

# Of Love and Death: De/Constructing the Special Effects Body at the Limits of Taste

Rachael Ball

Volume 3, Number 1, September 2020

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1102784ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1102784ar>

[See table of contents](#)

## Publisher(s)

Montréal Monstrum Society

## ISSN

2561-5629 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

## Cite this article

Ball, R. (2020). Of Love and Death: De/Constructing the Special Effects Body at the Limits of Taste. *Monstrum*, 3(1), 93–118. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1102784ar>

© Rachael Ball, 2020



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

**Of Love and Death:**  
**De/Constructing the Special Effects Body at the Limits of Taste**

**Rachael Ball**

Within horror fan circles, much digital ink is spent bemoaning the state of the modern horror film, so much so and for such a prolonged period that perpetual disappointment has become something of the status quo for well over a decade. Alongside the ubiquitous “jumpscare,” the greatest object of distaste seems to be the use of computer-generated visual effects (or VFX), in particular their replacement of so-called “practical effects” in the creation of sequences of bodily injury and destruction. High-profile horror and gore genre sites like *Bloody Disgusting* and *Dread Central* archive hundreds of such editorials which inscribe value onto practical gore effects while bemoaning the prevalence and the inefficacy of VFX within the genre, while innumerable listicles, fan videos, and message board throw-downs chronicle an ever-shifting array of individual and communal archives of cherished sequences of practically-mounted bodily mayhem. The use of prosthetics and make up, as well as physically modeled reproductions of the human body and its various components and excretions hold for these fans a great affective charge, and for many have come to symbolize a sort of “paradise lost” of truly embodied horror. I should note here that within the massive transnational genre of horror, this sentiment is most strongly attached to subgenres which rely for their affective response on the decomposure and deformation of the inner working of the human (or humanoid) body. These bodily-seated horrors are especially fascinating in this context for their relevance to questions of affective feedbacks, the questions they lead to about differing logics of special effects body-building and bodily entanglements, as well as the genre’s close imbrication with economies of taste and disgust.

---

**Rachael Ball** is a PhD candidate in the Film and Media Studies department at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her dissertation centers around bodily special effects technologies broadly conceived, and her research interests include transnational genre film, in particular global exploitation and horror, as well as animal and other more-than-human materialities in media.

The stated reason for this sense of loss within fan discourse, and the resulting devaluing of VFX work in body horror, is most often that some sense of tangible, visceral “reality” is only present when a practical effect is present as a sculptural, profilmic object which occupies the same space before the camera as the principle actors. While this argument seems somewhat disingenuous—how might an artisanally-produced latex molded head boast more of a toehold in ontological reality than one produced through scanning and coding?—there is much worth exploring in this insistence that some connective tissue is lost, or perhaps more importantly is *felt* to be lost, in the conversion from practical to visual gore. Three general patterns cohere across these seemingly disparate but thematically unified fan discourses—first, that VFX sequences within the horror film lack a certain verisimilitude or acceptable level of photorealism; second, that the absence of a profilmic effects object, which occupies the same space as the human actors at the moment of filming, removes a crucial element both of ontological truth-value and of human presence; and third, that the use of VFX in the production of bodily decomposure and destruction effaces a vital visceral punch necessary for the affective functioning of the body horror genre—namely, that the ‘gut punch’ of the gore sequence’s affect is impossible to achieve through VFX, and conversely, that the gut ‘knows’ when it is being duped.

Any exploration of the logics beneath and the discursive structures scaffolded upon these missing and mourned tissues quickly raises a thorny tangle of questions about the place of the body in relation to network and information cultures and aesthetics, as well as what experiential and communicative connections and flows are possible between not only human cognition and new media virtualities, but also between biological matter and digitally coded and rendered corporealities. Chief among these thorny questions is this: What is materially and experientially distinct between the spectator’s encounter with a profilmic, sculptural effects body composed of latex, corn syrup, and animal offal, and that same spectator’s encounter with an effects body produced through scanning, coding, and digital rendering? In other words, what affective ties and communications pass between the fan body and the architectures of the practically or digitally constructed effects body, and what bodily or discursive logics are at work which dictate the relative desirability of each to the discerning genre fan?

By taking seriously these anxieties, I aim to better approach the affective logics and somatic interactions that flow between the fan body and these two seemingly oppositional architectures of effects bodies, and to ground them within a larger framework of rhetorics surrounding verisimilitude, ontological

truth, and bodily invocation. Utilizing Anna Munster's generative concept of the baroque fold as interface within new media systems, and tracing a larger pattern of fold logics within the creation and presentation of both digital and practical special effects bodies, I trouble the assumption that increased virtuality must necessarily reduce the fleshy weight of the corporeal, and propose the potentialities of the enteric imaginary as both a reinscription of the biological corporeal within virtual mediascapes, and a potent system for thinking through alternative avenues of embodied experience and interaction with the digital.

### **I. Connective Tissues: “Anchoring” the VFX Body**

A conspicuous common denominator in the ongoing horror fan disavowals of VFX work is the notion that the images and animated sequences produced through such technologies are inherently unbelievable—an assertion that draws upon both a judgement of failed or unconvincing verisimilitude, as well as metaphors of loss. This lost object is difficult to pin down in material terms, which perhaps makes its invocation all the more compelling, given that it can stand in for a variety of different anxieties or discomforts that crop up around VFX-inclusive films. What is lost is alternately described as a sense of reality—most often in reference to the primal scene of the profilmic space, and often connected to the reality judgements made (or imagined to be made) by human performers at the moment of filming—or a loss of the human body (and by extension humanity) itself, particularly when a human performer is rendered either in full or in part through digital animation.

Fan invocations of verisimilitude and photorealism in this context are highly complex, as they can alternately be understood as critiquing from a particular historically-situated moment (the technology is not *yet* as convincing as a profilmic practical effect), or as a more proscriptive claim that the horizon of acceptable visual and textural fidelity to ontological reality will never be reached. Moreover, as Julie Turnock asserts in her study of the rise of VFX out of the Hollywood blockbuster of the 1970s, despite the common rhetorics in technical and fan discourses of VFX as naturally progressing towards greater photorealistic fidelity, the “historically dominant ILM style of photorealism involves a much more complicated and multifaceted example of photorealism than is usually assumed, including a great deal of stylization and what might be called anti-realistic techniques” (2015, 66). Claims of VFX's unconvincing appeals to verisimilitude also place the digitally rendered effects object in opposition to the profilmic object of the practical effect by decrying a loss of

materiality, presuming a response feedback between the performers sharing the space/time before the camera with the effects object. This imagined construction suggests that a practical special effect constitutes a presence (a physical profilmic object was there), while a digital special effect necessarily constitutes a compelling absence or lack (a physical profilmic object was not only not there, but an empty space had to be created into which the VFX object could later be inserted). Following such an argument to its logical end, this lack would seem to bleed out into the performers sharing this profilmic space/time, in some way reducing the “truth value” of their performance, and ultimately, unavoidably communicating its own absence of meaning to the viewer.

