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### Horror (Re)Productions: Birth, Body Horror and History

Something bad is happening in the United States. A roiling anxiety is churning in the gut of many across the nation as an impending doom seems to approach at a rapid pace. Doubt in the “future of the nation” has become a “significant source of stress” for 76% of participants in a 2025 survey conducted by the Harris Poll on behalf of the American Psychological Association. In the same survey, 75% of adults report they are more stressed about their country's future compared to previous years. Similarly, a 2025 Gallup poll revealed only 59% of those surveyed “gave high ratings” when prompted to consider the quality of their life in the next five years, the “lowest annual measure” since the question was first posed “almost 20 years ago” (Sanders). There is no uncertainty that this anxiety can be, at the very least partly, attributed to the rise of extremist politics since the start of the millennium. An increase in reported hate-crimes since 2015 (USAFacts) that feels almost supported at times by chaotic leaders like Donald Trump has made the United States a scary place to be. But fear and politics have long had close ties, their intimate relationship found on congressional debate floors and in the movie theater.

Horror movies regularly take on political meaning, the terror of the film echoing the real fears plaguing a society. Because of this, they have developed a cult following of scholars interested in deciphering the sociological and psychoanalytical meaning of horror tropes or the genre itself. As a horror movie fan myself, I have recently taken an interest in body horror movies. The body horror subgenre is characterized by its “particular focus on human bodies that are subject to torture, mutilation, mutation, decay, degeneration and transformation, usually shown in graphic detail via the use of special effects” (Dartmouth Libraries). Far from the

haunting specters of psychological horror, body horror anchors the terror within the body rather than the mind. It transforms something innately personal to humans into a public spectacle to shock and to horrify while making a social statement. In body horror, the personal has never been more political.

Feminist scholars of cultural media are no stranger to body horror, with slashers and monsters coming under careful analysis by many critics. Although conclusions from analysis often describe the media as being more nuanced than initially understood, it is hard to deny that body horror media relies heavily on the exploitation of the human body. The corporal form is exploited to shock and disturb, contorted and distorted to repulse and unnerve. It becomes a spectacle, the means to carry out sadistic and masochistic fantasies. But it often does so through women's bodies.

In viewing a handful of some popular body horror films, I noticed pregnancy and reproduction as a cinematic motif consistently appears in some shape or form at some point in body horror stories. Classic Cronenberg films like *The Brood* (1979) and *The Fly* (1986) use monstrous pregnancies to unnerve while other movies like *Alien* (1979), and more recently, *The Substance* (2024), use imagery symbolic of pregnancy and birth to terrify as well as to suggest meaning. This trope that permeates body horror can be traced back to the origins of horror. In this project, I will track the pregnancy trope in the subgenre through body horror film history, adding historical context and theoretical perspectives to better understand how the trope has been used and how its meaning has changed as the socio-political landscape that created it changed.

Prior to the 1960s, many scary movies, including those of the body horror sub genre, were science fiction in nature. 1956's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* sees an alien invasion by

way of replicating the inhabitants of a small town as they sleep (Siegal) while 1958's *The Blob* depicts an amorphous alien growing larger as it consumes more and more people (Doughten, Yeaworth). These movies usurp the autonomy of one's body, assimilating it into something larger and other than human, a metaphor for the panic surrounding the rise of communism during the Cold War. Alien invaders became a comprehensible stand in for the spreading of communist ideologies as scientific progress ramped up during the space race. But as McCarthy warned of ideological dangers abroad (Miller Center), many in the United States were protesting against the domestic ideologies that continued to oppress its citizens.

