency and passivity. If attempting to categorise these acts according to the hegemonic binary such as 'masculinity=activity' and 'femininity=passivity', the case of *Susurrus* represents a veritable challenge to pick one of those two, as the protagonist is always already acting *because* of *Susurrus*, and nevertheless acts through his own volition. He is being invaded, which is deeply coded with femininity (Kemp 5), but the invasion paradoxically seems to be only enabled through the protagonist's masculinity. In this way, *Susurrus* disrupts the logic of binary coconceptualisations related to sex/gender.



Figure 11: *Susurrus* – The protagonist inspects his mouth (0:02:22).



Figure 12: *Susurrus* – Point-of-view shot from inside to oral cavity (0:02:30).

The ambition with which the protagonist fosters *Susurrus*'s growth reaches a climax when the protagonist ultimately rejects medical advice to have the parasite removed despite experiencing discomfort and even pain. This decision significantly shifts the protagonist's "psychological interiority" (Butler *Performative* 272). As the first person-narrator reflects: "[the doctors] want me to remove him but my answer is 'no'. This is the moment he and I became 'we'" (0:02:13). This moment, where the parasite's presence within the protagonist is no longer distinct but forms a new, hybrid identity with the host, can be valuably examined through Butler's concept of performativity as new realities are enacted and produced through performative acts.

Drawing on linguistic speech act theory, Butler explains that "a performative is that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names" (*Bodies* 13). In her own theory of performativity, Butler extends the classic paradigm of performativity and argues that linguistic structures shape our broader reality via the everyday speech acts we engage in,

focusing on the performative production of the binary categories of sex/gender. As discussed in Chapter 2, Butler defines gender as “the act that one does, the act one performs” (*Performative* 272), which ultimately “constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority” (*Performative* 279). They further argue that “[i]f the ‘reality’ of gender is constituted by the performance itself, then there is no recourse to an essential and unrealised ‘sex’ or ‘gender’ which gender performances ostensibly express” (*Performative* 278). Butler’s concept of performativity thus suggests that identity categories are not essential truths but repeated sets of actions that shape and construct reality.

Through Butler’s lens of performativity, it becomes evident that the protagonist’s refusal to remove *Susurrus* not only verbalises a decision but also enacts a transformation in identity and psychological interiority. In this context, the protagonist’s rejection of the doctor’s advice to remove *Susurrus* represents a performative act through which he redefines his relationship with *Susurrus*. By declaring this moment as “the moment he and I became ‘we’” (0:02:13), he rejects the doctor’s attempt to separate them and establishes a new, plural identity with the parasite. The declaration thus functions as a performative utterance where speaking itself materialises an effect that will equally reshape the protagonist’s identity from the inside out. *Susurrus* graphically depicts how the body and mind are reshaped through performative processes such as the ritualised act of cultivating the parasite and the performative decision of not to removing the parasite. By linking bodily invasion to hegemonic symbols of masculinity and the protagonist’s rational (and thus, equally masculine) choice, *Susurrus* subverts the binary oppositions of impenetrability/ penetrability/, masculine/feminine, active/passive, and rational/irrational.

However, *Susurrus* does not simply depict a reversal of these binaries. Instead, it visually and narratively displays the simultaneous presence of these signifiers. Through such a simultaneity, the binary logic of these conceptualisations, which hinges on an ‘either/or’ realisation of the binaries, is disrupted. The protagonist is both exercising choice and relinquishing it, exerting control and succumbing to control, being both active (as in the act of naming) and passive (due to *Susurrus*’s voice, effectively naming itself while the protagonist remains nameless). Visually, this is reflected through the film’s use of the blended over-image layers as discussed in subsection 5.2.1, where both the protagonist and *Susurrus* are present in the same frame, the outside of the body over blended with the infested inside. On a corporeal level, a similar disruption of logic can be detected, as the protagonist’s body starts deforming and turning into more and more grotesque shapes, portrayed as if his skin was slowly breaking up, letting the inside of the body seep out in the progress, in a permeability and openness that

might be read as feminising, where it not for his aggressive and almost threatening demeanour throughout the film.

