

A Phantom Experience: Traumatic Embodiment in Temporal Body Horror Cinema



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This dissertation defines a new subgenre of body horror cinema by engaging with the temporal latency associated with traumatic experience. By working through the intricacies of traumatic experience, temporal body horror views time uniquely as an integral part of the body, though one that draws attention to the body's overarching independence from the subject inhabiting it. Trauma takes up residence in a body when an event occurs but isn't experienced. It creates a phantom experience with uncertain origins that I discuss in films from around the globe which depict this structure in different unsettling ways. Within scholarship, my project's intervention bridges the corporeal turn in film studies, horror studies, and the cinematic philosophy of time. It moves attention from the film spectator's body to the film characters' bodies themselves in the first field, posits an experiential level at which horror films create their associated affect in the second that differs from its common spectatorial approach, and creates new understandings about the embodied but incorporeal sensation of time for the third. In these ways, the project argues that time functions as much as a bodily organ as the physical viscera most often associated with the body horror subgenre. At a structural level, it constructs a conceptual map where each chapter classifies a different variation of traumatic experience that a given director investigates throughout their filmographies. In the process, each chapter discusses a type of time, a horror figure, and external symptoms of the experience it focuses on. In chapter one, traumatic structure appears in the form of cheating death in Carl Dreyer's films; in chapter two, it takes on a unique bodily experience in the films of David Cronenberg called body-centric fusion; in chapter three, it appears

as a paradoxical form of material emptiness in the films of Kiyoshi Kurosawa; and in chapter four, it's the sensation of being possessed by a ghost in the films of Takashi Shimizu.

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1.0 Introduction: The Other Side of Corporeality

Special Agent Dale Cooper: What year is this?

Laura Palmer: *bloodcurdling scream*

-*Twin Peaks: The Return* (2017)

Just before the conclusion of Takashi Shimizu's canonical Japanese horror film *Ju-on: The Grudge* (2002), the film's protagonist, Rika, finds herself to have gone back in time. There's no time machine, no CGI wormhole, no feeling of intense pressure that often occurs in cinematic time travel; she uses only her body, putting her hands over her eyes to see through her fingers. This corporeal mode of time travel is highly unusual. It turns out that another woman, named Kayako, was killed by her husband in that same location ten years before, so that Rika putting her hands over her eyes uncannily places her body in the exact position, in space and in time, as that of the dead woman. Kayako's husband, long since dead, then walks down the stairs and kills Rika in the same way he killed his wife: by cutting out her tongue with a knife. To be clear, Kayako had been, to this point in the film, causing strange occurrences in and around Rika's body: a ringing in her ears, the feeling of a phantom hand on her head while washing her hair, and what's perhaps its most horrific aspect, the horrible voice she hears when the ghost appears. But the important thing to grasp at the end of this film seems to be that Rika's body has physically taken Kayako's place to such an extent that she has travelled through time and become Kayako. Here, Rika screams before the husband cuts out her tongue, but does the scream come from her body, or the other woman's? At what point does Rika's body end and Kayako's begin? And most of all, what sort of

uncanny logic do these out-of-body cross-temporal experiences follow? This project takes scenes like this as its starting point, arguing that *Ju-on* makes up a subgenre that's developed throughout film history I call temporal body horror.

What is temporal body horror? At a basic level, the horror genre is well-known for its emphasis on the body. It's famously defined by Linda Williams as a body genre due to the direct effects of fear on the surface of the viewer's skin, and contains its own more specific subgenre of body horror.¹ For these reasons, it's by no means a stretch for Allan Cameron to define the genre for its philosophical emphasis on thinking through and re-thinking bodies, stating that, at bottom, "[b]odies are horror cinema's raw material."² At a further level, the body horror subgenre tends to feature bodies being made strange. Whether this be the grotesque process of humans becoming aliens in Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982), the merging of man and machine in Tsukamoto's *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* (1989), or the strange enjoyment of eating raw meat in Ducournau's *Raw* (2016), body horror films are most discernible by depicting unsettling events and transformations involving bodies. In his canonical article on the subject, Philip Brophy differentiates this type of horror film from its more classical variation because it "tends to play not so much on the broad fear of death, but more precisely on the fear of one's own body, of how one controls and relates to it."³ In body horror, the human body itself is the primary horror element instead of some other force external to it.

However, despite its obvious interest in breaching bodily parameters, this common approach to body horror nonetheless has its limits. It doesn't account for films investigating a less

¹ Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," *Film Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (1991): 2–13.

² Allan Cameron, *Visceral Screens: Mediation and Matter in Horror Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 1.

³ Philip Brophy, "Horrority— The Textuality of Contemporary Horror Films," *Screen* 27, no. 1 (January 1, 1986): 8.

tangible part of the body but which also acts as a source of disturbing experience: time and temporality. Some of the more recognizable ways in which time effects human bodies include changing over time through aging and the inevitable prospects of death and human finitude. Yet, philosophy, often in phenomenological studies, has explored the body as an independent entity. For Jean-Luc Nancy, a human body is a point of thought between a subject and an object because a body “is never properly me. It’s always an ‘object,’ a body objected precisely against the claim of being a body-subject, or a subject-in-a-body.”⁴ While we may call it home, or at least the source of our subjecthood, a body can function more as a haunted house or terrible place that controls us, rather than the other way around: an object where a subject should be. It’s experiences of indistinct embodiment, where things happen to a body but aren’t experienced by it, that I discuss here. My project defines moments when time functions as a phantom limb, a substantial body part that doesn’t belong to the physical body. As Brian Massumi terms it, time is an “incorporeal dimension of the body,” separate from the body while also constituting it: “[o]f it, but not it. Real, material, but incorporeal.”⁵ When time becomes a horror element, when origins mutate or disappear, a body becomes what Alanna Thain calls a “heterochronic body,” one that “activates, through a duplicitous intuition of other durations, via our own (our otherness), the virtual, incorporeal dimension of the body.”⁶ Following these definitions of time, temporal body horror produces a type of bodily excess that’s unsettling in ways which don’t appear in the familiar dismembering of body horror at large. Rather, the product of this otherness results in phantom experiences with

⁴ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. Richard A. Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 29.

⁵ Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 5.

⁶ Alanna Thain, *Bodies in Suspense: Time and Affect in Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 43.

uncertain origins. This is not a body horror without the body, but one expanding what constitutes the body through tense-based mutations.

1.1 Methodology

To define the subgenre, I use a philosophical methodology, specifically one classifying different types of temporal body horror. My approach follows Gilles Deleuze's influential film philosophy work by discussing filmmakers as philosophers who create concepts in their work. In his last book with Guattari, Deleuze defines his approach to philosophy as "the discipline that involves creating concepts," and it's clear in the *Cinema* books that he utilizes this approach across film history to formulate a philosophical classification of cinema.⁷ By this term, I mean that he discusses the creation and development of philosophical concepts across film history by citing evidence from the films themselves, their directors, and the theorists and critics writing about them. Now, body horror is notably absent from much of Deleuze's studies, as is the horror genre as a whole, although he does include underrated chapters on German expressionism and the potentials of a cinematic philosophy of the body.⁸ But, over and above other types of films, the body horror genre constitutes the most significant development of this cinematic philosophy of the body precisely because of its clear and foregrounded interest in experimenting with and on the body.

⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 5; Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Barbara Habberjam and Hugh Tomlinson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983); Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

⁸ For a study putting Deleuze's thinking to work for the horror genre, see Anna Powell, *Deleuze and Horror Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005).

Eugenie Brinkema goes so far as to give the horror genre a novel overarching purpose: more than any other genre, horror functions as a laboratory for experimenting with the possible forms a given body can have. In her words, “[b]odies do not possess form, detaining it like a thing; rather, for horror the body is nothing but a trajectory process of change that is formally navigable, which is to say givable and manipulable, and which does not disappear with an encounter with violence but in fact is positively enabled by it.”⁹ My methodology thus allows me to not only locate time as a key element within the horror genre, but to further emphasize that the body horror subgenre makes legitimate contributions to philosophies of time and the body. While my project is narrower in scope than that of Deleuze, I classify concepts from films in a similar way, my philosophers being Carl Dreyer, David Cronenberg, Kiyoshi Kurosawa, and Takashi Shimizu. Their conceptual maps ultimately form a list of ways in which bodily experience isn’t experienced when it happens: cheating death, fusion, emptiness, possession.

Through this classification, an important aspect to my methodology develops an understanding of body horror that goes beyond abjection. The abject has provided an appropriate framework for discussing what body horror can do, with the concept being defined famously by Julia Kristeva as what “is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses.”¹⁰ She describes this concept as not quite a subject nor an object and cites as examples substances which breach bodily boundaries of inside and outside: corpses, blood, vomit, shit. But while this concept has accurately provided a discursive framework for many of the most well-known body horror films, the abject doesn’t account for cases where experiences of time make bodily boundaries themselves difficult to distinguish. The bodies I discuss constitute non-

⁹ Eugenie Brinkema, *Life-Destroying Diagrams* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2022), 22.

¹⁰ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 2.

orientable surfaces, an idea borrowed from topology to refer to a surface whose spatial limitations, inside and outside or subject and object, are indiscernible, forming a surface on which a figure seamlessly can become its inverse mirror image like on a Mobius strip. Here, the problem isn't that the body is disgustingly fleshless or has its organs turned inside out, although Cronenberg does reach this result at various points in his career (i.e. when testing out the Telepod in *The Fly* (1986)). Rather, it's a body whose temporal experience fundamentally prevents it from feeling inside itself at a particular moment, so that it becomes an empty form of a body, missing portions of its timeline and imbued with those of others, living and having lived time not necessarily its own. Following this trajectory, I argue that, in temporal body horror, origins can be abject as well. The films I discuss tend to conclude on unsettling notes where one person's experience has become completely engulfed by that of another. They aren't incorporated inside another physical body, but inside another body's experience whether living or (most often) dead. The result of such engulfment is a unique horror experience not theorized before in scholarship. While not as grotesque as Kristeva's abject, the obscured origins of temporal body horror problematize divisions of the body into inside and outside, past and present, self and other, and thus put forward the disquieting possibility of an experience seeking out a body to live through it.

Along with rethinking what constitutes the body, my classification of temporal body horror also expands where in the world its content comes from. As I discuss different instances of the subgenre from across film history, this project necessitates a global philosophy that includes films from the east as well as the west. Classical horror scholarship, as well as film philosophy, typically gives films from outside Europe and the U.S. only marginal attention. Robin Wood, for one, focuses his canonical essay on the American horror film, leaving out contributions from Asian

horror as well as European influences.¹¹ Deleuze does give Ozu, Mizoguchi, and the other Kurosawa a fair place in his *Cinema* books, but his canonical work of film philosophy is otherwise largely centered on the west.¹² The body horror genre, however, has been heavily influenced by Japanese filmmakers as much as western ones. From classical films like Tsukamoto's *Tetsuo: the Iron Man* and Otomo's *Akira* (1988) to the contemporary perversity of Takashi Miike and Sion Sono, Japanese filmmakers, and directors from other Asian countries, have proven to be serious philosophers of the body and its experiential possibilities. Made after and alongside these films, and occasionally starring their own directors (Tsukamoto himself stars in Shimizu's *Marebito* (2004), for instance), Japanese horror's temporal variant of body horror is no exception to this influence. These directors are highly influenced by western body horror to the point of borrowing its definitive concepts and extending them in new directions. At a further level, the turn-of-the-century moment in which I locate the subgenre's maturation constitutes part of a larger resurgence in global body horror. As discussed in scholarship, this historical moment features public desire for such extremist movements such as American torture porn, French extremism, and the larger Asia Extreme brand of which J-horror is a part.¹³ While these movements have been discussed for their relation to real-world body horrors, the scholarship overlooks the overarching interest in time and temporality engaged with by many horror films of this period around the globe. Amid displays of terrorist violence around the globe on top of Francis Fukuyama's infamous claim that western

¹¹ Robin Wood, "An Introduction to the American Horror Film," in *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant and Christopher Sharrett, Revised Edition (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004), 107–40.

¹² For scholarship confronting Deleuze's limited national scope in film philosophy, see David Martin-Jones, *Deleuze and World Cinemas* (London: Continuum, 2011); David Deamer, *Deleuze, Japanese Cinema, and the Atom Bomb: The Spectre of Impossibility* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).

¹³ For more on these movements, see Adam Lowenstein, "Spectacle Horror and *Hostel*: Why 'Torture Porn' Does Not Exist," *Critical Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (2011): 42–60; Tanya C. Horeck and Tina Kendall, eds., *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013); Jinhee Choi and Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano, eds., *Horror to the Extreme: Changing Boundaries in Asian Cinema* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009).

civilization has reached the end of history, the violent origins of that history began resurfacing the turn of the twenty-first century period like a parasite that lay dormant for decades during the global prosperity of 1970s and 80s. The same can be said of the eastern world, as Japan faced great uncertainty with the onset of an overwhelming recession amid local terrorist attacks of its own. This project views these film movements in a new light by drawing out from them a mutual interest in time as a horror element. It equalizes the philosophical contributions made by J-horror directors like Kurosawa and Shimizu with western body horror directors like Cronenberg and George A. Romero. Though not the subgenre's only manifestation, I treat the turn of the century J-horror movement as central to the development of temporal body horror, arguing that it represents a landmark moment in the subgenre's history through its unprecedented investigations of phantom experience.

1.2 Significance

In the process of mapping this classification, my project extends recent work bridging horror studies and film philosophy. Time is rarely thought of as an aspect of the body, and this project argues that conjoining these fields has much to offer existing discussions in each area. For one, horror films are infrequently objects of conceptually driven philosophical study. Among other topics, they most commonly contribute to philosophies of the body through affect theory, exemplified by Brinkema or Xavier Aldana Reyes, or the phenomenology of horror spectatorship

by Noel Carroll.¹⁴ The tendency to think affect and feeling through horror is clearly appropriate given the genre's definition in scholarship as a body genre, a concept defined by Williams classifying films by the particular feelings they produce in spectators.¹⁵ Williams' work is part of a larger trend in contemporary film studies known as the corporeal turn, which emphasizes the embodied nature of film viewing experiences.¹⁶ For this line of thinking, the spectator's body is not merely a passive medium through which it receives cinematic content, but an active participant with that content.

While the work of the corporeal turn has filled a gap in film studies by particularizing film experience in the body of the spectator, this dependence on spectatorial sensations limits much of its philosophical potential by largely removing conceptualization from the realm of possibility. Subordinating larger patterns and connections to individual description, the corporeal turn prevents close reading for the ways in which a film might create new concepts out of its film characters' experience in a way that can't be achieved by focusing on one's own viewing experience in relation to it.¹⁷ A film's content, especially that of a horror film, is often equally invested in speculating on and exploring a body's formal possibilities, and therefore should be read for the new concepts it creates in the specificity of that particular film as well as how it develops across larger patterns in a director's filmography or a genre's history. This project thus directs the corporeal turn in film

¹⁴ Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); Xavier Aldana Reyes, *Horror Film and Affect: Towards a Corporeal Model of Viewership* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Noel Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart* (London: Routledge, 1990).

¹⁵ Williams, "Film Bodies."

¹⁶ See Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Jennifer M. Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

¹⁷ This position is described in Brinkema's work. See her delineation between thinking affect for the spectator's subjective experience of a film and discussing how a film particularly puts an affect to use in Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects*, 26–46.

studies toward philosophy and the film's content without sacrificing corporeality. Personal experience need not be thrown out in the process; concepts can be particular to one individual or a group, one film or many, one place and time or a larger geography and era. They can even be borrowed from other concepts others have already come up with, altered to account for a different case. But in any case, concepts involve creation and thought, forging something new that didn't necessarily already have a name. Here, my project intervenes between horror studies and film philosophy by arguing that the experiential is also conceptual.

Specifically, my project adds to recent scholarly expansion toward the purpose and result of body horror. Brinkema, for her part, has come to diagnose much of horror studies as suffering from a limitation she calls, in her singular language, "neck essentialism." Based on the etymology of the Latin word "*horrere*" referring to hairs raised on the neck, she argues that discussing horror movies only for the ways in which they impact spectators' neck hairs traps the discourse too deeply in spectator phenomenology to the detriment of possible conceptual mutations that might emerge from it. She redefines the results of horror as a genre creating new bodily shapes and forms because, for her, "necks shield and delay confrontations with unsuspected modes of horror, ones linked to forces of order, systematicity, languages, schemes, shapes, and structures."¹⁸ In another respect, Larrie Dudenhoeffer takes a similar stance against horror scholarship's prolonged investment in a specific body part: the skin. With all of the genre's many depicted lacerations and wounds, many of which from a subgenre named specifically after skin lesions, it's easy to overlook how the horror genre works through other organs as well, like the lungs, muscles, or intestines. On the way to defining a series of central "tissue types" created by the genre, Dudenhoeffer argues that "such theories overemphasize one specific aspect of one organ, the integument of the skin and

¹⁸ Brinkema, *Life-Destroying Diagrams*, 8.

its responses to the stimuli of its extracellular environment, and neglect our other organs, tissues, members, and fluids.”¹⁹ This project, too, views body horror differently from raised neck hair or lesions to the skin; in this case it investigates the properties of the possible ways in which a body doesn’t register an experience that it lives through. In temporal body horror films, time creates a phantom limb effect that’s felt as a novel bodily organ both of the subject and not it. Only, time in this case typically doesn’t feel like a missing arm or heart but rather a phantom experience, an occurrence that’s missing an origin. It’s not the past memory of a limb being still attached after it’s been severed, but an experience lodged inside a body without the registration of its having occurred. Therefore, films of this subgenre create their disturbances not necessarily on, in, or under the skin, but at a given body’s experiential level, not what’s happened to the body but the way in which it doesn’t register that happening.

Now, a well-known concept already exists that refers to phantom experiences like those envisioned by temporal body horror. A term recognized by medical practice, trauma refers to a psychic wound often resulting from an overwhelming experience. A trauma may take more familiar and diagnosable forms like unwitting repetitions, recurring nightmares, or inexplicable behaviors stemming from the event in question. It can result from a direct physical wound to the subject’s body, but just as often originates in the way one relates to an event regardless of skin-level traces. The definition of the affliction given by Cathy Caruth, whose trauma studies work deals extensively with the strange temporality associated with it, is worth quoting in full:

“the pathology cannot be defined either by the event itself – which may or may not be catastrophic, and may not traumatize everyone equally – nor can it be defined in terms of a *distortion* of the event, achieving its haunting power as a result of distorting personal

¹⁹ Larrie Dudenhoeffer, *Embodiment and Horror Cinema* (London: Springer, 2014), 3.

significances attached to it. The pathology consists, rather, solely in the *structure of its experience* or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it.”²⁰

This way, more than a skin wound, trauma is a structure or form of experience that takes hold of the subject’s body and directs their contemporary actions and experiences, against consciousness, back to the origins of that structure. The affliction is one of the clearest ways through which one can understand the object of a philosophy of body horror: the independence of the body from one’s experience of it. This way, after I’ve discussed what about the body and where and when the content comes from, my use of trauma theory points here to whose body I discuss in the project. The film characters discussed here aren’t necessarily traumatized in the conventional sense of the word. Rather, the human subjects of this project exhibit the traumatic structure described by Caruth through four different phantom forms of time corresponding to each chapter: time that’s un-lived, lost, forgotten, or looped. In the process, I locate these temporal forms inside particular horror figures whose bodies make ideal locales for thinking through their implications: vampires, zombies, vessels for possession by a ghost, and one less familiar but of equal significance, a fusional splice. This is not to equivocate these figures with real traumatized people, but horror figures like these nonetheless create new insight into what it feels like to experience trauma. In turn, temporal body horror redirects film studies’ corporeal turn toward the embodied implications of phantom experience.

Along with adding to work on the cinematic body, this project also intervenes in discussions of cinematic time. Since Deleuze’s publication of the *Time-Image*, temporality has

²⁰ Cathy Caruth, “Introduction,” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 4, original emphasis.

seen a considerable increase across film studies scholarship, particularly around early cinema and modernity, historical developments in national cinemas, and stylistic trends in contemporary cinema.²¹ In the process, time has also become a definitive element in horror studies as a primary source of the genre's definitive hair-raising feeling. The discourse significantly rethinks many of the horror genre's iconic elements through their effects on temporality, such as ghosts, haunting, and other forms of uncanny embodiment. Bliss Cua Lim makes the most prominent association between horror and time, arguing that East Asian supernatural films aren't mere trivial artifacts of a backward emphasis on the past, but significant modes of understanding the problems associated with temporal difference across cultures.²² For her, time is felt through the presence of ghosts who embody lingering social structures and traditions as well as the nonlinear trajectories through which they exist. Dylan Trigg's horror phenomenology also draws out new concepts for philosophy from horror films by putting works by body horror directors like John Carpenter and Cronenberg in conversation with phenomenology, spawning impossible ontologies like the "body out of time" which I discuss more later.²³ His work focuses on the films themselves over spectatorship, and is fundamentally attuned to the strangeness of time. Yet, while these scholars describe significant hauntings of the body, their work isn't as corporeal as it could, and should, be. Lim focuses more on the heterogeneity of spaces haunted by ghosts, and while Trigg does focus on the body, he leans more on phenomenological description than conceptual creation. For her part, Thain's work in *Bodies in Suspense* gives a thorough and inventive discussion of the

²¹ Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); Scott Nygren, *Time Frames: Japanese Cinema and the Unfolding of History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); Todd McGowan, *Out of Time: Desire in Atemporal Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

²² Bliss Cua Lim, *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic, and Temporal Critique* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

²³ Dylan Trigg, *The Thing: A Phenomenology of Horror* (London: Zero Books, 2014).

incorporeal dimension of time in cinema, but she discusses suspense films (Hitchcock and his disciples) rather than body horror.²⁴ This way, my project adds to discussions of cinematic time by arguing that temporal body horror depicts time as a physiological body part that's as integral to the body's existence as any other bodily organ. The filmmakers I discuss achieve material results by extracting phantom experience from characters' bodies, transplanting it into another body that didn't originally live it, or locating it inside them in ways that feel completely foreign to them. In the process, these films force us to rethink the body's experiential boundaries in both philosophically compelling and deeply unsettling ways.

1.3 Chapter Outlines

In classifying temporal body horror, my project defines the subgenre through four forms of phantom experience, one in each chapter. Specifically, I draw these forms out of a director's filmography and emphasize one particular film of theirs as a primary example of how the concepts work. Partly philosophers, each director I discuss experiments throughout their career with a specific type of experience that illuminates a different form that traumatic structure can take. In the process, the chapters design a conceptual map from the following components of each phantom experience: an experiential form for what it phenomenologically feels like; a temporal form for the time causing it; a figural form for the horror character who most closely embodies it; and a symptomatic form through which it extends the experience into the world (see Table 1). The

²⁴ It should be noted that many of the films Thain discusses do in fact constitute temporal body horror as much as suspense (Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), Lynch's Hollywood trilogy).

chapters also include, and tend to conclude with, the experience’s anti-form, its foil with the potential to cure the symptom. Yet, these potential cures tend to produce haunting experiences of their own that can only be uncomfortably described as remedies. The project thus provides a framework for the temporal body horror subgenre and the philosophical implications of its experiential effects. It doesn’t aim to provide a complete picture of the subgenre in the sense of the last word on the topic, but rather to open up more work and study on the philosophical potential of body horror.

Table 1 - Conceptual Map

Filmmaker	Experiential Form	Temporal Form	Figural Form	Symptomatic Form
Dreyer	Cheating death	Unlived life	Vampire	Disembodiment
Cronenberg	Fusion	Lost time	Splice	Impulses, organs
Kurosawa	Emptiness	Forgotten memories	Philosophical zombie	Light, water
Shimizu	Possession	Time loop	Ghost	Spiral, vertigo

Chapter one, “From Dust Thou Art: A Phenomenology of Cheating Death in the Films of Carl Dreyer,” locates the origins of temporal body horror in Carl Dreyer’s films. Though they are more often classified as art films than horror, Dreyer’s films nonetheless hold strong philosophical influence over the horror genre through their many film bodies experiencing the maximum amount of time possible within a single instant. The chapter contests the marginal place of *Vampyr* (1932), Dreyer’s lone horror film, within his larger oeuvre by arguing that its vampire figures, as well as its strange point-of-view cinematography, pose the clearest example of the director’s overarching philosophy built upon the prospect of cheating death. At a larger level, from *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928) to *Gertrud* (1964), Dreyer continually pushes his characters’ bodies against their temporal limits to the point where they achieve the spiritual experience of eternity within a moment, to either beatifying or damnatory results. Though not advertised as a horror director per se, Dreyer’s death-cheating philosophy surpasses a bodily limit not reducible to that of the skin of

which the vampire figure exemplifies even more than his other martyr or witch figures. As an early precursor to temporal body horror, then, I argue in chapter one that Dreyer's filmography thinks through the phantom experience of cheating death, and that *Vampyr* poses the most helpful example of this phenomenology. I make this argument by discussing the results of embodying an immortal character (in this case, the vampire) with a film camera, the type of time vampires experience (unlived time), and the symptoms through which the experience appears (the feeling of disembodiment). Though more generally canonical in the art cinema genre, this chapter shows how Dreyer holds an equally canonical status for temporal body horror.

Chapter two, "'We'll Always Be Together': Body-Centric Fusion in the Films of David Cronenberg," discusses temporal body horror at work in a more anticipated horror filmmaker. Already at the forefront of the body horror genre, it places Cronenberg in a similar place at the center of its temporal variation. As a corollary to what he calls a body-centric filmmaking style, Cronenberg's films also can't help but explore another form of phantom experience when characters find themselves caught in an interzone between their own experience and that of someone, or something, else. I call this out-of-body experience, drawing on the content of Cronenberg's films, fusion. Only, the film in which I locate its primary example isn't the parasitic *Shivers* (1975) or the gene-splicing *The Fly*, but what constitutes perhaps his least gruesome film, though one no less unsettling, *A History of Violence* (2004). There, and throughout the more general turn-of-the-century point in his career, a new infectious agent captures Cronenberg's interest: the traumatic structure of lost time. While not featuring a familiar horror figure, the film's protagonist is nonetheless infected with a diseased form of time that's both his and not his, and thus makes him a new type of horror figure unique to Cronenberg's fusion that I call the splice. Through these concepts, chapter two argues that *A History of Violence* poses the strongest example

of Cronenberg's conceptual logic for fusional experience by way of depicting its protagonist's being fused with an experience he believed to have left behind decades in the past. The surreal return of that experience creates a traumatic structure inside his body that also strangely spreads to those of his surrounding family. I first define the component parts of the fusion process (lost time, splice), then, as appropriate to one of the more diagnostic directors in cinema history, spend the rest of the chapter discussing the ensuing symptoms of being fused with time (impulses, organs). While Cronenberg's popularity largely stems from an interest in physical mutations, chapter two suggests that he should be equally regarded for an interest in pathologies caused by lost time.

Chapter three, "Antimatter and Memory: The Traumatic Philosophy of Emptiness in the Films of Kiyoshi Kurosawa," moves the discussion of temporal body horror from the west to Japan. Kurosawa's films depict the memory aspect of traumatic structure as the next form of phantom experience, particularly as a form of material emptiness affixing itself inside characters' bodies. Though his entire filmography works through this paradoxical embodiment, it's never foregrounded as much as it is in *Cure* (1997). There, it focuses on Mamiya, the amnesiac hypnotist who induces all who interact with him to commit violent acts, only for the victims to completely forget doing so afterward; he exhibits a strange form of embodiment, completely empty yet somehow filled with the traumas of those around him. The chapter argues that Mamiya poses a unique variation on the zombie figure, specifically a philosophical zombie, and that this figure appears in different varieties to embody Kurosawa's larger philosophy of traumatic emptiness. Moreover, instead of lost or un-lived time, this chapter engages with the voiding effects of forgetting. It posits that Kurosawa's films treat memory as a bodily organ producing notably disturbing results when it takes on a traumatic structure. I do this by mapping out the phantom

experience (emptiness), its horror figure (philosophical zombie), its type of time (forgotten), and its material symptoms (light and water). Chapter three thus challenges the marginal position of the so-called “Japanese Cronenberg” in the body horror genre while also extracting new understandings of traumatic embodiment from his films.

Lastly, chapter four, “Ghost in the Time Machine: Embodying Possession in the Films of Takashi Shimizu,” locates a phenomenology of possession in Shimizu’s films. Rather than discussing the more familiar ghost figure, it focuses on what it feels like to be possessed by a ghost. More specifically, the ghost figure of Shimizu’s *Ju-on* possesses characters similarly to the way done by a traumatic event. In a way attested to by trauma theory, his films suggest that ghosts and trauma function in a closely similar possessive way. The events hold a form of agency over the film characters’ bodies to the point where their actions seem to take on a life of their own. Since the overwhelming actions weren’t experienced when they happened, they move from body to body across Shimizu’s films re-enacting horrible events over and over again, as though moving back in time through time travel. Chapter four, then, argues that the possessed bodies of Shimizu’s films, and *Ju-on* in particular, create a corporeal form of time travel specific to temporal body horror and that requires conjoining scholarship on ghosts with that on time travel for conceptualization. I do this by equalizing possessed experience with being inside a time loop, positing its strange effects on characters’ voices and their ability to speak, and locating the spiral as the way the experience extends into the world. As the most frequent anti-form throughout this project, the act of reliving trauma provides an uncanny respite from the experience in many of these films, though it remains a question to the end whether traumatic structure can be cured or if it can only be alleviated through repetition. An ambivalent substance by definition, trauma can only be created and destroyed, breached and repaired, caused and cured in the same gesture. Therefore, the double-edged

conclusions of the films under discussion, and the related possibility of repairing traumatic structure, by nature originate in this uncanny ambivalence of time in itself.

2.0 Chapter One: From Dust Thou Art: A Phenomenology of Cheating Death in the Films of Carl Dreyer

“He said time is dead as long as it is being clicked off by little wheels; only when the clock stops does time come to life.”

-William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (1929)

The first form of phantom experience appears much earlier in film history than that of the later chapters. In the early decades of film history, it's difficult to pin down a precise moment in which the temporal body horror subgenre was born. One could locate it in the strange attachment of phantom limbs across time in silent films like Browning's *The Unknown* (1927) or DeMille's *The Road to Yesterday* (1925).²⁵ But, as scholars like Robert Spadoni have noted, the arrival of film sound called attention to the strangeness of cinematic embodiment, and does so through the prevalence of monster figures like Dracula, Frankenstein, and the Invisible Man.²⁶ Following this line of thought, I locate the subgenre's origin inside a further aspect of uncanniness, specifically a scene from Carl Dreyer's vampire film *Vampyr*. This chapter is less on the characters' voices and more on their bodily experience. In this scene, a man looks at a corpse inside a coffin. The man is supernatural aficionado Allan Gray, and, as those familiar with the film are often perplexed to witness, the body in the coffin is himself. The confusion is understandable since it's technically

²⁵ On embodiment in the DeMille film, see Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

²⁶ Robert Spadoni, *Uncanny Bodies: The Coming of Sound Film and the Origins of the Horror Genre* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

impossible to attend, and view, one's own funeral. But when Gray views his body from this position outside it, as he does rather frequently in the film, Dreyer captures a strange aspect of the relationship between the body and time: events aren't always experienced when they happen, even one's death.



Figure 1 - Cheating death in *Vampyr*

Because *Vampyr*'s many anomalies often vex viewers, scholars have discussed it less as a horror film and more as an avant-garde experiment. They tend to either compare the film's techniques to more common formal tendencies or they draw out novel aspects of the vampire figure itself. For David Bordwell, *Vampyr* appears anomalous beside classical narrative form because it, much more than other films, eschews causal logic. Often in the film, "[a]n event is presented which, by explicit reference or implicit logic, is seen as a consequence. But the cause is absent," meaning that "what makes the film difficult is what will emerge as a generative pattern for the plot as a whole: the absent cause."²⁷ Though there are effects, the film often leaves their causes missing from view. For Noël Burch, *Vampyr* relates in a similar way to the common purpose of point-of-

²⁷ David Bordwell, *The Films of Carl-Theodor Dreyer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 94.

view camerawork: placing the spectator into the character's shoes.²⁸ In more contemporary works, the film's unusual techniques speak to further aspects of vampires. Pushing against the idea of form, Alison Peirse argues that the film uniquely shows how vampirism itself involves appearing to have a formless body. It evokes vampirism "not through detailed depictions of torn flesh and bleeding wounds, but through the oscillating bodily boundaries between Gray and the omnipresent gaze of the vampire."²⁹ At a further level, Allan Cameron uses it as a prime example of how vampire films in general seem to exist through an entire optical schema unique to the vampire.³⁰ The act of looking, as scholarship shows, holds a forefront position in discussions on *Vampyr*, especially the ways in which the early sound film pushes this central filmic component into uncharted stylistic territory.

Influenced by these approaches, chapter one argues that these discussions of *Vampyr* have missed the cause of the film's frustrating aberrations of film form and body: its depiction of the vampire as a body not subject to time's progression, as a body that's cheated death. I do this by locating a conceptual thread between this phantom experience, *Vampyr*, and Dreyer's larger oeuvre, centering around the sensation of traumatic structure discussed in the introduction: a gap between living through and experiencing time. I organize the chapter in four sections: the first on the results of using a camera to embody an immortal character, the second on ways that *Vampyr* depicts this experience in its vampire bodies, the third locating these points inside a larger interest in this experiential gap across Dreyer's filmography, and the fourth on ways that Dreyer's films reanimate this gap. By discussing this phenomenology of cheating death, I show how temporal

²⁸ Noël Burch, "Carl Dreyer: The Major Phase," in *Cinema: A Critical Dictionary*, ed. Richard Roud, vol. 1 (New York: Viking Press, 1980), 296–310.

²⁹ Alison Peirse, "The Impossibility of Vision: Vampirism, Formlessness and Horror in *Vampyr*," *Studies in European Cinema* 5, no. 3 (November 2008): 161.

³⁰ Cameron, *Visceral Screens*, 21–48.

body horror originates in the alterity of Dreyer's bodies encompassing mortality and eternity. I shed new light on Dreyer's philosophical influence for the horror genre and novel commentary on his filmography, with phantom experience excavating significant new potential in both.

2.1 The Death-Cheater's Point of View

The prospect of filming the body of a vampire leads Dreyer to an unusual approach to point of view camerawork. His *Vampyr* becomes a catalyst for many films after it that depict immortality, many of which are not about vampirism but that strangely use the same POV camera techniques. Typically, the cinematic point of view shot is discussed as a stand-in for spectators identifying with a character. For Edward Branigan, "[t]he POV shot is a shot in which the camera assumes the position of a subject in order to show us what the subject sees."³¹ Anything else meant to look like someone or something's viewpoint would be considered deviant from classical cinema standards.³² Branigan provides a detailed list of the component parts of which the POV shot sequence typically consists: Shot 1 – a shot of someone looking at something offscreen; a transition or cut establishing continuity; Shot 2 - a shot of the object of the look from the first shot's position in space; and a sense of awareness justifying the sequence.³³ Next, Branigan emphasizes that a

³¹ Edward Branigan, *Point of View in the Cinema: A Theory of Narration and Subjectivity in Classical Film* (New York: Mouton Publishers, 1984), 103.

³² While the POV shot is often used for identification, Daniel Morgan argues that this tendency is in reality an epistemological fantasy and doesn't inherently do so. Daniel Morgan, *The Lure of the Image: Epistemic Fantasies of the Moving Camera* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2021), 57–90.

³³ See also the useful history of the POV shot's development in Jean Mitry, *The Aesthetics and Psychology of the Cinema*, trans. Christopher King (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 206–19.

sequence missing one of these components in some form or another constitutes a narrative problem that the film must resolve by its conclusion. If a film shows shot 2 without shot 1 before or after it, we have a POV shot that isn't grounded in a body and, therefore, a body exceeding its bodily boundaries. While this two-part sequence appeals to the invisible editing techniques partial to classical narrative cinema, at a further level, it solves a larger embodiment problem at the heart of the films that use it. The integrity of bodily boundaries makes for an often assumed, but nonetheless significant, aspect of this style, which we can call "classical embodiment style."

Now, it's not surprising that one finds the POV aspect of classical embodiment style most often challenged in the horror genre. For Carol Clover, horror is the film genre most self-reflexive about the act of looking. She argues that, "insofar as it introduces a narrative that necessarily turns on problems of vision – seeing too little (to the point of blindness) or seeing too much (to the point of insanity) – and insofar as its project is to tease, confuse, block, and threaten the spectator's own vision, ... [h]orror privileges eyes because, more crucially than any other kind of cinema, it is about eyes."³⁴ One could go so far as to say that the horror genre's interest in vision constitutes part of the genre's embodiment style: almost as often as we see blood, guts, and limbs detached from their bodily sources, we see through a POV shot detached from its reverse shot. When the main character arrives at the setting where the ensuing horror will occur, we see them through Branigan's second shot in the sequence, through the gaze of an unknown body.³⁵ Clover punctuates the sequence's centrality for horror to the point of excess, going on to call the technique "probably

³⁴ Carol Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 166–67.