This valorization of the profilmic, practical effect as somehow rooted strongly in ontological reality depends upon longstanding historical assumptions about the immateriality and inorganic nature of the digital—a structuring of the digitally animated effect as both the profilmic’s binary opposite and an excessive representation that signifies nothing. Turnock traces a lineage of what she calls the “technophobic” anxiety in certain strands of journalistic and academic criticism around the loss of “something essential, and essentially real, about the cinema in the shift to digital production” (2015, 270). As Lisa Bode (2015) explains, this anxious critique has an even longer cinematic history, cropping up around the grafting of flesh and elaborate prosthetics and make-up developed in the 1920s to radically disfigure or conceal the performer. The extra-filmic discourses of anxiety and ambivalence provoked by early practical effects’ radical decomposures and restructurings of the architectures of the human body were similar to those attending the rise of full digital motion capture and imaging, which as Bode argues again dredged up the concern that a new special effects technology “removes the physical reality of the body and replaces it with something or someone digital” (2015, 34).

A similar justificatory move can be seen in the case of the transnational action cinemas, in which films that make heavy use of computer generated environments and effects tend to insist upon the fleshy materiality of the musculature of their central bodies. In addition to narrative and visual economies which value human exertion and bodily transformations,<sup>1</sup> this centering of the body’s fleshiness is often achieved through focusing paratextual discourses around the beauty and body-building regimes supposedly undergone

---

<sup>1</sup> This functions differently in different industrial and cultural contexts—Lisa Purse identifies this most clearly in narrative logics of body training and laborious transformation over time in Hollywood-inflected mainstream action cinemas, while the South Indian Telugu industry instead structures its value system around fantastic bodily potentiality drawn through extratextual legacies of star lineages.

by the actors, thereby effacing the corollary labor of the CG body-building undertaken by scores of VFX workers in the construction of the increasingly outsized musculature of the bodies of central performers. In his exploration of the musculature materialities of the seemingly techno-hybrid literal “hardbodies” of *300* (Zack Snyder, 2006), Drew Ayers suggests that it is both the hyperbolic musculature of the Spartan protagonists itself that, along with paratextual discussions of the personal training and body-building regimes supposedly undergone by the actors, strive to make possible the shedding of digital blood’s affective indexical relation to the body of the viewer, in some way grounding the digitally rendered world through an insistence on physicality.<sup>2</sup> A corollary process is visible in the case of the Telugu cinema action hero, whose techno-fantastic, VFX-produced star body is constructed through dual projects of literal bodybuilding, the first of which—the individual labor of training and cosmetically constructing the body undertaken by the star himself—is ritually and repetitively valorized in paratextual discourse, becoming a sort of catechism by which the diegetic body of the Telugu “mass hero” is exalted to the superhuman tasks which are his charge.<sup>3</sup> The second form of bodybuilding, the collective labor of massive teams of digital animators, optical effect teams, and stuntmen, is effaced and abstracted into the visual signifiers of shredded abs, intergenerational dance-offs, and flying baddies, receiving very little credit in popular press accounts and advertising campaigns which instead foreground the arduous training regimes and martial arts education the male stars supposedly undergo to prep for each new film.<sup>4</sup>

Both of these industrial examples hearken back to Bode’s work on 1920’s popular press and industry publications that insisted upon bodily presence and

---

<sup>2</sup> Drew Ayers, “Digital Materialism: “300” Bodies in Virtual Space.” *Special Effects*, (London: British Film Institute, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> For the fundamental text on the spectacular onscreen and offscreen body of Telugu cinema’s mass hero, see S.V. Srinivas, *Megastar: Chiranjeevi and Telugu Cinema after N.T. Rama Rao*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009). I have elsewhere written on my concept of the “new” mass hero and his techno-spectacular VFX body, in “Body/Building: Figuring the New Tollywood Mass Hero on a Global Stage” (unpublished).

<sup>4</sup> For example, the majority of the early press buzz relating to the upcoming Telugu remake of the Tamil hit *Thani Oruvan*, starring megastar Ram Charan, take as their headline some variation of “Ram Charan Hits the Gym,” or “Cherry’s New Fitness Challenge,” and even “Anything for a Hit: Ram Charan Goes Vegetarian.” “Anything For a Hit: Ram Charan Goes Vegetarian.” *The Deccan Chronicle*. 27 May 2016; Kirubhakar Purushothaman, “Ram Charan Hits the Gym for His Telugu Remake of *Thani Oruvan*.” *India Today*. 7 May 2016; Suhas Yellapantula, “Cherry’s New Fitness Challenge.” *The New Indian Express*. 7 May 2016.

human effort in composite special effects bodies. First stressed are the hours of discomfort and often intense physical pain undergone by the individual actor, and thereby relating tortured physicality to valued performance; later, these same physical discomforts are connected to the high degree of skill necessary to produce a legible performance through motion capture rigs and digital prosthesis, most visible around the body of work of actors like Andy Serkis and Doug Jones (Bode 2015). In all of these cases, it would appear that anything that might look on its face like the disappearance of the human form into digitally produced environments or bodily structures must be counteracted with a strong insistence upon the physical materiality of the body itself. A more widely used, cross-generic example can be found in the ubiquitous green screen used to insert digitally imaged worlds and populations around a human performer, which is itself by definition an anchoring of a highly technically mediated environment around the profilmic body.

The defensive rhetorical techniques undertaken within these major global film industries might seem to suggest that violence's affect necessitates some indexical appeal to corporeal materiality, yet the ubiquity of these rhetorical and visual 'anchors' is not itself proof that without them, we would be stranded in a vast immateriality of the digital, severed from our own bodily experience. Rather, it is proof of the presence of popular anxieties around the possibility of such a digitally mediated unmooring. An exploration of the functional logics behind VFX versus practical special effects reveals that such anxieties are not simply technophobic, but reveal concerns about the bodily/digital interface and cybernetic graftings which are predicated upon limiting Cartesian mind-body binaries that distance human cognition from the full array of biological systems which present alternative avenues of embodied experience and interaction with the digital.

## **II. Enveloping Logics: The Morph and the Fold**

Beyond the stated difference in ontological truth-value in fan discourses that differentiate practical and computer-generated effects, there are alternative avenues from which to conceptualize the natures of these two effects regimes without dipping into technophobic notions of a dismembering immateriality or technofuturist essentialism. VFX and practical effects can indeed be said to rely on different structural and functionalist logics, in which the additive, sculptural logic of the practical effect (the careful adding of layers of make-up or prosthesis to an actor, for example, or the sculptural layering of a latex molded torso) is

distinct from the VFX logic of the fluid, liquid morph. While the use of stop-motion animation and lap dissolves enable the additive model of practical effects work to represent a morphing of one form into another, this transformative motion seemingly stops short of fluidity.

