

SCREENING DISGUST: THE EMERGENCE OF BODY HORROR IN MODERN
CINEMA

by

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1. INTRODUCTION

From the earliest films depicting foreign monsters rising from decrepit pits to prey on the vulnerable to the “pod people” of 1950s invading everyday life and the monstrous aliens and zombie plagues of recent cinema, horror films can be said to reflect, address, and respond to cultural anxieties. The 2000s have seen the resurgence of the “body horror” film, whose most common feature is the often-graphic destruction or degeneration of the human body. A rich genre whose parameters are difficult to pin down, body horror has also been commonly called biological horror or visceral horror due to the propensity of films within the genre to deal with portrayals of decay, disease, mutation, mutilation, and parasitism.

In recent years, films have become increasingly likely to cross generic boundaries, borrowing elements from one genre or another in their construction. The imagery and filmmaking techniques of the conventional horror film, if they have ever existed, have become “dispersed” outside the genre, with elements of these films appearing in “hybrid films” (such as the science fiction horror film), or even more unexpected and startling forms, such as the body-horror-comedy film, with much modern scholarship discussing how films outside conventional genres are still able to use their generic elements in order to convey their message.

District 9, a 2009 science fiction film directed by Neill Blomkamp, is a prime example of a film that draws from outside its conventional genre to make a commentary that is both local (it addresses apartheid in South Africa) and global (xenophobia on a larger level). *District 9* has been lauded for its ability to draw from various genres: it has

been called an incredibly smart science fiction thriller, an extremely violent socio-political mockumentary, and even a classic science-fiction horror film harkening back to the earliest days of the genre. *District 9* is a text which blurs and eludes boundaries by virtue of its very construction, retaining a link to its cinematic ancestors, but also creating something new entirely. With this in mind, I have chosen to examine elements of body horror in *District 9*, which serve as crucial markers of a broader cultural and social criticism.

I have chosen to focus primarily on film because of the medium's unique ability to create an atmosphere inviting a visceral response from viewers. In addition to the narrative that may be equally compelling on screen or in print, films are capable of using sound and editing to enhance the narrative or draw the audience's attention to a particular element. While any film genre conveys associations with its time and place, ideological and social messages unique to their time period, horror films have a tendency to function on profound levels and elicit a fundamental anxiety shared by all human beings (Prince 1). Neill Blomkamp, aware of the power of horror to generate anxiety in its audience, borrows particularly from body horror and turns *District 9* into an incredible mental and physical experience, where the experience of Wikus van de Merwe's change resonates with the audience through prolonged gross-out shots.

Disgust is a response unique to all humans, and, importantly, *inescapable* in film. A film's audience, cannot, per instinct (which I discuss in this thesis), establish a critical distance between themselves and the scene that is generating the disgust response. A meticulously orchestrated scene eliciting disgust positions the audience in adverse relation to an overarching theme, which might then lead to a critical understanding of the

social problem or problems invoked in the film. In the case of *District 9*, the disgust response addresses and criticizes the relationship between one's self and the broader social order; this response also speaks to the nature of xenophobia, immigration, and morality.

This thesis is divided into three chapters, the first concisely summarizing the history of horror films and body horror's place in the history of cinema. In Chapter One I also discuss science fiction's use of elements of body horror, and describe *District 9*'s generic instability. Inasmuch as it is thought of as a science fiction film, it also borrows heavily from the genre of horror (as well as, we shall see, a host of other genres).

The second, and more theoretical chapter, begins with an examination of the experience of general disgust, from which moral disgust will be distinguished. I explain the connection between morality and "goodness," as well as the connection between disgust and "badness," paying particular attention to the use of disgust in language when describing perceived negative or immoral actions. Following this, I describe Sigmund Freud's concept of the uncanny, especially those passages in his work describing the experience of the uncanny as that which is "strangely familiar," as well as that which generates cognitive dissonance within the subject undergoing the experience of the uncanny (in this case, the audience, or audience member of the film *District 9*) due to the paradoxical nature of being simultaneously attracted to and repulsed by the uncanny object.

I also draw from Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject, which Kristeva writes as that which is based in a breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of distinction between the self and the "other." Main character Wikus van de Merwe's traumatic degeneration

forces him into confrontation with himself as he attempts to disguise his changing body (even going so far as to attempt to amputate a mutated thumb), but also forces him to confront the very ideas underpinning the society he lives in; as a being who is human and also not human, his existence disrupts the social order.

My third chapter takes the concepts of disgust, the uncanny, and abjection, and examines how, in conjunction with elements of body horror, they are used in *District 9* to reveal a critique of the relationship between one's self, one's race, and the overarching social order we are expected to live in. Chapter Three also addresses what happens to Wikus as he experiences what it is like to be on the receiving end of what his organization has been doing to the alien "prawn" throughout the entirety of the film.

Blomkamp's excessive attention to the degeneration of protagonist Wikus van de Merwe is not without purpose. I argue that Blomkamp is addressing the widely held but oversimplified notion that morality is intrinsically tied to the concept of what is not only "good" and "pure," but also what is "human." Blomkamp inverts these notions; throughout *District 9*, Wikus becomes more "human" as he becomes less "human". Ultimately, *District 9* is a penetrating, subversive meditation on the nature of racism and repression, an ambitious film where the elements of body horror and science fiction come together to confront the way racist ideology contends with the uncanny and the abject.

I close with a brief conclusion in which I examine other media which use elements of body horror to convey a cultural critique, and I offer potential avenues for future research. I also suggest that the resurgence of body horror, as well as extreme graphic elements in recent film, is reflection of a broader anxiety toward the idea of the other, the outsider, the abject, in general. The foreigner, the alien, has been symbolic of

infection, filth, and danger in our modern culture – the twisting knife to the inside and the transforming body speak directly to the loss of one’s self and one’s greater identity.

2. CHAPTER ONE

My intention in this section is not to present an entirely comprehensive history of horror and horror films, a daunting task that would require an extensive number of volumes. Rather, I would like to present what I hope will serve as a representative history of the genre, beginning with a brief overview of literary horror. I then present an overview of the horror film and its origins, highlighting key films which have helped to define the genre of horror and discussing the origin of body horror. Finally, I place *District 9* on the timeline as a postmodern, genre-blending work which uses elements of multiple genres to convey its message of cultural criticism.

Horror is everywhere. It lives not only in books and in film, but also in art (like the work of H. R. Giger or Zdzisław Beksiński), in video games (the survivor horror of the *Resident Evil* series or the body horror of *Parasite Eve* and *Bioshock*), in television shows (*Are You Afraid of the Dark* or *Tales from the Crypt*), in music videos (“The Kill” by Thirty Seconds to Mars is based on *The Shining*), and so on. But it is also in evening headlines, in history, in politics. As H. P. Lovecraft discussed in the introduction to his essay “Supernatural Horror in Literature,” the oldest and most powerful emotion of human beings is fear, and the strongest kind of fear is also tied to disgust and revulsion, a visceral response to some *wrongness* or some *filth* (“Supernatural”).

Noël Carroll writes in *The Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart* that “the word ‘horror’ derives from the Latin ‘horrere’—to stand on end (as hair standing on end) or to bristle—and the old French ‘orror’—to bristle or to shudder” (24). And so, in its broadest sense, horror may be defined as a genre that includes elements intended to provoke an emotional, psychological, or physical response that causes its audience to

react in fear or disgust. As with any genre, horror has fuzzy boundaries; still, this definition may apply to borderline cases which cannot be decisively ruled in or out of the genre, cases which, as we shall see, are more common than not.

The horror film and horror literature share an intimate history. Many horror films are adapted from horror novels (1973's *The Exorcist*, for example, one of the most popular and successful horror films of all time, began as a novel by American author William Peter Blatty), and many successful writers in the genre have been deeply influenced by earlier "cycles" of horror films (Carroll 2). Long before the existence of the first horror film, elements of horror lived in oral and written narrative, in stories handed down from one generation to the next. Horror traces its origins to folklore, expressive culture shared by a particular group of people (like the *llorona* of my childhood, whose weeping can be heard on quiet nights, or the *cucuy* who steals wicked, naughty children away in the night), as well as religious traditions around the world (Dixon 1). Elements of horror can be found as early as Homer's *Odyssey*, as well as the graphic portrayal of tortured sinners in Dante's *Inferno*, as with the following depiction of the "neutral" in Canto III:

These wretches, who had never truly lived
went naked, and were stung and stung again
by the hornets and the wasps that circled them

and made their faces run with blood in streaks;
their blood, mixed with their tears, dripped to their feet,
and disgusting maggots collected in the pus (Alighieri 36)

The selection above is but one of many horrifying descriptions of graphic torment within the *Inferno*. Still, there is a distinction between myths and the genre of “true” horror: horror is distinguished from myth because creatures in the world of myth can be accommodated by the metaphysics of the cosmology that produced them (Carroll 16). Horror, then, in the incarnation contemporary readers may be familiar with, is more strongly associated with the work of Gothic authors, such as Horace Walpole’s 1764 novel *The Castle of Otranto*, which used elements as moving pictures and doors shutting by themselves (tropes of many a horror story) and is widely considered the first Gothic novel as well as the first “horror” novel. Still, perhaps the most famous of these early works is Mary Shelley’s 1818 work *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, created as the result of a challenge from Lord Byron to his friends to write a ghost story to pass the time (Dixon 2).

Just as horror has existed in literature for ages, the horror film has been a staple of the genre since the inception of the medium. The earliest “origin” films from the primitive days of the genre borrowed from literary works and stories of monsters, murders, demons, and beasties. These include the first film version of *Frankenstein* as well as George Méliès *Une nuit terrible (A Terrible Night, 1896)*, where a man is menaced by a giant beetle, Walter R. Booth’s *The Haunted Curiosity Shop* (1901), where the owner of an antique shop is confronted by a mysterious skull, and Abel Gance’s *La folie du Docteur Tube (The Madness of Dr. Tube, 1915)*, whose abstract visuals feature a mad scientist’s attempt to alter the nature of light (Dixon 6).