³⁵ Branigan even delineates generic tendencies for horror and suspense films according to an emphasis on one shot in the POV sequence over another. Horror films, for him, tend to linger on the first shot and its facial affections before revealing what the face is looking at, while suspense films tend to show the second shot before designating that someone looks at it, a technique favorable to Hitchcock giving the audience more information than the characters. Branigan, *Point of View in the Cinema*, 113–14. I claim that horror films actually emphasize both in equal measure.

the most widely imitated – and most widely parodied – cliché of modern horror.”³⁶ Found in the openings of iconic films like Michael Powell’s *Peeping Tom* (1960) or John Carpenter’s *Halloween* (1978), Clover’s point is not surprising due to the genre’s definitive abjection envisioned by Julia Kristeva: defined by breaching bodily boundaries.³⁷ The technique thus creates the uncomfortable sense of being watched without knowing who the look belongs to. But even more so, as with a voyeur behind a keyhole, horror’s disembodied looks absorb all the potential power available in a given environment. This way, horror’s embodiment style is very often driven by questions of visual power and its often-unjust distribution.³⁸ Horror narratives featuring this technique often conclude by not only punishing the looker, but in the process, distributing power back to those being looked at. The powerlessness that comes from being unable to see who is watching you makes effective feelings of horror, though it’s importantly not the only embodiment problem that the genre thinks through.

For my purposes, I ask a different question in relation to the POV sequence: what might cause a film to keep the two shots intact, but remove the cut dividing them instead? This question moves the discussion away from power distribution, which often reduces horror to solutions of kill

³⁶ Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, 186.

³⁷ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 1–31.

³⁸ Here, Clover’s work is influenced by larger innovations in feminist theory explicating the horror genre’s often male-centered embodiment style. In addition to the famous work by Laura Mulvey and Linda Williams, these advances are best discussed in Clover’s sections on assaultive and reactive gazes, in which, almost by rule, the disembodied looker looks because they, usually a he, are powerless. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, 181–205. But also related is Michel Chion’s discussion of the voice in cinema and vocal embodiment. He creates a neologism, the “acousmatic voice,” to discuss a voice without a body whose eventual embodiment automatically kills its source or renders them less than human (as in James Whale’s *The Invisible Man* or the titular Wizard of Oz). Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, ed. and trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 27–29. I argue that this result applies equally to the gaze as well as the voice, the embodiment of each being requirements for classical embodiment style. This style further takes a particular form in horror subgenres. On the serial killer film, for example, see Steffen Hantke, “Monstrosity Without a Body: Representational Strategies in the Popular Serial Killer Film,” *Post Script: Essays in Film and the Humanities* 22, no. 2 (Winter/Spring 2003): 34–54; Adam Charles Hart, “Killer POV: First-Person Camera and Sympathetic Identification in Modern Horror,” *Imaginations: Journal of Cross-Cultural Image Studies* 9, no. 1 (November 10, 2018): 69–86.

or be killed. Instead, a film creates a different way of breaching bodily boundaries when the two shots are breached by each other and the character looking appears within their own POV shot, the subject and object of the look seamlessly combined. This strange form of suture gives Allan Gray the ability to view his own corpse from outside his coffin. When this happens in *Vampyr*'s narrative, he's just given his blood to the film's vampires by way of transfusion and has begun his departure from the land of the living. But he hasn't quite entered the land of the dead, either. Because Gray is becoming a vampire, he no longer feels the possibility of death that limits and defines his life, but he, importantly, is not dead. Rather, he's becoming immortal. The style through which Dreyer films Gray reveals how time is just as important as power to classical embodiment style, so that a POV sequence missing its dividing cut becomes a marker of the body's evading, escaping, or somehow cheating death.³⁹ Rather than an imbalance of power through a missing reverse shot, *Vampyr*'s missing cut evidences an imbalance of potential, breaching temporal boundaries through unliving, forming different narrative problems requiring different solutions.

Now, when someone can be said to have cheated death, they aren't necessarily eluding a personified skeleton, but rather a form of certainty. In philosophical discourse, death has been defined in a largely twofold way: as the future certainty that our time will end, but also, through this certainty, as the guarantor of our ability to experience time in the first place. This is one of Martin Heidegger's well-known points, that our experience of time, and therefore of being alive,

³⁹ While I argue that most instances of a missing POV cut indicate an experience of cheating death, the technique is often, though not always, used for that purpose. Among the many films referenced in his essay, Morgan cites *Vampyr*'s camerawork as one of his primary examples of a film not using the POV sequence for identification purposes, among others also classifiable as temporal body horror. But, to his point about the epistemological fantasy surrounding POV shots, not all of these instances fit the subgenre, such as those of *The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift* (2006). And yet it does remain difficult to believe that the characters in that franchise are, in fact, capable of dying based on the amount of death-defying stunts they successfully perform. Morgan, *The Lure of the Image*, 83–84.

is dependent on the certainty that one day we will, and must eventually, die.⁴⁰ While we may not know the exact time, death's arrival is a form of future certainty, the most predictable "will be." If this certainty never comes to pass, we theoretically experience everything at once, akin to living inside a Borgesian *aleph*, a point in space and time containing all spaces and times: in other words, eternity. This way, death is also, for Emmanuel Levinas, that which is fundamentally averse to the present tense. As he defines it, reflecting on the saying "if you are, it is not; if it is, you are not," "[d]eath is never now."⁴¹ The certainty that death will arrive is the limit of the experience of a now, so if death never happens, the now never fades away.⁴² Immortality means not being limited by the now's disappearance into the past, or as discussed further by Aristotle, not being measured by time.⁴³ Immortality, therefore, opens up a temporal chasm on one's timeline that's felt as an infinite laceration: infinity as a bodily ailment. This is what it means to not feel the boundary between the subject and object of one's look; that boundary is the temporal certainty of death. A body which doesn't die, and that sees from a position outside of time, proves to be a problem for classical embodiment style, though it's not a problem of where, as in Daniel Morgan's chapter titled "Where are we?", or the recurring problem of who from the horror genre's missing reverse shots.⁴⁴ It's instead a problem of when, or rather, the nullity of when.

While there have been many films across film history investigating forms of cheating death and immortality, the first film to come to mind for most viewers on this topic is probably not *Vampyr*, but James Wong's *Final Destination* (2000). Following a formula relived in many

⁴⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1962), 299–304.

⁴¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other and Additional Essays*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 72.

⁴² See the many novels experimenting with the typically disastrous results of death ceasing to function, such as José Saramago's *Death with Interruptions* (2005).

⁴³ Aristotle, *Physics*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 102–17.

⁴⁴ Morgan, *The Lure of the Image*, 57–90.

sequels, the narrative involves the following: a character has a vision of a future accident in which they and many others die, but the vision allows them to survive and save a few others in the process. Death then stalks each survivor, killing them one by one in increasingly improbable ways following the order in which they would have been originally killed. While the characters go to elaborate lengths to thwart “death’s design” and flirt with immortality, with one particularly confident survivor exclaiming “well, then I’ll never die!” only to wet his pants later when his time comes again, death always catches up with them, making the point of the series, repeated almost *ad nauseum*, to reinforce death’s certainty. Death is the obvious horror element in *Final Destination* and appears through the familiar POV shot without a reverse shot, though it incarnates more a moment in time, a future certainty, than a monster with a body. Having escaped this certainty, the characters’ actions are reduced to extending their time infinitely, to the point that the series itself endlessly conjures possibilities without conclusion. Here, as discussed by Eugenie Brinkema, death is not a monster or other horror figure that would take power over them; rather, it’s simply a form, an “ordinal arrangement,” “what gives textual shape to what has not yet happened” but certainly will.⁴⁵ The film is, as Brinkema argues, a type of horror rooted in the philosophy of forms rather than the oft-discussed spectator fright; for *Final Destination*, “[d]eath is the aesthetic force of possibility in horror.”⁴⁶ Moreover, without death’s certainty, *Final Destination* would lose the generative force behind its many overly-complex sequels. I, in turn, ask: what happens to horror, then, and to its defining component techniques, when this force of possibility isn’t there? Can a film in which the fear of death has been nullified constitute a horror film at all, a genre in which the certainty of death, as perhaps the end point of fear, so often drives

⁴⁵ Brinkema, *Life-Destroying Diagrams*, 42–43.

⁴⁶ Brinkema, 73, emphasis removed.

the narrative? Or does this film move into further directions thinking about not only a philosophy of forms, but a body's capacity for experiencing time? Immortality is the limit point of *Final Destination* and the horror genre's iconic POV shots, leaving it to *Vampyr* and the vampire film to think beyond these limits.⁴⁷ When embodying immortality, the missing POV cuts suspend horror's aesthetic force as if set inside an hourglass filled with a novel form of time.

2.2 The Hourglass and the Scythe: Unliving Time in *Vampyr*

Out of the many methods through which fictional narratives envision immortality, the horror genre tends to do so through the vampire.⁴⁸ Whether of the Transylvanian castle of *Nosferatu* (1922), the underground societies of *Blade* (1998), or the book and vinyl-filled apartments of *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2013), the vampire is defined by the fact that it doesn't experience time. As the figural form of cheating death, a vampire has lived through more time than anyone, only it hasn't experienced or felt its passage. It tends to resist the appearance of aging considering it's often consumed blood for upwards of millennia. When it's ultimately killed by a

⁴⁷ Art cinema's alternatives to classical narrative form, and its associated embodiment styles, produce further instances of characters cheating death from outside the horror genre. Though not about vampires, these film bodies are uncannily able to witness themselves from outside themselves as a result of evading death's certainty. The protagonist from Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962), for instance, witnesses the moment of a man's death as a child, only to realize, when later time-travelling as an adult to this defining moment of his past, that he actually witnessed his own death, being shot and killed at the very instant of understanding that "there is no way out of time." Marker's protagonist is haunted throughout life by this disturbing event without realizing that this fascination with his past will provoke his own doom, that this doom has, effectively, already happened. Following Marker are the death-cheating protagonists of Oshima's *The Man Who Left his Will on Film* (1970), Antonioni's *The Passenger* (1975), and Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974), who all appear within their own POV shots and have each cheated death in some way. A separate study is needed for international art cinema's contributions to temporal body horror after Dreyer.

⁴⁸ For a comprehensive development of immortality in fiction, see Brian Stableford, "The Immortal," in *Icons of Horror and the Supernatural: An Encyclopedia of Our Worst Nightmares*, ed. S. T. Joshi (Westport, Conn: Greenwood, 2006), 307–40.

stake through the heart, its body then lives through all of this time in the blink of an eye, so that it feels thousands of protracted years go by in a matter of seconds. Therefore, it wouldn't be accurate to say that the vampire lives through time; as the temporal form of cheating death, vampires rather *unlive* it. Here, time is both the vampire's weakness and its strength. Technically speaking, the figure should be defined by this intolerance for living time just as much as having fangs and a need for blood.⁴⁹ In these ways, the philosophical merit of the vampire film lies in thinking through the bodily effects of being a storage tank for time.

While it may not be the very first vampire film, *Vampyr* innovates with film form to envision what it feels like to embody the vampire's imperviousness to time. It does so in a variety of ways: the doctor who resembles more Doc Brown from *Back to the Future* (1985) than a typical vampire, Marguerite Chopin, the many disembodied shadows running amok in the setting, even the protagonist Allan Gray himself, are all characters who unlive their time. They are, at different points, depicted in a state of latency and delay in relation to their bodies which grants them the theoretical possibility of detaching their look outside themselves. While Murnau's earlier *Nosferatu* features plenty of formal aberrations, like negative photography or expressionistic set design, that film feels more invested in the vampire's relation to light than in its experiential alterity. Released just before *Vampyr*, Browning's *Dracula* (1931), too, also seems more interested in the vampire's monstrosity and its hypnotic power over others. In this section, I build upon the missing POV cut to describe how *Vampyr* envisions an alternative to classical embodiment style. Though many scholars have been confounded by it, *Vampyr* becomes understandable as a meditation on the body's capacity for experiencing time.

⁴⁹ On the history of the cinematic vampire, see Stacey Abbott, *Celluloid Vampires: Life After Death in the Modern World* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007).

Before discussing my evidence, the verb “to unlive” needs to be defined. The OED gives the word a sense of undoing existing events, “to undo, reverse, or annul (past life or experience).”⁵⁰ In the context of the vampire, unliving means to indefinitely postpone time’s progression, progressing forward without accompaniment from one’s body. Because Brian Massumi describes time as of the body but not it, time is unlike other bodily elements in that it doesn’t necessarily require synchronization.⁵¹ Unlike respiration or blood circulation which are immanent to their functioning, human bodies don’t necessarily experience time as it passes. Such a lack of synchrony is known to cause serious maladies to their functioning. In trauma theory, Cathy Caruth shows how a trauma is only experienced after the event originally happens. It’s experienced for the first time after a period of latency in a similar, now contemporary, scenario, making it not a “simple, healable event” like those typically harming the body. In her words, trauma is an event that “is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known.”⁵² Not registered in the body, the trauma is nonetheless stored inside it and felt there as a strange and unknowable event through which one has unlive, “fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time.”⁵³ Accordingly, though the vampire figure hasn’t necessarily experienced trauma, its immortal being certainly fits the description of a phantom experience.⁵⁴ Even more so, the act of being bitten by one compels one to relive that moment by biting others in turn; they begin as victims but must perpetuate the cycle out of an impulse to survive. Caruth’s idea of temporal latency, then, stretches

⁵⁰ “Unlive, v.,” in *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, n.d.), accessed June 24, 2022.

⁵¹ Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 5.

⁵² Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 4.

⁵³ Caruth, 17.

⁵⁴ Since *Vampyr* was shot in France between the two wars, the vampire soldier with a wooden leg can be viewed productively as a traumatic remainder from the first World War. Though the film doesn’t give background or context to the character, it was the experience of soldiers like them that prompted Freud to invent trauma studies with the publication of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

out inside the vampire body. Rather than being unclaimed or not referable to as its own, the vampire's experience is, rather, un-lived, felt as a gap between life and experience.

This experiential gap makes the vampire's body into a virtual storage space for time. The only things that can be un-lived proper are experiences of time since time is the only "material" which can be stored without regard for the space it takes up. This is why, while often living in opulent mansions, the vampire only needs the cramped confines of its coffin as a basic necessity. It's also for this reason that, as Cameron discusses, "vampires are associated with arcane objects" like antiques, old books, buildings, or other forgotten things.⁵⁵ These items aren't archaic for them, but contemporary; they indicate the massive amount of time passed after the vampire had last experienced its passage. Jorge Luis Borges further shows that "[e]verything in the world of mortals has the value of the irrecoverable and contingent," but for immortals like vampires, "[n]othing can occur but once, nothing is preciously in peril of being lost."⁵⁶ A pure agent of accumulation, then, the vampire doesn't actually do anything with these items; since the now doesn't pass, the figure can't alter or affect it. Nor do vampires spend their time remembering these artifacts of bygone days, since, as Henri Bergson argues, we remember things in order to use them in acting on the present.⁵⁷ As it un-lives its time to infinity, the vampire has no choice but to collect without feeling,

⁵⁵ Cameron, *Visceral Screens*, 28.

⁵⁶ Jorge Luis Borges, "The Immortal," in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 192, emphasis removed.

⁵⁷ Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1962). Throughout his work, Bergson works to change common perceptions of what memory, in fact, is by rethinking its materiality. One of his most lasting interventions shows how memory isn't a kind of physical material stored inside the mind like photos in a hard drive, but rather an action recalled in order to respond to a stimulus. Therefore, the extent to which a vampire can remember the many years it has un-lived would seem to create in them something other than a memory of those years, likely only the necessary actions for consuming new sources of blood.

a fact which reduces its will to acts of endless collection, whether of blood, sculptures, candelabras, decaying houses, vinyl records, or other people's time.⁵⁸

Because nothing is either lost or experienced for the vampire, the prospect of embodying it in a film is, like all storage problems, a problem of limits. Specifically, I refer to the limits of the POV shot sequence, that well-known staple of horror film form. While *Vampyr* isn't shot entirely from the POV perspective, Dreyer's disembodied techniques make more sense knowing that Allan Gray is in the process of becoming immortal.⁵⁹ At many points in the film, we look through the camera from what we are led to presume is Gray's point of view, only to see him walk into the shot himself. As he explores the strange setting of Courtempierre, the camera often pans or tracks to follow his gaze, only to pan back to where he previously stood, finding him having already walked away into another room. His detachable gaze is explainable through the film's use of shadows. Just as frequently as he appears in his POV shot, Gray sees people's shadows separate from their bodies. The film associates the procedure only with the vampires: a gravedigger's shadow "undigging" a grave in backward motion without a bodily source; the soldier with a wooden leg sitting still while his shadow walks away; the community of bodiless shadows cavorting around to music, an anti-*danse macabre* that neither begins nor ends, perpetually celebrating the triumph over death. Gray even witnesses his own shadow detach from *his* body, allowing him, in the most famous sequence, to look at his corpse and even inhabit it as it's carried

⁵⁸ The vampire's collecting function makes it a powerful metaphor for capitalism. Karl Marx specifically uses the figure as a metaphor: "[c]apital is dead labor which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks." Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes, vol. 1 (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 342. See also Paul Kennedy, *Vampire Capitalism: Fractured Societies and Alternative Futures* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

⁵⁹ While Cameron comprehensively discusses vampire optics in *Visceral Screens*, the experience of the vampire's embodied vision remains an unfillable void in many narratives. For example, in Neil Jordan's *Interview with a Vampire* film (1994), Tom Cruise tells the newly bitten Brad Pitt, "Now, look with your vampire eye." In describing later what he saw with this eye, Pitt's character responds, "No words can describe it - might as well ask heaven what it sees. No human can know."

to the grave.⁶⁰ In these ways, the vampire’s body becomes as much an optical effect as an embodied experience. For Cameron, these shadows “resemble memory-images of past actions,” playing out “an anterior or future (or perhaps virtual) chain of actions.”⁶¹ Alanna Thain would describe these effects as suspended POV shots, which, while normally “understood as spatial impossibility, ... such spatial positions are almost always impossibilities of time”, incompatible actions existing at once.⁶² These actions and potentials aren’t experienced by the vampire bodies who act them out. In these ways, a symptomatic form of the vampire’s cheating death appears in the detachability of its actions and potentials from its body, forming an absent margin in the visual field where its mortal limit should be.



Figure 2 – A phantom experience in *Vampyr*

Dreyer also depicts this gap in the film’s editing style: a missing cut from the reaper’s blade. It’s significant, here, that the reaper figure, which would typically enforce mortality by way of its cut, is early on shown departing from the film’s setting. A longstanding symbol of death and another of the film’s more iconic images, Dreyer includes the reaper in his film to indicate that

⁶⁰ Strangely enough, Dreyer does include reverse shots during Gray’s POV of his funeral procession, even going so far as putting a small window in the coffin for the corpse to “look” through.

⁶¹ Cameron, *Visceral Screens*, 27.

⁶² Thain, *Bodies in Suspense*, 3.

death's certainty is not to be found in its vampire-possessed setting. Strangely, while much scholarship has been written on major horror figures like the vampire, ghost, or zombie, there is surprisingly little to be found on the grim reaper. What has been written discusses its development in art history more through its original moniker: father time.⁶³ In Greek mythology, this label originally refers to the god Cronus, the wide-eyed figure known for devouring his sons in the famous Goya painting and who is exhibited on the cover of many horror books. Eventually, the father time figure developed to brandish specific tools across paintings: an hourglass and a scythe to reap and separate dying souls from their bodies. The hourglass it carries obviously indicates that a victim's time is up, and the scythe, a tool taken from agriculture, harvests the souls from dying bodies the same way nature reaps a farmer's harvest before it's ripe. In his films, Dreyer is clearly aware of death's function as a reaper of time. In his later film *Ordet* (1955), as Inger dies after giving birth, the madman Johannes, viewing himself as the second coming of Christ, warns of the spiritual presence of "the man with the hourglass and the scythe." The painting of death's arrival on Gray's hotel room wall also brandishes an hourglass and a dagger. Aware of its iconography, death's blade limits when time begins and ends in Dreyer's films, making its departure from *Vampyr* equivalent to the removal of that limit.⁶⁴ At the level of film form, then, death's missing

⁶³ See Samuel L. Macey, "The Changing Iconography of Father Time," in *The Study of Time III: Proceedings of the Third Conference of the International Society for the Study of Time Alpbach—Austria*, ed. J. T. Fraser, N. Lawrence, and D. Park (New York, NY: Springer, 2013), 540–75. For a wide-ranging discussion of death describing the iconography of the skeleton, but not the reaper or father time, see Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death: The Classic History of Western Attitudes Toward Death over the Last One Thousand Years*, trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Vintage, 2008).

⁶⁴ Among *Vampyr*'s more recognizable images is one ultimately missing from the film's many versions: a shot of Gisele, the young woman who Gray eventually saves from abduction by the vampires, sleeping in the chateau with a massive shadow of a scythe looming over her (see Figure 3). A wonderfully harrowing shot, David Rudkin wonders why Dreyer may have removed it from the film, and I propose that its presence would have suggested the collusion between death and the vampires. A vampire, it seems, would want nothing at all to do with the certainty of death. See David Rudkin, *Vampyr*, BFI Film Classics (London: BFI Publishing, 2005), 59–60.

scythe prevents *Vampyr*'s editing structure from being cut in classical ways just as its departure from the setting removes embodied limitations on point-of-view.

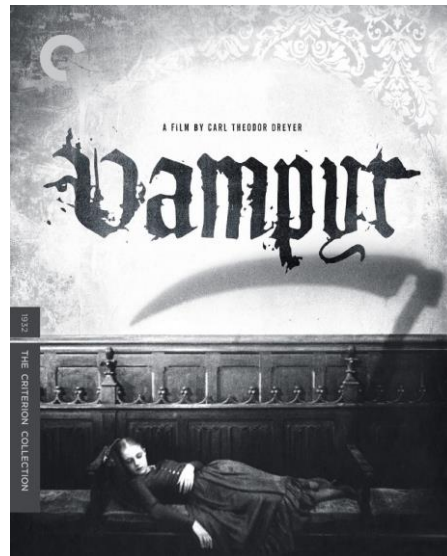


Figure 3 - Cover for the Criterion *Vampyr* DVD

While Dreyer leaves out edits that we might expect in more classical form, he also changes the felt dynamics of a familiar editing technique: the eyeline match. Like point-of-view, eyeline matches are a more common way editors show a character looking at someone by juxtaposing two shots of one character looking and another returning the look. Their gazes line up in space there, as when Gray looks out his hotel window and the reaper seems to look back. Since the vampires feature a level of bodily detachment impervious to a more classical embodiment style, it's not a stretch to find similar distortions in this editing technique as well. For example, David Rudkin discusses the eyeline match between Gray and the reaper as evidence of an irrational geometry at work in the film. He describes it as follows after Gray walks away from his hotel room window: “[a]s Gray goes to the window to look out again – the sight of the [reaper] has bothered him for sure – his eyeline down onto the [reaper], now seated in the ferry, has him closer than before,

though narratively he is out on the water now, farther away.”⁶⁵ As the reaper floats farther away from Gray in space, we expect the figure to get smaller in the frame, not larger. The sequence leads Rudkin further to ask whether the camera showing the reaper is actually an eyeline match with Gray, or whether Gray’s gaze somehow “looped around to look back in its own direction.”⁶⁶ It’s important to remember, moreover, that Gray isn’t looking at a man here, but rather at a moment of certainty. The scene’s strange geometry suggests that, as reconceived in *Final Destination* seventy years later, the further one feels from one’s moment of death, the closer to it they actually are. Holding an eyeline match with death is, furthermore, impossible, since recalling Levinas, death is never now. Consequently, one could say that, in this scene, Gray looks into a moment outside time; a typical technique for orienting in space becomes disorienting in time. Along with its missing POV cuts, then, *Vampyr*’s eyeline matches envision another symptomatic form of cheating death by further detaching vision from the body.

As for the narrative problem caused by the film’s POV sequences, Dreyer solves it in the film’s conclusion when the vampires die. Following the funeral sequence, Gray and the chateau’s servant open Marguerite Chopin’s grave and drive a stake through her heart. After this, her body lives through the time that it stored and instantly decomposes through a fade from flesh to skeleton. Gray then enters the vampire’s lair again and rescues Gisele from inside a locked room. They escape from the setting across a misty river, whose composition makes it seem that they could have easily drifted down into Kenji Mizoguchi’s *Ugetsu* (1953) filmed twenty years later on the other side of the world. Dreyer ends the film by crosscutting between the escapees and another of the film’s more perplexing moments: the doctor being buried inside a flour mill. This conclusion

⁶⁵ Rudkin, 38, emphasis removed.

⁶⁶ Rudkin, 38.

resolves the film's embodiment problem by burying the doctor underneath the unlived time he's amassed. For Jean-Louis Schefer, the flour mill sequence isn't as nonplussing as it seems. If viewed as a product of the vampire's time, it becomes a kind of "flour-glass" flipped upside-down, so that the gears and pulleys observed by Dreyer's camera "work like an apparatus of time to produce the disappearance of a body into dust."⁶⁷ The epitaph written on Gray's coffin therefore takes on new meaning for the vampire: "From dust thou art, to dust thou shalt return." Only, for these figures, the dust is their unlived experience, to which they can only return for an instant. Reflecting on the figure's imperviousness to time, Schefer eloquently solves *Vampyr*'s narrative problem by viewing the vampire's body as a rotten clockwork mechanism. The doctor dies "like a hand falling off a clock-face ... because time suddenly begins to count him and kills him as it is winding down. All that is necessary, then ... is that time begin to count a single body which can no longer represent it ... He has become, through less fluid matter, the glue oozing from this clock (as the wheel suddenly turns against itself)."⁶⁸ In these terms, the problem driving the film's narrative is that the vampire's body is no longer counted by time. It's not a coincidence that Gray finds the key to the room containing Gisele in the space where the pendulum of a faceless grandfather clock is missing; the key to the door, as well as the vampire narrative as a whole, is this clock's missing hand. Dreyer first displays the missing clock hand as the threshold barring entry to the shadow dance earlier in the film. There, the pendulum moves back and forth, yet it's not attached to a larger mechanism. If the body's components are detachable for the vampire, then, so are the clock's, envisioning a horror experience emphasized by few vampire narratives. The

⁶⁷ Jean Louis Schefer, *The Ordinary Man of Cinema*, trans. Max Cavitch, Noura Wedell, and Paul Grant (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext, 2016), 171.

⁶⁸ Schefer, 174–75.

film's narrative problem is, in turn, resolved by making the vampires mortal again, thereby replacing the hold of immortality over the town with the certainty of death.



Figure 4 - A pendulum without a clock in *Vampyr*

Influenced by Dreyer, the exception to this tendency among cinematic vampires is Guillermo del Toro. In his audio commentary for the Eureka! *Vampyr* DVD release, del Toro speaks emphatically about Dreyer's influence over his work. Upon further investigation, it's clear that most films that del Toro has made investigate some correlation between blood and time with clocks taking on the qualities of a vampire. In his first film, *Cronos* (1992), the clock's gears appear inside a small metal insect who sucks blood from the aging protagonist who wishes for youth (Jesus Gris, named after Allan Gray and the resurrected Christ), in exchange for granting him immortality. As the filmmaker attests, the film aims to show the disastrous results of wishing to never die, as well as the religious and capitalistic implications of this wish. But these gears never leave del Toro's filmography, making up, instead, different forms of clocks which have stopped working. There's the quiet ticking of the unexploded bomb at the center of *The Devil's Backbone* (2001) that fell on the orphanage the same night its groundskeeper killed one of the orphans; giant gears appear in *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) inside its barbarous army captain's bedroom, whose barbarity comes from, in del Toro's words, being "stuck inside his father's watch" which stopped the moment the father died; in *Hellboy* (2004), the hourglass takes on a human form through the

eternal Nazi whose mechanical body is filled with sand instead of blood, and who the protagonist kills by crushing him under a giant gear; the gears of *Crimson Peak*'s (2015) mine, moreover, pump a blood-red mud beneath its mansion setting, managed by the grown man who spends his time making toy machines when he isn't murdering a new wealthy bride for her money. In vampiric fashion, the clocks of del Toro's films run on human blood since the brutal men associated with them can only trap people inside the past. They tend to force protagonists, often orphans with no foreseeable future, to create futures far away from these gears. The future, this way, appears to be an antidote to cheating death in these cases. Dreyer himself would work through different potential remedies to the phantom experience throughout his filmography depending on one's relation to eternity.



Figure 5 - Horological vampirism in del Toro's *Cronos*

2.3 The Martyr and the Witch: Two Sides of Eternity

Because of the widespread difficulty in making sense of *Vampyr*, Dreyer has been overlooked for his influence on the horror genre. He's more known for holding an undeniable

influence on generations of art film directors after him.⁶⁹ Still, though not using the more familiar embodiment style one might expect in the horror genre, Dreyer's filmography thinks through other horror figures also caught within a gap between life and experience. For one, he has an oft-discussed interest in witches and female characters burnt at the stake, as in his more recognized films *The Passion of Joan of Arc* or *Day of Wrath* (1943). If one is accused of being a witch, regardless of its truth, the accusation affects the entire timeline of the accused, requiring them to confess to not just being a witch now, but having always been one throughout their life.⁷⁰ Through that experience, the witch pertains more closely to the dictionary definition of "unlive" by being forced to undo, reverse, and annul the time they've lived through. What's more, these same female characters can easily be read alternately as mummies due to their proximity to death. They're often described by their passivity and lack of action, with the protagonist from *Gertrud* even deciding on her tombstone engraving at the young age of sixteen, effectively burying herself alive before living her life.⁷¹ Skulls and graveyard imagery abound. One can say, too, that the figure of the martyr has been considered a horror figure in recent decades, as exemplified in Pascal Laugier's Dreyer-influenced torture porn film *Martyrs* (2008). There, a young woman gets mercilessly tortured by a religious cult seeking to mine a vision of immortality from the martyr that they claim it can see just before dying. There's even a resurrection scene in *Ordet* where Johannes miraculously brings Inger back from the dead by simply asking God to do so and believing that it's possible. With this evidence, the fact that, in *Final Destination*, James Wong gives one student

⁶⁹ See the extensive map of Dreyer's stylistic influence on contemporary world cinema in the introduction to the revised edition of Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018).

⁷⁰ This aspect of Dreyer's thinking influenced Robert Eggers' more recent film *The Witch* (2015). Robert Eggers, Cinematic Exorcism: Director Robert Eggers on "The Witch," interview by Brian Tallerico, February 17, 2016, <https://www.rogerebert.com/interviews/cinematic-exorcism-director-robert-eggers-on-the-witch>.

⁷¹ See the work of one of Deleuze's former students, Veronique Tacquin, "Sur Dreyer et Le Neutre : De *Jeanne d'Arc* à *Gertrud*, Ou de La Mystique à La Momie," *Cinergon* 6, no. 7 (March 1999): 77–86.

the last name of “Dreyer” among other characters named after canonical horror figures (“Billy Hitchcock,” “Alex Browning,” “Valerie Lewton”) speaks further volumes toward Dreyer’s seminal influence on the genre.⁷²

But while his overarching interest is the prospect of cheating death, Dreyer’s influence on the horror genre runs deeper in testing the limits of the body’s capacity for experiencing time. Long before contemporary extremism, Dreyer was pushing bodies beyond these experiential limits. Whether monstrous or human, his film bodies form two poles demarking the emptiness of time, as in the vampire or the witch, or the fullness of time found in the martyr who affirms its entire experience at its moment of death. This way, Raymond Carney argues that Dreyer’s cinema constitutes varying methods of exceeding the boundaries of the human body: “[a]lthough bodies can never ultimately be left behind or completely forgotten in realistic narrative films of the sort that Dreyer makes, he goes as far as he can in the direction of suggesting that his characters can move beyond the physical and social limits of embodiment.”⁷³ By contrasting the martyr and the witch, then, Dreyer locates positive and negative polarities to unliving time. All of life passes through the martyr’s body in an instant, though this passage makes for a full and meaningful experience, unlike the witch, for whom the same passage proves damnatory. If the accused witch is doomed to be separated from their timeline, then martyrdom actively affirms this timeline. In these ways, the bodies of Dreyer’s other films reveal an oddly small distance between the emptiness and fullness of time. Going a step further from the temporal storage of *Vampyr*, Dreyer’s philosophical contribution to horror lies in relocating the genre’s aesthetic force of possibility from death to the prospect of finding eternity in the present.

⁷² Incidentally, while never appearing on screen, Wong goes so far as to name Blake Dreyer’s father “Carl.”

⁷³ Raymond Carney, *Speaking the Language of Desire: The Films of Carl Dreyer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 93.

In the spiritual context of Dreyer's films, considering the prospect of eternity within a moment might produce an understandable material disbelief. Though such a basic idea as an instant might seem like an easily understandable temporal component, it's actually been argued over in philosophy at least as much, if not more than, eternity.⁷⁴ More than just the passing now, philosophy views the present moment as a limit between past and future that equally defines our experience of time as does our impending death. Summarizing the term's development, Michael North argues that the present has been viewed in two opposing ways: the Aristotelian way, as a quantitative sequence of repetitive instants, and the Kierkegaardian way, a qualitative moment transcending repetition.⁷⁵ Kierkegaard's present is the type that Dreyer explores. Perhaps the principal feature of Christianity, the religion that the atheist Dreyer's films both appraise and criticize, is this possibility of merging eternity with the present. The ideas of the eternal God sending his son to live among mortals, as well as this son's death by crucifixion and subsequent resurrection, are based in the larger belief that eternity is something accessible right now. In other words, the religion believes in the potential conjunction between Heaven and Earth. As another Dane concerned with and criticizing Christianity, Soren Kierkegaard describes the fullness of time, "the moment as the eternal," to be the "[t]he pivotal concept of Christianity."⁷⁶ Though a mere momentary instant, the present moment can take on immense importance for the believer when viewed as a matter of choice. Gilles Deleuze describes its significance well by asserting, "in Kierkegaard as in Dreyer, the true choice, that which consists in choosing choice, is supposed to

⁷⁴ For example see Gaston Bachelard, *Intuition of the Instant*, trans. Eileen Rizo-Patron (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2013); Karl Heinz Bohrer, *Suddenness: On the Moment of Aesthetic Appearance*, trans. Ruth Crowley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Koral Ward, *Augenblick: The Concept of the 'Decisive Moment' in 19th- and 20th-Century Western Philosophy* (Aldershot: Routledge, 2008).

⁷⁵ Michael North, *What Is the Present?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 21–39.

⁷⁶ Soren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, ed. and trans. Reidar Thomte (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 90.

restore everything to us.”⁷⁷ Even if that choice involves choosing death (i.e., martyrdom), the ability to choose in a situation where choice seems impossible transcends all gaps between life and experience: “[a] moment such as this is unique. To be sure, it is short and temporal, as the moment is ... and yet it is decisive, and yet it is filled with the eternal.”⁷⁸ One need not even necessarily maintain Christian interests to consider the fullness of time, as in Walter Benjamin’s more Judaic conception of messianic time.⁷⁹ For Dreyer, moreover, the only place where one can feel eternity in a moment is in the traumatic gap between life and experience. Some characters reach a point where their lives will have been worth living, while others, and there it gets horrific, find their lives nullified in that instant, so that everything they lived through will have never occurred at all. Dreyer’s films thus mark out this tension between redemption and damnation in the figures of the martyr and the witch.

Before its looming death, the martyr faces a problem in its reasons for dying. Through the typical torture methods and forced statements, the martyr’s captors place it on the verge of altering the significance of their life. The enjoyment of torture is organized around preventing the tortured individual from maintaining their life’s value amid such overwhelming anguish. Citing Kierkegaard, Dai Vaughan discusses the martyr’s logic in Dreyer’s characters, who, for him, seem only able to redeem their lives and affirm their significance by dying for them. For example, Dame

⁷⁷ Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, 116.

⁷⁸ Soren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments/Johannes Climacus*, trans. Edna H. Hong and Howard V. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 18.

⁷⁹ See thesis III in Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 4, 1938-1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Walter Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 389–400. Also significant here is Slavoj Žižek’s discussion of Benjamin’s essay, where, “in order to understand a past epoch properly, it is not sufficient to take into account the historical conditions out of which it grew – one has also to take into account the utopian hopes of a Future that were betrayed and crushed by it – that which was ‘negated’, that which did not happen.” Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute: Or, Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London: Verso, 2009), 89–90. The fullness of time is also discussed with the redemptive remainder foregrounded in Giorgio Agamben’s book on St. Paul, Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

Margaret in *The Parson's Widow* (1920) has impossibly survived to be the titular figure by a form of witchcraft that indefinitely extends her lifetime. In the film's narrative, she has outlasted four generations of parsons as their wife. The current parson, and his desired fiancée of similar age, are anguished by the fact that they can only marry each other after the immortal Margaret dies. Near the end, they surprisingly learn from Margaret herself that she, too, wished for the same thing when she was younger. Her first husband, of whom she has fond memories, was forced to marry the previous parson's widow, causing her to wish for the death of the other woman. That way, her wish created the repetitions into a form recalling the latency of trauma, though obviously in a different context from being caused by an event. For Vaughan, the eternal Dame Margaret is in "a situation where her death is, in a sense, the prerequisite of her previous happiness." Her cheating death has turned her brittle and only capable of spreading her misery to others. At the end, she chooses to die "not to fulfil a moral obligation, but to define the significance of her own experience – which, moreover, is of significance only to herself."⁸⁰ Her choosing death effectively changes her figural status from witch to martyr, and thus allows her to redeem the time she's lived through, experiencing it in full as she dies.

