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Xavier Aldana Reyes. 2014. *Body Gothic: Corporal Transgression in Contemporary Literature and Horror Film*. Cardiff: U of Wales P. 229 pp. ISBN: 978-1-78316-092-1.

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Xavier Aldana Reyes (b. 1984), currently a lecturer at Manchester Metropolitan University, is one of the most promising young researchers in the field of Gothic Studies. In *Body Gothic*, his first monograph, he challenges gothic scholars to reconsider the central place of the materiality of the flesh in this narrative mode, focusing in particular on the last thirty years. As he stresses, Gothic Studies scholars tend to foreground the "spectral, uncanny and psychological aspects of the gothic" unjustifiably forgetting that this genre is "also somatic and corporeal" (2). This neglect is due, arguably, to two main factors: first, researchers often find the most visceral aspects of the less refined gothic narrations an uncomfortable aspect of the genre; second, only a fully determined, totally unprejudiced researcher can brave the gory body politics of contemporary gothic, particularly in film. Aldana Reyes is, thus, to be praised for having managed to produce extremely sound academic criticism out of his selection of shocking primary sources.

The author himself draws attention in his Conclusions to the position which his volume occupies, at the intersection between Body studies and the wide range of gothic academic work exploring "corporeal transgression" (168). Certainly, his *Body Gothic* closes brilliantly the accidental trilogy which it forms with its two main predecessors in the application of "cultural materialist and historicist approaches" (167) to the analysis of the body within Gothic Studies. One of these is Steven Bruhm's pioneering *Gothic Bodies* (1994), an analysis of the role of pain as understood by Romanticism in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century classic gothic fiction. The other is Kelly Hurley's equally well-known volume *The Gothic Body* (1996). Hurley connected the "abhuman," as she called the category, generated by experiments on the limits of the body in late Victorian fiction—such as H.G. Wells' *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896)—with contemporary *fin-de-siècle* discourses on evolution, anthropology, psychology and even criminology. A third major influence that Aldana Reyes specifically acknowledges is Judith Halberstam's *Skin Shows* (1995), a volume focused on the construction of the monster in the last two centuries. More recent studies, such as Catherine Spooner's *Fashioning Gothic Bodies* (2004) and Fred Botting's *Limits of Horror* (2008), also frame

Aldana Reyes's work. None of these volumes, including *Body Gothic*, could however have appeared without Philip Brophy's bold incursion into the "horrality" of 1980s cinema, first analysed in a celebrated *Screen* article (1986), which Aldana Reyes rightly praises.

The main argument binding together the different chapters in *Body Gothic* is Aldana Reyes's thesis that, far from being a sub-genre of gothic, body gothic includes "all gothic," since "it naturally appeals to the body of readers and viewers, as well as their imagination and intellect" (7). The foundation of this bold statement is not just a morbid fascination for the open bodies of much contemporary gothic but a fundamental research question: paraphrasing Aldana Reyes's own words, how and why does certain (gothic) narrative material affect us mentally and physically, despite our knowing that it is fictional? A complementary question is here required: how far are we willing to go as readers and spectators in our search for this treacherous kind of narrative pleasure? We must bear in mind that the kind of transgressive novels and films which Aldana Reyes examines deal with "dismemberment, mutilation, mutation, extreme disease or transformative surgery" (11). For him the ubiquitous carnage depicted in these extreme texts is never "pointless" as it "often hides a sustained questioning of the role of embodiment" in our everyday lives (18). Body gothic addresses, in short, our fears regarding the vulnerability of our bodies by paradoxically subjecting us to the vicarious experience of seeing other fragile bodies destroyed in the cruellest ways.

The period that *Body Gothic* examines starts in 1984—with the passing of the controversial, censorious Video Recording Act in Britain intended to clamp down on, precisely, body gothic in film—and reaches to our days. Chapter one is devoted to a sub-genre already explored in Gothic Studies: 1980s *splatterpunk*, a label coined in 1986 by David J. Schow at the Twelfth World Fantasy Convention. The chapter considers as case studies the rough horror fiction by pulp master Richard Laymon and the more elegant works of author and film director Clive Barker, in particular his atmospheric short fiction in *Books of Blood* (1984-1985).

Chapter two deals with body horror, "one of the most ill-defined terms in gothic and horror studies" (52). Aldana Reyes tries here to pin down the meaning of this label by pointing out that body horror deals mainly with the "estrangement from one's own body" (54) as a possible "form of corporeal transcendence" (56). Thus he focuses this chapter on Canadian filmmaker David Cronenberg: his films, in particular *The Fly* (1986), being indispensable examples of this transcendental alienation. Although Aldana Reyes offers insightful analysis throughout the volume, in this chapter he bypasses a fundamental genre issue. In his scrutiny of Stuart Gordon's *Re-animator* (1986)—and in his comments on the pioneering splatter classic *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), or on the proficient use of prosthetics in the *Saw* (2004-2010) and *Hostel* (2005-2011) series—Aldana Reyes shows a clear awareness of the spectacular evolution since the 1980s of ultra-realistic, anatomically-accurate, gory special effects. There is not, however, a sustained analysis of how this crucial factor impacts on the stylistics of the novels and short fiction also dealing with body horror, as one might expect.

Chapter three returns to the printed page for an exploration of the short-lived school of body gothic headed by *NME* journalist and former punk poet Steven Wells, a school christened by Mancunian writer Jeff Noon the "new avant-pulp." This movement resulted in the gruesome novels published by Attack! Books in the late 1990s. These books were accompanied by a definitely punk manifesto aimed at launching an assault, never really operational, against (in its words) the "effete bourgeois wankers who run the literary scene" (77). Defined by Aldana Reyes as a "collapse of goth into gothic" (78), avant-pulp failed to see that the "highly literate and dissenting working-class" (79) which it targeted simply prefers (horror) films to reading books. The publisher folded in 2002, a failure which Aldana Reyes disingenuously attributes to "lack of funds" (82). Somehow extravagantly, he praises the writers for their "eagerness to explore the limits of corporeal transgression" (82), finding the bad taste of their novels "interesting for its capacity to upset the status quo" (95).

