

Research in Practice

(ADAD5004)

*Title: **Bodies of Horror: Exploring Grotesque Beauty in Visual Art, Media and Cinema***

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Abstract

Led by the 3 keywords : Horror, Grotesque and Beauty, this essay examines how body horror provokes visceral reactions through the connection between them, within visual art and cinema. Through *Bones and All* (2022), *Crash* (1996), *Silent Hill 2* (2001), and the paintings by Francis Bacon I explore how these works manipulate our instinctual responses to harm, objectification, and decay. I also briefly reflect on my own practice, specifically my recent photographic series, *Caro Mortalis*. In which, abstracted images of preserved and live bodies blur the boundaries between species, with in intention of confronting viewers to both the horror and strange beauty of flesh.

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The human body in a state of distortion or decay, has a strong existence in both horror and art. This essay will explore how body horror, through unsettling and often monstrous depictions of flesh, activates primal human responses. I will examine how horror, the grotesque, and beauty all intertwine in visual art and cinema, revealing how something disturbing can also be strangely captivating, and even desired.

Specifically, I am focusing on films like *Crash* (1996), *Bones and All* (2022), and the psychological horror game *Silent Hill 2* (2001), as well as the paintings of Francis Bacon. In all of these works, bodies are twisted and transformed, confusing the line between repulsion and attraction. I will also touch on how we naturally react to body based harm, like flinching away or feeling sick, and how body horror exploits these instincts in chase of a visceral response. Finally, I will briefly connect these themes to my recent photographic series, *Caro Mortalis* (2025), which depicts the beauty and horror found in preserved and live bodies.

Body horror is a variant of horror that focuses on the graphic transformation or mutilation of bodies, not just human but also those of animals and insects. It aims to corrupt the heavenly body through themes of mutation, infection, absorption, and any sort of unnatural changes to provoke discomfort and fear within it's viewers. With body horror comes lack of control. The threat is internal, it comes from within, it tangles it's way into the mind and preys on our most primal fears. It harshly reveals how weak and malleable the body is, how easily it can be distorted or taken over. Notable examples include horror master David Cronenberg's *The Fly* (1986), in which the protagonist undergoes a severe and grotesque transformation into a human/insect hybrid, after a science experiment goes wrong. Visceral imagery of shedding flesh, oozing green sludge, and abnormal movements show his descent into the uncanny, also acting as a metaphor for the fear of aging. Similarly, John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982) is a classic portrayal of this genre. External forces infecting a group of isolated researchers, altering their very DNA, creates a

chaotic spiral of freakish mutations, stretching tissue, and strange fluids that gets under your skin.



Figure 1

These films tap into our evolutionary discomfort with blood, injury, illness, and decay. We are programmed to react viscerally to the sight of these things as a means of self-preservation. The sight of blood alone can create a sudden flash of danger or empathy within a person, even causing fainting in some cases.

Art and cinema creates a safe and controlled environment to experience these intense emotions, which can sometimes result in conflicting reactions to this sub genre.

Therefore, I will explore a more nuanced approach, in which I discuss examples that complicate the boundaries between fear, disgust, desire and existentialism.

Through grotesque representations of death and loss of control, in the the film *Bones and All* (2022), director Luca Guadagnino is able to twist the aesthetics of body horror into something deeply emotional and frankly, aesthetically beautiful.

Bones and All (2022) is a tender yet sometimes repulsive horror film, following the relationship development between two young cannibals, Maren and Lee.

Maren, a young woman on the run, has a chance encounter with solitary drifter Lee, which leads them on a bloody journey of self discovery, across the backroads of America. Guadagnino uses it's deteriorating 1980s setting, to emphasise the outsider status of his protagonists, while highlighting the strange emptiness and shame within them. Natural light is used to create a sense of realism that comes across as authentic, it almost feels like seeing old photos of parents from their youth . Golden hour and dusk casts a warm, nostalgic glow over the film, which accentuates the brutality of the characters' actions within still, dreamy landscapes. Wide framed shots of these protagonists in the vast open areas of the USA, make them look alienated, vulnerable and small, which is complimented by handheld closeups forcing the viewer into their isolated world and emotions.



Figure 2

Cannibalism in this film is used as a metaphor for intense longing and intimacy. Maren and Lee's shared monstrosity is what brings them together, in turn allowing something grotesque to be seen as beautiful. Within this world, cannibals have the ability to identify each other through scent. This heightened sense of smell helps them to survive yet

speaks to the uncanny found within body horror. It presents them like a predator, a wolf looking for it's next meal, it blurs the line between creature and humanity, it makes them 'other'. This connection draws comparison to themes found in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. In which The Monster begs Dr Frankenstein to create him a mate, *"it is true, we shall be monsters, cut off from all the world; but on that account, we shall be more attached to one another"* (Shelley, 1818). Despite their existence being considered an abomination, that does not matter to The Monster. He yearns for companionship, safety and love with someone that he can relate to. In this moment he does not care for acceptance from wider society or even God, their alienation from the outside world will deepen the relationship between them. Maren and Lee live, hunt and feed together, almost as if they live in bubble away from threat. That is until, they are forced to face the consequences of their destructive addiction.