Another character in whom eternity in a moment takes place is Joan of Arc. Joan also chooses to die of her own will rather than being imprisoned for life as a heretic. Though coerced by her judges, she ultimately rescinds the confession of guilt she was forced into signing. In the end, "only by dying for her cause and convictions," says Vaughan, "can Joan constitute these as having been worth dying for," this choice redeeming the life she's lived over and above the shadow

⁸⁰ Dai Vaughan, "Carl Dreyer and the Theme of Choice," *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1974, 157. Incidentally, the actress playing Dame Margaret apparently fell mortally ill during the production of *The Parson's Widow* but kept her promise to Dreyer that she wouldn't die before the film was finished. See Tom Milne, *The Cinema of Carl Dreyer* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1971), 57.

of her burning at the stake.⁸¹ It's for this reason that Chris Marker describes *Joan of Arc* as Dreyer's attempt to make a film "in the present of eternity," a temporality accounting for *The Parson's Widow* as well, as both films conclude with a martyr's salvation.⁸² There's also the Finnish woman at the end of *Leaves from Satan's Book* (1920) who chooses to commit suicide rather than potentially betray the Finnish people and her children held captive by Russians. Her act becomes a kind of temporal transaction, granting Satan a thousand years of life back from his otherwise eternal punishment of betraying people across the ages. As the film's villain, Satan is damned by eternity in a moment, evidenced as he has to relive an original moment of betrayal across the film's omnibus narrative from Christ's time to the present day. In these examples, Dreyer's interest in the martyr seems to originate in their (often her) ability to maximize the amount of time a body can experience at once. The martyr's pathways to this moment are certainly fraught with terror, but the eternity they experience in dying closes any potential gap separating life from experience.

The witch, on the other hand, can't make the same claim. It rather suffers a similar fate to the vampire; though unliving a smaller amount of time, accusations of witchcraft result in an equivalent experience to a vampire being buried inside its hourglass. While Dame Margaret and Joan of Arc have a proximity to witchcraft, the women from Dreyer's *Day of Wrath* are the only true witches in his filmography because their time is completely annulled by accusation. The only agency remaining for Herlof's Marte before she's burnt at the stake lies in either accusing someone else of witchcraft or cursing someone remaining in her wake. That way, she winds up cursing the young protagonist Anne's older husband Absalom. Unlike the martyrs before her, Anne is burnt at the stake for supposedly killing Absalom by simply wishing his death, the wish holding almost

⁸¹ Vaughan, "Carl Dreyer and the Theme of Choice," 159.

⁸² Chris Marker, "La Passion de Jeanne D'Arc," *Esprit* 190, no. 5 (May 1952): 842.

a godlike power for Dreyer's thinking. Before this, Anne has an affair with Absalom's son Martin from a previous marriage, only to witness the younger Martin betray her after seeing his father die from her invocation. Through Martin's betrayal, *Day of Wrath* presents another "situation where our present actions alter the significance of our past, since faith broken has never been faith at all."⁸³ Anne's life is not redeemed in the fullness of time, but rather damned to have never occurred; she will have always been a witch in spite of her intimate experience with Martin and previous social respect. While not drowning beneath a cascade of sand, Anne nonetheless unlives too much time at once.⁸⁴ The seamless fade at the film's conclusion from the cross, that symbol of vampiric consternation and Christian salvation, to the witch's stake, one of eternal damnation, shows how thin the margin is between Dreyer's two sides of eternity. Concentrating a lifetime within a moment will either save or kill you, depending on whether death has cheated you out of life.

2.4 The Tick and the Toll: Reanimating Unlived Time

As the anti-forms of cheating death, Dreyer's films further develop two devices for reanimating this temporal form: the clock hand and the funeral bell. According to his biographies,

⁸³ Vaughan, "Carl Dreyer and the Theme of Choice," 160.

⁸⁴ While not necessarily witches or vampires, other Dreyer characters also die by living through too much unlived time. There's the judge from Dreyer's first film *The President* (1919), whose father's dying warning to not make his same mistakes only leads him to die in the same fashion, or the aging artist from *Michael* (1924), whose despairing death occurs simultaneously with his male model and lover leaving to marry a wife. Neither of the two mention any illnesses which would cause these deaths, instead revealing two further ways that one can die from unliving time: one by being sucked into the vortex of someone else's emptying hourglass, the other by a less supernatural form of vampirism.

Dreyer worked as a mechanic before entering the film industry, so one could easily describe his films as technical devices to repairing spiritual gaps between life and experience.⁸⁵ Since its working version is the primary device for registering time's progression, a stopped clock hand appears to measure its stagnation. Most often, a stopped clock indicates either a zone of endless boredom or proximity to some traumatic event, its hand indicating the minute when a natural disaster or otherwise significant death occurred. For his part, the stopped clock in Dreyer's cinema registers the gap between time that's progressed and the amount that's been unlived since it stopped. After *Vampyr*, the device's most notable appearance occurs in *Ordet* when Inger dies giving birth. Her husband, the nonreligious Mikkel, falls into despair, which Dreyer signifies by Mikkel walking up to the wall clock and, without explanation, reaching out to stop the pendulum's sway. Outside of speech, the only sound produced inside the Borgen home is the clock ticking on the wall, making its silence a notably chilling effect on the atmosphere. As many of Dreyer's characters appear to be on trial of some kind, it would seem that Inger's life is the one being judged as cause of her death. But in reality, it's the Borgen father, Morten. He worries throughout the film that neither of his three sons will carry on his brand of faith, one that's partially ostracized him from the local community and church but that he views with a sense of independent pride.⁸⁶ More of a witch than the well-regarded Inger, Morten's intransigence, as well as that of the church toward him, risks undoing the meaning of his lived experience. His sons' misalliance, atheism, and religious madness are each indirect side effects of it. In this way, Inger's body becomes a kind

⁸⁵ See Seth Barry Watter, "Dreyer's Machines," *Film International* 18, no. 4 (2020): 101–13; Jean Drum and Dale D. Drum, *My Only Great Passion: The Life and Films of Carl Th. Dreyer* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2000), 21–36.

⁸⁶ For a discussion of the disparity between the film's disparate faiths, see Daniel Watts, "The Fullness of Time: Kierkegaardian Themes in Dreyer's *Ordet*," *Religions* 10, no. 58 (January 2019): n.p.

of surrogate for the Borgen father's larger spiritual crisis. Unbeknownst to her, she appears to die a martyr's death for Morten's inability to redeem his life.

But instead of the tragic conclusion of *Day of Wrath*, Johannes redeems time for Borgen's family by bringing Inger back from the dead. By simply asking Inger to get up and walk, Johannes's miracle causes Mikkel to believe again ("I've found your faith," he says to his wife) and ensures the younger Anders' wedding to the daughter of Morten's rival. While Mikkel's renewed faith is important to this new beginning for the Borgen family, it's also important that the mad Johannes, believing himself to be the second coming of Christ, needs to become contemporary with the present. He does so by separating his name from the bible passage he leaves as a note before running away in a previous scene.⁸⁷ But the most important aspect for *Ordet*'s conclusion occurs when Anders sets the clock hand moving again. As the device begins working again, Mikkel and Inger embrace, saying amidst its resumed ticking: "Now life begins for us." They repeat the word "life" as if they'd never experienced it before. This moment from *Ordet*, then, speaks to a larger view for Dreyer's cinema in which the clock's ticking holds a necessary life function.⁸⁸ Repairing the time-keeping device makes possible what could be the fullest celebration of cheating death in all of film history. If its vampiric predecessor concludes by burying the vampire under its amassed time, the more spiritual *Ordet* shows the elation and vitality that comes from reuniting a body's life with its experience.⁸⁹ One could easily see Mikkel taking on vampiric attributes after

⁸⁷ See Richard Goodwin, "An Old Film in a New Light: Lighting as the Key to Johannine Identity in 'Ordet,'" *Journal of Religion & Film* 22, no. 2 (October 1, 2018): n.p.

⁸⁸ Carlos Reygadas features the clock in a similar way in his loose *Ordet* remake set in modern-day Mexico, *Silent Light* (2007). In fact, the first thing its protagonist does is get up to stop the wall clock in his home. On the comparison between the two films, see Rick Warner, "Filming a Miracle: *Ordet*, *Silent Light*, and the Spirit of Contemplative Cinema," *Critical Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (July 2015): 46–71; Ian Tan, "Death, Time and the Possibilities of Renewal in Carlos Reygadas' *Silent Light* and Carl T. Dreyer's *Ordet*," *Off/Screen* 20, no. 4 (April 2016): N. p.

⁸⁹ Dreyer moves this life-measuring clock hand backward in his short film *They Caught the Ferry* (1948). In it, a young couple hurries on a motorbike across the Danish highway to catch a ferry at a certain time, but in their haste, they crash into a car driven by death, arriving on time to catch the ferry to the underworld instead. In this film's logic,

his wife's death without necessarily growing fangs. He would cease to fear death, and his inability to grieve would cast a further affective shadow over the Borgen home. While the film's miracle might seem to make it Dreyer's least realistic movie, *Ordet* actually reveals how the phantom experience associated with vampirism can be remedied by making the individual feel the reanimation of the clock's hand.

But in other cases, the tick of time can offer Dreyer's characters no respite, instead indicating death through the toll of a funeral bell. By undoing the sense of un-lived time, it acts as anti-form not by setting time in motion again that was temporarily stopped, but by stopping it conclusively. In the historical time periods Dreyer tends to depict, church bells, and not clocks, served as primary timekeepers for towns and communities. The bell's toll was associated with a variety of different social functions: warning of inclement weather, announcing assemblies, decrees, and judgments, marking hours of prayer, and many more.⁹⁰ Among these many functions, its ringing also burgeoned a recently dead person's soul into the afterlife. A common belief held that evil spirits were averse to a bell's toll and prevented the spirits from corrupting the soul on its way to the afterlife.⁹¹ Townspeople could thus deduce who had died in the community by the number of tolls, ringing once for every year the dead person lived through. Although, the question raised by a bell's toll could be quickly answered with the old *memento mori*: "Do not ask for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."

the motorbike's wheel becomes a type of sped-up clock, rushing the couple all too quickly to the end of their time. For a discussion of the many spinning wheels found in Dreyer's oeuvre, relating them to fortune's wheel more than the movement of a clock hand, see Watter, "Dreyer's Machines."

⁹⁰ Gerhard Dohrn-van Rossum, *History of the Hour: Clocks and Modern Temporal Orders*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 197–216.

⁹¹ Bertram S. Puckle, *Funeral Customs: Their Origin and Development* (London: T. W. Laurie, Limited, 1926), 82.

For Dreyer, if a stopped clock reanimates time's temporary stoppage, then the bell's toll marks the end of time's passage entirely. In a symbolic gesture, the reaper from *Vampyr* rings a small bell to call for the ferry in a way that resounds throughout the setting as though the bell were much larger. He rings it twelve times, once for each position left vacant by the missing clock hand, the bell tolling for the death of time itself as he leaves the town. The silent films *The Parson's Widow* and *Joan of Arc* show bells ringing to mark the martyr's redeemed time, for whom the clock's cessation reaps eternal benefits. The fullness of time saturates the moment of their death; the martyr's experience of time doesn't tick incrementally like a mortal or accumulate in space like a vampire but is felt immanently in its entirety without delay. While neither a martyr nor a vampire, Gertrud escapes from her suffocating environment toward a Paris only designated by the ringing sound of bells outside her home. At film's end, she lives inside a glowing white room so devoid of amassed material it can hardly be considered a living space. Her room is one of Dreyer's many white spaces suggesting some form of afterlife, from the blank walls of Joan's cell and the floor of *Vampyr* to the bleached-out room in *Ordet* where the resurrection occurs. Dreyer's tolling bells thus indicate that the moment of death isn't countable by the clock's ticking, and therefore can't be cheated by tampering with its parts. In some cases, setting time in motion again will only resume the feeling of entrapment inside unlivable life, making the bell's toll the only source of freedom from such a situation.

As the day on which the bell tolls and time ends, Dreyer's films also often conclude on something akin to judgment day. The last possible moment, everyone who has ever lived is to be judged on their lifetimes on this day. While it has a different appearance for different religions, one of the most significant aspects of judgment day for Dreyer's Christianity is the moment when, as the Bible describes, "the books are opened." John of Patmos recounts witnessing it in the book

of Revelations: “[a]nd I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works.”⁹² Now, for Dreyer, everything about this day, its books, judgments, even the day’s arrival, has dubious accuracy. It’s often been noted that many of his films’ opening scenes begin with the opening of a book, like the account of Joan’s trial or the titular leaves from Satan’s book. For Bordwell, Dreyer’s books direct the narratives, “provid[ing] an authority for the impersonal causality, parallelisms, and temporality informing the narrative.”⁹³ The book’s inclusion seems to say about the films’ content: “This really happened.”

But after introducing an origin in the authority of the word, the ensuing visual content of Dreyer’s films always resists that authority. James Schamus shows that the films’ textual realism is always the site of tension, arguing that Dreyer’s philosophy fights against what’s written in these books: “if Dreyer is famous for anything, it is for the intense emotionality with which his films portray the struggles of his heroines against the order of the word.”⁹⁴ Schamus’ evidence comes from moments where written words effectively end a character’s life: the way that Gertrud’s husband’s writing always already subordinates her; the confession Joan is forced into signing; the Finnish woman in *Leaves From Satan’s Book*, a telegraph operator, dying because she refuses to send enemy communications. Dreyer even takes pains to indicate the weakness of the heresy accusations against Joan by including multiple shots of the handwritten “relapsed heretic” sign nailed to her stake. In a close-up shot, the words burn up in the same fire as her body. Instead of

⁹² Rev. 20: 12, KJV, emphasis removed.

⁹³ Bordwell, *The Films of Carl-Theodor Dreyer*, 36.

⁹⁴ James Schamus, *Carl Theodor Dreyer’s Gertrud: The Moving Word* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), 29.

textual authority, the words inside the books of judgement day hold the same potential for cheating death as does a vampire's bite: words contain as much vampiric potential as any horror figure. Even in *Vampyr*, as discussed by Peirse, the *Book of Vampires* that the characters read tells of Marguerite Chopin's haunting the town and her death via a stake through her heart. When Gray reads this book, though, Chopin's death hasn't happened yet, making the book appear to have been written before the film's events occur, reading "about the future as if it were the past."⁹⁵ In these ways, Dreyer's films reproduce events which never happened according to written documentation, but which undid lifetimes in an instant by the falsities of the word. Out of all Dreyer's films, judgement day, the *dies irae* or "day of wrath," is harshest for Anne. After Martin's betrayal, her life is effectively made to have never happened, going down in history as a witch and nothing more. *Day of Wrath* concludes with the haunting possibility that judgement day, "the constantly postponed day" dubbed by Walter Benjamin, doesn't necessarily happen even when it arrives.⁹⁶ At the same time as one can cheat death, one can also be cheated out of life, and death only cares about instances of the former.

Though it's often viewed as an anomaly, this chapter has shown that *Vampyr* is far from an aberrant example of Dreyer's larger film philosophy. Among his more acclaimed works, his lone horror film functions as a forefront example of a career-long interest in the bodily limits of temporal experience. Dreyer's films aren't considered influential to the genre because they remain fixated on the possibility of exceeding the certainty of death to liberating or incarcerating results. As Brinkema points out, describing death as the genre's aesthetic force of possibility, a horror film that doesn't have death in some shape or form as its limit may, in fact, cease being a horror film.

⁹⁵ Peirse, "The Impossibility of Vision," 166.

⁹⁶ Walter Benjamin, "The Meaning of Time in the Moral Universe," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1996), 286-87.

The possibility of evading death would go on to generate many definitive monster figures besides the vampire, i.e., the zombie and ghost, often with religious origins of their own. These figures appear later in this project when discussing Japanese filmmakers. But as the subgenre develops, temporal body horror will again suggest that death need not be the one and only prime mover of horror genre aesthetics. As film censorship lessens in the 1960s and the body horror genre begins taking shape, physical bodies gain their own aesthetic significance for themselves. With body horror, bodily experience can be seen to replace the certainty of death as the genre's aesthetic force of possibility and does so most clearly, and most explosively, in the films of David Cronenberg.

3.0 Chapter Two: We'll Always be Together: Body-Centric Fusion in the Films of David Cronenberg

“It is illness that makes us recognize that we do not live in isolation but are chained to a being from a different realm, worlds apart from us, with no knowledge of us, and by whom it is impossible to make ourselves understood: our body.”

-Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time* (1920)

After the body's experiential limits discussed in chapter one, chapter two explains time's detachability from the body. As the body's incorporeal dimension, time can be embodied to varying degrees, even being, as in Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, lost and later regained. In cinema, David Cronenberg discovers a more unsettling aspect to time's possibility for being lost through his unique “body-centric” film philosophy. Body-centricism entails that, as Dylan Trigg puts it, Cronenberg's films foreground how “the body can become a site of independence, developing its own history, habits, and affects, often in conflict with the manner in which consciousness experiences or remembers those affects.”⁹⁷ In what constitutes the aesthetic force of the body horror genre, the body holds an agency of its own separate from the subjectivity it contains. Yet, what's strange about the subgenre's force of possibility is that it produces an oddly disembodied result. Ironically, Cronenberg's body-centrism creates phantom experiences sensed

⁹⁷ Dylan Trigg, “The Return of the New Flesh: Body Memory in David Cronenberg and Merleau-Ponty,” *Film-Philosophy* 15, no. 1 (February 2011): 83.

as both of the body and not it simultaneously. The more independence the body gains, the more uncanny one's experience of it becomes.

Think of Tom Stall, the protagonist from *A History of Violence*. The film introduces him as an everyman, a small-town diner owner who, unbeknownst to those around him, spent the first half of his life as a ruthless killer for the east coast mafia. When his old enemies arrive at his home looking for revenge, Tom, to the great consternation of those close to him, can't help but engage his old instincts in response to these attacks. Part of the film's haunting power lies in the sheer impossibility that such violence could come from someone they thought they knew to be mild-mannered and peaceful. That way, Tom's experience as a hitman in *A History of Violence* forms a phantom experience in his body, though one from which he feels totally separated. He constitutes one of many Cronenberg characters reckoning with an experience that's simultaneously theirs and not theirs and, noteworthy for my larger project, a time that's variably lost and found again. Whether or not this experience translates to novel diseases or disgusting growths is ultimately less important to Cronenberg's cinema as a holistic filmography than bodily experiences that don't belong to their owners.

Discussing his body-centric filmography, scholarship on Cronenberg has understandably found difficulty in discussing his work in a holistic fashion. Many scholars feel compelled to divide the director into binary oppositions while expressing trepidation toward doing so. The researcher finds not one but an assortment of distinctly different Cronenbergs: a Canadian and American one, a progressive and reactionary one, one of the body and one of the mind, a genre filmmaker and an art cinema director, and so on. As though reflecting one of his film plots, William Beard, for example, pits the Canadian Cronenberg against the American one on the way to arguing that the

Canadian one emerges as the most primary force in the end.⁹⁸ Lianne McLarty, too, divides his work into progressive and reactionary films depending on the origin of the horror: in the female body or the male mind.⁹⁹ It's relatively rare, however, for scholars to approach his work from the standpoint of joining these Cronenbergs in a sustained way. For example, while citing these scholars, Adam Lowenstein tarries with the uncomfortable results of such convergences for our understanding of nation and identity. For him, these movies "insist on imagining Canadian national cinema as an ambivalent dialogue with American genre cinema," and that the horrific bodies within them raise larger questions about what it means to constitute a self or a nation in general.¹⁰⁰ Similarly to *Vampyr* and the vampire figure, then, discussing Cronenberg's unique work requires the thinker to reconceptualize the very concepts they're using to discuss it.

Rather than splitting Cronenberg into further classifications, chapter two gives a name to the conceptual conflation pervading his oeuvre and scholarship on it: fusion. I argue here that Cronenberg's films build an overarching logic for the sensation separating characters from their experience while opening them to that of another. Specifically, this phenomenon appears most clearly in examples where characters fuse, or resist fusing, with time, of which *A History of Violence* provides a chief example. I first define the component parts of the fusion process and then delineate how it produces new ways of transmitting bodily impulses and creating new bodily organs and forms of sex. In the process, the chapter locates Cronenberg's interventions inside larger philosophical discussions of bodily potential, such as duration and organology. Largely

⁹⁸ William Beard, "The Canadianness of David Cronenberg," *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 27, no. 2 (1994): 113–33.

⁹⁹ Lianne McLarty, "'Beyond the Veil of the Flesh': Cronenberg and the Disembodiment of Horror," in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, 2nd ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 259–80.

¹⁰⁰ Adam Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 153.

known for his inventive body horror content, creating new diseases, parasites, and the like, Cronenberg should be just as well known for expanding our knowledge on the mobility of another bodily agent and its pathologies: lost time.

3.1 Breach and Splice: The Components of Fusion

At a basic level, Cronenberg's fusion involves one body fusing with another. The elements can be human, insect, or objects, but the overall point is to create a third entity out of a convergence between two. Since no horror figure exists to personify such a form, I call this third entity the splice. Once fused, a splice lives through an overlapped experience granting it both freedom and constriction. Spliced experience is thus both one's own and that of another; its body both is and is not its own. In the scholarship, Trigg comes closest to a definition: a process "in which the body becomes a strange fusion of *being-in-itself* and *being-for-itself*, both alien materiality and centre of lived experience."¹⁰¹ For example, in *The Fly*, just as memorable as the film's oozing makeup effects is Brundlefly's newly spliced experience of his body. Olympian agility and superhuman strength emerge from the reclusive scientist's body due to his new housefly DNA like it had somehow always been there. Though, to the scientist's chagrin, that physical prowess soon becomes rapid deterioration since a typical housefly lifespan only lasts about a month. But what's important is that Brundle's fusion with the fly makes his experience of his body no longer only his.

¹⁰¹ Trigg, "The Return of the New Flesh," 90, original emphasis.

The Mantle twins from *Dead Ringers* (1988), identical twin gynecologists, also make up a splice together. Their similarity grants them a peculiar freedom: their experiences overlap to such a degree that they substitute for each other in the office, at events, and on dates. One brother even explains this logic as a threat when the other tries to have a meaningful moment all his own: “You haven’t had any experience until I’ve had it, too.” Yet their fusion also creates dependency problems beyond their control. If one twin succeeds in the medical field, the other wallows in debauchery or addiction: when one publishes research, his brother undermines him with new sexual conquests, and when that brother becomes a charismatic teacher, the other develops a narcotics addiction. Neither schizophrenic nor bipolar, the Mantles, effectively, *are* each other. Or better, they are a single entity. Their confusion over who experiences what defines Cronenberg’s spliced entities as the figural forms of fusion.¹⁰²

But before the splice can be born, fusion begins first with a general impetus: the breach. Splicing can’t occur without an opening in what exists, whether in the physical body or in one’s experience of it. For Cronenberg, and more broadly the body horror genre he helped invent, a breach in the body is always a narrative problem.¹⁰³ Unlike the typical desires or needs of most

¹⁰² Even Cronenberg’s approach to adapting literature on film follows this logic. He fuses his film style with content by authors like Ballard, Burroughs, or DeLillo to create a third spliced creature that is the film. He describes his adaptation of *Naked Lunch* (1991) as the result of himself and Burroughs going through the telepod from *The Fly* and fusing into a third creature neither properly one nor the other. Chris Rodley, ed., *Cronenberg on Cronenberg* (London: Faber & Faber, 1997), 162.

¹⁰³ From the standpoint of film form Cronenberg differs his body-centric filmmaking style from others. His directing method requires physical effects and corporeality more than elaborate camera movements or editing techniques. For Cronenberg, these latter aspects only distract from the more important things: “To me, the ‘talking head’ is the essence of cinema. ... I’m not afraid to sit on a close-up and let it happen. If you’ve got the right face saying the right things at the right moment, you’ve got everything cinema can offer.” David Breskin, *Inner Views: Filmmakers in Conversation* (New York: Faber & Faber, 1992). Cited in David Schwartz, ed., *David Cronenberg: Interviews* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2021), 90. From a body-centric standpoint, one could even say that every body is always already breached by its independence from the subject inhabiting it. In turn, all human experience is, at a basic level, fused with and to that of one’s body and should be considered, to varying degrees, of a phantom quality. Body-centrism thus holds much in common with the anti-essentialism put forward in contemporary humanities discourses around the body through which anatomy doesn’t determine experience, as found in, for example, Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

narratives, the narrative breaches of body horror are often more difficult to physically fill or conclusively resolve. Like a physical wound, these narratives can be either sutured with surgery or left to fester and rot with infection. Suffice it to say, though, that Cronenberg leaves his narrative breaches wide open, with *A History of Violence* presenting a primary case. As Lowenstein argues on the film's form, its last moments leave the familiar shot-reverse shot sequence "achingly, awfully open – the film's final shot shows Tom looking desperately toward Edie, waiting for a sign from her about who he is in this once familiar but now completely bewildering setting. The reverse shot of Edie never comes."¹⁰⁴ As a narrative about a spliced character, Cronenberg leaves the breach open at the end between Tom and his family. Its experience is clearly painful for the characters as well as the audience watching it, though it's nonetheless meant as a hopeful moment. In *A History of Violence*'s narrative, the breach is healed by being left open.

But beyond narrative, the breach even more pervades Cronenberg's film bodies. Physical breaches fascinate many characters as they openly infiltrate their flesh in ways ranging from car crashes to performance art surgery. Brundle has the small cut on his back from which the fly hairs begin to protrude, and one Mantle brother has a nightmare where his girlfriend gnaws through an imagined fleshy tissue binding him to his twin brother. Others are more closed-off and need to open themselves to fusion, as in the bodyguard from *eXistenZ* (1999) getting over his breaching phobia, or the insulated Wall Street investor from *Cosmopolis* (2012) who shoots a hole in his hand simply to feel something. Sometimes it's a collective breach a character needs to open up to (*Shivers*, *Rabid* (1977)); others live in isolation as social outcasts because of their breaching capability until they discover how to put their powers to meaningful use (the titular *Scanners*

¹⁰⁴ Adam Lowenstein, "Transforming Horror: David Cronenberg's Cinematic Gestures after 9/11," in *Horror After 9/11: World of Fear, Cinema of Terror*, ed. Aviva Briefel and Sam J. Miller (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 67.

(1981), the foresight of *The Dead Zone* (1983)). The scanner protagonist even creates a new possibility for narrative resolution by fusing his body with that of the villain as a way of killing him, making his own voice emerge from the other's body (this after the villain threatens him with a similar end, "Everything you are is going to become me."). Each film has its own examples of the breach, and it can occur early or late in the narrative. But regardless of when it happens, Cronenberg's film bodies lodge themselves deep inside a breach where the fusion takes place.¹⁰⁵

3.2 Lost Time: Anatomy of an Illness

Now, unlike most of Cronenberg's fusions, Tom Stall from *A History of Violence* isn't a splice made of two separate entities, but of two incompatible aspects of a single one. Though apparently far from the sci-fi body horror of *The Fly*, Tom makes up as much of a sci-fi oddity as Brundlefly by conjoining two senses of time in one body. Tom's breach occurs before the narrative plot begins: he attempted to destroy his experience as a killer long before starting his family. When pressed for an explanation in the hospital by his wife, Edie, he says, "I thought I killed Joey Cusack. I went out to the desert and I killed him. I spent three years becoming Tom Stall. You have to know this, I wasn't really born again until I met you." In this scene, the way he describes his breach makes it not bodily, but experiential. Tom appears here to have attempted to cheat death by killing

¹⁰⁵ Cronenberg's son Brandon, whose own film style strongly resembles his father's, gives the breach a similar importance in his films. *Antiviral* (2012) places great weight on its many needle injections transfusing the bodies of paying customers with celebrity diseases. *Possessor* (2020) likewise emphasizes the fusion procedure undergone by its corporate body possession agent. The procedure through which she merges with the people who she inhabits is successful to such a degree that she needs to perform the same procedure on herself when going home to her personal life. In both cases, the protagonists immerse themselves in experiences not local to their bodies, even masochistically living through their own death from outside it in *Infinity Pool* (2023). See Carlo Comanducci, "Dying Someone Else's Death: Embodied Experience of a Disembodied World in Brandon Cronenberg's *Antiviral*," in *Body Horror and Shapeshifting: A Multidisciplinary Exploration*, ed. Jessica Folio and Holly Luhning (London: Brill, 2014), 25–32.

his experience and being reborn as someone else, all somehow without affecting his body. He doesn't aim to kill himself or his body, but his experience of time. If Tom has in fact been born again, he doesn't realize that the experience he tried to kill remains alive, only lost. Time isn't a living substance that can be killed; like someone on the clock just doing their job, it's largely indifferent to the life and death matters it carries out. It's fitting, then, that the bodily reaction in this scene doesn't come from his body but from Edie's. In response to Tom's revelations, she can't help but run to the bathroom and throw up. Her husband's lost time returns inside her with the nausea of something left undigested decades ago suddenly returning to the surface. Time regained doesn't only appear in the appetizing sweetness of a Proustian madeleine; for Cronenberg it's much more bitter, like the putrid burn of vomit.¹⁰⁶

The hospital scene shows how Tom's attempt to kill his temporal experience goes completely against the way that time works. After a history of debate dating back to the Greeks and Zeno's paradoxes, philosophers have made time and fusion virtually synonymous. Henri Bergson's famous example of sugar melting in water provides the concept's defining image: time doesn't consist of subdivisions around a clock but an indivisible and holistic duration.¹⁰⁷ For Bergson, "the deeper psychic states, those which are translated by free acts, express and sum up the whole of our past history."¹⁰⁸ In his thinking, if we act as though parts of our past never

¹⁰⁶ See the stylistic philosophy of disgust put forward in Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects*, 115–77.

¹⁰⁷ See Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1944), 9–10. Commenting on the example, Michel Serres more explicitly defines time as fusion beyond dissolving carbohydrates in liquid. He asks, "[h]ow can it be that philosophy has taken several centuries to ask that we wait a moment while the sugar in a glass of water melts? How can it be that when faced with such evidence, time itself was not immediately associated with mixture and the fusion of one body into another? ... The intimate fusion of one thing into another, of one flow into another." Michel Serres, *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*, trans. Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 168. For more on time as indivisible fusion, see also Michel Serres, *Genesis*, trans. Genevieve James and James Nielson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 81–122; Thomas Nail, *Being and Motion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 367–420.

¹⁰⁸ Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. F. L. Pogson (New York: George Allen & Co. Ltd., 1913), 185.

happened, if we don't assimilate or fuse with them to some degree, then we are not being true to our experience and will never experience freedom. Rest assured, though, that Bergson doesn't believe literally everything that's happened needs to be absorbed into the present. Events can hold greater or lesser significance to our development, but it isn't redundant to say that, if these events happened, one needs to relate to them like they did. As we've already seen, trauma theory makes clear the many psychic problems that arise from lost experience when the body unwittingly repeats it. In Bergson's thinking, he anticipates Cronenberg's fusion by understanding that one needs to absorb experience, lest they risk feeling the existence of, "within the fundamental self, a parasitic self which continually encroaches upon the other."¹⁰⁹

If time is fusion, then, how does a breach in time occur? The answer is through a period of lost time. Instead of assimilating his time with the mob into his present, Tom Stall seeks to erase these events from having happened, and therefore challenges Bergson's duration. Though not as apparent as Brundlefly, he and Joey Cusack make up just as much of a splice as any other.¹¹⁰ Tom's body reacts to violent situations with a swift brutality impossible for the everyman figure he'd been introduced as to that point. Despite being stabbed in the foot during the struggle in the diner, his breach isn't a skin lesion. That physical breach opens up a deeper wound in time, a disembodied wound whose bleeding Tom never had a chance to experience as such until now. He makes up what Trigg calls a "body out of time," one that shares its experience with another subject existing

¹⁰⁹ Bergson, 166.

¹¹⁰ Instead of holistic duration, Tom believes more in the instant. This is true in more ways than his instantaneous reactions to violence; he believes in new beginnings over extended continuity. Gaston Bachelard contrasts Bergson by emphasizing single creative instants and the power of accidents. For him, "[t]here is but one general law in truly creative evolution—the law that an accident lies at the root of every evolutionary attempt." Bachelard, *Intuition of the Instant*, 13. Nor is Tom the only Cronenberg character to challenge Bergson's thinking. Not incidentally, several of his splices find themselves lumping excessive amounts of sugar in their beverages. In the café scene following his fusion, Brundle heaps spoonfuls of sweetener into his coffee mug, leading his girlfriend to ask, "Do you normally take coffee with your sugar?" The excessive sugar doesn't dissolve but absorbs the coffee just as his insect experience begins absorbing his human one.

before them.¹¹¹ His present uncannily occurs alongside the time of another before him, causing Tom, though not a Lovecraftian madman, to always feel “anterior to himself.”¹¹² For such a figure, the apparently average town of Millbrook, and particularly its dining rooms, quickly become a twilight zone outside temporal boundaries when Carl Fogarty addresses Tom by his prepersonal name.¹¹³ Hearing someone call him Joey Cusack nullifies Tom’s attempt to kill history in an instant. By the film’s conclusion and the uncomfortable reunion at the dinner table, it’s clear that he’ll never again feel the phenomenological sense of being-there in his experience that he felt so strongly at the beginning. The everyday recognitions and intimate family moments might still happen, but from then on, they’ll feel like they happen to someone else, to Joey Cusack and not Tom Stall. *A History of Violence*, therefore, shows the haunting results of a breach in time: experiences usurping the body’s feeling of ownership over them.

Breaches in time like Tom Stall’s often make lost time into a bodily illness. While not the pathology Cronenberg is best known for exploring, complications from not fusing with one’s time take distinct forms in many of his films. Adapting the addictions of *Naked Lunch* perhaps first sparked his interest in the lost time phenomenon. As a drug addict, the film’s writer protagonist, modeled on William Burroughs, attempts to make time stand still. Theoretically speaking, addictions seek to prolong a moment of satisfaction far beyond its usual instantaneity. Sociological studies have discovered that cures for addiction often involve simply recreating the addict’s sense of time. Gerda Reith cites accounts of addicts describing their experience as “a period of lost time,

¹¹¹ Trigg, *The Thing*, 61–102.

¹¹² Trigg, 69.

¹¹³ The frozen clock at the center of Millbrook is also not an incidental prop; Tom effectively tried to leave his experience of time behind in Philadelphia. Cronenberg introduces Tom’s position in the setting by framing him in front of the large town clock whose hands never move. The clock reads 1:15 no matter how thin or deep the sun casts shadows. Though Cronenberg says in his commentary that the actual clock in Millbrook, Ontario, where he filmed the town exteriors, stays frozen in real life, the film’s Millbrook is nonetheless as much a zone out of time as Dreyer’s Courtempierre from *Vampyr*.

an extended present in which time seemed to freeze.”¹¹⁴ In hindsight, the addiction period feels like it never happened, so that addictions begun during teenage years, no matter the age of recovery, cause the user to feel as though they haven’t matured at all since their youth.

This way, like the vampirism discussed in the last chapter, thawing out the addict’s frozen time can make an effective cure for their addiction: “[t]he recovery for addiction was couched in terms of a regaining or re-animation of this sense of time.”¹¹⁵ Alongside being suspended inside this moment, *Naked Lunch*’s protagonist also can’t seem to help repeating the moment when he shoots his wife. His drug use grants him some distance from it, allowing him to feel like it never happened, but only to the point where he feels that he’s escaped the moment entirely: right when he’s about to cross the border out of Interzone, it happens a second time.¹¹⁶ Later, Cronenberg will take a larger interest in traumatized characters who can’t help but repeat moments from their youth they lived through but didn’t experience, and I discuss them in the last section. But for now, it’s important to understand the parallels between trauma and addiction put forward in *Naked Lunch*. By creating a similar latency, addiction turns an impulsive desire into an interminable need just as trauma turns a momentary experience into an endless repetition. They form two ways that lost time becomes a bodily illness with as much destructive threat as a cellular disease.

¹¹⁴ Gerda Reith, “In Search of Lost Time: Recall, Projection and the Phenomenology of Addiction,” *Time & Society* 8, no. 1 (March 1, 1999): 101.

¹¹⁵ Reith, 101. A former alcoholic, Deleuze describes a phenomenology of alcoholism as a physical separation from the present. For him, the alcoholic only lives in the past perfect tense since the addiction causes them to feel as though they’ve already done everything they could possibly do. See Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, ed. Constantin V. Boundas, trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 154–62.

¹¹⁶ Burroughs even equates addiction with the vampire phenomenology from chapter two: “The addict runs on junk time. His body is his clock, and junk runs through it like an hour glass. Time has meaning for him only with reference to his need.” William S. Burroughs, *Naked Lunch: The Restored Text*, ed. James Grauerholz and Barry Miles (New York: Grove Press, 2001), 170.

Cronenberg's extremism then develops the more disturbing prospect that combining trauma and addiction makes for an equally strange cure.¹¹⁷ Beyond the drugs of *Naked Lunch*, Vaughan and the survivors from *Crash* (1996) cure themselves of their trauma by willfully becoming hooked on it. This affliction, while liberating, challenges general understandings of health.¹¹⁸ With every new accident, *Crash*'s characters cease living through their experience altogether, instead immersing entirely in the experience itself: experience without life.¹¹⁹ Here, the fact that they devote all their energy to re-enacting famous car crashes from history (James Dean, Jayne Mansfield) and surrounding themselves with artifacts from historically significant accidents (driving the Lincoln Continental model in which JFK was shot) puts these characters in strange proximity to the vampires discussed in chapter one. There, life without experience defined vampirism, but here, a trauma addict has experiences without living through them, extracting latent experience from time like blood from a throat.

¹¹⁷ Lowenstein suggests that Cronenberg's fusion philosophy creates a new speculative form of therapy and perspective on health. Rather than consisting of separate roles for doctor and patient, Cronenbergian therapy "reimagines therapy's bridge between self and other as something closer to a telepod," a mechanism "for the struggles of indivisible and ongoing transformation rather than the solutions that maintain divisions safely separating self from other." Adam Lowenstein, *Horror Film and Otherness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 103.

¹¹⁸ Catherine Malabou discusses life-affirming results of major accidents as a variation of her concept of plasticity, one of many modes in which the human body exists in malleable ways. See Catherine Malabou, *The Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity*, trans. Carolyn Shread (Cambridge: Polity, 2012).

