

The cover features several stylized, light green leaf motifs scattered across a pale yellow background. Each motif consists of a stem with two leaves pointing upwards and to the right.

WRITING HORROR AND THE BODY

The Fiction of Stephen King, Clive Barker, and
Anne Rice

Linda Badley

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*The Fiction of Stephen King,
Clive Barker, and Anne Rice*

LINDA BADLEY

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Introduction

This book is about contemporary horror fiction as it has shaped and been shaped by three best-selling authors: Stephen King, Clive Barker, and Anne Rice. All three grew up in an increasingly visual and electronic culture out of which they somehow created millions of readers. Still, rather than “author,” each might better be defined as a figure or phenomenon whose impact goes far beyond any genre or medium. Each is a scriptwriter, and King and Barker are almost as heavily involved in the film industry as in the production of fiction. Each has a huge cult following, King and Rice in particular.

This book is also something of a “sequel,” a continuation of the business of my previous book, *Film, Horror, and the Body Fantastic*. Like most sequels, this one has its own subject and integrity but is informed by the prior text’s premises. Both projects, which I originally planned as a single volume, germinated in a special topics course proposal in 1982. Gothic and Horror, as the course was called, was a flagrant appeal to what had all the symptoms of a fad.

My real inspiration at the time was not fiction but horror movies, a long-term guilty pleasure, and a taste for camp. Otherwise I knew little of what I was getting into. I had heard of Stephen King’s popularity with students, although I had not read any of his books. I planned to use his novel *The Shining* (1977) as bait and to transfer the passion thus generated back into the “real” texts: the subliterate classics of the nineteenth century, and some standard modern classics—Flannery O’Connor, Shirley Jackson, Franz Kafka, perhaps Joyce Carol Oates. The strategy worked. Mary

Shelley and Stephen King converted students into enthusiastic readers. In the meantime, I became something of a fan.

My students led me to *Danse Macabre* (1981), King's freewheeling study of modern horror not as a genre so much as a personal and cultural experience whose elements—fiction, film, television, comics, and the 1950s—were inseparable. I became interested in horror's encroachment on the popular mainstream, into the Book of the Month Club, Hollywood and avant garde film, and rock culture. What had been a marginal phenomenon—beginning in cult films such as *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975)—had possessed the 1980s. Horror, like the other popular genres, was absorbed into postmodernism. It infected the media with its iconographies. For its themes and metaphors it absorbed sources from advertising to biochemistry to philosophy, becoming more than one of the popular genres or even a genre. Its mythology had spread throughout mass culture, causing us all to think and speak about ourselves and our feelings in peculiar ways.

By the mid-1980s, people were noticing that the horror genre had changed: from the norm-affirming genre Stephen King had pronounced “as Republican as a banker in a three-piece suit” (qtd. in “An Evening” 9) to a carnival of the perverse. My awakening occurred in 1984, when I picked up Clive Barker's *Books of Blood, Volume I* in the local Kroger. Some time later, a student introduced me to Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* as a cult classic from some years back. In Barker and Rice, as in films like *The Evil Dead*, *The Hunger*, *Blade Runner*, and *Dawn of the Dead*, the monsters had become victims and anti-heroes whose difference provoked empathy and fascination. Or they presented us with undeniable images of ourselves. The genre had become symptomatic and diagnostic. A new wave of “deep” or “anti-” horror engulfed the mass market and seemed bent on subverting traditional values, certainty, and identity.

Something like it encroached on academic space, especially the humanities, which became informed by a Gothic, pathological perspective that sanctioned subversion and the perverse. Literary criticism, if the titles were any indication, was a hellish prospect: Hassan's *The Dismemberment of Orpheus* (1971), Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1979), Carter's *The Sadeian Woman* (1979), Showalter's *Sexual Anarchy* (1990), Scarry's *The Body in Pain* (1985), Cixous's “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1976), Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor* (1979). Buzzwords like *deconstruction*, *schizophrenia*, *oppression*, *Other*, and even *body* began to sound as Gothic as they were politically correct.

Preparing Gothic and Horror alongside courses in contemporary critical theory, Victorian literature, and contemporary women writers, I could not help but wonder, for instance, how the “madwoman in the attic” of Gilbert and Gubar’s title of 1979 related to what was deemed feminism’s antithesis: the rape-revenge fantasy (*I Spit on Your Grave*) and the gender bending transformations available to special effects. And so I began to see horror as one of several discourses of the body that use the fantastic—the iconography of the monstrous—to articulate the anxieties of the 1980s and to re-project the self.

