

Genre Analysis of Body Horror in Contemporary Hollywood Films (The Substance, Bodies Bodies Bodies, and It's What's Inside)

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ABSTRACT

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This article examines the dynamics of the body horror genre in three recent Hollywood films: *The Substance* (2024), *Bodies Bodies Bodies* (2022), and *It's What's Inside* (2024). Utilizing Nick Lacey's "repertoire of elements" model, the study dissects how body horror functions as a site of cultural and ideological discourse, encompassing themes of identity, beauty, technology, and social criticism. Through detailed narrative, character, iconographic, setting, and stylistic analysis, the research demonstrates how body horror, far from being mere spectacle, operates as a potent metaphor for anxieties surrounding the human condition in contemporary society. The findings reveal that these films push the boundaries of horror to engage in a critique of body politics, gender norms, performative culture, and capitalist commodification.

INTRODUCTION

In the landscape of contemporary cinema, genre functions not only as a system of classification but also as a methodological lens through which narrative structures, aesthetic choices, and sociocultural discourses can be analyzed. Among the many genres that continue to evolve, body horror emerges as a compelling subgenre of horror that centers on the violation, transformation, or destruction of the human body. This study focuses on three recent Hollywood films—*The Substance* (2024), *Bodies Bodies Bodies* (2022), and *It's What's Inside* (2024)—each of which explores the grotesque body through different narrative strategies and cinematic techniques. These films not only share a common thematic concern with bodily disruption but also reflect deeper anxieties regarding identity, beauty, technology, and social decay.

To understand how these films engage with the body horror genre, this study employs Nick Lacey's repertoire of elements framework, which emphasizes the significance of recurring features such as narrative structure, iconography, character types, visual style, and thematic motifs in establishing a film's genre identity. This approach allows for a

systematic analysis of how genre conventions are reproduced, subverted, or reimagined within specific texts. Genre, in this sense, is not a fixed category but a dynamic cultural form that evolves in response to industrial practices, audience expectations, and shifting social contexts.

Historically, genre has played a pivotal role in the Hollywood film industry, particularly during the classical studio era from the 1920s to the 1950s. During this period, studios adopted genre-based production systems to streamline output and maximize profits, producing films according to proven formulas that audiences could easily recognize and consume (Grant in Bayuwestra, 2024). However, scholars such as Steve Neale (2000) have challenged the notion of genre as a rigid or static structure. Neale argues that genres are fluid, often marked by hybridity and overlapping conventions, and that the assumption of strict genre specialization during the studio era overlooks the complex, adaptive strategies employed by filmmakers. Far from being limited to post-studio filmmaking, hybridization and genre-blending have long been integral to Hollywood's industrial logic.

Film also functions as a powerful medium of mass communication, capable of conveying

ideological messages and social commentary through its unique blend of audio-visual storytelling. It is not merely an artistic expression of the filmmaker's vision but a cultural product embedded in specific historical, economic, and ideological contexts. As Nugraha and Adi (2016) explain, film exists within a web of interactions that includes not only production and distribution mechanisms but also cultural reception and interpretation. Within this framework, the body horror genre serves as a particularly rich site of inquiry, as it foregrounds the human body as both a symbolic and literal site of anxiety, conflict, and transformation.

The three films analyzed in this study each present unique depictions of bodily grotesquery that reflect broader social tensions. In *The Substance*, directed by Coralie Fargeat, the protagonist Elizabeth undergoes a terrifying transformation after ingesting a mysterious substance in a desperate attempt to reclaim youth and beauty. Her bodily disintegration serves as an allegory for the pressures imposed by beauty standards and societal expectations on aging women. Fargeat's narrative critiques the commodification of female bodies and the psychological toll of an image-obsessed culture.

Bodies Bodies Bodies, directed by Halina Reijn, offers a different kind of bodily horror, one that arises from the psychological breakdown of social relationships. Set against the backdrop of a hurricane, a group of young adults gathers in a secluded mansion to play a party game that quickly devolves into real violence and paranoia. Here, the body becomes a canvas for the unraveling of interpersonal tensions, hidden resentments, and generational cynicism. The horror is not external but internal, rooted in the collapse of trust, empathy, and communication among peers.