I should also like to make a brief mention of German Expressionism, a huge influence on the budding horror genre. A style that rejected natural depictions of reality

in favor of distorted figures and landscapes in order to generate unease within its audience, the most influential film within the genre was the 1920 *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*), a silent film telling the story of an insane hypnotist who uses a somnambulist to commit brutal murders. The German Expressionism tradition continued with works like *The Golem* (1920) and *Nosferatu* (1922), made by F. W. Murnau. Dixon writes the following on *Nosferatu*'s legacy:

This moody, expressionistic vision of the classic vampire tale (employing negative images spliced directly into the positive print for an otherworldly effect, stop-motion photography to speed up the action, and other trick effects) was anchored by the mesmeric performance of Max Schreck in the leading role, and for many, for sheer atmosphere and visual brilliance, it has never been equaled. (Dixon 8)

The atmosphere in *Nosferatu* that Dixon writes on also conveys direct images of war. An expository intertitle identifies the film as a “Chronicle of the Great Death in Wisborg, 1838.” Audiences watching might recall the Great War that had ended in 1918 and taken an estimated 16 million lives, as well as the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918 that is estimated to have taken around fifty million lives around the world (Taubenberger 15). Images of death and decay abound throughout the film, and even Count Orlokk's signature appearance, with fangs jutting from the front of his face, is evocative of a disease-bringing rat. In spite of its age, *Nosferatu* is still effective in conveying those images without the use of sound.

Perhaps the most important transformation of the 1920s was the advent of sound within the horror film, a radical addition that has been crucial to the development of the

modern horror film. Roy Del Ruth's *The Terror* emerged in 1928 as the first all-talking horror film. In spite of its clumsiness due to bulky early sound equipment, *The Terror* transfixed audiences and became a box office hit (Dixon 21). The advent of the sound film caused an incredible shift in pictorial values, with visuals relegated to background effects:

The visually acrobatic brilliance of such artists as Pabst, Leni, and Murnau most immediately suffered; those directors who were younger and perhaps more adaptable, such as Fritz Lang, prospered, although Lang was never really a horror auteur. The age of silent horror cinema had been a period of fecund experimentation in which the literary classics of the past had been plundered for source material and relatively new concepts (the figures of the werewolf and the mummy) had been introduced to the popular imagination for the first time. (Dixon 22)

Universal became the key horror studio of the 1930s and the 1940s, beginning with Tod Browning's 1931 film *Dracula*, based on the stage adaptation of Bram Stoker's novel. The film made a celebrity out of the Hungarian Béla Blasko (better known as Bela Lugosi), and paved the way for a series of high-profile "monster films" that would include *Frankenstein* (which established Boris Karloff as a horror icon and led to the even more successful *Bride of Frankenstein* in 1935), *The Mummy* (1932), and *The Invisible Man* (1933), based on H.G. Wells's science fiction novel of the same name. The monster film turned the grueling horror of the world around audiences into a force that could be destroyed.

Another notable film of the 1930s is Browning's *Freaks* (1932), a controversial movie whose original version was considered so horrifying it was banned and has since been lost. (It is rumored that one of the only individuals to have watched the complete, unedited version of the film threatened to sue MGM for causing her a miscarriage.) *Freaks* emerged as one of the most controversial "Pre-Code" films produced during the brief period between the introduction of sound pictures and the rigorous enforcement of the Motion Picture Production Code censorship guidelines in mid-1934.

Freaks tells the story of Hans (played by actor Harry Earles), a circus dwarf, who is seduced by aerialist Cleopatra (Olga Baclanova) into marriage. However, Cleopatra wants to poison Hans, inherit his money, and flee with her lover, Hercules (Henry Victor), the troupe's strong man. When the other circus "freaks" discover her plot, they track Cleopatra down and carve her into a part woman/part fowl abomination that joins them on display. Its use of actual "sideshow freaks" as actors shocked audiences, and *Freaks* was banned outright in Britain until 1963 before re-establishing itself as a cult film. *Freaks* was finally selected for the Library of Congress's National Film Registry's archives in 1994 for its "unusual subject matter, its cast of curiosities, and its untraditional moral sympathy" ("Complete").

While hundreds of successful films (including *It's a Wonderful Life*, *Citizen Kane*, *Casablanca*, and *The Great Dictator*) were produced in the 1940s, many studios made the decision to crank out variations on their tried and true films. The biggest box office hits were those that were more "realistic", such as Lon Chaney Jr.'s portrayal of Lawrence Talbot in 1941's *The Wolf Man*, one of greater additions to the genre during this period:

There had been one werewolf film from Universal before this, Stuart Walker's *Werewolf of London* (1935), starring Henry Hull, but the film failed to catch on as a series and is in no way related to Chaney's work as the tortured Larry Talbot. Chaney conveys a depth of sadness and spiritual isolation in the role that shows what he could have done with his career had he been given material of this caliber on a regular basis (Dixon 31).

The Wolf Man had a significant influence on future depictions of the legend of the werewolf, and its success led to many "monster mash-up" films, beginning with *Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man* (1943), as well as *House of Frankenstein* (1944) and *House of Dracula* (1945). The 1940s saw the rise of "Poverty Row" films, B-movies produced under tight budgets, with as little originality, imagination, and ambition as possible.

In 1942, RKO studios produced *Cat People*. Directed by Val Lewton and taking place in New York City, *Cat People* tells the story of Irena (Simone Simon), a Serbian-born fashion designer convinced that she is a descendant of a race of people who turn into cats when aroused. Like *Nosferatu* did in 1922, *Cat People* relies on a chilling atmosphere as opposed to an overtly frightening monster: the giant cat Irena believes she turns into is never explicitly shown, only implied.

Cat People was a box office sensation and Val Lewton followed it by producing *I Walked with a Zombie* in 1943. *I Walked with a Zombie*, like *Cat People*, plunged audiences into a world where darker, complex, rarely-discussed human motivations took center-stage. Like its predecessor, *I Walked with a Zombie* also deals heavily in ambiguities; one is never really sure if the explanation for the events taking place in the

film is supernatural or not: one explanation for the condition of character Jessica's "zombie-like" behavior is a spinal cord injury. This ambiguity makes *I Walked with a Zombie* all the more frightening because it draws attention to the unease that is generated from our inability to explain or narrate reality. "All that we can be certain of at the end of *I Walked with a Zombie*, Telotte writes, "is how very fragile our normal environment is and how incommensurate to experience our rationalizations remain (12).

In the 1950s the fear of the atomic bomb and communists, along with advances in space technology, led to the flourishing of films dealing heavily in themes with space aliens and mutant monsters. Notable sci-fi horror films of the 1950s include *The Thing from Another World* (1951), the first adaptation of John W. Campbell, Jr.'s novella *Who Goes There?*, which follows a U.S. Air Force crew who find and revive a monster in Artic ice; *The War of the Worlds* (1953), an adaptation of H.G. Wells's 1897 invasion novel of the same name; *It Came from Outer Space* (1953), which tells the story of an alien spacecraft which crash-landed on Earth; *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*, a 1953 film about a fictional dinosaur released from hibernation by an atomic bomb test in the Arctic Circle (and the first live-action film featuring a giant monster resurrected by atomic testing); and *Them!* (1954), where a colony of giant ants, mutated by radiation from atomic bomb testing, invade the sewers of Los Angeles.

As well, the rise of television led major film studios to develop 3D technologies (and even attempts at "smell-o-vision") to awe and shock their audiences (Dixon 65). The first and one of the most successful of the lavish 3D production craze was André de Toth's *House of Wax* (1953), itself a remake of Michael Curtiz's 1933's *Mystery of the Wax Museum*. Vincent Price plays a deranged museum proprietor, who, following a

horrific accident, turns to murder to supply “models” (really, his victims) for the museum. *House of Wax*, a commercial success, marked the beginning of Vincent Price’s association with horror films, a relationship which would prove beneficial to him through the following decades.

Military operations in Asia (Korea and Vietnam), along with the madness of the Cold War, also lent an air of paranoia and fatalism to the media of the time, and perhaps no better horror film conveys this attitude than *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), produced by Walter Wanger, directed by Don Siegel and starring Kevin McCarthy and Dana Wynter. *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* was adapted from Jack Finney’s 1954 novel *The Body Snatchers*, and concerns a local doctor who uncovers an extraterrestrial invasion of earth that begins in the California town of Santa. The “pod people” are a race of parasites from a dying planet, floating like spores through space and carried to Earth, where they embark on replacing human beings with emotionless replicas. Much has been said of the film’s allegories to McCarthyism and the Red Scare, as well as the potential negative consequences from technological advances. *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* is considered one of the greatest films ever made, and was selected in 1994 for preservation in the National Film Registry by the Library of Congress (“Complete”).

Much like those of the 1950s, the films of the 1960s reflected the decade’s tremendous social change. Among the best examples of horror films that pushed boundaries of acceptable onscreen sex and violence was Alfred Hitchcock’s 1960 film *Psycho*. Based on a novel by Robert Block, *Psycho* broke a number of conventions in film and showed audiences that evil was not only in vampires and werewolves or aliens from outer space, but right next door. Dixon explains:

As the proprietor of the Bates Motel, Norman Bates is the psychopath in our midst, the person we would never suspect, the evil that hides in plain sight. In terms of both graphic specificity (the justly famous shower murder sequence) and originality, *Psycho* is unsettling, riveting, and mesmerizing. You can't look away from the screen, no matter how much you might want to. *Psycho* changed the conventions of the horror film forever, to say nothing of helping to topple the outdated production code. (Dixon 76)

It is certainly true that by 1960 the Motion Picture Production Code, the set of moral censorship guidelines introduced in the 1930s was losing its steam. *Psycho*'s violations include showing a flushing toilet, depicting a post-coital scene, a peeping tom, exposed breasts, and, of course, an unprecedented amount of blood and violence in its infamous shower scene. Still, *Psycho* showed that a film violating the Motion Picture Production Code could be released and become a commercial success.