In today’s culture, a person’s self-concept has been increasingly constituted in images of the body. In the ongoing crisis of identity in which the gendered, binary subject of Eurocentric bourgeois patriarchy (in particular, the Freudian psychoanalytical model of the self) is undergoing deconstruction, horror has joined with other discourses of the body to provide a language for imagining the self in transformation, re-gendered, ungendered, and regenerated, or even as an absence or a lack. Like my book *Film, Horror, and the Body Fantastic*, this book is concerned with the cultural origins, technology, and impact of this fantastic “body language”—with the myths and media through which horror has articulated and modified the embodied self.

In *Sensational Designs* (1985), Jane Tompkins examined some American popular classics whose sensationalism, sentimentality, or even popularity has kept people from taking them seriously; for example, Charles Brockden Brown’s Gothic *Wieland* and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s “sentimental” *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Tompkins proposed that we find a means for accounting for the value of such texts not on the basis of some temporary aesthetic trend, but for doing “a certain kind of cultural work within a specific historical situation.” Popular fiction, she argued, offers society mechanisms for “thinking about itself,” for “defining aspects of itself shared between authors and readers, for dramatizing its conflicts, and recommending solutions” (200). This view of texts as doing work, as “expressing and shaping the social context that produced them” (Tompkins 200), I find especially applicable to popular horror fiction today.

Cultural work, as I use the term, is neither positive nor negative: it is, like Stephen King’s place in modern culture according to David Atwood, Senior Writer of The Book of the Month Club, “indisputable” (3). My definition of the term *horror* is inclusive, moving between rather than within generic boundaries and media, allowing for elements in a variety of texts and types: Anne Rice’s Gothic romances and sadomasochistic pornography, Angela Carter’s revamped fairy tales, Octavia Butler’s

“Bloodchild” (science fiction), the medical thriller (Robin Cook’s *Coma*), serial killer/procedural (Thomas Harris’s *The Silence of the Lambs*), graphic novel (Alan Moore’s *The Watchman*), pathological nonfiction (Richard Preston’s *The Hot Zone*), as well as the novels of King and Barker. I consider the diffusion and implantation of images and mythologies throughout levels of culture essential to the issue.¹

Chapter 1

Flesh Made Word

SPECIAL EFFECTS

On October 6, 1986, *Time* magazine “covered” Stephen King. The occasion was the publication of *It*, which King had proclaimed his magnum opus and last horror novel. On the cover was a large cartoonish drawing of the “typical” King reader, hair standing on end, eyes transfixed with suspense on “A Novel by STEPHEN KING.” The caption, from *It*, was superimposed on the reader’s forehead, invoking a connection between effect and cause: “As It saw Eddie looking, Its green-black lips wrinkled back from huge fangs.” The reader’s face and eyes glowed with light reflected from the open pages. The author appeared in a tiny dust jacket photo in the darkened bottom left-hand corner—sign of the death of the author in the birth of the reader, or perhaps a view of the author as special effect. The cover saluted King’s power (similar to *Time*’s power) to embody and affect, to bring the common reader to scalp-tingling, glowing life.

The *Time* cover said that King exploited fear in a way that charged the medium of print and transmitted directly to the body, hence to the visually and electronically literate. Posing as a mass media shaman, he textualized aural, visual, and kinetic sensations, evoked icons from film and television, and narrated in a voice that readers experienced viscerally. If prose fiction was defunct, the Stephen King phenomenon was a long night of the living dead (now entering its third decade). In 1982, Paul Gray had called it, with some justification, “postliterate prose.”

Horror returns audiences to preliterate, somatic modes of knowing, and movies, television, and rock concerts most completely recreate the experience of the den or campfire. Sitting in the darkened theater, we re-encounter our earliest dreams. The visual and electronic media have been most directly responsible for the contemporary horror phenomenon. King's fiction, a product of the horror film classics of the 1930s and 1950s, brought a cinematic perspective to the naturalistic novel. As King became an institution and was imitated, the images that inspired him gave renewed life to underground comics, which reinspired fantastic fiction and film.