The Civil Rights Movement gained significant momentum throughout the 1950s and continued into the 60s, inspiring a slew of other rights based movements. This period, often referred to as the rights revolution, saw the start of what has since been described as second wave feminism with the Women's Liberation Movement. Unlike the Civil Rights Movement that aimed to enforce the rights guaranteed to Black Americans by law, the Women's Liberation Movement sought to expand the existing rights of women (Sturkey). Reactions from a white perspective to these impactful social movements can be seen in Roman Polanski's 1968 film *Rosemary's Baby*. The film's terror hinges on Rosemary's growing satanic paranoia about her neighbors and her unborn child as her body breaks down with each trimester. After Rosemary Woodhouse and her struggling actor husband, Guy, move into a new apartment and become acquainted with their neighbors, Rosemary feels they are constantly meddling in her life. Guy disagrees, growing closer to the neighboring couple. In a cryptic turn of events, Guy lands a lead in a play after the previous actor inexplicably goes blind, motivating the couple to try for a baby. On the night they plan to attempt conception, Rosemary passes out, only to wake to scratch marks on her body and the memory of being sexually assaulted by a demonic Guy. Guy reassures

her, however, that he had just had sex with her while she slept so as to not miss “baby night” (Polanski). Because of the legacy of coverture laws in the United States, in which a white woman's legal identity was essentially absorbed by her husbands, women’s bodies and opinions were still seen, at least in a way as that of their husbands. Marital rape was not considered criminal in the US until states started taking legislative action against it in the mid 1970s (Allgor, Sturkey). Guy’s sexual assault on Rosemary critiques the legally accepted lack of agency wives had over their bodies within marriage.

Bodily autonomy within relationships was a primary demand of second wave feminists as was bodily autonomy in medicine. Since the FDA approval of the pill for contraceptive use at the start of the decade, it had exploded in popularity, becoming the most popular form of birth control for women in just five years. Yet, several states barred its usage, denying women the opportunity to make choices pertaining to their health and family planning (Sturkey). Rosemary is similarly blocked from making informed choices about her own health and baby throughout the film. After learning of her pregnancy, her meddlesome neighbors recommend Rosemary leaves her current obstetrician to see the prominent Dr. Saperstein. Rather than quell her worries with informational answers, Dr. Saperstein continuously dismisses Rosemary’s anxieties about her and her baby’s health even as her body grows obviously sicker. Her old doctor proves to be untrustworthy too, calling Dr. Saperstein and Guy to take Rosemary home after she secretly seeks his opinion. Her neighbors and her husband chastise her when she deviates from the diet and exercise plans that they decided on, never letting Rosemary make the decisions for her body or her baby. When she grows suspicious that her neighbors are actually satanists, her research is impeded by her husband who throws away or hides her books. In one scene, Guy scolds Rosemary for reading and places the book in a spot Rosemary cannot reach, just above *Sexual*

*Behavior in the Human Male* and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* by Dr. Alfred Kinsey (Polanski). This can be interpreted as information and education, especially sexual education, is purposefully placed out of reach to disenfranchise women. It can also reference the ways in which sexuality and sexual knowledge, especially among women, is demonized and considered demoralizing to the point that satanic cults and sexuality are equally deviant. Although the landmark case *Griswold vs. Connecticut* ruled states' bans of the pill unconstitutional in 1965 (Sturkey), (white) women like the character of Rosemary Woodhouse still faced institutional and individual obstacles when trying to acquire birth control. Rosemary's distrust reflects the real life distrust white feminists had in patriarchal institutions that marginalized them by severing their autonomy held over their bodies. The distrust black feminists of this time had in the same patriarchal institutions would have been multiplied ten times over considering the reproductive violence black women have been forced to experience throughout American history (Summerville). A black feminist perspective is ignored however, instead focusing more so on the white experience.

