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Research Paper

Embodied Fear: Alterity and the Monstrous Other in Horror Literature and Film

Abstract
This paper explores the concept of alterity—the quality of otherness—as a foundational mechanism within the horror genre, arguing that horror does not merely represent difference but actively constructs it as a site of fear, fascination, and transformation. Drawing upon critical frameworks from Julia Kristeva, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, the study examines a range of literary and cinematic texts, including Get Out, The Bloody Chamber, Frankenstein, The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, Blue Velvet, and The Company of Wolves. Through these analyses, the paper demonstrates how horror mobilizes alterity to destabilize identities, expose cultural anxieties, and confront the limits of empathy and understanding. Whether through racialized bodies, psychological fragmentation, adolescent transformation, or cosmic insignificance, the monstrous "Other" in horror functions not merely as an antagonist but as a mirror to humanity's most unsettling questions about the self, society, and the unknowable.

Keywords: *Alterity, Abjection, Monstrosity, Horror cinema, Identity, Cultural anxiety*

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I. Introduction

From phantom to lycanthrope, horror is rooted in the fear of the unknown. The object of fear can be something simple, like the inability to see past your fingertips in the dark, or something more complex, like a creature with a limb attached somewhere it's not supposed to be. It is precisely this "not supposed to be" that has disturbed and seduced generations of audiences.

Throughout horror stories, alterity is a source of fear: radical difference creates the monster. Alterity often evokes what Julia Kristeva describes in *The Powers of Horror* as the abject, or that which "has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I" (Kristeva, 10). Being abject is to be the enemy of a self, collapsing boundaries between an "I" and "other". Horror does not simply display alterity; it mobilizes it to destabilize structural identity. In doing so, alterity functions as a narrative vehicle for horror's deepest anxieties, molded by cultural moments and flexible to all stories. Adapting to context, the "other" becomes whatever the genre demands: a grotesque body, a racialized subject, a fractured thought. Through this moldability, alterity is not just what horror is about; it is how horror works.

Bleed Out Your Own Skin: Fear of the Other Body

While all bodies exist in diverse states, horror often distorts bodies and renders them sites of desire and fear. In Jordan Peele's *Get Out*, the Black body is fetishized and ultimately erased under the guise of admiration. Similarly, in Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, the female body is a paradoxical castle. Both enticing and dangerous, its sexuality is mystified and punished. These works interrogate societal projections onto Other bodies and the violence that ensues when attempts are made to possess or reshape such bodies.

The first thesis of Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's *Monster Theory* establishes how bodies encapsulate culture or experience by writing, "[t]he monster is only born at this metaphoric crossroads, as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment"(Cohen, 4). This suggests that the othered bodies extend beyond a physical form, entailing the cultural experience as the true culprit of fear. In *Get Out*, aside from the casual microaggression targeting Chris's blackness, Peele hones in on Chris's eyes. In the unsettling scene modeling after a slave auction, Chris's eyes are auctioned off to a blind art dealer he happens to admire. Apart from being uncomfortably admired for his other physical attributes, Chris's artistic vision is most desired by the art dealer. It is important to note that his visions also capture an experience, a cultural moment that connects to the movie's opening, which displays Chris's photographs of Black people. In Chris's body lies a lived experience and

identity that is abjectly sought after, echoing an earlier comment from an auction attendee of "Black is in fashion." While making Chris feel like an outsider in a deer head-mounting, tealeaf-reading elite white family, the white characters of *Get Out* also envy Chris for his differences, cherry-picking what should be adopted from the Black identity.

A similar portrayal of the monstrous can be seen in Angela Carter's title story of *The Bloody Chamber*. In this piece, two bodies exist: the Other body is constructed in the woman through both her grappling with sexuality and the environment around her. "No, I was not afraid of him; but of myself. I seemed reborn in his unreflective eyes, reborn in unfamiliar shapes." (Carter,) In this line, the narrator recognizes that what frightens her is not simply the violence the Marquis represents, but the unfamiliarity and instability of her own body's desires. As a monstrous, enclosing structure, the castle mirrors this fear: it consumes her, reshapes her, and renders her alterity visible. The bloody chamber itself, evoking both the womb and the tomb, marks where female sexuality and violence intersect in a bodily manner. After the husband leaves the narrator alone in the castle, it begins to devour her to feed its own menacing fertility (Beams). The castle is a locked up, isolated setting with guttering candles and hallowing shadows, but it is also a body of its own, mirroring the female anatomy. With the story's name being reminiscent of the womb, it paints the female body as something both uncanny and something to reconcile with.