The increasing disregard of the Motion Picture Production Code also ushered in the production of horror films in the subgenre known as "splatter films," which generated their fear from the physical destruction of the body. The first of these was *Blood Feast*, a 1963 film directed by Herschell Gordon Lewis; *Blood Feast* was considered so shocking that its trailer was preceded with the following warning:

Ladies and gentlemen, you are about to witness scenes from the next attraction to play this theater. This picture, truly one of the most unusual ever filmed, contains scenes which under no circumstances should be viewed by anyone with a heart condition or anyone who is easily upset.

We urgently recommend that if you are such a person, or the parent of a young or impressionable child now in attendance, that you and the child leave the auditorium for the next ninety seconds. (Lewis)

Like many of the splatter films to come, *Blood Feast* was characterized by a ridiculous plot line (a maniac goes on a killing spree in order to procure parts for a “blood feast” where Egyptian goddess Ishtar will be resurrected), and wooden acting. Still, its explicit gore and violence makes it one of the more important film releases of the 1960s:

Despite obscene market pressures and impossible technological advances, the future of horror was plotted in the mid-1960s when Herschell Gordon Lewis premiered *Blood Feast* (1963) to turn away crowds at a Peoria, Illinois drive-in. Garnering no positive notices the film made a fortune for Lewis and the film’s producer David Friedman. And, beyond affording a substantial return on a meager \$24,500 investment, *Blood Feast* provided the template for the adoption and presentation of gore. (Crane 156)

Another film widely criticized for its explicit gore was George A. Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). Following a group of people trapped in a Pennsylvania farmhouse as they are surrounded by ghouls, *Night of the Living Dead* reinvented the idea of the zombie: no longer were zombies individuals in the Caribbean who had been enslaved by a Voodoo witch doctor. They had become gruesome, flesh-eating, *living dead*. The film’s gruesome violence, along with its terrifying ending, shocked audiences. “I don’t think the younger kids really knew what hit them,” critic Roger Ebert would recall in a commentary on *Night of the Living Dead*. “Horror movies were fun, sure, but this was pretty strong stuff. . .The movie had stopped being delightfully scary about

halfway through, and had become unexpectedly terrifying” (Ebert “Night”). The film’s initial release generated controversy, but wound up becoming one of the most popular horror films of all time and spawned a score of related films, including *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), *Day of the Dead* (1985), and *Land of the Dead* (2005).

Other notable horror films of the 1960s include Italian director Maria Bava’s 1960 *La maschera del demonio* (Black Sunday), a gruesome film banned in the U.K. for its violence, but aired in the United States as a double feature with Roger Corman’s *The Little Shop of Horrors* (1960); Hitchcock’s *The Birds* (1963), about a series of violent bird attacks in a California town; Roman Polanski’s *Repulsion* (1965), which focuses on a young woman’s breakdown in her sister’s London flat; Roger William Corman’s cycle of low budget cult films based loosely on the works of Edgar Allan Poe; and *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968), another Roman Polanski film based on the 1967 novel of the same name, in which a woman suspects she is pregnant with the Antichrist.

The 1970s were a decade where films with excessive graphic content continued to flourish. Wes Craven’s *The Last House on the Left* (1972) and *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977) are examples of exploitation films that emerged in the 70s. These exploitation films attempted to draw an audience by virtue of their lurid content. “Sexploitation, Blaxploitation, and cannibal films, among others,” Wassil writes. “As long as Hollywood was against a subject, exploitation filmmakers were making content about it” (82).

The Exorcist was originally a 1971 novel by author William Peter Blatty chronicling the demonic possession of twelve-year-old Regan MacNeil, daughter of actress Chris MacNeil, as well as following the story of the two priests who attempt to exorcise the demon possessing young Regan. In 1973, William Friedkin worked with

Blatty to adapt *The Exorcist* to the screen, producing the relatively faithful adaptation known today. Its incredibly controversial content included self-mutilation and masturbation with a crucifix by Regan, Regan projectile vomiting a foul green mess on the priest attempting to exorcise her, Regan's 360-degree head-rotation, and a grotesque, backwards crawl down a staircase. In spite of, or perhaps even because of, scenes featuring a then thirteen-year Linda Blair advising doctors to keep their "fingers away from her goddamn cunt," *The Exorcist* was nominated for 10 Oscars (Linda Blair as Best Supporting Actress, Ellen Burstyn as Best Actress, Jason Miller as Best Supporting Actor, Best Art Direction and Best Picture), and went on to win two of them: Best Sound, and Best Adapted Screenplay.

The 1970s also saw the advancement of the slasher genre with Tobe Hooper's 1974 film *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. Based on actions of serial killer Ed Gein and marketed as a true story, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* chronicles the "family" life of a group of murderers who terrorize friends on their way to visit an old family homestead. Dixon writes that both *The Last House on the Left* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* brought horror to an uncomfortable degree of closeness to audiences:

The monsters in both films are all too human, people who look like us, act like us, and for all intents and purposes could *be* us, bereft of hope or conscience or any sense of respect for human life. . . The horror was real now, and it was all around us, not hidden in some remote castle in the Carpathian Mountains or in a tomb in Egypt. It was grainy, realistic, and presented without preamble or apologies; audiences were as brutalized as the victims in the films. (122)

One can make the argument that with *The Exorcist* featuring a child-focused nightmare and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* presenting a distorted, insane picture of “family life,” that the great fear reflected in 70s culture is the breakdown of the family unit. Films such as *Carrie* (1976), documenting the relationship its titular character has not only with her high school bullies but with her deranged mother; *The Omen* (1976), which deals with a couple who unknowingly has their child substituted at birth with the Antichrist; and *Halloween* (1978), whose primary antagonist murders his sister at the age of six years old, were released this decade. Still, none of these rivals the frightening figure of the 1979 film *Alien*, the Xenomorph.

Alien, the first film of a franchise that includes prequels, sequels spin-offs, novels, comic books, toys, and more, depicts the spacecraft Nostromo returning to Earth with its crew and pet cat Jones. Detecting a mysterious transmission, the crew investigates and finds an alien spacecraft with the remains of a creature who appears to have exploded from the inside. A face-hugging creature bursts out of a pod and attaches itself to one of the crew members, the first of a chain of events that leads to the crew fighting for their lives against a monstrous alien being. The film was lauded for its special effects, and remains a crucial film within the body horror subgenre, even thirty years later, as Edelstein notes:

Alien remains the key text in the ‘body horror’ subgenre that flowered (or, depending on your viewpoint, festered) in the seventies, and Giger’s designs covered all possible avenues of anxiety. Men traveled through vulva-like openings, got forcibly impregnated, and died giving birth to rampaging gooey vaginas dentate — how’s that for future shock?
(Edelstein 2012)

Still, body horror didn't fully come into its own until the 1980s, a decade of great advancements in special effects technology. Although earlier films, such as *Shivers* (1975) and *Rabid* (1977), played with the idea of the destruction of the body, they had yet to take the incredibly visceral approach to horror that later films did, though one could perhaps make an argument that *The Incredible Melting Man* of 1977 was a campy play on the budding subgenre.

Special effects designers delighted in creating sequences that had never before been portrayed on film, allowing the creatures of earlier horror to return in more terrifying ways, usually with excessive amounts of blood, gore, pus, and goop. Zombies ravaged their way across the screen in *Re-Animator* (1985), where an (arguably mad) scientist invents a solution capable of reanimating the dead, albeit in a violent state. Werewolves returned in *The Howling* (1981) and *An American Werewolf in London* (1981), which used the boom in technology to display extended transformation scenes incorporating bubbling skin, fangs bursting from open mouths, hair sprouting from underneath clothing, hands and feet painfully growing, all accompanied by the cracks and pops and breaks of the were-person's shifting body.

Film became the perfect medium by which to deliver the grotesqueries of body horror, also called biological or visceral horror, a subgenre whose works feature the often-graphic destruction, degeneration, or transformation of the human body through over-the-top portrayals of disease, mutation, mutilation, and parasitism. The label is a broad one, and it often overlaps with the slasher and splatter subgenres I have mentioned earlier. (*Alien*, which I have already mentioned, brings together science fiction, horror, and, arguably, the slasher film.) This overlap largely has to do with the fact that films in

body horror, slasher, and splatter genres are characterized by the graphic violation of the human body (Cruz 161).

Body horror “exploits our own embodiment as viewers for maximum anxiety” (Milligan 28). The special effects advances of the 1980s lent power to those conveying the impact of body horror in a way that literature and earlier films could not. Of this tendency, Kim Newman, novelist, critic, broadcaster, and editor of *Sight & Sound* and *Empire* magazines writes:

It was obvious to even the most casual cinemagoer that genre movies of the late 1970s and early 1980s were becoming more fantastically grisly...Not only could the movies now technically show anything, but filmmakers in the horror and science fiction genres were ruthless and seemingly demented enough to want to show the sorts of things that had been only implied earlier. (“Mind”)

Of the many grotesque body horror films released during the 1980s, one of the more notorious was *The Thing* (1984), John Carpenter’s adaptation of *The Thing from Another World*, a 1950s science-fiction horror film. Carpenter took *The Thing from Another World* and applied all the special effects tricks in the book to produce scenes which are still horrifying to watch forty years later. *The Thing* was followed by other body horror films, including many of director David Cronenberg’s, such as *Scanners* (1981), *The Fly* (1986), and *Dead Ringers* (1988).