Figure 3

The act of eating human flesh within this film is very graphically shown. The muted tones of the characters skin and clothes are realistically doused with blood. It's smeared around

their face and chest, dripping down their arms. Ripping skin, wet mouth noises and the crunching of bones pierce through the quiet stillness of the films atmosphere and gentle soundtrack. After deciding to “*be normal for a while*” (*Bones and All*, 2022) by rejecting their true craving, Maren and Lee experience a brief period of peace and happiness, before their past eventually catches up to them. In a blood filled , heart wrenching ending, Lee makes the ultimate sacrifice for love, pleading “*I want you to eat me, Maren. Bones and all.*” (*Bones and All*, 2022). In this emotional moment Lee’s body is fully consumed, absorbed and annihilated. The intimacy becoming almost sensual, their bodies intertwining, becoming one entity forever.

David Cronenberg’s *Crash* (1996) is not traditionally classified as body horror. It’s a subtler, more analytical take on the genre, that explores psychological disfigurement as much as physical. Unlike *The Fly* (1986) that graphically shows a vomit-soaked creature, in a rapid state of transformation, *Crash* (1996) uses stunning cinematography to capture gritty imagery of scars, injury and car crashes.



Figure 4

It follows the life of unsatisfied car crash victim, James Ballard, and his subsequent involvement with an underground group that fetishise the anticipation and outcome of motor accidents.

Cronenberg eroticises harm and blood, as a way to explore obsession, desire and the complicated relationship between sex and violence. The use of soft, lingering, close ups of wounds, bruises and scars highlights, yet romanticises the real and fleshy nature of physical trauma. In body horror, transformation often causes a loss of 'the self'. The characters in *Crash*, end up becoming more psychologically and physically mechanical in their increasingly dangerous pursuit of sexual thrill. Their fetish becomes almost parasitic, infecting their brains. These nagging, internal obsessions start to manifest in a very real way. Their repeated exposure to crashes and injury acts as a slow, self destructive transformation, actively reshaping the characters' sense of self and body.



Figure 5

Their skin, identity and desire all become increasingly intertwined with metal, connecting this film to more obvious tropes in the body horror genre, as this fusion is explicitly corrupting their bodies. *Crash* challenges the boring, traditional standard of beauty by

allowing broken flesh and scary realities to be seen as fascinatingly erotic rather than signifiers of suffering.

Deeply atmospheric, survival horror game, *Silent Hill 2* (2001) also uses psychological exploration through the genre of body horror. Published by the Japanese company, Konami, It remains one of the biggest inspirations for my practice and visual style.