Modern horror fiction is as parasitic and omnivorous as horror film, incorporating movies and television, theater and the visual arts, with equal gusto. In 1983, Clive Barker, Liverpool illustrator and playwright, inspired by fringe theater, adult fantasy art, and schlocky movies, started writing the short stories that became the *Books of Blood* (1984–86). By 1987 he was directing a film called *Hellraiser* (1988), which became an international hit. Barker's "Son of Celluloid" (1986) is a cancer that absorbs the psychic energy projected by audiences onto the screen, and through its lethal impersonations of classic film stars and genres, evolves into flesh-eating cinema. The story has been collected in the shared world anthology *Silver Scream* (1988), edited by David Schow and with an introduction by *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* director Tobe Hooper. This hybrid form of "splatter-prose" brought the tale of terror into the postliterate era, where inscribing and "writing from the body" was taken to new and knowingly dangerous extremes.¹

Anne Rice confesses that *Interview with the Vampire* (1976) was inspired not by Gothic fiction—she never finished Stoker's *Dracula*—but by black and white movies (Ramsland, *Prism* 248). In 1985 her eighteenth-century vampire Lestat was restored in a new medium, as a heavy metal rock singer empowered by MTV and a vast subcultural network. Rock music appropriated horror motifs in the late 1970s, beginning with Alice Cooper, Kiss, and Ozzie Osborne; punk and shock rock fused in 1980s Gothic and gave birth to clubs with names like Helter Skelter and Theatre of Blood and groups like Megadeath, Iron Maiden, The Dead Kennedys, Anthrax, and Bauhaus.

As the Gothic was taken up in clothes and lifestyles, the Splatterpunks (derived from the term *cyberpunk* by David Schow in 1986) drew their hard-boiled attitude, driving prose rhythms, and violent situations from heavy metal, cyberfiction, and horror movies. Their infusion of horror film "splatter," epitomized in George Romero's zombie films, into prose fiction, had the purpose of revelation in the flesh, "meat meeting mind, with the soul as screaming omniscient witness" (Skipp and Spector, *Introd.*,

Book 10). For those who might deplore “no-limits” violence, John Skipp and Craig Spector asserted that there were “also moments of intense, perverse and profoundly disturbing *rehumanization*” (Introd., Book 9). In “literary” fiction and film respectively, Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* (1991) and Oliver Stone’s metafilm *Natural Born Killers* (1993) are equivalent to or descended from splatterpunk.

Like the punk rebellion against pop rock, as Ken Tucker suggests, the splatterpunks were a stimulus—both in their revolt against Stephen King’s pop dread, and in their connection with or influence on writers like Clive Barker, Dan Simmons, Kathe Koja, Joe Lansdale, and Bret Easton Ellis. Splatter in general, though, is a logical development of the eighteenth-century Gothic revival. Modern horror is often thought to be a degraded form of *terror*, the supposedly refined, “sublime” emotion treasured by the eighteenth-century. Accordingly, *horror* is the product of our mass media-brutalized age. A shift from linear and literate consciousness to postliterate culture, from imaginary terrors to graphic realism, through the proliferation of special effects, is undeniable. But *TV Guide*’s 1990 prediction of horror’s return to its “roots” in “psychological terror and subtlety with more impact than an ax to the head” (Lieberman 3) was erroneous, says Walter Kendrick. “There are no such roots, in television or anywhere else” (264).

Dark fantasy has always been a literature of extra-textual effects, their purpose to stimulate strong feeling. The first Gothic novel, Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), was the secondary product of Walpole’s imitation-Gothic castle, the first of the modern “haunted houses” whose ghosts are elaborate effects. That and the fact that horror is “the only genre named for its effect on the reader,” as Gary Wolf has pointed out (qtd. in Hartwell, “Introd.” 10), should tell us something.

Horror, whether fiction or film, enacts the formula inscribed in Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Philosophy of Composition” in which the text was a machine or apparatus that elicited a specific audience response. Indeed, 1980s horror did not “degenerate” into special effects; it returned to its theatrical roots—in the freak show, the phantasmagoria, the wax museum, the Théâtre du Grand Guignol of Paris, the Theater of Cruelty. The climax of Poe’s best loved stories is the reanimated corpse or revolting revelation: the old man’s heart beating beneath the floor; the Lady Madeline, bloody and emaciated after clawing her way out of the tomb; M. Valdemar’s protracted putrescence, the Red Death. For Poe the “most poetical topic in the whole world” was the death of a beautiful woman (“Philosophy of Composition” 55). The same inspiration was behind the modern slasher film.

