

An Ecofeminist Study of the Body Horror Film

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Abstract. Horror is the primitive psychology inherent to humans. Centering on the contemporary development of the body horror film, this study applies a method combining theoretical criticism and textual analysis, taking *Titane* (2021) and *The Substance* (2024) as two case studies, to conduct an ecofeminist investigation into the body horror film. This study points out that the two films effectively evoke the audience's pain empathy by depicting the lesions, alienation and violent experiences of the female body; through the semiotic metaphors of female bodies, they complete the female narrative of pain and resistance, exploring the female existential predicament filled with struggles; by means of the artistic form of extreme body horror, they reveal and criticize how patriarchy in the "post-human age" achieves the double control and violent colonization of women's bodily nature and spiritual ecology through collusion with technology and abuse of biomedicine, thereby accomplishing a profound ecofeminist critical interpretation of the body horror film.

Keywords: The body horror film, ecofeminism, criticism of patriarchy, post-human

1. Introduction

Horror is the primitive psychology inherent to humans. The body horror film, a unique sub-genre of horror films, focuses on the lesions, aging and alienation of the body, aiming to evoke the audience's horror and anxiety about the body and even the existence of life. Body horror films have undergone a long-term evolution. In the film *Frankenstein* (1931), adapted from Mary Shelley's novel of the same name, the scientist Frankenstein sews the corpses dug out from the grave into an artificial human. The deformed body and bloody scenes directly cause a sense of discomfort in the audience, establishing the film as a prototype of the body horror film. "The Father of Body Horror" David Cronenberg conducts an in-depth analysis of psychological triggers and social factors influencing the alienation of the human body. In his work, *The Fly* (1986), he uses body horror as a metaphor for dangers brought by technological recklessness and biocybernetics.

In recent years, body horror films have given more attention to women. Two outstanding female directors Julia Ducournau and Coralie Fargeat respectively present *Titane* (2021) and *The Substance* (2024) to the audience, completing the film writing of women's situation in an astonishing way. In contemporary academia, many scholars analyze the body horror film from a feminist standpoint, but it is relatively rare to explore it in the field of ecofeminism. In contrast to prevailing studies, this study, centering on the contemporary development of the body horror film, takes *Titane* (2021) and

The Substance (2024) as two case studies, applying a method combining theoretical criticism and textual analysis, to systematically examine the pain empathy mechanism, female semiotic metaphors and ecological critical implications of contemporary body horror films from an ecofeminist approach. The combined application of theoretical criticism and textual analysis contributes to conducting a meticulous critical analysis and in-depth theoretical interpretation of film texts based on a specific theoretical framework, fully excavating the eco-cultural critical connotation of the body horror film. Although there is no complete consensus on ecofeminism, ecofeminist critics have reached the following basic agreement: there is a significant correlation between human beings' domination over nature and men's exploitation of women; understanding the former undoubtedly aids in understanding the latter, and vice versa [1]. The language usages connecting women and nature, such as the expressions "virgin forest" or "Mother Earth", clearly proves this argument [2]. Since the modern era, under the influence of anthropocentrism and mind-body dualism dominated by reason, human beings initiated the disenchantment of nature and the human body, viewing them as mechanical devices governed by instrumental rationality and causal logic. From an ecofeminist standpoint, the destruction and deconstruction of women's bodies in the body horror film hold profound significance. Therefore, an ecofeminist inquiry of it carries great value, which not only expands the academic research of the body horror film, but also promotes the ecological attention and improvement of women's existential predicament.