Scott Bukatman (2003) identifies the morph as constituting “a phenomenology of the digital,” in which digitally-imaged morphing transfers the promise of spatial elasticity embodied in virtual reality to the mutability and potential transformation of the body and the self. Bukatman locates such performative elastic potentiality of the digitally rendered body in the modern superhero film as flowing from the logics of the morph within digitality itself, “in which nothing is immutable, nothing is essential” (2003, xi). In a similar vein, Norman Klein traces the digital logic of the morph back through the history of traditional animation, in which the body’s plastic potentiality is enabled by a corollary collapsing of environmental laws which previously prevailed on the morphing subject, enacting a parallel phenomenon in which “gravity itself seems to disappear. Laws of nature collapse,” and the mercurial, “uncanny logic” of morphing triumphs (2000, 22).

Julie Turnock notes that the combination of new digital imaging technologies with “traditional” (practical) effects in the 1970’s enabled an increased “plasticity of previously ‘inflexible’ live-action photography” (2015, 17). Such a plasticity reimagines the film frame as “infinitely mutable and designable,” while maintaining a toe-hold in ontological fidelity through its visual similarity to live-action photography (Turnock 2015, 26). Similarly, Barbara Flueckiger has described the connection between digital imaging in post-1970’s action cinema and “the spectacular stagings of digital or digitally modified bodies [that] transcend the physical boundaries of real, carnal bodies in all directions, and thus make their potential seem almost boundless” (2008, 5). It is clear that the logic of the morph is a compelling mode of considering digital animating and imaging’s rerouting of the limitations and potentialities of the human body, yet it is perhaps this image of the unbounded, interstitial body that provokes anxieties around a ‘digital denial’ of the materialities and biological imperatives of the human body and humanity itself.

In her work on the digitally-mediated body in sci-fi, Stacey Abbott argues that the effects-powered stretching of the human body beyond its corporeal limitations “cinematically construct[s] a futurist post-humanism, in which the body becomes a CG cyborg,” while many, like Flueckiger, have taken up Donna Haraway’s work on the subject to approach the figure of digital/human hybrid (Abbott 2006, 143). Anna Munster reminds us, however, that such technofuturist conceptions of new media as necessarily posthuman or



postbiological “give technology a utopian or transcendental place in cultural development, situating it spatially or temporally beyond embodiment” (2006, 11). For Munster, such conceptions reinforce Cartesian divisions between mind and matter, and are part of larger discourses (such as that of the interface) that work to erect divisions between the technological and the organic, as well as between our cognitive and our material selves, and which, in their oppositional conception of the human encounter with the virtual, cloud our understanding of our richly embodied engagement with the digital.

Commonly theorized and understood in opposition to the more static, additive logics attributed to practical effects work, the liquid morph reinforces in many ways conceptions of the digital as immaterial. Thinking of the liquid morph as the purview of the digital inscribes practical special effects as rigid, limiting, and static by virtue of their materiality, thereby obfuscating the ways in which both modes are emphatically material, transformable in their potentiality, and enmeshed with the body in fundamental ways. Bukatman’s morph, for instance, represents a multiplication of the plastic potentialities of the human body enacted by the digital, without explicit invocation of a severing of corporeal ties. However, the breathlessness of his (and others’) exultations of the unbounded, unmoored, radical potential plasticity of bodies seems grounded in assumptions about the immateriality of digital bodies and ‘scapes. Such assumptions describe a radical bodily potentiality where the traditional limitations of the corporeal are a fleshy albatross to be shaken off by the conversion to digitally powered bodily effects. The additive layers of traditional make-up and prosthesis effects can be said to be echoed in the many layerings in the creation of digital images, the layered graftings of photographed faces or body parts in the composition of stunt bodies with character faces, as well as the layerings of scanned gestures and modeled musculature and skin onto digital skeletal rigs in digital animation. By thinking of practical effects structures as unable to move and transform, we ignore the ways in which they do morph, and the myriad ways in which they employ logics of the fold to collapse fundamental boundaries and divisions, and to inspire sensational, embodied response through aesthetics of material excess, as we will see.

In arguing that “the incorporeal vectors of digital information draw out the capacities of our bodies to become other than matter conceived as a mere vessel for consciousness or a substrate for signal” (2006, 19), Munster draws upon Deleuze and Leibniz to assert the baroque aesthetics and praxis of the fold as an alternative way of conceptualizing the digital as a site of interaction between human bodies and technics. Along similar lines, Timothy Murray (2008) has advocated the baroque motion of the fold as itself an interface

between bodies and digital environments. It is the concept of the fold that foregrounds the dialectical, entangled interactions between “technical and organic forces” which is absent from the concept of the digital morph, reinscribing the place of the body and the material within the world of VFX.

The enfolding of the digital baroque also offers us another way to think through the experiential differences between the practical and the VFX-constructed bodily effects sequence, as a difference of degrees, rather than of kind, in the rapid proliferation of folds. In the spatial, temporal, and conceptual openings, “overlappings and turnings back and forth” (Murray 2008, 26) of the digital fold, one can locate the somewhat confusing provenance of the VFX object in relation to the profilmic, sculptural effects object. While the latter can more easily be understood spatially, geographically, and temporally in a relatively linear manner (by virtue of its presence at the precise moment and location of filming)—and also gestures directly to its own creation (as a product of an individual practical effects artisan or team, many of whom, like Tom Savini and Rob Bottin, enjoy celebrity status and cultic devotion within the horror fan community)—the VFX object gestures toward a multitude of possible spatial, temporal, and geographic allegiances. The moment at which the digitally rendered image enters the frame is far less obvious from a casual viewing of the film, for instance, and the creative and technical labor that produced it is likewise difficult to pin down, particularly given the industry tendency to employ a multitude of different special effects teams from various VFX hub cities spread all over the globe in the creation of a single film, or even a single sequence. The VFX object thus disguises its own numerous enfolded openings onto a vast array of worlds and temporalities, origin stories and futures. It is in part this locative and invocative imprecision that produces a concrete disjuncture between the fan experience of practical and VFX-mounted sequences of bodily deconstruction. It is perhaps more likely that this multitude of foldings, imprecise temporalities, and unclear geographies inherent in the industrial production of the VFX body itself, embedded in the logic of flow and morph, are a locus for distaste and disjuncture for the gore fan, rather than judgements made in an ontological register, or an indexical appeal inherent in the profilmic flow of corn syrup blood.

In problematizing the dismissal or devaluing of the digitally rendered effects body, I don’t mean to imply that materiality somehow does not matter—rather, just as both practical and digital special effects bodies are emphatically virtual, I want to foreground what is expressly material about these digital bodily architectures. It is important not to lose sight of the real connections and communications that humans (and biological systems of all kinds) can have with

the nonhuman, or even with object materialities—which goes a step towards explaining the deep affective and temporally layered relationships and mediations possible between practically produced special effects’ bodily architectures and the fan body. However, just as we recognize the value of this object materiality, so too must we realize that the VFX produced object also has a materiality—it too is the product of a certain amount of artisanal labor, it too is rigorously sculpted and modelled and built, it too can commune with biology in all manner of ways. It simply operates within different logical and affective circuits and structures, and the creative labor that produces it is much more spread out, distributed and invisible (as well as globally seated and economically precarious).<sup>5</sup> The enfoldings of the digital baroque offer us one way of asserting both that materiality matters—and that biological matter matters—while also opening up what biological processes that embodiment might include, for example. In the next section, I move beyond the easy binaries of morph vs. additive stop motion, to better examine the shared logics and characteristics of practical and digital special effects bodies, through the case study of the practically-mounted werewolf transformation (likely the most iconic representation of cinematic bodily morphing through practical, additive means) before considering the layered composure and decomposure of the digitally-produced special effects body in Paul Verhoeven’s *Hollow Man* (2000).