The slasher film, like body horror, came to prominence in the 1980s. *Friday the 13th* was released in 1980 and tells the story of a group of teenagers murdered one by one by Jason Vorhees. The success of the film launched the *Friday the 13th* franchise, with

eight of the eleven *Friday the 13th* films released in the 1980s. 1984 saw the release of *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, which follows several teenagers who are stalked and killed in their dreams (and consequently in reality) by Freddy Krueger, a disfigured murderer wielding a glove with razors extending from its fingers. *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, like *Friday the 13th*, also spawned a wave of sequels, with four of them being released in the 1980s.

The 1990s were a time when boundaries began to break down for horror movies. The rise of the DVD market made theatrical distribution the first step in a chain of possibilities that opened up other markets for distribution, and pay-per-view, cable, satellite, and compute downloads of contemporary and classic titles became possible (Dixon 172). Perhaps in response to the over-the-top grotesqueries of the 1980s, films of the 1990s approached horror in a subdued manner. Many films of this decade blended horror with thriller films and took a psychological approach to horror. Others horror films began to comment on tropes within the genre, or incorporated a sense of realism to the genre.

One of the features of horror I hope to have shown in this chapter is that it is a genre that responds to and plays off its predecessors. Monsters return in cycles, interpreted in new ways. *Interview with the Vampire* (1994), for example, chronicles the lives of vampires Lestat and Louis, including Louis's transformation into a vampire by Lestat, and their subsequent making of another vampire, Claudia. Although *Interview with the Vampire* used the vampire as its "monster," the film was unique because unlike past films, where the vampire was portrayed as superior to mortal men, the vampires of

Interview with the Vampire showed audiences what it might be like to “really” be a vampire:

Although one of the characters in *Interview with the Vampire*, begs to be transformed into a vampire, and eagerly awaits the doom of immortality, the movie never makes vampirism look like anything but an endless sadness. That is its greatest strength. Vampires throughout movie history have often chortled as if they'd gotten away with something. But the first great vampire movie, *Nosferatu* (1922), knew better, and so does this one. (Ebert “Interview”)

Interview with the Vampire, through its screenplay and direction by Neil Jordan, takes the vampire and exposes the loneliness and desire for companionship that one might imagine comes with eternal life.

Perhaps one of the most important horror films of the 1990s was *Scream* (1996). A slasher film directed by Wes Craven, *Scream* is often celebrated for its portrayal of characters who are intimately familiar with horror films. Following the glut of slasher sequels in the 1980s, *Scream* helped breathe new life into the horror genre. The film’s dialogue acknowledges the slasher films that existed before *Scream*, and, indeed, it seems it was made just for horror fans. There is a playful reference to a number of other horror films, as well as a not-so-subtle criticism of the media’s power to turn violence into a spectacle (perhaps much the same way horror movies do?).

The late 1990s also saw the popularization of the “found footage” film style with *The Blair Witch Project* (1999). The film is not based on graphic violence or torture, as some of the films in the 2000s would be. Its plot, described in the first minute of the film,

is simple: In October of 1994, three student filmmakers disappeared in the woods near Burkittsville, Maryland while shooting a documentary. A year later, their footage is found. The Blair Witch is never shown in the film, and its presence is only implied. Rather than use a monster to frighten audiences outright, the film cleverly uses the dreary atmosphere of woods, frightening sounds, and the imagination of its audience to generate fear. *The Blair Witch Project* spawned a sequel as well as a 2016 remake, in addition to inspiring an array of films which use the conventions of the found footage style, including *Paranormal Activity* (2007), *Cloverfield* (2008), and *V/H/S* (2012).

The events of September 11, 2011, popularly referred to simply as 9/11, ushered in a period that would be framed by the government and the media as one in which the fundamentals of Western society and existence were threatened, and in which every individual would be made to choose sides in the great “war on terror” (Briefel and Miller 3). And so the horror film has transformed in the post-9/11 period, playing off contemporary audience’s fear of being under constant threat, and emerging as a space with which one can offer critiques of public discourse:

To the extent that we habit today a culture of fear, which finds threats of decay and destruction at every turn, the horror film offers confirmation of this zeitgeist. It tells us that our belief in security is a delusion, that the monsters are all around us, and that, we, the inhabitants of this collective nightmare, are just so much meat awaiting the slaughter. (Prince 4)

Horror films in recent years feature violent and prolonged visualizations of disturbing imagery, assaulting the viewer’s sense of security and well-being. Dixon writes that the re-emergence of horror in the 2000s and beyond is linked to a global culture of fear,

brought about by the threat of nuclear terrorism, the tragic events of 9/11, and increasing political tensions among nations, as well as the crash of 2008 (173).

With its attacks on the body and continuous violation of boundaries, including physical boundaries like the surface of the body (torn apart through mutilations, mutations, degenerations) as well as ontological boundaries, such as the distinctions drawn by culture between the living and the dead, contemporary horror can be said to be “more cruel and unforgiving” in their treatment of spectators than their predecessors (Price 6-7). The emergence of the “torture porn” subgenre is considered both the pinnacle and gutter of contemporary horror. Still, there is an important point to be made by these films. *Saw* (2004) emerged as a post 9/11 horror film that incorporates themes easily extrapolated to contemporary politics: the morality or efficacy of torture, definitions of life, fundamentalist belief systems, and bodily and psychological experiences of violence (Zimmer 86).

Another dimension of the modern horror film is its saturation of popular culture. The imagery and filmmaking techniques of the horror film have become dispersed, with elements showing up in unexpected and startling venues, with much modern scholarship discussing how films outside conventional genres are able to use generic elements of horror to convey their message (see Picart and Frank’s essay “Horror and the Holocaust: Genre Elements in *Schindler’s List* and *Psycho*”).

So where does *District 9* fall into place in the 2000s as a film which incorporates elements of horror? I argue, before moving into a detailed analysis of *District 9*, that in order to highlight the film’s criticism of culture through its utilization of elements of body horror, we must also understand the film’s inherent generic instability.

Claire Sisco King writes in “A Gendered Shell Game: Masculinity and Race in *District 9*” that *District 9* asks audiences to think about the film not only for its content, but in relation to other films and genres, using generic amalgamations to act out its societal challenges (82). So, the critique at work in *District 9* is not only a result of its plot and utilization of elements, but also in the very nature of the film’s construction: it is simultaneously a horror, science fiction, documentary, and action film that blurs boundaries in order to make its point. Still, my focus in this thesis will be Neill Blomkamp’s deliberate decision to incorporate elements of horror in *District 9*. At many points disgusting, violent, and disgustingly violent, *District 9* emphasizes bodies onscreen to elicit a visceral response (sometimes screams, sometimes nausea) from its audience, much as horror films have done, and, which I argue, is meant to deliver a point, which I will discuss in my next chapter.

3. CHAPTER TWO

The presence or absence of monsters does not determine whether a work should be classified as horror, strictly speaking. As I discussed in the introduction to my last chapter, horror and its elements should be classified, along with other genres such as suspense, with respect to their capacity to raise a certain *affect* (Carroll 14). That is to say, films in the genre of horror (and films which knowingly borrow these elements from horror films) are instead brought together by a complex audience *reaction*. Carol J. Clover has called horror (as well as pornography) *body films*, devoted to the arousal of bodily sensations, existing especially to horrify and to stimulate, whose success is measured by their ability to excite their audiences:

The target is in both cases the body, our witnessing body. But what we witness is also the body, another's body, in experience: the body in sex and the body in threat. The terms "flesh film" ("skin flicks") and "meat movies" are remarkably apt. (189)

Yes, the chainsaw wielding maniac is frightening, but he is so much more than that: he arouses disgust—after all, he wears a mask of human flesh stitched together.) Fear of this sort is inexorably tied to the bodily sensation of disgust, and compounded by revulsion and nausea.

While Carroll's argument focuses specifically on the splatter film and gender, I feel the argument can be expanded to other subgenres of horror. The body and its reactions are significant in horror films on a number of levels. First, many horror films showcase interstitial, disgusting, uncanny, and abject beings. There are werewolves, mixing man and wolf, zombies in advanced states of bodily disintegration, and creatures

from alien territory, literally unknown to ordinary social intercourse (Carroll 35). There are also some who cannot even be properly classified in our language, left only to be described vaguely as (and perhaps even more terrifying because of this) *things*, and *its*, and *thems*, and so on. Secondly, film invites the union of the cinematic image to the bodies of the audience members. The audience is as much part of the film while it is being experienced as the main characters within the films themselves. Films become, in a way, an extension of the body, capable of being used to convey a breadth of possibilities.

This chapter, then is devoted to the various theories underlying horror, body horror, and their application in film. First, I discuss disgust from an evolutionary perspective how disgust affects our everyday lives and how disgust has worked its way into film, with emphasis on the genre of body horror. I then move into the discussion of the closely related concept of the uncanny, how it is used in the genre of horror and how the uncanny and disgust are intimately related to body horror. Finally, I close with a discussion of Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection, a concept developed in her influential *Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection*. Kristeva defines the abject as the human reaction to a breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction between subject, object, self, and other. I discuss how body horror is *embodied abjection*, articulated in film through slow-motion shots of transformation and lingering close-ups of these violent changes, complete with blood, pus, waste, and beyond. This embodied abjection is fundamentally challenging to the social order, as Kristeva discusses, and I use this concept as a segue into my third chapter, a detailed discussion of *District 9* and its use of elements of body horror to convey disgust, the uncanny, and abjection, to deliver its critique.

