



BA Illustration Hons - **Research in Practice** (ADAD5004)

**Proposal for Independent Project**

Word count: **2,632**

Lecturer: Delyth Lloyd-Evans

**Proposed question:**

Why does surreal body horror hit so close to home? Exploring the relationship between gore in comics and the artists who draw it.

## **Context**

Within the context of my research project, I will be using three key words: *escapism*, *catharsis*, and *experience* to fuel my exploration into the appeal and abundance of body horror in comics. I will examine the popularity of a genre that would assumedly repel and, implementing perspectives from various theories and practitioners, attempt to argue in what ways this reflects the minds of those who contribute to it. My key words will aid in breaking down the question into three main sections, and additional support from comic artists like Junji Ito, Emily Carroll, and Charles Burnes, will relate the theory to my practice.

## **Escapism**

What we see mirrored in the monster are the leaks and flows, the vulnerabilities in our own embodied being' (Shildrick in El Refaie, 2010)

Escapism is a term that is best defined within the context of the human condition. The word dates back to 1933 and refers to a "diversion of the mind" in response to reality or psychological stressors (Merriam-Webster, 2020). Being alive comes at the cost of being bombarded with external stimulation, from changes in the immediate and wider environment to the turbulence found in work and home life. And with the additional encroachment of social media subjecting its users to an endless stream of distressing content (Revell, 2022), it is no wonder that some kind of release is

needed. Escapism can be found in many activities, particularly in those that excite the imagination. Art is widely accepted as a therapeutic device (a point which will be expanded upon later in this proposal), working in conjunction with the limitless imagination of the artist to create the ideal escapist coping mechanism (Malik, 2021). Escaping from reality through art is not a new practice, and one art movement from history held this message at its core: Surrealism. The link between escapism and the Surrealist art movement will be covered at length in the essay, touching upon their common interests of 'formation and destruction' (Stich, *Anxious Visions*, p. 32).

Body horror is inherently Surrealist. While it does depict humanoid forms and recognised concepts like viscera and violence, it does so in a way that is removed from normal expectations. The bodies are distorted beyond the realm of possibility, facial features recontextualised out of their primary use, what was hidden is now glaringly on view. These constants within body horror and self-portraiture at large (Bond and Woodall, 2005, p. 7) reflect the artists' anxiety about the fragility of the body and the dependency on its functions, particularly the hands and eyes which are imperative to drawing. Further exploration into hypochondria and what it means for body horror will be undertaken to support this idea. Alongside this, a possible sub-topic that is worth exploring further is the self-/mis- diagnosis of physical ailments due to the growing wealth of medical information online, known as cyberchondria (Mathes *et al.* 2018). If anxiety triggers escapism through despondency towards the present, escapism via Nihilism is caused by despondency towards the future. Bülent Diken (2009, p. 17) defines Nihilism as a "failure to accept the world as it is, resenting the fact that the world is devoid of a goal, unity or meaning". The Nihilist perceives existence as a paradox: thinking without thought, feeling without emotion,

life without living, though they appear to revel in this. As Diken continues (p. 23), the Nihilist partakes in Ascetism, which is the practice of depriving yourself of pleasure and luxuries as a form of self-punishment (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2013).

This masochism serves as a means of control in a world that does not seem to care.

It is in line with the Freud's theory on death instinct, wherein people engage in destructive behaviour out of the wider desire to die (1920, p. 316). Suffering and scenes of hopelessness will naturally appeal, according to this logic, due to our yearning to be a part of them. As well as expounding upon the idea of control and the effects of its absence on the human mind, the essay will argue that the masochism central to Nihilism parallels the desire to create body horror for artists. Sub-topics such as Anti-Natalism and metamorphosis in horror have spawned from the research. The last term that falls under the *escapism* umbrella is romanticisation, a term used to describe the act of glorifying and fantasising about routine or otherwise undesirable concepts. The most dangerous examples of romanticisation include serial killers (Kohn, 2021), abuse or toxic partners (Béres, 1999, pp. 191-207), and mental health issues such as severe depression (Ghosh, 2021), which can cause these issues to be minimised or even sought after. A pattern of violence and pain emerges from the topics mentioned, which is something at the heart of the gore genre. One key example of 'gore-ification' (the glorification of gore) in graphic novels is *Black Hole* by Charles Burns (1995). The story centres around a sexually transmitted disease being spread from teenager to teenager that comes with grisly side effects of growths and animalistic metamorphosis. The fetishization of the disease is made apparent through the character of Chris and the progression of the clitoral tear on her back (as seen in Fig. 1), and while it is very much a self-aware

fetishization, it is still worth exploring in depth. Other topics that will be discussed in this section will be the normalisation of violence in the media and the online art trend of redesigning characters and stories into horror-based versions.