In *It's What's Inside*, body horror takes a more experimental turn through the depiction of body-swapping technology. A group of old college friends reunites for a pre-wedding celebration only to encounter a mysterious game that allows them to temporarily exchange bodies. What begins as a thrilling novelty soon spirals into chaos, as the loss of bodily autonomy leads to existential disorientation and social breakdown. The film uses science fiction elements to interrogate the instability of identity and the alienating effects of technological mediation on the self.

Together, these films illustrate how contemporary body horror cinema pushes beyond mere shock value or grotesque imagery. Instead, they function as cultural texts that interrogate modern concerns such as self-perception, authenticity, alienation, and the commodification of human experience. By analyzing these films through the lens of genre theory and media communication studies, this

research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how the grotesque body operates as both a cinematic motif and a social metaphor. The analysis not only seeks to map the specific features of body horror in each film but also to contextualize their narratives within broader discourses of gender, technology, and contemporary anxieties.

The resurgence of the body horror genre in contemporary Hollywood cinema has brought renewed focus to the representation of the human body as a site of ideological struggle, technological intervention, and cultural anxiety. While body horror has been widely discussed for its haunting depictions in the works of David Cronenberg and other late 20th-century authors, there is a significant gap in research on the function of the grotesque body in recent mainstream and indie Hollywood films that combine horror with social critique.

The selected films—*The Substance* (2024), *Bodies Bodies Bodies* (2022), and *It's What's Inside* (2024)—represent a unique research phenomenon: they blend traditional grotesque imagery with themes such as beauty capitalism, digital performativity, and posthuman identity. This hybridization reflects a broader industrial and cultural shift in which horror narratives are increasingly used to explore contemporary issues such as aging under patriarchal surveillance, the instrumentalization of online identity politics, and the destabilization of identity through technology.

While previous research has analyzed body horror as a subgenre, there has been little systematic investigation into how Nick Lacey's repertoire of elements can reveal the interplay of narrative, character, iconography, setting, and style in shaping the ideological function of body horror in the 2020s. Furthermore, recent literature often focuses on a single film or director, neglecting the cross-textual patterns that emerge from comparative analyses of multiple works.

This study addresses this gap by considering the grotesque body as both an aesthetic form and a cultural metaphor across diverse narrative contexts, highlighting how contemporary body horror moves beyond physical mutation to explore psychological, performative, and technological disruptions of identity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Body Horror and the Grotesque Body

The term "body horror" refers to a subgenre of horror cinema that foregrounds the human body as a site of disturbance, mutation, decay, or grotesque transformation. As noted by scholars like Anne Jerslev

(in Cruz, 2012), what is terrifying in body horror films is not merely the monstrous creature but the body itself that becomes monstrous. In this sense, the body becomes both the victim and the villain—an entity that betrays the self, resists control, and breaks social, aesthetic, and anatomical norms.

Historically, body horror films emerged prominently during the 1970s and 1980s through the works of David Cronenberg (*The Fly*, *Videodrome*), where themes of contagion, technological intrusion, and psychological trauma found literal expression in bodily mutation. However, as genre studies evolve, scholars such as Linda Williams (1989) and Steven Shaviro (1993) have argued that body horror operates within what is termed the “body genre,” which includes melodrama, pornography, and horror, where the body becomes a site of spectacle and involuntary reaction. These genres elicit visceral responses from the audience—be it tears, arousal, or screams—suggesting that the viewer’s body, too, becomes implicated in the horror.

Recent developments in body horror have moved beyond visceral spectacle toward more symbolic and psychological depictions. Films like *The Substance* and *It’s What’s Inside* do not only depict physical transformation but explore the social implications of bodily commodification, beauty standards, and existential disintegration. These narratives reflect a shift in the genre from external monsters to internalized fears about identity, decay, and loss of self, suggesting that modern body horror now functions as both affective cinema and sociocultural critique.

2.2 Body Politics and Feminist Critique in Cinema

An essential framework for analyzing body horror lies within the discourse of body politics. Feminist theorists, particularly Simone de Beauvoir and Luce Irigaray, have long critiqued how female bodies are constructed, regulated, and politicized through social institutions and cultural representations. De Beauvoir (1949) argued that “one is not born but becomes a woman,” emphasizing how the female body is shaped by external narratives and expectations rather than inherent essence. Irigaray later expanded this critique by highlighting how traditional psychoanalysis reduces the female body to a deviation from the male norm—a form of symbolic violence embedded in representation itself.