While the preceding two analytical chapters have subscribed to an affirmative interpretation of (body) horror, highlighting its capacity for metonymical deconstruction, this thesis refrains from advocating for a monolithic appraisal assessment of the examined films. Instead, the following chapter examines the films from a bit more distance, discussing the tendencies that transpire between films in the same category as well as between the two established categories.

CHAPTER 6

Binary Structures in the Analysed Films

The previous sections have analysed how the motif of body horror in the four selected films –*Relic*, *Retch*, *Progeny* and *Susurrus*– functions as a deconstructive element, revealing the instability of the binary structures underpinning the films’ narrative frameworks. However, as the present section discusses, these findings also highlight persistent hegemonic ideals of masculinity and femininity, suggesting a gendered division in the types of body horror representation identified in the selected films.

This section further discusses these findings by comparing the representational politics within the films chosen for close analysis as well as the broader list of 14 films in the categories of transformation and invasion. The section commences with an examination of the binary gender differentiation in the four films discussed in the previous chapters in section 6.1 before extending the discussion to the broader set of 14 films in section 6.2.

6.1 Upholding Binary Conceptualisations of Femininity and Masculinity

Comparing the four films in the categories of transformation and invasion reveals a key observation: both protagonists undergoing transformation are implied as women. In contrast, those experiencing invasion are implied as men. This apparent gendered predictability in the occurrence of body horror is particularly significant in the light of recent decades of feminist gender and horror scholarship. Scholars such as Barbara Creed and Carol Clover have provided valuable insights into the gendered dynamics within the horror genre, as discussed in Chapter 2.1. On the one hand, Creed’s work examines the gendered depiction of monstrosity, while Clover challenges the notion of women’s sole victimisation in horror films, highlighting the complex interplay between representation, characterisation, and spectatorship. While Creed and Clover’s seminal studies focus on representational dynamics at opposite ends of the victim/monster divide, the findings from this thesis’s analysis suggest a more intricate dynamic: While men’s bodies in the analysed films are depicted as vulnerable only to external invasion or infection leading to bodily change, women’s bodies are portrayed as inherently predisposed to undergoing metamorphosis without such external catalysts. This contrast reinforces

gendered stereotypes wherein women's bodies are depicted as inherently more open, fluid, mutable, and susceptible to change and transformation (Harrington 105). In contrast, men's bodies undergo transformation and bodily reconfiguration only as deviations from a presumed norm caused by a distinct organism, not because transformation is somehow an inherent quality of the bodies.

However, the binary differentiation runs deeper, encompassing the representation of these processes within the narrative structure. For example, in *Retch*, the protagonist, Sonya, breaks into uncontrollable convulsions and retches violently without any prior indication. The film's suspense and thrill originate from this abrupt start. Similarly, in *The Relic*, the film's surprise twist hinges on the shock of the sudden and biologically horrifying transformation of the character presumed to be the group member Kayla. Both films in the transformation body horror category thus rely on depictions of bodies spontaneously and unpredictably changing. Additionally, both films begin in medias res, relying on minimal exposition and narrative closure or worldbuilding to explicate and contextualise these processes. Overall, the representation of the two transformations seems to reiterate an underlying notion of the inherent mutability of women's bodies in these narratives and simultaneously suggests women's irrationality, as no logical causation is evident in these films.

In contrast, the films in the category of invasion body horror do not hinge on such spontaneity. In *Progeny*, a significant portion of the film is dedicated to worldbuilding, establishing the fictional world's logic and causality that contextualises the depicted processes of bodily invasion and the accompanying changes. Similarly, in *Susurrus*, the film meticulously combines visual techniques with an extensive voiceover monologue that details the reasons and mechanisms behind the protagonist's parasitic infestation. As the close reading in section 5.2 demonstrates, the protagonist in *Susurrus* is even actively implicated in the parasitic invasion process. By cultivating the parasite, the protagonist actively contributes to its growth within his body. A similar dimension of choice is evident in *Progeny*: Although Tanner's implantation with the alien progeny is unwilling, he still can exercise agency over his body by asking his wife for help to remove the progeny and later attempting to do so himself.

This comparison between *Susurrus* and *Progeny* highlights a stark difference from the inexplicable and spontaneous transformations seen in *Relic* and *Retch*. In the latter films, the protagonists' bodily transformations are abrupt and lack a clear causal explanation. Conversely, the bodily invasions experienced by the protagonists in *Susurrus* and *Progeny* are logically and rationally explicable within the films' narrative. Additionally, both invasion body horror films depict bodily change and reconfiguration as involving a degree of choice.