Fig. 1: Charles Burns, *Black Hole*, 1995

## Catharsis

The word *catharsis* has its roots in theatre with Aristotle first describing it as a means to process and overcome tragedy through external displays of emotion (Ahmed, 2018). Catharsis also has ties to religious practices of proclaiming your sins aloud in order to be forgiven, and even some medicinal associations have been titled as

catharsis (Dwivedi, 2017). Through these definitions, there is a clear commonality of release, of freedom. Catharsis is unleashing one's negative energy from the internal to the external, in the hopes of gaining spiritual or emotional enlightenment. Artistic endeavours like interpretive dance and painting are preferred releases of emotion, and art in particular has been shown to reduce stress levels and provide solace to those struggling (Kaimal *et al.* 2016). You need look nowhere else than at the remedial practice of art therapy, which has produced significant results in favour of itself (Regev and Cohen-Yatziv, 2018), (Ching-Teng *et al.* 2018). Traversing further into this topic, the genre of self-portraiture can be a very confronting and insightful form of catharsis. As Bell (2000, p. 7) writes:



If it is vanity that leads artists to worry over their wrinkles, it is a kind of integrity that leads them to transcribe them. Here I am, goes the common account, caught up in this decaying flesh, and where am I bound?

It is impossible for the artist to separate themselves from their work, as even if they are not represented in corporeal form, their emotions are. A continuation into the world of art therapy and its connection to improved mental state will be present in the essay.



Fig. 2: Emily Carroll, *Some Other*

*Animal's Meat*, 2016

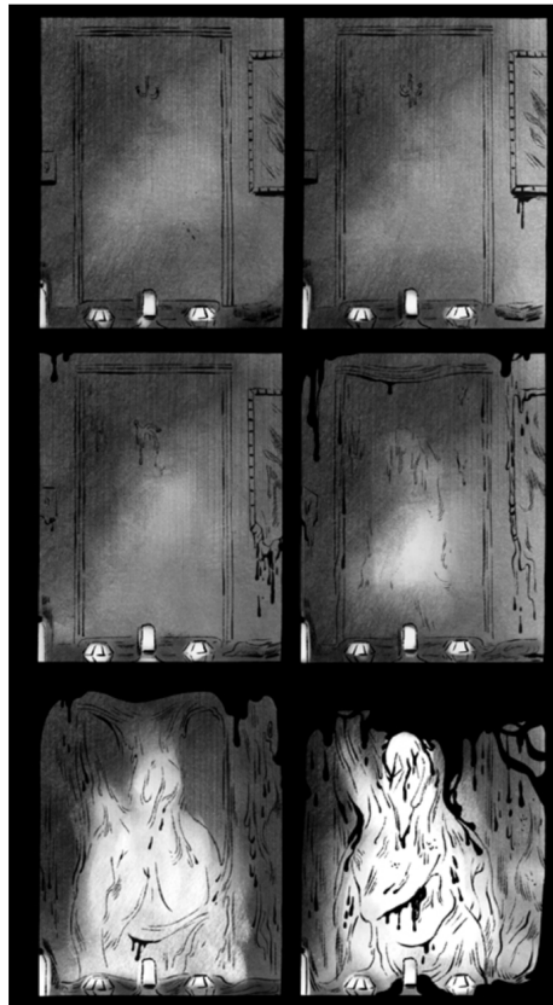


Fig. 3: Emily Carroll, *Some Other*

*Animal's Meat*, 2016

Fig. 2 is a panel from Emily Carroll's 2016 webcomic *Some Other Animal's Meat*.