¹¹⁹ Like Burroughs' addictions, J. G. Ballard's writing also tends to experiment with single moments of time. In *The Crystal World* (1966), for instance, everything that enters one everglade forest winds up crystallizing into a frozen state. Scientists studying the phenomenon describe it as follows: "We now know that it is time ('Time with the Midas touch,' as Ventress described it) which is responsible for the transformation. The recent discovery of anti-matter in the universe inevitably involves the conception of anti-time as the fourth side of this negatively charged continuum." J. G. Ballard, *The Crystal World* (London: Triad Panther, 1966), 85. Influenced by this passage, Mark Dery exemplifies the many Ballard protagonists who attempt to "tear loose from the time-space continuum. In short stories like "The Garden of Time" and novels like *The Crystal World* they cheat death and entropy by crystallizing, metamorphosing into glittering things for whom time itself has been frozen in an eternal now." Mark Dery, "Sex Drive," *21°C* 24 (1997): 51. In Cronenberg, his characters after *Naked Lunch* don't physically freeze with anti-time but live off it like an addictive substance, whether it takes the form of bug powder injections or repeating violent scenes from the past. See also Elana Gomel, "Everyday Apocalypse: J. G. Ballard and the Ethics and Aesthetics of the End of Time," *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 8, no. 1 (2010): 185–208.

In another respect, a trauma addiction removes all limitations on who experiences what. The addict in this case receives satiation from moments that weren't experienced by the people they happened to, and that gain magnitude for those re-enacting them precisely because of the lack of registry. In other words, the crash addicts turn malignant lost time into a life-sustaining substance. These parallels make it less surprising that, during the car wash scene where Vaughan has sex with Catherine, she sucks the crash wounds on his chest in a way resembling Mina Harker in *Dracula* (1897). Vaughan's pallid skin here makes him look less like a human and more like Count Dracula fused with the reanimating science of Dr. Frankenstein. Vaughan even lives in his car, the virtual coffin in which he (un)lives and eventually dies.¹²⁰ Technically speaking, Bram Stoker and the vampire tradition eroticized wounds long before Cronenberg, with the latter extending this interest onto new disembodied forms. In these ways, *Crash's* trauma addiction makes for an uncanny form of recovery. Cronenberg calls it a more active than passive approach to experience: "Instead of just letting it happen to you, you're actively trying to shape it."¹²¹ For those with temporal pathologies, willfully shaping the event over letting it shape you makes for a potentially healing aspect of fusion, though one with an unrealistic ignorance toward life.

Trying to kill time, on the other hand, prevents one from shaping it, and it leads to Tom Stall being totally engulfed by the experience in question. His reluctance to fuse with his life as Joey Cusack causes him to be eventually devoured by it. He can only look on in shame as his family members turn on him despite his action-hero capacity for action. This way, Tom is closer

¹²⁰ Of all Cronenberg's characters, the investor Packer from *Cosmopolis* is closest to a vampire. He, too, rarely leaves his car; the tech-based limousine allows him to manage all his investments from inside its protective frame. The limo functions as a haven from time's passage, another form of the vampire's coffin. Just before shooting Packer, his assassin says to him, "You're like someone already dead. You've been dead a hundred years. Many centuries dead."

¹²¹ Gavin Smith, "Mind Over Matter: David Cronenberg Interviewed," *Film Comment*, April 1997, <https://www.filmcomment.com/article/david-cronenberg-crash-gavin-smith-interview/>.

to the characters of *M. Butterfly* (1993) in Cronenberg's oeuvre; he wishes to, as Cronenberg describes René Gallimard and the Chinese Cultural Revolution he immerses himself in, "[sweep] out the past – viciously, violently, cruelly, completely."¹²² A French diplomat acting as ambassador in China, Gallimard seeks to lose himself in the local culture. When ultimately learning of the actress' trans identity with whom he's having an affair, he disintegrates in prison to the point of splicing himself with the Madame Butterfly role his lover played in the Peking opera. The experience completely absorbs and ultimately destroys Gallimard; M. Butterfly's actions and appearance emerge from Gallimard's body as if he'd been the one really performing them.

For his part, Tom would have made a fitting comrade for the Cultural Revolution. Its emphasis on remorselessly destroying the past and becoming something new fits his own thinking down to the last detail. Though, just as the revolution eventually fused with the old culture it sought to kill, the Communist party of today being completely devoured by a now-monstrous Chinese capitalism, so Tom gets assimilated by Joey and not the other way around.¹²³ He tries to assimilate to the American dream mythology after growing up in the mob with a similar result to the Frenchman entering Chinese culture. In spite of Tom's physical power, that power is passive, not active. With the temporal form of fusion, Cronenberg isn't suggesting that transformation isn't possible; as, in his words, a "card-carrying existentialist," he's certainly a proponent of self-invention and reinvention. Rather, he's more interested in what to do with past experience amid

¹²² Rodley, *Cronenberg on Cronenberg*, 184.

¹²³ While China's economy has stabilized since the revolution period, many contemporary Chinese films express a distinct melancholy for the social comradery that evolved then. Jia Zhangke's films prove exemplary on this point. His characters often experience their present lives as if they didn't happen to them, as evidenced by the alienation from social roles in *Platform* (2000) and *The World* (2004) where meaningful moments in the China of today only seem possible in total isolation or with characters who speak another language. While Jia tends to film these experiences in a style often discussed with reference to realism, and thus appears distant from Cronenberg, he does forge a connection with *A History of Violence* in *A Touch of Sin* (2013), where the alienation from Chinese capitalism explodes into violent impulses that seem completely estranged from people's usual temperaments.

the transformation, lest the lost time gain the disturbing agency of a horror film monster. The logic of these cases shows how pathological lost time consumes these characters' bodies and reduces the subject to a single action it doesn't experience as its own. Though fusion of any kind blurs distinctions between who experiences what, in cases like these, the products of that experience disintegrate into a single foreign impulse.

3.3 Impulses: The Symptoms of Fusion

As a phantom experience, Cronenberg's fusion takes on several symptomatic forms, the first major one being impulses. While his films spend significant time exploring the physical aspects of fusion, as in the characters' new flesh, the behavioral forces resulting from them prove equally important to his film philosophy. As a body-centric film, the impulsive nature of Tom Stall's history of violence exceeds the capacity of his present body. In many ways, his experience takes on an agency of its own as one of the film's main characters. For those closest to Tom, the actions of a seasoned hitman shouldn't be able to emerge so seamlessly from his body. What's more, Tom's violent impulse isn't treated as part of his body alone, but also becomes part of those of his family. His wife and son somehow inherit the violent impulse as though, despite there being no body horror parasites or other horrific agents, suddenly noticing that their bodies host a hereditary disease. For Cronenberg, all it takes to activate this latent impulse is the revelation that Tom killed people for the mob; his experience suddenly becomes theirs. As apparent throughout this dissertation, the impulse's presence will have always been inside the Stall family in retroactive fashion, and this section discusses the properties of this strange inheritance.

Outside Edie's puke, these hereditary effects become most visible in Tom's high-school age son, Jack.¹²⁴ Early on, Cronenberg introduces Jack as a reflection of his father. He's down-to-earth and doesn't take things too seriously. At school, Jack responds to situations with a mature indifference he gets from his father. As the local bully and his minions try to provoke him in the locker room, Jack adds several more insults against himself to disarm the bully and avoid the pointless violence. More secure than his peers, his sense of himself doesn't depend on taking power from others for its functionality. On the verge of adulthood, however, the younger male Stall also feels the need to separate his identity from being fused to that of his father. He feels patronized when made to feel like a son, wincing at the breakfast table when Tom tries to pour him a bowl of cereal and pet his head with affection. Later, as Jack shares a joint with his girlfriend, he expresses with detached indifference how life in the small town feels written out ahead of time: "Eventually, we grow up, get jobs, have affairs, and become alcoholics." Though indifferent to his assumed fate, Tom's son actively controls his impulses early on rather than letting them control him.

But then, Jack changes considerably after learning of his father's violence. Previously modeling himself after Tom, his son now faces the conundrum of how to incorporate this new violence into his identity, since the impulse has, retroactively, always been a part of him. The knowledge unhinges his sense of time and prompts him to live through many moments again as though for the first time. In their next encounter, Jack viciously assaults the bully. As the bullying temperament often originates in a lack of authoritative attention, Jack becomes the terrifying father figure his adversary always wanted but never had. After his outburst, time unravels even more when Tom confronts Jack at home about the incident. He tells his son, "In this family, we do not

¹²⁴ Cronenberg also explores the strangeness of hereditary impulse transmission in *The Brood* (1979) and *Maps to the Stars* (2014), where offspring are similarly always already infected with their parents' afflictions.

solve our problems by hitting people!”, to which Jack sarcastically responds, “No, in this family, we shoot them!” The retort prompts Tom to hit his son for most likely the first time in his life. With a single blow, Tom nullifies Jack’s lived experience as his father’s reflection; there, Tom ceases to be Jack’s father and gets replaced by Joey Cusack. Jack will succumb to his father’s violent impulse once more when later shooting Carl Fogarty. Saving Tom’s life, the moment prompts father and son to share an emotionally cathartic embrace that has the appearance of them having never embraced before. In these ways, *A History of Violence* shows how hereditary fusion makes repeated actions feel like they’re happening for the first time. Like the characters of *Crash* drawing out un-lived experience from other people’s traumas, Tom’s lost time extracts novel experience from actions done many times before.

In a larger sense, Cronenberg’s filmography frequently depicts impulses that seem foreign to the bodies experiencing them. Specifically, his films examine ways in which impulses enter characters’ bodies through the breach. Whether physical or experiential, the breach makes up a zone of the body through which impulses flow freely regardless of their origin. Cronenberg’s career begins by investigating how impulses can spread like an infectious disease and sums them up in single actions running rampant throughout a setting: the kiss in *Shivers*, the bite in *Rabid*. These impulses originate in a breach, whether bursting out from inside the stomach in the former film or growing from a skin-graph scar in the latter. After getting a bioport, a small hole opened in one’s lower back, the bodyguard from *eXistenZ* looks on with bewilderment as he undergoes a series of impulse-transfusions inside the video game. The film emphasizes his estrangement from these impulses through a sense of detachment from his actions: as he eats lunch in a restaurant, he realizes his hands are building a gun out of the leftover bones in order to assassinate someone; as he works on a factory line, he becomes aware that his eyes are looking for items hidden in the

material; as he and the game designer begin to have sex, he finds his body responding to her sensuality with an assertiveness impossible for his timid character to that point.¹²⁵ In these examples, Cronenberg emphasizes less the novelty of the impulses and more the distance from those new impulses that the characters experience. As symptomatic forms of fusion, these behavioral forces extract new potential from their hosts, which then gets externalized further into the world through objects given a similar new utility.

3.4 Organs: The Objects of Fusion

Another symptomatic form of fusion appears in the objects of those impulses. For Sigmund Freud, possibly an early body-centric physician, impulses require an object “in regard to which or through which the instinct is able to achieve its aim,” this aim always being satisfaction.¹²⁶ A word exists for this phenomenon in the form of the fetish, though Cronenberg’s films don’t depict fetishism through the typical lens of objects of desire. Against the term’s popular understanding, a fetish isn’t inherently sexual.¹²⁷ While the general understanding of the term defines it as a

¹²⁵ Mark Fisher cites these detached actions in the process of explaining *eXistenZ*’s capitalist critique. For him, this detachment reveals a strong link between “the scenes in which characters are locked in fugues or involuntary-behavior loops” and “the call-center world of twenty-first century labor in which quasi-automatism is expected of workers.” Mark Fisher, “Work and Play in *eXistenZ*,” *Film Quarterly* 65, no. 3 (2012): 72.

¹²⁶ Sigmund Freud, “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, vol. XIV (1914-1916) (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957), 122. While Freud writes this essay about instincts, he uses the terms “instinct,” “impulse,” and “instinctual impulse” interchangeably throughout his work.

¹²⁷ The fetish and fetishism have a long history in scholarship with backgrounds in psychoanalysis, Marxism, and the more contemporary object-oriented ontology. See Henry Krips, *Fetish: An Erotics of Culture* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999); Alfonso Maurizio Iacono, *The History and Theory of Fetishism*, trans. Viktoria Tchernichova and Monica Boria (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Sean Braune, “Fetish-Oriented Ontology,” *Open Philosophy* 3, no. 1 (2020): 298–313. For a study of fetishism in film studies, see Laura Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity: Cinema and the Mind’s Eye* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

substitute for a body part with which one invests erotic impulses (as in the typical women's shoes or items of clothing), the term more broadly refers to any object channeling the force of an impulse. Like the compulsions with which they're associated, fetishized objects have the power to constitute and destroy the subjects handling them: dollar bills, bottles of alcohol, the religious cross, good luck charms, even, in certain cultures, automobiles. When outlaws and sheriff flash their guns in a western film, the fetishizing close-ups gives both the object and their wielder a higher power, whether good or evil, of crime or the law. Though they can certainly be eroticized, the fetishization process more generally raises everyday objects to a heightened level of power. They don't just reach an impulse's aim but, by way of extension, allow that impulse to reach its full potential.

From his body-centric standpoint, Cronenberg's approach to fetishes is more literal: instead of treating body parts as objects, he instead makes objects into bodily organs themselves. When one hears his film characters discuss the need for "inner beauty" pageants, it's more than mere facetiousness: his philosophy makes fetishes out of interior bodily organs.¹²⁸ He's the only film director in history to have an entire museum exhibit dedicated solely to the otherworldly objects he invents for his films.¹²⁹ But at deeper level, the alterity of his objects comes more from the fact that his characters often physically fuse with objects and treat them as attached to their bodies. Virtually all his films invent a unique object/organ hybrid granting the characters access to new impulses. Far from the mechanical technology of real video games, the gaming console from

¹²⁸ Cronenberg believes so strongly in the fetishistic power of inner beauty that he's even made his own organs into objects of economic exchange by turning his extracted kidney stones into NFTs. Now being auctioned off as art, his organs harken back to questions raised by Marcel Duchamp's readymade objects as to what can and cannot constitute art. See Collin Frazier, "Bodymades: The Essence and Anatomy of David Cronenberg's Latest NFT," *SuperRare Magazine* (blog), March 29, 2022, <https://superrare.com/magazine/2022/03/29/bodymades-the-essence-and-anatomy-david-cronenbergs-latest-nft/>.

¹²⁹ See the object section of the Cronenberg virtual museum from the Toronto International Film Festival, Caroline Seck Langill, "Cronenbergian Artifacts," David Cronenberg: Virtual Exhibition, March 18, 2014, http://cronenbergmuseum.tiff.net/artefacts-artifacts_m-eng.html#4.

eXistenZ consists of a living lump of flesh; instead of flicking on a power switch, one rubs and massages the gamepod to power on, typically resulting in the device squirming and squeaking in response; one doesn't connect to the gamepod through electrical outlets, but rather by plugging directly into one's body; the gamer then fuses body and gamepod through a fleshy tube resembling an umbilical cord. It's through this embodiment process, a fusion of technology and flesh, that the characters of *eXistenZ* transfer new impulses into their bodies. The objects of *Videodrome* (1983) hold a similar function: the TV producer protagonist famously grows a vaginal slit in his stomach in which he plugs VHS tapes. Breathing, moaning, and pulsing with eroticism, these tapes contain "Videodrome," a TV frequency that transfers impulses into the producer's body. They transform him from media producer to corporate hitman to political assassin by fusing the tapes with his body. There's also the fetishized typewriters from *Naked Lunch*: after injecting bug powder into his veins, the writer witnesses his typewriter turn into a talking insect. It dictates instructions to him for enacting new sexual impulses; it even generates what could be the strangest organ/object of all, the "sex blob." An ineffable fusion of typewriter, centipede, and male and female sexual organs, it constitutes "a kind of all-purpose sexual thing" according to Cronenberg.¹³⁰ Stating his belief that humans can grow new organs at will, Cronenberg's fusions culminate in the character from *Crimes of the Future* (2022) being able to grow completely new ones.¹³¹ Also played by Viggo Mortensen, he can even digest plastic with the aid of a bed made of massaging flesh and a crunching, skeletal breakfast chair. Most characters, of course, don't have his "accelerated evolution syndrome," though they do make up human game consoles, cassette players, and typing machines. This is how one creates an organ according to Cronenberg's films: by fusing the body

¹³⁰ Breskin, *Inner Views*. Cited in Schwartz, *David Cronenberg*, 96.

¹³¹ See Rodley, *Cronenberg on Cronenberg*, 80–84.

with an object. Though, as with all fetishes, the satisfaction these objects bring can and often does prove deadly.



Figure 6 - The gamepod in *eXistenZ*

Though it doesn't feel like a body horror film, *A History of Violence* makes novel organs out of firearms. Though no one's flesh fuses with objects in the manner of a telepod, the film treats guns as parts of Tom Stall's body, though ones that he's estranged from. While it may seem that Tom's violence comes from somewhere deep inside him, Cronenberg believes the contrary: "you would feel that if he had that incredibly violent temper and anger and rage for example that it would come out in those twenty years he tried to be Tom. ... Now it comes back only because it's a tool he needs, that he has."¹³² Those all-too familiar American fetishes, guns return the violent impulse to Tom's body rather than it being inherent within him. When the robbers attack Stall's Diner, Tom uses the closest objects nearby to stop them. Since it happens to be in his hand, he slams a hot coffee pot into the one robber's face. The blow knocks the gun loose, and Tom, without hesitation, picks it up and kills them. It's only after doing so that he first seems to notice the gun

¹³² David Cronenberg, David Cronenberg: A Director Looks at Violent America, interview by Brad Balfour, November 3, 2005, <http://www.popentertainment.com/cronenberg.htm>.

in his hand. It's the first time he's held a gun in decades, but in the instant his Joey Cusack experience returns, it feels like it never left his hand.



Figure 7 - Tom and the gun in *A History of Violence*

Therefore, Tom's lost time turns guns into the equivalent of phantom limbs. For Trigg, the body remembers a missing limb despite its removal: "Neither solely a memory bound in the past nor simply a stimulus-response in the present, the phantom limb establishes itself as a spectral agency working between the psychological and the physiological."¹³³ The phantom limb itself is independent of the body and has a mind of its own, a point making the body's experience of said limb independent from it as well. Using these weapons thus makes Tom's experience more of a phantom one spawned by traumatic structure. Moreover, it's also true that new organs have a similar phantom effect to that of missing ones. Later, after shooting his mobster brother, Tom can't just drop the gun and leave it. Cleaning his wounds in a pond behind the house, he forcibly hurls the gun into the water as though ripping out a malignant tumor. Nonetheless, the gesture feels futile because his body can't kill lost time; though necessary, the gesture is simply another attempt to avoid the inevitable fusion. Whereas earlier it turned his son's repetitions into novel experiences, here Tom's lost time draws out repetition from his own experience where novelty should be.

¹³³ Trigg, "The Return of the New Flesh," 87.

In these ways, *A History of Violence* makes up one of many instances where Cronenberg depicts guns as bodily organs, if only ones uncomfortably attached. Though he often associates them with powerful impulses, in his films there's nothing natural about holding a gun. Often, movie characters tend to use guns without thinking. They're treated as everyday objects and even mediums for heroism in ways appropriate to action films. Against this unreflective utility, Cronenberg's films view guns as equal parts philosophical problems and bodily organs, and attributes this perspective to his Canadian identity. Discussing Canada's different historical development from the U.S., itself a fusion of American, British, and French influence, he suggests "[p]erhaps that is why we have a totally different attitude toward guns and gun control here than you do in the States. We just don't expect citizens to have guns. We don't even think of it as a right. It's odd. Why would you want a gun?"¹³⁴ Against the Americanized second nature, Cronenberg's characters fuse these weapons with their bodies in variously weird ways. There's first the flesh gun from *Videodrome*. In piercing close-up, drill-pointed tubes splice the producer's hand with the gun he pulls out of his stomach. The flesh gun contains liberating impulses he doesn't have access to otherwise, though they also destroy him and his environment. Later in *eXistenZ*, Cronenberg moves from flesh to bone with the gristle gun providing the bodyguard access to the instincts of a secret agent.¹³⁵ In *A History of Violence*, instead of flesh or bone, the gun is made of

¹³⁴ George Hickenlooper, "The Primal Energies of the Horror Film: An Interview with David Cronenberg," *Cinéaste* 17, no. 2 (1989): 4–7. Cited in Schwartz, *David Cronenberg*, 35.

¹³⁵ The guns in *Cosmopolis* pose a further development in Cronenberg's organ/objects. As a security measure, Packer's bodyguard uses a voice gun activating only upon hearing a password spoken by the gun owner's voice. Later, when conversing with his assassin at gunpoint, Packer tells him that the violence harbored in his gun doesn't belong to him or his body proper: "The gun is all wrong. You're not a violent man. ... The crime you want to commit is cheap imitation. It's a stale fantasy. People do it because other people do it. It's just another syndrome, it's a thing you caught from others." The assassin then retorts that Packer has overlooked the role history plays in his impending death, making the film's anti-capitalist violence just as much a product of lost time as Tom Stall's. Other guns prevent future events, like the rifle used by the seer in *The Dead Zone* to shoot the next Adolf Hitler; though missing with his aim, he nonetheless hits his target. But outside of Tom, no one simply picks up a gun and uses it without considerable trepidation and debate. *Cosmopolis* features a good forty minutes of discussion between Packer and his killer, an eternity in screen time, before cutting to black and ending the film without anyone visually pulling the trigger.

another no less bodily substance: a time gun. It forms a fetish for Tom's lost time, the object through which it leaks like discharge from a decades-old wound. When his fingers pull the trigger, his extremities don't feel like they belong to his body, yet they nonetheless do. Therefore, he can't simply detach himself from these weapons. They constitute the objects Tom must fuse with, implying with horror that, no matter what he does, as one *Dead Ringers* twin says to the other, they'll "always be together."



Figure 8 - Cronenberg's fusional guns

By turning objects into organs, Cronenberg intervenes within a philosophical history of the organ. Here, Deleuze and Guattari immediately come to mind. They define the organ by its specified function inside of a larger system akin to a machine part: "the organs of life are *the working machine*."¹³⁶ Used to perform everyday tasks, the general sense of an organ establishes a means of action and a tool for making, doing, or working. Etymologically, the word comes from the *-erg* linguistic root meaning "to do" associated with words like the "urge" to act, "ergonomic," and "energy," as well as words with more bodily referents like "surgery" and "orgasm." When the body doesn't make or do in a way disposed toward economic production, as in Deleuze and Guattari's body without organs, it still produces. Only, its products become forces, impulses, and

¹³⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 1983), 33, original emphasis.

affects that tend to surpass and even overwhelm utilitarian requirements.¹³⁷ This way, a body without organs challenges the capacity and limits of what a body can do, and that way classifies among the figural bodies discussed in temporal body horror.¹³⁸

Yet, it's less known that Deleuze and Guattari's organ work follows a larger discussion of organs in philosophy. Thinkers have talked and written about them since the time of the Greeks, long before even their contemporary prominence in medical discourse. They make up their own mode of study that Leif Weatherby calls a philosophical organology.¹³⁹ Organs, it turns out, have not always referred to individual units of a body's functioning, but rather mean more generally "elements with variable functions. ... Organology is a study of infra-objects, of usable parts that might be repurposed depending on the body or process at hand."¹⁴⁰ Organology, therefore, studies a thing's potential as a tool of thought, adaptation, or creation in a way making any object into a potential body part.¹⁴¹ In light of this definition, Cronenberg intervenes in organology by depicting the study at its literal extreme. He takes seriously the proposition that any usable part can be

¹³⁷ Beyond his thinking on organs, Deleuze makes for a helpful thinker of fusion. He describes his approach to philosophy as a monstrous form of conception in a way resembling *The Brood*, creating monstrous thought-children with the philosophers and artists he writes about. See Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations 1972-1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 6. Most of his books are the result of fusing with thinkers like Bergson, Proust, Nietzsche, Foucault, and Bacon in his books about them. But his most productive fusion books are those written with Guattari. Few co-author pairs have been as influential to the point where the two can be said to constitute a third entity with its own adjective, "Deleuzoguattarian." See "Letter to Uno: How Felix and I Worked Together" in Gilles Deleuze, *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews 1975-1995*, ed. David Lapoujade, trans. Ames Hodges and Mike Taormina, Revised edition (New York: Semiotext, 2007), 237–40.

¹³⁸ Anna Powell, for example, applies the body without organs concept to Cronenberg's films in Powell, *Deleuze and Horror Film*, 62–108. But Cronenberg's later career, and the idiosyncratic ways of curing trauma, appears to verge from the resistance to use and productivity emphasized by Deleuze and Guattari. Films like *Crash* and *A History of Violence* seek out new ways through which trauma can be put to new use, otherwise it threatens to use the subject. See also the psychoanalytic rejoinder to Deleuze in Slavoj Žižek, *Organs without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences* (London: Routledge, 2004).

¹³⁹ Leif Weatherby, *Transplanting the Metaphysical Organ: German Romanticism between Leibniz and Marx* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 1–46. Weatherby draws this mode of study out of thinkers like Aristotle (the philosophical tools he calls the *organon*) and Descartes (the pineal gland found at the center of the brain believed to be the source of human thought) as well as German philosophy in the 18th-19th centuries.

¹⁴⁰ Weatherby, 9.

¹⁴¹ For an organological discussion of cinema's political potential, see Bernard Stiegler, "Organology of Dreams and Archi-Cinema," *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, no. 47 (January 2014): 7–37.

repurposed, meaning, for him, that the human body can physically fuse with just about anything. Through fusion, his films tap into new potential for what can constitute the subject of an experience, the object of an action, and even here what constitutes a part of the body. In the process, his organological extremity places him not within philosophical science-fiction, but rather explicates an unsettling component of body horror not often associated with it: potential. Beyond Dreyer's experiential capacity, Cronenberg's films intend to find out what a body can experience at the limit between itself and another with which it's spliced. As a result, the phantom experiences depicted in his films which accompany new organs mirror a similarly phantom sensation of actual organ transplants.¹⁴²

People, of course, can become objects too, and Cronenberg depicts them as objects for a specific impulse: narcissism. Malignant narcissists often designate a particular person as the object through which their self-inflating impulse reaches its aim: they treat people like virtual organs of their body. Like Cronenberg's other fusions, these figures, too, feel detached from their experience; a narcissist can only experience something by witnessing it through a mirror, whether of glass or flesh. As object-relations analyst Otto Kernberg shows, the narcissist's mirror prevents them from living through their own experience, a point causing many to suddenly realize, late in life, a feeling of having never lived their own life.¹⁴³ Here, we find the same sense of lost time found in addiction and trauma for both subject and object.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² Though not necessarily horror films, phantom experience often pervades more general organ transplant films like Denis' *The Intruder* (2004), Almodóvar's *All About My Mother* (1999), and Iñárritu's *21 Grams* (2003). See Patricia Pisters, "Heart of the Matter: Bodies without Organs and Biopolitics in Organ Transplant Films," *Angelaki* 19, no. 4 (October 2, 2014): 23–36.

¹⁴³ Otto F. Kernberg, "The Destruction of Time in Pathological Narcissism," *Cliniques* 14, no. 2 (December 7, 2017): 32–52.

¹⁴⁴ It's for this reason that having a narcissist parent makes for a disturbing experience of fusion, as found in temporal body horror films like Aronofsky's *Black Swan* (2010) or Bergholm's *Hatching* (2022).

In *Dead Ringers*, the charismatic Mantle twin Elliot makes for a textbook narcissist. A notorious womanizer, it might seem that women constitute the objects of his impulse. While he tends to not take them seriously, the real object of his powerful charm is his shy brother, Beverly. Spending all his time around someone who looks just like him, Elliot uses Beverly as a human mirror. When initiating Beverly to have sex with someone he's already seduced, Elliot gains satisfaction from his brother taking his, Elliot's, place rather than becoming a separate person of his own. The film is full of strange threesomes involving the brothers: in one, Elliot hires female identical twins from an escort service, though asking one to call him by his name and the other by his brother's. Beverly's flesh thus acts as a reflective surface that his brother vicariously lives through. It's therefore significant the way that Claire Niveau, in love with Beverly, rebuffs Elliot's advances when he visits her on a film set.¹⁴⁵ Elliot looks at his reflection in her actual mirror while asking her, "Am I really that different from Beverly?" Following Claire's affirmative answer, Elliot begins to fall apart. Her ability to see their difference forms the breach in Elliot's narcissism, the crack in the mirror supporting his sense of time.¹⁴⁶

While Tom Stall may not be the narcissist Elliot Mantle is, his relationship with Joey Cusack holds close similarities. Despite its identity theme, mirrors remain conspicuously absent from the Stall household and the rest of *A History of Violence*. The fact that Tom can't stand to see his face plastered on the front page of the news goes beyond just being afraid of discovery. His

¹⁴⁵ When Beverly explains his fused experience with Elliot by saying "We've always shared everything," Claire frees herself from the specular game by not participating in it. She responds, "I'm not a thing."

¹⁴⁶ Cronenberg's film set in Hollywood, *Maps to the Stars*, appropriately acts as a character study of narcissistic temperaments. The aging actress Havana Segrand is particularly significant. The daughter of a dead famous actress, Havana strives to play her mother's role in a biopic about her life even though the mother abused her as a kid. Because of this ambivalence, her mother's ghost haunts and berates her for wanting to undergo such a fusion: "You hate me, yet you're desperate to be me?" Havana also goes from throwing a vicious tirade against someone one moment to treating them like her best friend the next; she dances and sings upon learning of someone's death because it means she's being offered the role to play her mother. Her assistant eventually kills her with a fitting object: the knock-off Oscar award statue on display in Havana's living room.

problem is one of identity, not difference, meaning he's more in Beverly's place having never really lived his life while being a mobster in Philly. Shame, as much as time, limits Tom's experience, shame forming a dialectical splice with narcissism as the cause of the other.¹⁴⁷ Shame is the reason why he became "Tom Stall" in the first place. He therefore survives the film's conclusion, though not without feeling once again like the vicarious object someone else lives through. Tom's experience doesn't belong to him in the end: his relationships, possessions, achievements, and even, of equal interest to Cronenberg, his sexual encounters with his wife.

3.5 Reenactment: The Erotics of Fusion

Just as often as Cronenberg creates new objects for his characters' impulses does he also depict new ways of enacting more recognizable ones. Any definition of Cronenberg's fusion would be incomplete without discussing the eccentric ways in which his characters have sex. From a general standpoint, Katherine Monk argues that characters in his films never remain the same after having sex: "all sex in Cronenberg movies is transformative, and usually in a bad way."¹⁴⁸ I extend her point here by arguing that this sex is more than just transformative: it's fusional. While Cronenberg's own comments on sex are idiosyncratic, his film characters give a much clearer

¹⁴⁷ See Andrew P. Morrison, *Shame: The Underside of Narcissism* (Hillsdale, NJ: Routledge, 1989). Alenka Zupančič further considers narcissism in terms of its apparent opposites. For her, "it cannot be reduced to a simple 'love of oneself,' since this love cannot be entirely separated from hatred and destructive aggression directed against oneself." Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan* (London: Verso, 2000), 153.

¹⁴⁸ Katherine Monk, *Weird Sex and Snowshoes: And Other Canadian Film Phenomena* (Vancouver: Raincoast Books, 2002), 236. Cited in Bart Beaty, *David Cronenberg's A History of Violence* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 108.

philosophy of the act.¹⁴⁹ In *A Dangerous Method* (2011), Carl Jung and former patient and lover Sabina Spielrein theorize sex when Spielrein, now an analyst on her own, visits Jung years after their therapeutic affair. They discuss Spielrein's publications together, and their dialogue is worth quoting in full:

Jung: Explain this analogy between the sex instinct and the death instinct.

Spielrein: So, Professor Freud claims that the sexual drive arises from a simple urge toward pleasure. If he's right, the question is: why is this urge so successfully repressed?

Jung: You used to have a theory involving the impulse toward destruction and self-destruction: losing oneself.

Spielrein: Well, suppose we think of sexuality as fusion, losing oneself as you say, but losing oneself in the other. In other words, destroying one's own individuality. And wouldn't the ego, in self-defense, automatically resist that impulse?

Jung: You mean for selfish, not for social reasons.

Spielrein: Yes. I'm saying that true sexuality demands the destruction of the ego.

Jung: In other words, the opposite of what Freud proposes.

By no means a dogmatic Freudian, Cronenberg neatly summarizes his own approach to cinematic sex in this exchange by making it part of a larger philosophy of fusion. In a general sense, this scene reveals how sex makes for the most recognizable way human bodies fuse together. Typically, sex detaches its participants from their experience and immerses them in that of another. Alongside sharing love, this is how it provides pleasure: it's a mode of departing from experience, if only for the duration of the act. This scene makes sense of the strange eroticism surrounding Cronenberg's many oddly self-destructive characters: in sex as in fusion, one loses oneself in another.

Yet, as important as losing oneself in the other person is to sex, Cronenberg's fusions contain an equal propensity for losing oneself in time. Often resulting from trauma or a more general breach in time, Cronenberg characters find their sexual impulse altered beyond

¹⁴⁹ See session two in Breskin, *Inner Views*. Cited in Schwartz, *David Cronenberg*, 82–110.

recognizable forms. Instead of a sexuality driven to fuse with other people, these characters find themselves compelled to fuse with traumatic moments in time, moments through which they, or even others, have lived but didn't experience. *Crash* is, for sure, the primary case: after their accidents and interactions with Vaughan, the survivors feel compelled to eroticize car crashes and only have sex in crashed cars. Vaughan describes the crash as a form of sexual liberation: "a fertilizing rather than a destructive event, a liberation of sexual energy mediating the sexuality of those who've died with an intensity that's impossible in any other form." His followers reach the point where what could be called time sex becomes their only accessible mode of satisfaction. As J. G. Ballard describes in a similar occurrence from *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1969), the sex act after trauma becomes, for its participants, "a dual communion between themselves and the continuum of time and space which they occupied."¹⁵⁰ Beginning the movie unable to climax no matter who they pair with, James and Catherine are rejuvenated by the car crash. It opens a gap in them between life and experience and allows them to detach from themselves enough to climax once again. Theirs is a satisfaction that's simultaneously already happened but not yet been experienced.¹⁵¹ James even widens the gap after Vaughan's death by reincarnating him; he repairs Vaughan's totaled Lincoln from the scrap yard and swerves madly on the road before crashing into Catherine. Arguably Cronenberg's most inventive compulsion, the car crash cures the couple's inability to climax by redirecting the sexual impulse from losing themselves in other people to losing themselves in time.

¹⁵⁰ J. G. Ballard, *The Atrocity Exhibition* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006), 57.

¹⁵¹ Jack Reynolds uses this terminology when writing a phenomenology of the event. He describes the event as a moment that "never actually happens or is present; it is always that which has already happened, or is going to happen." Jack Reynolds, *Chronopathologies: Time and Politics in Deleuze, Derrida, Analytic Philosophy, and Phenomenology* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011), 108.

Despite *Crash*'s unparalleled alterity, it's not an isolated instance of Cronenberg characters losing themselves in this way. He works out two basic outcomes of time sex dependent on the participant's will: one removing all agency from the character and one reinstating their agency. In the first case, the traumatized protagonist of *Spider* (2002) is fused with the moment from his youth when (presumably) he kills his mother. As a child, Spider can't process the fact that his caring mother also has a sexual side to her. He mentally splits her into two different women upon seeing her go out with his father, one maternal and the other vulgar, each played by the same actress, Miranda Richardson. Everything after this early moment becomes fused together with everything that came before. Spider can't help confusing every woman he meets as an adult with this original fusion. He even comes close to re-enacting his mother's murder by confusing his landlady for her, the landlady also being played in that moment by Richardson. In his trauma, Spider's life continues while his experience remains stuck in a single moment. It prevents him from experiencing any sexuality of his own and traps him inside a temporal spider web.

But Cronenberg also views a liberating aspect to losing oneself in time less deadly than those of *Crash*. Sabina Spielrein in *A Dangerous Method* feels a similar liberation to the crash survivors and cures her hysteria by forming her sexuality around the moment causing the hysteria. Originally unable to speak of it, she reveals to Jung in analysis that her father habitually hit her as a child and that she perversely enjoyed it. Unable to fully experience that moment at the time, her body rebels against her as an adult, shown in the opening scene shouting and crying uncontrollably as she's carried into Jung's clinic. Her analysis and subsequent affair with Jung then grant her agency over her body and her time. In Buñuelian fashion, Spielrein asks Jung to beat her when they meet for a tryst and, that way, willfully relives the moment in question rather than letting it prevent her from living. Despite its appearance, the act is more a form of activity than passivity.

One imagines that Spider could cure his own sexual-temporal entrapment by willingly re-enacting something resembling the moment haunting him. Otherwise, as trauma studies attests, he will only continue to act out the violent scenario without being aware of it. When Cronenberg's films rework the sexual impulse, there's often a simple line between active and passive: one can either be lost in time or lose oneself in it.¹⁵²

Perhaps the most discussed scenes of the film, the sex in *A History of Violence* features both outcomes of time sex. Reflecting on their origins as a couple, Tom and Edie's sex scenes move in a decomposing trajectory: from active and healthy re-enactment to a passive and pathologic one. Early on, the two share a close bond together. Edie picks him up after work one day saying their kids will be out of the house. When he asks where they're going, she says, "We never got to be teenagers together. I'm gonna fix that." At home, she dresses in a cheerleader outfit and the two have sex while playfully acting like they're in high school. Less dangerous than reliving car crashes, Tom and Edie experience the teenage years they never lived through together; they willfully lose themselves in time by loving each other like it was their first time.