The eighteenth-century Gothic was a reactivation of feeling through the senses, a cycle repeated at the nineteenth century *fin de siècle*, and New Gothic revival performs a similar role for our waning century. Patrick Süskind's international best seller *Perfume* (1987), whose monstrous protagonist has an enhanced (and insatiable) sense of smell, turned French symbolist poetry and Huysmans's *Au Rebours* into olfactory fiction for the present. Rice, whose vampire protagonist Louis epitomized late Victorian self-division and decadence, describes horror as "Confusion of the senses, confusion of the mind to overwhelming physical responses" (qtd. in Wiater, "Anne Rice" 43). Speaking of the style of Stephen King, Rice stresses that "Horror and sensuality have always been linked" (qtd. in Wiater, "Anne Rice" 43), and it is no accident that, under two pseudonyms, she had an alter ego as a pornographer. Rice crosses Gothic horror with erotic romance to create the vampire's perspective of heightened consciousness. As to the view that he generates mindless "postliterate" prose, King has said that horror fiction is "necessary . . . not only for people who read to think, but to those who read to feel," a "moral" proposition in a "mad century" that "races toward its conclusion . . . ever more ominous and absurd" (Introd., *Arbor House Treasury* 11). Thus, accounting for King's appeal in Jungian terms, Harlan Ellison felt obliged to construct an elaborate metaphor that has King performing a cultural spinal tap; he "drills into the flow of cerebro-spinal fluid . . . [to] archetypal images from the pre-conscious . . . that presage crises . . . even as they become realities" (77).

Horror is the most physiological genre except for pornography, a fact the fanzines made a running joke—*Fangoria* flaunted a monthly cover foldout poster that proclaimed itself gore's equivalent of *Playboy*. In *Hard Core* (1989), Linda Williams classifies horror film with genres (including weepies, comedies, musicals, and pornography) that emphasizes body spectacle and movement and move bodies of viewers or readers to similar responses (x). As pornography's purpose is to arouse desire, horror's is to exorcise fear. The pleasure of horror's text, Philip Brophy suggests, is "getting the shit scared out of you" (5). Horror delivers a *frisson* that originates as a somatic response. The term *horror* comes from *horrére*, which refers to the "bristling of the hair on the nape of the neck" (Twitchell 10).

UNSAFE SEX

Most critics account for horror in psychosexual terms, as containing a subtext about repressed sexuality, and with good reason. Psychoanalysis

was a product of the same nineteenth-century sensibility that produced the Gothic literary classics. Freud's essay on "The 'Uncanny'" (1919), a case study based on E.T.A. Hoffman's "The Sandman," provided a model for psychoanalytic criticism.

Psychoanalytic criticism, Gothic and pathological in its origins, tells us that horror functions as displaced and therefore "safe" pornography. Like pornography, slasher films like *Friday the Thirteenth* employ phallic weapons to "open the fleshy secrets of normally hidden things" (Williams 191). Thus horror appeals to pre-adolescent boys, as James Twitchell maintains in *Dreadful Pleasures* (1985) and *Preposterous Violence* (1989). He argues that horror films provide an adolescent rite of passage, as fairy tales are to children. They are cautionary tales that demonstrate the dangers of unconventional sex, implanting taboos while providing safe outlets for repressed sexual energy and anxiety.

Disregarding for a moment the fact that the majority of readers of horror *fiction* are women in their thirties and forties (Hartwell, "Intro." 5), or the fact that adult themes dominate mainstream and revisionist horror fiction and film (from *Interview with the Vampire* to Cronenberg's *Dead Ringers* to King's *Dolores Claiborne*), what do we make of the trend in which the latent psychosexual contents have been made manifest (*The Rocky Horror Picture Show, It*), where subtext becomes overt text? Or where, as in King's *Gerald's Game*, Freudianisms are converted into a pop feminist myth—a myth that disparages phallogentrism, psychoanalysis proper, and Freud? In Barker and Rice, conventional sex is not sublimated but replaced with overt sadomasochism and polymorphic sensuality, and in the films of Cronenberg, Lynch, and Jordan, Eros is coupled with Thanatos in ways that Freud's phallogentric "family romance" does not account for.

In an age that appears ever more post-Freudian, Twitchell's argument is reductive. The horror genre as the product of repressed sexuality, as traditionally defined, is defunct. The thought that we are sexual beings, which reputedly horrified the Victorians, no longer horrifies or even signifies. What does signify since the sexual "revolution" is *Sexual Anarchy*, as Elaine Showalter called it in 1990, sexual anxiety, or, as is perhaps more appropriate in 1995, unsafe sex: the welter of constantly scrambled codes and alternatives and threats and prohibitions and dangers that today's sexually politicized world produces. These were the causes of *I Shudder at Your Touch*, the title of Michelle Slung's best-selling 1991 anthology of "22 Tales of Sex and Horror," its sequel, *Shudder Again* (1993), and kin (for instance, *Hot, Hotter, and Hottest*