Because of this white perspective, the panic Rosemary experiences over the uncertainty of her baby could also be interpreted as the broader anxiety over miscegenation white people felt in the US after the Civil Rights Movement made significant progress for black Americans. According to Siobhan B. Summerville in *Queering the Color Line*, race and sexuality are inextricably bound in US history because race is assumed to be reproduced through sexuality. Controlling sexuality then allows for control of racial categories. This has been done historically by restricting sexual interactions of Americans, particularly for Americans of color. Anti-miscegenation laws punished interracial relationships to prevent the reproduction of interracial children. Anti-miscegenation was also reinforced through sterilizations of black

women and by communities via lynching black men accused of sexual aggression towards white women. This behavior was done to avoid a “race suicide”, a popular fear that declining white birth rates would lead to the end of “white civilization”. Anti-miscegenation laws were struck down in 1967 thanks to the Supreme Court case Loving vs. Virginia and a year later, *Rosemary’s Baby* was released in theaters. Rosemary’s anxiety over her unborn child could be representative of the white fear of interracial pregnancies. Her fear for a half demonic baby stands in for white fears of mixed race children.

In the years following the success of *Rosemary’s Baby*, other body horror flicks featuring pregnancy or reproduction popped up more and more, each considering the birth of something monstrous in different ways. David Lynch’s 1977 jarring surrealist film *Erasurehead* employs the birth and subsequent abandonment of an alien like baby with the protagonist, Henry, as a metaphor to communicate the burdens and fears of fatherhood. In 1979, *Alien* and *The Brood* both used reproduction as a central point of horror and disgust, but in different ways. In *Alien*, gestation of the antagonistic Xenomorph alien is outsourced to humans. Beyond evading the murderous alien, the crewmates of an isolated cargo ship in space must also protect their bodies from becoming hosts for the Xenomorph’s offspring (Scott). In *The Brood*, the central character of Nola forms an exogenous uterus after she undergoes psychoplastic therapy, a fringe scientific treatment suggested by her psychiatrist to expel her repressed trauma. However, rather than processing the trauma to stabilize her psyche, Nola gives birth to deformed children with a psychic link, attacking those that she sees as a threat (Cronenberg). The horror surrounding pregnancy in these films can be understood through linguist and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection in her 1982 book *Powers of Horror*.

According to Kristeva, abjection is the casting off of what disgusts in an effort to define what we are as humans. It creates a distinguishable separation between our identity as human beings from what is non-human. For example, although bodily waste is generated in our bodies, we abject it, expel it from our bodies, understanding that although it was once held within the limits of our body, it is not part of us and therefore non-human. Birth is also understood as a site of abjection, where fetus is expelled from the mother's body, or conversely, the fetus abjects to the mother's womb. Facing the abject, however, creates anxiety because it forces us to confront the symbolic order humans have created to process and understand the semiotic, the primal desires, impulses and behaviors. The symbolic order and semiotic order converge in a way that destabilize the mechanisms humans have developed to sustain social order and coherence. In *Erasurehead*, the child of Henry is depicted for what a baby is: a complete unknown. It looks alien because it is altogether new and foreign to this world since it has never existed prior to its abjection from its mother (Lynch). Humans may feel parental bonds to their offspring, but what is this bond to if this tiny stranger has no identity if we do not assign it one. The symbolic order of parenthood is challenged by the bizarre nature of raising a being that is somehow you and a complete stranger at once. In *Alien*, the disturbing reality of a fetus as a parasite feeding off of bodies becomes explicit when men are vulnerable to parasitic infection rather than just women. The lethal (and iconic) chest burst that births the infant Xenomorph (Scott) would seem to differentiate the miracle of childbirth from the nightmare of being used as a human incubator for an alien parasite until you consider the staggeringly high maternal mortality rates that existed throughout human history and persist today (Declercq, Zephyrin). In *The Brood*, the process of reproducing the titular characters is on full display. What once was a biological process

contained within the confines of skin becomes a destruction of the limits we assign our bodies. Birth itself violates our understanding of the body.