Chapter four deals with the "slaughterhouse novels" of the kind epitomized by Michel Faber's disturbing SF work *Under the Skin* (2000), recently adapted into film, or Matthew Stokoe's bleak *Cows* (2011). Ultimately derived from Upton Sinclair's scandalous *The Jungle* (1906), but also connected with modern exposés of the meat industry such as Eric Schlosser's non-fiction volume *Fast Food Nation* (2001), the slaughterhouse novel seeks to school us on the "futility and vulnerability of the flesh" (100). This is achieved by tracing a horrifying analogy between the disempowerment of the humans whose bodies are destroyed in appalling ways and the millions of disempowered animals that we slaughter daily with complete disregard for their suffering.

Chapter five, "Torture Porn," considers a sub-genre now past its mid-to-late 2000s peak, which "deals openly with the mutilation and annihilation of the human body" (123) in films such as the notorious *Hostel* (2005). This radical variety of gothic, Aldana Reyes explains, "offers a visceral fantasy of vulnerability, and thus the fictional possibility of empathising with fictional pain at a safe remove" (126); he does not clarify, though, why anyone would subject themselves to this kind of audiovisual experience for enjoyment. The author insists on a "model of spectatorship that assumes total agency" (127); nevertheless, this seems to clash with the experience of the spectators that shun torture porn precisely because they feel too much empathy for the tortured victims. The *Hostel* franchise may have the ultimate goal of denouncing the callousness of the affluent persons engaged in the commercialisation of death and torture. Yet this is a message couched too conveniently in sadistic spectacle, thus ambiguously allowing viewers to side with the exploiters. Similarly, the very successful *Saw* (2004-2010) series—in which the vigilante killer nicknamed Jigsaw implements a bizarre system of justice—invites viewers to gloat over the dreadful bodily harm inflicted upon those he judges. Corporeal mortification, as Aldana Reyes points out, does not always fulfil its aim to send a positive anti-violent message, which "opens up the question of [its] ethical value as an experience to learn from" (142).

Finally, chapter six focuses on surgical horror, a belated descendant of Mary Shelley's classic *Frankenstein* (1818). After tracing the genealogy of this widespread category of body gothic, Aldana Reyes considers films centred on, as he calls them, patchwork bodies. Among these, no doubt the trilogy by Dutch director and screenwriter Tom Six *The Human Centipede* (2009) raises the issue of whether the transgressive and the deeply offensive can cross paths effectively. The simple plot summary (mad surgeon kidnaps young tourists whom he mutilates in order to stitch their bodies together in macabre ways) is enough to sicken any sensitive reader. Aldana Reyes, however, manages to offer a fine analysis of how contemporary horror cinema underlines "the biological constraints of human embodiment even when it seems to be advocating the creative side of corporeal destruction" (157).

Aldana Reyes never passes judgement on the controversial texts he deals with, explicitly rejecting any moralistic condemnation of their content. He rather chooses to stress the critical neglect to which they have been subjected for reasons that should perhaps be further explored. Paradoxically, although his very accomplished study in part undoes this neglect, his volume is unlikely to recruit new adepts to the cult of body gothic—unless the reader is already predisposed towards the kind of thorny gratification which the genre offers. In Aldana Reyes's view no text can be truly called trash, nor is there sufficient evidence to assert that our capacity to be shocked is being tested in more depth than at other times; he claims that this is always relative to our personal threshold of tolerance. Fair enough. Still, something is amiss.

As a feminist scholar, I am concerned by the fact that the gender of both writers and spectators in body gothic is predominantly male. Countless male bodies are destroyed in horrific ways in this genre usually by other men, yet Aldana Reyes's volume is peppered with comments on the (mis)representation of women (and homosexual men) that fail to be critical. The segment on Richard Laymon's novels suggests that their mixing of graphic mutilation with eroticism and even pornography "could, in places, be seen as misogynistic" (35) but no further observation is added. In relation to new avant-pulp, we are told that the body in these narrations appears as "a source of voyeuristic pleasure (primarily male)" (76), also that "misogyny or homophobia are disturbingly present in the novels" (81). Aldana Reyes chooses, however, not to explore these gender issues. Ultimately, this decision highlights a gap in his work: the body he analyses is oddly abstract, a ghostly rather than a material presence, despite the rotund materiality of body gothic. The dehumanisation of the victims in body gothic is, somehow, uncomfortably mirrored by the academic analysis: there are, with few exceptions, no singular, individual bodies marked by gender, race, age, nationality and other identity factors but an all-inclusive, intangible yet vulnerable, universal body.

Aldana Reyes shows immense courage by arguing that no manifestation of gothic must be excluded from Gothic Studies: the task of academics, after all, is not to censor but to illuminate, which he unquestionably does very well. As he concludes, "what often appear to be mere superficial or gratuitous experiments in shock or taboo-breaking

often conceal much more complex philosophical reflections that go hand in hand with contemporary notions of the body in the Western societies that produced these fictions" (167). Faced with the truly demanding, challenging texts that Aldana Reyes analyses the reader/spectator may often wonder why they exist at all—his volume provides many necessary answers. Our Western culture produces body gothic because we are more aware than ever of the vulnerability of our bodies. We consume its many subgenres avidly in the hopes of containing our fears that our own body may be brutally, randomly destroyed. The greater our fears, the more intense body gothic becomes. And this is a phenomenon which Aldana Reyes elucidates superbly.

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