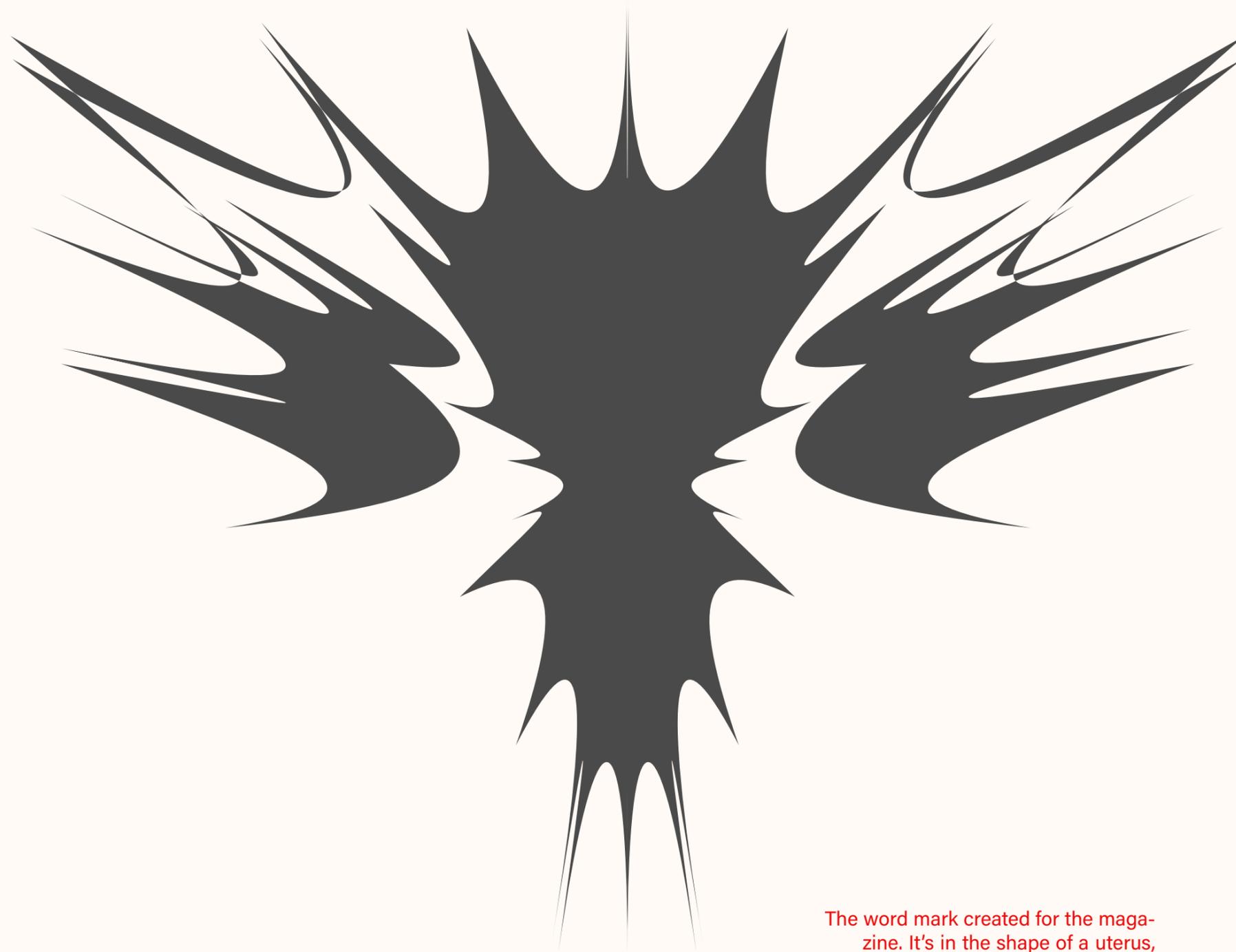


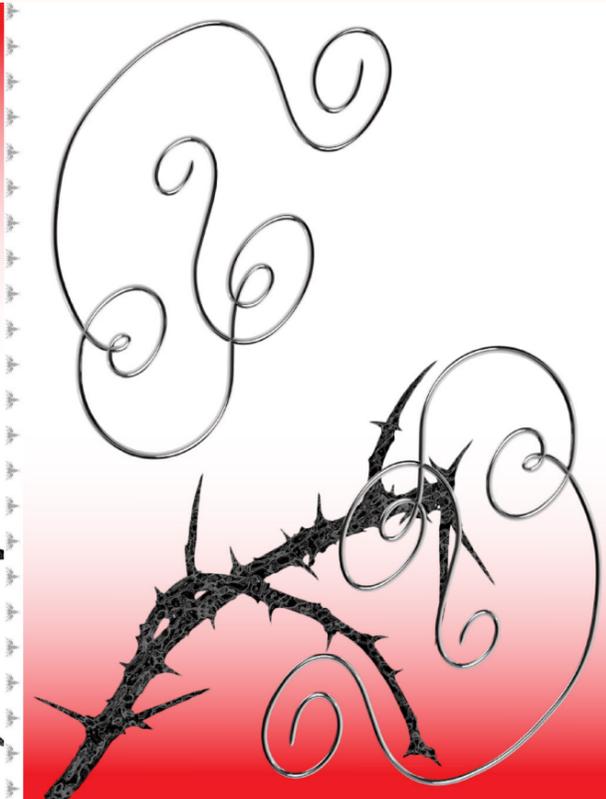
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EXPOSÉ**



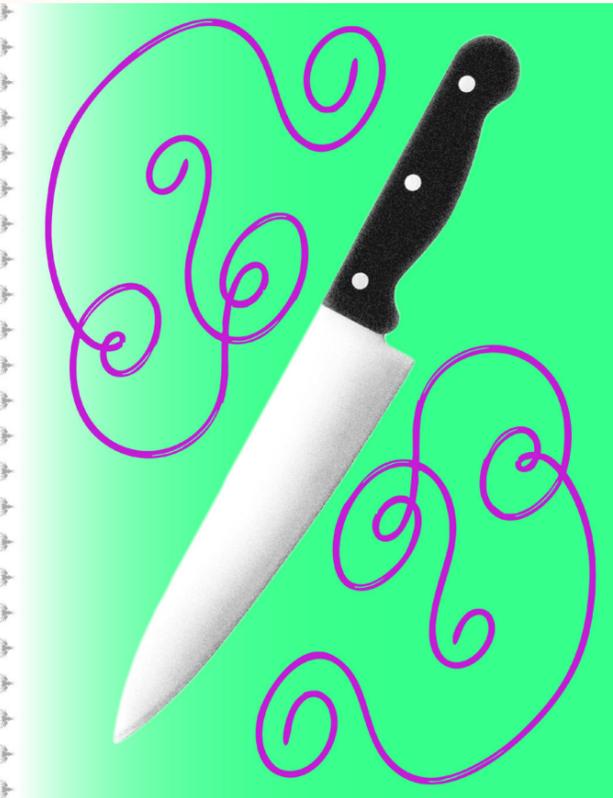
The word mark created for the magazine. It's in the shape of a uterus, but sharper.



Issue one



Issue two



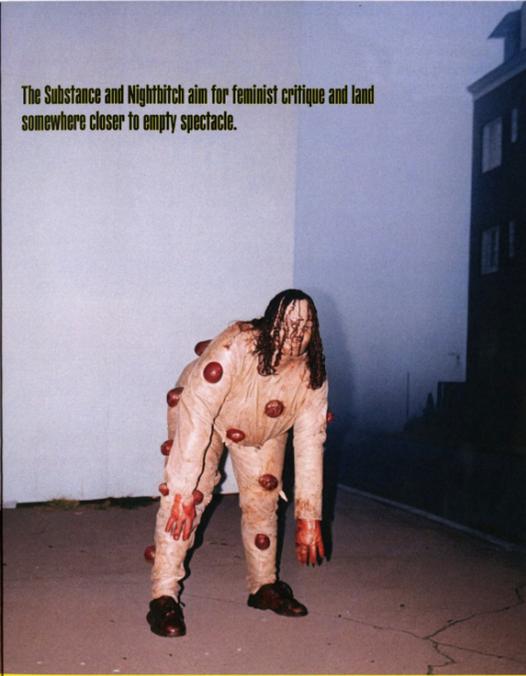
Issue three

Issue One: Body Horror and the Female Experience



Little Style, Less Substance

The Substance and Nightbitch aim for feminist critique and land somewhere closer to empty spectacle.




EXPOSE

LITTLE STYLE, LITTLE SUBSTANCE

i-D Magazine
Writer: Hannah Strong
September 23, 2024

There is a near-£800 billion economy built on supposed solutions to the so-called problem of women being ugly, fat or old. This is the age of 37-step skincare routines for 10-year-olds, Brazilian butt lifts and aestheticians who can scrape out your buccal fat in less time than it takes to get a good haircut.