The story follows a moisturiser saleswoman who grapples with bouts of vivid manifestations of her innermost fears. There are several levels of catharsis present in this comic; first is the shared relief and arousal the women experience while

applying the cream. While obviously an exaggeration, it is a close representation of how skin care products are marketed to women. 'Rejuvenate', 'glow', and 'youthful' are all common buzzwords found on beauty product packaging (Del Rosso, 2016), and the age-old obsession with women lacking any physical imperfections has deeply affected the female self-image (Berberick, 2010). The pressure to have a 'smooth' and 'glowing' complexion is unrealistic, and often pushes women to the other end of the spectrum after feeling monstrous and isolated. As part of the artist's job is to depict the human form for the masses to see, the question arises of whether we are past the derivative hourglass-shaped silhouettes of illustration's past. Further analysis will be done on the societal expectations and artistic depictions of the human form, alongside the impact it has on the way form is perceived and distorted.

The second level of catharsis in the aforementioned comic is Carroll's choice to manifest the fear into a corporeal being, as seen in Fig. 3. It is a gloopy, featureless moisturiser monster, a very literal manifestation of her fear of the cream, but it also holds a representational value. Carroll sets the protagonist up to be self-conscious of her body, comparing herself to the younger, healthier women she sees while selling her product. The figure is the concomitant manifestation of her body dysmorphia and hypochondria, threatening her with an encompassing warning of decay. Her allergy to the moisturiser (that she herself claims to revitalise and refresh) could be construed as a metaphor for the alienation she feels towards the other women and, possibly, her own body. This visualisation of trauma is a common tool implemented by psychologists to assist patients in explaining more abstract feelings they have, with free or autonomous drawing believed to be the gateway into a person's innermost thoughts (Hall *et al.* 2006). This catharsis of the mind onto paper is well

understood by others; that is, the emotion it generates. Resonance is a powerful attribute for commercialised illustration to possess, for reaching and making a connection with the viewer can sell or sink a work. Body horror achieves this naturally, subconsciously appealing to the shared human fear of death and ageing (Bryce, 2020). It frightens because it is a prophecy, it disgusts because it is an actualisation of the self. Gore, from an artistic and sociological perspective, will be the pivotal point of the catharsis keyword.

## **Experience**

Experience is an abstract concept, defined broadly as “past events, knowledge, and feelings that make up someone's life or character” (Collins, 2022). Experience is born of memories, memories constantly being forgotten and replaced. In pursuit of true satisfaction, some actively seek out activities on the extreme side of safety, such as tornado chasing (Trott, 2019) or rollercoaster riding (CoasterForce, 2016). This act of ‘cheating death’ has neurological reasoning behind it: the state of shock produces a rush of adrenaline that dissolves into dopamine, the chemical attributed with happiness. (Stephens, 2018) Rekindling that short burst of euphoria becomes an almost compulsion, manic attempts at topping the previous high; thus, the term “adrenaline junkie” is formed (Scott, 2020). This same cycle can also be attributed to fictitious horror experiences (such as movies and comic books), even though the viewer is not in any immediate danger, another point which will be discussed further in the next section. Other areas that will be investigated in this section are phenomenology, the sociology behind shared horror experiences, and the

desensitisation to violence through overexposure. Another subset of the body horror-experience marriage is censorship and how that plays into morbid curiosity. Similar to the car crash ideology (SGB-TV, 2019), observing horrific events provides the witness two choices: to look away (as is socially acceptable), or to continue to stare unashamedly. Usually, it is a combination of the two, the former being the dominant presence (or, the conscience) and the latter the overwhelming force that overrides any considerations of politeness. Viewing taboo imagery as opposed to witnessing it in person is a different case, however. John Taylor (1998, p.14) argues that the nature of photographs (that is, their ability to immortalise a passing moment in time for limitless viewing) encourages unabashed examination, in spite of instinctual reactions of disgust. Taylor continues: "Some people may prefer to run the risk of seeing real horror for themselves, but most people see it reproduced at some remove of distance and time." This sentiment of the viewer having the control to view it at their own discretion can also be applied to body horror, although a certain 'suspension of belief' is required. Exposure to graphic content in a safe environment can make the experience more enjoyable, as it removes the threat of immediate danger (Clasen, *et al.* 2020). The essay will cover censorship in art in greater detail as well as morbid curiosity in relation to psychology. The final sub-topic within this keyword brings the previous two topics together to understand how body horror can be depicted from a visual theory perspective, within the context of graphic novels. Junji Ito is considered the go-to graphic novel artist for nauseating violations of the human body, and this is ever-present in his critically acclaimed manga *Uzumaki* (1998). His ingenious integration of spirals as the recurring source of horror plays on optical illusion, engaging and encouraging the viewer to read deeper into the panels.