In body horror cinema, this politicization of the body is heightened. Films like *The Substance* do not merely showcase bodily distortion; they comment on the societal pressures faced by women to remain youthful and desirable. The transformation of Elisabeth Sparkle’s body into a grotesque hybrid becomes a metaphor for the violent consequences of beauty capitalism. The film critiques how medicalization, commodification, and media-fueled expectations turn the female body into a battlefield for identity and worth.

From a broader lens, the concept of the “grotesque” as defined by Mikhail Bakhtin also becomes relevant. The grotesque body is exaggerated, unfinished, excessive—always in transformation. This symbolic form challenges the classical ideal of the body as closed, pure, and complete. It allows space for the political to erupt into the aesthetic, revealing how normative bodily ideals are socially constructed and ideologically charged.

2.3 Genre Theory and Repertoire of Elements

Genre theory plays a foundational role in analyzing how films function both as art and as communication. According to Bordwell and Thompson (2004), genre provides a framework of expectations for both audiences and creators, shaping how narratives unfold and how meaning is derived. Genre is not merely a label; it is a cultural system—a set of conventions, codes, and ideological positions that are negotiated within each film.

Nick Lacey’s (2000) concept of the “repertoire of elements” becomes a useful tool in identifying genre patterns. He outlines five key elements that define a genre: narrative structure, characters, iconography, setting, and style. These elements form a relational system where audiences come to recognize and expect certain patterns, while filmmakers subvert or reinforce them for effect. The repetition and variation of these elements allow genres to evolve while maintaining coherence.

In this study, the body horror genre is analyzed through Lacey’s framework. The selected films—*The Substance*, *Bodies Bodies Bodies*, and *It’s What’s Inside*—are examined based on how they construct their narratives, visualize characters, use symbolic iconography, create setting atmospheres, and utilize stylistic techniques. What emerges is a deeper understanding of how these films communicate

social and ideological critique through genre conventions.

2.2 Nick Lacey's Genre Theory

Nick Lacey's genre theory, particularly his concept of the "repertoire of elements," provides a structured lens to analyze film. The five key elements are:

1. Narrative and plot
2. Characters
3. Iconography
4. Setting
5. Style

These components allow for a comprehensive examination of how a film adheres to or deviates from genre conventions, and how it communicates ideological content to its audience.

Genre theory by Nick Lacey (2000) provides a structured way to analyze how these thematic elements are embedded within the formal components of a film. His model of "repertoire of elements"—narrative, character, iconography, setting, and style—enables scholars to trace how films maintain or subvert genre conventions. This analytical approach is particularly useful for examining hybrid genres like body horror, where horror intersects with sci-fi, thriller, or satire.

2.3 Body Politics and Feminist Film Theory

Feminist theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir and Luce Irigaray have explored how the female body has historically been objectified, medicalized, and politicized. The grotesque in body horror can be interpreted as a form of feminist rebellion against idealized, sanitized representations of femininity. According to Harcourt (2022), body politics involves the struggle for control over one's own body against dominant cultural narratives of normalization and discipline.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative interpretive approach with an emphasis on textual and genre analysis. The primary aim is to unpack the symbolic and communicative functions of the grotesque body in contemporary body horror cinema. The selected method aligns with a critical cultural paradigm, where

media texts are viewed as ideological artifacts embedded in—and reflective of—power structures, norms, and resistances.

This study employs qualitative interpretive text analysis with a genre-based approach, focusing on the symbolic and ideological dimensions of the grotesque body in contemporary cinema.

The analysis is based on Nick Lacey's (2000) "Repertoire of Elements" model, which identifies five interrelated genre components—narrative structure, character, iconography, setting, and style—as the basis for a systematic study of film texts.

The analysis process includes the following steps:

1. Narrative mapping. Each film's storyline is examined using Todorov's narrative structure (balance, disruption, and resolution) to identify how the storyline builds tension around physical transformation (Todorov in Pratista, 2017).
2. Identifying character functions. Using Propp's character archetypes (hero, villain, victim, savior), the characters' roles are mapped to determine how they represent social, political, or ideological positions (Propp in Bordwell & Thompson, 2004).
3. Iconographic analysis. Recurring visual and symbolic elements (e.g., injections, mirrors, technical devices) are identified and interpreted based on their cultural significance (Grant, 2007; Cruz, 2012).
4. Set and mise-en-scène analysis. The spatial and visual environments are analyzed for their contribution to thematic and emotional resonance (Bordwell & Thompson, 2004).
5. Stylistic analysis. Cinematographic techniques, lighting, editing rhythms, and color palettes are examined to understand how style reinforces elements of the grotesque and horror (Neale, 2000).