After Edie witnesses her husband unleash Joey Cusack, though, Tom's lost time draws the same violent impulse out of her. After dissuading the local sheriff from investigating Tom's past, Edie becomes disconsolate, slapping Tom away as he tries to calm her. The two become violent and wind up having rough, carnal sex on the stairwell. Unlike the previous play acting, here they

¹⁵² With time sex, Cronenberg appears to show his influence by another Canadian director: Atom Egoyan. Many of Egoyan's films study characters with perplexing sexualities built around a moment of loss. The protagonist from *Calendar* (1993), for instance, recently divorced from his wife, invites a different woman from an escort service to his home every night for dinner, only to pay the woman to leave the table and pretend to talk to someone on the phone in another room. In *Exotica* (1994), a man creates a strange way to stay connected to his long since dead wife and daughter. He pays his niece to pretend to babysit for him while the niece actually sits alone inside his empty house. In the meantime, he visits a cabaret where the woman who used to babysit his real daughter now works as a dancer, and with whom he shares a strange and unspoken bond. Egoyan's characters replace the objects of their affection with moments reminding them of those objects.

have real, adult sex influenced by a violence that was lived but not experienced. This time, the couple becomes lost in time against their will; this isn't sex with Tom, but sex with Joey, experiencing their first time together for real. As when embraced by Jack, Edie also embraces Tom for the first time here, though without necessarily wanting to. They unwillingly experience each other's bodies as though they'd never been intimate before, even though they clearly have been for decades. In this passive sense, then, time sex gives an unsettling initial quality to intimate moments experienced many times before; again, unlike the sweetness of lost time, here Edie and Tom's intimacy becomes the coldness and cruelty of a shared origin that could never have happened. As the other side of time regained, the strange feeling of this sex scene comes from its retroactivity.

On top of this feeling, the moment's haunting originality carries over long after the embrace concludes: by the film's end, the entire Stall family has become evidently, and quite passively, lost in time. In the final scene, everyone freezes when Tom walks into the kitchen; no one can physically move until the daughter sets Tom's place at the table. The fully set table marks the new, or the true, beginning of the Stall family, though, if in the beginning was the word, here there are no words. The scene's oppressive weight makes it feel less like an origin than the massive singularity of a black hole. At this broader level, *A History of Violence* reveals one final symptom from Tom's lost time: the separation of beginnings from their origins.

The question remains how one can fuse with such a violent background outside living a lifetime prison sentence. If Tom's cure were to look anything like these other examples, he would have to find some way to willingly relive his violent experience again in continuity with his contemporary life. In Cronenberg's fusional logic, only then would Tom become the subject of his experience again. One could envision him leaving the restaurant business to do undercover work

for the law, infiltrating the mob as "Joey Cusack" from the other side. He could even exorcize his experience through tattoos on his body that externalize the brutality of his life story. This is, of course, the role Viggo Mortensen plays in Cronenberg's next film, *Eastern Promises* (2007), which, as many scholars have discussed, functions as a virtual sequel to *A History of Violence*.¹⁵³ In either case, though, as with all Cronenberg's fusions, his experiences will have ceased feeling like his own. *Eastern Promises* concludes with Mortensen at the head of a family for which he can never be physically present. His character does form a strong tie with the nurse and the orphan she adopts; though they share a passionate moment before separating for good, there's no question of their ever meeting again. For Tom and Edie, it remains open what a third sex scene between them would look like, since the playfulness of the first scene and the ferocity of the second are clearly outside the scope of possibility. Though the film refrains from envisioning this scene, it likely won't still feel like their relationship belongs to another place, another time.

In sum, the logic of Cronenberg's fusion creates many implications for temporal body horror. Through body-centrism, they hold philosophical weight for both understanding Cronenberg as a filmmaker and the body horror genre he inspired. Fusion begins with a breach in the body, physical or experiential, and splices the subject with another element. As a particularly temporal illness, it then detaches the body's impulses, particularly the sexual impulse, and further creates new organs out of external objects. As seen in *A History of Violence*, fusion also produces strange new possibilities for a spliced experience of lost time. It pulls out novelty from repetition,

¹⁵³ *Eastern Promises* can even classify as the antithesis of *A History of Violence* because of the primary absence of guns. Despite a film filled from beginning to end with mob activity, the many battling goons use only knives. On the connection between these films, see Lowenstein, "Transforming Horror"; Ernest Mathijs, *The Cinema of David Cronenberg: From Baron of Blood to Cultural Hero* (London: Wallflower Press, 2008), 225–56; Kristin Thompson, "Cronenberg's Violent Reversals," *Observations on Film Art* (blog), October 18, 2007, <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2007/10/18/cronenbergs-violent-reversals/>.

repetition from novelty, and origins from the middle of a timeline. There are abundant possibilities for future work on any of these subjects branching off from fusion. The concept of the breach, whether of the narrative, body, or experience, would make an illuminating further mode of study for a more general philosophy of body horror. The function of impulses in cinema feels equally immense for other films outside Cronenberg, especially New French Extremism and the Japanese New Wave. While the phantom experiences discussed so far lead to unsettling conceptions of how bodies experience time, the sheer materiality of time becomes a further body horror element inside films from a country with its own traumatic history: Japan and Japanese horror. In the next chapter, I discuss the ways in which memory affects bodily experience when it becomes an illness of its own in the films of the “David Cronenberg of Japan,” Kiyoshi Kurosawa.

4.0 Chapter Three: Antimatter and Memory: The Traumatic Philosophy of Emptiness in the Films of Kiyoshi Kurosawa

“Zero is the number which belongs to the concept ‘not identical with itself.’”

-Gottlob Frege, *The Foundations of Arithmetic* (1884)

After the previous chapter discusses the results of Cronenberg’s body-centric film philosophy, chapter three materializes the place of memory within body horror. A more recognized temporal aspect of the body, memory generally refers to the way we retain experience. As Henri Bergson shows, our memories of the past exist parallel to what we do in the present, so that when confronted with something in the present, we tend to reach automatically into the past for ways of responding to it.¹⁵⁴ While memory may not be a physical organ, it’s nonetheless a material experience stored within the body. By depicting this material in image form, one can’t help but notice that the films of Kiyoshi Kurosawa are filled with a strangely material form of emptiness. Whether empty spaces, objects, or even human bodies, voids of all kinds seem to constitute his films’ primary subjects. In another respect, Kurosawa makes films about memory. They often feature characters who have forgotten some experience, or whose memories have been appropriated for a new purpose. Helping pioneer the Japanese horror boom at the turn of the 20th century and continuing to forge an acclaimed career afterward, Kurosawa develops these strands of emptiness and memory into an overarching philosophy spanning his filmography. For him,

¹⁵⁴ Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 170–232.

memories are material suffused inside people's bodies, and this correlation enriches his filmmaking oeuvre in significance while hollowing it out in content.

Take the example of Kunihiko Mamiya from *Cure*. Mamiya poses a frighteningly unique threat by familiar horror film standards. An amnesic hypnotist, he hypnotizes people into remembering traumatic experiences they've forgotten, while he himself is prey to a powerful amnesia. In the film's content, Mamiya induces his victims to act out these traumas without remembering anything about himself or their actions afterward. He is, in this way, a figure of emptiness. Lacking the ability to remember, he claims to be an empty person, constantly, but not quite passively, repeating questions like "Where am I?" and "Who are you?" just after his interlocutors have answered them. In Akira Mizuta Lippit's terms, "Mamiya returns memories and desires (and later future images) to his victims from the outside; he restores to his victims an unfamiliar interiority, like an X-ray image. An outside interiority."¹⁵⁵ Mamiya's emptiness and opaqueness to meaning renders him somewhere between empty and full, void of memory but full of trauma. By personifying the act of forgetting, he incarnates the figural form of Kurosawa's philosophy of emptiness. Like Cronenberg's lost time, then, forgotten memories aren't eradicable like more common material objects, and this chapter posits that these films, especially *Cure*, create further idiosyncratic "cures" for recollective illnesses.

Scholarship on Kurosawa's films has largely discussed them through traumatic Japanese history, gender and genre, and the ethics of drawing meaning out of them. As in the other directors I've discussed, scholars writing on his films have needed to coin new terms and concepts to describe their film form and content. In large part, they require tarrying with paradoxes, whether a vision of the unseeable (Lippit's "avisuality") or a type of seeing which avoids interpreting

¹⁵⁵ Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Atomic Light (Shadow Optics)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 145.

(Aaron Gerow's "dis/continuity").¹⁵⁶ There are also different paradoxes of space discussed in relation to origins and history by Chika Kinoshita and Adam Lowenstein. Kurosawa's characters simultaneously erase the history of their spaces to put them to new use (Kinoshita's "non-originary aesthetics") and remain entrapped by this history that has come to pass but which nonetheless comes back (Lowenstein's "temporal crossroads").¹⁵⁷ Therefore, the "X" sign that the hypnotized of *Cure* carve into those they kill is as much a symbol for the individual film as it is for Kurosawa scholarship: it requires concepts to overlap to make sense of its enigmatic content.

Chapter three thus enters this conversation by developing an overlapping paradox of its own: the material emptiness of traumatic memory. More than everyday memories used to respond to the present, traumatic memory classifies as a type of matter that feels more like antimatter. As discussed to this point, trauma isn't simply a terrible event, but a delay between the event's occurrence and someone's experience of it, something that one's lived through but can't be claimed as one's own. Cathy Caruth describes it as an event "experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again."¹⁵⁸ Following Caruth's definition, I argue that the emptiness pervading Kurosawa's cinema materializes unclaimed, and unclaimable, experiences of traumatic memory. I do this by building Kurosawa's philosophy of emptiness through several forms and their origins in memory: empty characters I call philosophical zombies, the forgotten spaces these characters inhabit, and

¹⁵⁶ Aaron Gerow, "Kurosawa Kiyoshi, Dis/Continuity, and the Ghostly Ethics of Meaning and Auteurship," in *The Global Auteur: The Politics of Authorship in 21st Century Cinema*, ed. Seong-Hun Jeong and Jeremi Szaniawski (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 343–59.

¹⁵⁷ Chika Kinoshita, "The Mummy Complex: Kurosawa Kiyoshi's *Loft* and J-Horror," in *Horror to the Extreme: Changing Boundaries in Asian Cinema*, ed. Jinhee Choi and Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009), 103–22; Adam Lowenstein, "Spaces of Violence: History, Horror, and the Cinema of Kiyoshi Kurosawa," in *Killer Images: Documentary Film, Memory, and the Performance of Violence*, ed. Joram ten Brink and Joshua Oppenheimer (London: Wallflower Press, 2013).

¹⁵⁸ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 4.

the forms of materialized emptiness they encounter there, specifically light and water. These concepts produce, in turn, corresponding representational crises created by traumatic memory: crises of signification, memory, and form. Ultimately, this chapter contests Kurosawa's marginal placement as a filmmaker and philosopher within Japanese film history and also intervenes within trauma studies by exemplifying his philosophy of emptiness as a phantom bodily experience.

4.1 The Philosophical Zombie: A Linguistic Body

Firstly, Kurosawa personifies his philosophy of emptiness in the form of an empty character: the philosophical zombie. The figure originates from his later sci-fi film *Real* (2013). Borrowed from English (*firosafikaru zonbi*), the concept refers to an empty character who is, quoting the film, "pure appearance with no internality," "a kind of symbol" populating the memories of a comatose patient in place of a real person being remembered. Their faces are blurred and don't speak or respond to anything, representing placeholders of life rather than actually being alive. Though these figures originate in the memory worlds of *Real*, the philosophical zombie's overarching form appears repeatedly across Kurosawa's oeuvre. One finds examples in the jellyfish from *Bright Future* (2002), the tree from *Charisma* (1999), the mummy in *Loft*, the artificial body in *Doppelganger* (2003), the screensaver dots in *Pulse* (2001), and the aliens from *Before We Vanish* (2017). These empty figures encompass perfect amoebas whose emptiness doesn't so much drive the films' narratives forward as it presents an unanswerable question, an ontological problem that its characters attempt, and often remain unable, to solve.

Then there are the many idiosyncratic ghosts populating Kurosawa's films who often appear as ordinary, flesh-and-blood people indistinct from the living. These ghosts are, for the director, distinctly Japanese, and therefore aren't necessarily envisioned to inspire emotions like fear or horror. The genre with which they're associated serves a largely different purpose in Japanese film history than that of the west. The term *horā* wasn't even introduced into the Japanese language until the 1960s, though films that feel like horror movies were still made there going back to cinema's origins. In Japan, these films are known as *kaiki* films and have a specific generic definition not the same as "horror." For Michael Crandol, "[u]nlike horror or *kyōfu* cinema, which is defined by the emotion it is meant to produce in its audience, the word *kaiki* by definition points to an atmosphere of the strange and bizarre, rather than the emotional affect of horror."¹⁵⁹ Not seeking to create fear, Kurosawa's ghosts don't attack like monsters do in American horror films, but rather do something, in his words, "much more terrifying:" they "just sit there," so that "[y]ou have no chances of running away or fighting it; you're stuck with it forever" and that "the best you can do is figure out a way to co-exist with them."¹⁶⁰ That way, not to be confused with western zombies, Kurosawa's ghosts are in fact in fact strong examples of the philosophical zombie figure I'm defining here. Jared Rapfogel defines Kurosawa's ghosts as well as his philosophical zombies by way of describing *Bright Future*'s jellyfish: "Alive, but with no capacity for self-expression, their mode of perception is incommunicable. They are infinitely suggestive, blank screens collecting the characters' (and the viewer's) projections, while remaining stubbornly, tauntingly

¹⁵⁹ Michael Crandol, *Ghost in the Well: The Hidden History of Horror Films in Japan* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 39.

¹⁶⁰ Kiyoshi Kurosawa, "Land of the Dead: An Interview with Kiyoshi Kurosawa, interview by Paul Matthews," *Reverse Shot*, 25 2005, <http://www.reverseshot.org/interviews/entry/1503/kiyoshi-kurosawa>.

separate, possibly even unaware of anything outside of themselves.”¹⁶¹ Somewhere between alive and dead, aware and unaware, the philosophical zombie makes up a figure of simultaneous horror and philosophy.

Mamiya, for his part, manifests the quintessential philosophical zombie by inhibiting signification. His existence consists of wandering aimlessly and asking people questions while missing the interiority, or self-knowledge, that would classify him among living humans. To all intents and purposes, Mamiya moves, speaks, and acts like a human, but even a passing conversation with him quickly raises doubts. He neither remembers, experiences, nor preconceives anything: he, somehow, simply is. This way, Mamiya and the other philosophical zombies present ambiguously horrific figures specific to Kurosawa’s films.¹⁶² For Eugene Thacker, *Cure* exists among the ranks of horror films like *The Blob* (1958), *The Thing*, or more recently *It Follows* (2014) about unnamable beings he calls “conceptual aberrations.” Instead of a typical horror monster defined as an aberration “of nature, the unnamable creature is an aberration of thought. The classical creature-features still retain an element of familiarity, despite the impure mixture of categories (plant, animal, human) Films featuring unnamable creatures, by contrast, contextualize the monster in terms of ontology (form-without-matter, matter-without-form).”¹⁶³

¹⁶¹ Jared Rapfogel, ““Do I Exist?”: The Unbearable Blankness of Being in Kiyoshi Kurosawa’s *Bright Future*,” *Senses of Cinema*, July 26, 2004, http://sensesofcinema.com/2004/53rd-melbourne-international-film-festival/bright_future/.

¹⁶² Though it rarely appears in other films, the philosophical zombie has a history as a thought experiment in philosophy. See David J. Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Robert Kirk, “Zombies,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2021 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2021), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2021/entries/zombies/>; Robert C. Stalnaker, “What Is It like to Be a Zombie?,” in *Ways a World Might Be: Metaphysical and Anti-Metaphysical Essays*, ed. Robert C. Stalnaker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 385–400.

¹⁶³ Eugene Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet: Horror of Philosophy Vol. 1* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2011), 130.

Unnamable figures are arguably even more disturbing than namable ones because words don't exist, or don't necessarily work, in a way that would allow us to understand them.

Now, unlike other conceptual non-entities, Mamiya's resistance to signification gives him a unique capacity for absorbing experiences in his body that don't belong to it. With no possibility for experiencing anything himself, he functions as a virtual channel for transmitting the voids escaping others' conscious experience. Trying to comprehend Mamiya in conceptual terms only creates the empty void he needs for entry into another's body and mind. For example, detective Takabe, *Cure's* protagonist, specifically takes a conceptual route to investigating Mamiya: "All I want is to find words that will explain the crimes." Yet, attempting to find these words leads him to eventually reincarnate Mamiya and absorb his hypnotic abilities after finally killing him. The more Takabe studies up on Mamiya, digs through his apartment, and reads his grad school thesis, the more he opens himself for Mamiya to learn about him, or rather, to learn about the aspects of Takabe to which Takabe himself has no access. That way, their bodies and their minds become interchangeable; when Takabe indicates during interrogation that he wants to know what's inside Mamiya's head, Mamiya puts his finger on the detective's forehead, asking with intimidating laxity, "Here?" As a figure of traumatic emptiness, then, the philosophical zombie's power doesn't lie so much in a physical threat to the living body, though it does sometimes exude a form of poison in tree or jellyfish form. Instead, its is a conceptual power capable of absorbing and being absorbed by the unclaimable words, experiences, and understandings forming material voids inside people.

At a figural level, Kurosawa's philosophical zombie shifts the criteria for what constitutes a zombie. Certainly not a human though not quite a monster, zombies are commonly understood as a form of the undead somewhere between life and death. They seek out sources of nourishment around which they gather in massive hordes, creating new zombies out of those whose body they

consume. What's become known in scholarship as "zombie theory" defines the figure by its origins in Haitian voodoo as well as by its continual evolution in various cultures around the globe. In her introduction to the anthology *Zombie Theory*, Sarah Juliet Lauro argues that the zombie has never been understandable in a single way. As a figure with as many meanings as it has accumulated bodies, it "generalizes the specific, rendering the individual into a blank, evacuating it of specific content and rendering it an icon, a floating signifier, rather like the personal pronoun 'I.'"¹⁶⁴ Ironically, by closely resembling the word "I," zombies lack the possibility for experience that definitively makes someone an "I." While these figures tend to maintain their basic premise of being prey to a single consumptive impulse, the details of their origins function like a changeable palimpsest for those permitted only a minimal experience of being an "I" (slaves, refugees, workers) as well as an index for the multiple in general turning the "I" into a "we."

Though not succumbing to the need to consume, Mamiya's philosophical zombieism intervenes in zombie theory by taking the figure's blank multiplicity literally. He knows neither who he is nor who anyone else is, even after he's been provided this info with certainty. Much like the word "I," though unable to use it to describe himself, he maintains his existence only through whoever is speaking at the time; hypnotization typically begins when he asks his victims to tell him about themselves. Instead of feeding on living flesh, Mamiya subsists on experiences missing a first-person pronoun. As his victims describe themselves, he excavates the traumas buried within their words (the *kanji* characters making up the film's end credits notably appear to have been slashed open). For instance, Mamiya discovers that his doctor originally wanted to be a surgeon as a mode of taking revenge against men for gendered discrimination, and that detective Takabe

¹⁶⁴ Sarah Juliet Lauro, "Introduction: Wander and Wonder in Zombieland," in *Zombie Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sarah Juliet Lauro (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), xix.

lives as a virtual non-person between contrasting social roles. Under interrogation, Mamiya reverses the power distribution by pointing out Takabe's difficulty in balancing police work with caring for his mentally ill wife: "You do it by keeping your work and your home life completely separate. The detective or the husband...which is the real you? Neither one is the real you. There is no real you." In these unsettling ways, Mamiya's empty body functions as the grammatical "I" for all the experiences his interlocutors can't claim as their own.¹⁶⁵ This is why his victims can't remember anything about their actions afterward: by putting the experiences into words for the first time, providing them with a speaking subject, Mamiya then acts out the traumas through their bodies. One can call it an experience without a body, a zombie experience as variation of a phantom one. If zombies form multitudes by generalizing the specific and consuming from the outside, Kurosawa's more verbal zombies embody the first-person subject for voids people can't experience as their own, but that consume them from the inside.

Kurosawa's sci-fi film *Before We Vanish* provides a further example of the philosophical zombie's lexicographic existence. The film's aliens invade Earth by, in their words, "taking" linguistic concepts from people and making them forget the words about which they complain most. They do so in a physical way recalling Mamiya: placing a finger on people's foreheads. Whether work, family, ownership, or the difference between self and others, the words they take had previously entrapped the humans saying them as well as those around them. Therefore, forgetting the words' meanings makes up a strange form of cure, since, upon losing the words'

¹⁶⁵ *Cure*'s isn't the only cinematic zombie epidemic to originate in words and language. Words themselves are sources of infection and contagion in Bruce McDonald's *Pontypool* (2008). Characters find themselves getting stuck on and repeating certain words before eventually attacking and eating those around them. The film's protagonists avoid infection by repurposing each word in the English language, including their own names. See Eugenie Brinkema, "Kill Is Kiss, Words Are Rats," in *Michel Serres and the Crises of the Contemporary*, ed. Rick Dolphijn (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 71–92.

meaning, they also appear to lose their sense of themselves. For example, the protagonist's boss has a peculiar conception of "work." It causes him to play power games and harass female workers to ensure their submission. After her alien husband takes the concept from him, the boss turns into a virtual child, running around the office and destroying all the company's work on display. As the aliens explain, he technically already was a child who wanted to be freed from his fraught understanding of "work." Resembling Lippit's description of Mamiya's mode of curation, the characters in *Before We Vanish* are here cured of themselves, forcing them to, often beneficially, rebuild themselves from scratch.¹⁶⁶

Returning to this chapter's temporal form, *Cure*'s mutation of zombie theory intervenes in the figure's traditional lack of memory. Mamiya's blank tendencies differ from those found in other film zombies, such as those populating George A. Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978). Being drawn to Pittsburgh's Monroeville Mall by vague memories of shopping there, Romero's zombies make for a well-known critique of consumerism. As the characters say of the monsters' motive, "they're after the place. They don't know why, they just remember. Remember that they want to be in there." Discussing the neuroscience of these zombies, Timothy Verstynen and Bradley Voytek cite Romero's films to define the zombie by its inability to create new memories in a way akin to the anterograde amnesia from Chris Nolan's *Memento* (2000).¹⁶⁷ Zombies remember how to walk, move, and consume, but remain unable to create new memories or act on the present in novel ways. While the zombie can vaguely remember oft-frequented places like the mall, they can't put those memories to use in ways that haven't already occurred. This point explains why

¹⁶⁶ Lippit, *Atomic Light*, 155.

¹⁶⁷ Succeeding *Cure* by only a few years, *Memento*'s amnesiac Leonard joins Mamiya as another philosophical zombie of temporal body horror. Only, in Leonard's case, his insides are outside by being written on his body in the shape of tattoos detailing his life story. Instead of having the ability to manipulate those around him, Leonard's emptiness opens him up to people manipulating him.

zombies will quickly forget about chasing a victim due to a wandering attention span: “only immediate events are available to act upon.”¹⁶⁸ It also explains why the only way to effectively kill a zombie is by aiming for its head instead of the heart or other organs.¹⁶⁹ As an embodied experience, the zombie’s lumbering form of action isn’t caused by a lack of memories, since it doesn’t technically lack them, but rather the ability to use them.

In a similar way, memorial aberrations lead to easy misunderstandings about trauma. An experiential void, trauma is a feeling that something horrible occurred but with uncertainty as to what or when. As we’ve seen thus far, Caruth defines traumatic memory through latency. For her, “[t]he historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all. ... If repression, in trauma, is replaced by latency, this is significant in so far as its blankness – the space of unconsciousness – is paradoxically what precisely preserves the event in its literality.”¹⁷⁰ If someone can’t remember a traumatic event, it’s because the event occurred to their body, but not to their mind. It’s the equivalent of a momentary amputation of the mind from the body. Therefore, the term “repressed trauma” one hears in everyday parlance isn’t an accurate phrase. Traumatic experiences can’t be repressed, only deferred, postponed to a later date.

Trauma is, that way, not an event remembered but an action repeated. One can respond to its repetitions in either of two paradigms famously put forward by Dominick LaCapra: acting out

¹⁶⁸ Timothy Verstynen and Bradley Voytek, *Do Zombies Dream of Undead Sheep?: A Neuroscientific View of the Zombie Brain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 199.

¹⁶⁹ The brain’s relation to memory is frequently misunderstood. Bergson specifically shows that the brain isn’t a storage space for memories, like a hard drive holding files, but an organ bringing memories to consciousness for action purposes. For Bergson, the conscious brain “no longer represents our past to us,” as in the hard drive metaphor, “it acts it; and if it still deserves the name of memory, it is not because it conserves bygone images, but because it prolongs their useful effect into the present moment.” Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 93. For a contemporary scholar reaching the same conclusion without recourse to Bergson, see Dean Buonomano, *Your Brain Is a Time Machine: The Neuroscience and Physics of Time* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018).

¹⁷⁰ Caruth, “Introduction,” 8.

or working through. In acting out, one re-enacts the past without knowing it, making “tenses explode, ... as if one were back there in the past reliving the traumatic scene.”¹⁷¹ In working through, one regains an ability to classify time and thus to act differently: “one is able to distinguish between past and present and to recall in memory that something happened to one ... back then while realizing that one is living here and now with openings to the future.”¹⁷² The key distinction between the two lies in distinguishing a sense that time has passed. By using one’s experience to act differently in the present, they prevent the experience from, effectively, using them.

In contradistinction to the typical zombie, then, Mamiya is a true amnesiac. Though he shares the zombie’s blank experience, he can’t rely on memories like habitually flocking to a shopping mall. He remembers how to walk and speak but has no personal referents for those abilities to act upon. Instead, Mamiya’s inability to use his own memories becomes, in the film’s variation on zombie theory, a novel ability to put the traumatic experiences of others to use. He experiences what his victims act out, leaving all memory of the action without a body to use it. Mamiya, therefore, incarnates and preserves in his body the material voids, deferments, and latencies preserved within those around him, a process that unwittingly compels them to act out the traumas. The real object of Takabe’s investigation is thus the subject of all events that aren’t experienced when they happen and that fundamentally aren’t able to be experienced inside of a tense called the present. It only makes sense, then, that words fail the detective along the way.

To be sure, Mamiya isn’t the only Kurosawa character whose lack of memory alters their motor capacities. As with the impulses of Cronenberg’s films, many find themselves moving in what appear to be impossible ways for the people acting them. There’s the uncanny freedom

¹⁷¹ Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 21.

¹⁷² LaCapra, 22.

evinced by those who've had concepts taken by the aliens in *Before We Vanish*. There, the alien invasion causes mass amnesia where Japanese hospitals become chaotically filled with empty people who've forgotten who they are. Its aliens extract impossible movements from the human bodies they possess, as in the giggling teenage girl who outmans and disarms the cops and gangsters trailing them without so much as breaking a sweat. *Tokyo Sonata* (2008) also extracts atypical actions from the nuclear family's bodies: the flawless Debussy performance from the younger son, the janitorial movements from the patriarch, the elder son's unexpected patriotism in joining the US army, and the loyal housewife driving around in a stolen convertible with a convicted felon. The artificial body from *Doppelganger*, which the protagonist earlier spent all his effort working to humanize, gets released from its human constrictions in the end, alongside the protagonist who's now himself free from his inhuman labor conditions. These cases reflect an argument made by René Thoreau Bruckner that amnesia in cinema can also spawn a radical opening onto the new.¹⁷³ Through these further variations, the emptiness of Kurosawa's philosophical zombies functions around two poles of creation and destruction, generation and repetition. His philosophy of emptiness isn't an inherently negative or nihilistic one, though its first incarnation in *Cure* comes closest to bridging an ambivalent gap between the two poles.

¹⁷³ René Thoreau Bruckner, "Lost Time: Blunt Head Trauma and Accident-Driven Cinema," *Discourse* 30, no. 3 (2008): 373–400.

4.2 The *Muselmann* and the Crisis of Signification

Through the philosophical zombie, Kurosawa enters a longstanding conversation in philosophy around the concept of nothing. While its origins date back to early philosophy, the 20th century gave nothingness a central importance for philosophical thinking it didn't have previously.¹⁷⁴ Phenomenological thinkers like Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre locate nothingness at the core of our being, the element both granting us freedom and condemning us to it.¹⁷⁵ As an underrated influence on these thinkers, Bergson points out that “[p]hilosophers have paid little attention to the idea of the nought. And yet it is often the hidden spring, the invisible mover of philosophical thinking.”¹⁷⁶ More recently, Ronald Green goes so far as to differentiate nothing from nothingness, as well as putting forward the possibility that something claiming to contain everything can also contain nothing.¹⁷⁷ Moreover, following World War II, approaches to nothingness became a staple of the Kyoto School of Japanese philosophers through an influence by Zen Buddhism.¹⁷⁸ For each of these modes of thought, though it may appear without substance, the concept of nothing affirmatively matters as much as anything.

¹⁷⁴ For a history, see Roy Sorensen, *Nothing: A Philosophical History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

¹⁷⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Gramercy Books, 1994).

¹⁷⁶ Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 275.

¹⁷⁷ Ronald Green, *Nothing Matters: A Book About Nothing* (Winchester, UK: John Hunt Publishing, 2011), 217–48.

¹⁷⁸ Key works on nothingness by Kyoto School thinkers include Kitaro Nishida, *Intelligibility and the Philosophy of Nothingness: Three Philosophical Essays*, trans. Robert Schinzinger (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1958); Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, trans. Jan Van Bragt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Shinichi Hisamatsu, “The Characteristics of Oriental Nothingness,” ed. Gishin Tokiwa, trans. Richard DeMartino, Jikai Fujiyoshi, and Masao Abe, *Philosophical Studies of Japan 2* (1959): 65–97. For work bridging between eastern and western nothingness, see Joan Stambaugh, *The Formless Self* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999); Eugene Thacker, *Starry Speculative Corpse: Horror of Philosophy Vol. 2* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2015), 62–100.

In terms of embodying nothingness, Giorgio Agamben goes furthest in his concept of bare life and its personification in the *Muselmann*. The *Muselmann* of the death camps is a living corpse, a person who's still alive but been reduced by their extreme situation to a "husk" or a "shell." In Agamben's terms, "[a]t times a medical figure or an ethical category, at times a political limit or an anthropological concept, the *Muselmann* is an indefinite being in whom not only humanity and non-humanity, but also vegetative existence and relation, physiology and ethics, medicine and politics, life and death continuously pass through each other."¹⁷⁹ In Agamben's philosophy, the *Muselmann* is the figural form of the concept of bare life, which, under modern regimes of power, conjoins biological status with political status. If one can't fit into authorized ideas of health and wellness, then they aren't considered among the realm of the human, making bare life a constitutive exception associated with "the peculiar privilege of being that whose exclusion founds the city of men."¹⁸⁰ But in a further way, the *Muselmann*'s emptiness reveals an undiscussed result of trauma's effect on the body. More than the usual symptoms of forgetting and acting out, a body deferring experience to this ineffable extent makes up a virtual channel through which conceptual categories pass. In its traumatic experience, then, signifying concepts don't stick to the *Muselmann* because it indefinitely postpones its experience. It gives a body to a crisis of signification.

As the closest a human can get to embodying emptiness outside of death, the *Muselmann* holds obvious similarities to the zombie. Agamben cites Holocaust survivor Primo Levi describing the figure in a way strongly resembling the zombies of horror films: "Their life is short, but their number is endless; they the *Muselmann*, the drowned, form the backbone of the camp, an

¹⁷⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 48.

¹⁸⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 7.

anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical ... One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death.”¹⁸¹ As in the previous section, the difference between these two figures lies in the physical causes of their emptiness. While the zombie can’t turn memories into new actions, the *Muselmann*’s empty status originates in an inability to do the same with emotions.¹⁸² In figural forms of emptiness, therefore, something misfires within their ability to use mental components like memories or feelings.

But at another level, these empty figures are so confounding that they require a different mode of looking in order to be seen. Their material emptiness appears as what Lippit calls “avisuality,” which is not invisibility, but “a specific mode of impossible, unimaginable visibility.” Drawing the concept out of Japanese visual culture and its unwavering attempts to imagine the flash of the atomic bomb, he goes on: “presented to vision, there to be seen, the avisual image remains, in a profoundly irreducible manner, unseen. Or rather, it determines an experience of seeing, a sense of the visual, without ever offering an image. A visibility without images, an unimaginable visibility, and images without visibility, avisuality. All signs lead to a view, but at its destination, nothing is seen.”¹⁸³ Product of a different historical horror of World War II, the shadows burnt into the ground at Hiroshima and Nagasaki give this concept its own figural form. But nonetheless, Agamben views the *Muselmann* as a figure who equally cannot be looked at. Described by survivors as the Holocaust’s only “true witness,” the *Muselmann* is also

¹⁸¹ Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz and the Reawakening: Two Memoirs*, trans. Stuart Woolf (New York: Summit Books, 1986), 90. Cited in Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 44. See also Jon Stratton, “Trouble with Zombies: *Muselmann*, Bare Life, and Displaced People,” in *Zombie Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sarah Juliet Lauro (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 2017), 246–70.

¹⁸² Here, Agamben cites another survivor, Bruno Bettelheim: “Prisoners entered the moslem stage when emotion could no longer be evoked in them. ... Other prisoners often tried to be nice to them when they could, ... but they could no longer respond to the emotional attitude that was behind someone’s giving them food.” Bruno Bettelheim, *The Informed Heart* (New York: The Free Press, 1960), 156. Cited in Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 57.

¹⁸³ Lippit, *Atomic Light*, 32.

paradoxically the one who cannot bear witness because they are no longer human, and therefore cannot be witnessed, seen, or acknowledged.¹⁸⁴ By being reduced to bare life, the *Muselmann* becomes avisual, and therefore incarnates material emptiness.

For his part, Kurosawa creates his own image of avisuality when depicting Mamiya. If not too contradictory to say so, Lippit's mode of blind seeing appears clearly in the scene where Takabe first meets Mamiya. As a corollary to his character's conceptual approach to investigation, *Cure* presents Takabe as a detective with exceptional vision. Early on, while the other cops scramble to find the film's first perpetrator out of focus and in the foreground, Kurosawa frames Takabe in focus in the shot's background. The detective calmly opens a small cupboard inside which the killer hides; he makes the perpetrator appear out of nowhere, virtually pulling a rabbit out of a hat. But when he later searches for Mamiya, Takabe's visual capabilities strangely fail him. The scene shows Mamiya inside a storage room cloaked completely in shadow, only illuminated by the light at the end of his cigarette *a la* Hitchcock's killer from *Rear Window* (1954). After some verbal disagreement between the two over the definition of "here," Takabe becomes frustrated when Mamiya remains nowhere to be found.

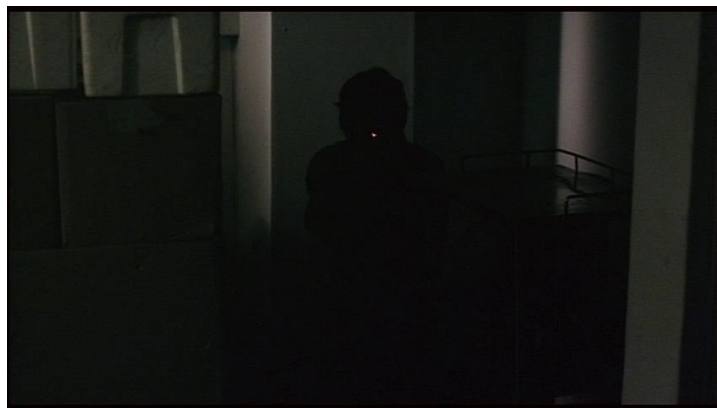


Figure 9 – Mamiya's Avisuality in *Cure*

¹⁸⁴ Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 82.

During the following interrogation scene, Mamiya further challenges Takabe's vision. There, the detective attempts to put Mamiya through the Lacanian mirror stage by showing the amnesiac a photo of himself and saying, "That's you." Only, what Mamiya uses as a mirror, a representation of his identity, is really a window through which one views others, manifested by Kurosawa in the interrogation room's two-way mirror. Like the words and concepts describing the *Muselmann*, Mamiya's image forms another voided channel through which all other images pass. Takabe's exceptional vision may be rooted in conceptual understanding, but his vision fails when confronted with the avisuality, emptiness, and traumatic understanding of Mamiya.

Through these connections, Kurosawa's philosophical zombies extend thinking on another important concept in trauma studies: understanding. Understanding poses an equally challenging question to those raised by signification: is trauma understandable? Speaking of the absurdity of attempts to understand the Holocaust (as one camp guard described it to Levi, "Here, there is no why"), Claude Lanzmann questions these attempts by arguing that they constitute an obscene gesture. For him, to explain the Holocaust would be to successfully move on from it, to contain it or censor the traumatic fact of its occurrence: "it is a way of escaping; a way not to face the horror."¹⁸⁵ This way, the act of understanding trauma leans over a thin boundary between questions of "can you?" and "should you?" It isn't that horrible events should be completely ignored, but rather considered in ways that resist resolution.

Though not always rooting them in specific historical traumas, Kurosawa takes a similarly atypical approach to understanding in his films. To understand something almost becomes an obscene gesture for different reasons, in an invasive sense rather than in Lanzmann's ethical sense.

¹⁸⁵ Claude Lanzmann, "The Obscenity of Understanding: An Evening with Claude Lanzmann," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 207.