It makes sense, that female filmmakers are turning to the subgenre of body horror to explore the tribulations of contemporary womanhood. In Coralie Fargeat's *The Substance*, an ageing TV star takes a black-market drug to create a younger version of herself; Marielle Heller's *Nightbitch* is about a woman who gives up her career to have a baby, and subsequently finds herself transforming into a dog. Both films do plenty of bone-crunching work to make their audiences shudder, but, for me, another nauseating truth oozes through the exoskeletons of these projects: that these visions of "feminist body horror" are in danger of becoming another corporate sales message. Only this time, we're getting sold the problems themselves, rather than any kind of solution.

Characterised by scintillating gore, a propensity to make the audiences uncomfortable and underlying ideas about the connection between our bodies and minds, body horror as a subgenre arguably originated with proto-scream queen Mary Shelley. Her 1818 novel *Frankenstein* concerns Victor Frankenstein, a doctor who goes against nature and God to create a man from disproportionately sized body parts. Victorian society ate Shelley's novel up, but the idea that such a grotesque read came from a

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woman scandalised her male contemporaries so greatly that they accused her of "forgetting the gentleness of her sex."

When it comes to the cinema, though, David Cronenberg is the big daddy of body horror, with a unsettling, fleshy library of work - among them *The Brood*, *Videodrome* and *Crimes of the Future* - spanning 50 years. Cronenberg took what Mary Shelley started - pushing the audience's squeamish buttons - and put it on film, creating films about psychosexual stimulation at the scenes of car crashes (*Crash*) or a perverse God complex that results in a Kafkaesque transformation (*The Fly*).

Cronenberg is far from the only filmmaker who's shaped the body horror subgenre, but he has directly inspired a new generation of artists, be it Charl'xx, whose 2022 album *Crash* drew on his film of the same name, or Julia Ducournau, director of the gruelling films *Raw* and *Titane*, who has spoken previously about how "foundational" his work was to her.

The evolution of body horror into "feminist body horror" - dealing with the unique frustrations of being a woman, including sexism, self-loathing and the disconnect between mind and body - makes sense. It's a fitting genre to explore and articulate the pain, fear and anger that comes with existing under the boot heel of patriarchy, offering catharsis and community where often, in reality, there is none.

Coralie Fargeat is often compared to Ducournau, and *The Substance* provoked the kind of strong reaction at the 2024 Cannes Film Festival that *Raw* and *Titane* did back in 2016

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LITTLE STYLE, LITTLE SUBSTANCE

and 2021 respectively. *The Substance* takes place in a facsimile of Hollywood, smooth and shaved, where a dance instructor named Elisabeth Sparkle (played by Demi Moore in a part touted as the instigator of an impending 'Demiseance') is fired from her TV gig on her 50th birthday for having the audacity to age. "People always ask for something new," Denis Quaid's perma-tan network exec - called Harvey, because subtlety is overrated - tells her, chewing loudly on a mouthful of shrimp. "At 50 well. It stops." Soon, she'll be secretly slipped some information on a new medical treatment called "The Substance". Taking it will make her "younger. More beautiful. More perfect" by releasing "another version of [her] self." Allured by the prospect of clawing back her youth, Elisabeth picks up her package from a nondescript parcel locker and follows the instructions, injecting herself with an ominous yellow fluid. And so, Margaret Qualley's impossibly beautiful, blissfully wrinkle-free character Sue slithers forth from her spine, like Eve from Adam's rib, and immediately gets the job as Elisabeth's replacement.

In theory, *The Substance* sets up something pretty fun: All About Eve by way of the Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, where the hot new thing replacing the old news is a flesh-and-bone younger version of the protagonist. But the wheels fall off pretty quickly when it becomes apparent there is little connection between Sue and Elisabeth - no shared memories or emotions - other than a slight physical resemblance. A later reveal unveils one thing that binds

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them: when Elisabeth binge eats fast food in depressive state, it causes Sue to physically suffer too (she berates Elisabeth as "gross, old, fat, disgusting" for it.) It's as if the act of eating is a moral failing - a dangerous suggestion given that 8.6% of women will experience an eating disorder in their lifetime.