### III. The Skin We Live In: The Shifting Anatomy of the Wolfman

In 1981, two American films were released within 4 months of each other which both sought to advance the werewolf transformation scene through the use of pioneering strategies of practical special effects. The first was Joe Dante’s *The Howling*, which focuses on television news anchor Karen White, who, after a traumatic encounter with a serial killer in a coin-operated LA porno booth, suffers amnesia and recurrent nightmares, and is advised by her doctor to spend a few weeks relaxing at his countryside “colony,” a mental health retreat. Once there, her colleagues discover that the killer Eddie Quist, ostensibly killed during Karen’s police rescue, has disappeared from the morgue, eventually leading them to his home at the colony. Karen discovers that the entire colony are secretly werewolves, and escapes with one of her fellow

---

<sup>5</sup> See Michael Curtin and Kevin Sanson, as well as Shanti Kumar and Michael Keane, in *Precarious Creativity: Global Media, Local Labor*, eds. Michael Curtin and Kevin Sanson, (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016).

reporters after receiving a cursed bite herself. Determined to expose their existence, she goes on the air upon returning to LA, transforms into a wolf on live television, and is summarily shot by her colleague with a silver bullet. The film then ends after we see one of the colony members picking up an unsuspecting trucker in a dive bar, pausing to hungrily order a rare hamburger.

The second film, more widely recognized outside fan circles, is John Landis's *An American Werewolf in London*. Briefly, the narrative concerns two backpackers in England who are mauled on the moors by a werewolf—David survives, while his friend Jack is killed. As David convalesces in a London hospital and begins to transform nightly into a wolf himself, he receives increasingly urgent visitations from a progressively rotting Jack. David transforms for a final time and rampages through Piccadilly Circus, where he is ultimately gunned down by the police.

In both films, the clear centerpiece is a lengthy scene of a man's transformation into a werewolf, within which in both cases the apparent morphing of the body and of the face, without recourse to stop motion animation of still images, functions as something of a virtuosic money shot, on the promise of which both films were funded ("Unleashing the Beast," 2001; "The Making of *American Werewolf in London*," 2001). Special effects designer Rick Baker was approached to work on both films, providing concept work for both before recommending his protégé Rob Bottin for *The Howling* after choosing to sign on to *American Werewolf*, yet the strategies employed to achieve their shared goal differ significantly in their approach and stylistic effect. Both centerpiece sequences utilize manipulable, movable layerings of prostheses animated through internal mechanical apparatuses and offscreen puppeteering. Yet, while *American Werewolf* achieves the motion of extension and elongation of its character's body through the manipulation of expandable skeletal structures, *The Howling* focuses more on rhythmic expansions and contractions of the body and its parts through the use of inflatable subcutaneous bladders, suggesting radical potentiality and a roiling biological fecundity ("Unleashing the Beast," 2001). In looking closely at these two sequences, and the larger formal and aesthetic structures of which they are a part, I consider the ways in which their liminal play with threshold zones between fundamental cultural and biological oppositions such as inside and outside, man and animal, city and wilderness, culture and nature, man and meal—and with the mediating technologies which regiment and make safe the liminal passages between these zones—are elaborated through the folding, unfolding, and enveloping logics of the practical special effects body.

In response to technofuturist conceptions of new media as necessarily posthuman or postbiological, Munster's work on the baroque fold is expressly intended to reinscribe digital bodies and worlds with materiality and corporeal weight and engagement, yet in many ways it is highly generative in helping us approach the logics of the fold within practical special effects sequences as well. Munster's examination of the baroque *Wunderkammer* offers a potent image for approaching the folding and unfolding logics of the practical special effects body, and this body's use within the body horror gore sequence. The 'cabinet of wonders' tradition, as the basis for Western museum culture, offers an aperture onto "an epistemology that did not operate via binary divisions between nature and technics" (Munster 2006, 11). It freely mixed different aesthetic and scientific threads, and forged multiple crossovers between artisanship and biological matter, in much the same way that it combined a myriad of object materialities in a presentational style grounded in techniques of humor, the surreal, and "affective relations to 'science'" (Munster, 2006, 11). Munster uses Frederick Ruysch's renowned 17<sup>th</sup> century cabinet as an example of the science of anatomy formulated as art in the register of "grotesque delight and humor" (2006, 80). These affects come in its incorporation of fetal skeletons, stretched stomach lining, colorfully preserved constellations of arteries and veins, and other "bodily bits" in the creation of dioramas which did not allow visitors to passively absorb rational scientific knowledge, but instead required them to "actively create this knowledge through the admiration of the cabinet's contents and in their marvelous, unfolding modes of display, modes that included incongruence, humor, surprise, illusion, visual amplitude and trickery" (Munster 2006, 80). In the humorous and expressive, rather than purely representational, models of the body and its components, these unfolding (and enfolding) structures demonstrated "the heights to which science, as an art turned toward the wonderful, could aspire" (Munster 2006, 77).

In their combination of various haptic materialities, as well as their sensational, expressive, and even explosive presentation according to modes that might be considered in excess of "properly" rational scientific presentation, such cabinets provide a productive window onto the practical special effects body, which enacts through folding, excessive presentational logics a corollary merging of biological matter and technics. Enacting anatomy "turned toward the wonderful," the body horror film's gore sequence enacts a cabinet of wonders around the practical special effects body, itself an explosive, unfolding, and enveloping mélange of mechanical riggings, animal viscera, and human limbs, organs, and excreta, both simulated and real. In many cases, these

sequences craft miniature Wunderkammer-like openings out of the body's orifices and cavities themselves. These structures, like the cabinet of wonders, model (and make a marvel of) the body's component parts, while also making full use of expressionistic techniques aimed at channeling and inspiring sensation, rather than (or perhaps, in excess of) striving toward pure anatomical fidelity. A striking example of this expressionism occurs in David Cronenberg's *Scanners* (1981), in which the explosion of a character's cranium is achieved through the exploding of a sculpted plaster head filled with many gallons of corn syrup blood and animal offal, a composite substance which for 47 frames splatters upward to arc across the entirety of the screen (Furze 2015, 197). As Robert Furze notes, materially and texturally, the effect can claim "little equivalence to the contents of a real human head," achieving its visceral impact not through ontological fidelity to the stuff of actual human gore, but rather through its expressive, excessive, "somewhat indescribable qualities" (2015, 197).