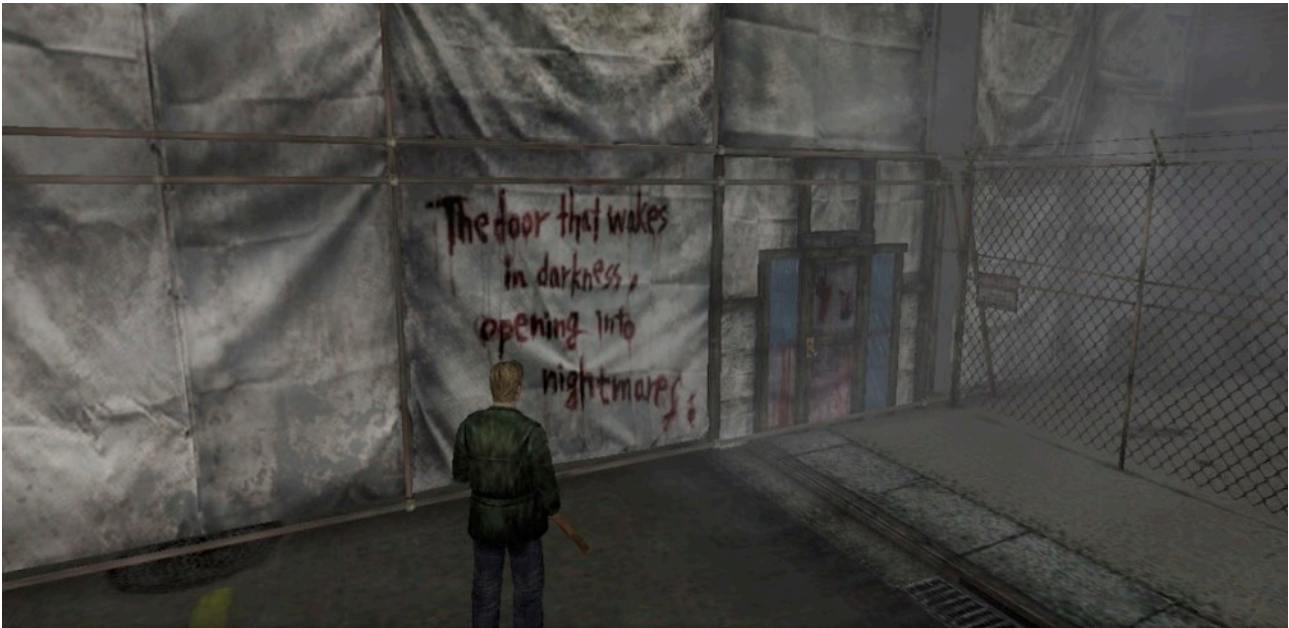


Figure 6

The game's plot centres around protagonist James Sunderland, who arrives in the town of Silent Hill, after receiving a letter from his deceased wife, Mary. Claiming to be there, she is waiting for him at their 'Special place'. Though Silent Hill is a 'real' place within the confinements of the game, each secondary characters' version of Silent Hill is unlike the other. They are all there for different reasons: grief, isolation, abuse, torment - they are drawn to this place in search of something. Their version of Silent Hill, is a manifestation of their own psyche, their deepest experiences and emotions projected onto the desolate, haunted town.

In *Silent Hill 2*, players navigate the foggy town using hand scrawled maps while struggling to stay oriented. Equipped with a static-filled radio, a wooden plank, and a few

handgun bullets, James descends deeper , solving puzzles, scavenging for supplies, and uncovering cryptic letters that hint at Mary's whereabouts. As he moves through abandoned apartments, a decaying prison, a rancid meat locker, and an eerily familiar hotel, James faces increasingly sickening threats and gradually recalls the truth. He killed Mary to end her suffering from a terminal illness that left her scarred, abusive and deeply depressed.

Every enemy you encounter acts as a representation of James' broken mind and repressed feelings of guilt. Crawling, faceless bodies, cocooned in their own flesh, spew acidic bile as you attack them, mirroring Mary's sick state and verbal abuse directed at James. The enemy type described as "*Mannequins*" are two bottom halves of female dolls sewn together, lacking any sort of face. (*Figure 7*)



Figure 7



Figure 8

Bound by tubes, gauze and leg braces, these mannequins represent the protagonist's objectification of women and repressed sexual desires due to his wife's illness and her appearance during this time. "*What the hell is it? Whatever it is, it's not human*" (*Silent Hill 2001*), this quote from James encapsulates the horror he feels towards these uncanny, grotesque creatures. They are pure corruption of the human form, fully solidifying them

within the body horror genre. Character art designer, Masahiro Ito stated he took inspiration for these characters from Ashinaga-Tenaga monsters found in traditional Japanese folklore. However, it is undeniable that they very closely resemble the artwork of German artist Hans Bellmer (*Figure 8*), who is known for his surrealist depictions of mutilated dolls that explore themes of strange sexuality and forbidden desire. His work also acts as “comment on Nazi Germany’s notions of the “perfect” versus the degenerate body.” (Dr Vanessa Rocco, n.d) Linking nightmarish, dreamlike visuals with real life horror to distort reality, is exactly where the genre excels at provoking viewers.

At points of the storyline, where sanity begins to decline, the main character shifts to '*The Otherworld*'. This disturbing, astral plane, is a twisted mirrored reality of the Silent Hill. It maintains the basic outline but with labyrinths, harsher creatures and more rusted, neglected architecture. The rust on the walls and floor is so red it resembles blood, to the point where it can be assumed it's a mix of both. Within this area you meet the enemy type called “Mandarin”.



Figure 9

Hanging from metal grates on the ceiling or beneath the floor, the creature swings constantly, its thin, pale body is covered in cloth resembling a hospital gown or straitjacket. It's bare resemblance to Mary, bedridden and waiting to die. Its mouth shaped hands extend a tongue-like tendril, lapping at James as it moves, a grotesque reminder of his inability to save her. These creatures literally hang over James throughout the game, embodying the suffocating weight of his guilt and the inescapable burden of his sins.



Figure 10

For this design, Masahiro Ito was directly inspired by Francis Bacon's *After Second Version of the Triptych 1944 (1989)*. In the triptych, Bacon depicts monstrous, contorted forms surrounded by blood red walls. Like these figures, the Mandarin's face is a featureless maw, lacking eyes or nose, reducing the body to a consuming, wailing orifice. Ito has also stated through social media, this prominence of the mouth is in reference to the verbal abuse James suffered. Both Bacon and *Silent Hill 2* use disfigured bodies to explore anguish and repression, transforming flesh into a place full of suffering and degradation. This fixation on body corruption connects further with the game's James's existential torment.