At its most basic level, disgust is an emotional response of revulsion to something considered offensive or unpleasant. It is an important part of the human emotional spectrum, with a host of practical and intellectual applications. Disgust affects many aspects of our lives, from our individual, domestic, everyday hygiene habits, through our moral choices as members of society, to even public policy on issues such as health, justice, social exclusion, and warfare:

Disgust is . . . a source of much human suffering; it plays an underappreciated role in anxieties and phobias such as obsessive compulsive disorder, social phobia and post-traumatic stress syndromes; it is a hidden cost of many occupations such as caring for the sick and dealing with wastes, and self-directed disgust afflicts the lives of many, such as the obese and fistula patients. Disgust is used and abused in society, being both a force for social cohesion and a cause of prejudice and stigmatization of out-groups. (Curtis 3478)

Disgust in humans seems also to be triggered by objects possessing particular features that signify disease. Curtis writes that a variety of disgust elicitors can be tied to almost every infectious condition. Feces, contaminated water and spoiled food for fecal-oral infections, skin lesions for dermatological diseases; for sexually transmitted diseases, ulcerated genitals; and for respiratory infections, respiratory secretions and contaminated materials. (3479).

In total, there are a large number of disgust elicitors: bodily waste products (such as feces, urine, vomit, saliva, mucus, and sexual fluids), foods (spoiled), animals (fleas, ticks, lice, cockroaches, worms, flies, rats, and mice), body-envelope violations (blood,

gore, and mutilation), death (corpses and organic decay), and visible signs of infection (Curtis 20-21). Many hygienic behaviors play an essential role in the prevention of infection, and many are instinctual to humans and automatic: the idea of consuming infectious substances, such as saliva, feces, or vomit is (with rare exceptions) deeply uncomfortable as to even contemplate (Curtis 3479).

Disgust has also been shown to elicit sensitivity on a spectrum, with rare individuals on the very high or very low ends of the spectrum. Those too easily disgusted might be predicted to manifest hypochondria, a phobia associated with potential disease sources such as other people, bodily products, sexual organs and their byproducts, food, and disease-related animals; those on the low end of the spectrum (i.e., those who seem relatively insensitive to disgust elicitors) may find difficulty being accepted into society and in maintaining bodily and domestic hygiene, potentially negatively impacting their health (Curtis 3482). Disgust's power to divide populations between in-groups and out-groups grants it a role in religion, justice, technological progress, class, xenophobia and the politics of exclusion.

Disgust can be said to operate within three domains: pathogen disgust, sexual disgust, and moral disgust (Tyber 103). Pathogen disgust "motivates proximal avoidance of perceived infection risks," while sexual disgust "motivates avoidance of individuals within the specific context of sexual interactions" (Tyber 107). Moral disgust motivates avoidance of social relationships with norm-violating individuals" and "might also underlie motivations to punish norm-violating third parties" (107). Moral disgust, then, can be said to describe the experience of disgust in response to exposure to moral transgressors and offenses.

Elevated disgust sensitivity leads to what Fitness and Jones describe as moral hypervigilance, a syndrome consisting of “behavioral tendencies, attitudes, and cognitive biases aimed at reducing the risk of exposure to transgressors” (613). The connection between disgust and moral judgement is striking when one examines the vocabulary used to describe crimes or criminals: offences can be “revolting,” “sickening,” or “disgusting”; perpetrators are “pigs” and “rotten bastards”; dubious behavior “stinks” or is “fishy” (613).

While moral disgust is helpful in deterring individuals from participating in perceived wrongs, it is also important to highlight that the disgust response can be triggered by a “false positive.” That is to say, individuals can create a (false) correlation in their minds between what is considered moral (and therefore good) and what is considered disgusting (and therefore bad). As Ellena Savage has put it, “Politicians, punters and polemicists all frequently invoke disgust in their speech, especially around topics that resonate strongly with their constituents, but such a thought paradigm is radically oversimplified, and its consequences can be particularly horrifying” (27). The sense that the disgust response is “embodied morality” and therefore a form of higher truth, leaves little space for rational cognition.

Many horror films operate with the premise of disturbing their audiences through the elicitation of disgust, some of which achieve this to great effect. Many films within the genre are rife with bodily waste products such as feces, urine, vomit, saliva, and mucus. The 1999 film *Audition*, for example, is a film which uses disgust in a memorable way. *Audition*'s plot seems simple enough: a widower stages fake “auditions” to find a new wife; he becomes interested in one and they begin to date. The film is an excellent

example of building tension and eliciting horror through disgust. In one of the film's most memorable (and disturbing scenes), a sack which repeatedly appears throughout the film is shown to contain a filthy man with missing fingers and no tongue. Asami Yamazaki, the woman widower Shigeharu Aoyama is dating, is shown to vomit into a dog bowl and present it to the man, who sticks his face in the bowl and proceeds to ingest the vomit.

Zombie films are also often disgusting; zombies usually retain their pre-death or pre-infection wounds, have fluids (sometimes infectious) running out of their orifices, and rotting meat between their teeth. In *Night of the Living Dead*, zombies could spread their sickness with a bite. In a more modern revamp of the "zombie" film (which introduced the *infected* as a key trope), *28 Days Later* (2002) features primary antagonists that are not resurrected dead and do not eat their victims, but seek to spread their disease, the *Rage* virus (a fusion of Ebola and an "inhibitor" drug). The virus, an incredibly virulent, blood borne disease, sends its hosts into a state of extreme "rage." It is highly contagious (e.g., the film emphasizes that one drop of blood is enough to cause infection) and is spread through bites, saliva exchange, and the blood that is continuously flowing from the infected individual's eyes (which turn red) and mouth. As well, the sequel to *28 Days Later* shows that individuals in the film can become carriers who are still capable of infecting others through their blood and saliva, but not displaying any symptoms of infections other than a partially red sclera.

The disgust response is related to the experience of the uncanny. In his 1919 essay *The Uncanny* Sigmund Freud writes that the subject of the uncanny belongs to all that is terrible, that is, to all that arouses dread and creeping horror. As well, the qualities that

identify an object as *uncanny* must be distinguished from those that identify an object as *fearful*. “The uncanny,” Freud writes, “is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar” (2). The uncanny can be something humanlike, perhaps an automaton or a doll that arouses one’s sympathies, but that is also capable of eliciting the disgust response. As well, the uncanny is represented by anything to do with death, dead bodies, severed limbs, revenants, spirits, ghosts, due to humanity’s primitive fear of death:

Dismembered limbs, a severed head, a hand cut off at the wrist, as in a fairy tale of Hauff’s, feet which dance by themselves, as in the book by Schaeffer which I mentioned above – all these have something peculiarly uncanny about them, especially when, as in the last instance, they prove capable of independent activity in addition . . . to some people the idea of being buried alive by mistake is the most uncanny thing of them all.

(Freud 15)

An object can be rendered uncanny simply by changing the position of his eyes, or changing him in some manner that renders him peculiar in some way. Because the uncanny object is familiar, yet incongruous, it has been seen as creating cognitive dissonance within the experiencing subject, due to the paradoxical nature of being simultaneously attracted to, and yet repulsed by an object. This cognitive dissonance often leads to an outright rejection of the object rather than an attempt to rationalize it. This is known as the “uncanny valley effect” within the field of robotics and 3D computer animation. Representations of the uncanny have also been seen in a variety of horror films.

The idea of something that is familiar, and yet *wrong* in some way is another method by which horror films incite a reaction from their audience. Here, we can consider any incarnation of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, either the 1956 or the 1978 version, and even the 2007 remake *The Invasion*. What every version of this film shares is that they are linked by some feeling of wrongness in the face of ostensible normality. The individuals look normal, save the lack of emotion and emotional response as they calmly (unusually so) replace humanity day after day after day.

The uncanny is present in other horror films as well, in everyday objects rendered unnatural. An automaton or a doll can become uncanny with a slight change of its features: consider Chucky, the killer “Good Guy” doll of the 1988’s *Child’s Play*. Although the numerous sequels wore out the franchise, the 1988 version is horrifying in his uncanniness. The contemporary horror film *Annabelle* (2014) also uses the uncanniness of a doll to incite horror in its audience. There is a wrongness to the Annabelle doll, with its eerie, too-human wide-eyed stare and its porcelain skin.

I return once again to body horror for examples of the uncanny. Images of body horror, I argue, are always uncanny. The manipulation of the human body, something so fundamental and known to us all, the base of our bodily experience, so to speak, into an unfamiliar object through a usually gruesome (and disgusting) process is disturbing. Many times, the transformed being, and certainly during the transformation itself, retains human attributes. *Slither* (2006), for example, features a number of grotesque, bloated, tentacled bodies which still retain human faces. Similarly, *The Thing*’s most recent 2011 incarnation shows the power of the uncanny to horrify by putting a normal human face on a monster. The film spends time exploring a number of bodily transformations, and also,

eerily, showing the power of putting a human face on an unfamiliar object. An autopsy of a burnt creature shows a nearly complete human head, with eyeballs, nose, mouth teeth and tongue intact, but with cloudy eyes and covered by a thin, translucent, jelly-like skin. Other scenes show hands animating themselves, sprouting tentacles, latching onto individuals, all while retaining the ability to clench its fingers into a fist over and over again. A human body, invaded by the “thing,” lies on its back and sprouts extra limbs from its sides. While the body has changed, the face remains intact; the open mouth lets out an inhuman roar and clambers onto the body of a fallen scientist, where it begins to “melt” one face over another and engulf it. Another scientist’s chest opens into a gaping maw, complete with fangs and tentacles, but the resulting monster still retains the scientist’s face.

