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Gomel, Elana

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The Visible Man

Knife in the head before, now in the hand
Makes little difference. Pain is never personal;
As love or anger unconfined, it takes
Part in each moment and person, unconditioned
By time or identity, like an atmosphere.
There is no giving or receiving, only
Pain and creation coming out of pain.

—SIDNEY KEYES, “Gilles de Rais”

BOOKS OF BLOOD

“Everybody is a book of blood,” says the epigraph to Clive Barker’s six-volume collection of horror stories, Books of Blood. “Wherever we are opened, we are red.”

Here, it seems, horror is finally honest about itself. What is it if not one giant book of blood, fixated on the tortured, mutilated, grossly violated body? What other genre could produce “splatterpunk” novels and “slasher” movies? Many people’s discomfort with, if not outright revulsion from, horror literature and film stem precisely from what is seen as a gratuitous pleasure in graphic scenes of torture, a pornography of violence. Horror fiction, it is often claimed by its critics, is not really fiction but rather a pretext for sating the reader’s perverse appetites with pictures of violence. In pornography, plot, characterization, and other elements of narrativity wither to fig leaves on the obscene body of sexual description; similarly, it is said, horror jettisons all literary pretensions in pursuit of graphic bloodshed.

However, Barker’s mammoth collection demonstrates that the spectacle of violence does not necessarily dam the flow of words. The indefatigable story-
telling activity of Stephen King, another world-famous horror writer, pits narrative ingenuity against the speechlessness of visual shock. The body is both “red” and “read.” Horror’s violent subject is born in this tug-of-war between story and spectacle. Horror, whether as fiction or film, emphasizes visibility: it is structured around the spectacular body of the monster. The word “monster” comes from the Latin “monstrum,” i.e., “portent,” deriving from monere, “to warn.” A monster is a warning flag of danger, striking the eye with terror: “the traditional idea of the monstrous was strongly associated with visual display, and monsters . . . were to be seen, not heard” (Baldick 45). But on the other hand, horror is a popular narrative genre. Thus, the horror text is strained by the opposition of spectacle and narrative, of what Peter Brooks called “the imaginary versus the symbolic order” (207). Even in horror cinema, where the scales are naturally tipped toward the spectacle, there is the same tension between the Imaginary and the Symbolic. The violent sublime is inscribed in the gap between the conventional structure of the narrative and the shocking visibility of the monster’s body, which, I will argue, is both the body of the perpetrator and that of the victim.

The paradoxes of violence shape the paradoxical identity of the monster. The monster is a living oxymoron, created by the collapse of a binary dichotomy, such as living/dead (the undead vampire) or human/animal (the werewolf) (Carroll 34). Scholars of horror have pointed out that the monster is a subject beyond humanity, occupying a position that Judith Butler calls “the humanly unthinkable” (1993, 8). Often, “the humanly unthinkable” is understood in terms of a specific moral panic, as in Butler’s own discussion of gender bending. But whatever sexual taboos the monster transgresses, its violence creates a deeper disruption in the structure of discourse. The “humanly unthinkable” subject is the one who has committed deeds that “put their perpetrators outside of the pale of humanity,” with any history of torture, genocide, or serial killing providing a sufficient catalogue of such acts (Sheleff 16). Horror translates the abstraction of ethical excommunication into the concreteness of visual impression: when a slimy shape rises from the swamp, we do not need to be told that it is “outside the pale of humanity.”

But the monster’s ultimate transgression is of the one boundary that actual, as opposed to fictional, violence cannot cross. In horror fiction and film, the monster is often not only a fantastic reflection of the subject of torture but also an image of the victim. The monster expresses the commonality of the flesh that underlies violence: we are all books of blood, we are all potential monstrous displays. Its terrifying and obscene body is simultaneously the ruined corporeality of the victim and the ruined subjectivity of the perpetrator. This might appear perverse and often is. But the perversity of horror
discloses the true seduction of the violent sublime, which is the escape from
the slippery discriminations of morality into the incontestable materiality of
the body.

Volume 1 of Barker’s collection opens with the eponymous tale “The Book
of Blood.” In this tale a fraudulent medium is attacked by the enraged ghosts
whose messages he falsifies. Determined that the world should know the
truth, they use his body as a parchment on which to write the stories of their
predicament. Grotesquely scarred with their inscriptions, the medium’s body
is transformed into “their [the dead] page, their book, the vessel for their auto-
bigraphies” (11). He becomes a living script. The female psychic investigator,
in love with the medium, assumes the role of the enraptured reader of the
body/text: “She would read them all, report them all, every last syllable that
glistened and seeped beneath her adoring fingers, so that the world would
know the stories the dead tell” (16).

The medium’s grotesque body is both a spectacle and a sign. It is porno-
graphic, not in the sense of producing a specifically sexual pleasure in the
audience, but rather as a fetishistic object that straddles the boundary between
verbal and visual. In her discussion of pornography, Linda Williams describes
the genre as structured by the opposition of visual stasis and narrative drive.
On the one hand, she claims, pornography is a “frenzy of the visible,” in
which the naked body “provokes a disturbance in the text” (43). On the other
hand, pornography is “just another way of speaking about and constructing
the apparent ‘truths’ of sex” (122). As a story, the pornographic text projects a
certain modality of the gendered, sexualized subject, with which it invites its
readers to identify. But its efforts to generate a smooth flow of textual identi-
fication are disrupted by the spectacle of the body. This body, with its sex
organs that have no intrinsic meaning but that, nevertheless, simply and
indisputably are, interferes with the misogynist or banal message of the text.
In its visual emphasis pornography strives to capture the irreducible thingness
of the body; but as a text (whether verbal or cinematic) it is structured by the
cultural meanings of sex and gender. While gesturing at the sexual body,
pornography covers its nakedness with stories.

Just as all human bodies are endowed with genitals of one sort or another,
they all have viscera. They can be cut, opened, brutalized in various ways.
They are all material and mortal. As shows, horror fiction and film convey
the irreducible materiality— and vulnerability— of the body. As stories, they
construct, in various ways, the “truth” of violence and victimization. But the
visual impact of violence interferes with their ability to inscribe coherent iden-
tities. Like “the spectacle of the naked or nearly naked body . . . [that] retards
any possible forward narrative drive” in pornography (Williams 71), the vio-
lated body in horror undermines narrativity.
A way to conceptualize the spectacle of violence is through what Barthes calls “the third meaning” of a visual image. “The third meaning” is “a message without a code” (36). Also called by him “the denoted image,” it is what exceeds the symbolic or representational function of a display and yet accounts for its power to hold the gaze. The “denoted image” is composed of a network of visual elements, untranslatable into a verbal narrative. Barthes’s formal definition has an advantage over Freudian and Lacanian analyses of specularity because it is not grounded in a specific theory of psychosexual development. All such theories may be contested on various grounds. But there is no contesting the fact that a mutilated human body is the object of a horrified and fascinated gaze. When we see it, we stare, or we avert our eyes, unable to bear its “message”; we throw up or run away or remain rooted to the spot; we may laugh, jaded by too many such images, or we may cry. But we are not indifferent, and the message gets through, even though we may be unable to say what it is. There are many codes used to translate this human reaction to violence into discourse, but none of them can quite capture the impact of seeing the violated body. Calling him a “denoted image” is a rather antiseptic way of describing Barker’s character, scarred and mutilated, bleeding on a filthy floor. But when blood flows, asepsis is what is needed.

The interaction between the spectacle and the story in horror suggests that the current critical consensus over the construction of the body in discourse needs some modification. This consensus (which, of course, is not undisputed) claims that the materiality of the body is created in, and through, language: culture endows us with the capacity “to read the inscribed messages of socially constructed bodies” (Burroughs and Ehrenreich 1). Judith Butler’s highly influential analysis of the body describes it as a “variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice . . .” (1990, 139). It seems that Barker’s tale offers an allegory of such theories, with the medium playing the role of the passive “socially constructed body,” and the angry incorporeal ghosts descending upon him like the furies of the Foucauldian discourse. However, the tale demonstrates not only the power of the discourse over the body, but also the power of the body over discourse. The body validates the writing rather than the other way around. The ghosts’ stories are true because they are written on the flesh. The medium told lies in order to hide his inability to communicate with the dead, and his tales, like all spiritualist communications, were ambiguous, obscure, and suspect. But the book of blood is incontrovertible by virtue of the terrible spectacle it presents. Words are slippery, but there is no arguing with wounds.

The female investigator recognizes her own corporeality in the medium’s violated body. The caresses she lavishes upon the mutilated flesh highlight the intensity with which violence brings home the knowledge of the body’s irre-
ducible materiality. In a sense, the investigator represents the audience of horror, whose involvement with the spectacle of violence has baffled and disgusted many high-minded critics. But such critics often fail to distinguish between the reactionary or puerile message of the text and the visual impact of the violated body, whose truth is all the more potent because it cannot be articulated.

