
Jack Morgan. *The Biology of Horror: Gothic Literature and Film*.
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STEFFEN HANTKE
SOGANG UNIVERSITY, SEOUL

In *The Biology of Horror*, Jack Morgan joins the scores of scholars in the humanities who have discovered the body as a stage of social, political, and ideological drama. "This book will suggest," Morgan declares, "that the horror literature tradition is an aspect of our mental life in which our physiological constitution is more notably implicit, that horror is essentially bio-horror and involves the tenuous negotiations between rationality and the looming biological plenum that defies rational mapping" (2-3). After numerous Foucaultian and New Historicist readings of power having its way with the body, especially in the light of cybertechnology, one would think that a book published nowadays has a hard time selling the "discovery" of the body as noteworthy news. As far as the horror genre is concerned, an author who concerns himself with embodiment has his work cut out for himself anyway; the term "body horror" has been a familiar trope among producers and the critics of horror since David Cronenberg's films in the late 1970s and early '80s.

Morgan acknowledges the latter problem when he writes that *all* horror "is essentially bio-horror." Unless he is concerned with horror as affect, and thus with all literature, his statement seems to recognize that any book working out the implications of embodiment is essentially stating the obvious. This blurriness around the edges of his central definition shows itself in two ways. One is that Morgan spends much time on texts that do fall into the gothic tradition, like Henry James' and Edith Wharton's ghost stories. These particular authors, I would argue, are perhaps among the least interested in the body as a site of horror. Morgan seems to think so too, because later on he gives a lucid, insightful reading of James' style as an exercise in evasion and equivocation, emphasizing how James' prose nervously avoids contact with material certainties and thus keeps the reader in a state of cognitive suspension. His discussion fares better with the likes of John Cheever or James Joyce, but then most readers will not think of them immediately as gothic writers.

When returning to the canonical gothic tradition, which works more easily within the generic definition of horror, the inclusiveness of Morgan's definition comes back to haunt him because here the body as a site of horror is, in fact, a well-established critical trope. Reading Maturin, Radcliffe, and LeFanu, Morgan focuses on the conflation of bodies and buildings, on the themes of vampirism,

languishment, regression, and possession. Predictably, Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection gets a spin, just as Bakhtin's discussion of the body in the carnivalesque. Morgan includes a chapter on the migration of the gothic from Europe to America, which focuses on Brockden Brown, Hawthorne, and Melville, and draws heavily on Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel*. All of these topics are discussed with eminent competence. (His editors are to blame for a glitch on page 185 where Morgan talks about "Don Siegle's [sic] book on which *Body Snatchers* was based"—I am not sure if he means Don Siegel, the director of the original film version of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*; the author of the novel on which Siegel's film is based is Jack Finney). But there is little sense that the discussion is breaking new ground.

More original is Morgan's return to the myth criticism of Northrop Frye and Jessie Weston, which examines "the cycles of biological life and the ritual-mythic inventions that express them" (40). There is nothing wrong with the use of this critical approach per se, though current academic fashion may say otherwise. But myth criticism brings with it a curious indifference, a theoretical blindness, to the concrete historical circumstances under which some texts are produced and consumed. Unlike much contemporary body criticism, which conceptualizes the body primarily as a sociohistorical construct, Morgan's theoretical model puts more emphasis on the body as a stark, unalterable fact. Aside from tautologically reiterating its simple there-ness, this leaves little to say about it for a critic writing in a humanistic more than a scientific framework. Although it makes Morgan's argument stand out in a discussion dominated by constructionist models of the body, it makes political analysis a difficult endeavor. For example, discussing Melville's "Benito Cereno," Morgan uncomfortably hints around the possibility that racist discourse might aid Melville's implied author in gothicizing slavery (213-215). But Morgan stops short of canonical heresy. Melville's use of a "politically dubious and even offensive reportorial voice," he concludes, "resists, as dream does, the intrusion of ordinary historical and morally complex light of day" (215). This is not even to say that the only satisfying conclusion should be about the biographical author of "Benito Cereno." But given some of the more obvious interpretive choices, Morgan's readers might be willing to go a step further, though they are told that, in the final instance, Melville's tale "will not be caught, classified, and tamed."

To these twin themes of the ineffable and of mythical universality, Morgan's topic of embodiment adds the notion of biological imperatives. This strikes me as politically problematic unless fully theorized. Cultural practice and institutions, Morgan suggests, are responses to, or articulations of, physiological and biologi-

cal facts of human existence. If Morgan were to hitch his entire study to the rising star of neodarwinist evolutionary theory, like that of E.O. Wilson or Richard Dawkins, this point could be made to stick. Readers who take issue with it are taking on Wilson and Dawkins. But Morgan's affinity to Frye leaves him hovering on the threshold to such grim materialism. The book's concluding chapter argues that horror is capable of transcending biology and its alleged disinterest in morality. Biology might be destiny, but it is a destiny that needs to be wrought symbolically from indifferent matter. Again, some readers might agree with Morgan on this point, the final optimistic upturn in the argument aside. Yet those who disagree might want to see him identify his own position as neither more nor less of an ideology than those more idealistic ones he discredits.

Having pointed out these problematic aspects of the book, I do have to add that there are passages in the discussion that are intriguing and rewarding. I enjoyed Morgan's discussion of gothic tropes in Frederick Douglass, found myself intrigued by the discussion of Catherine Williams, and wished for an expansion of his remarks on the connection between horror and noir. Although his focus on Maturin, Radcliffe, and Poe feels like a roundup of the usual suspects, he also devotes time to lesser known contemporary gothic writers like Patrick McGrath and Thomas Ligotti. Medical horror gets a nod; so does splatterpunk, condensed into references to Clive Barker's early work. A book less concerned with canonical texts might have devoted an entire chapter to this most body-obsessed of literary horror subgenres.

From Morgan's discussion of cinema, splatter is almost entirely absent. Having finished the book, I also tried to remember one sustained, detailed discussion of horror film that would have justified the last phrase of the book's title: "and Film." I couldn't. There are references to cinema, to Roman Polanski's *The Tenant* and *The Blair Witch Project*, for example, but the discussion of literature outweighs them by far. ✿