2. Analysis of representative works

2.1. Pain empathy in the body horror film

Philosopher Spinoza believes that affections of body generate affect. Differing from those horror genres with a grand world view, exploring the mysterious and the unknown, like sci-fi horror and supernatural horror, body horror, which concentrates on displaying the horrible effect of the human body or psychologically disturbing physical harm (such as abnormal sexual behaviour, mutation and disassembly or disability of limbs), directly engages the audience's senses. Thus, it can evoke the painful experiences of the audience in a more realistic way, making it a film genre highly prone to stimulate "affect" [3]. When the audience is able to personally experience the bodily sufferings endured by the characters, the director achieves the film's pain empathy. The body issue widely concerned in the contemporary social and cultural context deeply reveals that the body is never a peaceful harbour or an isolated insulator, but rather a ceaseless battlefield between the individual and society, nature and culture, male and female, seeing and being seen, flesh and technology, reason and desire, the inside and the outside. Just as Judith Butler argues that "in order for feminism to proceed as a critical practice, it must ground itself in the sexed specificity of the female body" [4].

Patriarchy tries to guide women's aesthetics through shaping flawless idols, while the cruelty behind it remains hidden. In *The Substance*, director Coralie Fargeat, displaying the extreme bodily mutation suffered by the female protagonist Elisabeth after using "The Substance", thoroughly presents the physical torture of women by such "materialized violence". Bloody scenes like body cracking, pupil splitting, tissue metamorphosis and the detachment of organs and viscera, constantly stimulate the audience from the sensory perspective, challenging their threshold of acceptance. In Julia Ducournau's *Titane*, the heroine Alexia experiences many intense body changes accompanied by severe physiological pain, such as having a titanium plate fitted into her head after a car crash, attempting to have an abortion with her hair stick, breaking her nose, giving birth leading to the tearing of the belly and even death. The director, with the aid of the realistic makeup and post-

production special effects, supplemented by the audio-visual language, enables the audience to physically feel the pain suffered by the character and generate strong pain empathy.

The two films not only physically provide strong stimulation to the audience, but also mentally arouse their resonance and empathy. Elisabeth in *The Substance* is reluctant to lose her acting career due to her age and decaying beauty, she orders a beauty product named “The Substance”, hoping to “be reborn” as a younger and more beautiful self. The fear of aging is a common anxiety among many middle-aged women, which reflects society’s harsh expectations for women and the impractical pursuit of the perfect appearance. By exposing pervasive social issues like “appearance anxiety” and “age crisis”, the director links the audience with the characters on the mental level. They reflect on themselves through the inner pain and struggle of the characters, achieving profound emotional resonance. In the film *Titane*, the ambiguous gender identity of Alexia is largely a “post-human” outcome where the body is titanized, metallized and even dehumanized. The difficulty with gender and identity, rooted in the “fission” of body, drives her mental state to undergo alienation and makes her suffer great psychological torments. More significantly, whether it’s in the beginning of the film where Alexia, as a showgirl, needs to make a living by displaying the pornified female body, or in the latter half of the film where she seeks protection as the male identity of Vincent’s “son” after committing serial killings, she is never able to escape the structural oppression of patriarchy.

2.2. Semiotic signification of the female body in the body horror film

Both *The Substance* and *Titane* tell women’s stories and are directed by women. The two films, through the deconstruction and mutation of the body, construct a portrayal of the female body filled with semiotic metaphors, complete female narratives of pain and resistance, and explore the social issue of female existence.

The female existence of the heroine Alexia in *Titane* is filled with struggles and resistance. In her childhood, owing to defying her father’s command and keeping playing around in the car, she is involved in a car crash, and thus has a titanium plate implanted in her head. The forcible intervention and violent transformation of the body caused by the masculine technology and metal not only serves as a direct manifestation of the reality shock Alexia experienced due to defying the patriarchy, but also provides the physical foundation of a “cyborg” for the gender transgression in her adulthood. Therefore, after reaching adulthood, Alexia’s gender-neutral style and queer identity that appeals to both men and women further complicate her female existence. The hair stick, traditionally a female adornment and a symbol of elegance and beauty, is transformed into a murdering tool by Alexia. At this point, the hair stick becomes a symbol of the phallus and its piercing into the human body represents violation. Such violation is not so much an artistic expression of feminine power’s rebellion of patriarchy as the result of Alexia’s psychologically male and even mechanical identification due to her “cyborg” body. During pregnancy, she tapes her breasts and pregnant body, pretending to be the firefighter Vincent’s son to gain access to the male society. Her erasing of her feminine features reflects that while she is resisting patriarchy, she becomes a part of it. The intense oppression of the patriarchy system compels a woman to become a pseudo-male, and the transformation of the female body and the reshaping of the female identity by technology in the film symbolize male-dominated technocentrism’s oppression of women’s existence.