Thus, two key binaries related to sex/gender and the body, as well as femininity and masculinity can be detected in the four films: While the bodily processes experienced by the men are constructed along hegemonic masculine qualities such as rationality and activity (Deutscher 76), the transformation films clearly align with the opposite side of the binary opposition. Whereas the invasion films hinge strongly on exposition and narrative to represent, explain, and justify the invasions, the spontaneous and unpredictable transformations of the women in *Relic* and *Retch* can be connected to the association between femininity, irrationality, and passivity. This finding is particularly evident in *Retch*, where Sonya's transformation begins immediately and in medias res, with no explanation or justification provided at any point throughout the film. The transformation itself becomes a spectacle, with Sonya depicted as a passive recipient, unable to intervene or react. She is overwhelmed by what is happening to her and her body, reiterating the binary logic that defines the female body "in terms of fragility, unreliability, or biological closeness to nature" (Gros xiv). This depiction starkly contrasts with the male protagonists in the invasion films, who maintain a degree of control and agency over their bodily changes, reinforcing traditional gender binaries of passive, irrational women and active, rational men. Therefore, while the deconstructive power of body horror depictions was demonstrated through a metonymic close reading of selected scenes and filmic instances in individual films, a broader binary tendency emerges when comparing and contrasting the similarities and differences across the two categories of invasion and transformation and the respective films within these categories.

6.2 Locating Binaries Across the Broader Corpus

While the previous subsection provided a comparison and critical evaluation of the representational tendencies in the four analysed films *Relic*, *Retch*, *Progeny*, and *Susurrus*, this section examines the broader applicability of these findings within the context of the other films categorised as invasion and transformation body horror in the initial corpus from the ALTER playlist "Body Horror Movies". Specifically, this section aims to compare the gendered predictability of body horror types occurring in characters implied as men and women, testing whether the close reading findings extend to other films or are incidental to the four selected ones.

As discussed in Chapter 3, ten films were classified as transformation films, and four as invasion films during the categorisation process and subsequent film selection. Table 3 illustrates that all protagonists in the four invasion films were implied as men, mirroring the findings from the close readings of the invasion films discussed earlier. In the larger category

of transformation films, a similar but less uniform tendency was observed, with seven out of ten characters implied as women and three as men. This brief quantitative survey of representational tendencies within the 14 films further supports the observation of a gendered tendency regarding the type of body horror depicted, correlating with the implied sex/gender of the protagonists who undergo invasion or transformation.

Nr.	Films	body horror	protagonist's sex/gender implied as man	protagonist's sex/gender implied as woman
1	<i>Posies</i>	Transformation		X
2.	<i>Pete's Putrid Peas</i>	Transformation	X	
3.	<i>The Relic</i>	Transformation		X
4.	<i>Darkness Comes</i>	Transformation	X	
5.	<i>Nova</i>	Transformation		X
6.	<i>Retch</i>	Transformation		X
7.	<i>Eddie</i>	Transformation	X	
8.	<i>Daughters of Virtue</i>	Transformation		X
9.	<i>Undress Me</i>	Transformation		X
10.	<i>Smear</i>	Transformation		X
11.	<i>Progeny</i>	Invasion	X	
12.	<i>I am Not a Monster</i>	Invasion	X	
13.	<i>The Stomach</i>	Invasion	X	
14.	<i>When Susurrus Stirs</i>	Invasion	X	

Table 3: Type of body horror and sex/gender of protagonists

While a detailed study of how the binaries of sex/gender and the body, as well as femininity and masculinity, manifest within the broader set of films, as illustrated in Table 3, is beyond the scope of this thesis, some preliminary speculations regarding the implications of this quantitative survey can be made. The apparent binary differentiation between men/women and invasion/transformation evident in the broader corpus suggests underlying hegemonic notions of femininity and masculinity. Whereas men's bodies are represented as vulnerable only to change and transform in unpredictable ways when they are invaded or infected by some

alien life force, women's bodies seem to be just 'naturally given' to such processes and need no external stimulus to cause internal or transformations or biological changes.