Before We Vanish makes understanding for one person equivalent to another's forgetting, as the aliens invade by taking people's understanding of concepts from them. This act seems to cure the humans of an illness caused by their understanding of that concept, but their new amnesic freedom prompts them to go mad. In *Real*, the closer the comatose protagonist gets to understanding his past trauma and remembering it, the more his heartbeat flattens. Here, Aaron Gerow gets at the heart of this crisis in signification by locating an anti-paranoid ethics against interpretation in these films: "Kurosawa is ultimately not a director of discontinuity or continuity, but of the space between them, of what I would call dis/continuity. ... His films do not just shift or inhabit the space between these different perspectives, but, as with the split screens [in *Bright Future* and *Doppelganger*], can sometimes inhabit them simultaneously."¹⁸⁶ Kurosawa himself describes a similar experience when presenting an early version of a film script in the US. In the script, he says, "there are many moments where my protagonist has no goal. He is just existing. Many of the Americans there kept bothering me, kept saying, 'What's going on with this character now? What's his intent? What's his motive?' And I would have to say, 'He doesn't have any intent. He's just being.' They found that very strange and odd."¹⁸⁷ For Kurosawa, understanding can sometimes fill a void, but can also create new ones more difficult to fill.

¹⁸⁶ Gerow, "Kurosawa Kiyoshi, Dis/Continuity, and the Ghostly Ethics of Meaning and Auteurship," 351.

¹⁸⁷ Kiyoshi Kurosawa, "Emerging Cinema Master-Kiyoshi Kurosawa", interview by James Emanuel Shapiro, trans. Linda Hoaglund, accessed March 19, 2020, <http://www.dvdtalk.com/interviews/004275.html>.

4.3 Forgotten Space and the Crisis of Memory

After these voided figures, Kurosawa's traumatic emptiness takes on a spatial form in the many empty spaces in which he locates the philosophical zombie. In these locales, space externalizes the characters' empty interiority. It takes the form of vacant, deteriorating, or forgotten spaces. Kurosawa has a reputation for filming inside of condemned buildings that are sometimes scheduled to be torn down within a few days of the shooting. These include the many abandoned factories found in his films, the construction sites and sanatorium in *Retribution* (2006), the junkyard in *License to Live* (1998), and the warehouses and vacant buildings in *Cure*. The houses of the dead visited by the protagonist and her husband's ghost in *Journey to the Shore* (2015) appear at first to be populated and lively one day, then abandoned and decayed the next. Like Mamiya, these empty spaces are voided by amnesia. They are themselves forgotten, contain what is forgotten, and are occupied by characters who have forgotten. They make up storage spaces that store nothing and materialize a temporal void between occurrence and experience.¹⁸⁸ Though empty space makes for a common horror film locale, Kurosawa gives it a unique significance by making it an extension of his main characters and the philosophy of emptiness they incarnate.¹⁸⁹

Cure is especially important here for the place where Takabe first meets Mamiya. The meeting occurs inside a shadowy stock room that functions more like Kafka's door to the law for the detective. When Takabe crosses its threshold, he enters a space that contains nothing, which isn't an inexplicable secret like it is for Kafka, but the material emptiness of his own point of

¹⁸⁸ These spaces function less as aspects of the films' mise-en-scene and more as what Eugenie Brinkema calls the mise-n'en-scene: "what is not put into the scene; what is put into the non-scene; and what is not enough put into the scene." Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 46, emphasis removed. In this case, they depict what's locatable in experience but not in memory.

¹⁸⁹ For more on the use of empty space in the horror genre, see Karl Schoonover, "What Do We Do with Vacant Space in Horror Films?," *Discourse* 40, no. 3 (2018): 342–57.

trauma.¹⁹⁰ Kurosawa explicitly chooses these spaces for what he calls their “ghost town effect” because he believes they reflect the interior states of his philosophical zombie characters. In his words, the emptiness of these settings “has something to do with my understanding that many of us, although we may live in physically crowded areas, existentially we often find ourselves alone and adrift in empty space.”¹⁹¹ As much a card-carrying existentialist as Cronenberg, these are spaces of existential solitude. And yet, the ghost town effect is not an affirmation of nihilism, a Buddhist emphasis on suffering, or a Japanese emphasis on *mono no aware* (a sensitivity toward impermanence). It’s often the space of an unclaimable experience indicating a crisis of memory.

As empty spaces, Kurosawa’s settings constitute images of waste. They’re neither the non-spaces of Marc Augé, which cater to “the accelerated circulation of passengers and goods” of late capitalism, nor the affective “any-space-whatever” of Gilles Deleuze, which loses “the principle of its metric relations...so that the linkages can be made in an infinite number of ways.”¹⁹² Kurosawa’s spaces materialize emptiness, and thus are actually not empty but filled with the particular kind of inessential, forgotten matter out of mind known as waste. For Bergson, there isn’t really such thing as nothing, since all that appears as such is simply something that isn’t useful to us: “[t]he truth is that the ‘nothing’ concerned here is the absence not so much of a thing as of a utility.”¹⁹³ When defining a larger philosophy of waste, William Viney extends Bergson’s

¹⁹⁰ Mamiya holds an inverse function to that of the doorkeeper guarding the interior of the law in Kafka’s story. Rather than the “simplemindedness” of the guard who “does not know the Law from inside, but knows only the way that leads to it, where he patrols up and down,” Mamiya clearly knows the law from deep inside it, and is therefore always already inside everything in *Cure*, whether doors or people. Franz Kafka, “Before the Law,” in *The Basic Kafka* (New York: Pocket Books, 1979), 179.

¹⁹¹ Quoted in Chris Desjardins, *Outlaw Masters of Japanese Film* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005), 213.

¹⁹² Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 2009), 34; Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, 109.

¹⁹³ Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 297. Here, Bergson extends points he makes in *Matter and Memory* about the nature of memory and action: “The characteristic of the man of action is the promptitude with which he summons to the help of a given situation all the memories which have reference to it; but it is also the insurmountable barrier which encounter, when they present themselves on the threshold of his consciousness, memories that are useless or indifferent.” Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 198. For Kurosawa’s films, his characters don’t have access to the

definition by giving waste a specifically material sense: “matter out of time.”¹⁹⁴ The warehouse where Takabe meets Mamiya therefore isn’t empty but full of material not being used.

At a further level, Karl Schoonover provides a photographic term for Kurosawa’s emptiness by defining a specific kind of image made up of such unused matter: the “waste-image.” Schoonover locates Dario Argento’s frequent images of dust, filth, and grime as products of his horror films’ specific historical moment: “the Argento image opens itself to a different profilmic by focusing on waste as the site in the mise-en-scene able to respond to the illusory security offered by *il boom*, ‘the economic miracle [of postwar Italy].’”¹⁹⁵ He echoes Gerow in connecting the waste-image to interpretative use in that “it asks what it means to grasp otherness, without trying to reconcile it to a known value system or render it useful.”¹⁹⁶ Kurosawa, for his part, creates his own form of waste-images in these forgotten spaces. They likewise constitute matter out of time by being abandoned amidst the Japanese recession and Lost Decade, a time directly contrasting the prosperity of Italy’s economic miracle out of which Argento made his films.¹⁹⁷ This way, Kurosawa’s waste-images give an image to the excrement of history.

memories required to act. Instead they either, like Mamiya, appropriate the memories, experiences, and actions of others, or act in new ways not based on their memories often through some form of waste (the father laid off from his job in *Tokyo Sonata* who begins cleaning toilets to support his family; the estranged father from *Bright Future* who fixes scrapped electronics for a living).

¹⁹⁴ William Viney, *Waste: A Philosophy of Things* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 2.

¹⁹⁵ Karl Schoonover, “Scrap Metal, Stains, Clogged Drains: Argento’s Refuse and Its Refusals,” in *Italian Horror Cinema*, ed. Stefano Baschiera and Russ Hunter (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 113.

¹⁹⁶ Schoonover, 120.

¹⁹⁷ Like the *Giallo* horror films made during postwar Italy, many New Wave directors from Japan’s own postwar economic boom also refused presenting images of national splendor and prosperity in favor of degradation and impulses. They form two opposing poles: Shohei Imamura’s characters emphasize primitive impulses and crude animality consistent with literary naturalism, while Nagisa Oshima’s characters are often left empty by deadlocks caused by raising those impulses to the levels of collectivity and social revolution. Oshima’s films are more devastating in that his revolutionary characters seeking to change history tend to wind up as entrapped by it as Imamura’s, since, as Bergson points out, to live according to impulses means living only in the present. Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 198.

While Kurosawa's forgotten spaces may seem to encapsulate a general void of historical time, they nonetheless contain references to specific aspects of Japanese history. Scholarship often cites the country's multifaceted historical timeline as the cause of many strange cinematic effects and occurrences in Japanese cinema. This history includes, to mention only a few major events, the rapid modernization beginning in the 19th century, the US occupation and restructuring after World War II, as well as the different ways people remember and relate to the war.¹⁹⁸ Others have connected the lingering shadows of Kurosawa's *Pulse* to those burnt into the ground at Hiroshima, and World War II is explicitly present in *Retribution* as the scene of a crime of memory. Lowenstein describes the construction sites of *Retribution* as "temporal crossroads" demarcating where this crime takes place. At this location, "multiple temporalities are condensed" between Japan's recessionary present and its wartime past, so that "the site also functions as a setting for horrific conflicts over remembering and forgetting, history faced and history erased."¹⁹⁹ That way, space appears in this film to be both incorporated within its larger national context and outside of it at the same time.

Kurosawa even films literal signs posted in his empty spaces left over from earlier historical moments providing directions for navigating these temporal crossroads. Sometimes from real history and sometimes fictional, these signs point to a location lost in time rather than one locatable in space. At one level, the "X" carved into *Cure*'s murder victims indicates the first instance of this signage. It denotes a location on a map and an identifying signature as well as a void and a mystery within the same sign. But even more so, the physical sign posted in front of the protagonist's childhood home in *Real* speaks more clearly against forgetting. It warns in

¹⁹⁸ On the many incisions, hinge points, and origami folds constituting Japanese temporal experience, see Nygren, *Time Frames*.

¹⁹⁹ Lowenstein, "Spaces of Violence," 138.

Japanese, “do not forgive” the development of the film’s tourist resort, while the resort, a symbol of western modernization, has been abandoned and reduced to scattered garbage and refuse. *Before We Vanish*, too, openly points to remnants of Japan’s postwar occupation. The journalist guiding the aliens will first meet one in front of a large anti-occupation protest sign from the 1960s that reads, in English, “U.S. Army Go Out!” A notable shadow looms over their meeting, though it appears far too large to be cast by the protest sign or anything else nearby, or at least anything there in the present. Casting this shadow out of time, a forgotten sign pointing to Japan’s historical occupation only makes sense inside of a Japanese alien invasion film. Later, the film goes even further back to another invasion of Japan: modernization layering an alien way of life on top of Japanese tradition. After the aliens take his concept of ownership, a former shut-in tied to his home has now become a type of curbside preacher warning about the dangers of their invasion. Kurosawa frames him speaking in front of western-imported storefront signs like Toys “R” Us and Baskin Robbins. Amidst markers of intersection and unfamiliarity, it remains difficult to find one’s way through these cinematic spaces.



Figure 10 - Protest sign from the U.S. occupation in *Before We Vanish*

Such artifacts make Kurosawa’s films an expression of what Harry Harootunian calls the end of Japan’s “long postwar” period. For Harootunian, the American occupation following World

War II didn't officially end until the contemporary Lost Decade. Japan's recession, originally spanning from the late 1980s to the 1990s but which continues through the present day, forces the nation to reflect for the first time since its postwar economic prosperity on its location in, and forgetting of, history. Many Japanese feel that their memories of this period are not truly theirs, associating "Americanism, as it was called," with "destroy[ing] memory and encourag[ing] social forgetfulness."²⁰⁰ With its recession, the Americanized memories from the postwar period become far less useful and lead to the aforementioned memory crisis. The fact that the words "self" and "others" make up unspeakable points of trauma for the police officer guarding the aliens in *Before We Vanish* creates an optimal image for such a malady. He, and many other characters in Kurosawa's films, need to be cured of their associations with such disembodied identifying markers to create conceptions of themselves that feel more like their own.

Though not associated with Americanism, the dilapidated and forgotten building where Takabe kills Mamiya serves a similar identificatory purpose. As Mamiya puts it, it's where people go to "meet their true selves." For Takabe's interests on one hand, the empty building houses the scene of the original crime he's investigating. There, Mamiya's forgetting, and apparently that of the other hypnotists before him, originally took place. The space doesn't even seem to constitute a physical location due to Kurosawa's discontinuous editing style leading up to it. This space can only be experienced when passing on the emptiness to someone else through the "X" hand gesture.

²⁰⁰ Harry Harootunian, "Japan's Long Postwar: The Trick of Memory and the Ruse of History," in *Japan After Japan: Social and Cultural Life from the Recessionary 1990s to the Present*, ed. Tomiko Yoda and Harry Harootunian (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 99. More disturbing are the contemporary attempts to alter the way Japanese schools teach World War II by ignoring the country's own responsibility as imperial colonizers. Particularly, Shinzo Abe, prime minister during the 2000s, led a campaign to erase all mention of comfort women from Japanese history textbooks, claiming that the immense number of women, mostly from colonized countries, forced into prostitution by Japan's armed forces chose to do so through their own will. As Harootunian emphasizes, history and memory tend not to coincide, but especially when it comes to historical horror. For more on the recent political contestations of Japanese history, see Sven Saaler and Wolfgang Schwentker, eds., *The Power of Memory in Modern Japan* (Kent, UK: Global Oriental, 2008).

That way, it constitutes a moment in time irreducible to space. On the other hand, for Mamiya, this building serves as a memorial. It's the only place, the only locatable "here," that Mamiya can identify, experiencing all others as non-places that eventually lead only to it. Littered with decayed benches and strange, archaic devices, hypnotic ceremonies likely took place here, if not long ago, then in a time without an origin, like the original hypnotist with a date of death but only a question mark for a date of birth. As the matter of Mamiya's memory, this building at the end of *Cure*, and the memorial erasures that take place there, can't be located on a map or inside a history book. A true space of trauma, it's only locatable in the reenactments occurring elsewhere.



Figure 11 – Traumatic empty space in *Cure*

Though *Cure* certainly lingers over the disturbing and bleak aspects of forgotten spaces, they aren't inherently so in Kurosawa's films. Alongside the many references to memory and history, others become spaces of creativity and futurity specifically disregarding origins. Considering the abandoned buildings in which *Loft* (2005) takes place, Chika Kinoshita argues that Kurosawa's spaces exemplify what she calls "non-originary aesthetics." A style seen across much of turn-of-the-century Japanese horror, the non-originary resists and frustrates approaches to the horror genre rooted in excavating causality, origins, and resolution. Kurosawa's films are less interested in explaining the causes and backstories of their horror, as one would find in more

western-based horror, and tarry more with the supernatural surfaces and images produced by their ghosts. Rather than render the unknown known, J-horror tends to leave it unknown.

Kinoshita goes on to discuss Kurosawa's spaces as examples of this aesthetic: "[t]he ruins that have ubiquitous presence in his films...are not the site of memory and history," but rather sites of appropriation "characterized by the erasure of history and ownership."²⁰¹ A different perspective on empty space, the voids of forgotten spaces also present an optimistic possibility for putting these spaces to new use, ranging from criminals and thieves to women seeking to move beyond limiting gender roles. These "ruins or abandoned dwellings provide the socially marginalized with sites for constructing family-like communities based on the practices of play and negotiation, rather than on 'natural' and normative bonds such as blood lineage or the institution of marriage."²⁰² In turn, Kinoshita splits Kurosawa's female characters along an axis of appropriating space or belonging to a space, where some women experience identifying with a space as a horror element, while others maintain a freedom to appropriate space without regard for its origins or their own histories. In other words, the female characters either possess the spaces they're in or those spaces possess them.

Based on Kinoshita's axis, Kurosawa's movies, and especially their conclusions, further depend on the appropriability of experience. Whether in the horror, social realist, or science-fiction genres, many characters' bodies appear likewise possessed by an experience. The films' generic

²⁰¹ Kinoshita, "The Mummy Complex," 118.

²⁰² Kinoshita, 118. This way, though not affiliated with J-horror, Kurosawa's non-originary aesthetics hold close affinity with those of his contemporary, Hirokazu Koreeda. Both directors form communities of outsiders in their films; only, Kurosawa's philosophy is based around emptiness, while Koreeda's seems to be based on substitution (the substitute lover of *Air Doll* (2009), the substitute families of *Like Father, Like Son* (2013) and *Shoplifters* (2018)). Moreover, Koreeda discovers a correlation between substitution and memory dating back to his early documentaries on people with a similar anterograde amnesia to the zombie figure. Often combining documentary realism with supernatural elements, they consider the significance of other people's memories for personal identity rather than the individual's own. The characters of *Afterlife* (1998), between the living and the dead, seem to make the most poignant example of this correlation by bridging the act of remembering someone with substituting for them.

classifications even seem to depend on whether this possession remains intact at the film's end. Think of the salaryman from *Tokyo Sonata* who's been fired from his job but continues to get dressed and leave his house at the same time each day, going to a park filled with other laid off employees instead. Delaying the recognition of his dismissal causes his family to entirely disintegrate the moment his wife recognizes him, by chance, working as a janitor in a shopping mall. The film ends with optimism as the family structure transforms into an entirely new unit, but the film's generic constituents, the nuclear family, must be completely reshaped in order to foreclose their possession by their losses. In other words, the film ends optimistically because the family makes their disintegration their own.

On the other hand, when Kurosawa's characters remain possessed by their experience, as appears more in his earlier career, the films conclude with more pessimism. In such cases, the characters' experiences of themselves seem to bleed into and overlap with those of others. The writer in *Loft* becomes uncannily entwined with the plot of a novel she's found in her new apartment, and the detective investigating the crimes in *Retribution* finds himself under investigation for those very crimes (i.e. his shock when, running a fingerprint found at the crime scene through a federal database, his own face appears as the match). In these cases, with which we should include Mamiya's victims, the experience in question proves impossible to appropriate as one's own and, in the process, takes over their entire sense of themselves. It's for this reason that Kurosawa's films conclude with endings verging on sentimentality after *Tokyo Sonata*.²⁰³

²⁰³ Kurosawa himself points out a change in his filmmaking approach much earlier. At the 2001 Toronto Film Festival, *Pulse* screened the day before the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Most of his 1990s films center around some form of terrorism, a tendency often connected to the Aum Shinrikyo attacks on the Tokyo subway system in the mid-1990s. But after *Pulse* seemed to eerily predict the atrocity by featuring an airplane crashing into Tokyo buildings, he expressed trepidation toward his film content after the real event. It took some time to reorient the script for *Bright Future*, which exudes a notably lighter feel despite its ambivalent conclusion. See his interview with Shigehiko Hasumi, where he responds to Hasumi's claim that, while many remarked that 9/11 looked like a Hollywood film, it looked to him more like a Kiyoshi Kurosawa film. Kiyoshi Kurosawa, "'Loft' Kurosawa Kiyoshi × Hasumi Shigehiko: Nijū isseiki wa

With the exception of the darkness of *Creepy* (2016) and *Wife of a Spy* (2020), which feels like Cronenberg's *History of Violence* but from Edie's point of view, many of the later films emphasize the creative pole of emptiness rather than the destructive one.²⁰⁴ But whether space or experience, possessing events that aren't experienced when they occur remains impossible in the face of a figure like Mamiya, whose forms of emptiness always manage to slip through the grasp of those attempting to possess them.

4.4 Matter Degree Zero: Light, Water, and the Crisis of Form

Within these empty spaces, unclaimed experience takes on symptomatic forms of material emptiness: light and water. As a director, Kurosawa is interested in matters of film form, particularly cinematography and lighting. He's written a number of books on film theory that, to this point, haven't been translated into English, and makes up a rare example of a filmmaker who's also a published film theorist (Robert Bresson, Andrei Tarkovsky).²⁰⁵ Kurosawa's close attention to form appears most prominently in his aesthetic lighting. There are frequent power outages in his films as well as characters almost indiscriminately turning lamps on and off, leading Lippit to describe the "numerous single lights" and "small luminescent spots" of Kurosawa's oeuvre as

Kurosawa o minakereba wakaranai," in *Sekai saikyō no eiga kantoku: Kurosawa Kiyoshi no zenbō* (Tokyo: Bungei Shunjū, 2017), 49–96.

²⁰⁴ The same tendency appears in Christopher Nolan's filmography. The temporally haunting films of his early career like *Memento* and *The Prestige* (2006), which remain unable to envision a mode of escape for their protagonists, become overwhelmed by sentiment upon resolving them in his later equally labyrinthine films like *Interstellar* (2014) and *Tenet* (2020). They remain philosophically compelling, but only until film's end, unlike the earlier films whose questions burn long after their endings.

²⁰⁵ See, for example, his book on horror, Kiyoshi Kurosawa, *Eiga wa osoroshii* (Tokyo: Seidosha, 2001).

forming “small moments of avisuality.”²⁰⁶ He extends this point on individual light sources onto a broader scale as well, where, in Kurosawa’s universe, “even diffuse light can produce the effect of a small, pointed light.”²⁰⁷ Other scenes will feature a distinct glow or shine produced by a light being obstructed by or reflected off a screen or some form of diffuser. To obstruct vision even more, a translucent screen appears frequently in his mise-en-scene in the form of the many hanging curtains that divide his spaces as well as the opaque windows through which characters look (the mesmerist looking out from the warehouse window in *Cure*; the protagonist peering through the researcher’s window in *Loft*). Kurosawa testifies that his many curtains show his influence by the shower scene from Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960). But these opaque surfaces reflect further the importance of aesthetic surface for conveying the affective atmosphere so important to his films’ sense of dread. For Giuliana Bruno, “a visual text can even wear its own history, inscribed as an imprint onto its textural surface. ... An affect is actually ‘worn’ on the surface as it is threaded through time in the form of residual stains, traces, and textures. In visual culture, surface matters, and it has depth.”²⁰⁸ Based on the previous section on space and memory, Kurosawa’s films can be said to wear their obscured relation to Japanese history on their many opaque, translucent, and reflective surfaces. Through diffusion, light takes on a more material dimension than does typical cinematic light used for realistic practical effects. That way, Kurosawa’s light fills his spaces with another form of material emptiness alongside that of memory. Light, as Lippit shows, holds a privileged place in Japanese visual culture by way of the atom bomb’s flash and ensuing

²⁰⁶ Lippit, *Atomic Light*, 148.

²⁰⁷ Lippit, 149.

²⁰⁸ Giuliana Bruno, *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 5.

destruction of visual order. Like the invisible tactility of atomic radiation, Kurosawa's philosophy of emptiness grants a material dimension to light: a luminous form of dark matter.

Kurosawa is often explicit about the materiality of light in his films' content. He goes so far as to have the husband's ghost in *Journey to the Shore* give a public lecture on quantum physics and the materiality of light. He explains that, at the quantum level, particles of light have zero mass, but that zero mass is also not itself nothing. "In other words," he says, "zero isn't zero. So, the whole universe is filled with an infinite number of zeroes. Zero is the basis of everything. Nothingness isn't the same as meaninglessness. Nothingness is the foundation of everything." Outside of Mamiya's dialogue, Kurosawa gives here the closest thing to a manifesto for his philosophy of emptiness. But during this scene, he also provides a virtuoso lighting display, moving the diffused outdoor key light all around the lecture hall where the scene takes place.²⁰⁹ It were as if discussing this philosophy in words accelerates the Earth's axial movement around the sun, repurposing light from the standard of measurement for distance in astronomy into that for the materiality of atomic light.

²⁰⁹ Later in *Journey to the Shore*, the husband's ghost gives another lecture about the proximity between infinity and nothingness. He discusses how the age of the universe, measured in billions of years, is only equivalent to a mere instant against the exponential scale of the universe. As he speaks, the many ceiling lights in the hall turn on one after the other. For Kurosawa's philosophy, light is the result of a collision between some form of zero and the more massive weight of its experience.



Figure 12 - The zero lecture in *Journey to the Shore*

At zero mass, gravity turns the concept of time into another form of material zero, both instantaneous and infinite. Tung-Hui Hu equates “time zero” with the flash of the atomic bomb’s explosion, echoing Lippit’s avisuality in saying that “[t]ime zero is precisely the moment that can never be seen, recorded, or filmed by conventional means; it can only be approximated.”²¹⁰ As a signifying component, trauma forms around a void that nonetheless leaves a lasting trace, like the small dot engrained on the overexposed test footage from the atom bomb discussed in Hu’s essay. Sometimes Kurosawa’s characters, whether human or ghost, are made up of these small dots of nothingness to the point where they disintegrate into a granular powder dispersing into the air. But more often, he associates flashes of light with moments between occurrence and experience. Light

²¹⁰ Tung-Hui Hu, “Real Time/Zero Time,” *Discourse* 34, no. 2–3 (2012): 163–84, 171.

appears on the aliens' fingers as they take people's concepts in *Before We Vanish*, as well as in the jellyfish's glow from *Bright Future* which contains in crystalline form the sting of the protagonist's ambivalence toward the future. Mamiya's hypnotism in *Cure* makes him a master of light, where the light from his cigarettes causes his victims to remember a deferred trauma. He also has a large burn mark on his back recalling the *hibakusha* victims of the atom bomb. The burn may or may not have some causal relation to Mamiya's condition, but it does suggest his having come too close to some intense form of light. These examples make light into an attractor for traumatic experience, absorbing it into an empty matter that indicates a further crisis of form.

Alongside light, Kurosawa also has a predilection for filming another materially empty element: water. As something tactile and transparent, water in his films frequently fills his mise-en-scene with a similar emptiness to the forgotten space on land: the Tokyo canals of *Bright Future* by which the jellyfish return to the sea; the swamp in *Loft* where the dead women are buried; the canals of *Retribution* leading to the ghost; the nighttime beach at the end of the world in *Tokyo Sonata*. These maritime spaces locate the moment that evades experience for his characters. Lowenstein cites Kurosawa's own testimony in connecting the seascapes of *Retribution* to Tokyo's specific history as a waterway. The film treats water as a further temporal crossroads: "Water as conquered force characterizes those dreams of the future staked on the condominium development [around which the film takes place], while water as conquering force characterizes the present economic realities when the recession paralyses that development."²¹¹ But in addition to this forgotten space, Kurosawa uses water as an assimilable form of material emptiness by having virtually all of his characters consume it more frequently than usual in cinema. Someone often guzzles down water from a bottle or holds a conversation around a water cooler so they can drink

²¹¹ Lowenstein, "Spaces of Violence," 139.

from it while talking. This way, and in a way echoing Lippit's point about Takabe being "filled with emptiness" at film's end, Kurosawa's characters aren't so much quenching their thirst as they're filling themselves with a material emptiness between experience and occurrence.²¹²

In *Cure*, Mamiya uses water as well as light to hypnotize his victims. In one interrogation, Takabe tries to steal his lighter and hypnotize him, already showing signs of making a great successor. In response, Mamiya remains unmoved as it slowly begins to rain and a ceiling leak puts out the flame. He says to Takabe, "The water will make you calm. It will make you happy, empty, born again just like me." As Mamiya explains his emptiness earlier to the doctor, he fills a glass of water in the sink and knocks it over, while Kurosawa films the water seeping across the floor in an unsettling long take in close-up. The water here becomes a form of emptiness making its way over to the doctor; it returns to her the desire to take revenge on the sexist world in which she works. If light absorbs unclaimed experience as material emptiness, water transports it back to the empty bodies in which it originates. The symptoms of this chapter's phantom experience thus convey different types of empty matter dependent on their absorptive or transportive functions.

Though water forms another significant aspect of this framework in *Cure*, Kurosawa perhaps goes farthest with the element later in *Pulse*. One of the more unsettling scenes in this most unconventional horror film occurs in what feels like an insignificant moment when the protagonist, Michi, washes dishes in her apartment with the news on in the background. The newscaster reports about a message in a bottle written ten years ago in Japan that was recently found off the coast of Malaysia. But as the report continues, the TV begins to malfunction and freezes on a shot of the newscaster appearing headless. Michi, whose friends have begun disappearing without explanation, quickly turns off the TV while breathing frantically in fear. The

²¹² Lippit, *Atomic Light*, 153.

film then produces its lone jump scare when an empty bottle falls behind her on the counter. This scene may appear insignificant in light of *Pulse*'s larger narrative, but the theme of the empty bottle containing something, as well as the SOS message of "help me" audibly floating throughout the film, both originate here. At film's end, as she unpacks her belongings inside her cabin on the boat leaving the now-destroyed Japan, the college student she befriends becomes a shadow on the wall and disappears. Michi describes how she has now found happiness "alone with her last friend in the world," but the only thing in the room with her is a change of clothes and another water bottle, now full of water, full of emptiness. *Pulse* thus takes on a trajectory similar to Takabe in that the emptiness that was traumatic for Michi in the early kitchen scene becomes the emptiness she incorporates and that fills and satiates her. At the end of *Pulse*, the uplifting rock song playing over the credits makes this ending, which might feel especially bleak, somehow positive and optimistic. As Kinoshita suggests, emptiness isn't inherently horrifying or pessimistic, but becomes a distinct mode of survival in the face of apocalypse, a way to keep going.

Classifying as the anti-form of his philosophy, Kurosawa frequently opposes emptiness with the rich fullness of nature and plant life. He includes a botanical space in virtually all his films where characters care for plants and whose connection to life and vitality seem to distinctly oppose existential solitude: the communal greenhouse in *Pulse*, the botany school in *Daguerreotype* (2016), the therapist in *Retribution* who waters his plants while listening to patients, the community of gardeners listening to the lecture in *Journey to the Shore*. But despite appearances, Kurosawa's presentation of these natural worlds is quite far from an environmental interest. He views nature as something dangerous and horrific: "If anything, I think of nature as an alarming, terrifying, vast force that, at times, can be beautiful and peaceful, but can just as readily come after

you and devour you.”²¹³ This explains why *Charisma*, a film about an ideological war fought over the preservation of a tree, is far from an environmentalist film: the contested forest there is actually a warzone where humans battle each other for access to an element of nature destroying everything around it.²¹⁴

Kurosawa’s perspective on the horror of nature appears to prefer the emptiness of water and light. He seems to associate the natural world with successful mourning and the other forms with something closer to a kind of uplifting melancholia. In an illuminating scene from *Journey to the Shore*, the protagonist, Mizuki, visits a woman with whom her husband had an affair before he died. To her surprise, she discovers that the other woman has easily moved on from the affair and is now expecting a child with her own living husband. Kurosawa frames the two in a shot-reverse shot sequence with green plants visible behind the mistress and a water cooler behind Mizuki (it’s unclear whether the tank is full or empty). The mistress tells her, “From now on, I’ll just have a very ordinary life until the day I die. But is there anything more one should really want?” Though this statement doesn’t sound troubling, her words clearly cause Mizuki a great deal of unease. She immediately goes home to water the many dead or dying plants that litter her apartment, only to, out of frustration, call her husband’s ghost to return soon after. Here, nature and the ordinary life associated with it consume memory in order to move on from experiences in a way Mizuki declines

²¹³ Quoted in Desjardins, *Outlaw Masters of Japanese Film*, 214. Elsewhere, Kurosawa goes on to discuss trees as virtual philosophical zombies: “For many people, plant life is generally seen to be quiet and beautiful and tame. But the way that trees survive over several centuries is by decimating everything around them, in a very cruel and beautiful way. It’s the contradiction between plants being very still, and yet so voracious and devastating, that interests me. The idea that, though they operate on different principles of time than mammals, they are just as alive as we are.” Quoted in Chuck Stephens, “Another Green World,” *Film Comment* 37, no. 5 (October 2001): 72.

²¹⁴ For an article placing Kurosawa’s environmental interests inside a thematic tradition in Japanese film history, see Tim Palmer, “The Rules of the World: Japanese Ecocinema and Kiyoshi Kurosawa,” in *Framing the World: Explorations in Ecocriticism and Film*, ed. Paula Willoquet-Maricondi (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010), 209–24. One can further relate Kurosawa’s views on nature to the transformation of rain water from a cleansing element to a contaminating one after the atom bombings in 1945, an experience depicted well in Imamura’s film *Black Rain* (1989).

to do. Kurosawa expresses a similar uncertainty toward this so-called ordinary life in his comments on Takabe at the end of *Cure*: upon incorporating Mamiya's emptiness, the detective realizes that "living the complacent, average life is what is truly sick," though the opposite of that life, which Kurosawa views as freedom, would move Takabe outside the law for which he works.²¹⁵ As perhaps the lightest experiment with the materiality of emptiness, *Journey to the Shore* investigates how to respond when an apparent fullness feels more empty than holding on to a loss. The point here isn't emphasizing incurable melancholy since Mizuki exorcizes her husband's ghost in the end. Unlike Takabe, her conclusion is optimistic since she appropriates her husband's death over letting it appropriate her.

In this chapter, I've constructed a philosophy of emptiness from Kurosawa's films and, in the process, made interventions in understanding traumatic embodiment. I've shown how he uses the empty material of memory as a conceptual paintbrush and gives it a figure, a location, and various symptoms particular to Japanese history. The emptiness seen at the end of *Pulse* even posits another more liberating aspect of emptiness. While appearing with *Cure* as some of the bleakest films ever made, Kurosawa nonetheless believes that both have optimistic conclusions. Created at the birth of the internet and long predating social media, *Pulse*'s emphasis on existential solitude envisions a healthier alternative to the feeling of fullness advertised by its networks (One character says about online interactions, "People don't really connect, you know."). The internet can be an immensely useful resource, but it can also become a source of collective madness. As its characters disappear by connecting with ghosts online and human life appears to be at its end, *Pulse* puts forward the idea of becoming comfortable being alone with oneself as a mode of

²¹⁵ Desjardins, *Outlaw Masters of Japanese Film*, 213. Kurosawa is clear in the interview that he's not suggesting that people become criminals and traumatize people.

survival without lonely or fatalistic implications. Koji Yakusho, the actor playing Takabe and many other roles in the director's films, even has a cameo appearance here as the boat captain reassuring Michi she's doing the right thing to keep going in the face of such mass nihilism. The film's final image suggests that, though it might appear a frightening possibility, turning the screen off is a sign of health and the continuation of life. Otherwise, the fear of solitude takes on a familiar disembodied POV of the horror genre stalking characters like a ghost wherever they go, making them feel they aren't alone to an unbearable degree. Kurosawa's former film student and J-horror contemporary, Takashi Shimizu, will give the ghost figure its proper due within temporal body horror by considering the horrific sensation of not feeling alone in one's own body. The last chapter, then, discusses how trauma takes on the function of a ghost in possessing the bodies of those experiencing it.

5.0 Chapter Four: Ghost in the Time Machine: Possessed by Traumatic History in the Films of Takashi Shimizu

“...there are some places in this world which no one will ever possess or inhabit.”

-Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves* (2000)

Defining temporal body horror to this point, the previous chapters have discussed phenomenological aspects of familiar horror genre figures. Vampires, witches, and zombies become more comprehensible, and more unsettling, when understood through their experience of time. In some cases, the filmmakers even coin an entirely new figure out of the conjunction between two separate elements, as in Cronenberg's fusal splice. Yet, if there's one horrific figure which *is* commonly understood by its temporal experience, it's the ghost. If the vampire cheats death through blood addiction, the ghost does so by returning after its bodily death. It either does so as an ethereal specter, which doesn't mean it isn't physically palpable, or by inhabiting the body of a living person. It's this second type of spectrality, specifically the bodily experience of being possessed by a ghost, that this chapter explicates from the films of Takashi Shimizu. Even more than his contemporaries in the J-horror movement, Shimizu's films investigate the felt temporality of housing an external force inside oneself.

My primary source material comes from his most well-known film: *Ju-on: The Grudge*.²¹⁶ A film about a sense of ill will left behind in a house where a woman named Kayako was once murdered by her husband, *Ju-on* makes up one of J-horror's most unsettling products. Its unease partly originates in the film's unique structure of time, one that its many filmed remakes and sequels tend to overlook to their detriment. As Kayako's ghost cheats death and haunts those who engage with the house where she died, the film organizes its narrative form in a manner outside chronological order. What's more, this haunting appears as her experience hijacking and taking up a physical residence inside other characters' bodies. As Kayako's experience acts through them, these characters find themselves able to peer into the past and future in a way generally reserved for time travel films. Though *Ju-on* is far from the first film to investigate spectral possession, whether in Japan or elsewhere, it nonetheless puts forward unique insight into the phenomenological experience of it in a way further exceeding the body's temporal boundaries.

As the horror figure most often associated with time, scholarship on ghosts naturally defines them as beings who are neither of the present world nor of the present time. Discussing its most familiar incarnation in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1601), Jacques Derrida gives the figure's most concrete definition as a conjunction of times: "Repetition *and* first time: this is perhaps the question of the event as question of the ghost. ... One cannot control its comings and goings because *it begins by coming back*."²¹⁷ Though it may speak in an understandable way, if it speaks at all, the ghost's mere existence points out that the present time is not all there is. Others have discussed how the ghost's disjuncture necessitates that we alter understandings of other concepts, such as

²¹⁶ I will refer to the Japanese feature-length film released in 2002 as *Ju-on* throughout this chapter. There have been many films made in the *Ju-on* franchise, as well as English-language remakes of them, and I clarify which version I refer to when discussing them.

²¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, The Work of Mourning & the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 2006), 10–11, original emphasis.

space for Bliss Cua Lim (“The ghost film’s core conceit, visualized in its mise-en-scene, is that *space has a memory*”) and vision for Akira Mizuta Lippit (“Before the spectral gaze, I am blind, blinded perhaps by the law of spectral visibility”).²¹⁸ In many cases, discussions of the ghost, phenomenologically-relevant though they may be, focus on the figure as an entity separate from the human body. While they certainly haunt people, spectral scholarship tends to consider them apart from those who they haunt.