In the centerpiece transformation sequences of both *The Howling* and *American Werewolf*, multiple layers of makeup appliances, latex skins and faces, prosthetic limbs, organs, and even entire bodies are grafted onto the performer's body to elaborate a gradual scene of a morph from a humanoid form to that of a hybridized, giant bipedal or quadrupedal wolf. Both Dante and Landis describe their approaches to the films as prioritizing new logics and techniques in representing a cinematic monstrous morph—Dante explicitly describes planning to break with previous cinematic reliance on lap dissolves, which could approximate transformative motions while stopping short of a liquid morph presented within a single take ("Unleashing the Beast," 2001). In both cases, special effects designers Bottin and Baker turned to skeletal mechanical structures which could be skinned over both by latex approximations of the performers' dermis, and be grafted onto the body of the performer itself as prosthetics. These mechanical structures stopped short of animatronic autonomous motion, requiring the bodily labor of special effects crews to manipulate them. For *The Howling's* pivotal scene of Eddie Quist's assumption of his werewolf form, Bottin designed a series of bladders (ultimately employing dozens of condoms and a large hot water bottle) to be layered around the performer's body and sculpted prosthetic forms, and then covered over by latex skin. These were connected by a series of wires and tubes to the mouths of the offscreen production assistants, who would rapidly inhale and exhale to inflate and deflate these subcutaneous balloon shapes, stretching Quist's skin and limbs to create the disquieting effect of a body wracked by bubbling, festering, suppurating flux, the shapeshifting potentiality of which could extend in any

direction. This roiling potentiality which stretched the body's shape within single takes was supplemented with the swapping in and out, masked by cutaways, of multiple prosthetic molded heads and limbs, which depicted Quist in a gradual progression of transformation into werewolf form.

For the scene in which David first transforms in *American Werewolf*, Baker constructed a different set of skeletal technics, pressing long syringes into service underneath the latex skins of the makeup appliances and prosthetic members attached to actor David Naughton's body, which through concealed mechanics allowed offscreen assistants to press the plungers of the syringes down, extending the wire forms to create a slow stretching and elongation effect. Through these devices David's body and face is displayed extending into bizarre shapes within single takes, and again a progressive series of "change-o-heads" limbs, and hair and skin textures were grafted onto the human body to link together this stretching motion into the full elaboration of a werewolf morph ("The Making of *An American Werewolf in London*," 2001).

The baroque *Wunderkammer* offers us a view onto the practical special effects body which attends to the melding of multiple materialities into a grafting of mechanical prosthetics and biological flesh, as well as the visceral address of such dismembered, manipulated, constructed and deconstructed bodies, which is intrinsically tied to the logics of the fold. It is in these practical transformation scenes that the logics of folding, unfolding, and enfolding inherent in the practical special effects body are clearly articulated, as multiple different object materialities are folded together and enmeshed. This comes in the grafting of biological structures and membranes sculpted from latex, plasticized rubber, synthetic fibers, and clay press skeletal forms, blood and viscera created from animal entrails, gelatin, and corn syrup, together with human skin, sweat, and tears. The performer's appendages must be folded and bound down to allow for the attachment of prosthetic limbs,<sup>6</sup> and wide swaths of the body become enfolded and enveloped by applications of delusory skins, exposed organs, and even simulated recessions into the body itself. The logic of the fold in these scenes is also a folding into themselves of exterior and interior surfaces, as the exterior edge of human skin becomes interior, for example, and the expelled breath of a special effects crew enacts a physical distension beneath the skin of the special effects body, enacting a collapsing of divisions between

---

<sup>6</sup> Sometimes even the entire body must be enfolded onto itself and concealed—for the final portion of the *American Werewolf* transformation, actor David Naughton crouched into a small recession in the floor with only his head exposed, which was then attached to a massively stretched, puppeted pre-sculpted full body prosthetic. "The Making of *An American Werewolf in London*."

inside and outside which furthers these films' playful engagement with and transgression of liminal zones and boundaries represented by the wolfman figure.

Within the larger unfolding of the radical transformation of bodily forms and architectures through the use of special effects technique, these sequences enact a multitude of layered folds, through which sight becomes tied to the act of unfolding as revelation, and the sanctity of the body's seals is broken as apertures to the corporeal interior are ceremoniously opened and unfolded for the viewer's privileged sight and pleasure. The effect mirrors the union of sight and revelation in the unfolding of scenes of the numinous Bernhard Siegert identifies in the fold logics of 16th century Flemish painting (2014, 198). This linking between the visceral and visual apprehension through techniques of the fold, as we shall see, is also articulated in the VFX body, and in its enmeshing and unfolding revelation of interior biological zones presents a useful object for considering the role of viscera not simply as presented within the body-as-*Wunderkammer*, but as a system implicated within larger patterns of experience, fandom, and consumption within the body horror genre. I will now consider the gut as a site for conceiving both the emphatic viscosity of the practical special effects body's materiality and address, and also the corollary judgements of moral opprobrium, disgust, and allegations of extreme bad taste which swirl around these scenes, the genre at large, and the bodies of its fans.

#### IV. Disgust and the Enteric Nervous System

In her exploration of the psychosomatic body as an opportunity to reconsider the value of biological determinism for feminist conceptualizations of the body, Elizabeth Wilson quotes Hungarian psychoanalyst Sándor Ferenczi's call to approach biology "from the other side" (2015, 155) in order to rescue what connective tissues of somatic transformation fall out of physiological and anatomical constructions of the human body. The "other side" Ferenczi refers to is psychoanalysis, but his call to step beyond accepted vantage points of the biological offers for Wilson a jumping off point to consider ways in which hierarchical models that enthrone the cognitive function of the brain or central nervous system limit our ability to conceive of other types of thinking, experiencing, and feeling that are spread out throughout the soma, while also enshrining human cognition as both separately routed and superior in function to biological matter of all kinds (Wilson 2004). Wilson's notion of 'the brain in the gut' offers a model to consider embodied affective relationships



between viscerally hailed fan body and special effects bodily architectures. It also highlights—much as the concept of the enfolding digital baroque does—that biological matter matters within new media technologies and environments. Following Wilson, there are a multitude of ways of embodied interacting with virtualities and the digital that do not sever cognition from the fleshy weight of the physical body—that do not see the body as something that must be cast aside in order to free the mind to interface with the digital immaterial.

The enteric nervous system, “a complex network of nerves that encases and innervates the digestive tract from the esophagus to the anus” (Wilson 2004, 24), is heavily implicated with the genre of body horror, and the gore sequence in particular. The enteric system’s most obvious affective feedback is that of disgust, the hallmark affective response of the genre. In her working toward a definition of the offensive film as “cinema vomitif,” Nikita Brottman notes that “by displaying the nauseating, these movies induce nausea; they are both a spectacle to be witnessed and a part of our bodily lives” (2005, 3). Alongside the disgust which is (most often) pleurably experienced by the fan at the viewing of scenes of bodily mutilation, there is also the wider disgust that is directed towards the genre as a whole, and which functions to structure and inform wider regimes of cultural taste classifications. William Ian Miller identifies “disgust’s powerful image-generating capacities” as fundamental to “the important role it plays in organizing and internalizing many of our attitudes toward the moral, social, and political domains” (1997, 11). These disgust-inspired judgements of moral opprobrium are not simply culturally vital, as in the case of Bourdieu’s class-inflected taste distinctions, but also have a long history of driving legal and economic action within the genre of body horror and the exploitation film—made clear in the UK’s “video nasties” legislation in 1984, as well as *Cannibal Holocaust* director Ruggero Deodato’s highly publicized joint obscenity and murder trial.<sup>7</sup> This curious power of disgust to both dwell intensely within the body and its orifices, as well as travel far beyond it, is conceptualized by Miller as an “[explosive] world of meaning, coloring, vivifying, and contaminating political, social, and moral orderings” (1997, xii).