This interpretation is based on a critical cultural paradigm (Nugraha & Adi, 2016), which treats films as cultural texts with ideological meanings, particularly related to body politics (de Beauvoir, 1949; Irigaray, 1985; Harcourt, 2022) and posthuman identity (Haraway, 1991). This approach ensures that the queer body is read as both an aesthetic construction and a social metaphor.

The subject of this research is the grotesque body as depicted in contemporary body horror films. The body is examined through narrative, character, iconography, setting, and stylistic construction.

The subjects of this research are three Hollywood films scheduled for release between 2022 and 2024:

1. *The Substance* (directed by Coralie Fargeat, 2024) a feminist body horror narrative that critiques beauty capitalism through the story of a woman's grotesque transformation after consuming a rejuvenating substance.
2. *Bodies Bodies Bodies* (directed by Halina Reijn, 2022) a satirical horror thriller in which interpersonal paranoia and performative identity politics replace traditional external monsters.
3. *It's What's Inside* (directed by Greg Jardin, 2024) a science fiction-influenced body horror film that explores the destabilization of identity through a mysterious body-swapping device.

These films were selected based on two criteria:

1. Thematic relevance: All films feature the grotesque body as a central motif, albeit with different narrative strategies.
2. Cultural relevance: Each film addresses contemporary societal anxieties, ideas of beauty, digital performativity, and the mediation of identity through technology, and is thus relevant to genre studies in the 2020s.

These films function as cultural texts that both reinforce and subvert genre conventions while encouraging social critique. These films are consistent with Lacey's genre theory and the critical cultural analysis framework applied in this study.

4.1 Object of Study

The films analyzed—*The Substance* (dir. Coralie Fargeat, 2024), *Bodies Bodies Bodies* (dir. Halina Reijn, 2022), and *It's What's Inside* (dir. Greg Jardin, 2024) were selected for their thematic focus on bodily transformation and their relevance to the resurgence of body horror in modern cinema. These films have garnered critical attention for their innovative narratives and visual representations of the grotesque body, making them appropriate objects of genre-focused research.

4.2 Data Collection

The data were gathered through a documentation study of the films, focusing on both visual and narrative content. This included repeated viewings of each film to identify key scenes and motifs relevant to genre analysis. Supporting materials—such as reviews, interviews, and academic articles—were also reviewed to provide additional context.

Primary data consisted of detailed observations of film scenes, particularly those involving body transformation, symbolic imagery, and narrative progression. Secondary data included literature on genre theory, feminist film critique, and contemporary horror studies.

4.3 Data Analysis

Analysis was conducted using Nick Lacey's Repertoire of Elements, applied systematically to each film. The process involved:

1. Mapping out the narrative structure using Todorov's equilibrium-disruption-resolution model.
2. Identifying character functions based on Proppian archetypes (hero, villain, victim, etc.).
3. Analyzing visual iconography related to the grotesque body (e.g., injections, blood, mirrors, dismemberment).
4. Examining setting and *mise-en-scène* (e.g., secluded mansions, sterile labs, isolated retreats).
5. Exploring stylistic features (e.g., lighting, sound, editing, color palette).

Interpretation was guided by a critical reading of the films as cultural texts that both reflect and challenge dominant ideologies, especially concerning gender, body politics, and social critique. The final comparative stage drew connections across the three films to identify shared genre patterns and divergent thematic strategies.

RESULT

Narrative

All three films explore the horror of identity loss through distinct narrative frameworks.

1. *The Substance* follows a linear tragedy where a woman's quest for beauty through a

mysterious substance leads to bodily collapse and identity fusion.

Figure 4. 1 The Substance

2. *Bodies Bodies Bodies* adopts a non-linear whodunit structure where miscommunication and social paranoia escalate into chaos and death—with no external killer, only internal breakdowns.

3. *It's What's Inside* presents a psychological narrative centered on a speculative body-swapping device, where each exchange

Figure 4. 2 Bodies Bodies Bodies

disorients the characters further until identities become irreversibly scrambled.