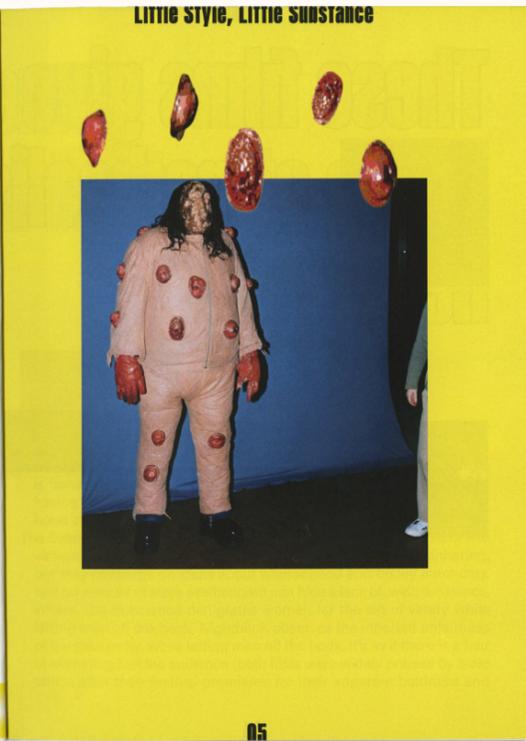
The Substance wants to hold a mirror up to Hollywood, showing the ways women torture themselves to remain relevant in the eyes of adoring fans, but when the only person who suffers is the main body in the frame, it feels less like a critique of the patriarchal entertainment industry and more a lambasting of women for conforming to the standards they didn't set in the first place.

Marielle Heller's *Nightbitch* - based on Rachel Yoder's 2021 novel of the same name - suffers from a similarly misjudged execution, as Amy Adams bravely forgoes make-up and hair to play 'Mother', an exhausted artist turned reluctant stay-at-home-mom who realises she's turning into a dog, with bonus nipples and a protruding tail. Her husband, a whining, hapless man-child played by Scoot McNairy, is not aloof as much as he

is oblivious, as if he's never met a woman.

Despite her isolation and obvious symptoms of post-partum depression - which the film never mentions, let alone considers - Mother still views herself as morally superior to the other moms (and it's only moms) she meets at various baby events. She has a deep-rooted fear of becoming a mother who unironically goes to 'Book Babies' at the local library because she thinks 'Book Babies' is cringe. We learn all of this in exhausting, constant voice-over from Mother, replicating the first-person perspective of the novel but in the process removing any space for ambiguity. *Nightbitch* has the sort of thorny, absurd concept that might work if approached with a scant fatalism, in the style of say, Athina Rachel Tsangari's antisocial coming-of-age *Attenberg* or Onur Tukel's brutal, semi-absurd *Catfight*. But with the perpetually chirpy voice of Mother at every turn and its peppy soundtrack (complete with Yeah Yeahs and Joanna Newsom needle drops,) the visceral female unpleasantness that Marielle is reaching for - that she so beautifully articulated in *Can You Ever*

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EXPOSE

These films give some stabs at radicalism that never stick



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LITTLE STYLE, LITTLE SUBSTANCE

Forgive Me? and *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* - never quite comes to pass. Where it promises maternal rage and righteous catharsis there is none - just a middle-aged man getting squeamish about his wife having her period, and a load of dogs running around the neighbourhood at night.

The Substance and *Nightbitch* are aesthetically opposite - one stark and vicious and barely written, the other wordy and homey and dithering, but they converge on ideas about womanhood and bodily autonomy, and no amount of sleek aestheticism can hide a lack of...well, substance. Where *The Substance* denigrates women for the sin of vanity while letting men off the hook, *Nightbitch* observes the inherent unfairness of the patriarchy...while letting men off the hook. It's as if there is a fear of alienating half the audience (both films were widely praised by male critics after their festival premieres for their apparent boldness and