This curious interior and exterior mobility and vitality of the affect of disgust calls to mind Wilson’s (2004) exploration of the digestive system as interstitial boundary, which like the skin separates us from the exterior world, yet which is unique in that it itself contains an exterior zone, in which digestion necessitates a tunnel within us that “allows the outside world to pass through

---

<sup>7</sup> See Julian Petley, ““Are We Insane?”: The “Video Nasty” Moral Panic” and Mikita Brottman, *Offensive Films*.

us” (44). Given this unique connection and interaction with the outside world, the gut is vitally implicated in our relationality to others and the environment. Rather than simply metaphors for internalization, ingestion and digestion, Wilson suggests, are themselves literal mechanisms of relation and intersubjectivity (2004, 44). It is this mechanism of relationality and lived emotional experience rooted in the enteric nervous system that beckons us to consider what types of bodily ‘cognition’ might be implicated in visceral affective relationships with media, and how we might more broadly conceive of the biological realities of embodied media experience.

Given the visceral subject matter and affective appeal produced by the layered foldings and enmeshing of the special effects body in the body horror gore sequence, the inside/outside liminality of the intersubjective, interstitial border zone of the human gut, itself a series of nestled interior folds constituting an exterior zone, seems a valuable element in conceptualizing such modes of cinematic address. In the case of the werewolf transformation sequence, the gut is centrally located within the logics of the existence and contaminating spread of the werewolf figure. The ravenous wolf is threatening precisely because he is likely to indiscriminately devour and digest living human tissue, embodying not just the possibility of a violent death, or a contaminating or cursed bite, but also of the potential for cannibalistic consumption. By virtue of his ability (or imperative, depending upon the legend) to shapeshift into animal form, a reversal of this cannibalistic meal is also disquietingly possible. This nauseating swirl of potential anthropophagic transgressions becomes localized to the image of the wolf man’s ravenous, cavernous mouth. As Miller notes, the body’s orifices are always already breeding grounds for disgusting imagery, as unavoidable breaks in the protective seal of the body, as well as “holes that allow contaminants in to pollute the soul ... the passageways through which substances pass that can defile ourselves and others too” (Miller 1997, 58-9). And their association in the werewolf’s case with a virus-like curse, which threatens to mutilate not just the body but the eternal soul, makes them all the more eerie as passageways (Miller 1997, 58-9).

Like the doorway, the threshold of the mouth (and by extension the gut) is culturally mediated by ritual, practice, and technology in an effort to divest it as much as possible of its mysterious destructive powers. In his work on cultural techniques, Bernhard Siegert examines at length the role of the Christian communion in inaugurating a massive tangle of cannibalistic possibilities centered around the collective consumption of the meal—possibilities that are exacerbated by the profoundly disgusting and contaminating potentialities that arise from the space of the table (Siegert 2014, 39). The technologies of the

tablecloth, the spoon, fork, knife, as well as a multitude of regulations governing the etiquette of shared vessels, like the fold of the gate or the door, are erected against the inevitable possibility that a meal might “descend into a partial cannibalism in which everybody eats everybody” (Siegert 2014, 45-6). The figure of the wolf man represents the threat of perversion of the boundaries between man and meal, through his own liminal coexistence on both sides of this divide, as well as his animalistic rejection of the cultural technologies which ensure communal safety from cannibalistic (and other) contamination. In *The Howling*, the profoundly disgusting and unsettling potentialities of the transgression of these boundaries manifests in a diegetic obsession with meat which exceeds or escapes the protective power of technologies and rituals of the table. Karen’s colleagues, when visiting the morgue, are confronted by the combination of exposed brain matter and bloody autopsy tools occupying the same grimy counter as the coroner’s casually unwrapped hamburger and styrofoam cup of coffee. The coroner then refers to the bodies under his charge as simply “the meat.” Later, immediately after Karen’s head is blown apart by a shotgun blast following her televised transformation, panicked network employees switch from the live feed to a dog food commercial, matching the previous image of her fatal wounding to the sickening, sloppy plop of unidentified chunks of meat into a dog’s bowl in close-up. Finally, the film ends on a slow zoom into sizzling raw hamburger meat on a fry cook’s griddle, as the credits roll. *The Howling* extracts all of the disgusting thrills embodied in the cannibalistic threat of the werewolf’s gaping mouth, suggesting the futility of such table practices and techniques, while also linking the viewer’s consumption of the tortured and eviscerated special effects body to another type of cannibalistic consumption. *The Howling* foregrounds the subversive power of both the gut and its affinitive emotional feedback, disgust, in both the production and consumption of these decomposed, destroyed, and dismembered special effects bodies—so often created with the aid of animal flesh and other comestibles, like corn syrup and gelatin—in a literal feast for the eyes.

## V. Biological Wanderings: Skinning the Digital Corporeal

Contemplating the original conceptualization of hysteria as the literal unmooring of the womb to wander freely about the body, Wilson offers the provocation that “perhaps all biology wanders” (2004, 13). Her suggestion immediately calls to mind the materialities of body horror, in which the ubiquitous motif of the opened body and displayed viscera becomes something

of a baroque *Wunderkammer*, in which biology bites back. Consider the alien-infiltrated intestines of *The Thing* (John Carpenter, 1982) which transform a man's torso (his gut) to a gaping maw with which to devour the people around him, or biology in revolt in *City of the Living Dead* (Lucio Fulci, 1981), in which possessed organs force themselves out from their owner's own screaming mouth, or the dripping biology that constitutes the figure of the rotting zombie horde. Wandering biology also offers us a potent way for thinking against models of our bodily materiality as locked in one space and in one function, of which the mind is the only element free enough from fleshy boundaries to interface with the vast immaterial void of the digital. In this section, I explore the spectacular VFX-produced body at the center of Paul Verhoeven's *Hollow Man* (2000)—an “invisible man” reimagined as a radically shapeshifting grotesque of layered human anatomy—as a way to consider the role of unfolding and enmeshing logics in the material elaboration of the digital corporeal, particularly located around the appearance (and disappearance) of the skin. Like the practically-mounted wolfman morph, the *Hollow Man*'s exterior and interior zones become folded unto each other, and the unfolding presentational logics of the body-as-*wunderkammer* formulate inner anatomical and organic structures as a visual marvel. Meanwhile, the film's visual foregrounding of its erstwhile invisible man as flayed viscera and organs—formulating horror through biology out of place and emphatically *not* out of sight—together with its insistence upon mapping the fleshy weight, volume, and topography of its seemingly immaterial central body, all converge to resist easy divisions between additive practicality and digital immaterial morphs.