Moreover, if we compare the visuals of these three films to *Rosemary's Baby*, there is an employment of grotesqueness that does not exist in the earlier film. Rosemary may be growing evil within her, but the imagery is quite cut and dry, neat and lacking excessive blood and guts that is typically associated with the genre (Polanski). The trio that followed differs by making use of imagery that disgusts. The infant of *Erasurehead* is slimy, gushing viscera in its climactic death (Lynch). *Alien's* chestburst scene sprays blood on the victims crewmates as they watch the Xenomorph fetus emerge from the gore, covered in slime (Scott). Nola frees one of her brood from their placenta by tearing it open with her teeth and licking away the blood and vernix (Cronenberg). This excessive "gross" factor can be understood by considering Linda Williams' essay *Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess*.

She explains that films that exist in the body genre, such as melodramas, horror and pornography, depict bodily reactions to elicit the same reactions in their viewers. The "sobs of anguish" in a melodrama prompt tears from those watching, the "screams of fear" in horror movies cause the audience to scream as well, and the "cries of pleasure" in pornography result in arousal and similar cries of pleasure by viewers. Each of these signifiers are sounds that exist outside of the articulation of a linguistic system. These excessive sounds have accompanying bodily fluids, tears with melodramatic sobs, blood with terrifying screams and sexual fluids with erotic cries. These excessive sounds that are mimicked by the audience along with the excessive bodily fluids expose the "materiality of the human body" that "exceeds the ideas of humans as rational". Again, the symbolic system that brings order to human bodies is peeled back in these body horror films, disgusting and unnerving in the process.

Williams explains that although women are often at the center of the body genre, they are not necessarily used as a body to project sadistic fantasies of the male gaze. These films can of course be enjoyed by women, some perhaps finding the depictions of pregnancy as a cathartic means to process their own relationship with pregnancy. However, the “overinvolvement in sensation and emotion” that the excessiveness in body horror produces in an audience because of a “lack of esthetic distance” diminishes deeper intellectual contemplation. The deeper themes and symbolism in these gory body horror films may not be immediately apparent because viewers are too wrapped up in the horror of it all, made worse by the spectacle of blood and guts (Williams). This trio of body horror films from the late 70s signals a shift away from the horror conceptualized around birth from *Rosemary's Baby*. Rather than pregnancy creating terror by ruminating on patriarchal systems that restrict sexuality, reproduction and birth itself becomes the point of terror because it seems to challenge the limits of human bodies and therefore the sense of self. The fear that was once cast on the oppression of bodies is instead cast on the bodies that are disrupting symbolic order and triggering the screams of the audience.

This shift could be attributed to the changed political landscape of the 70s from the 60s. Although the Women's Liberation Movement continued into the new decade, conservatism was on the rise with Richard Nixon campaigning on a platform for the silent majority, the conservative populism that was not engaging with the public discourse over second wave feminism, the anti-war movement or any other form of counterculture that had gained momentum in recent years. This silent majority shared a belief that the rights revolution had been taken too far, with too many rights doled out to the point of decadence. With the passing of the Equal Pay Act in 1963, Title IX in 1972, the Equal Credit Opportunity Act in 1973 and the ruling that abortion is a protected right in the 1975 Supreme Court Case *Roe vs. Wade*, women in the

United States were able to exert more agency in society and autonomy over their bodies. The conservative reaction to these advancements in women's rights was that it led to the moral decay of US society. After all, divorce rates had risen to nearly 50% by 1973 and birthrates had plummeted to an average of 1.7 children born during a woman's lifespan by 1976 thanks to more women pursuing higher education and entering the workforce, less than half the figure from 20 years prior. The domestic sphere that had so long been delegated to the matriarch of a family was missing the woman in command as the number of married mothers with school aged children in the workforce jumped to over 60% by 1980, up from 39% 20 years prior. As women were redefining their roles in society, the traditional family structure fell under threat (Kraner, Waldman). A Christian reawakening also occurred during this time as conservatives that witnessed the collapse of the traditional family structure attributed it to the "waning influence of Christian morality in American life" (Rosenfield). As these conservative beliefs took more presence in the US political stage, women's bodies as a site and source of horror helped reinforce christian conservative beliefs that women's bodies were weaker vessels susceptible to corruption.