Butler claims in *Bodies that Matter* that the materiality of the body is merely the result of a discursive “process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter” (9). But this “effect” is far more efficiently produced by a moment of pain than by hours of such verbal persuasion. We may be told that the body contains moist mechanisms that work independently of the mind. But we are truly convinced of the thingness of the body when we see it open—and red. To see is to believe; to see violence is to believe that we are material and mortal.

The victim of torture “is only a body, and nothing else beside that” (Amery 33). Physical violence endured with no possibility of resistance or reciprocity makes the flesh the only reality there is: “only in torture does the transformation of the person into flesh become complete” (ibid.). In the silence of the victim’s pain “the edges of the self become coterminous with the edges of the body it will die with” (Scarry 33). Of course, any physical pain has the effect of reminding the sufferer of his or her corporeality. But sickness can be symbolized away, transformed into a seal of purity, like consumption in Henry James’s *The Wings of the Dove* or stigmata of desire, like cholera in Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice.* For the victim of violence, especially violence unmotivated, unearned, unexpected, there is no escape into language. The death of language in the brutality of suffering pervades Primo Levi’s *Survival in Auschwitz.* In the Lager, which is essentially a giant torture chamber, “the reality was revealed to us: we had reached the bottom. . . . Nothing belongs to us anymore. . . . If we speak, they will not listen to us, and if they listen, they will not understand. They will even take away our name. . . .” (22). Outside language, locked in the brutal thingness of physical suffering, the victim confronts—and becomes—the Real.

Survivors of torture, rape, and attempted murder are a special minority. They are admired but also feared because they have touched the bedrock of humanity. Like Oedipus after his self-blinding, they become witnesses to the unspeakable. But while nobody would willingly follow them into the anguish-filled realm of “total reality,” the desire to see their quest is what underlies the Grand Guignol spectacle. We may condemn this desire, but we cannot deny its existence. The popularity of horror comics, films, and novels is only a recent incarnation of the age-old popularity of the spectacle of the scaffold. Public torture was still an acceptable method of punishment in the eighteenth century. Public execution was only discontinued in England in the middle of
The visual industry of violence today is a direct continuation of this trend (and its many critics should consider that in this case a fake is definitely preferable to the real thing). The artificiality of the horror film mitigates the raw impact of the violent sublime but does not completely neutralize it. And society needs this impact, while simultaneously deploring it. The spectacle of the violated body fulfills an important function in the construction of identity by providing a model for being in the body, being a body.

Jean Baudrillard asserts that in postmodernism the body disappears, eaten away by what he calls “the ecstasy of communication.” In the obscenely visible space of the electronic media and the Internet “this body, our body, often appears simply superfluous” (153). Baudrillard’s view is essentially nostalgic, harking back to the Golden Age of corporeality that never was. Mortality has not been abolished by electronic communication. But the development of the society of the spectacle, coupled with increasing personal security from violence, have made it inevitable that new means of experiencing the “total reality” of the flesh will be found in the realm of visual representation. Contra Baudrillard, it is possible to claim that what he calls “the obscenity of the visible” creates the modern and postmodern material body rather than destroys it. Horror’s obscenely visible book of blood is what we read in order to learn how to be “a body and nothing else besides” (Amery 33).

JUST LOOKING

In H. G. Wells's *The Invisible Man* (1896) there is a scene that links violence and vision in a particularly striking way. Griffin, the Invisible Man, an outcast genius who becomes a terrorist and a murderer, is set upon by an enraged mob that beats him to death. And as his invisible body suffers kicks and blows, it curdles back into visibility. Like a photographic negative, his absent corporeality is developed by pain:

> Suddenly an old woman, peering under the arm of the big navvy, screamed sharply. “Looky there!” she said, and thrust out a wrinkled finger.

And looking where she pointed, every one saw, faint and transparent as though it was made of glass, so that veins and arteries and bones and nerves could be distinguished, the outline of a hand, a hand limp and prone. It grew clouded and opaque even as they stared . . .

And so, slowly, beginning at the hands and feet and creeping along his limbs to the vital centers of his body, that strange change continued. It was like the slow spreading of a poison. First came the little white nerves, a hazy grey sketch of a limb, then the glassy bone and intricate arteries, then the flesh
and skin, first a faint fogginess and then growing rapidly dense and opaque. Presently they could see his crushed chest and his shoulders, and the dim outline of his drawn and battered features. (Wells 1933, 305)

With the help of a mysterious chemical process, Griffin has previously made himself invisible. Escape from visibility for him equals escape from the body. Griffin is an albino, with no money or class, shabbily dressed, painfully aware of being the object of mocking and prying stares. And so he opts for the radical solution of total invisibility, which to him represents freedom from the detested burden of corporeality. To see but not to be seen; to ravage others’ bodies, while having no body to feel the sting of retribution—this is Griffin’s dream, shattered at the moment he realizes that an invisible body is a body still, vulnerable to heat, cold, hunger, and most of all, pain. His subsequent violence is an attempt to complete his project, to foist, as it were, the remnants of his own corporeality onto the despised bodies of the human herd. At the end, his project is turned against him, as violence becomes the means to reveal his pitiful nakedness to the group of spectators, all of whom are protected from his reciprocal gaze.

This scene epitomizes the spectacle of violence, central to the aesthetics of horror. At work here is a double movement of identification and disavowal. On the one hand, Griffin’s mutilated body elicits a visceral response from his killers, forcing them to identify with his pain. On the other hand, the scene establishes a new social hierarchy, as the would-be invisible dictator is now an object of scorn and derision. For a victim, to be seen is a condition of abjection. But in this abjection also lies the victim’s only power.

Violence may be incorporated into the discourse of domination. As such, it becomes a signifying activity, symbolizing something other than itself: the might of a state, the victory of an ideology, the triumph of an individual. But in the sight of violence there is also a “surplus” emotional affect, which is not reducible to the symbolism of the vanquished victim. The spectacle of the tortured body is greater than the story that it is supposed to illustrate. Griffin’s death may be understood in several different ways: as just retribution; as hate crime; as society’s self-protection. But none of these explanations can quite capture the feelings of the mob petrified by their own bloody handiwork when it becomes fully and brutally visible.

Perpetrators often respond to the spectacle of violence by banishing it outside language, in the hope that such banishment will remove the moral issues posed by the act of homicide. However, in many horror texts, conscience turns out to be far easier to pacify than the guts that rebel at the shock of spilled blood. In Oscar Wilde’s The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891), the dialectic of language and spectacle in violence structures the aftermath of Dorian’s murder.
of Basil Hallward. In order to keep what’s left of his sanity, the murderer deliberately separates the sight of the dead body from language. The body is the “thing . . . seated in the chair, straining over the table with bowed head, and humped back, and long fantastic arms” (466). Refusing to name the corpse, Dorian also refuses to name himself as the agent of Basil’s death: “He felt that the secret of the whole thing was not to realize the situation. The friend who had painted the fatal portrait to which all his misery had been due had gone out of his life. That was enough” (ibid). But exiled from language, “the thing” implacably hovers on the fringes of Dorian’s field of vision. Dorian can only get some temporary peace of mind by having the corpse destroyed without a trace by a chemist friend. And then he becomes burdened with another dead body as the chemist, whom he blackmails into helping him, commits suicide. What Dickens in *Oliver Twist* calls “an item of mortality” cannot be gotten rid of easily. Like Dorian, other horror-fiction murderers are also haunted by the bodies, rather than the spirits, of their victims. In F. Marion Crawford’s classic ghost story “The Screaming Skull” (1911), for example, the malefactor is graphically killed by the skull of the title, while in M. R. James’s “Martin’s Close” (1911) it is the entire corpse that is on the prowl. This convention is an exaggeration of the reaction of such murderers as Bill Sikes who are unhinged by the sight of the flesh and the blood—“such flesh and so much blood”—of the victim (Dickens 1837, 424). The “sight of his victim, his first victim, bloody and pitiful at his feet” makes the Invisible Man abandon for a time his schemes of world domination (Wells 1933, 292).

Paradoxically, the Symbolic becomes a haven from the wordless sublimity of violence. If the subject of violence feels that his psychic integrity is being dissolved by the “sight of his victim,” he will attempt to anchor his identity in a story. He will seek a narrative to keep the horror of the violated body at bay and to reduce it to a mere cipher of powerlessness. Polish writer Stanislaw Lem gives a striking description of the difference between the visual and the cognitive impact of murder on the behavior of the SS killers during the execution of the Jews. The lower ranks beat and abuse the condemned men, but the officer is invariably polite. He is also the one who carries out the shooting with no flicker of hesitation:

> Although he spoke to us, you see, we were not people. He knew that we comprehended human speech but that nevertheless we were not human; he knew this quite well. . . . The simpler ones among his men did not possess this higher knowledge; the appearance of humanity given by our bodies, our two legs, faces, hands, eyes, this appearance deterred them a little from their duty; thus they had to butcher those bodies to make them unlike people’s. But for him such primitive proceedings were no longer necessary. (Lem 1983, 65–66; emphasis mine)
The "simpler ones" are intoxicated by the sight of human beings being reduced to the "thing," the deindividualized bloody object. This intoxication is what prompts them to engage in sadistic abuse, but it is also what makes them disturbed and uneasy afterwards. The officer, however, is immune to the spectacle of violence because he is equipped with an ideological narrative that blinds him to the actual sight of the victims. He does not see the "thing"; he looks straight through it to the abstractions of racial science. Being immune to the fascination of violence makes him also incapable of empathy.