Figure 4. 3 It's What's Inside

In each case, narrative tension is built not through traditional antagonists, but through internal fragmentation, misrecognition, and the grotesque consequences of losing control over one's body or self.

Characters

Characters across the three films embody social archetypes shaped by external pressures.

1. In *The Substance*, Elisabeth and her younger double, Sue, represent the split between authenticity and artificiality in beauty culture. Their fusion into a grotesque hybrid reflects the collapse of self under capitalist ideals.

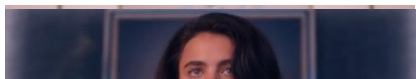


Figure 4. 4 Elisabeth and Sue in The Substance

2. *Bodies Bodies Bodies* features a cast of Gen Z personas—an influencer, a sober partner, a



jealous friend—whose social masks deteriorate under stress. Their identities are deeply performative, shaped by digital culture and fragile egos.



Figure 4. 5 Bodies Bodies Bodies characters

3. *It's What's Inside* portrays characters who literally and metaphorically lose themselves through body-swapping. Their arcs are driven by confusion, displacement, and a desperate search for emotional truth in a world where bodies no longer anchor identity.

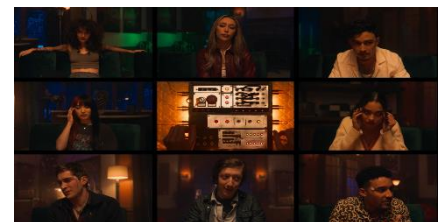


Figure 4. 6 It's What's Inside characters

Across all three, the body is no longer a stable container for the self, but a contested, unstable space where identity is performed, traded, or destroyed.

Setting

The films use confined, stylized spaces to enhance psychological horror.

1. *The Substance* unfolds in hyper-controlled environments—TV studios, labs, and luxury interiors—that contrast with the protagonist's bodily disintegration. The sterility of the

setting intensifies the grotesque horror of decay.



Substance

2. *Bodies Bodies Bodies* takes place in a dark, isolated mansion during a storm. The blackout becomes symbolic: without electricity (and Wi-Fi), social performances collapse, leaving only confusion and suspicion.



Figure 4. 8 Setting in Bodies



Figure 4. 9 Setting in It's What's Inside

3. *It's What's Inside* is set in a sleek, modern countryside home. Its clean, symmetrical design heightens the surrealism of the body-swapping horror, emphasizing emotional detachment behind a curated surface.

Each setting reflects the emotional isolation and dissonance of the characters—spaces that seem comfortable but grow increasingly alien as identity unravels.

Iconography

Each film employs distinct yet thematically connected symbols of bodily disruption.

1. *The Substance* uses injections, decaying skin, blood transfusions, and mirror imagery to highlight the violence of cosmetic obsession.

Figure 4. 10 Iconography in The Substance

2. *Bodies Bodies Bodies* incorporates smartphones, household objects turned weapons, and visual cues like flashlights, TikToks, and reflective surfaces as metaphors for performative identity.



Figure 4. 11 Iconography in Bodies Bodies Bodies

3. *It's What's Inside* centers around a mysterious suitcase device, mirrors, and subtle performance shifts—suggesting that even without blood or wounds, the grotesque can be psychological, emerging from mismatched embodiment.



Figure 4. 12 Iconography in It's What's Inside

Across the films, iconography reinforces how the body becomes both site and symbol of horror—whether through mutation, confusion, or misrecognition.

Style

Stylistic choices deepen the affective experience of the grotesque.

1. *The Substance* uses bold color palettes (red, black), sharp contrast lighting, and rhythmic, erratic editing to evoke physical discomfort and emotional fragmentation.



Figure 4. 13 Style in The Substance

2. *Bodies Bodies Bodies* relies on handheld camera work, diegetic lighting from phones, and overlapping dialogue to convey chaos, anxiety, and distrust.



Figure 4. 14 Style in *Bodies Bodies Bodies*

3. *It's What's Inside* uses polished cinematography, eerie stillness, and nuanced performances to gradually reveal inner horror beneath external serenity.



Figure 4. 15 Style in *It's What's Inside*

Each film's style reflects the nature of the horror it presents: grotesque body in *The Substance*, chaotic mind in *Bodies Bodies Bodies*, and fragmented self in *It's What's Inside*.