The Conservative response to the progress of second wave feminism continued into the 1980s with the election of Ronald Regan targeting campaign efforts towards the "moral majority" (Green, Meyer). Morality in American culture continued to be a polarizing topic with reproductive rights arguably a center of culture war discourse during the decade. At the same time, body horror legend David Cronenberg rose to the height of his career, releasing films *Videodrome* (1982), *The Fly* (1986) and *Dead Ringers* (1989) within the decade. Continuing with body horror film tradition, each film includes reproduction or reproductive imagery as a point of horror and spectacle. The female protagonist Roni in *The Fly* faces the prospect of giving birth to the unknown after finding out she is pregnant after she and the genetically altered Seth Brundle

have sex (Cronenberg). This plays on the same abject fears of giving birth to the unknown as seen in *Erasurehead*, but can also be seen as a revival of puritan beliefs as Christian conservatism pushed back against progressive women and the sexual revolution.

Roni is a reporter for a scientific journal, hoping to find and share the next scientific breakthroughs. After meeting Seth Brundle and learning of his incredible telepods that could enable teleportation, she is eager to publish the technological advancements, however Brundle urges her not to and to keep the development a secret until it is complete so that he will be credited with the invention. Roni agrees (Cronenberg). Among Puritans, secrets were morally wrong because they were seen as isolating an individual from the rest of the community, and because “secret information” such as knowledge of fate or the future was something only their unknowable God could know. Therefore, possession of it must have been gained by nefarious means. Seth’s technological advancements could be read as this kind of secret knowledge, its corruption manifesting in the physical changes to his body throughout the movie. Much like Eve, Roni is punished for her pursuit of this “secret” knowledge through her reproductive system. Puritan women were believed to experience monstrous births as punishment for their sins of secret knowledge, enduring difficult pregnancies or birthing children with birth defects (Reis). The possibility of gestating and birthing a monstrous fly humanoid is visualized in a dream sequence where Roni births a massive maggot during an abortion. Roni’s pregnancy could also echo similar fears from *Rosemary’s Baby* about the creation of “fit” white children. In *Queering the Color Line*, Summerville finds that “fit” white people, or affluent and healthy white people, were seen as having a cultural responsibility to reproduce in order to perpetuate a white majority and thus dominance in the US. Interracial relationships or relationships with lowerclass and disabled people were frowned upon because they produced “unfit” offspring that were

marginalized. Seth's spliced genetic makeup can be interpreted as a metaphor for a mixed race lineage. Alternatively, it could be a metaphor for HIV/AIDS considering the AIDS epidemic was raging in the US and many were concerned with how it may spread between mother and child (fears over the reproduction of AIDS were similar to the fears over the reproduction of racial groups). In both interpretations, Roni's pregnancy would be considered monstrous because it is unfit.

Body horror films of the 21st century comment much more directly on the exploitation of women in society. In *Antiviral* (2012), diseases are harvested from celebrities and sold to the public by clinics to let them feel closer to their favorite stars. Even more disturbing, cells from idols are used to generate meat for consumption, sold in celebrity meat markets. Hannah Geist is massively popular, and after she falls ill and supposedly dies, the demand for her sickness skyrockets. After the main character Syd is infected with this deadly sickness he learns that Hannah was purposefully infected by a company competing with the Lucas Clinic, the company that had exclusive access to Hannah and any of her illnesses. Ultimately, Syd pitches the "Afterlife Product" to the competing company, using virtual reality of Hannah Geist to market the illness that killed her. Her body is revealed to be kept barely alive, with mutated cells growing off of her in a cell garden, with diseases constantly injected and harvested from her to then be sold (Cronenberg). Hannah is completely usurped of control over her body by a corporation that effectively owns her. She is not treated as a person, but as a body to generate and regenerate something to be sold. The concept of exchanging women's bodies is explored in feminist anthropologist Gayle Rubin's 1975 essay *The Traffic of Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex*, where she articulates the ways that kinship structures that form the basis for a broader society in many cultures depend on the exchange of gifts within the society's economies.