The officer is a New Man, a subject of ideology, rather than an ordinary killer. His underlings, like the mob who killed Griffin, are far more representative of nonideological reactions to, and participation in, violence. The Medusa-like fascination of the violated body is powerfully described in Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), the French Revolution novel replete with images of staring eyes, gorgon faces, sights that cannot be endured and yet must be seen. The crowds that gather around the guillotine are animated not only by vengeful rage but also by "a species of fervour or intoxication" that eventually prompts some of them "to brave the guillotine unnecessarily, and to die by it" (310). This intoxication, the delirium of the show of violence, represents for Dickens an attempt "to collapse the limits of the self as it is conceived in subject-centered terms" (Kucich 200). This collapse is both sought and abhorred. This is the dialectic of horror whose pleasure is predicated on revulsion and shock.

Griffin's battered body represents a defeat of language by the spectacle of violence. Just before his death, already half-mad with rage and privation, he issues a number of declarations, threatening the population with terror. "Death, the unseen Death, is coming" (Wells 1933, 293). Like his mysterious books holding the secrets of invisibility, these "strange missives" are invested with the magic of the Symbolic, a premonition of a new order, to which this would-be New Man is desperate to ascend out of the mire of his own corporeality. This magic is made void by his death, the proclamations meaningless, the books undecipherable. What is left is an anonymous body beyond language in all its ghastly visibility. Death is not unseen.

In his proclamations, refusing to divulge his real name, Griffin calls himself "Invisible Man the First," promising a new era, "the Epoch of the Invisible Man," a reign of anonymous tyrants (293). This is the namelessness of power, in which the proper name of the ruler is supplanted by a general title. Ironically, however, Griffin is ultimately granted another kind of namelessness: that of the victim, as his individuality is obscured by the terrible sight of his "crushed" body. Here is the anonymity of language and the anonymity of the spectacle, and Griffin's entire career may be plotted between the two. He aspires to lose himself in language, becoming a word rather than a man, an
unseen Terror, an intangible symbol of pure power. All he achieves is to become a “bloody and pitiful” sight (292).

In being both an image of violence and a symbol of power, Griffin exemplifies the duality of the violated body, which, like the duality of the Lacanian Real, is “at the same time that of corporeal contingency and that of logical consistency” (Zizek 171). In other words, the body is both an intrusion of mute and incommunicable pain that shatters language and a token of social communication, traded in the stock exchange of ideological narratives. Thus, it possesses a double fascination. In terms of “logical consistency,” the book of blood tells the story of difference: the difference between the powerful and the powerless. But as an image of “corporeal contingency,” the book of blood is beyond words. It inhabits the ecstatic realm of the sublime.

“I AM EVERY DEAD THING”

Horror’s tales of violent excess probe the desire that leads ordinary human subjects to lose themselves in this realm, to seek the condition of sublimity that is also self-erasure. Horror texts not only detail the transformation of a man into a monster but also uncover its underlying dialectic of repulsion and attraction. Nobody is born a subject of torture; this is a condition that people achieve because they aspire to it. And the generic tradition of horror investigates the nature of this aspiration.

Contemporary horror is an offshoot of the Gothic novel of the late eighteenth- through early-nineteenth centuries. Since the blood-and-thunder excesses of Ann Radcliffe and “Monk” Lewis, preoccupation with violence has been the backbone of the genre. The shadow of Jack the Ripper hovers over the great horror thrillers of the fin de siècle. Their contemporary descendants, steeped in visual culture, are obsessed with graphic torture and mutilation. Despite the conventional critical emphasis on sexuality, it is violence that constitutes the one stable topos of the genre. True, Dr. Jekyll becomes the monstrous Mr. Hyde to ease the intolerable burden of middle-class repression and hypocrisy; Dracula’s female victims are seduced by his Sadeian charms; Dorian Gray exchanges identities with a work of art ostensibly in order to live a life of sensual pleasure. But while the beginning of monsterhood may be sexual, its subsequent development invariably leads to violence. Dracula is a killer; Lucy, the angelic beauty turned into a vampire by his love bite, preys on children; both Jekyll–Hyde and Dorian Gray commit senseless and atrocious murders. Beyond eroticism, horror discloses the existence of another desire, more difficult to pinpoint, which is sometimes designated by the empty phrase “motiveless violence.” No human action is motiveless; what is meant by the phrase is rather that the motivation of a
murderer exceeds both the rational calculus of profit and the Freudian calculus of sex.

The Picture of Dorian Gray explores the trajectory of the violent desire and its consequences. It suggests that the murderer wants to be a monster and that monstrosity does not mean freedom from the annoying restrictions of the superego. Rather, it means a far more radical freedom from the self. The monster is a subject who succumbs to the seduction of pure materiality, seeking escape from the Symbolic in the wordless revelation of the violent sublime.

Wilde’s novel has been variously seen as immoral or as excessively moralistic. But almost all critics agree that Dorian’s bargain to exchange identities with his own portrait is a means to an end. Hedged in by the taboos of a homophobic society, Dorian seems to seek nothing more extraordinary than the possibility of enjoying himself in peace. However, those who, like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, see the novel as a parable of homosexual desire, find it difficult to explain Dorian’s subsequent transformation from a placid hedonist into a near-psychotic killer (67–91). He has what he wants: why can’t he just be happy, instead of driving Sybil Vane to suicide and knifing Basil?

The key is “what he wants.” And it is certainly more than a few clandestine trips to the brothels of Soho. Dorian’s wish is to be an objet d’art, to exchange the mutability and uncertainty of discourse for the materiality of painting. He wants to escape time, to remain frozen in “this particular day in June” (391). Impervious to aging, forever fixed in his perfection, Dorian would become the body of the Real, the corporeal self-presence untroubled by the divisiveness of consciousness. To acquire the immediacy of a spectacle, Dorian gives up his temporal—and hence narrative—subjectivity.

Before some nameless force grants his desire, Dorian cries out: “I would give my soul for that!” (391) He is “soul,” in this novel of a devil’s bargain without Devil or God, his humanity, predicated on change, mutability, and mortality. And instead of being the means to an end, the loss of the soul is an end in itself. It is not the price Dorian reluctantly pays for his transformation, but the transformation for which he has to pay a price. And the price is murder.

Dorian first commits a murder by proxy, driving Sybil Vane to suicide. But his metamorphosis into a body without a soul is only completed when he stabs Basil Hallward, his best friend and the painter of the fateful picture. After the stabbing, Dorian experiences the ultimate evacuation of subjectivity. There are no feelings left: no craving, no hope, no memory, no remorse. Basil’s corpse is a “thing,” but so is Dorian himself. He is a beautiful object, just like the beautiful objects that he collects and that he pities for their impermanence. In the moment of violence, he becomes that phantasmagoric flesh that, poised outside language, appears to beckon with the promise of immortality and omnipotence.
But being a purely corporeal subject is impossible. Dorian eventually realizes that being “a body and nothing else besides” paradoxically means renunciation of bodily pleasures: “But I seem to have lost the passion, and forgotten the desire” (492). Desire and passion are products of the mind, physical sensations filtered through the soul. And Dorian’s soul is missing.

Dorian’s desire is perverse, not in the homophobic sense of the Wilde trials, but as a murderer’s desire is perverse because it apes the horror of the victim. For Amery and Levi and every other torture victim, being an object is the ultimate degradation. For Dorian, it is the ultimate bliss. The victim has both his soul and his body destroyed; the perpetrator believes he can amputate the soul and enjoy the self-presence of the body at the expense of somebody else’s suffering. But once violence is unleashed, it spares no one. Dorian ends up as just another anonymous corpse. “Lying on the floor was a dead man, in evening dress, with a knife in his heart. He was withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage” (503). In order to experience his own corporeality as sublime, the torturer destroys the bodies of others: “the goal of the torturer is to make . . . the body emphatically and crushingly present by destroying it” (Scarry 49). But this absolute presence of the body, unclouded by language and consciousness, is achievable only in death.

Every time Dorian commits an act of violence, his picture undergoes an additional transformation, becoming as monstrous as the bodies of his victims. When he spills blood, blood appears on the portrait’s hands. The fairy tale simplicity of this visual image expresses the link between the murderer’s desire and the victim’s body. The murderer wants to be as Real as he perceives the victim’s body to be. In a sense, the murderer wants to be the victim. Cleansed of his limited subjectivity, he aspires to the condition of the sublime, in which “the body affects the soul” and in which the body ultimately consumes the soul (Lyotard 1991, 99). Thus, his monstrosity is the monstrosity of all flesh. It symbolizes not so much the distortion of morality as the inescapability of mortality.