According to Cohen, "[t]he monster's body quite literally embodies fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy[...] giving them life and an uncanny independence" (Cohen, 4). This idea can be reinterpreted to reveal that the independence of Black people and women are uncanny and feared in *Get Out* and *The Bloody Chamber* respectively. Autonomy of physical decisions and reclamation of lived experiences result in violence and mayhem. In both cases, the monstrous lies not in the bodies themselves, but in the fear of what they represent: uncontainable identity, power outside the normative, and a collapse of dominant structures.

Pieced Together, Torn Apart: The Monstrous Mind

As we have so far seen, the body often bears the burden of otherness, but bodies aren't the only thing that alienates experiences from the normative. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* reveal how the horror genre externalizes fractures of the mind, portraying psychological and reinterpreted neurological conditions as a form of alterity that unsettles both characters and audiences. In texts such as these, the boundaries between reason and delusion, identity and fragmentation, are blurred, allowing horror to interrogate the instability of the self.

As Tiffany Oharriz writes in *The Monster Within: Disability Narratology and the Representations of Bodily Difference, Disability, and Monstrosity in Gothic Fiction,* "even with the mutability of the term, it should be noted that most physical or mental disabilities in the Middle Ages were purported to be caused by demons and seen as omens" (Oharriz, 14). From this we derive that the alterity of the mind is essentially a vilified difference in the human experience. One divergent human experience (namely, neurodivergence) is infused into the Creature in *Frankenstein*. He is literally fragments of different people, navigating the world through observation. As part of this engagement, he encounters a life of loneliness and overt rejection. It is important to note that the Creature was not born; he was created from pieces of other people, already pointing towards a life of difficult functioning and lack of self. In *Young Frankenstein (1974)*, Mel Brooks incorporates a scene where the Creature's brain is taken from Abby Normal. The jar in which her brain is stored is labeled "abnormal," misread by the character who was sent to retrieve the brain. Although intended as a comedic twist, the fact that the Creature is a tapestry of different people and an "abnormal brain" embeds a neurodivergent narrative into the story.

Living with the De Laceys, the Creature imbibes the knowledge of being human: "I found that these people possessed a method of communicating their experience and feelings to one another by articulate sounds [...] This was indeed a godlike science, and I ardently desired to become acquainted with it. But I was baffled in every attempt I made for this purpose" (Shelley, 103). The way the Creature analyzes social interactions and the expression of emotions echoes a distinctly autistic experience. Autistic individuals are constantly labeled aloof and antisocial. In actuality, they are often isolated and rejected. Much like this experience, the Creature seeks out company only to be met with disgust from society and his own creator. His otherness lies not only in his appearance, but also his different navigation of humanity.

In the century after *Frankenstein*, the German expressionist film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* created the blueprint for surrealist horror films, introducing a more explicit lens of madness. Nestled in sharp angles and slanted colors, the movie centers around Caligari, an insane hypnotist, and Cesare, his brainwashed somnambulist, depicting an altered consciousness that was new to audiences. Told through a frame narrative later revealed to be a patient's hallucination, the film challenges the viewer's sense of reality. Claiming it as the first real horror film, film critic Roger Ebert writes that "*Caligari* creates a mindscape, a subjective psychological fantasy. In this world, unspeakable horror becomes possible" (Ebert). The horror is not externalized but embedded in the narrator's psyche. There's nothing grotesque or otherworldly, but the alterity

lies in how we are trapped within the narrated perception, unsure whether Caligari is truly a villain or merely a figment of madness.

Stripped of autonomy, agency, and identity, Cesare becomes another figure of mental otherness. As Ebert notes in comparison to the Creature in *Frankenstein*, "the camera considers him an object, not a person" (Ebert). Not a fully formed individual, he exists as a tool, a puppet of someone else's mind. In contrast to Frankenstein's Creature, who seeks knowledge and companionship, Cesare is denied selfhood entirely. His sleepwalking state becomes a metaphor for a mind controlled or erased by outside forces.

In the context of psychiatry, alterity refers to a difference in the perception of reality or self, resulting in fragments of identities. Ever versatile, alterity makes its way into the horror landscape in the form of psychiatry. On empathy and alterity, Laurence J. Kirmayer argues that the former "demands imaginative engagement with the other's personal history, willingness to experience strong affect, and the self-reflexivity to distinguish one's own emotional reactions from those of the other" (Kirmayer, 14). While "the other" here refers to an external person, the empathetic split can also apply to one's own realm. Once someone's detached from the continuity of their own experience and estranged from their own reactions, they become the other; that is how alterity manifests in horror stories like *Frankenstein* and *Caligari.* Ultimately, these narratives paint a monstrous depiction of mental conditions, accentuating the horror through the terrifying distance between identity and perception.