What makes the monsters of *The Thing* horrifying is that these beings, with their in-between bodies, are also *abject* bodies. Kristeva, in the seminal work *Powers of Horror*, writes on the concept of that which is abject, something which inherently disturbs conventional identity and cultural concepts. Building from Freud’s uncanny and also the concept of disgust, Kristeva writes that the *abject* exists somewhere between the concept of an object and the concept of a subject:

A massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A “something” that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. (Kristeva 2)

Abjection is co-extensive with social and symbolic order, on the individual and collective level. The abject disturbs identity, system, and order, and does not respect borders, positions, and rules (Kristeva 3). Because of this, it is a universal phenomenon, encountered “as soon as the symbolic and/or social dimension of man is constituted, and throughout the course of civilization,” assuming specific forms according to its various systemic variants (Kristeva 68).

I have already touched on bodily waste products (such as feces, urine, vomit, saliva, mucus, and sexual fluids), foods (spoiled), animals (fleas, ticks, lice, cockroaches, worms, flies, rats, and mice), body envelope violations (blood, gore, and mutilation), death (corpses and organic decay), and visible signs of infection as eliciting disgust, but it is important to note that these are also *abject*. They are repulsive because they make the boundaries of our bodies ambiguous. Our human skin provides a very flimsy and easily assaulted partition between what is inside (me) and the rest of the world outside. Kristeva ties abjection to the female body and the construction of the maternal figure. The mother-child relation is conflicted by the child’s desire to break from its mother, but the mother’s reluctance to release it. So, the maternal body becomes a site of conflicting desires and consequently, abject.

Many films within the horror genre (*Psycho* chief among them, but also 1976’s *Carrie* and 2010’s *Black Swan*) touch on this subject, and with good reason. Pregnancy and birth are themselves fairly horrific, wherein a living and alien being infects a body, parasitically feeding off it until it is ready to burst forth (painfully), endangering the life and certainly the well-being of the host.

One of the most distinctive characteristics of the horror genre is that it can illustrate abjection in a variety of ways, two of which are especially relevant to my discussion on elements of body horror:

Firstly, the horror film abounds in images of abjection, foremost of which is the corpse, whole and mutilated, followed by an array of bodily wastes such as blood, vomit, saliva, sweat, tears and putrifying flesh. . . .

Secondly, there is, of course, a sense in which the concept of a border is central to the construction of the monstrous in the horror film; that which crosses or threatens to cross the 'border' is abject. Although the specific nature of the border changes from film to film, the function of the monstrous remains the same – to bring about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability. (Creed 71).

Frankenstein's Creature and Dracula are abject. The wolf-man, as a hybrid of man and animal, is abject. Zombies are especially abject; not only are they images of disgust, but they are walking corpses.

Body horror in particular is frequently discussed in terms of abjection in multiple ways. The subgenre itself, as I have discussed, is a difficult one to define, as it has a tendency to pull elements from other genres of film into its orbit; body horror, then, can be seen as a representation of the collapse of distinction and boundaries, as Mark Jancovich discusses in *Horror, The Film Reader*:

In these films, the monstrous threat is not simply external, but erupts from within the human body, and so challenges the distinction between self and other, inside and outside. In *The Fly* (1986), for example, Seth Brundle has

an accident when he uses the teleportation machine that he has created. In the process of teleportation, his body is fused with that of a fly at the molecular level. His DNA has been rewritten and the film concerns the gradual transformation of his body and his inability to maintain a sense of mastery and control over his physicality or identity. Brundle is therefore both victim and monster, and the threat comes from the inside, not from the outside.

The idea that the beings within body horror are victims is important, as, with very few exceptions (the *Hellraiser* films come to mind), the transformation from human into something else is done against the individual's will or with extreme reluctance, if they are aware of it at all. Body horror, then, encourages different kinds of identifications between the onscreen, mutating or mutated being, and the spectator.

From this point, one could argue that films have the capacity to be powerful tools in exposing the instability of the social order. Building on disgust, the uncanny, and Kristeva's abjection, it is easy to see that the body horror film (and, perhaps, horror in general) presents an opportunity to break down boundaries, and reconstitute them in novel ways. Directors aware of this power can take elements of body horror and draw audience's attention to these scenes in order to expose and contest forces at work that would not ordinarily be questioned by an audience member. In a moment of horror that arises from being exposed to a mutated body, and the abject looming behind it (or in it?), one can reflect upon and reconfigure one's ideas.

4. CHAPTER THREE

Chapter One presented a representative history of the horror genre, moved into a discussion on the horror film, and placed *District 9* on the timeline as an example of a genre-bending—I would even go so far as to call it *genre-breaking*—work which employs elements of multiple genres to convey its message of cultural criticism. My second chapter discussed horror’s capacity to incite a reaction in its audience due to its crafty utilization of disgust, uncanniness, and abjection. I discussed the idea that an audience experiences the film in much the same way as the characters within the film. Importantly, I highlighted how body horror, as an embodied abjection, is fundamentally challenging to the social order. The horror that arises from exposure to a mutated body presents the opportunity to reflect on and reconfigure one’s ideologies. This chapter will examine importance of body horror, its elements and effect, to *District 9*. Neill Blomkamp, no stranger to presenting critiques of culture in his films, uses body horror to deliver a staggering social commentary that touches on race, gender, sexuality, xenophobia, and so much more.

A South African-Canadian film director, producer and animator, Blomkamp has developed a filmography that includes a handful of short films among feature-length works such as 2013’s *Elysium* and 2015’s *Chappie*. Blomkamp’s films have shown themselves capable of delivering social commentary and criticism. For example, *Elysium* discusses the ever-increasing problem of wealth inequality around the world. *Chappie* invites audiences to consider the nature of consciousness, and it opens up a discussion on the nature of parenthood through its casting of Ninja and Yolandi Visser of the controversial South African rap group Die Antwoord as Chappie’s surrogate “parents”.

The most recent of Blomkamp's short films, released on June 14, 2017, under the name *Rakka*, condenses its social criticism into just under twenty-two minutes. Although Blomkamp has stated via Twitter that the name *Rakka* refers to the Japanese word for "fall," it also alludes to al-Raqqa, the city in Syria which has become the capital of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in 2014 and has since become the target of airstrikes.

Before *Rakka*, before *Elysium* and *Chappie*, and even before *District 9*, Blomkamp made *Alive in Joburg* (2006). The inspiration for *District 9*, *Alive in Joburg* is a grainy film set in 1990 during South Africa's apartheid regime, and it presents interviews with locals regarding their opinions of the aliens that have landed. The aliens are depicted as refugees living in terrible conditions who escaped to earth and are made to live amongst the black, oppressed population of Johannesburg. It has been rumored that footage of the interviews were real individuals asked about their opinions of Zimbabweans, but I have been unable to find a direct source of Blomkamp verifying this information. Still, there is something sobering about knowing that the discussion of the bug-like "aliens" in the film also refer to individuals who were themselves considered alien (i.e., both foreign and racially different). For instance, a woman mentions, in a manner that is eerily reminiscent of current discussions of immigration and immigrants, that the arrival of the aliens brought with it rape and murder. *Alive in Joburg* is a short, documentary-style film that offers little by way of story progression, which, in some ways, is better, inasmuch as the future is left open-ended. Where the aliens go, what will happen to them, is left a mystery. The only thing that is certain is that the budding tension

between humans and aliens is not diminishing, and the citizens of Johannesburg are left to figure it all out.

Expanding on many of the ideas presented in *Alive in Joburg*, *District 9* is a feature-length film, directed by Blomkamp and produced by Peter Jackson, starring Sharlto Copley as protagonist Wikus van de Merwe (who also made an appearance in *Alive in Joburg* as a police officer). Wikus, as he is referred to in the film, is an Afrikaner bureaucrat assigned to relocate a race of extraterrestrial creatures stranded on earth—the film refers to the aliens as “prawns”—from District 9, a slum in Johannesburg, to an internment camp outside the city.

District 9 opens with a documentary-style series of interviews which introduce not only the basic plot of the film, but its main characters. The film’s opening scene features protagonist Wikus, a field worker for Multi-National United (MNU), the world’s second-largest weapons manufacturer, which was put in charge of containing the aliens by the government of South Africa. At MNU’s head office for the “Department of Alien Affairs,” which looks like an everyday workspace, Wikus cheerfully points to the other Alien Affairs workers behinds him and explains that his department’s job is to try to engage with the prawn on behalf of MNU and on behalf of humans.

The film then cuts to an eerie, grainy footage shot of Johannesburg, South Africa, with an enormous alien ship hovering over the city. Through various interviews, including an interview with Grey Bradnam, “the Chief Correspondent of UKNR,” another entity within the film, audiences piece together that twenty years earlier, in 1982, the earth was visited by a large spacecraft which hovers above Johannesburg. Despite its menacing appearance, the beings assumed to be onboard the ship make no attempt to

contact humanity. After three months of frightened speculation and silence—“It just hovered there,” Bradnam states, “Nobody could get in”—humans cut their way into the ship.

The film cuts to a shot of soldiers, complete with biohazard suits and machine guns strapped to their back, wiping a brown sludge (the implication is that it is feces) off a door and drilling their way into the ship. “We were on the verge of first contact,” another character, Sarah Livingstone, a Sociologist at Kempton Park University, remarks. The first contact is far from the music from heaven and bright shining lights as in Stephen Spielberg’s *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. Rather, it is reminiscent more of a biohazard laboratory experiment that has gone wrong. “We’ve got a lot of moisture in here,” a soldier comments from under his biohazard suit. “Oh my god,” the same soldier adds a second later, after which the camera cuts to what he is staring at: a “million” sick, malnourished aliens. The first sight of the “prawns” shows one scuttling across the filthy floor, with others around this alien clustered around makeshift fire pits. Unhealthy and aimless, the aliens are placed into a temporary settlement which eventually becomes militarized and turns into a slum, the film’s titular District 9.