In the film *The Substance*, the plot where Sue breaks through Elisabeth’s skin, deconstructing yet relying on the maternal body, embodies complex semiotic implications. When Sue stitches the slit in Elisabeth’s back like mending a mother’s cesarean scar, and cuts the suture as if cutting the

umbilical cord, the true separation between the Matrix and the Other self is achieved. The feminist theorist Barbara Creed points out that research on the female body in the horror film indicates that the child, with a repulsive mentality towards the maternal body, struggles to break away from the mother to construct his or her own identity [5]. However, the mandatory requirement of exchanging the two bodies every seven days constantly emphasizes Sue's dependence on the maternal body. Therefore, rather than being Elisabeth's rebirth, Sue is more of a self-spiritual illusion split off by Elisabeth due to her fear of aging and anxiety about appearance. The deconstruction of the female body, filled with a teasing tone, reaches its climax at the appearance of the monster Monstro Elisae, who is a combination of Elisabeth and Sue, as well as a chaotic arrangement of body parts with female features. When she opens her mouth to sing, she spits out a breast from the mouth. The male security personnel's shooting of her demonstrates the suppression of women's resistance by patriarchy. In this scene, the director unprecedentedly used the largest amount of blood plasma in film history, and blood has multiple symbolic meanings for the female body (such as menstruation, childbirth, violence and oppression, etc.) The blood spurted by the monster is a sign that accuses the entertainment industry consuming women, criticizes the harsh and abnormal aesthetics of women and resists the patriarchal society exploiting women. Just as Beauvoir examines the real situation of women from an existentialist perspective in *The Second Sex*, the director, with the extreme way of body horror, tells the audience that only by facing the cruel reality and accepting the imperfect self can women find the correct self identity and obtain a true sense of subjective existence [6].

2.3. Ecological criticism of alienation of the female body in the body horror film

The *Substance* and *Titane*'s revelation of the physical and mental dilemma of women in the post-industrial and post-human social background is rich in humanistic concern and has profound ecological critical significance. Marx believes that "nature is man's inorganic body" [7]. And both films regard the female body as the symbol of nature. The black motor oil flowing through Alexia's body and the physical organs bursting out of the body in *The Substance*, become the most shocking symbol of wounds in this era. The two films declare with sharp cinematic language that the pain of the female body and the moaning of the earth's ecology are double traumas under the same structural violence.

Showing the illusion of the perfect body, *The Substance* profoundly exposes how patriarchy aesthetic standards impose violent discipline on women's bodies through media spectacles and medical technology. Elisabeth reconnects with an old classmate she hasn't seen for a long time and prepares to go out for the meeting after dressing up. However, glimpsing her aging face in the reflection of the doorknob, she's trapped in uncontrollable appearance anxiety and finally ruins the date. Spiritual ecology explores the relationship between human beings and themselves, and the inner and genuine meaning of humans conveyed by the spirit enables human beings to truly become what they are [8]. Under aesthetic violence, Elisabeth's spiritual ecology is destroyed. Losing her confidence and correct self-awareness, she is shrouded in endless anxiety and desperation. As the subject of desire, Sue is the projection of her longing for youth and beauty. They complete the separation between the subject and the object by virtue of the potency of "The Substance". Just as Hegel's theory of alienation argues that, the subject splits off an object opposing it, and the object, breaking away from the subject, in turn controls and dominates the subject [9]. As an alien force, Sue encroaches on and drains Elisabeth's body, causing the maternal body to fade away. Physical ulceration, as a result of violence against women's bodies, is the "toxic feedback" produced by the distortion of nature by technology. It heralds the return of the suppressed and exploited female body to the flesh and nature.