Across the White Picket Fence and Off the Wooded Path: Becoming the Other

Disorders are not the only instances where experience and perception feel illusory. Outgrowing bodies, outliving memories, characters meet their most monstrous nemesis within themselves in coming of age stories. Alterity manifests in horror media such as David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* and Angela Carter's *The Company of Wolves* as a force to elevate the coming of age narrative.

In her work on abjection, Kristeva argues that the "abjection of self would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural *loss* that laid the foundations of its own being" (Kristeva, 14). Under the conditions that Kristeva describes, the subject is forced to reckon with the instability of its own boundaries, not through abstract reflection but primal confrontation with what is *within* yet marked as *other*. In horror, this confrontation takes the form of the other: a split body, a disturbing sexuality, a loss of innocence. These disruptions of identity are precisely what horror leverages to stage adolescent alterity.

Under the suburban blue skies and freshly mown lawns of *Blue Velvet*, Lynch doesn't paint college student Jeffrey Beaumont's descent to Lumberton's underbelly as a confrontation with alien creatures or the supernatural. Instead, this descent takes the form of an excavation of his own subconscious. The movie begins with the discovery of a severed ear, a prototypical abject object, something cast off that elicits disgust, horror, and a sense of fascination. Deceivingly, the true horror in *Blue Velvet* lies not in the physical uncanny but Jeffrey's realization of duality as he embarks on the journey to reveal the grotesque side of Lumberton. In Lynch's own words, "an ear is wide and as it narrows, you can go down into it" (Lynch). So we go down into it, down away from the town's white picket fence and sprinklers, to crippling apartment buildings where sexually disturbed psychopath Frank Booth hangs with his crew and to bars where tortured singer Dorothy Vallens performs.

As Jeffrey uncovers more of Frank's cruelty and perversion towards Dorothy, he expresses his frustration at the world. The sheriff's daughter Sandy responds: "I guess it means there is trouble 'til the robins come.'" This line refers to her dream, in which robins bring love and goodness to a cruel, strange world. At this point, Jeffrey's frustration is still about the world. As he descends further into Lumberton's underworld, his initial role as a passive observer deteriorates. The severed ear no longer signifies just a mystery to be solved. It becomes a symbolic opening into his own psyche. What began as a voyeuristic curiosity transforms when Jeffrey slaps Dorothy. Now, he is no longer watching violence now; he's enacting it. His horror turns inward as the "good college boy" also wields the power of rage and sadistic control. Jeffrey continues to steer back to his original path to help Dorothy after a breakdown over his own violence and everything miraculously resolves, like a dream. As the Lumberton police capture Frank Booth and his crew, the sheriff says to Jeffrey, "it's all over, Jeffrey". The darkness is all over, so is Jeffrey's innocence rendered unrecognizable by his encounter with the abject, at least that's what we're supposed to think.

Transitioning with an exploding lightbulb, we return to a restored suburbia with Jeffrey basking on the porch and Sandy observing an intentionally mechanical looking robin. Circling back to Kristeva, "abjection is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin; nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory" (Kristeva, 14). The robins have come; Lumberton is back to the familiar town we started off with, but what about the criminal "joy rides", gas-huffing psychopath, and the determined yet distraught Jeffrey we've grown familiar with? Not a shadow of that lives. The eerie restoration of normalcy in *Blue Velvet* does not erase what

Jeffrey has become. In fact, this sudden peace underscores the dissonance between who he was and who he is now.

Like many coming-of-age horror stories, *Blue Velvet* offers paradox, not catharsis. The protagonist survives, but emerges altered, fragmented by the Other within. In this way, Lynch joins a tradition of horror that uses adolescence as a for distance. While *Blue Velvet* explores coming of age through a male protagonist's descent into moral ambiguity, *The Company of Wolves* reimagines feminine adolescence as a fairytale confrontation with alterity through a sexual transformation that emerges from within.

In Carter's tale, a young girl's encounter with the wolf represents a moment of transformation. It is established early on that adolescence is a weapon: "[s]he has her knife and she is afraid of nothing" (Carter, 3). The girl is not bound to rules and warnings about the dangers in the woods as she's wielding her novel weapon of growth. Carter describes the girl's red shawl as follows: "the colour of poppies, the colour of sacrifices, the colour of her menses, and, since her fear did her no good, she ceased to be afraid" (Carter, 5). Leaving the protection of girlhood, the girl sheds not only her clothing, but also her fear and submission, crossing the threshold into womanhood by embracing the very creature she was taught to fear. In doing so, the girl embraces her own transformation. In the line, "she knew she was nobody's meat"(Carter, 6), Carter demonstrates that, rather than being devoured by the wolf, the girl devours the narrative of passive femininity and emerges refigured. She is not a victim. She is something other, no longer the child bundled up by a red shawl.