The residents of Johannesburg are uneasy about the presence of the aliens, and some are openly hostile. Various locations in the film place signs outside indicating that their public amenities are reserved for the exclusive use of humans. With tensions between humans and aliens growing worse, as evidenced by an increase in looting and rioting, the aliens are going to be “relocated” to a safer and better location two hundred kilometers outside of the city, District 10. “The people of Johannesburg, and of South

Africa,” Wikus states, “are going to live happily, and safely, knowing that the prawn is very far away.”

District 9 also shows that MNU, as a private military contractor, has a deeper motivation than their superficial humanitarianism in helping to relocate the aliens to District 10. The aliens brought with them from their home world a cache of weapons technologically superior to those of the humans, and these weapons turn out to be responsive to the alien’s DNA only. MNU hopes to harness and use the alien technology to further their economic interests with organizations and governments around the world. As the leader of the project to remove the aliens—a position, I should note, that is heavily implied to be due to nepotism, as he is married to the daughter of MNU’s Managing Director—Wikus is charged with issuing eviction notices and finding weapons and other illegal materials in District 9, tasks which he takes to with frightening zeal.

Indeed, it is interesting to see the barbaric way Wikus takes to his new position. It is heavily implied through the documentary-style introduction that the refugee aliens are being manipulated, and that the entire eviction process of District 9 is illegal. And although Wikus is charming, with an almost permanent smile across his face and goofy interactions with his coworkers, he is also frighteningly cold when dealing with the aliens. “Prawn,” we learn, is a derogatory term that citizens use when commenting on the aliens, but it is a slur which Wikus casually drops many times in conversation with the aliens themselves and with the other individuals he interacts with.

Wikus, it turns out, is a bigot, harboring a deep prejudice against the aliens, and the eviction notices he serves to them are just a formality. During his first encounter with the aliens, one of them knocks the paperwork out of Wikus’s hands, tells him to fuck off,

to with which Wikus responds that the alien's scrawl—the mark on the notice caused by the alien's blow—counts.

With each eviction, Wikus's bigoted attitude becomes more and more apparent, and the film's representation of the aliens throughout the eviction scenes almost encourages audiences to adopt these attitudes. The aliens, large, bipedal insectoid creatures that walk around filthy and covered in rags, are presented as base, stupid, and garbage-eating monsters who attack at the slightest provocation: "The prawn likes to eat the rubber," Wikus comments in another encounter as one of the aliens chews on the spare tire of the MNU vehicles, "it's sort of like a marshmallow." The alien eating the vehicle's tire then tears a soldier's arm off for "prodding" the alien and telling it to stop. Cat food, which has a narcotic effect on the aliens, is used to disperse an alien crowd, and also to bribe them into signing the eviction notices, and the aliens are shown engaging in a version of "cockfighting" with creatures brought from their homeworld, as well as engaging in arms dealing and theft, murder, kidnapping, interspecies prostitution, carjacking, and so on. Hence the audience might well be inclined to adopt an anti-alien bias.

Inserted almost a means to justify the inhumane treatment of the aliens, the film cuts to a scientist attempting to explain their behavior. "What we have stranded on earth," an entomologist states, "are the workers." The aliens don't particularly think for themselves or have initiative, but will "take commands," and so must be treated a bit roughly by the MNU officers. In a particularly memorable scene in the film, Wikus and the other officers stumble on a "breeding shack" and then proceed to burn the shack down. Wikus comments on the eggs popping like popcorn and also offers a sludge-

covered tube to one of his coworkers, with the comment to keep it as a memory of his first abortion. Meanwhile, the eggs are squealing with what can only be imagined as pain, and the audience is given the unsatisfactory, cursory explanation that it is illegal for the aliens to breed unlicensed children in District 9.

During the eviction of Christopher Johnson and his son, who with the aid of another alien have been carefully and painstakingly for twenty years collecting a fluid from alien machinery for some as yet unknown purpose, Wikus discovers the container of fluid and accidentally sprays himself in the face with a black fluid that begins to trigger changes in his body. Initially, Wikus is stunned, then takes the container and seals it up as it obviously “dangerous.” A few minutes later Wikus is shown vomiting outside one of the shacks, and, later, after medical treatment for a burn that resulted from being knocked into a fire by one of the aliens, comments that he is a little hot, but only needs food to feel better.

Things only spiral downhill from there. During his meal, Wikus begins to “bleed” a black fluid from his nose in addition to developing dizzy spells. As he attempts to go about his work, Wikus is shown to have trouble concentrating. Nibbling a fingernail, he peels it off and, terrified scurries to the bathroom, where, in a direct allusion to Seth Brundle’s transformation in *The Fly*, he peels another fingernail off. After what can only be imagined as a rather terrible afternoon, a pale and clammy Wikus rushes home, accompanied by loud sound-effects of his stomach gurgling. “I think I crapped my pants,” he tells his wife, who has staged a rather inconvenient surprise party for her ill husband to celebrate his promotion. A sweating Wikus navigates his party, has an awkward encounter with his father-in-law, and then proceeds to have another vomiting

episode in the bathroom. During the cutting of the celebratory cake, a delirious Wikus sees the room spinning around him, attempts to cut one piece of the cake off, then vomits black fluid all over the food on the table, collapses into unconsciousness, and is rushed to the hospital by his worried wife.

At the hospital, a worried Tania, Wikus' wife, waits while Wikus attempts to explain his ever-increasing symptoms to the attending physician. The bandages on his arm are bloody, and the doctor lets out a startled "Oh!" while cutting away the last of the bandages. "Is it bad?" "Is it infected?" Wikus asks, to which the doctor, a frown on his face comments that the wound has a great deal of "suppuration." The doctor, cutting away the last of the bandages, reveals that Wikus's forearm and hand have mutated into the insectoid appendages of the alien species. An evacuation is ordered, and Wikus is quarantined by MNU, placed into a bodybag, evacuated to MNU headquarters, where he is put through a series of tests, including one that shows his "new" body parts are capable of feeling pain.

Wikus is then subjected to experiments that show he can use alien weaponry. He is restrained and a variety of alien weapons are brought out for him to use, and Wikus initially protests. The MNU scientists prod him in the shoulder with a cattle prod, causing his muscles to spasm, activating the weapon, which, it turns out, he can use with his alien hand as well as his human hand. In the last experiment, one of the aliens—who, it is implied, is unaware of his fate—is brought out and Wikus begs to have him taken away. "I will shoot a cow," he begs, and then, "Listen, you can't use a real guy, he didn't do anything to you." Wikus is stuck with the cattle prod again, prompting the gun to fire, and causing the alien to explode, showering a horrified Wikus with its remains. His

father-in-law watches this all take place from a separate room, then impassively discusses Wikus' fate with other MNU officials while Wikus is strapped to a table, begging his father-in-law for help. His father-in-law tells his wife that Wikus has fallen gravely ill due to blood poisoning brought on by the injury to his arm in District 9.

During an attempted vivisection, Wikus escapes and flees. When trying to purchase food at a restaurant, MNU falsely announces that Wikus is infected with a terribly contagious disease brought on by "prolonged sexual activity with aliens" and that members of the public should remain at least twenty meters from Wikus. A furious, isolated Wikus then attempts to find a way to reverse his condition, leading to his entry into the slum of District 9, the only place where he is able to evade the MNU forces looking for him. After a phone call with his wife, Wikus promises to find a way to cure himself of the mutations wracking his body. As a fugitive from MNU officers, he winds up in the home of Christopher Johnson, the alien who he was attempting to evict when he became infected, and who is the only person that can help Wikus return to normal.

During subsequent encounters with Nigerian gang members and the MNU forces who are both after Wikus in an attempt to harvest his limbs and discover a way to use alien weaponry, Wikus continues to mutate. He gains control of various alien devices which he uses to allow Christopher and his son "Little CJ" to escape to the larger alien ship, which Christopher promises will return to aid Wikus in three years. The end scene of the film shows other characters speculating over Wikus's ultimate fate, and, finally, a fully transformed Wikus crafting a flower out of metal, waiting for Christopher to return with a cure.

Blomkamp's excessive attention to Wikus's "degeneration" is not without purpose. I have already shown that elements of body horror are perfectly suited to critique culture by means of their ability to arouse disgust, the uncanny, and convey abjection. Blomkamp, I argue, uses Wikus's changes to do multiple things, one of which is to make a direct challenge to the widely held, but oversimplified notion that morality is intrinsically tied to the concept of what is not only "good" and "pure," but also what is "human." Blomkamp breaks down the idea of an intrinsic embodied morality: throughout the film, Wikus's becomes more human as he becomes less human.

Wikus's character development as well as his physical changes serve as an illustration of Blomkamp's breakdown of the concept of human goodness. At the beginning of *District 9*, audiences are introduced to Wikus as a very likeable, sweet character. Wikus is the average joe climbing the ladder of success, trying to make the best of what he's been given, all with a bright smile on his face. He dotes on his wife, and is also very popular with his coworkers and underlings, who congratulate him on his promotion with a genuineness the rest of us can only wish for. He is an all-around good guy, a "good son" as his mother comments, and audiences cannot help but like him.

And yet, as the movie continues, Wikus's proves himself to be flawed. He is bigoted and cruel towards the aliens and obsequious towards the MNU authorities that have tasked him to remove the aliens from District 9. He proves himself manipulative to aliens who do not listen to him during the attempting relocation, as he threatens to remove Little CJ from Christopher Johnson if he does not sign the necessary paperwork. Wikus's behavior is disturbing and unsettling, as audiences observe his condescending remarks about the "prawns," who he considers not only stupid, but dirty and immoral.

With Wikus as the protagonist, audiences must accept not only the charming man who commented that his promotion was the second best day of his life next to his wedding, but also the man who would certainly be accused of racism if he had been interacting with human beings and not aliens. Consider what would happen every instance of the word “prawn” was swapped with *nigger*, *gook*, or *spick*. Blomkamp excels at making audiences accept Wikus’ behavior as normal, only to then realize how uncomfortable a position that really is.