DISCUSSION

The Relationship of the Three Films to Social Criticism

Each of the three body horror films—*The Substance*, *Bodies Bodies Bodies*, and *It's What's Inside*—functions as a critique of different sociocultural anxieties, using the grotesque body as a cinematic metaphor for systemic pressures on identity, beauty, technology, and communication.

In *The Substance*, the film critiques the entertainment industry's obsession with youth and perfection, especially in relation to the female body. Elisabeth's transformation is not only physical but symbolic of a society that discards women who no

longer conform to patriarchal ideals of desirability. As Susan Bordo (2003) explains, women's bodies are sites of constant regulation, shaped by cultural expectations that equate worth with appearance. The grotesque mutation of Elisabeth into a monstrous hybrid critiques the violent internalization of such expectations.

Bodies Bodies Bodies focuses on the performativity of Gen Z's social interactions, particularly within digital spaces. The film satirizes how language from psychological and activist discourses—such as “gaslighting” or “toxic”—is often reduced to social performance. Turkle (2011) notes that social media has created conditions in which individuals “perform” connection while actually growing more isolated. In this context, the body becomes a surface for digital projection, stripped of authentic relational depth.

In *It's What's Inside*, identity is destabilized through the sci-fi premise of body-swapping, revealing the fragility of selfhood in an age of fluid identities. As Bauman (2000) writes, modernity produces “liquid identities”—mutable and contingent rather than stable. The film critiques the illusion of self-control in technologically mediated relationships, portraying a reality in which identity becomes untraceable and interchangeable.

The Position of the Human Body in the Three Films

Across all three films, the human body is presented not as an organic whole, but as a site of ideological conflict—fragmented, traded, objectified, and destabilized.

In *The Substance*, the body is commodified and subject to artificial reconstruction. Elisabeth's choice to transform through “the substance” illustrates how women are socially coerced into altering their physical form to remain socially relevant. Bordo (2003) argues that such body regulation is a form of discipline that aligns women with patriarchal and capitalist goals. The grotesque outcome—Elisasue—represents the collapse of identity under the weight of those external pressures.

In *Bodies Bodies Bodies*, the body is performative and highly surveilled. Characters use their appearance, speech, and even trauma as tools to gain social leverage. Butler (1990) asserts that gender and identity are not innate, but performed through repeated social actions. The film reflects this idea by

showing how the characters' bodies are entangled in a performance that ultimately turns violent when performance replaces empathy.

In *It's What's Inside*, the body is portrayed as a temporary vessel, divorced from fixed identity. The horror stems from the disconnect between physical form and interior consciousness. Haraway (1991) argues that in a posthuman world, the boundaries between machine, identity, and body become increasingly blurred. The film builds on this by revealing how even intimate relationships disintegrate when the body no longer serves as a reliable anchor for the self.

Social Criticism Embedded in the Films

Each film employs its own mode of critique, rooted in body horror but branching into different ideological concerns:

The Substance critiques ageism and beauty capitalism, exposing how medicalization and perfectionism are marketed to women as self-worth (Bordo, 2003; Kristeva, 1982). The grotesque body is a form of resistance, showing the consequences of internalized societal norms.

Bodies Bodies Bodies critiques performative activism and digital disconnection. It presents young people who weaponize identity politics not for justice, but for control. Turkle (2011) emphasizes that digital performance often replaces true emotional engagement—a theme central to the film's unfolding chaos.

It's What's Inside critiques technological alienation and the commodification of identity. The body-swapping mechanism turns the body into data, echoing concerns raised by Sherry Turkle and Donna Haraway regarding the loss of subjectivity in an increasingly technologized world.

The findings of this study also align with the theory of genre evolution, which explains how genres evolve over time through repetition, variation, and hybridization. Body horror, once dominated by explicit bodily transformations in Cronenberg's works and 1980s splatter films, has shifted in the 2020s toward symbolic, psychological, and socially embedded forms of grotesque.

The three films studied retain traditional body horror motifs (loss of bodily integrity, transformation, identity instability) but embed them within hybrid genres. *"The Substance"* combines body horror with

feminist melodrama, *"Bodies Bodies Bodies"* combines horror with satirical crime, *"It's What's Inside"* combines horror with science fiction and psychological thriller.

This development reflects a strategy that captures audience interest and adapts it to current sociocultural themes. The grotesque body no longer functions solely as a representation of blood—it has become a flexible metaphor for addressing anxieties surrounding digital identity, gender politics, and technological embodiment.