As Kristeva notes, "the erotization of abjection [...] is an attempt at stopping the hemorrhage: a threshold before death, a halt or a respite?" (Kristeva, 64). When eroticized, abjection facilitates the moment before the dissolution of boundaries in self. In *The Company of Wolves*, a story already adorned with the blood of menstruation and ruptures of virginity, the protagonist eroticizes her confrontation with external alterity (the werewolf), halting the hemorrhage of womanhood by reconfiguring the self as something primal yet new. In contrast, *Blue Velvet's* Jeffrey resists this eroticization; he flinches from the Other within, and his attempt to return to normalcy is not healing, but repression. Where Carter's heroine is complemented by alterity, Lynch's protagonist is shattered by it. In the end, both don't escape change as they cross into the threshold with the death of their innocence, made possible by alterity.

Anyone Can Be The Thing: Cosmic Horror and Humanity as the Alien

Extraterrestrial minds, woodland creatures with claws: the entities we find terrifying adorn the horror landscape. In retrospect, alterity doesn't have to be centered around humans; what we find strange may reciprocate the feeling. Texts such as John Carpenter's *The Thing* and HP Lovecraft's *Call of Cthulhu* are benchmark cosmic stories, showcasing that humanity in its own right otherworldly.

Emmanuel Levinas, the philosopher who conceived the notion of alterity, aregues that we can decipher more about alterity at its core. Levinas writes that alterity "is strongly bound to ways of life, to cultural determinations and specific anthropological characteristics, such that it varies depending on the observer's point of view or the place one occupies within a context of meaning. That is, in first establishing a border we only later measure the world according to it" (Levinas). In horror, the observer doesn't have to be human. As a whole, humanity can be seen as an entirely different culture or can be said to possess other anthropological origins in the eyes of what we deem strange.

John Carpenter's *The Thing* follows a research group with around a dozen men, situated in the unforgiving grounds of Antarctica. The researchers'camaraderie and hope to return get disturbed by a force of danger that has killed off a neighboring Norwegian research station. Amidst the bleakness, the American researchers discover that a being that assumes its victims' forms and memories is threatening the station. All result in a fear of each other, and that no one can be trusted. In a review on the movie, a reviewer describes the amorphous and ubiquitous monster as "an image of the formless, the faceless and rapacious void seething below our illusions of a fixed nature. It is pure alterity wrapped in the most familiar of disguises" (Pridham). Alterity as demonstrated in *The Thing* is so intangible that none of us, including the characters, know what it is to be scared of. Other people, the film shows, are inherently untrustworthy. This lack of distinction between familiar and unfamiliar projected into humanity is exactly what haunts audiences.

The word "alien" has been used interchangeably to describe what's othered, but what about the cosmic alien's perspective? In Lovecraft's *Call of Cthulhu*, the alien is no longer a shapeshifter mimicking humans, but an entity whose very existence renders humanity insignificant and unknowable. The eponymous Cthulhu looms in dreams and myths of "Great Old Ones," an incomprehensible being whose presence defies human categories. In the face of such cosmic vastness, humans are the other: fragile, finite, and culturally bounded observers confronting a reality they cannot grasp. Echoing Levinas's concept, Lovecraft is pushing the boundaries of how we measure the world. Here, alterity manifests not in the familiar becoming strange, but in the strangeness of the universe reframing the familiar—our own humanity—into alien terms.

The fear of encountering Cthulhu also echoes Frankenstein's cautionary tale: knowledge itself can evoke alterity, alienating the seeker from the world and even from their own initial intentions. Lovecraft himself

created his stories with this cautionary in mind, expressing, "[t]he most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far" (Lovecraft). Humanity, while intrigued by the unknown, isn't supposed to explore its full extent, and the alterity within these stories lie in this unhuman zone of "not supposed to be". We're not supposed to trust the most trustworthy; we're not supposed to fathom the unfathomable; we're not supposed to venture outside of the measures and contexts of our world.

II. Conclusion

Through an exploration of horror media, it becomes clear that what terrifies us is often a reflection of what we perceive as fundamentally different, challenging the boundaries between the familiar and the alien. From the visible differences in humans to what lies beyond the unfathomable universe, horror consistently confronts us with beings or forces that exist outside of our understanding, forcing us to grapple with fear, uncertainty, and the limits of empathy. By examining the intersection of horror and alterity, we see that alterity exists as more than a theme or association in these narratives. Alterity actively invites reflection on the ways humans respond to difference, molding into fears that often mirror our own insecurities, biases, and the boundaries of our perception.

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