I have mentioned the connection between disgust and moral judgment. This is especially evident in *District 9* when one considers the vocabulary used to describe the prawns: they are “bottom-feeders” who “cannot be allowed to breed” (Blomkamp 2009). One of the most disturbing, almost surreal, moments of the film is where Wikus stumbles on a “nest”: a shack being used to hide illegal alien eggs. When opening the shack door, Wikus retches and cries, “Jesus!” as he exposed a hideous mass of reeking flesh and tubes coming from the corpse of a cow which has been hung from the ceiling and is providing nutrition to the “little prawn eggs.” He then delights in removing one of the tubes from the eggs, which responds with a squeal unusually reminiscent of a cross between a human baby and a mewling kitten. “There you go,” he exclaims, delightedly removing the first tube, “no more nutrition to the guy!” He then removes the second tube, effectively killing alien in the egg, and comments that the “little guy has gone to a nice little sleep now.”

Wikus then offers one of the removed tubes, covered in a brown goo, to one of his stunned underlings as a “souvenir” from his first abortion, while one of the soldiers laughs. Wikus explains that it would take far too long to go and “abort” each of the eggs

one at a time, and summons an MNU unit armed with flamethrowers to set fire to the entire shack. While the shack is torched, Wikus turns to the camera and excitedly explains that the sound being heard, the little popping sounds as opposed to the tiny squeals coming from the eggs, is the remains of “the little guy” exploding “like popcorn.”

Such a scene serves a twofold purpose. Audiences watching the film might share in Wikus’ desire to cleanse the space of the decomposing cow; after all, it is rotting meat with the potential to carry infections. Moreover, the entire alien process of producing young is itself rather disgusting, as the eggs and tubes are covered in oozing substances, and the shack smells, no doubt, like hot, rancid, putrid meat. These considerations overlap with a sense of moral disgust, since the justification for setting fire to the shack with the eggs is because it is, after all, a crime to have unlicensed offspring, and Wikus takes an almost sadistic delight in destroying these eggs. He is correcting a disgusting wrong.

On the other hand, audience members are simultaneously allowed to feel repulsed by Wikus’s actions as well: I have discussed already that substituting a racial slur instead of the word prawn throughout the film would disclose Wikus’ horrifying bigotry, were it previously in doubt. Now, if we substitute human beings in place of the aliens in the shack, then what is being committed is no less than mass murder. Consider audience’s reaction if Wikus’ had instead found a nursery of a dozen black babies and decided to burn them with fire. It is easy to make the jump, particularly given the barely veiled allegory with respect to apartheid in Blomkamp’s film. The audience is forced to experience a disjunction between what appears to be good (Wikus and “humanity”) and what appears to be bad (the “prawns”). The complex interplay of our intrinsic association

with morality and disgust becomes exposed and broken down, and Blomkamp sets the audience up for Wikus's metamorphosis in the film.

Wikus's physical transformation is the ultimate embodiment of the encounter with the disgusting, the uncanny, and the abject. After Wikus is sprayed with the unknown black fluid, when his transformation begins and he learns he is going to change into an alien, a few things unfold rapidly. First, on a physical level, Wikus's transformation is incredibly disgusting and disturbing. As he vomits black fluid and his flesh falls off, as one of his eyes changes color and his arm becomes an armored mess, as his teeth fall out and his body is punctured by an exoskeleton poking its way out of skin, the audience becomes aware of his changing "humanity" and is repulsed by him. He is potentially infected, and certainly ill, which means that the audience ought to be instinctively repulsed by him.

Still, audiences cannot help but sympathize with Wikus as he is forced to murder the "prawns" he has suddenly come to relate to, as he is kidnapped and forced to suffer through experiments that include shock treatment and an attempted vivisection, as he escapes and desperately tries to find a way to reunite with his wife and return to his old life. Audience members cannot help but put themselves in his shoes, and come to associate the humans, and perhaps, the entire human race, with negativity and immortality.

Several close-ups of Wikus's face during the latter half of the film highlight the extent of his changes for the audience to see: his blood is blue and black, his eyes are mutated, black scales and spikes jut from his half-changed, deformed body. Disgusting, certainly, but at the same time, Wikus becomes more understanding of the plight of the

aliens, and we are shown that Wikus and the alien Christopher Johnson (whom Wikus tried to evict and had nothing but contempt for mere days before) have at least one thing in common: they both want to go home. The audience cannot help but come to understand the plight of Wikus and of the aliens toward the latter half of the film. The “humans” represented by the MNU employees and the gangs pursuing Wikus are monstrous and “inhuman”; the aliens become associated with morality and “human” or humane qualities. Blomkamp has broken down the conventional ties between morality and health or purity, and the audience is left scrambling to reorient themselves, having been forced into a confrontation with their own beliefs.

As a genre, body horror represents an effective means by which to deliver cultural criticism due to their visceral effects. Blomkamp knowingly takes the elements of body horror, injects them into *District 9*, and takes audiences on a journey that requires them to step into the shoes, so to speak, of a character who finds himself trapped in a world where he is being threatened by his own species and who ultimately must abandon them, as there is no space for him to exist peacefully alongside humanity while he is still in his abject, in-between body.

What ties *District 9* to reality is its use of cognitive dissonance to comment on very real problems of our current world. Certainly, the political overtones are both local and global. Pacatte writes that *District 9* alludes to South African history, but also appeals to a broad audience. After all, racism has existed throughout history, and so have refugees and immigrants looking to escape some horror or atrocity back “home”:

[*District 9*] refers to South African history such as the invention of and rationale for concentration camps (1900-1902) by the British in the second

Boer War. The implication that the living conditions in townships still exist, as they did under apartheid, is less than subtle. The government of South Africa dominating *District 9* is fascist, demonstrating a Nazi-like ideology with parallels to the genocide carried out by the Nazis in World War II (Pacatte)

Furthermore, *District 9* offers ambiguity about which civilization (human or “prawn”) audiences should ally themselves with, and, embodied in the character of Wikus, even questions where one civilization ends and the other begins. That is, where do we draw the line between when Wikus is human and when he is not? Certainly the beginning and the end are the totality of his transformation, and there is a point in the film where it is commented that Wikus’ alien and human half are perfectly balanced, but what of everywhere else? This ambiguity, and the audience reaction it generates, helps to generate a sense of abjection. Wikus violates the border between man/alien in the visible signs of his transformation in order to delve into fundamental questions concerning the nature of humanity. What is it that makes us human? How does one define the nature of humanity? Is humanity necessarily tied to the body? If the body is lost, is one still human? Does humanity, perhaps, result from something beyond the body? While *District 9* gives no direct answer to the above questions, it does seem to imply the following: “human” has really been a placeholder for “sentient being” and that what we consider to be “human” rights are really rights meant for anything that fits the criteria for sentience and perhaps other cognitive functions.

Science fiction and horror deal heavily in the theme of personhood, from artificial intelligence to the disintegration of the body. *District 9*, in particular, addresses the

speculation of rights concerning alien life. In the film, alien life (the prawns) are found to exist, but their rights are violated over and over again on the justification that the prawn do not look like humans. Their existence, as something with a “human” brain and “human” eyes, has erupted from some frightening, alien space and broken into the everyday life of Johannesburg in *District 9*.

Kristeva’s point that abjection surpasses both disgust and the uncanny in its universality is relevant in this context. Individuals who embrace the abject, as Kristeva writes, are merely trying to find a way to surpass it. It can be argued that *District 9* create scenes and atmospheres that are fundamentally disgusting on a cross-cultural level, but they also generate the more universal abjection, which exists anywhere something comes to clash with the greater societal or symbolic order.

The acts undertaken by the human characters in the film likely engender both disgust and moral opprobrium. It is hard to imagine an audience that would find the genocide of the unborn acceptable (as when the humans torch the “prawn” nest) or that would deem it acceptable to violate the rights of another being and conduct gruesome experiments on him or mutilate him (in the film, MNU not only kidnaps Wikus but also creates an elaborate ruse that casts him in a negative light and frames him as the villain).

5. CONCLUSION

Ultimately, while an analysis of *District 9* in the historical context of apartheid South Africa can be fruitful, there is a certain philosophical depth to the film that allows us to speculate on human nature, our methods of crafting morality for society, how we deal with the generation of morality when those methods are removed, and how to critically confront these through body horror.

The study of body horror and its elements is a burgeoning field that I feel offers a great deal for potential research. The films within the body of works produced by David Cronenberg, for example, offer rich terrain for further exploration of these ideas.

Tracing its origin is difficult, especially in films, because as a genre/subgenre, it often intertwines so closely with others that at times it is separated. Still, some films offer incredible potential for research: *Antiviral*, a 2012 film which uses body horror to offer a critique of celebrity culture, is one such film; *Contracted*, a 2013 film which offers a fresh take on the zombie film and raises discussion of the demands placed on women; *Antibirth*, a 2016 film, which uses body horror to subvert cultural ideas of pregnancy and motherhood; and *Taxidermia*, a 2006 film with a growing body of scholarly research. Other texts include graphic novels, including the Japanese *Uzumaki* series, which takes the importance of symbols in Japanese culture and turns one, the spiral, into shockingly visceral possibilities.

Video games also offer the potential for more research into body horror, with many of them in recent years dealing heavily with themes of infection, mutation, and beyond. The *Bioshock* series uses elements of body horror, and many games have been

developed with body horror as a main element, including the *Resident Evil* series, many of the *Silent Hill* games, and *Parasite Eve*.

Still, perhaps the first task should be to develop a history of body horror and define what goes in, and what goes out as best as one can. The nature of the beast is slimy, gooey, and fluid, and I imagine one can only go so far before one is up to one's neck in sludge, and pus, and shit, and blood and so on. But I am curious to see what changes await us on the other side.

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