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From Monster to Human: Subjecting the Mutilated Body in the Horror Film *Martyrs*

In his book *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*, Lennard Davis discusses visual representations of the disabled and the mutilated body in art, from the classical forms (Venus de Milo) to the contemporary (modern filmic representations). Among other points, Davis claims that in witnessing the disabled/mutilated body, the viewer cannot help but to *reassemble* the disabled whole they are witnessing, as the mutilation or disability of the body represents “a direct *imago* of the repressed fragmented body” (Davis 139). Davis borrows Freud’s concept of *Spaltung* (“splitting”) and Lacan’s formulation of the subject’s Imaginary, symbolic wholeness of the body to account for people’s repulsed reaction upon seeing a disabled body: “The divisions whole/incomplete, able/disabled neatly cover up the frightening writing on the wall that reminds the hallucinated whole being that its wholeness is in fact a hallucination, a developmental fiction” (130). The disabled body repulses because it reminds us that our sense of our own bodies as whole is an illusion: in our actual state, in the Real, we are divided, our individual parts separated and connected only through schematic hallucination. According to these theories, as well as Davis’, we cannot reconcile these visions of the repressed and therefore must imagine the disabled body abled, the fragmented whole, the mutilated body pristine and clean and useful in order to move on from the shock of that witnessing.

Applying these notions to artistic, visual representation, Davis says that many visual manifestations of the disabled or mutilated by artists fall under the conception of the “grotesque,” which he defines in this visual-art sense as a “disturbance in the normal visual field” (151). But Davis says the aesthetic of the grotesque in art is not typically meant to create the disabled/mutilated subject, but is actually a means of “disempower[ing] the object of observation,” thus making grotesque art culpable in the condemnable societal push to uphold the illusory sense of the normalized, whole body as standard and the abnormal body as freakish and inferior, whether it means to or not (151). Davis seems to want to apply this condemnation most rigorously to the “cinematic experience,” the art form of film, which he says is “powerfully arranged around the management and deployment of disabled and ‘normal’ bodies” in a reductive, objectifying, and normalizing way (153).

Though this may sometimes be the case, I want to provide an exception to Davis’ formulation and challenge his notion that grotesque visual art, or grotesque art in general, is such a predictable and objectifying form. To do this, I will draw an example from that place where the visual and the Gothic meet most often in contemporary art: the horror film. This entire genre is essentially centralized around moments of the returning repressed, of grotesque, mutilated (and often *mutated*) visions of the body presented to the shocked, trembling viewer. But I do not accept that all of these representations objectify their subjects, or that horror films always make the audience wish for a return to the normalized, standard depiction of the whole and beautiful body. To challenge Davis I present *Martyrs*, a

French horror film directed by Pascal Laugier in 2008 and easily one of the greatest horror films made thus far in the 21st-century.

There is one focal depiction of a grotesque, mutilated body in the film *Martyrs* that, I will argue, disrupts and counters Davis' conception of film and grotesque art in general as a normalizing influence on our society's understanding of the body. This depiction exhibits the film's conventional "monster" transformed from the realm of the fantastic and the phantasmagoric to the realm of the painfully, tragically human.

Martyrs opens with an image of a young, brutalized girl named Lucy running from a torture chamber and quickly shifts our perspective through Lucy's teenage years in a rehabilitation center to depict her, in her twenties, invading a seemingly-normal bourgeois French home and massacring the four family members who reside there (in bloody, over-the-top fashion, at the barrel of a powerful shotgun). Lucy breaks down and cries for what she has done immediately after she has done it, and calls her friend Anna to get her to come and help her dispose of the bodies. Before Anna arrives, though, the film's "monster" is introduced: a writhing, constantly-contorting feminine figure, nude and covered head-to-toe in knife slashes and chain marks that begins murderously chasing Lucy around the now-empty bourgeois home.

Our early understanding of this creature is very much in line with Davis' conception of the "monster" as an artistic symbol of the disabled human being: it reminds us uncannily of the human body but is not standard or normal-looking, its skin is opened and gashed innumerable (the attention to a monster's skin being,

according to Davis, a reminder of touch and the terrifying presence of the limit of the ego inherent in the act of touching an Other, and therefore something that directly “represents the fragmented body, a threat of mutilation, and a fear of losing one’s boundaries, one’s bodily integrity”), and it ambulates in extremely unnatural ways (the actress who portrays the monster is clearly a contortionist or some other kind of body artist) (148). The creature terrorizes Lucy for the first half of the film, and the first half ends with the creature finally getting the better of Lucy. Seemingly solidifying the otherworldly, inhuman nature of this monster, we see in the culmination of the first half that this monster is actually not real, is only a hallucination: it is revealed to us that Lucy has been cutting herself the whole time, that she has been terrorizing and mutilating her *own* body, and the monster is apparently not actually corporeal but only an illusion, a phantom purveyor of Lucy’s psychic pain, a nod to move her towards self-harm and, as we watch the culmination of the first half, self-destruction. Lucy kills *herself*, hallucinating that the monster is the one cutting her open, and the monster is now totally relegated to the realm of fantasy as far as the audience is concerned.