The findings discussed in this chapter suggest interesting directions for the study of gender, body horror, and horror film. Historically, the study of horror films has often focused on the opposition between women's victimisation and gendered monstrosity, as seen in the influential works of Barbara Creed and Carol Clover. However, the present analyses suggest the need for a more nuanced differentiation. While bodily invasion or mutation is typically associated with monstrous femininity (Williams, *Masculinity* 35), more recent scholarship has discussed "mutating masculinity" (*Masculinity* 35), noting the many cases of when "the grotesque body is more 'naturally' a male one" (*Masculinity* 35). The close readings and preliminary analysis across the list of 14 films considered as invasion and transformation films suggest that besides such questions of representations which ask if it is *either* masculinity *or* femininity which is depicted as monstrous or victimised, it might be insightful to take a close look at depictions within different kinds of representations and scrutinize the degree to which the narrative construction of such depictions might be complicit with the reiteration of binary and hegemonic conceptualisations of sex/gender and the body.

CONCLUSION

This thesis aimed to detect the inherent deconstructive power of filmic depictions of the motif of body horror in four horror short films. Drawing on a theoretical framework rooted in poststructuralist feminist theory and an analytic approach to horror film influenced by existing scholarly work in the field of feminist horror scholarship, I demonstrated that filmic depictions of bodily transformation and invasion disrupt the body's integrity and composition inevitably affect the stability of related binaries of sex/gender and femininity and masculinity in unique ways, differing from film to film.

To address the prevailing tendency in current body horror scholarship, which often employs a broad definition encompassing nearly all depictions of threatened bodies in horror films (Reyes, *Body Gothic* 52), this thesis proposed a more specific delineation of body horror. Body horror was defined strictly as manifestations originating from within the body, thereby de(con)structing it from the inside out. This study focused on two identified sub-categories of body horror: the motifs transformation and invasion body horror. This conceptualisation of body horror not as a subgenre but as a motif is one of the original contributions of this thesis. By adopting this perspective, the analysis transcends traditional genre boundaries, allowing examination of how the motif operates across diverse films. For instance, films like *Progeny* and *Relic*, which blend elements of science fiction and adventure with horror, are included in the study despite not conforming to conventional horror genre criteria. This approach sheds light on the versatility of body horror while maintaining a necessary analytical rigour by offering a precise definition of the term.

In *Relic*, the first of two transformation body horror films analysed, traditional concepts of sex/gender and the body are deconstructed through the film's profound underlying notion of uncertainty and unpredictability. Through dynamic and erratic lighting, the bodies of the protagonists are abstracted and fragmented, challenging the notion of the body as a stable whole and instead representing it as a collection of parts. Changing and restless film scoring further creates an atmosphere of unease and unrest. Through the film's graphic portrayal of body horror through the figure of the mysterious man as well as Kayla's transformation towards the film's end, this notion of uncertainty further intensifies, ultimately questioning human modes of knowledge production and fundamental biological principles such as the stability and immutability of the body. Ultimately, these disruptions deconstruct the categories of sex/gender as well, given their relation to essentialist views of biology where sex is readable on the body

and gender a logical consequence of sex. In a world where mysterious new (life)forms may be concealed underneath a body's surface, these constructs cannot remain stable but are instead left uncertain.

In *Retch*, yet another form of deconstruction takes place. Although Sonya's transformation is depicted as extremely painful, evidenced by her screams and illustrated by cinematography that materialises the force of her struggles, the transformation itself is surprisingly 'ungory'. Instead, on a visual level, the process of shedding skin is rendered in a rather aesthetically pleasing manner, indicating a sense of intimacy rather than terror. This reading is further supported by the film's surprise twist towards its final moments, when Sonya shrugs off the transformation while acknowledging that she feels "better" now. Through her transformation and changing bodily shape, which no longer conforms to binary norms of sex/gender and the body (or even humanity), Sonya's transformation indicates new possibilities for human embodiment, which ultimately necessitate new boundaries for what sex/gender classifications can or should include.