In chapter four, I argue that Shimizu’s filmography defines a phenomenology of ghostly possession within and through human bodies, not outside of them. Specifically, *Ju-on* builds this experience across its different characters in a way that’s felt as a form of corporeal time travel without relying on science fictional time machines. As elements of temporal body horror, understanding the experience of ghostly possession requires conjoining scholarship on ghosts with the spatiotemporal paradoxes of time travel. I do this by associating *Ju-on*’s ghosts with an overall experience of a loop, which allows them to act through their host vessel’s actions and voices, then discussing the loop’s experience as a spiral shape, and concluding with the possibility of dispossession. By explicating the embodied nature of possession at work in his films, Shimizu illuminates further unsettling actions, passages, and forms through which trauma expands what a human body can experience. Following the phenomenologies of trauma discussed in the previous films, the traumatic events in *Ju-on* continue to take on an apparent existence and agency of their own like a ghost inside a time machine.

²¹⁸ Bliss Cua Lim, *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic, and Temporal Critique* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 205, original emphasis; Akira Mizuta Lippit, “Reflections on Spectral Life,” *Discourse* 30, no. 1 & 2 (Winter & Spring 2008): 242.

5.1 The Loop: Where the Dead Die Again

As a starting point, Shimizu's ghostly possessions are best approached through the temporal form of a time loop. Typically associated with science fiction and time travel, the general understanding of a loop strikes one as familiar: it indicates repetition. A time loop exists when a character in a narrative repeats a given period of time indefinitely. Often, it requires a time machine for its creation, wherein characters can escape the loop by altering either the past or the future, sometimes both in the same gesture. Time loops provide a great freedom, though this freedom can easily delve into disaster. One can feasibly go back to observe the moment of their birth or even consider the prospect of killing their ancestors, though not without the inevitably dangerous potential of nullifying their existence in turn. Therefore, whether in retroactive or proactive ways, a time loop disjoins causal linkage. Discussing the subgenre's notable paradoxes, James Gleick remarks that "all the time-travel paradoxes, births and murders alike, stem from retrocausality. Effects undo their causes."²¹⁹ Constance Penley similarly points out that, inside a time loop, "cause and effect are not only reversed but put into a circle: the later events are caused by the earlier events and the earlier by the later."²²⁰ Based on these points, time travel requires its characters to restore causality to its primary place ahead of effectuality. This tendency thus makes up the loop's ultimate function: it's a narrative device forcing or instigating action as a way to restore causal linkage.

²¹⁹ James Gleick, *Time Travel: A History* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2016), 235.

²²⁰ Constance Penley, "Time Travel, Primal Scene, and the Critical Dystopia," *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 5, no. 3 (15) (December 1, 1986): 72. The tendency of the time travel subgenre to experiment with narrative possibilities leads David Wittenberg to call it a "narratological laboratory": "a literature about the forms and mechanisms of storytelling itself." David Wittenberg, *Time Travel: The Popular Philosophy of Narrative* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 31.

Marty McFly from *Back to the Future* provides perhaps the most recognizable example of time travel's common result. He intervenes in the past in order to alter his ability to act in the present. Early on after losing a local music competition, he worries that his failure is an effect of his parents' historical line of social failures. His father is a pushover and, as though in response to her husband's lack of will, his mother is an unabashed alcoholic. His other siblings also lack discernible motivation. Mutually unable to cause any effects, the McFlys begin the film in an experiential loop. That way, when travelling back in time, Marty dramatizes the moment when his parents first meet and subsequently becomes the cause of his own birth. The result introduces action into his family's present situation over the passivity stagnating inside it at the beginning. Doc Brown's time machine is just as much an action machine, and the time loop it creates allows its protagonist to escape from the loop in which he's trapped.

In other cases, a loop isn't made by a time machine, but by the characters' actions on their own. More than the general possibility of action, these loops occur when a character can't move on to an ensuing moment. In comedies like *Groundhog Day* (1993) or the horror hybrid *Happy Death Day* (2017), a loop appears when a protagonist acts solely in cynical ways that benefit only themselves, the metaphor being that self-centered actions make life feel like an endless loop of irritation. While *Groundhog Day* can't be classified as a horror film, it does happen to locate a feeling of immortality caused by these cynical actions.²²¹ Instead of changing the past and altering their origins, characters resolve these experiential loops by simply acting differently in the here and now. After approaching each of his looped days as new chances for nihilistic comedy and cheating death, *Groundhog Day's* weatherman begins viewing them as opportunities for

²²¹ According to *Groundhog Day's* creators, the film's time loop was actually inspired by depictions of immortality from Anne Rice's vampire novels. Although it may exist in the comedy genre, *Groundhog Day's* loop nonetheless originates in vampire horror and the prospect of unliving time.

promoting meaningful changes in the world around him. The film's logic suggests that these new actions cause him to feel the forward motion of time again. All it takes to free oneself from experiential loops in the comedy genre is to act with a meaningful purpose, though at the cost of the experience ceasing to be funny.

Instead of sci-fi time machines or comedic narcissism, however, Shimizu's loops occur when characters live through a traumatic experience. If the previous loops require a new form of action on its subject's part, those in Shimizu's films repeat events which aren't experienced when they happen. Particularly, these traumatic loops reverse the course of action seen in typical time loops; rather than claiming the action as their own, here the action inhabits the characters, takes over their willful capacities with its own agency. That way, trauma appears to limit what's possible in the time travel genre by presenting an event which can't be nullified, but only returned to and experienced again for the first time. In line with Derrida's description of the specter, traumatic actions retain their sense of originality while repeating on a loop. As he puts it, ghostly possession occurs inside of "a moment that no longer belongs to time."²²² There can be no freedom or will enacted toward this moment because not even time, that prime mover, can lay claim to it.²²³ We see here how traumatic moments are not accessible through a time machine: even if one were to return to the event to prevent it from happening, one could only watch it unfold regardless of any

²²² Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, xix.

²²³ As much as oxygen, philosophical writing often views time among the major elements of human existence. For Elizabeth Grosz, "[e]verything moves or changes, moves or changes in time, but time itself does not move or change." Elizabeth Grosz, "Time Out of Joint," in *Time and History in Deleuze and Serres*, ed. Bernd Herzogenrath (New York: Continuum, 2012), 148. Further discussing *Hamlet* and its famous "time out of joint" assertion, she describes time as one of the main characters in the play so that Shakespeare gives this "possessed time" a life and will of its own. Jorge Luis Borges echoes this description of time as fundamental element, though without reference to *Hamlet*: "Time is the substance I am made of. Time is a river which sweeps me along, but I am the river." Jorge Luis Borges, "A New Refutation of Time," in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings* (New York: New Directions, 1962), 234.

preventive measures.²²⁴ Less capable of change and activity than those of science fiction, the loops of horror films like *Ju-on* present an external force, often supernatural, acting through individuals to relive, reenact, or somehow repeat a past event that wasn't fully experienced when it happened.

What happens, then, using this terminology, when a moment no longer belongs to time? Firstly, looking at *Ju-on*'s omnibus narrative structure, causal linkage comes undone. Shimizu divides the film into six sections based on the way Kayako possesses individual characters and displays the sections in achronological order. A character's death can be mentioned before it explicitly happens in the film's plot, as when the protagonist Rika's death gets discussed on the news in the fifth section without occurring yet on screen. Rika then appears alive again in the film's final section depicting the details of her death as they happen. Some events occur more than once, such as when one character leaves a voicemail in the first section before they're introduced, only to show the caller leaving the message again in the third section from the other side of the phone line. At the level of narrative causality, Shimizu's film depicts a different kind of action problem than those of *Back to the Future* and *Groundhog Day*. Instead of a lack of will or nihilism, the problems of *Ju-on* are ones of ordering and arranging what happens.

To be fair, *Ju-on*'s non-linear chronology does hold plenty in common with time travel. Only, in its case, the disjunctive narrative style originates in an experience of trauma over the use of a time machine. Here, Kayako's traumatic experience functions similarly to a time machine for

²²⁴ When attempting to undo larger-scale historical traumas like African American slavery or the Holocaust, the actions produced in time travel narratives nearly always fail. Elena Gomel argues that this fatalism in the genre is due to the comprehensive way by which the past determines our present identities. She goes on to discover a strange parallel between the frequent imperviousness to action found in these narratives and the fact that they just as often present themselves in blockbuster action movie style. See Elana Gomel, "Shapes of the Past and the Future: Darwin and the Narratology of Time Travel," *Narrative* 17, no. 3 (2009): 334–52. Stephen King takes a more anthropomorphic approach to this generic irony in his novel about an attempt to prevent JFK's assassination. His time traveler often repeats a mantra lamenting the stubborn will of time: "The past is obdurate. It doesn't want to change." Stephen King, *11/22/63* (New York: Gallery Books, 2012).

other characters, albeit one that's broken down, making trauma an effect whose cause hasn't happened yet. Instead of the time travelling subject willfully using the machine for their own purposes, in a familiar reversal seen throughout this project, the time machine for Shimizu takes on a will of its own and uses the subject's body as the time travelling vessel. To this effect, I've often cited Cathy Caruth's definition of trauma throughout my project against the term's common understanding as a horrible event. She emphasizes that it's more a structure or form of experience involving an event's "repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event."²²⁵ That way, a traumatic event feels like using a time machine that doesn't work correctly and which has built up a will of its own. The event itself, then, gains an agency over the subject in a way turning them into an effect without a cause. Moreover, and as seen in Cronenberg's reenactments, the only way to regain one's agency over this possessive event is for the effect to somehow precede and act on the cause. One must, against all possibility, will something in the trauma to have happened in order to regain a sense of agency over it. Shimizu will explore the potential of this agency later in his career as his films continue to develop forms of bodily time travel. At the early point of *Ju-on*, though, trauma overtakes the action of its characters regardless of their will.

Since time machines remain absent from *Ju-on*, the actual travelling takes place within the characters' bodies. The Tokunaga family from the second section, for instance, re-enacts Kayako's murder without presumably knowing anything about how the event originally took place. That day, as he leaves for work, the husband Katsuya expresses confusion over the date and complains that it feels the same today as it did the day before. His wife, Kazumi, generally stays home and cares for the house and her ailing mother-in-law. After waking up from a nap, Kazumi sees

²²⁵ Caruth, "Introduction," 4–5.

someone darting out from the corner of her eye. She follows the footsteps upstairs, where she screams upon finding Kayako's son Toshio waiting for her. In the evening, Katsuya returns home to find his wife now struck catatonic upon seeing the ghost child. Not knowing what to make of the situation, he begins biting his nails, and as he does this, a shadow with no discernible source falls over his face. In an instant, his expression fades from anxious to malicious. Katsuya's nail biting gesture so strongly resembles that of Kayako's husband during her murder that the entire primal scene takes over Katsuya's body. He eventually carries Kazumi upstairs to the attic where the police find them both dead in a later section. But in this scene, Kayako's murder physically possesses the Tokunagas to the point where their deaths don't even technically happen to them. This is *Ju-on's* haunting logic: while Kayako may be dead, her death was nonetheless unsuccessful. The actions that killed her remain very much alive, making these actions themselves the film's ghostly possessors before Kayako's body even appears.

When she does appear, *Ju-on* also grants Kayako more physicality than typical cinematic ghosts. Scholars writing on the film have made this case by discussing her ghost's visual appearance and actions. Marisa B. Hayes, for example, points out that Shimizu's conception of the ghost was influenced by a unique form of avant-garde dance originating in Japan called *butoh*.²²⁶ More a form of anti-dance, *butoh* was created by iconoclastic artist Tatsumi Hijikata in the wake of World War II as an aesthetic way to make sense of the war's aftermath. The style inspired the 1969 Japanese film *Horrors of Malformed Men* in which Hijikata also starred. Further drawing from Antonin Artaud and Georges Bataille, the dance style consists of actors embodying horrifying memories and experiences in ways that result in especially macabre and grotesque mises-en-scene.

²²⁶ It's well known that Takako Fuji, the actress playing Kayako in many iterations of *Ju-on*, was notably cast as much for her experience in contortionist ballet as she was for her ability to make scary faces.

For its influence on *Ju-on*, Hayes discusses how *butoh* performers “frequently painted their bodies completely white using the *oshiroi* common in traditional Japanese theatre to represent ghosts, mentally equating the process to creating an empty vessel for the dancer’s body to be inhabited by spirits of the dead.”²²⁷ Further strengthening the connection, Hijikata’s self-professed aim for the dance style rings like an open invitation for ghostly possession: “I would like to make the dead gestures inside my body die one more time and make the dead themselves dead again. I would like to have a person who has already died die over and over inside my body. I may not know death, but it knows me.”²²⁸ By acting as a vessel for dead gestures, *butoh* dance illuminates a possessive aspect to the structure of trauma: the traumatic event creates similar dead actions that take up residence inside the subject’s body. Through its affinity with the dance style, *Ju-on* suggests a deeper influence by *butoh* than just Kayako’s appearance. Philosophically speaking, the inhabitants of her house become bodily vessels for the dead gestures of Kayako’s murder as it obtains new bodies through which to, repeatedly, die again.²²⁹

By viewing the body as a vessel for dead gestures, subject status inside *Ju-on*’s loop can’t take the familiar form of a singular “who.” As the film’s protagonist, the traumatic event haunts Rika’s body to a greater degree than other characters, or at least in a different way. After she first sees Kayako appear at the elderly Tokunaga’s bedside, Rika shows evidence of traumatic experience that never quite goes away. Though she returns to her job as a social worker, she

²²⁷ Marisa B. Hayes, *Ju-on: The Grudge* (Leighton Buzzard, UK: Auteur Publishing, 2017), 34.

²²⁸ Quoted in Hayes, 33. For more on the details, contexts, and manifestoes of *butoh*, see Bruce Baird, *Hijikata Tatsumi and Butoh: Dancing in a Pool of Gray Grits* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Bruce Baird and Rosemary Candelario, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Butoh Performance* (London: Routledge, 2020).

²²⁹ If, as Lim says, “[i]n ghost films, space remembers,” it does so toward further Bergsonian ends. As an extension of Lim’s thinking, the space in *Ju-on* remembers in order for that space to act on the present through the dead gestures I discuss here. Lim, *Translating Time*, 207, emphasis removed. *Ju-on* is also not the only J-horror film displaying influence by *butoh*. Hideo Nakata’s *Ringu* (1998), another film about looped experience, also draws upon it when depicting its ghost, Sadako. For more on the *butoh* influence on *Ringu*, see Adam Lowenstein, *Dreaming of Cinema: Spectatorship, Surrealism, and the Age of Digital Media* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 79–116.

develops an uncontrollable facial twitch and suffers from recurring nightmares featuring the house's spectral inhabitants observing her inside her apartment bedroom. What's more, Rika also feels and sees remnants of these ghosts in various public places until she realizes the ultimate source of their appearance in her own body parts: specifically, her hands. The ghosts appear when she puts her hands over her eyes regardless of whether she does so as a conscious gesture of fear or just happens to look through parted fingers. That way, Rika's hands constitute the vessel through which Kayako witnessed her husband cutting out her tongue and killing her. Rika's aren't the clock hands missing from the immortal vampire's environment, but ones possessed by the dead actions of a traumatic event. Ghosts don't unlive their lives, indefinitely postponing the moment of their death, so much as they die repeatedly, a looping death that never fully occurs. *Ju-on*, this way, envisions a different form of cheating death for its ghosts: a perpetual state of dying an incomplete death.

As the dead actions flow through Rika's body, the confluence between Kayako and herself makes the two indiscernible by *Ju-on*'s conclusion. The film's final section follows Rika after an undisclosed amount of time has passed since her first experience in the house. Yet, the film gives this section the title of "Kayako," indicating that the vignette's subject is about a kind of fusion between the two. In the film's last section, Rika has returned to the house to prevent the ghost from killing her friend Mariko. When Rika looks into a mirror inside the house with her hands over her eyes, she's shocked to notice that her image no longer reflects back to her; instead, Kayako looks at her from where she should be looking. Even worse, Rika then shrieks as she feels a third hand sliding up from underneath those covering her face. She looks down to see Kayako's head bursting out from inside her shirt, rising to look Rika dead in the eye from inside her stomach. Though the scene seems to constitute a waking nightmare, it's clear that the phenomenological experience has

considerably real effects. Kayako, and specifically the form of her death, has taken up a physical residence inside Rika, or in other words, has possessed her. That way, this moment shows how traumatic experience functions as a spectral “I” in search of a body to live through what wasn’t experienced.

Amid this fusional confluence between ghost and host, it can become difficult to interpret what exactly ghosts want from those they haunt. Sometimes ghosts in narratives present themselves not as a threat of what they themselves will do but as a warning about the proximity of the trauma happening again to someone else. Against her fearful expectations, Rika’s possession doesn’t lead to Kayako killing her like it apparently does for other characters in *Ju-on*. As the ghost crawls downstairs and reaches out toward her, Rika covers her eyes with her fingers again to reveal another change in what she sees. Though Kayako’s face had previously appeared menacing and covered in blood, now the dead woman looks back at Rika with a clean face as it looked before the murder. Here, the film flashes back to moments when Kayako appeared previously to other characters, only this time depicting her without the macabre makeup. The sequence changes the ghost’s appearance to that of any other living human reaching out for help, and thus changes Rika’s perspective toward her from one of fear to one of empathy. The disembodied hand she felt touch her head while showering in an earlier scene was really a gesture of care on Kayako’s part. This empathic moment, however, doesn’t last long. Rika is, instead, killed by Kayako’s husband as Toshio, the couple’s son, looks on from upstairs. This traumatic re-enactment occurs against even the ghost’s will; Kayako can’t seem to help that her trauma repeats itself to the point where Rika even observes the dead woman shed a solitary tear just before her death.²³⁰ That way, *Ju-on*’s

²³⁰ The prospect of empathy for the ghost runs across many Japanese horror films of the Lost Decade era. The narratives of films by Hideo Nakata, Kiyoshi Kurosawa, and Takashi Miike often conclude with their protagonists embracing or somehow caring for a corpse: even, in the case of *Pulse*, the body of death incarnate. The theme of grisly

conclusion can only offer a moment of empathic connection from across time as the dead gestures act themselves out again. Shimizu's later filmography would put forward a less fatalistic response to possessive experience, but before discussing it, one can't overlook another equally important aspect of *Ju-on*'s possessions: the voice.

5.2 Audio Loops: I Have No Tongue and I Must Scream

One of the pleasures of making a possession film lies in the creative ways in which filmmakers envision the vocal effects of a ghost speaking through a live human body. It's difficult to forget Mercedes McCambridge's voice dubbing for the possessed girl in Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973), the growl of the little boy who lives inside Danny Torrance's mouth in Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980), or the backward vocal effects from Lynch's *Twin Peaks* series (1990-1991, 2017). Those familiar with *Ju-on* will easily recognize how Shimizu's film fits into this lineage; alongside her disturbing appearance and actions, Kayako also makes a deeply unsettling noise whenever she's present. This sound has been described in a number of different ways, including a kind of respiratory croaking, gurgling, or groaning. Most often, it's referred to as a death rattle, the muted sound one makes just before dying. Other variations of the *Ju-on* cycle mention in their narratives that Kayako's husband cuts out her tongue just before snapping her neck, so here, I view the sound as the result of Kayako attempting to scream without a tongue. From this perspective, *Ju-on* puts

empathy has even moved outside Japanese horror to Asian horror at large, as in Natalie Erika James' *Relic* (2020), an Australian horror film specifically influenced by Kurosawa and Shimizu. These films make clear a necessity for cross-temporal empathy as a way of phenomenologically alleviating, if never fully curing, unclaimed moments from the past that return like ghosts within the contemporary era.

Kayako's inability to scream on a loop; the sound returns indefinitely just as her ghost does. While certainly disturbing on one hand, the tongueless scream also makes for an easily misunderstood narrative aspect of the film. Like the ghost's face, the horrible sound even changes at the film's climax when Kayako crawls toward Rika for the last time. In the same way as Rika's experience of her body becomes interspersed with that of Kayako, so, too, does her experience of her voice.

Ju-on introduces these vocal asymmetries early on when Rika first meets Kayako. Occurring in the film's first section, the encounter functions like a primal scene for the protagonist where the possession first takes place. As is often the case with Shimizu's approach to horror filmmaking, the pace and timing of the scene are of note. After reporting her discovery of Toshio, Rika attempts to learn more about him by way of conversation. To this point, she's already failed to communicate with the house's sole inhabitant, the elderly woman she's supposed to be caring for. As Rika begins to walk upstairs to talk with Toshio, she jumps in fright upon finding him at the top of the stairs gazing down at her. She begins to introduce herself, but isn't given a chance to finish:

Rika: "Little boy, what's your name?"

Toshio: "...Toshio..."

Rika: "Oh. You're called Toshio. My name is..."

Toshio cuts off Rika's introduction by looking away toward a new voice emerging from the living room: the old woman has finally begun speaking. Rika runs into the room, only to find her patient rambling incoherently. It's at that moment when Kayako's ghost appears, though not yet fleshed out with a body. First, we hear the tongueless scream; then, a woman-shaped shadow appears, after which a darkened pair of eyes casts a sharp glance at Rika. The piercing quality of these eyes causes the social worker to faint, and Toshio looks on from the doorway as the film's first vignette ends.



Figure 13 - Embodying a voice in *Ju-on: The Grudge*

This moment isn't the first time Rika's voice has failed, either. Before she even reaches the house, her boss at the Social Welfare Center ignores her protests while forcing her to take on extra work in a situation for which no one is prepared, least of all the volunteer Rika. Nor can she use her voice to answer the Tokunagas' phone when it rings because of the awkwardness of explaining the situation in which she's been stuck. In these early scenes, the film initially embodies Kayako by giving a spectral body to Rika's lack of a voice. Instead of succeeding its source's appearance, the ghost's voice here appears to precede it, making all the subsequent moments when Kayako appears to Rika a product of the protagonist's voice trailing behind her body. Caught in the traumatic loop, Kayako's voice emerges out of the blank space where Rika's identification should be, grammatically and phenomenologically.

By introducing its ghost as a voice in need of a body, *Ju-on* presents the voice as a central problem for its protagonist. Later, in the last section, Rika seems to have long since recovered from her encounter in the house and now appears fully employed at the Social Welfare Center. She receives a call from her friend Mariko who helped her recover earlier in the hospital, and the two go out to lunch to catch up. As Mariko discusses the difficulties of her teaching job, Rika responds with marvel toward her friend's career progression. When asked about herself, however, and despite her apparent status at her own workplace, Rika feels once again lost for words:

Mariko: At this rate, I won't finish my home visits.

Rika: That's right, home visits.

Mariko: All the other classes have finished, I'm the only one left.

Rika: Mariko, you've turned into a real teacher.

Mariko: What about you, Rika?

Rika: Hmm...I wonder, I really can't tell...

As her voice cuts out again, Rika feels something under the table brush against her feet. She looks down (through parted fingers again) to see Toshio staring back at her, in response to which she screams and falls to the floor, disturbing the entire restaurant. Again, the scene's timing is key. There appears another blank space in Rika's speech where her identification should be; only this time, instead of Kayako's voice emerging from this space, the film extracts a scream from Rika's body. When she first saw Kayako, Rika's voice failed her, so the way Toshio appears here makes him into a kind of sonic debt collector from the film's traumatic scene. Therefore, through trauma's latent logic, one can make sense of Kayako's haunting by attaching it to screams which don't happen when they occur. Since the dead woman herself couldn't scream as she died, now her ghost returns to extract the screams of others through which to properly experience her own terror. Through its vicarious correlation between voices and bodies, *Ju-on* suggests that a possessed voice takes on the structural form of trauma, and through this latency becomes a possessive agent of its own.

In its concluding scenes, *Ju-on* resolves the problem of the voice in a similar way to that of action. As Kayako crawls toward Rika the last time, recall that the dead woman's appearance changes from bloody to clean. Though it may not be as noticeable, the ghost's voice changes here as well. As Rika covers her eyes, Shimizu gradually raises the pitch levels of Kayako's tongueless scream until she looks up at Rika with a face free from blood. The ghost's voice has gone from a

garbled, throaty rattle to a more human cry for help.²³¹ The last thing Rika does, then, before Kayako's husband cuts her tongue out as well, is to give the ghost's tongueless scream its proper high pitch. In these ways, *Ju-on* enters the lineage of films modulating vocal source and quality as a trait of possession. Kayako possesses Rika to a greater degree than *Ju-on*'s other characters because Rika's voice isn't attached to her body. The social worker's tongue has been always already removed because she has no say in what she does at her occupation. The senile and mentally ill patients with whom she interacts everyday respond to her words as little as do her employers. It's no wonder that she shares her body with Kayako: Rika is practically a ghost, too.

Through these tongueless screams, *Ju-on* gives a unique and unsettling voice to a larger social problem: the silencing of women's voices. Alongside that of a related partial object body part, the gaze, the voice has taken up a significant position of its own inside feminist film theory. Scholars like Kaja Silverman and Britta Sjogren have discussed the gendered differences granted to different characters' voices.²³² In classical Hollywood films, these differences become especially apparent in voiceover narration, so that the stylistic element becomes a contested zone of conflict over who controls the narrative. In that sense, vocal possession poses another source of unequal power distribution between the sexes. Though *Ju-on* itself doesn't overtly suggest that Rika's lack of a voice at her job comes from her status as a woman, it's not difficult to extend the idea of lacking a voice to a larger expression of women's experience in a notoriously male-centered

²³¹ Shimizu would experiment more with sound levels and vocal modulation for the Japanese feature-length sequel (*Ju-on 2*, 2003) and the English remake (*The Grudge*, 2004). In these films, Kayako's muted screams sound even more terrifying by adding digital distortion methods to the already disturbing sound. *Ju-on 2* especially uses sound design for further looped horror scenes, such as when a couple hears something banging against their bedroom wall but can't find any source for the sound. Only later do they recognize the sound's source in their own bodies hitting against the wall, as they now hang dead from the ceiling after Kayako's hair wraps around their throats. Sound sources aren't just modulated and distorted in Shimizu's loops, but also occur before they're experienced.

²³² Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); Britta Sjogren, *Into the Vortex: Female Voice and Paradox in Film* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

country like Japan. The tongueless scream eventually inhabiting her body acts as a form of negative voice, the sound of not having a voice. Akin to her spectral status, Rika doesn't possess her own voice, thus making her available for possession by Kayako's negative voice.

It's moreover surprising that few, if any, of *Ju-on*'s many remakes and sequels build upon the feminist potential of its silenced voices and tongueless screams. Most of them move the original source of the haunting from the actions of Kayako's husband to Kayako herself, depicting her as simply crazy without any outside cause for her actions. The empathy for the ghost so important to J-horror tends to be removed in its remakes so as to, supposedly, make her more frightening to western audiences. Valerie Wee makes this argument in comparing *Ju-on* with its 2004 American remake, *The Grudge*. She associates the remake with dangerous ideologies toward gender and culture: "by demonizing Kayako and having her dominate the narrative as the primary malevolent, destructive force, [the remake] appears to reify an essentialistic, male-dominated, and nativistically centered notion of Japanese culture in which the treacherous and dangerous female continues to undermine and threaten nature, culture, and society."²³³ More recently, the 2020 English version of *The Grudge* appeared in theaters alongside other feminist horror films just before the pandemic, such as *Promising Young Woman* (2020), *Swallow* (2019), and the *Invisible Man* reboot (2020). Unlike these other critically successful films, though, this version of *The Grudge* didn't suggest any roots in contemporary women's consciousness and can only appear, in a way solidified by its poor reception, as a glaring missed opportunity. Though the tongueless scream could easily be redirected into a powerful representation of a negative voice for women, that voice remains silent outside of *Ju-on*'s early versions.

²³³ Valerie Wee, *Japanese Horror Films and Their American Remakes: Translating Fear, Adapting Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 149.

For my larger classification, like the experiences, organs, and memories discussed in previous chapters, *Ju-on* views the voice as another transplantable body part of temporal body horror. A trademark component to the genre, horror bodies have had as many screaming voices extracted from them as physical limbs, eyeballs, or other viscera. Michel Chion goes as far as describing certain films as machines specifically “built to give birth to a scream.”²³⁴ The narratives of films like *King Kong* (1933), *Psycho*, or *Blow-Out* (1981) appear specifically designed to reach their climax at the moment a character, usually a woman, screams. Chion discovers what he calls a screaming point at their core, “which above all must fall at an appointed spot, explode at a precise moment, at the crossroads of converging plot lines, at the end of an often convoluted trajectory, but calculated to give this point a maximum impact.”²³⁵

Clearly, *Ju-on*’s narrative centers on a similar purpose in the significance it envelops in extracted screams. Only, Shimizu’s film differentiates the concept by looping the screaming point inside a traumatic event. In its case, *Ju-on*’s core appears more constructed by a screaming loop than a screaming point. The difference between the two resides in the coincidence of the scream with its bodily source. In a screaming point, everything in the narrative builds up to the moment when the scream happens. The narrative can only be resolved after this point occurs. But in a screaming loop, the scream has already happened but wasn’t experienced by the body that emitted it. As a result, the screaming point in *Ju-on* never officially arrives, but only repeats its unexperienced status. As *Ju-on* concludes, Rika’s body turns completely into Kayako’s, finally

²³⁴ Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, 77.

²³⁵ Chion, 76–77. This point in a film also notably “occupies a point in time, but has no duration within. It suspends the time of its possible duration; it’s a rip in the fabric of time.” Chion, 77. See also Peter Schwenger, “Phenomenology of the Scream,” *Critical Inquiry* 40, no. 2 (2014): 382–95.

emitting the same tongueless scream as the traumatic cycle begins again. As suggested by *Ju-on*'s sound design, films with narratives built around a traumatic loop can't be resolved.

Outside of the *Ju-on* cycle, Shimizu builds many of his other films around screaming loops as well, further removing much of the possible conclusiveness from their conclusions. The mad cameraman from *Marebito*, for instance, slices open his tongue at the end to provide living sustenance for the vampiric woman he's brought back from underground, the gesture appearing as a strange blood-sucking kiss. As he returns with her to the underground down a spiral staircase, his final words indicate a new inability to speak ("I have no use for human words now") but also, in what manifests the great horror he sought to find, a related inability to scream. In *Tormented* (2009), the protagonist is mute, hasn't spoken since screaming after she accidentally killed her stepmother as a girl. The circular merry-go-round where the death took place forms another screaming loop to which she returns in her nightmares. Eventually, the protagonist recovers her voice, but only as she falls to her death down the center of another spiral staircase. For Shimizu after *Ju-on*, the space between muteness and scream continues to pose a problem for his protagonists to the point where the loop I've discussed until now doesn't truly serve as the most accurate image of the traumatic experiences he depicts. Rather, his films suggest that the force of traumatic latency feels more like a spiral.

5.3 Spiral, Vertical, Vertigo: The Shape and Form of Trauma

As a horror film, *Ju-on* also works through the phenomenological shapes and symptomatic forms taken by traumatic possession. For Eugenie Brinkema, alongside the horror genre's familiar

characters, affects, and violence, resides a formal interest experimenting with the possible bodily forms created by those elements. She argues that “horror regards the body as nothing but formal material, treating it as a compositional aspect, ... a formal problem from the very beginning.”²³⁶ In that sense, examining the genre’s most unsettling depictions of traumatic experience leads to discovering formal patterns in those experiences: a hole, a descent, a loop, a spiral. As stated earlier, trauma studies generally views the malady as a form of repetition. Clinically speaking, its treatment tends to seek out the event’s appearance in signs and bodily symptoms. They can be dreams and nightmares directly returning the subject to the event or waking forms of unconscious re-enactment.

But trauma gains a unique formal dimension in possession films. Kubrick’s *The Shining* poses a good example, a film that’s influenced Shimizu to a great extent.²³⁷ This film follows the Torrance family as the father, Jack, takes on a caretaker job at the mountainside Overlook Hotel while it’s abandoned during the winter. Despite his awareness that the previous caretaker went mad and killed his family, the Torrances move in until Jack, too, goes mad over the course of the film and tries to kill his wife and son. Kubrick emphasizes Jack’s possession and the hotel’s looped existence by including several scenes where Jack seems to move back in time to the 1920s when

²³⁶ Brinkema, *Life-Destroying Diagrams*, 22.

²³⁷ Though never directly referencing *The Shining*, Shimizu would shoot a loose remake of it in *Reincarnation* (2005). There, a production crew in present-day Japan recreates on film a fictional murder set in a large hotel around the time of Kubrick’s film. The diegetic film director insists on the importance of his cast and crew visiting the actual hotel where the murders took place, but the return proves too much for the actress playing the lead role. She becomes possessed by her character to the point where she ends the film tied up in a straitjacket after having unexplained seizures on set. The film uses an exceptional crosscutting sequence lasting nearly thirty minutes to depict the lead actress’ possession by those whose experience lingers inside the hotel. *Reincarnation*’s influence by *The Shining* has led Michael Blouin to describe it as the “grand re-opening of the Overlook Hotel.” Michael J. Blouin, *Japan and the Cosmopolitan Gothic: Specters of Modernity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 121–42. Its final shot even looks exactly like the shot of Rika in Kayako’s body at the end of *Ju-on*, marking another instance in Shimizu’s career of possessed characters in present-day Japan unable to exist in only one time, one experience, or one body. Perhaps not incidentally, Kiyoshi Kurosawa also has a cameo role in *Reincarnation* as a psychology teacher lecturing about cryptomnesia, an instance where something previously known and forgotten feels like it’s never been conceived before.

the original murders took place. He even has discussions with the previous caretaker, who unsettlingly tells Jack that, somehow, “you’ve *always* been the caretaker. I should know, sir, I’ve *always* been here.” This way, *The Shining* depicts its possessed experience through a type of retroactive form: not just what will be or what has been, but combining the two into what will have been. In addition to control or ownership, as in referring to “Jack’s” body, job, or family, Kubrick’s film extends the meaning of the possessive form to one indicating possession by other entities like someone dead, a space of violence, or a traumatic event.

Resulting from this form, possession films give time an unusual spatial sense. Discussing *The Shining*, Dylan Trigg extracts a perpendicular theme from its haunting. He argues that when we think of time in spatial terms, it’s usually horizontal, as in moving forward or backward along a timeline. But he proposes that Kubrick’s possession film relocates that plane by placing the Overlook Hotel on a vertical axis above a Native American burial ground. In Trigg’s words, “[i]nstead of situating the ghost as a trace of our memories that has been left behind, the task is now to regard the ghost as an irrecoverable depth, which can only be understood in archaeological rather than experiential terms.”²³⁸ As part of an essay combining the experience of phenomenology with the unconscious structures of psychoanalysis, Trigg refigures spatialized time in terms of below and above instead of before and after. In the process, *The Shining*’s possessive case explains how Jack can have always been the caretaker despite not being around in the 1920s. Under this logic, taking on the role of caretaker at the Overlook means discovering the buried history beneath the hotel below his own history as well. One need not even go beyond phenomenological experience to understand how this possession works: the archaeological is experiential.

²³⁸ Dylan Trigg, “Archaeology of Hauntings: Phenomenology and Psychoanalysis in *The Shining*,” in *Stanley Kubrick’s The Shining: Studies in the Horror Film*, ed. Danel Olson (Lakewood, CO: Centipede Press, 2015), 277.

Though *Ju-on*'s haunted locale isn't built above a graveyard, it nonetheless constructs a vertical axis of its own for its characters' temporal experience. Instead of a position underneath the house, the haunting occurs at its apex from above, crawls down the stairwell from the attic. In fact, Kayako's downward crawl repeats across so many of the film's iterations that the motion itself feels looped. However, the crawl is only one of many instances of vertical haunting across Shimizu's oeuvre. They reach a point where this axis seems to constitute the primary phenomenological form through which his films work. From the same film, there's also the elevator scene in which Katsuya's sister, Hitomi, flees from Kayako after seeing and hearing her in a public bathroom. As the elevator moves toward her apartment's floor, Hitomi feels Toshio looking back at her through an elevator window on each floor. Phenomenologically speaking, Hitomi feels something impossible: the elevator moving upward to the same floor. One can say, more accurately, that the elevator doesn't move here but rather folds further inside its destination, which can't really be considered Hitomi's apartment. In this scene, mobile stasis renders what it feels like to return again for the first time. The elevator transporting the now-posessed Hitomi in this ghost film becomes the faulty time machine described earlier and envisions further what ghostly possession feels like. What could be called here a "trauma machine" reduces the number of potential destinations to the singular one despite an appearance of movement.

For René Thoreau Bruckner, traveling in a time machine produces a similar effect to that of watching a film. He describes the protagonist of H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895) as a movie spectator. Citing the 1960 film version, the time traveler is "spatially still, contained, inside the machine, but temporally in motion, uncontained and unsituated, outside of space. This is a temporal 'outside,' as the machine's trick is precisely to evacuate the now."²³⁹ Instead of being

²³⁹ René Thoreau Bruckner, "Travels in Flicker-Time (Madre!)," *Spectator* 28, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 65.

outside space and time entirely, Shimizu's trauma machine remains tied to the place where the event occurred, a time machine with a single destination. It doesn't even necessarily evacuate the now; the elevator seems to immerse itself further upward into Kayako's house without necessarily leaving Hitomi's apartment complex. No matter what button she presses, Hitomi will only end up that much closer to Kayako.