Horror’s monsters have been often defined through their deviance from the “standard” human corporeality. However, for all their baroque bodily shapes, they share one salient feature with humans: materiality. Even spiritual entities, such as ghosts, enter horror fiction only through their material manifestations. The monster’s corporeal difference acts as a defamiliarizing device (in Viktor Scklovsky’s sense of the word), to return us to the unfamiliarity of our own bodies, whose irreducible materiality the mind stubbornly refuses to accept. Dorian’s body, so alluring and yet so monstrous, is the body as a “thing,” exiled from language and narrative by violence. There are many other horror texts that explore the same trope. The protagonist of Ray Bradbury’s story “Skeleton” (1945), for example, becomes obsessed with the
thought that he has a monster inside him, a Halloween horror, “one of those jointed, snowy, hard things, one of those foul, dry, brittle, gouge-eyed, skull-faced, snake-fingered, rattling things that sway from neck-chains in abandoned webbed closets” (184). The “thing” is ordinary human bones. The monster of horror is frightening not because it is the distant and impossible Other but because it is the Other who is a constant and unavoidable companion of the conscious self. The monster is the human body, with its capacity to violate, to be violated, and to thrill in wordless identification with violence. On a small and carefully circumscribed scale of aesthetic experience, horror does what Scarry describes torture as doing: the body is set against the psyche, “made a weapon against [the self], made to betray [the self] on behalf of the enemy, made to be the enemy” (48).

LANGUAGE OF ANGELS

Imprisoned in the Imaginary, the monster in horror has a strained and equivocal relationship with language, in particular with the language of self-description. The monster is a creature that is seen for what it is but who cannot give a coherent account of itself. Sometimes when a monster is disguised as an ordinary human being, this narrative deprivation coincides with its transformation into a “thing.” In tales of the werewolf, for example, a radical physical change that heralds the onset of violence vitiates the subject’s self-consistency to the point of amnesia. Returning to the human form, the werewolf often has no memories of its nocturnal phase. But on the other hand, as a narrative genre, horror needs to equip the monster with some sort of narrative identity and link its violence to a specific moral, epistemological, or sexual transgression. Thus, the monster’s body becomes “infinitely interpretable... a machine that, in its Gothic mode, produces meaning and can represent any horrible trait that the reader feeds into the narrative” (Halberstam 21). But the running of this “machine” is never smooth, as narrative interpretation is impeded by the violent spectacle. The meanings that horror produces aggregate around a core of semantic emptiness that is the monster’s visible body. The monster eludes the straightjacket of narrative interpretation through the enigmatic “message without a code” of its visibility. Some horror texts explicitly dramatize the conflict between spectacle and language by linking the appearance of the monster with a disturbance in the temporal and causal progression of the narrative.

M. R. James’s ghost story “The Mezzotint” (1904) and the film A Nightmare on Elm Street (1984) oppose ordinary time to the time of the monster. The monster appears in a picture (in James’s story) or in dreams (in the film), in a realm where order, duration, and causality are so scrambled that no narrative
of origin can be reconstructed even in retrospect. The two observers of the moving mezzotint wonder whether they are looking at the past or the future: “Has it happened already, or is it going to come off?” (46). In Freddy-haunted dreams there is only the endless “now” of a nightmare. But this realm is not “illusory” in any poetic sense; having been killed in a dream or in a picture, the victim remains dead. The two monsters defy the temporal and moral order at once: both are victims and victimizers simultaneously. In James’s story the skeletal intruder who is seen in the picture stealing into a building and kidnapping a child is a poacher, judiciously executed by the child’s father. Similarly, Freddy Krueger of Elm Street is a child abuser, murdered by enraged parents, who subsequently invades their children’s dreams. Violence and victimization are tied in a circle, in which discriminations of guilt and innocence become meaningless. The monster and its victims literally merge into one. The creature of “The Mezzotint” always appears with the boy firmly clasped in his arms, while the film’s teenagers, murdered in their dreams, are caught like flies in Freddy’s viscous body.

Freddy Krueger devours temporality; other monsters destroy language itself. Many horror creatures simply do not speak. But even when the monster is quite voluble, there is some mysterious slippage in its self-expression. The classic paradigm of the loquacious monster is Frankenstein’s creature, and of the silent monster, Dracula. As eloquent as a star lawyer, Frankenstein’s fiend easily mounts a convincing defense of himself, arguing away such trifling matters as the murder of a child. But his smooth and coherent account of himself is undermined by the unbearable spectacle he presents. The creature’s uncanny and horrifying appearance affects even those who are well disposed toward him, so that the tension between spectacle and speech becomes central to the novel. Dracula, on the other hand, is firmly entrenched in his monsterhood by being denied access to language. He is the only major character who is not a narrator in Stoker’s novel. The few things he says are conveyed to us by his enemies, filtered through their incomprehension or hostility. Deprived of a self-narrative, Dracula is totally absorbed in the visual appurtenances of his monstrosity: fangs, bloody hands, bats, and rats. It is not an accident that while cinema has been unsuccessful in finding an appropriate visual equivalent of Frankenstein’s creature (Boris Karloff’s neck screws are quaint rather than frightening), the vampire has become a major part of the iconography of popular culture. Since Stoker, of course, there have been many attempts to write a vampire’s first-person narrative, with Anne Rice’s Interview with a Vampire and its sequels being only one example. But all such texts fall into what might be called Frankenstein’s trap. If the monstrous self is presented as transparent, coherent, sympathetic, it is not a monster. If it is presented as alien, mute, incomprehensible, it is not a self.
The result of this trap is a grotesque psyche, paralleling the monster’s grotesque body. Grotesque corporeal images emphasize the patching together of incongruous parts. The psychic grotesque “moves inward towards an individualized, interiorized space of fantasy and introspection. . . . Emerging with the concept of the Romantic sublime, the category of the uncanny grotesque is associated with the life of the psyche and with the particular ‘experience’ of the ‘strange’ and ‘criminal’ variety . . . .” (Russo 8). The grotesque character is one of the “many partial, dual, multiple and dismembered selves scattered throughout literary fantasies [that] violate the most cherished of all human unities: the unity of ‘character’” (Jackson 82).

The connection between the grotesque self and the grotesque body is explored in Clive Barker’s short novel Cabal. Its heroine, Lori, contemplates the ideal body of Western culture and rejects it in favor of its monstrous counterpart:

Dreams of the perfected anatomy—the soap opera face, the centerfold body—had distracted her with promises of true happiness. Empty promises. Flesh could not keep its glamour, nor eyes their sheen. . . . Against that the monsters of Midian—transforming, re-arranging, ambassadors of tomorrow’s flesh and reminders of yesterday’s—seemed full of possibilities. (188)

The parameters of Lori’s choice are set by Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian cultural scholar, in his distinction between the classical and the grotesque body. But for Lori the choice of a grotesque body also indicates an escape from the straitjacket of a normative identity. Midian, the city of monsters where she and her lover, Aaron Boone, also known as Cabal, eventually find refuge, is a perpetual carnival of weird and wonderful flesh, an enclave of ecstasy, exuberance, and excess in the desert of “centerfold bodies.” The grotesque body is “full of possibilities” because it houses a personality free of guilt, compulsion, and repression.

In the course of the novel Boone’s body undergoes multiple transformations, collapsing all binary dichotomies that are used to define the self and the Other. Infected by a shape-shifter’s bite, pumped full of bullets, cut open in a police autopsy, Boone’s body remains triumphantly alive. He violates the boundary between human and animal (by becoming a cannibalistic “beast” when seduced by the scent of blood); one and many (he is renamed Cabal, an “alliance of many” [243]); inside and outside (he breathes out a “veil of smoke” that melts down and reshapes his flesh [119]). And while only implicit in Cabal, the monster’s transgression of the gender boundary is explored in many other Barker texts, always in terms of liberation tinged by horror or violence colored with exaltation.
“Skins of the Fathers” (in volume 2 of Barker’s Books of Blood) offers an origin myth of gender indeterminacy that posits monstrosity as a counterweight to patriarchy. The patriarchal descent is supplanted by an alliance of women and monsters. Those “fathers” who jointly beget a son on the willing body of a woman are irreducible to the ordinary definitions not only of gender but even of physiological sex. But in their grotesquerie, they are things of beauty and wonder: “Creatures too fantastic to be real, too real to be disbelieved; angels of the hearth and threshold. One had a head, moving back and forth on a gossamer neck, like some preposterous weather-vane, blue as the early night-sky and shot with a dozen eyes like so many suns. A father, with a body like a fan, opening and closing in his excitement, his orange flesh flushing deeper as the boy’s voice was heard again” (138–39).