Figure 11

Bacon's work is so intertwined with the aesthetics of body horror. Bacon shows our form in an intense, distorted way to represent existential dread and psychological decline. His figures are piles of raw, pulsating flesh. They seem to exist in a state of torment, their bodies butchered, and their faces twisted in agony, as though they lay in purgatory. By reducing the human form to a disfigured, animalistic mass, Bacon confuses the relationship between man and beast, turning flesh into gnawing, existential horror. Within this quote, Bacon's motivation is perfectly epitomised: *"Well, of course, we are meat, we are potential carcasses. If I go into a butcher's shop, I always think it's surprising that I wasn't there instead of the animal."* (Francis Bacon, 1963). This unsettling, melancholy statement highlights our shared anatomy and mortality with different species. We are all fragile and will eventually decay. Our desire to control and defy death is tied to our deepest, earliest fears.

These themes directly inspired my most recent photographic series, *Caro Mortalis* (2025). By abstracting images of human, animal, and insect bodies I strip away their sense of life

to reduce them to bones, hair, and raw meat. They become archival and scientific. I intentionally blurred the line between species, to create confusion and discomfort.

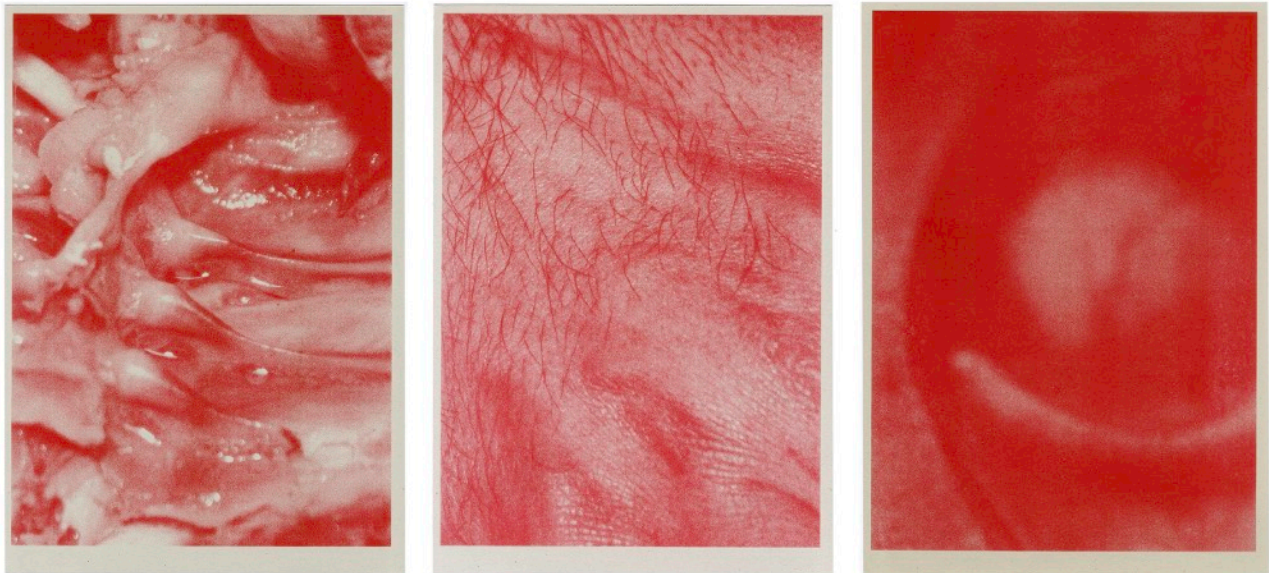


Figure 12

Each image is riso printed in red ink to resemble muscle and body tissue. The use of green-beige paper references the changes of preserved Victorian specimens. They become bloated and pale, and even more fragile looking. It is meant to draw out a strong reaction, like the primal human response to blood and flesh that I have previously discussed in terms of body based horror. I was fascinated by the way these specimens are relatable, yet in the clinical setting they are reduced to data, trapped in jars, suspended in fluid and archived, making them ephemeral and alien.

Through the analysis of my examples in this essay I have come to the conclusion that body horror is not just there to turn our stomachs or terrify, it allows us to reflect on our very natural inner fears. One day our bodies will fall apart, but there is something weirdly comforting about this. To challenge body horror, we should not be so afraid of what is inside us, we can learn to accept our mortality by understanding it's true beauty. We are all flawed, fragile and ultimately human.

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