Again, this all fits more or less with Davis’ construction of the monster. In his discussion of Frankenstein’s monster as exemplar of the monster-as-disabled-person in artistic representations, Davis says that, “In order for the audience to fear and loathe the creature, he must be made to transcend the pathos of a single disability,” and that “[The monster’s] body is a zone of repulsion; the reaction he evokes is fear and loathing” (144). As the monster in *Martyrs* goes so far in presenting an ambiguous sense of mutilation/disability that it literally fades from

existence and becomes an illusion, a trick of Lucy's mind, this creature is perfect as the audience's cathartic villain; it is nothing but a "zone of repulsion" (144). Why should we empathize with something that is not human, that only wants to murder principal characters, and turns out to only be a figment of Lucy's imagination?

The answer lies in the second half of the film, in which Anna (who now takes over as protagonist as Lucy is gone) discovers a person chained to a wall in the shadowy, futuristic basement of the bourgeois home the movie has been playing out in. This person exactly resembles the creature that had been terrorizing Lucy, that we thought was only a figment of Lucy's imagination: it turns out that this is a real human being. Lucy's psychic monster was a creation of her mind, sure, but the image of the monster was grafted from her memory of a real person she saw as she ran away from her torture chamber as a child, which we realize through a flashback that fills out full narrative of the movie's opening scene; her guilt in not saving this woman has followed her throughout her life and manifested itself in her hallucinatory creature.

What's important to note here is that the director Laugier has pulled the rug out from under the audience: just as he sets up his monster as the perfect, pure receptacle of all the terror and revulsion we've been feeling throughout the first half of the film (and there is plenty of terror and revulsion to go around: *Martyrs* is a very extreme film in terms of violence), he reveals to us that this creature is actually a human being. We can no longer be so swift to assign the fear and loathing that Laugier has manifested in us systematically as the film has gone on, we can no longer turn away and write the monster off as fantastical and easily abjected.

The woman's body is a canvas of mutilation, a pure sign of violence most likely acted upon her by the bourgeois family that Lucy killed in the beginning of the movie (considering that this woman was found locked up in their basement, after all). The woman must have been tortured for at least twenty years, considering Lucy's age, and she cannot communicate properly with Anna, or even walk without real effort and Anna's help. Laugier manifests her as complete and total mutilation, what would normally look like the uncommunicative, deaf, and blind objectification of the human being in your average torture porn horror film, the sort of grotesque thing that Davis finds despicable. But here, we cannot walk away from this body so easily, for it is not an object: Laugier spends the entire first half of the film creating his object, his phantom monster, and *then* shows us that this monster has a human precedent. Laugier presents us with an utterly mutilated body, and considering how the narrative has gone so far, and the fact that the film has been assaulting us with nonstop torture and mutilation and terror, we are able to empathize. We know she has been tortured, deprived, depraved; we have to see her for a human being now, as she is the exact obverse of the creature-version that Lucy's mind projected earlier.

Some of the most repulsive, gut-wrenching mutilations in a film utterly stocked full of physical mutilations happen in this section, which consists of Anna trying to care for this tortured woman. The woman has a metal helmet screwed into her skull which Anna tries to remove; Anna tries to put her into a bath, which quickly fills up with the seeping blood of the woman's infinite flesh wounds; the woman consistently tries to cut herself to death as she has no conception of how to

go on living in her current physical and mental state. It is probably the most brutal fifteen minutes in modern horror, and not because these grisly scenes of violence are unprecedented. These scenes are almost unwatchable because they are happening to a real human being, a real human being that we can barely watch for her total mutilation but a human being that we have no choice but to empathize with, given her history of torture.

Laugier's formulation of the tortured woman's character is impressive, in light of Davis' conception of the disabled/mutilated body in society's view. The woman still retains her physically disfigured appearance as she is transmuted into a human being by the film's narrative twist, the very opposite of Davis' negative conception of grotesque bodies in art. She still contains a "composite quality...evocative of the fragmented body," as Davis claims all monsters contain, but in *Martyrs* we are empathetic, her character becomes more and more tragic (145). Some might then say that we are actually just feeling pity for this woman, but she is no object: she has a narrative history, she is complicated in the traditional narrative ways, she even has a conflict and interacts, albeit slightly, with Anna, our current protagonist. Also in regard to the question of pity, the woman is still monstrous, still the spitting image of the first half of the film's terrifying creature. Laugier does not make it easy for his audience.

I'm not sure that this representation of the mutilated/disabled body exactly qualifies as a "positive" one, but it certainly challenges Lennard Davis' notions about artistic representations of grotesque bodies. Laugier does not objectify the grotesque body in *Martyrs*: he simply shows it to us, finds a way to make that body a

subject and character, and lets us deal with the resounding tremors of that narrative act.