*Hollow Man* centers around a remarkable special effects body, produced primarily through digital effects work, that presents both a flayed, powerfully mobile biological materiality exposed for the eye of the viewer, and a completely eviscerated husk as an apparently empty, yet violently ambulatory skin. *Hollow Man*'s narrative concerns a group of military scientists and pathologists developing an experimental serum capable of making mammals completely invisible, by placing them in an indefinite state of “quantum phase shift” which lasts until the proper antidote is administered. Having successfully made invisible all manner of animal test subjects, it is not until Dr. Sebastian Cane singlehandedly makes viable an antidote that the project becomes feasible for human experimentation. Cane, hungry for power and laboring under significant delusions of grandeur, talks the team into letting him be the first human to undergo the procedure, but becomes trapped in an invisible state. Gradually, he begins devising ways to escape from the watchful eyes of the team he once led, perpetrating an escalating series of violent sexual and physical abuses, first on

strangers, and ultimately on his erstwhile colleagues after he traps them in their locked-down lab. As Cane sets to work murdering the scientists, Dr. Linda Kay escapes, confronting Cane and ultimately casting him down an elevator shaft to perish in the chemical fire below.

Materially, the “phase-shifted” Dr. Cane is a complex creature indeed, appearing alternately as an eroding or reforming series of bodily layers, as either flayed musculature and bone or hollowed shell, and as a total void of perceptible form, often partially “skinned” over with nearby objects like electrocardiographic pads and bedsheets. Visually, Cane’s radically shifting anatomy congeals around three major forms throughout his life as an “invisible man”: the flayed man, the hollow man, and the invisible phantom. Though the film’s central horror is ostensibly the promise of the latter form, a powerful human completely severed from a (visible) body, Cane is rarely depicted in this form without the aforementioned improvised “skins,” and almost never without some limited visual mapping of his bodily topography or location, as when an apparently floating cup or knife belies the location of invisible fingers. It is worth noting that the difference between the three states of visual presentation Cane undergoes is one of degrees, not of kind; here, biological matter is modeled as a series of layers, with each form representing a removal or addition of certain visible bodily strata.

This layering of the body into anatomical sections, progressively made visible or invisible, is foregrounded in the films’ centerpiece VFX sequences of, first, the gorilla, Isabel, and, later, Dr. Cane, undergoing the procedures to become invisible and to reenter the world of the visible. We are first introduced to the procedure as the team continues its experimentation on Isabel, one of many captive creatures in the lab, administering the antidote Cane has just developed. The completely invisible Isabel is initially only mapped on the screen through a tangle of medical tubes and monitoring wires, and as the antidote is injected her digitally animated arterial system slowly comes into view, shifting into various brilliant colors as constellations of arteries and veins seemingly bloom out from the injection site. These are rapidly followed by the “growth,” or reappearance, of her skeletal structure, then her musculature, organs, and finally skin and hair. Significantly, these systems do not sprout in whole, one after the other—instead, her body (and later, in a nearly identical sequence, Cane’s) reappears as an architecturally deep, recessed space, where the topmost edges of skin and musculature are the last to (re)grow, maintaining for as long as possible a frame around and an unobstructed view of the surging biological ferment of the body’s seemingly regenerating interior—the digital special effects body as *Wunderkammer*. This layered approach to the body’s biology is

maintained in Cane's appearance as a flayed anatomical monstrosity later in the film, when an electrical shock transforms the previously invisible (though often skinned over) doctor into a partially reappeared figure, in which apparently every biological layer has been restored save his skin. It is significant that the climactic final sequence in which Cane murderously pursues the surviving scientists, and is finally defeated by Linda, depicts the monstrous invisible man not as invisible at all, but simply as removed of the "veil" of his skin.<sup>8</sup> Like the special effects body of the wolfman, interior zones and systems are here made exterior, and vice-versa, as biological matter is both presented for viewing and enfolded and turned onto itself.

Throughout *Hollow Man*, the folding, unfolding, and enmeshing logics of the special effects body are located most clearly in the skin, whether in Cane's visually unstable epidermis which reveals interior systems beneath, the series of improvised skins which are placed over his phase-shifted body, or in the multiple colored bodysuits employed in the creation of the digital effects body itself. Three of these bodysuits were used, one green, one blue, and one black, specifically chosen for their relative performance in different environmental conditions, in order to allow for the films' obsessive motif of partial skinning without recourse to full digital skeletal rigs and animation—rather, each necessary shot was filmed twice, with identical camera movement, so that actor Kevin Bacon could easily be digitally removed from the final frame while preserving his gestural performance and the topology of his body underneath a given skin ("Anatomy of a Thriller," 2001). In their folding, textile nature, these fabric jumpsuits are part of a larger play with the surface of biological and object skins within the film, as well as being a necessary component of the visual representation of this play. As I mentioned before, one of the three major forms the shapeshifting Dr. Cane assumes is that of the titular hollow man, an effect achieved by the full, rather than partial skinning of Cane's fully invisible body. This occurs when the scientists, realizing they will be unable to return Cane to visibility in the near future, pour a flesh-colored latex polymer over his entire body, in the manner of taking a life-mold<sup>9</sup> that, once it has solidified, is slit to

---

<sup>8</sup> Michel Serres' suggestion that skin is fundamentally a folding medium, within a theory of the enfolding, intermingling bodies in which "Klein bottles are a model of identity," and particularly his description of the skin as textile-like, layered veil seems significant here. However, Serres is reluctant to connect the veil of the skin to sight as revelation, as one might be tempted to do following Siegert's notion of unfolding media. Michel Serres, "Veils," *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*, trans. Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley, (London: Continuum, 2008), 22.

<sup>9</sup> A clear reference to this practice in the creation of practical special-effects prostheses.

accommodate his mouth and eyes. It is these orifices which provide openings into the sheath of the artificial skin, revealing the awkwardly wrinkling, folding prosthetic skin to be completely emptied of visible contents. While Cane is partially skinned by a wide range of substances during his life as invisible man, including water droplets, smoke, and even gallons of human blood hurled onto him by a scientist desperate to reveal his location, it is this latex skin that most fully enacts the image of human as evacuated skin, completely eviscerated of biological filling. This hollow figure is the double of Cane as exposed viscera, which resembles both a man flayed and a man turned inside out, biological matter completely enfolded on itself.