Midian and “the angels of the hearth and threshold” are alternatives to the society of the centerfold and patriarchy (139). They are an attempt to imagine and reimagine the violent sublime as utopia. Barker does not minimize the violence of the monster, but he sets it against the greater violence of social discipline. In Cabal, the violence of the Symbolic is represented by the monster-hunter and psychopathic killer Decker. He is a sterile and implacable authority, whose purification of the monstrous body takes the form of wholesale slaughter. It is in opposition to such an authority (with its “classic,” “closed” corporeality) that the monster’s transgression appears as seductive and liberating. But the monster’s rebellion is ultimately not against a specific discursive formation, a specific ideology, but against discourse itself.

The monster’s spectacular body and speechless self hold out a promise of release from the prison of language. Monsters are postmodern angels. They point to a world beyond words, in which “the violence of the letter” is overcome with the greater violence of the spectacle. In Rachel Pollack’s story “Angel Baby” (1982) a woman raped by a monstrous angel gives up her ordinarily human life to bear his autistic child. The angel comes from the world without language, in which “you did not need any reason for anything” (141). Purged of feelings and causality, bathed in the perpetual glow of a never ending apocalypse, this is a world of the Real: “Everything humans did had to mean something because humans couldn’t stand it otherwise. Only the angel did things that didn’t mean something else, something explained in words or feelings” (154). Desperately longing to enter the angel’s realm, the heroine welcomes his brutal assault in the hope of getting at least a glimpse of the wordless “world of lightning.” But she is still too human to bear its splendor; only her son, with the “metal coldness” in his eyes, is vouchsafed an access to it (158). Like Barker’s monsters’ offspring, he will become a prophet of the unspeakable. But to do so, he will have to learn to speak. In order to be comprehensible, the language of angels has to be translated into ordinary speech.
or, at least, into those shared discourses that have traditionally grappled with the sublime.

**THE MEDUSA’S HEAD**

Since of all the genres of violence horror is most responsive to its shattering impact on identity, it is always close to those areas of experience that involve excess or transfiguration, or both. In other words, horror is particularly concerned with desire and divinity. In this section I will explore the role of sexuality in horror’s depiction of the violent sublime, and in the next one I will look at some monstrous gods.

The spectacle of violence often has the same effect as the Medusa’s head in the Greek myth of Perseus, petrifying the onlooker. This image has been a recurrent starting point for explorations of the interrelation of violence and gender. The Medusa’s head in *A Tale of Two Cities* is a metaphor for the fascination of the countless heads rolling off the guillotine under the avid stares of the mob. And long before Freud, Dickens is aware of the sexual connotations of the image. He links it with the dancing, blood-splattered women of the Revolution, the castrating furies at the knife edge between violence and sex.

In Freud’s short essay “Medusa’s Head” (1922; published in 1940), the sight of the Medusa becomes the tableau of sexual difference. What turns the male spectator to stone is the castrated female genitals:

To decapitate = to castrate. The terror of Medusa is thus a terror of castration that is linked to the sight of something. Numerous analyses have made us familiar with the occasion for this: it occurs when a boy, who has hitherto been unwilling to believe the threat of castration, catches sight of the female genitals, probably those of an adult, surrounded by hair, and essentially those of his mother. (273)

“To decapitate = to castrate.” An equation can always be turned around and still remain valid. Freud uses sex to explain violence. But can violence explain sex? In Thomas Ligotti’s horror story “The Medusa” (1996), a man obsessed with the eponymous creature of the title is finally reunited with it in the “rose-tinted heart” of his own private hell (376). Whatever Ligotti’s Medusa is, it is not what the protagonist derisively calls “the image par excellence of romantic panic” (365). Rather, the enigmatic Medusa seems to be horror itself, irrespective of its cause, haunting us “just this side of ... the Real” (375). Ligotti’s post-Freudian tale tries to undo the connection established by classical psychoanalysis between horror and sexuality. What holds the gaze of the male spectator in the Freudian model is the recognition of sexual difference. What
Dregler, Ligotti’s protagonist, eventually sees in the mirror is his own naked, contorted, violence-scarred body, “the thing itself” (376).

The recognition of sexual difference through the image of the Medusa involves an irreducible element of violence. The female genitals are reinterpreted as a site of mutilation: “the absence [of the penis] is the cause of the horror” (Freud 1922, 273). Femininity is a trace of violation. And not satisfied with seeing the wound of the female genitals, the gaze of the masculine subject commits further aggression by trying to penetrate the mysterious interior of the female body. The “absent” genitals draw the gaze inwards, inviting the opening up of the dark visceral cavern. The “bodily cave,” writes Mary Russo, “is culturally identified . . . with the female and the maternal” (116).

But in *The Invisible Man* it is a male body that is opened up, its viscera displayed to the audience’s gaze, its “bodily cave” invaded. What makes this violent feminization possible is Griffin’s victimization. From a disembodied (and implicitly masculine) Power, he has been reduced to an inert (and implicitly feminine) Thing. But in the humiliation of his downfall, his passive body becomes invested with a compelling magnetism. The savage attackers are now as petrified by Griffin’s shamelessly exposed materiality as the boy in Freud’s parable of gender is petrified by the mother’s castrating genitals. Invisibility is the power to act but visibility is the power to be.

The opened-up body is “abject,” as Julia Kristeva argues in *Powers of Horror*. The abject is the unclean body of the birthing mother. The affect of horror, claims Kristeva, results from “something horrible to see at the impossible doors of the invisible—the mother’s body. The scene of scenes here is not the so-called primal scene but the one of giving birth, incest turned inside out, flayed identity” (155).

But is the violated body horrible because it reminds one of the maternal body or vice versa? In other words, what is the real “scene of scenes”: giving birth or killing? Kristeva situates the discussion of the maternal in the context of her analysis of Celine’s anti-Semitism, making an implicit connection between abjection and genocide. Would giving birth be terrifying to an observer if, by a biological accident of human anatomy, it were not accompanied by pain and bleeding, producing a natural simulacrum of the “flayed identity” of the victim of violence? The scene of “birth” in the first *Alien* movie (1979), with the creature bursting out from its male “mother’s” abdomen in a shower of blood, flouts the logic of gender to make a point about our attitude to the interiors of our own bodies. In the *Alien* films, feminine and maternal abjection becomes a wandering signifier attached to any character who loses control over her own corporeality. It has taken four films (so far) to sort out the permutations of gender and violence and to restore, more or less, the alignment between abject femininity and biological femaleness.
Violence creates its own hierarchy, which cannot be neatly aligned with the hierarchy of sex. There is the gender of violence, as well as the gender of sex, and the two are not the same. In her book *The Rites of Man* Rosalind Miles argues that violence is a necessary component of masculinity, a contention that is patently untenable, for not all men are killers and not all killers are men. However, Miles’s argument can be reversed: masculinity is not always violent but violence is always masculine, even if perpetrated by a woman. Today, with popular culture overrun by single white females and leather gear vampireettes, a violent woman is still awarded an honorary phallus. Stephen King calls his character Carrie “Woman, feeling her powers for the first time and, like Samson, pulling down the temple on everyone in sight” (170). Carrie’s defiance coincides with the onset of her menses, but her violent womanhood is still conceptualized by her creator in terms of masculine heroism. The violator is always manly because his body is intact, while the body of the victim is open, receptive, and penetrable. Thus, the male victim acquires the abject maternal body, the “flayed identity” of the birthing mother.

Of all contemporary horror writers, Clive Barker is most aware of the possible disjunction between ordinary gender and the gender of violence. In his novella “The Hellbound Heart” (on which the *Hellraiser* series of films, directed by Barker himself, is based), the abject body is not merely male but explicitly phallic. Frank, a reckless womanizer, is captured and dismembered by the strange androgynous creatures called the Cenobites he accidentally conjures up in his pursuit of forbidden pleasures. He becomes a patchwork of bodily parts, an animated anatomical exhibit: “the body has been ripped apart and sewn together again with most of its pieces either missing or twisted and blackened as if in a furnace. There was an eye, gleaming at her, and the ladder of a spine, the vertebrae stripped of muscles, a few unrecognizable fragments of anatomy” (212).

The feminization of the male victim hardly requires a proof: one has only to consider the sort of verbal and physical abuse (including castration) that the victors commonly heap upon the vanquished. A more interesting and provocative question is whether anybody may want such feminization. Even posing this question sounds like blaming the victim. But here as well, horror suggests some unsettling answers. If Dorian and other assorted killers want to become monsters by committing acts of violence, some horror characters achieve monsterhood through victimization. In *Cabal* the monstrous inhabitants of Midian, displaying a dazzling collection of opened-up, mutilated, twisted, ripped bodies, are mostly male. Their violation has endowed them with the magic of anarchic fertility, commonly associated with femaleness. The abject body is a fecund body. And like the imaginary invulnerable body of the killer, the victimized body transcends mortality. In Barker’s “The Madonna,” two men...
wandering into a deserted swimming pool discover the Virgin Mother, ceaselessly giving birth to monstrous children and surrounded by young girls who suckle her creations. The Madonna is not even remotely human; she looks like "something slow and molten..." (Barker 1987, 195). Having been touched by the Madonna's magic, the two men undergo a spontaneous sex change but respond to it in opposite ways. Ezra Garvey, a man's man, commits suicide by trying to "slice off" his transformed genitals. Jerry Coloqhoun, a gentle dreamer, welcomes the change: "There were miracles in the world! Forces that could turn flesh inside out without drawing blood; that could topple the tyranny of the real and make play in its rubble" (206). Miracle is "turn[ing] the flesh inside out" without dying; dissection without blood; violence without pain. And in this transubstantiation of torture, feminine passivity is eagerly embraced.