The Substance ingeniously connects the female body parts with food, revealing the striking similarity between “the ‘meatification’ of animals and the objectification of women” [1]. When the boss announces Elisabeth’s dismissal, the camera focuses on a plate of leftover prawns; when Sue performs an erotic dance in revealing clothing, the shot dissolves into soda, lemons and roasted chickens. Both women and nature are viewed as consumer goods instead of complete living beings; the female body is dismembered like an animal and divided into useful and useless parts [1]. These mutually convertible visual metaphors not only stress women’s bodily production and mental anxiety disciplined by the male gaze, but also uncover human beings’ desiring-production of food and the non-ecological behaviour of extravagance and waste. In modern society, the desiring-production of beautiful women and tasty food via media signs like language and images and the industrial production of the female body, animals and plants via medical treatment and biotechnology are different levels within the same socialized mass production.

In *Titane*, the female body’s alienation reflects a strong cyborg flavour. Alexia’s fascination with machinery and confrontation against biological instincts become an entry point for exploring the relationship between human beings and the ethics of science and technology. The titanium implanted in the brain makes her natural person identity mutate. She hates the human emotions she possesses, murders her admirer with a hairpin and sets fire to kill her own parents. On the contrary, she has an extraordinary affinity for cold machinery. As a car show model, she stays with cars day and night, dancing in front of the cars and caressing them during the day, and even having sex with them at night. Alexia’s metal implant and her conception by the car directly point towards the colonization of the natural body by industrial civilization. Her body becomes a battlefield where humans and machines are intertwined and the leaking oil serves as a concrete expression of industrial pollution invading the life cycle. The metal foetus she produces, is a complete alienation and replacement of natural birth, a core female experience, symbolizing the desecration of the sanctity of reproduction by industrial logic. Nevertheless, this radical physical practice obviously disrupts the ecological balance of the human body and ultimately, she cannot escape the fate of death. Human beings may not be able to avoid the increasingly cyborg fate, but where will the boundary between the human body and the cyborg end?

Director Julia Ducournau brings this technological anxiety to the screen—unlike the plot where a human and a robot fall in love in *Her* (2013), *Ex Machina* (2015) and *Wifelike* (2022), *Titane*, removing the “humanity” of the robot and making Alexia develop a desire and love for the object without human appearance and emotions and even produce offspring with it, takes it a step further. This kind of combination between humans and machines projects post-human ethics that breaks traditional ethical concepts. As Rosi states in *The Posthuman*: “The merger of the human with the technological results in a new transversal compound, a new kind of eco-sophical unity.” [10]. This is actually another type of alienation, where machines created by humans take control of humans. The director edited and rearranged the titanium medal and the human body as fundamental components of the post-human architecture, highlighting the non-ignorable existence of the alienated body in post-human philosophy with shocking visual language.

3. Conclusion

Ecofeminism connects the female existence with ecological and environmental issues, arguing that the exploitation and control of women and nature by patriarchy are mutually reinforcing and women’s emancipation and nature’s liberation are inextricably interwoven. The body horror film emphasizes the substantive existence of the natural body, exploring the trajectory of human destiny with the unique tactility of the body. Director Coralie Fargeat, constructing the black market drug

“The Substance”, discusses the ambiguity of ethical boundaries through the complicated relationship between Elisabeth and Sue, demonstrates the destruction of social ecology caused by scientific experiments and technological abuse, and also reveals the objectification of women’s bodies and the control of their mental state exerted by anti-ecological aesthetic violence. The film *Titane* breaks through the ecological understanding of bodily cognition via Alexia’s physical transformation and identity reconstruction. This symbolizes the predicament and emancipation of women in modern society and simultaneously shows the exploration of individual subjectivity in the cyborg era. The two films, through the extreme form of body horror, effectively arouse the audience’s pain empathy. They not only criticize patriarchy, media violence, technology abuse and ecological crisis, but also examine the possibility of women seeking liberation and reconstructing their subjectivity in the face of harsh reality, becoming a contemporary extension of ecofeminism.

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