The repeated discourse of the film's characters around invisibility as a journey, or resulting in material absence, resembles the larger tangle of representational concerns situated around the digitally-produced special effects body. Isabel is repeatedly described by the scientists as having "gone away" following her phase-shift, ultimately causing concern that she may have "been away too long" to preserve normal cognitive and behavioral function. Upon awaking from the invisibility procedure, Cane anxiously shouts that his eyelids are missing, until he is reminded by Linda that they are still there and functional, but as invisible coverings are no longer capable of protecting his eyes from the light; later, he tells her he feels like he "isn't there," prompting her to lay a hand on his (completely invisible) chest, as a reassuring reminder of his materiality and presence. The repeated references made of Cane as ghostlike on the part of the scientists—to which Cane replies "ghosts are dead, I'm very much alive"—are echoed in the many scenes in which a fully invisible Cane assumes the makeshift skin of the draped bedsheet, a visual reference to ghostliness associated with children's improvised Halloween costumes. *Hollow Man* responds to these anxieties expressed by its characters—and likely also projected onto the viewer, who is presented with not only a heavily VFX-mediated performance on the part of Bacon, but also with the concept of a central character as visual void—by insisting that materiality will out. The film dwells upon the indentations created in chairs, beds, and pooled liquids on which the invisible man sits or stands, obsessively intercutting footage captured with thermo-imaging cameras, and as I have described, visually foregrounding not the seemingly imperceptible body, but the exposed viscera of a body turned inside out, or the textile-like wrinkling folds of the seemingly eviscerated "hollow" skin.



## Conclusion: Towards an Enteric Imaginary

In considering the possible wanderings, interventions, and interfaces of biological matter, I propose extending Elizabeth A. Wilson's spirited defense of the experiential, emotional, and even thoughtful anatomy of the gut to suggest the concept of an enteric imaginary. Such a system could serve as one possible tool for broadening both our understanding of what constitutes possible embodied engagements with the digital beyond simply cognition, as well as what counts as cognition. My concept of the enteric imaginary seeks to trouble the normative ontologies and binaries surrounding the special effects body, and to bring into view new horizons of corporeal relationality and interaction across the different bodies at stake in the context of these effects' production and consumption. In joining the material and the speculative, the enteric imaginary approaches the special effects body as a site of flows and folding enmeshments, opening up the bodies at play in the production and consumption of spectacular effects to a much wider field of possibility, and troubling the boundary lines between aesthetics and the biological, mind and soma, human and nonhuman, meat and technics.

Wilson's advocacy points toward a need for a more distributed picture of biological matter, which becomes important within media studies in considering the separable parts that may interface or merge with the digital, as well as in broadening what 'counts' as a body, within this most embodied of genres and fan communities. Rather than reject the appeals for viscosity called up by fan discourse, I want to broaden what we consider our viscera to be capable of, and open new avenues to consider how all levels and pieces of our biological matter commune with and are informed by the materiality of both digital and analogue media. Instead of disregarding the fan's love for the supposedly greater ontological presence of a practically-mounted gore body, the enteric imaginary puts visceral entanglements of all kinds front and center. It beckons us to approach what is expressly material, and what "matters," in systems which are typically conceived of as invisible or immaterial—both within media and within the body itself. As I have tried to suggest, the experiential, emotive, and image-generating capacities of the enteric system are uniquely suited to explorations of the creation and destruction of special effects bodies, and particularly their consumption within the genre of body horror. By launching investigations into the interactions and entanglements between bodily systems, biological matter, and the larger rhetorics of both analogue and digital



media, perhaps we might more generatively approach both theories of embodiment and media itself “from the other side.”<sup>10</sup>

## References

- “Anatomy of a Thriller,” *Hollow Man*, special ed. DVD. Dir. Paul Verhoeven. Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2001.
- “Anything For a Hit: Ram Charan Goes Vegetarian.” *The Deccan Chronicle*. 27 May 2016.
- Abbott, Stacey. “Final Frontiers: Computer-Generated Imagery and the Science Fiction Film.” *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 33, March 2006.
- Ayers, Drew. “Bleeding Synthetic Blood: Flesh and Simulated Space in *300*.” *Special Effects*, edited by Dan North, Bob Rehak and Michael S. Duffy, 101-113. London: British Film Institute, 2015.
- Bode, Lisa. “Fleshing it Out.” *Special Effects*. North, Dan, Bob Rehak and Michael S. Duffy, eds. (London: British Film Institute, 2015).
- Brottman, Mikita. *Offensive Films*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2005.
- Bukatman, Scott. *Matters of Gravity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003. Kindle Edition.
- Curtin, Michael and Kevin Sanson, eds. *Precarious Creativity: Global Media, Local Labor*. (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016).
- Flueckiger, Barbara. “Digital Bodies.” *Visual Effects: Filmbilder aus dem Computer*. Translated by Mark Kyburz, 2010. (Marburg: Schueren, 2008).

---

<sup>10</sup> As part of our commitment to developing scholars doing original work in horror studies, *MONSTRUM* is pleased to collaborate with the Horror Studies Scholarly Interest Group (SIG), part of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS), in the selection and publication of this annual prize-winning graduate student essay, selected by a jury of SCMS-SIG scholars and the *MONSTRUM* editors.

- Furze, Robert. *The Visceral Screen: Between the Cinemas of John Cassavetes and David Cronenberg*. Bristol: Intellect, 2015.
- Klein, Norman. "Animation and Animorphs: A Brief Disappearing Act." *Meta Morphing and the Culture of Quick Change*. Sobchack, Vivian, ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).
- "The Making of *An American Werewolf in London*." *An American Werewolf in London* collector's ed. DVD. Dir. John Landis. Universal Studios, 2001.
- Miller, William Ian. *The Anatomy of Disgust*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997.
- Munster, Anna. *Materializing New Media: Embodiment in Information Aesthetics*. Lebanon: Dartmouth University Press, 2006.
- Murray, Timothy. *Digital Baroque: New Media Art and Cinematic Folds*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.
- Petley, Julian. "'Are We Insane?': The 'Video Nasty' Moral Panic," *Moral Panics in the Contemporary World*. Ed. Julian Petley, Chas Critcher, and Jason Hughes. New York: Bloomsbury, 2013.
- Purse, Lisa. *Contemporary Action Cinema*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011.
- Purushothaman, Kirubhakar. "Ram Charan Hits the Gym for His Telugu Remake of *Thani Oruvan*." *India Today*. 7 May 2016.
- Serres, Michel. "Veils," *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*, translated by Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley. London: Continuum, 2008.
- Siebert, Bernhard. *Cultural Techniques: Grids, Filters, Doors, and Other Articulations of the Real*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2014.
- Srinivas, S. V. *Megastar: Chiranjeevi and Telugu Cinema after N.T. Rama Rao*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Turnock, Julie. *Plastic Reality: Special Effects, Technology, and the Emergence of 1970s Blockbuster Aesthetics*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).
- "Unleashing the Beast: The Making of *The Howling*." *The Howling*, collector's ed. DVD. Dir. Joe Dante. MGM, 2004.
- Whissel, Kristen. *Spectacular Digital Effects: CGI and Digital Cinema*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).
- Wilson, Elizabeth A. *Gut Feminism*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

Wilson, Elizabeth A. *Psychosomatic: Feminism and the Neurological Body*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

Yellapantula, Suhas. “Cherry’s New Fitness Challenge.” *The New Indian Express*. 7 May 2016.

---

- 2020/2021 -

MONSTRUM is Published in Montréal, Québec by the Montréal Monstrum Society.

Intellectual rights are held by the individual author(s).



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).