Barker's stories make explicit what tamer horror texts only hint at: victimization is power. If women are made into honorary men by wielding guns or carving knives, men are made into women by submitting to the same. This is a commonplace; but what is far less frequently noted is that both men and women might trade their actual gender for the femininity of violation in the hope of tasting the sublime. Barker's tale, with its images of monstrous maternity, recalls the famous predecessor of Dracula, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's vampire story "Carmilla" (1870). Like Barker's characters, its female protagonist seeks miracle in abjection. Laura, the first-person narrator and heroine of the story, goes to her death willingly and with pleasure. Assaulted by the beautiful vampire Carmilla, Laura is by turns seduced and brutalized, wooed with tender love, and dragged like a lamb to the slaughter. Carmilla is lover, sister, friend but, most of all, mother. Her enchanting realm, glimpses of which Laura gets in her delirium, is like the realm of Barker's Madonna, a maternal space of mingled beauty and horror, carrying her away on the stream of its "unaccountable fascination" (Le Fanu 307). Laura is Carmilla and Carmilla is Laura: in the pre-Oedipal kingdom of the vampire, there is neither separation nor identity.

There is both pleasure and power in victimization, as a famous episode in Stoker's Dracula (1896) demonstrates. When Jonathan Harker is about to be attacked by three vampire ladies, he is instantly transformed into a Victorian bride, awaiting with bated breath her consummation: "There was something about them that made me uneasy, some longing and at the same time some deadly fear. I felt in my heart a wicked, burning desire that they would kiss me with those red lips...I was afraid to raise my eyelids, but looked on and saw perfectly under the lashes. The fair girl went on her knees and bent over me, fairly gloating" (39).

This scene has been interpreted in terms of every sexual perversion known to psychology. But there is another way of reading Harker's sexual
masochism: as a strategy of empowerment. Were he allowed by his author to cross the barrier of a vampiric rape, Harker, like Lucy, would eventually be transformed into a powerful, immortal, irresistible being. For Harker, a little clerk ordered around by everybody, from his London employer to the Transylvanian Count, an effective feminine mystique would be preferable to a frustrated and impotent masculinity.

Other victims of horror show how evil endured becomes a prerequisite for evil inflicted. Frankenstein's creature stridently claims the status of an abused child. The Invisible Man has been on the receiving end of taunts and blows for most of his life. In M. R. James's ghost story "Martin's Close" (1911) an implacable toadlike creature is the phantom of a poor retarded girl killed, for no particular reason, by a wealthy gentleman. But more than the psychological balance of suffering and revenge is at stake here: the empowerment of the victim coincides with a physical transformation into an abject body. The vampire is the most striking example of such transformation. Each vampire has been a victim once, and each victim is a future vampire. A vampire, of either sex, is a phallic mother, giving birth to its offspring at the very moment of a murderous assault. Despite his perpetually erect fangs and virile mystique, Dracula, in the climactic scene of his takeover of Mina, becomes a nursing mother: "With his left hand he [Dracula] held both Mrs. Harker's hands, keeping them away with her arms at full tension; his right hand gripped her by the back of the neck, forcing her face down on his bosom...The attitude of the two had a terrible resemblance to a child forcing a kitten's nose into a saucer of milk to compel it to drink" (Stoker 249).

This maternal power is rooted in the Medusa-like fascination of the spectacle of violence. Robbed of agency, the victim is invested with the passive fascination of an object, having become what Kristeva calls "something horrible to see at the impossible doors of the Invisible" (155). Having lost his ability to elude the gaze, the Invisible Man, in the humiliation of his public torture, acquires the ability to make people look at him. As the viewers of fashion television know, this is not an inconsiderable power, especially in the absence of any other. Like a beautiful woman, a mutilated corpse rules the gaze. The executioner unwittingly turns his victim into the Medusa's head that can unman him with its ghastly sight. And the femininity of violence can be more powerful than the femininity of sex. Nancy's looks earn her the paltry living of a prostitute and Bill Sikes's blows. But the spectacle of her mangled body forces her abuser to hang himself in the public square.

There is something undeniably seductive, a sort of poetic justice in a world bereft of most such consolations, in horror's empowerment of the victim through abjection. But there is danger in it as well. The dumb schoolgirl of the horror flick, going down into the cellar to meet the monster, seeks
submergence in the violent sublime and drags the audience with her. Having had their fill of second-hand shivers, the spectators go home unharmed, but the schoolgirl remains in the cellar forever. She is only a fictional construct, of course; but who is to say that the idea of violence as a transfiguring experience has not leaked out of the confines of the movie theatre, into the mind of some would-be murderer or suicide? Here is Barker’s character from “The Madonna” lured by the glimmer of the sublime on the other side of violent death:

There was light ahead. How far it lay, he couldn’t calculate, but what did it matter? If he drowned before he reached that place, and ended his journey dead, so what? Death was no more certain than the dream of masculinity he’d lived all these years. Terms of description fit only to be turned up and over and inside out. The earth was bright, wasn’t it, and probably full of stars. He opened his mouth and shouted into the whirlpool, as the light grew and grew, an anthem in praise of paradox. (Barker 1987, 209)

Plunging into the whirlpool of violence, the victim seeks a metamorphosis into the Medusa’s head: the shape of mingled horror and beauty, that can revenge the pain and humiliation endured by the victim’s ordinary human body. If victimization is the epitome of powerlessness, perhaps it can be turned inside out to become an invincible armor. The Medusa lures its devotees into the “rose-tinted heart” of horror, in which Dregler, forever fused with the Real, exists in a timeless realm, bereft of “his world and his words” (Ligotti 376).

The sublime exaltation of violence, dissolving gender and overturning social hierarchies, can become an object of desire for both the perpetrator and, shockingly, for the victim as well. This desire is ruinous for the individual, who, becoming the lawless subject of torture, is ultimately exiled into the wilderness outside the social field of narrativity. But what happens when the craving for the violent sublime becomes social and collective? Can a community of monsters exist?

GOD’S BODY

Horror’s monsters are ordinarily loners. M. R. James’s ghosts (like M. R. James himself) prefer their own company; Pollack’s angel strikes on his own; King’s “It,” the ultimate monster, the embodiment of everybody’s worst fear, is sui generis. However, in Frankenstein’s creature’s longing for a family and community, in the Invisible Man’s dictatorial aspirations, in Dracula’s plans of conquest, and in Barker’s Midian, we are beginning to discern the outline of
a monstrous body politic. And as we shall see later, such a body uncannily mirrors the lineaments of utopia. Bypassing the subject of discipline, the subject of torture and the subject of ideology join hands in building the brave new world of permanent violence.

Barker's visionary glorification of the liberating violence of torture in opposition to the stifling violence of discipline follows a long philosophical, political, and literary tradition. It is paralleled by Walter Benjamin's distinction between "mythic" violence, which is the violence of the law, and "divine" violence, which is the violence of excess, transformation, and rebellion:

Just as in all spheres God opposes myth, mythic violence is confronted by the divine. And the latter constitutes its antithesis in all respects. If mythic violence is lawmaking, divine violence is law-destroying; if the former seeks boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them; if mythic violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine power only expiates; if the former threatens, the latter strikes; if the former is bloody, the latter is lethal without spilling blood... Mythic violence is bloody power over mere life for its own sake; divine violence is pure power over all life for the sake of the living. The first demands sacrifice; the second accepts it. (1921, 249–50)

Despite the absence of any contemporary references in the essay, its politics—in the shadow of World War I, following the recent Revolution in Russia, and surrounded by the volatility of the defeated Germany—are not difficult to fathom. The "mythic" violence of war is to be defeated by the "divine" violence of revolution, with its promise of a utopian transformation. However, in a more comprehensive sense of the politics of the body, Benjamin's essay also makes clear what is at stake in viewing violence as an instrument of utopia. Revolutionary ethics has to deny the integrity and inviolability of the human body and regard it as malleable and expendable:

Man cannot, at any price, be said to coincide with the mere life in him, any more than it can be said to coincide with any other of his conditions or qualities, including even the uniqueness of his bodily person. However sacred man is (or however sacred that life in him which is identically present in earthly life, death, and afterlife), there is no sacredness in his condition, in his bodily life vulnerable to injury by his fellow men. (1921, 251)

With the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to point out the historical results of the large-scale application of "divine" violence or to ponder the irony of Benjamin's own fate. However, what is more interesting is the rhetorical attempt in this passage to burst, as it were, the boundaries of the individual body, to
extend it beyond death, to blur the distinction between the actual physical individual and the body politic. Benjamin’s “imaginary anatomy,” to use Lacan’s expression, is the anatomy of the monster, fluid, protean, and unbounded. The monster is simultaneously a sideshow and a revelation. In the political discourse of “divine,” liberating violence, the implicit rhetoric of corporeal monstrosity interacts with an explicit apocalyptic thrust. Hannah Arendt emphasizes the apocalyptic (in the sense of “revelatory”) dimension of utopian violence:

Not many authors of rank glorified violence for violence’s sake but these few—Sorel, Pareto, Fanon—were motivated by a much deeper hatred of bourgeois society and were led to a much more radical break with its moral standards than the conventional Left, which was chiefly inspired by compassion and a burning desire for justice. To tear the mask of hypocrisy from the face of the enemy, to unmask him and the devious machinations and manipulations that permit him to rule without using violent means, that is to provoke action even at the risk of annihilation so the truth may come out—these are still among the strongest motives in today’s violence on the campuses and in the streets. (1970, 65)

The violence of radical revolt is the revelation of the truth. The language of unmasking points to the utopian desire for the clean page, the new beginning, and the end to secrets and lies. But, paradoxically, the secret that needs exposing is precisely the absence of physical violence in democracy, the fact that the “enemy” manages “to rule without using violent means” (Arendt 65). The complaint of the revolutionary is not that there is too much violence in society, but that there is too little.