In the case of *Progeny* the first of two invasion body horror films analysed, multiple axes of deconstruction could be detected. First, through the film's circulation of two models of masculinity in crisis – one based in feminisation and one rooted in hypermasculinity – the fragility of hegemonic notions of femininity and masculinity is revealed, deconstructing the assumed naturalness of these categories. Secondly, through an analysis of one central depiction of body horror in the film, it became evident that the film's depiction of body horror does not evoke a specifically gendered horror but rather a sense of the primary vulnerability of the human body by employing techniques such as objective-internal sound design and extreme close-ups.

On the other hand, the analysis of *Susurrus* demonstrated how the film renders incoherent normative conceptualisations of binary categories altogether. In visually depicting the protagonist's fusion with the parasite, the film blurs the borders of the cinematic body to visualise its internal reconfiguration and reconfiguration while the parasite's presence in the body grows. Furthermore, by constructing the gradual invasion as a subjective choice and a repeated performance which ultimately leads towards the merging of the bodies of the host and parasite and their minds, the performative construction of identity categories, including gender, is revealed. Most importantly, however, in *Susurrus* the simultaneous presence of assumedly exclusive binary categories such as activity and passivity were detected. In breaking up the 'either/or' logic which lies at the root of binary thinking, *Susurrus* deconstructs these binaries.

However, despite the deconstructive contents carried by the motif of body horror in the examined films in various ways, the overall representational politics of the selected films were

revealed to warrant critical examination. Both within the four films subjected to close analysis and the 14 films categorised as invasion and transformation body horror, a gendered dichotomy emerged in the films' portrayal of body horror: Transformation body horror was notably more prevalent in films featuring 'female' protagonists, whereas invasion body horror predominantly affected 'male' characters. This observation suggests that while body horror serves as a deconstructive element, its representational politics beyond individual films reflects and reinforces underlying hegemonic assumptions regarding femininity and masculinity within the narrative framework of examined films. Considering that discussions surrounding gendered representation and horror films tend to be structured along the poles of women as victims or monsters, this finding signals the need for further exploration of these findings on other lists of films or short films.

While this thesis serves as an exploration of the motif of body horror within the context of horror short films, certain limitations warrant acknowledgement. Firstly, the study's focus on horror short films, while providing a rich foundation for detecting body horror due to their concise narrative format and tendency to emphasise singular themes (Felando 41), does not delve deeply into the unique characteristics of the short film format itself. An investigation that considers the specific attributes of body horror within the unique format of the short film could offer valuable contributions to understanding the form and function of horror short films and the motif of body horror within them. Secondly, the thesis primarily examines the body through the lens of feminist and gender studies, deprioritising the potential intersections of questions of the body with other socio-cultural dynamics such as race and class. Exploring these intersections would be integral to acquiring a more comprehensive view of the motif and the sex/gender dynamics it encompasses.

Additionally, while the thesis aims to scrutinise the destabilisation of binary conceptualisations of sex/gender and the body through selected filmic scenes, it primarily focuses on individual filmic instances rather than a comprehensive analysis of entire films. This limitation underscores the need for future studies to explore broader narrative contexts and thematic developments within horror cinema to understand body horror's implications better.

Continuing to investigate the bodily constructions, deconstructions, and reconstructions presented by body horror from various lenses and perspectives contributes not only to the specific fields of horror and film studies but also to the critique of normative, essentialist, and limiting views on the categories of sex/gender and the body.

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- Demon Seed*. Directed by Donald Cammell, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1977.
- Hellraiser*. Directed by Clive Barker, New World Pictures, 1987.
- Hereditary*. Directed by Ari Aster, A24, 2018.
- Rosemary's Baby*. Directed by Roman Polanski, Paramount Pictures, 1968.
- Shivers*. Directed by David Cronenberg, Cinépix, 1975.
- Silence of the Lambs*. Directed by Jonathan Demme, Orion Pictures, 1991.
- The Brood*. Directed by David Cronenberg, New World Pictures, 1979.
- The Exorcist*. Directed by William Friedkin, Warner Bros, 1973.
- The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. Directed by Tobe Hopper, Vortex, 1974.
- The Thing*. Directed by John Carpenter, Universal Pictures, 1982.