Furthermore, *Ju-on*'s elevator is one of many examples from Shimizu's oeuvre where the haunting happens vertically. Any space can fulfill this function as long as a traumatic event occurred there. In his filmography, traumatic events turn spaces into zones where only one thing can happen, usually something involving a character's death. Characters will often revisit a spot where someone fell to their death, where the present-day observers are shocked to notice the character, long-since having died, falling again, their downward motion repeating *ad infinitum*. When driving by the place where her sister fell to her death, the protagonist of *Howling Village* (2019) notices the sister's body falling repeatedly from the same spot as though diegetically looped with digital technology. In *Ox-Head Village* (2022), a minor character is perplexed by a large and seemingly unmotivated splash in a puddle in front of a haunted building. Upon looking closer, he's shocked to witness the reflection of a body repeatedly jumping from the building's roof down into the puddle, its reflection reappearing when the water settles. Several characters in *Shock Labyrinth* (2009) even get crushed to death in the present by someone's body that fell long ago in the precise spot in which the characters stand now. For Shimizu's thinking, some aspect of these deaths hasn't been experienced yet, leaving the dead to die again in ways suspending them in space and time. In this way, traumatic events gain a gravitational force through their latency in which any stray passerby can find themselves caught.

The traumatic physics at work across Shimizu's films further raise the possibility that a loop isn't necessarily a circle. Specifically, a loop becomes a spiral when characters participate in or somehow relive someone else's traumatic experience; when Rika fails to scream, it's not the same as the previous event in Kayako's murder, but slightly different. A spiral forms around a loop's central point; the witness' outside perspective to the event creates a spatial link funneling down into a temporal void.²⁴⁰ In this light, the shape holds more significance for Shimizu in his settings and narratives than a loop to the point where a spiral often forms in the physical center of his work, functioning like a strand of cinematic DNA. Yet, it's important to note that the spiral is by no means a form unique to Shimizu. Eugene Thacker discusses it in the process of describing a more iconic shape of the horror genre: the occult "magic circle." Standing inside the magic circle allows one to conjure alchemical and black magic forces. This shape's powers, in most cases, can only be accessed within the space containing the circle. Using the *Uzumaki* manga series by Junji Ito as an example, Thacker argues that the spiral is a form through which the magic circle's power can be dispersed into the outside world.²⁴¹ As a geometric shape, a spiral "has no actual existence in the world, except as a manifestation in the form of a spiral (a snail's shell, a slice of fish cake). This paradoxical state means that the spiral can only be said to negatively exist – the spiral in itself is never manifest except as a spiral 'in' some thing, in the world."²⁴² For Thacker, Ito's *Uzumaki* (1998-1999) unleashes occult forces onto its larger story world through the infectious spirals over which its characters obsess. Though Shimizu's spirals may not dissipate the diabolical forms of black magic, they do nonetheless wind a negative space around a negative voice. In turn,

²⁴⁰ Bruckner proposes this approach to the spiral in a different article, René Thoreau Bruckner, "Why Did You Have to Turn on the Machine?": The Spirals of Time-Travel Romance," *Cinema Journal* 54, no. 2 (2015): 1–23.

²⁴¹ Ito's *Uzumaki* was also adapted into a film of the same title (2000) by Ukrainian-Japanese director Higuchinsky into one of the more unique J-horror films of the Lost Decade era.

²⁴² Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet*, 79.

possession sucks characters down into the spiral's gravity.²⁴³ Where trauma eludes the subject and becomes latent, the experience gives a helical shape to the world around them.

The spiral shape manifests most clearly in the many staircases twisting inside Shimizu's films. Much of *Ju-on*'s narrative occurs around the half-turn staircase inside Kayako's house, specifically her crawl and scream. From a broader standpoint, the stairs of his other films constitute more traditional spiral staircases, although they don't, as one might expect, all lead in the same direction. One set of stairs, in *Marebito*, leads downward to the underground tunnel system beneath Tokyo while another set, in *Homunculus* (2021), goes upward to the mad medical intern's trepanation laboratory. Here, the particular direction one moves on these stairwells matters less than the fact of one's entry into their rotation. The characters in *Shock Labyrinth* return to a spiral staircase inside a haunted house down the center of which their friend fell when they were kids; *Tormented* uses CGI to extend the same staircase from the previous film to a dizzying infinity, with both ends also containing its own protagonist's impending point of death. These staircases give a phenomenological image to the way trauma possesses a space and all who enter it. The early POV shot from *Homunculus*, where a circular drill spins a hole into a flat black background meant to indicate someone's forehead, constitutes the defining shape of his filmography: a physical hole drilled into one's experience of space and time.

²⁴³ This is why the spiral even appears in Shimizu's only non-horror film, a live-action remake (2014) of Miyazaki's *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989). Shimizu added a haunted house scene that wasn't in the original animated film where a former popular singer, who's also lost her voice, lives as a recluse inside a large, empty house. The film's otherwise high key mise-en-scene begins resembling the low key one of *Ju-on* inside this house, which, as expected, contains a spiral staircase in the center with the reclusive singer residing at the top. For Shimizu, the spiral need not appear only in horror films, though it's not coincidental that his films begin to verge stylistically toward the genre when it appears.



Figure 14 - The spiral stairwell in *Tormented*

Shimizu's spirals draw influence further from a foundational temporal body horror film also fixated on the spiral shape: Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. What's perhaps the most canonical possession film abounds with spirals that represent many elements of the narrative: the protagonist's acrophobia, his unwitting immersion inside of a criminal plot, his romantic obsession with a woman who appears possessed by a ghost, and his gradual transformation from trauma victim to perpetrator. Though less extreme than those of Ito's fixations, James Stewart's Scottie becomes as obsessed with seeing spirals as he fears heights, including the famous vertigo zoom shot looking down its own spiral staircase. For Chris Marker, merging the spiral shape with the feared abyss forms "a spectacular metaphor for another kind of vertigo, much more difficult to represent – the vertigo of time."²⁴⁴ In Shimizu's film, the spirals I'm discussing here caused by trauma produce their own vertigo of time. In *Ju-on*'s house, the center of the spiral forms an abyssal drop inside the bodies of those entering the house. It's where the feeling arises as the elevator moves upward to the floor from which it departed; where the characters who relive falling to their deaths don't ever hit the ground; where characters feel a dead person crawling out of their

²⁴⁴ Chris Marker, "A Free Replay (Notes Sur « Vertigo »)," *Positif*, June 1994, 79.

stomach. Trauma, in Shimizu's thinking, creates its own experience of vertigo, only it's not an external abyss staring back at the acrophobe, but an internal one inverting the subject's vestibular sense.



Figure 15 - The spiral of time in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*

It might seem simple to describe traumatic vertigo as descending a downward spiral into madness. Both Hitchcock and Shimizu would struggle with medically authorized understanding throughout their careers. Although Hitchcock often resorts to cringeworthy explanations for many of his depictions of trauma, as in the doctor's diagnosis of Norman Bates at the end of *Psycho*, *Vertigo* is one instance which avoids being diminished by its medical doctors. Though the doctor in *Vertigo* provides Scottie's diagnosis halfway through the film, "acute melancholia together with a guilt complex," Scottie's experience in the rest of the film seems to boil over from the sterile confines of that diagnosis. The experience overflows its possible re-enactment into unknown territory, Scottie's movement *up* the spiral staircase resulting in one of the more ambivalent conclusions of Hitchcock's career. This way, it feels too easy to say that *Vertigo*'s protagonist, and Shimizu's to boot, simply go mad; rather, they are possessed by someone else's spiral, stuck in a reenactment that doesn't necessarily belong to them.

Though nowhere expressing special influence by Hitchcock's film, Shimizu nonetheless can't help but recreate this form of temporal vertigo when characters become possessed by an

event. The protagonists of *Vertigo* and *Ju-on* directly relive a traumatic moment that wasn't experienced when it occurred, a person's death which was only partially successful (for Scottie, Judy's death which was really Madeleine's; for Rika, the death of Kayako which is really her own). Though Rika may have less of a personal investment in the event than Scottie, both death sequences possess them to an overwhelming extent. Rather than looping back to the moment with a time machine, they re-enact it with their bodies to equally destructive results. Scottie is apparently cured of his vertigo, though at the cost of both Madeleine and Judy's lives; Rika shares a moment of cross-temporal empathy with Kayako, though at the cost of dying in the same way. Even before these climactic conclusions, the characters' bodies speak in a symptomatic language true to the traumatic event: both have nightmares about returning to it, Scottie particularly suspended in a blank space; when awake, Scottie becomes catatonic while Rika's face twitches uncontrollably and her ears ring with tinnitus. It's noteworthy, this way, that unlike his later films, *Ju-on* doesn't include any doctor explanations. Rika wakes up in the hospital to Mariko's voice, and her friend suggests her experience was caused by being forced to work too hard. Mariko isn't entirely wrong, but what's going on with Rika runs deeper than the workplace. These many instances of vertical repetition in Shimizu's characters combine into a larger experience associated with being possessed by a traumatic event: a vertiginous feeling of falling inside one's body.

In a related context, this vertigo of time also appears cinematically in African American experiences of racism. In what's become one of the most acclaimed body horror films, Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017) gives traumatic vertigo a unique name for Black bodies: the sunken place. For his film, it's an experience of falling into an enormous void inside one's body caused by interactions with white supremacists. The film correlates this sunken place with the protagonist Chris' individual experience of trauma: not moving from the TV as a boy while his mother lay

dying from a car accident. In the process, the white supremacist mother uses Chris' trauma, specifically by making him relive the experience in the present, as an opening to entrap him so deeply inside his body that his actions become no longer accessible to him. But from a larger standpoint, the film makes Chris relive many aspects of a traumatic experience running far deeper within the country in which it was made: American slavery. His body is auctioned off for a lobotomy meant to fuse his body with the brain of a white supremacist; the lobotomized victims then act as servants working on the family grounds. Chris even escapes from his captivity in the sunken place by putting a particular artifact of this history, cotton picking, to new use, picking it out of a chair to block his ears from the racists' hypnotic triggers. That way, *Get Out* puts traumatic history to new use as a potential way for its protagonist to escape from the temporal vertigo of the sunken place. I further discuss Peele and his films' depiction of phantom experience in the conclusion, but before that, the cross between slavery and embodiment opens the possibility of escaping Shimizu's spirals through a familiar idea I've discussed in previous chapters: reliving the event.

5.4 Reliving Trauma: The Convergence of Cause and Effect

By having its characters directly relive traumatic events, *Ju-on* employs an uncommon mode of representing trauma. In many ways, one can say the film works to the contrary of the aesthetic tendencies discussed in the previous chapter on Kurosawa. In terms of its depiction of Kayako's ghost, *Ju-on* originally raised skepticism for breaking J-horror's number one rule with

direct representation: showing the ghost's face.²⁴⁵ Not only does directly showing Kayako's face work as one of the film's most frightening horror elements, but so does its equally direct approach to showing her traumatic experience. While obviously influenced by Japanese aesthetic traditions, the film's approach to trauma more closely resembles that found in African American time travel narratives. Against the indirect mode formulated by Claude Lanzmann discussed in the previous chapter, many contemporary narratives working through American slavery take the opposite route. Novels like Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* (1979) or Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata* (1998) and films like Haile Gerima's *Sankofa* (1993) or Gerard Bush and Christopher Renz's *Antebellum* (2020) transplant a contemporary Black character back in time to directly relive the experience of slavery. Notably, none of these narratives uses the technology of a time machine to achieve this aim. Instead, like Shimizu, they turn the protagonist's body into a time traveling device. The protagonists even develop wounds from across time as reliving the trauma fundamentally changes the way they experience their bodies: *Kindred*'s protagonist loses an arm in her travels back to the time of her ancestors; *Stigmata*'s protagonist, a descendant of slaves, wakes up at night in the present day with fresh whipping scars and traces of steel chains across her body. Though these traumatic events have largely shaped the experiences of Black Americans, for these protagonists, the ancestry they inherit holds little importance for their senses of themselves in the present until they relive it. In this light, slavery seeks out and acquires the protagonists' bodies like a cause searching for an effect. In the end, the narratives resolve these problems by, in the reliving experience, proposing that these two positions, cause and effect, be combined.

²⁴⁵ Discussing J-horror writer/director Hiroshi Takahashi's manifesto for depicting ghosts, Chika Kinoshita states that Shimizu's *Ju-on* "marked a certain break in the history of J-horror. Some even locate the end of J-horror at its release. ... Takahashi conveys his and his colleague Kurosawa's sense of shock and awe in watching a short video project by Shimizu, then one of their students at Tokyo Bigakko (the Film School of Tokyo)." Kinoshita, "The Mummy Complex," 115.

By directly reliving a traumatic experience through bodily time travel, these narratives rethink some of the influential concepts in trauma studies discussed to this point. In fact, Lisa Woolfork argues that Black time travel narratives invent their own unique area of trauma studies: a Black vernacular trauma theory. For her, the way these stories proceed “combines the time-travel convention of fantasy fiction with the imperatives of realism to pose an alternative to the predominant antirepresentational ethos of much current literary trauma theory.”²⁴⁶ As discussed previously, thinkers like Lanzmann view direct depictions of traumatic events, those meant to result in some form of understanding, as obscene gestures whose intelligible approach can’t do justice to the incomprehensible horror of the experience.²⁴⁷ The point for this perspective isn’t to indulge in an apathetic nihilism but rather to transmit the experience, communicate it and about it without claiming that there would or could be a way to understand it. His documentary *Shoah* (1985), for example, indirectly relives the Holocaust through survivor testimony and contemporary footage observing the empty camps in the present. The result proves as moving and harrowing as a more direct depiction like that used for Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* (1994). Black trauma narratives, for their part, often rethink this binary of direct/indirect by directly reliving the horrors of slavery, though not in order to understand why slavery happened or to necessarily recreate what its horrors felt like. Rather than transmitting the experience, time travelling through the body instead *restores* the history of slavery to its characters by making them constitute themselves around its occurrence. This approach to restoring trauma shouldn’t be approached as positive or negative, as the narratives tend to conclude with ambivalent tones toward their experiences; the

²⁴⁶ Lisa Woolfork, *Embodying American Slavery in Contemporary Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 2. See especially the chapter “Trauma and Time Travel,” Woolfork, 19–44.

²⁴⁷ Claude Lanzmann, “The Obscenity of Understanding: An Evening with Claude Lanzmann,” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 200–220.

conclusions tend to combine uplifting sentiment with a harrowing disquiet. The point is that this history doesn't constitute the protagonists' present when, in fact, an ancestral experience so unfathomable, or the actions of their ancestors within it, shouldn't be so easily disregarded. The goal, in other terms, is to resist the trappings of traumatic latency by participating in the experience rather than remaining a detached spectator to it, willing something in the event to have happened.

For Woolfork, one of the key aspects of directly reliving trauma is the fact that it minimizes the distance between observing and acting. *Kindred* specifically pushes its time-travelling characters to the point where they can't observe slavery from a safe distance but must become immersed in its time and all the horrors which that entails. Where the time traveler can't remain detached from the past, that's where trauma ceases being latent (read: possessive) and becomes constitutive of the present. Butler's novel specifically "stages this gap between trauma and its registration in the mind and in history as parallel to the distance between the observer and the participant. [The protagonist] Dana's return to the slave past as an observer who will become a participant represents a process not possible in trauma theory: to experience the event as it occurred and to recognize it as trauma while it is happening."²⁴⁸ While this technique does seem to offer some agency over the latency separating its characters from their history, this potential way out of the spiral doesn't provide them with understanding. The logic behind her losing her limb remains a mystery to Dana at the end, although she does gain a new respect for her ancestry and the difficult decisions they had to make in order to survive and for her to exist. Though the direct experience doesn't redress the event's haunting capacity, to achieve this feeling of participation and action necessitates an apparent impossibility that certainly, at first glance, eludes understanding: becoming both a cause and an effect of the same event. Here, the event in all its revulsion becomes

²⁴⁸ Woolfork, *Embodying American Slavery in Contemporary Culture*, 27.

a foundational part of one's existence; in an irreducibly disturbing way, one becomes trauma's offspring.²⁴⁹

Though his Japanese horror films take place on the other side of the globe from Butler's context, we've seen throughout this chapter how Shimizu's films, and *Ju-on* in particular, share an investment in directly reliving traumatic events. The return experience clearly provides some level of ownership or claim over the event, if only one short-lived. Instead of real historical moments like slavery, though, Shimizu's films relive ones involving supernatural occurrences, urban legends, and local myths. Some of these are tied to real locations, but for the most part they're invented by Shimizu for narrative dramatization.²⁵⁰ Though real history may be missing, the persistent explorations into trauma's effect on bodily experience inspires what could lay the groundwork for a Japanese-specific approach to trauma theory. Differently from Black trauma, Japanese approaches to the affliction have to consider a different position between victimhood in the second World War as well as perpetration, taking into account the many folds and layers of Japanese history before modernity even reached its shores. Japanese history contains horrors like Hiroshima and the Tokyo firebombing as well as occupation by the U.S., but also many massacres, mass rapes, and colonial endeavors directed against neighboring countries. Much has been written about the many Japanese films working through and re-enacting the atom bomb explosions.²⁵¹

²⁴⁹ On the implications and potential pitfalls of this prospect, see Saidiya Hartman's account of her contemporary journey along a slave route in Africa, Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008).

²⁵⁰ It's worth noting that Shimizu's later films also lean more heavily on CGI than earlier ones to a particularly detrimental result. The poor critical reception of the director's later career can be attributed to the films moving away from J-horror's typically low-budget aesthetic in their direct representations of trauma. The high-concept style of films like *Shock Labyrinth*, *Tormented*, and the Village trilogy tends to engulf the narratives to the point where their conclusions often feel underwhelming. What's more, as was the case with Hitchcock's trauma films, the prominent authority Shimizu grants to diegetic psychologists and their explanations in the later films also detracts from their possibilities. Earlier films like *Marebito* and *Reincarnation* eschew simplistic methods of understanding which grants them a power that lingers long after they conclude.

²⁵¹ See Lippit, *Atomic Light*; Mick Broderick, ed., *Hibakusha Cinema: Hiroshima, Nagasaki and the Nuclear Image in Japanese Film* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Deamer, *Deleuze, Japanese Cinema, and the Atom Bomb*.

Less attention has been paid to the thornier confluence of subject positions that can make up a traumatic experience, such as victimhood and perpetration, cause and effect, within the same history.

While Shimizu features characters directly reliving a traumatic moment throughout his career, he gets closest to discovering agency over it in *Howling Village*. The first film in the so-called Village trilogy, *Howling Village* practically constitutes the Japanese version of *Kindred* with its own time travel back to its protagonist's traumatic origins. In it, a young medical doctor in contemporary Japan named Kanae begins investigating her origins after cases of supernatural possession and death start occurring around her hospital. She eventually discovers that the occurrences revolve around her own family ancestry; she learns she's descended from inhabitants of a village destroyed long ago that was designated outside the reach of Japan's laws and constitution. According to the urban legend (largely invented for the film), the residents of Inunaki Village lived inside shacks in the woods separate from modern society and survived by killing and eating wild dogs. They lived this way until a modern power company, wanting to build a dam over the village in the 1940s, began mercilessly torturing the community. What's particularly disturbing to Kanae is that the head of the corporation apparently raped and impregnated her grandmother, one of the village women, making Kanae herself one of the last remaining humans with Inunaki blood. Shimizu films the protagonist coming to terms with her origins through time travel without a time machine, and thus aims to resist the time lag of traumatic latency. The narrative problem requires her, together with her other siblings, to physically return to the site where the trauma originates (the moment of her mother's birth) and not just observe its occurrence, but to take action to ensure that it happens.

When Kanae time travels back to the village, the ensuing scenario strongly resembles *Kindred*: the time-travelling doctor ceases to be an observer and becomes a participant in her own origins. With the community destroyed, the last residents, a couple who just gave birth, beg Kanae to take the newborn baby out of its ruins to grow up in modern civilization. Upon separating from the baby, its mother becomes ravenous, sprouts animal fangs, and chases after her. Here, Kanae's brother sacrifices himself to the village in a moment which can't be said to belong to time, allowing her to escape from the scene. She then passes out from exhaustion in front of a house where a young boy in pre-modern garb, her grandfather as a boy, picks up the baby and brings it inside. Without cutting, Shimizu then shows her grandfather in the present, now an old man, waking her up in the same spot. Though she only realizes it later, this moment marks Kanae's participation in guaranteeing her mother's birth. She herself becomes thus, in the roundabout way only possible through time travel, responsible for her own origins, both a cause and an effect of the event.

Here in *Howling Village* we have the anti-form of Shimizu's phantom experience: directly experiencing this moment effectively functions as a mode of dispossession, a possible way out of the spiral. Kanae achieves clarity toward her ancestry and comes to view it in a less horrific light. Describing the experience to a younger sibling still alive, she speaks her grandmother's name for the first time while emphasizing that their ancestor was a person despite her monstrous actions: "That is not a monster. Her name is Maya. If it wasn't for her, we may never have been born." Like Rika's perspective on Kayako, Kanae's perspective on her ancestor changes from fear to empathy. In turn, unlike *Ju-on's* bleak ending, *Howling Village* concludes on a more positive note, though one with as much dark ambivalence as that of the cure at the end the other films I discuss in this project. Kanae doesn't come to understand her ancestry, she restores it, but her particular ancestry's restoration remains an ethical problem. As is clear from the many films discussed in

this project, traumatic cures rarely take the healthy and hopeful appearance of typical medical cures. The film's haunting final shot shows Kanae baring her own set of fangs she didn't have earlier. Inside these fangs is the stinging venom of a history fraught with converging victimhood and perpetration, much like the larger Japanese context suggested by Shimizu's film. Though *Howling Village* does envision a way out of trauma for its protagonist, it does so by visualizing these origins as newly accessed body parts which can only appear monstrously inhuman. Grown from a traumatic ancestry, Kanae's fangs are the disembodied wounds of Japanese history, though giving a new body to such a history remains a difficult and unsettling prospect.



Figure 16 - Kanae's fangs in *Howling Village*

By working through what it feels like to be possessed by an event, Shimizu's films discover a similar function between ghosts and trauma. Happening inside, not outside the body, they possess people by returning the host's body to what wasn't experienced at the time that it happened. *Ju-on* particularly shows how traumatic possession works when the event acquires a body, an action, and a voice. The possessive event also takes the form of a phenomenological spiral encircling vertiginously around the event's latent occurrence. Shimizu's later career would go on to explore a way out of possession that involves becoming a simultaneous cause and effect of the event. The way out doesn't produce an experience removed from the trauma entirely but grants one an

agential, though often ethically ambivalent, claim over it. At a broader level for trauma studies, the prospect of restoring history holds potential for future thinking, especially since the results vary so much depending on the situation. As *Howling Village* shows, restoration can become a feeling of monstrous inheritance when the history in question involves perpetrating trauma. In a different national context, as inheritors of Black slavery in the United States as well as the atom bomb, one can easily recognize the sensation of being inhabited by a monstrous heredity in the contemporary U.S. More distressing, the prospect of restoring history has even become popular ideology: the nationalistic idea of making the country return to a past state of glory. Yet, in what's by now become common knowledge, the American history sought to be restored dangerously needs to re-enact the country's history of torturing and erasing minorities in order to achieve its goal. The American context shows how grave the promise of restoration can become when done by perpetrators; Americans haven't grown fangs, but rather something far worse that's somehow, like the impulses in *A History of Violence*, always been there. In this way, phantom experience haunts the present-day context out of which my project has been created, and the conclusion discusses the way it functions inside the contemporary environment through the films of Jordan Peele.

6.0 Conclusion: The Possibility of Experience in the Films of Jordan Peele

“You haven’t had any experience until I’ve had it, too.”

-Elliot Mantle to his brother in *Dead Ringers*

It’s no coincidence that the contemporary American environment has produced arguably the most widely acclaimed and recognized body horror film director in film history. After releasing *Get Out* in 2017, Jordan Peele has become possibly the most significant western director in the subgenre since David Cronenberg. As I discussed in chapter two, Peele’s Canadian predecessor engages with the uncanny feeling of fused experience, whether with time in *A History of Violence* or another person in *Dead Ringers*. The latter film unlocks a fusional aspect of narcissism from its characters evident in this section’s epigraph quote. Less interested in feelings of self-importance most often associated with the term, Cronenberg is interested in the strange fusional results of extreme narcissism that involve someone being unable to experience anything of their own outside that of other people, needing to take experience from others in order to have one at all. In that case, the act of preventing others from having an experience of their own becomes a life-sustaining substance like blood to a vampire. Living in a social world, it’s common to share experiences with other people, and a degree of self-regard is only natural. But for Cronenberg’s philosophy of fusion, narcissism becomes an illness when experience becomes impossible outside that of others.

In line with this experience, Peele’s films create his own unique approach to fusion in a way locating it as a horror element of American history. Focusing on experiences of Black Americans, Peele’s films envision horrific new ways in which Black bodies have their experienced

surgically taken, absorbed, and otherwise acquired. In *Get Out*, the white supremacists turn the Black people they kidnap into experiential hosts by transplanting the brains of white people into their bodies. Even more than the parasitic twins of *Dead Ringers*, *Nope* (2022) gives one of the more powerful images of narcissism in film history in an alien flying saucer that physically engulfs people who look at it. In his films, Peele makes horror film monstrosities out of the theft of African American experience, whether in an unsettling form of racial fusion or ocular ingestion sucking out the ability to look, see, and make photographic history.

But Peele's most sustained engagement with fusion comes in the form of the *Tethered from Us* (2019). In this film about doubles, mirrors, and a battle over a single identity, he conceptualizes a phantom experience haunting the United States originating in the contemporary nationalistic fervor in which it was made. Inside the overarching fear of outsiders found in that context, Peele investigates the uncomfortable proximity, even interchangeability, between the insider and outsider positions. For him, "I think in the simplest form, the very nature of 'us' means there is a 'them,' right? So that is what this movie is about to me, it's that: Whatever your 'us' is, we turn 'them' into the enemy, and maybe 'we' are our own worst enemy."²⁵² Named specifically after its country of origin in the late 2010s, the film depicts a violent revolution carried out by doubles for every American citizen who live in squalor inside a system of underground tunnels. The revolution begins when the film's protagonist, an above-ground American named Adelaide, revisits a hall of mirrors where her reflection took on a life of its own as a girl. After meeting her double, also American but from underground, she can't help but feel the experiential latency of trauma; she explains to her husband after they return in the present, "I can't be here, it's too much. Being here,

²⁵² Ailsa Chang, "Jordan Peele Looked Into The Mirror And Saw The Evil Inside 'Us,'" *NPR*, March 22, 2019, sec. Movie Interviews, <https://www.npr.org/2019/03/22/705875221/jordan-peepe-looked-into-the-mirror-and-saw-the-evil-inside-us>.

it feels like there's this black cloud hanging over me, and I don't feel like myself." Something, then, is preventing her from having her own experience. After this confession, the Tethered appear and begin their fight to the death, and like the contestations over national identity of the film's real-world context, they fight over the experience of a single identity to which neither Adelaide nor her double feel they have access.

In line with my project's classification framework, tethering makes up the film's unique experiential form. Peele's conception of tethering splits a single experience across two bodies, one above ground and the other below. The two bodies live through the same events, but they occur in vastly different surroundings. In a way, it's a variation of Cronenbergian fusion where the experience of one person leaks into that of another without any bodily contact (when praised for his horror work, Peele is always quick to show his influence by Cronenberg). Only, in *Us*, it's a partial fusion, and that partiality is what makes it so unsettling for those on the underground end. In the film, Peele depicts this experience by crosscutting from the above-ground experiences to their below-ground side effects: where people enjoy themselves at a boardwalk amusement park, their doubles perform the same actions at the same time, but in a barren and endless underground tunnel. Thus, being tethered creates experience for one and latency for the other. One's experience, when below ground, never belongs to just the subject; there are only effects without cause, the phantom form of trauma every day. The resulting resentment, envy, and other ugly feelings that naturally come with being tethered make the duel into its symptomatic form, causing the specular foes to battle to the death over the possibility of experience in the same way as occurs around a malignant narcissist unable to access their own. Though neither Adelaide nor her double are narcissists, the pair's duel over their experience, reducing it to a contest over a single one, nonetheless indicates the affliction's structural presence behind Peele's conception of tethering.

As the horror figure for this phantom experience, Peele uses the form of the double. Familiarly known as a doppelganger, the double historically indicates the presence or proximity of death; upon seeing one's double, it usually means the end is nigh. In his study of the figure, Paul Meehan locates the association between doubles and death in early mythology; "folklore beliefs are curiously consistent on one point: it is dangerous, or even fatal, to be in the same place at the same time as one's double."²⁵³ Because of this threat, the typical response to seeing the double is to engage, like animals seeing their reflections, in a vicious battle for survival without a moment's hesitation. If only one experience is possible, this response is to be expected. That way, the double also functions as a figure for narcissism in its malignant form. As discussed in chapter two, the worst results of narcissism break multitudes down into their most singular form. Though it might seem to be a multiplication of the self, the double indicates an inability to access one's experience. In itself, though, experience is unique to everyone and therefore isn't really something that can be taken; it can be shared between people but is ultimately registered differently by each party. In that sense, a more civilized response to seeing one's double would be to avoid viewing other people and their experience as an extension of oneself. If not, the experiences of others will appear as horrifying doubles preventing one from having their own, and in a broader sense, conceptions of groups like nations or collectives can't exist as the multitude of experiences they are.

Among the symptoms of this phantom experience, Peele finds another in the consumerism of the family friends who Adelaide's family meets at the boardwalk. Heavily invested in commodities and possibly named after the main character of *Fight Club* (1999), another film

²⁵³ Paul Meehan, *The Ghost of One's Self: Doppelgangers in Mystery, Horror and Science Fiction Films* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2017), 3.

critiquing narcissistic capitalism that utilizes the double, *Us* depicts the Tylers' experience to be so anesthetized by the commodities they own that they can't seem to do anything besides preventing others from having any experience of their own. They embody the worst aspects of narcissism by reducing all possibilities to meaningless jokes. For example, the film depicts the result of encountering the Tylers as an endless series of personal slights: discussing the envy he feels toward the family, Adelaide's husband complains, "You saw their new car, right? He had to just get that thing to fuck with me"; when the Tyler mother hears the Tethered outside their house and asks her husband to investigate, he chides her with O.J. Simpson jokes, to which she can only respond with annoyance, "Don't fuck with me, Josh." The Tyler daughters, identical twins, embody further symptoms by their experiences being completely inseparable. When they aren't knocking over the sand architecture of other beachgoers, they often find themselves saying the same things at the same time, to the point of having to double and even triple "jinx" each other. Unable to experience anything themselves, the Tylers resort to preventing its potential in others, imbibing alcohol at all hours of the day, and feeling an all-encompassing resentment. Their affliction is never more telling than when the Tyler husband offers his wife a drink on the beach. He pulls the cup back before handing it to her, asking in an infantile voice, "Ah, ah...what do we say?" to which she can only respond, not with gratitude, but rather, "I hate you?"

For his part, Peele is by no means averse to humor after beginning his career co-creating the Comedy Central show *Key & Peele* (2012-2015). But since characters in horror films rarely survive if they don't take things seriously, humor becomes the Tylers' downfall by presenting their expensive and envy-laden commodities as effectively useless when needed for survival. When Adelaide's husband shares his recent boat purchase with the Tyler father, he gets mocked for not having smaller accessories for it like a flare gun, his excitement being quickly spoiled. Later, when

hiding from the Tyler father's double, he tries to use a flare gun from inside his friend's well-accessorized boat to defend himself, only to discover that the commodity does nothing. Later, the digital assistant knock-off in the Tylers' house doesn't call the police when requested, but instead cruelly plays N.W.A.'s song "Fuck Tha Police." For their part, Adelaide's family gives these commodities new utility by using anything within reach to fight the Tethered; they kill their assailants using fireplace pokers, golf putters, and decorative rocks. They draw new experience out of these objects in ways allowing them to survive, and in the process un-tether themselves from their doubles. The Tylers, on the other hand, remain tethered to the social status of these objects, therefore dooming them when that status is nullified in survival situations.

At a further level, *Us* also resonates with a larger-scale traumatic experience of African Americans. The ways in which Adelaide's family kills their tethered doubles hold uncanny resemblances to ways in which Black people have been terrorized over the course of U.S. history. Part of Peele's popularity as a director lies in the so-called "Easter eggs" he scatters throughout his movies, filling minor details with significance like clothing, setting, and references to other films.²⁵⁴ He particularly approaches a familiar horror trope in novel ways by creating poetic justice through the way characters die. In *Get Out*, for instance, many have pointed out how the protagonist kills the white supremacist family holding him hostage. He pulls pieces of cotton from the chair to which they've tied him and lodges them inside his ears, therefore resisting the sonic triggers used to hypnotize him into submission. He also uses the bust of a deer head to kill his captors in what many viewers recognize as an inversion of the Black buck stereotype often limiting

²⁵⁴ For instance, Peele imbues *Us* with many references to Kubrick's *The Shining*. From a thematic interrogation of family structure to replicating specific camera movements and framings, Peele displays a clearly conscious effort to make a similar film to Kubrick's, only starring and revolving around the experiences of Black people. See Joy McEntee, "The Tethered Shadow: Jordan Peele and Stanley Kubrick," *Film Criticism* 46, no. 1 (June 22, 2022).

the actions of Black male film characters. *Nope*'s protagonists also make new use of history. Descendants of the first African American captured on film, they survive the alien attack by making visual history themselves: being on the other side of the camera capturing an influential image, the first recorded picture of extraterrestrial life. In such ways, Peele's characters make new utility out of these artifacts from Black history that allows them to escape their horrific scenarios. The utility produces forms of action more in line with those of time travel and restoring causal linkage.

In *Us*, however, Black history isn't so much usable by its characters as, in the refrain of temporal body horror, it uses them. Black trauma seems to vicariously act through the characters like those of Mamiya's hypnotized victims in *Cure*. Here, the ways in which Adelaide's family kills their doubles and wins the duel over experience discover dead Black bodies in hauntingly familiar positions from a U.S. historical standpoint: her husband's double dies when thrown off a boat, as captive slaves were during transportation to collect the insurance money on their lives; her daughter's double dies hanging from a tree in a way resembling a lynching; her son's double, a white mask covering his face, walks backward into a burning fire with his arms outstretched to form the shape of a burning cross; and Adelaide kills her own double by strangling her with a handcuff chain that could have been shackled to slaves of the past or Black Americans killed in police custody in the present. Whether or not Peele consciously references this iconography isn't as important as the more pressing feeling that these images seem to float throughout the American setting like ghosts seeking out new bodies to possess them. There's no poetic justice to their appearance in this horror film, just the perpetuation of injustice amidst such experiential duels. As further bodies out of time, the ways the Tethered die point toward an origin of racial inequality underlying the victories of American nationalism.



Figure 17 - Imagery from traumatic Black history in *Us*

In the end, *Us* makes damning suggestions about the results of winning the duel over a single experience. One might think that to the victor go the spoils of regaining access to experience, but the film's conclusion shows how that's not the case. After finally killing her double, Adelaide recalls what about their first encounter had such a powerful effect on her: she was really the one who grew up in the underground tunnel as a member of the Tethered and switched places with her above ground double the night they met. In that sense, she's clearly come a long way from the miserable environment in which she grew up. But on the other hand, just as the film restores her origins to her, Adelaide notices her son Jason looking at her in a similar way to that seen at the end of Cronenberg's *A History of Violence*. After seeing his mother kill people with a violent impulse that could only come from years spent being tethered to someone else's experience, he clearly understands the traumatic nature of her origins. Like the Stall family, Jason can't offer the comfort of a reverse shot telling her who she is; his cold, piercing stare cuts right through her. Though she smiles at him and rolls her eyes to suggest she's not going to hurt him, it remains difficult to say that, by defeating her double and winning the duel, Adelaide finally regains access to her experience and is therefore cured of being tethered. With the now familiar dark ambivalence of

temporal body horror, it seems more accurate to say that she's now become the very person she was fighting against: she's become her own worst enemy.²⁵⁵



Figure 18 - Echoes of *A History of Violence* in *Us*

While Adelaide isn't a metaphor for malignant narcissism, her conclusion nonetheless produces a warning for the American nationalism saturating the world in which *Us* was made. The end point of the film leads to a haunting suggestion for its experiential form as well as for its

²⁵⁵ This way, *Us* resembles another temporal body horror film about doubles: Denis Villeneuve's *Enemy* (2013). The film depicts a man discovering his double living an opposite life to his and the ways in which the two of them begin swapping their identities. Both are envious of the other though they're both equally dissatisfied with their own lives, and they eventually decide to switch permanently. After the protagonist's double dies and the narrative feels resolved as he takes over the other's place, the film ends by revealing that the dissatisfaction problem runs far deeper than what appeared to be a winner-take-all fight over a single experience. A rare feminist-minded filmmaker for big budget Hollywood movies, Villeneuve describes this fiction film as a documentary of the male brain, so it deconstructs a narcissistic problem particular to male envy. The point of *Enemy* is to relocate the source of problems associated with this form of envy from those specular enemies against whom the subject fights to the subject's relation to himself. For a female-centered film about a similar battle over experience, see Barbet Schroeder's *Single White Female* (1992) and Sianne Ngai's discussion of it in Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 126–73.

national context: the winner of the experiential duel only wins the feeling that experience will never feel like it belongs to them again. It's not a coincidence that this nationalistic period produces a rise in fascist sympathies; the movement in Germany turned a need to prevent experience in others into a need to destroy all of life itself. Almost a century after defeating the Nazis at the cost of millions of lives, it's truly terrifying to recognize that the seeds for the next incarnation of fascism are, and somehow have always been, buried in American soil. If there is a remedy for the present's phantom experience, it won't be found in killing perceived enemies to restore experience, of national identity or otherwise. Succumbing to this affliction, you will forever embody the very enemy you're trying to kill.

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