Men in these gift exchanges hold the status of the gift givers, active participants, while women are the gifts exchanged. Their bodies are used as currency that strengthen social bonds between kinship groups and men. Therefore, causes of gender stratification do not exist in human biology but in humanity's social organizations.

We can see this idea played out in *The Substance* (2024) where protagonist Elizabeth Sparkle is a fitness instructor that has reached massive amounts of success through her fitness program. However, the company that owns her show plans to drop her because she is considered undesirable for her age and less marketable. In an attempt to hold on to her power as the star of the show, as well as the influence that she has with her youth and beauty, Elizabeth takes the substance, a cryptic drug treatment that causes her back to split and birth a younger version of herself. Rather than Elizabeth's consciousness existing in the younger body, deemed Sue Sparkle, the two exist as separate people with separate personalities but still one entity. Their consciousness volleys back and forth with only one able to operate at a time. Rather than "respecting the balance" Sue forcibly takes over the spotlight, aging Elizabeth at an accelerated rate. At the same time, Elizabeth resents Sue for her eclipsing fame as well as her lack of respect for the balance and the effects it has on Elizabeth (Fargeat). The movie follows this struggle and its insane consequences, but the whole commentary is about the exploitation of women's marketability. Both Elizabeth and Sue are constantly featured on posters and billboards marketing the network's fitness program. Multiple scenes of Sue are shot with vibrant music and energetic close up shots that fragment her body. She is being marketed like a car rather than introduced as a person. She is an object to be sold for capitalistic gain rather than a person making a career for themselves. Sue replaces Elizabeth, not because Elizabeth has failed at her career, but because she is no longer marketable for the network due to her age. *The Substance*

comments on how women's value is linked directly to their youth and beauty because it is something that can be desired, profited off of and reinforce male bonds. Even the fitness program that gives Elizabeth and Sue their fame is targeted at women to stay in shape in order to be considered more desirable and thus valuable under a patriarchy.

Rubin also touches on the exploitation of women in capitalist societies, noting how capitalism's goal of increasing profit by any means necessary exploits women's reproductive capabilities. Elizabeth reproduces this desirability by birthing Sue, clarifying that women are both marketed, and expected to reproduce their marketability in the next generation that will replace them while men continue to hold their power well into their elderly years. At the same time, Sue and Elizabeth cannot exist without one another. After Sue finally kills Elizabeth in a violent fight, Sue's body begins to break down as she remembers that they together are one being. When she tries to create a new version of herself the same way Elizabeth did, it births a monstrous amalgamation of the two bodies (Fargeat). Even as they both attempt to gain control and extinguish the other, the perceived dominance of the other is necessary to keep the patriarchal system going. The illusion of not being on the bottom rung of the ladder, not being old and washed up like Elizabeth in the eyes of Sue, motivates people to perpetuate the system that is also oppressing them.

Although this project only scratches the surface of body horror with a handful of notable films, it appears that reproduction and birth is a significant trope in the subgenre going back to the rise in its popularity. Birth and reproduction has been used in body horror films to express fears over barriers to reproductive care, miscegenation, exploitation of sexuality, morality, HIV/AIDS, fatherhood and more. The trope continues to be used in films and its meaning continues to evolve as the cultural and political landscape of the country evolves. These films

reflect our real world, but their effect on audiences gives them the ability to influence it as well. Analyzing this trope helps to understand the climate around reproduction at the time of each film's release as well as the impact it had on other movies and thus on pop culture as a whole. It does not give a satisfying solution to the problems of the country, but it can give insight into the attitudes and history causing the problems. This project does not address what the reproduction trope in body horror says about men's and men's bodies or trans and gender nonconforming identities and bodies, however it is the beginning of a thorough exploration into the reproduction trope of body horror.

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