CONCLUSION

The grotesque body, as portrayed in *The Substance*, *Bodies Bodies Bodies*, and *It's What's Inside*, emerges as a powerful cinematic medium for articulating the anxieties, contradictions, and ideological pressures of contemporary life. Through the lens of body horror, these films do not merely provoke fear or disgust—they confront viewers with unsettling truths about identity, the commodification of the body, and the erosion of authentic selfhood in modern society.

At the heart of this study lies the understanding that body horror is not confined to the genre's traditional association with physical transformation or monstrosity. Rather, it functions as a discursive space where cultural ideologies are made visible, embodied, and deconstructed. By applying Nick Lacey's *Repertoire of Elements*—narrative, characters, setting, iconography, and style—this research demonstrates that each film contributes uniquely to the evolving language of body horror.

In *The Substance*, horror arises from the violent internalization of patriarchal beauty standards. Elisabeth's physical transformation is both a literal and metaphorical manifestation of societal expectations imposed on aging women. Her grotesque bodily evolution critiques the toxic intersection of femininity, consumerism, and the entertainment industry. The grotesque in this context becomes an embodied protest, exposing the exploitative systems that profit from women's insecurities.

Bodies Bodies Bodies reframes horror in a digital and psychological register. Its depiction of Gen Z characters trapped in a house during a blackout dramatizes the fragile nature of identity constructed through social media. The film's horror is not supernatural but interpersonal—the disintegration of

empathy and the collapse of trust in a hyper-performative culture. The body in this film is a social avatar, constantly negotiated, judged, and ultimately destroyed when stripped of context and compassion.

Meanwhile, *It's What's Inside* presents a philosophical exploration of identity fragmentation in the post-digital era. Through the sci-fi device of body-swapping, it challenges conventional assumptions of selfhood, embodiment, and emotional intimacy. When consciousness becomes transferable, the meaning of the body is destabilized. The horror here lies in the dislocation between internal identity and external form, a reflection of how modern subjectivity is shaped—and often fractured—by technological mediation.

Collectively, these films reveal how the grotesque body has shifted from a site of mutation and monstrosity to a site of critique—a communicative figure through which contemporary culture interrogates its own failures. Each film presents a different facet of this critique: gender and beauty politics (*The Substance*), digital performance and social alienation (*Bodies Bodies Bodies*), and technological disembodiment (*It's What's Inside*). Despite their stylistic and narrative differences, all three works embody a common impulse: to unsettle normative assumptions about the body and expose the hidden violence of social systems.

This study also illustrates the value of genre analysis in media and communication studies. By using Lacey's genre framework, the grotesque elements are contextualized not just as aesthetic choices, but as cultural texts embedded with ideological meaning. The grotesque body is not accidental—it is intentional, strategic, and often politically charged. It compels the audience to confront the instability of identity and the body in a world increasingly defined by performance, surveillance, and commodification.

In conclusion, contemporary body horror films reflect a deepening cultural awareness of how bodies are no longer stable or private. They are public, politicized, technologized, and constantly mediated. Whether it is through aesthetic perfection, online identity, or digital transfer of self, the horror lies in what we do to our bodies—and what our bodies do to us in return. These films thus stand not only as horror stories, but as cultural documents—narratives of a society in transition, and bodies that refuse to conform.

Based on the findings and limitations of this study, several recommendations can be made for future research on the body horror genre and the grotesque body in contemporary cinema:

1. Examine body horror in non-Hollywood contexts to capture cultural variations in grotesque body representation.
2. Compare classic and contemporary works to trace genre evolution.
3. Include audience reception analysis to understand viewer interpretations.
4. Apply intersectional approaches to explore how gender, race, and other identities shape body horror narratives.
5. Investigate links between body horror and posthuman themes in emerging technologies.

Author contribution

Farrel Rakha Adi Pramana was responsible for all stages of this research, including: Conceptualisation and Research Design, Data Collection, Methodology, Writing of the Entire Paper, Data Analysis, Editing, and Layouting. The author also applied relevant theoretical frameworks, conducted detailed film analysis, and synthesized the findings into a critical academic discussion. Aulia Rahmawati, S.Sos., M.Si., Ph.D served as the academic supervisor, providing guidance and feedback throughout the research and writing process, particularly in relation to theoretical refinement, structure, and academic rigor. All authors have read and approved the final version of this paper.

Declaration of interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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