This is the point forcefully made in D. H. Lawrence’s Apocalypse (1931). A Nietzsche without irony and depth, Lawrence denounces “the vast anti-will of the masses, the will to negate power” (17). Cut off from the vital Cosmos and locked in a Baconian hell of science and rationality, the modern man (or rather the modern male, for Lawrence has different prescriptions for women) is deprived of his “natural proud self of power” (21). He is tyrannized by words, bound by the Lilliputian web of rules and regulations. The main flaw of society, as seen by Lawrence, is that it relies on prohibition rather than on force: “The community is inhuman, and less than human. It becomes at last the most dangerous because bloodless and insentient tyrant” (Lawrence 21). In Lawrence’s version of what John Fraser calls “a simple dichotomy between oppressive ‘order’ and liberating ‘revolt,’” the goal of the revolt is to supplant the subject of discipline by the subject of torture (43). The “natural self of
power" is the self that can kill without pangs of conscience or fear of jail. Violence is not a regrettable stain on utopia. Violence is utopia.

In Foucault’s description of public torture, the institutionalized spectacle of violence generates a social epiphany in which the ghastly spectacle of the torn and bleeding flesh becomes an indisputable signature of power. The truth is incarnated in the suffering body, whose text has an inestimable advantage over the text of a written proclamation or a legal code. It is free of ambiguity—no “différance” here, no slippage of meaning. The visceral shock of seeing the blood, the wounds, and the hanging entrails leaves no room for argument. Franz Kafka’s well-known parable “In the Penal Colony” (1919) describes a torture machine that literally writes on the body, slowly and painfully executing its victim by carving on his flesh the text of the Law. The text cannot actually be read; it is obscured by gushing blood. But precisely for that reason, it cannot be disputed. The language of violence cannot lie: whatever the suffering body says, becomes true by virtue of its suffering. The torture machine reveals the truth of the power that “not only did not hesitate to exert itself directly on bodies, but was exalted and strengthened by its visible manifestations” (Foucault 1975, 57).

It is in its revelation of the truth that the trauma of torture can be rewritten as utopia. For Barthes the visual impact of a spectacle combines the traumatic destruction of language with the paradisiacal innocence of image. On the one hand, “a pure denotation” exists “at the level of absolutely traumatic images . . . The trauma is a suspension of language, a blocking of meaning” (30). On the other hand, “the denoted image can appear as a kind of Edenic state of the image; cleared utopianically of its connotations, the image would become radically objective, or, in the last analysis, innocent” (42). In the extreme spectacle of torture, trauma is transmuted into utopia by its “Edenic” purification of language from ambiguity. And thus torture and radical violence in general can become objects of desire for people with no sadistic inclinations. The most terrible thing about Kafka’s penal colony is the idealism of the officer who runs the torture machine. The depth of his devotion is measured by his ultimate self-sacrifice: when the new governor abolishes torture, the officer lays himself down under the machine’s harrow, seeking the enlightenment that violence brings.

However, this enlightenment is transient precisely to the extent that it is not verbalized. Insofar as the monstrous body politic attempts to hold itself together only by the sublime spectacle of torture, it is as impossible in its collectivity as the single monster in its fantastic corporeality. The more social violence appears as divine, the speedier is its disintegration into senseless butchery.

In Barker’s darkly visionary story “In the Hills, the Cities” (presciently written in 1984), a couple of gay lovers vacationing in Yugoslavia encounter
two monstrous giants at war with each other. These are walking cities in which the bodies of their inhabitants are lashed together to create a sublime Leviathan, a literal body politic: "They could see the way the roped bodies pushed and pulled against each other in solid cords of flesh and bone. They could see the intertwined people that made up the body: the backs like turtles packed together to offer the sweep of the pectorals; the lashed and knotted acrobats at the joints of the arms and the legs alike, rolling and unwinding to articulate the city" (Barker 1986a, 207).

This monstrous body politic is created through the self-torture of its inhabitants who stretch themselves on the rack for the greater glory of the community. Here mutilation and self-mutilation, pain inflicted and pain endured, sadism and masochism are fused together in a violent epiphany that transcends the puny "uniqueness of [a man's] bodily person" (Benjamin 251). The hills as it goes, the walking city is preceded by a sweeping tide of blood and avalanche of broken flesh resulting from its clash with its rival. Its sublimity draws one of the lovers, Mick, to join the giant, sacrificing his life, like Kafka's officer, for the apocalyptic ecstasy of torture. Mick is tired of his problematic identity, of the pettiness of his mundane existence, of his unsatisfactory and compromise-ridden love life. The pleasure of sex cannot compete with the exaltation of violence; it is too transient, too sentiment-dependent, too enmeshed in the muddle of human relationships. Far better to lose himself in the utopian body of death than to be confined to the humble body of life.

The Englishmen remained where they stood, watching the spectacle as it approached. Neither dread nor horror touched them now, just an awe that rooted them to the spot. They knew this was a sight they could never hope to see again; this was the apex—after this there was only common experience. Better to stay then, though every step brought death nearer, better to stay and see the sight while it was still there to be seen. And if it killed them, this monster, then at least they would have glimpsed a miracle, known this terrible majesty for a brief moment. It seemed a fair exchange...

The earth was gone from beneath [Mick]. He was a hitchhiker with a god: the mere life he had left was nothing to him now, or ever... Love and life and sanity were gone, gone like the memory of his name, of his sex, or his ambition. (Barker 1986a, 207–9)

Being "a hitchhiker with a god" offers the ecstasy of the "oceanic" that Freud described in Civilization and Its Discontents (5). The oceanic is a renunciation of individuality, a feeling of "oneness." Feminist psychoanalysts link it to the baby's experience of the plenitude of the maternal body in the pre-oedipal stage. But Klaus Theweleit points out that killing may be just as powerful a
source of the “oceanic” as mother love: “What Neruda says of the ocean (‘And you lack nothing’) is realized for Junger in the battle-machine: lack is transcended” (Theweleit 2, 155). The “battle-machine” is a collective body generated and sustained by violence visited first on its individual members and then on unlucky bystanders. Benjamin’s “divine” violence does create a god but it is a god-as-monster.

In Barker’s novel *Imajica* God the Father appears as a city of flesh and bone: “What were those gleaming folds at the windows if they weren’t skin?; what were those arches if they weren’t bone? What was that scarlet pavement, and that light-shot stone, if it wasn’t flesh? There was pith and marrow here. There was tooth and lash and nail” (1066). Imprisoned in the material and maternal body of violence, Barker’s characters search for freedom, finding it, like the child in his fairy tale *Thief of Always*, in the separation from both parents. To be born is to emerge from the “oceanic” dissolution either in the waters of the womb or in the blood of violence. Theweleit calls the murderous fascist subjects “not-yet-born,” meaning that they prefer the ecstasy of belonging in the sublime body of a “battle-machine” to the inevitable humdrum of individual existence (155). Like the components of Barker’s monstrous city, such not-yet-borns are simultaneously victims and violators. And the greater the pain they endure, the greater the pain they are willing to inflict.

In attempting to fight the mythic violence of discipline with the divine violence of excess, Benjamin and Lawrence face the paradox of the flesh made word. Both see violence as a means to reveal the Edenic truth beyond the lies and prevarication of language. But in looking for such truth in the bleeding body of the victim, one discovers that while wounds indeed speak louder than words, their meaning is not necessarily clearer. The sublime impact of violence may be felt only in silence; once it is made basis for a communal politics of any kind, the tortured flesh is translated into a political doublespeak, the “oceanic” becomes part of battle drill, and God is reborn as an army. Barker’s walking and warring cities utilize their “terrible majesty” in the service of a petty village feud. Kafka’s torture machine is programmed to write in blood Sunday school platitudes.