APPENDIX

a) Full Table of Selection Process

	Process steps	1	2	3			4	5
Nr.	Films	English	body horror	trans-formation	parasite	zombie	visual depiction	final selection
1.	Posies	X	X	X				
2.	Pete's Putrid Peas	X	X	X				
3.	The Relic	X	X	X			X	X
4.	Darkness Comes	X	X	X				
5.	Nova	X	X	X			X	
6.	Retch	X	X	X			X	X
7.	Eddie	X	X	X				
8.	Daughters of Virtue	X	X	X				
9.	Undress Me	X	X	X			X	
10.	Smear	X	X	X				
11.	Progeny	X	X		X		X	X
12.	I am Not a Monster	X	X		X			
13.	The Stomach	X	X		X		X	
14.	When Susurru Stirs	X	X		X		X	X
15.	Kissed	X	X			X		
16.	Point of view	X	X			X		
17.	Pigskin	X						
18.	Stuck	X						
19.	Shhh	X						
20.	Stucco	X						
21.	Box room	X						
22.	Toe	X						
23.	Emptied	X						
24.	Milk Teeth	X						
25.	Asking for a Friend	X						
26.	Penance	X						
27.	B.E	X						
28.	Consurgo	X						
29.	Sweet Tooth	X						
30.	The Disappearance of Willie Bingham	X						
31.	Snake Eyes	X						
32.	The Herd (Borden)	X						
33.	The Herd (Light)	X						
34.	Carnal Orient	X						
35.	Human Form							
36.	Angst, Piss and Drid							
37.	Mechanika							
38.	Animals							
39.	And Then! He Kissed Me							
40.	Sea Devil							

b) English abstract

This thesis explores the deconstruction of binary conceptualisations of sex/gender and the body through the lens of filmic depictions of body horror. Drawing from a multidisciplinary theoretical framework encompassing poststructuralism, feminist and gender theory, and film studies, the research delves into cinematic representations of the on-screen de(con)struction of fictional bodies. Focused specifically on body horror threats originating from within the body, the analysis examines four films to elucidate how these bodily processes catalyze complex deconstructions of binary constructs surrounding the body through narrative and filmic techniques. The study reveals instances where the motif of body horror operates independently of narrative, either reinforcing or challenging deconstructive tendencies within the storylines. Moreover, by analysing horror short films, the research highlights the efficacy of close analysis in unpacking the nuances of body horror. Beyond the realm of horror, the thesis proposes an understanding of body horror not merely as a subgenre but as a motif capable of transcending genre boundaries, thus offering broader insights into cinematic analysis. Furthermore, the study contributes to critical discourses by critiquing normative and essentialist views on sex/gender and the body, extending its relevance beyond film studies to broader societal discussions.

c) German abstract

Diese Arbeit untersucht die Dekonstruktion binärer Konzeptualisierungen von Geschlecht und Körper durch die Linse filmischer Darstellungen des Körperhorror. Unter Berufung auf einen multidisziplinären theoretischen Rahmen, der Poststrukturalismus, feministische und Gendertheorie sowie Filmwissenschaft umfasst, untersucht die Forschung filmische Darstellungen der bildlichen De(kon)struktion fiktiver Körper. Mit einem spezifischen Fokus auf die Bedrohungen des Körperhorror, die aus dem Inneren des Körpers stammen, analysiert die Arbeit vier Filme, um aufzuzeigen, wie diese Prozesse komplexe Dekonstruktionen binärer Konstrukte rund um den Körper durch narrative und filmische Techniken auslösen. Die Studie zeigt auf, in welchen Fällen das Motiv des Körperhorror unabhängig von der Handlung operiert, entweder die dekonstruktiven Tendenzen innerhalb der Handlungsstränge verstärkend oder herausfordernd. Darüber hinaus hebt die Analyse von Horror-Kurzfilmen die Effektivität der detaillierten Analyse bei der Entschlüsselung der Nuancen des Körperhorror hervor. Jenseits des Horrorgenres schlägt die Arbeit ein Verständnis des Körperhorror nicht nur als Subgenre, sondern als Motiv vor, das in der Lage ist, Genre-Grenzen zu überschreiten, und damit breitere Einblicke in die filmische Analyse des Motifs bietet. Darüber hinaus trägt die

Studie zu kritischen sozio-kulturell relevanten Diskursen bei, indem sie normative und essentialistische Ansichten über Geschlecht und Körper kritisiert und ihre Bedeutung über die Filmwissenschaft hinaus auf breitere gesellschaftliche Diskussionen ausdehnt.