The panels shown in Fig. 4 demonstrate another area of interest for this essay: sequence. Body horror greatly benefits from the sequential design of comic books, especially when clarifying the body horror in question to be gradual decay or transformation. Seeing a distortion of figure take place in stages can significantly improve the viewing experience for readers in numerous ways that will be touched upon in the research project. An additional topic that will be covered is the link between the classic black-and-white print aesthetic of comics and the black-and-white film noir aesthetics of horror.



Fig. 4: Junji Ito, *Uzumaki*, 1998

The purpose of this research project is to compartmentalise the appeal of body horror to the artists that draw it into three key topics: escapism, catharsis, and experience. The main take away for how escapism plays into the appeal of gore is the ability it has to trivialise and make light of the real thing, allowing artists to distance themselves from their own bodies. The imagination pulls us into a different reality, where physical dysfunction is played for aesthetics. The second key point of catharsis offers a different perspective on artist's relationship towards corporeal trauma; instead of avoiding it, it is a confrontation. It argues in defence of art therapy and explores the idea of resonance being a central goal in creating body horror. The third key word turns away from the artist to focus on the consumers of body horror comics, and how to create the optimal viewing experience through layout and style. It points to chemical reactions in the body and the darker parts of human nature as a subset of the appeal for gore.

## **Conclusion**

My practice for this project will be creating a fourth wall-breaking graphic novel that features the artist of the comic losing the dexterity of their hand due to an infection-induced illness. Playing on the layout of comics and the idea of sequential transformation, the artist will realise that progressing through the panels worsens the illness, but their love for drawing compels them to continue. In the end, the infection has rendered their hand useless, and the comic ends in one of two ways: the last panels are deliberately unfinished as the artist decides that they have gone too far; alternatively, the last panels are shaky and unintelligible, as the artist perseveres to

finish the comic. Fig 5 illustrates this concept in its basic form and a concept art of a potential panel is shown in Fig 6. This topic is personal to me, as it highlights my irrational fear of not having the motor function to draw and combines my love for horror and subversive storytelling. The practice relates to the theory through the direct link of an artist's perception and manifestation of physical illness in their art, taking inspiration from the ideology of escapism and the therapeutic vehicles of catharsis to create an engaging and unique reading experience.

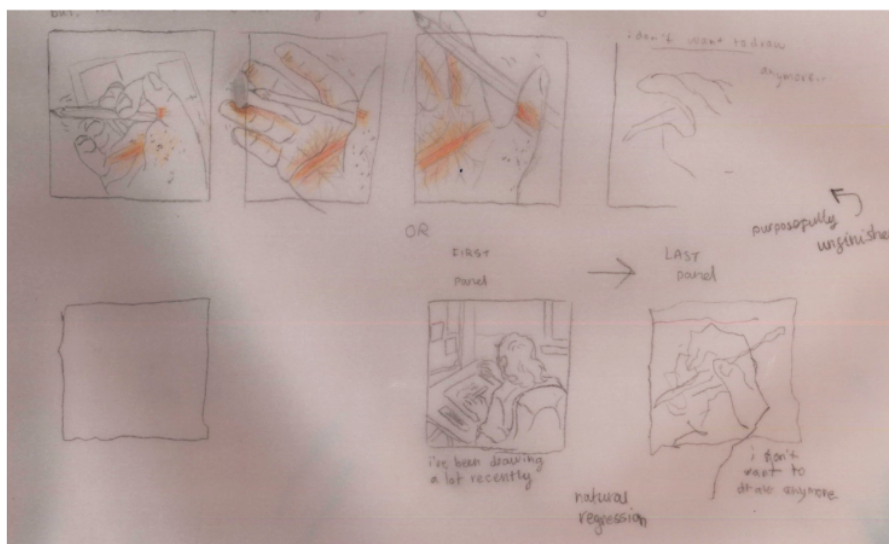


Fig. 5



Fig. 6

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