In the image of God’s body as a monstrous body politic created by violence, horror comes closest to utopia. Seemingly opposite, these two genres meet in the realm of torture, both drawn by the fascination of the violent sublime. Dystopia, utopia’s dark twin, constantly slides into horror, as in George Orwell’s 1984 and Yevgeni Zamyatin’s *We*. Horror, when it ventures into the realm of the social, becomes dystopia, as in Barker, Kafka, and Dan Simmons’s *Children of the Night*. If the ordinary monster is a subject both created and destroyed by violence, the divine monster is a community of such
subjects, requiring constant infusions of fresh blood to sustain their impossible existence.

SEQUELS

Popular culture has to satisfy its audience’s desire for reassurance, stability, and conformity. Popular horror may tease us with a glimpse of the sublime, but it can never adopt its aesthetics as wholeheartedly as does the avant-garde. For every visionary book of blood, horror produces ten run-of-the-mill monster hunts, in which the “creature” is allowed its share of killing before being brought down by a righteous avenger. The paradox of horror is that this most subversive of all literary genres can also be the most philistine. Dracula is eliminated and the middle-class Victorian paradise is restored; all the Edwardian ghosts are exorcised; Freddie Krueger is defeated; and the killer angels of the film Dogma are recalled to heaven. And yet, despite its overt longing for the status quo the very narrative form of horror is intrinsically unsettling. As opposed to the detective story, horror has no strong narrative strategies to subdue the violent sublime. On the contrary, its plot constructions are normally slack; its fictional worlds paradoxical and inconsistent; and its strategies of explanation attenuated to the point of absurdity. The narrative form of horror showcases rather than represses the violated body. Horror is a realm of paradoxical and enigmatic plots, illogical transitions, and dreamlike sequences. It is a genre underpinned by oxymoron, “a figure of speech which holds together contradictions and sustains them in an impossible unity, without progressing towards synthesis” (Jackson 21).

Like the psychological consistency of the subject, the consistency of horror’s fictional world collapses under the weight of the violent sublime. This process is vividly dramatized in Christopher Priest’s novel The Extremes (1998). The heroine’s addiction to the virtual reality game of Extreme Experience, in which she relives scenarios of serial killing, results in the textual universe of branching simulacra, a labyrinth of high-tech nightmares. This is Baudrillard’s world of endless imitations, except that it is created not by the absence of the body but precisely by its traumatic presence. Motiveless, insistent, and addictive violence shatters Teresa’s selfhood and demolishes her story.

The supernatural and fantastic aspects of horror undermine the ontological stability of the projected fictional world. In horror’s deployment of the supernatural (different from the deployment of fantasy), it functions not so much as an index of a self-consisted “other world” but rather as an incomprehensible and inexplicable intrusion. The supernatural in horror marks the semantic locus of paradox, where the clear-cut distinctions of real and unreal, existent and nonexistent, objective and subjective begin to merge. Terry
Heller locates the aesthetics of horror in the endless oscillation between two possible readings, neither of which can be chosen over the other (169–71). The monstrous text is as paradoxical as its monstrous subject.

In Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu’s classic ghost story “The Green Tea” (1872) the protagonist pursued by a spectral monkey cries out in anguish against the alien and incomprehensible system, which is destroying him: “But as food is taken in softly at the lips, and then brought under the teeth, as the tip of the little finger caught in a mill crank will draw in the hand, and the arm, and the whole body, so the miserable mortal who has been once caught firmly by the end of the finest fibre of his nerve, is drawn in and in, by the enormous machinery of hell, until he is as I am” (Le Fanu 200).

Here opposites are brought together: the “machinery of hell” is likened to the homely machinery of the mill crank and, even more intimately, of one’s own mouth. The result, however, is not the naturalization of the supernatural but the alienation of nature. Collapsed together with the “machinery of hell,” natural order becomes as threateningly opaque as its opposite. Natural and supernatural mirror each other in the gray zone where familiar reality is subverted, but no alternative reality emerges. This is the domain of horror, the twilight space of joined but not reconciled opposites. Stallybrass and White describe the textual grotesque as “a boundary phenomenon of hybridization or inmixing, in which self and other become enmeshed in an inclusive, heterogeneous, dangerously unstable zone” (193). Le Fanu’s text, with its absence of causality (the protagonist never knows why he is haunted), its multiple and mutually contradicting narrators, its intimate entanglement of the self and the Other, inhabits just such a “dangerously unstable zone.” But as the narrative becomes broken, paradoxical, and grotesque, so does the protagonist’s body, poisoned by green tea, shaking in fear, contorted in agony, and eventually bleeding from a self-inflicted wound.

In the postscript to Barker’s Books of Blood, the equivalence of the horror narrative and the monstrous body is made explicit. A hired assassin flays the ghost-inscribed medium, attempting to separate the body and the text. But the flayed skin continues to bleed, and the tide of blood becomes a tide of words, sentences, and stories. This grotesque image sums up the poetics of horror, whose narratives are both generated and undermined by the ineffable spectacle of the tortured body.

Barker’s apparent inability to wrap up his collection with a tidy closure is not just a sign of creative exuberance. A book of blood needs a postscript. The messy, opened-up body of the text oozes sequels like bloodstains. Unlike the trim detective story, horror can rarely be contained within a trim Aristotelian plot, with a beginning, middle, and end. Straining for closure, horror bursts its own boundaries, each successful text hatching a brood of sequels, from
Alien 4 to Blair Witch 2. No sooner is the monster decisively eliminated then it reappears anew.

Not only horror, of course, indulges in sequels. From the soap opera to any successful blockbuster, popular culture uses sequels as a marketing ploy. But the sequels of horror almost always involve actual death and resurrection: since the monster is most often physically eliminated, its return indicates the rebirth of the monstrous body, not just the repackaging or extension of the original text, as in other genres. Sequels to Star Wars may deal with plot and setting continuity and introduce new characters at will, but sequels to Alien necessitate the resurrection of the alien itself. Freddie Krueger's absurd indestructibility is the stubborn return of the (corporeal) repressed, haunting the dreams of suburbia.

The horror sequel is a reflection of our ambivalence toward violence. Sickened by torture, we turn away, only to sneak another look at the sight that is both intolerable and compelling. Condemning bloodshed, we are held spellbound by its magic. Casting out the monster, we secretly dream of becoming it.

I will end this chapter with a postscript of three images. These are glimpses of the torturer's paradise, of which horror's book of blood is a testimonial—and a warning.

The first image is from Barker's story, “Jacqueline Ess: Her Will and Testament.” Jacqueline Ess, a bored and depressed housewife, discovers in herself a magical ability to wish people's bodies into new shapes. Followed by a trail of grotesque mutilations—hated, worshipped and desired—she becomes a modern equivalent of the mythological Terrible Mother. Her only true mate is a man who is willing to pursue the sublimity of desire to its consummation in death:

And thinking they were together, her will was made flesh. Under her lips her features dissolved, becoming the red sea he'd dreamt of, and washing up over his face, that was itself dissolving: common waters made of thought and bone. Her keen breasts pricked him like arrows; his erection, sharpened by her thought, killed her in return with its only thrust. Tangled in a wash of love they thought themselves extinguished, and were. (Barker 1986b; 116)

This is divine violence guarding the doors of true bliss. For these characters, the “red sea” of blood is a reasonable price to pay for the Promised Land of the sublime, in which mundane identities are extinguished. But so many—perhaps all—drown on the way.

The second image is from Oliver Onions's horror classic “The Beckoning Fair One”(1911). Paul Oleron, an unsuccessful writer, rents a lovely house...
haunted by an intangible succubus, an amorphous feminine essence that seems to echo Oleron’s unborn literary character. Bewitched, Oleron courts the creature—and ends up murdering his best friend, a woman journalist whose florid and all-too-real body stands in the way of his transcendental consummation. Commenting on Oleron’s pursuit of the violent sublime, the narrator says:

To the man who pays heed to that voice within him, which warns him that twilight and danger are settling over his soul, terror is apt to appear as an absolute thing, against which his heart must be safeguarded. . . . Mercifully, he has never far to look for safeguards. Of the immediate and small and common and momentary things of life, of usages and observances and modes and conventions, he builds up fortifications against the powers of darkness. He is even content that, not terror only, but joy also, should for working purposes be placed in the category of the absolute things; and the last treason he will commit will be that breaking down of terms and limits that strikes, not at one man, but at the welfare of the souls of all. (Onions 66)

Searching for “absolute things,” one is apt to find oneself with a dead body wedged in the kitchen cupboard. This is the ethics of the mundane. But does not “the welfare of the souls of all” sound terribly philistine and old fashioned, compared with Jacqueline Ess’s power of unleashing the “red sea”?

The third voice is that of a real-life murderer in prison talking to a political scientist who investigates “the nature of evil.” It turns out evil is an irrelevant category for a man who has tasted the sublime: “I didn’t care whether I killed the guy or not. I just wanted to be his God for a little while” (Alford 28).