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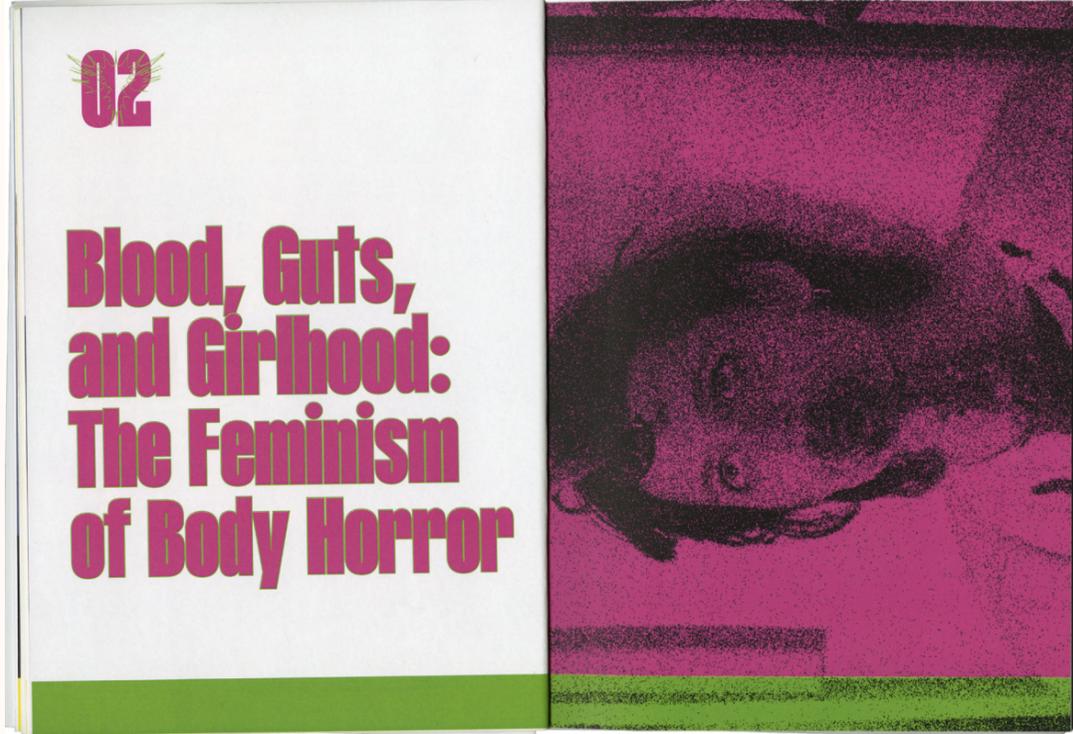
humour) even in films that purport to address womanhood and speak directly to female-identifying viewers. With their supposed shock-and-awe loglines and stunt set pieces (a giant, fleshy monster! A woman as a dog, killing a cat!) there is some stab at radicalism that never sticks and feels filtered through a lens of palatability.

When we talk about body horror, we talk about the capacity of cinema to expose our deepest fears, thoughts and desires through violations or modifications of the physical. There lies incredible potential within our literal flesh and bones - The Wachowskis' covert body horror *The Matrix* is an iconic trans allegory, while Jordan Peele used the genre to expose the insidious nature of modern racism in *Get Out*. But when it comes to working through the modern hell of womanhood, these hollow gestures at very real misogyny aren't sharp enough to cut.

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Issue One: Body Horror and the Female Experience

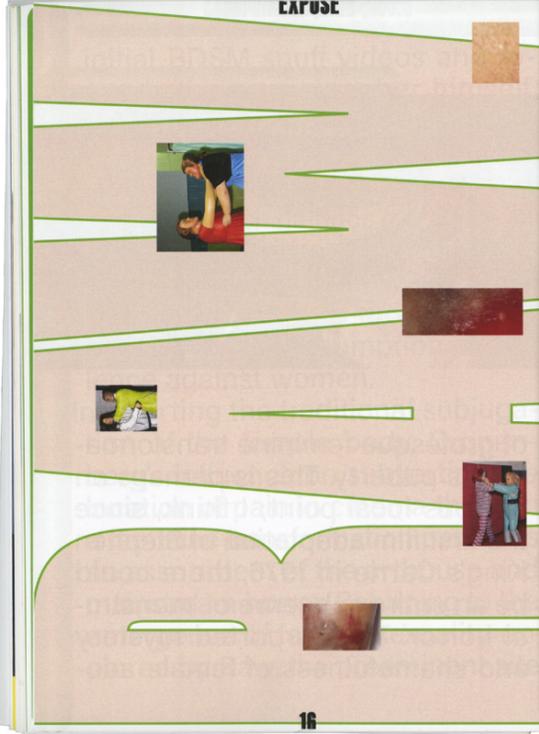


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violence, animal bodily pleasure, a lack of inhibition, and sexual appetite. Ducourrière addresses the feminist nature of Justine's cannibalism as 'a punk culture against this patriarchy'; this is particularly resonant in Justine's first taste of human flesh, which arises from a bikini wax gone horrifically awry, resulting in Justine heartily gobbling her sister's severed finger. It is a startling reiteration of girlhood. The body horror of the film – its teeth, blood, viscera – is a corporealisation of feminist resistance. The body, or biological horror genre is concerned with transforming the human form through grotesque violations of the body. Often, in mainstream slasher films and horror cin-

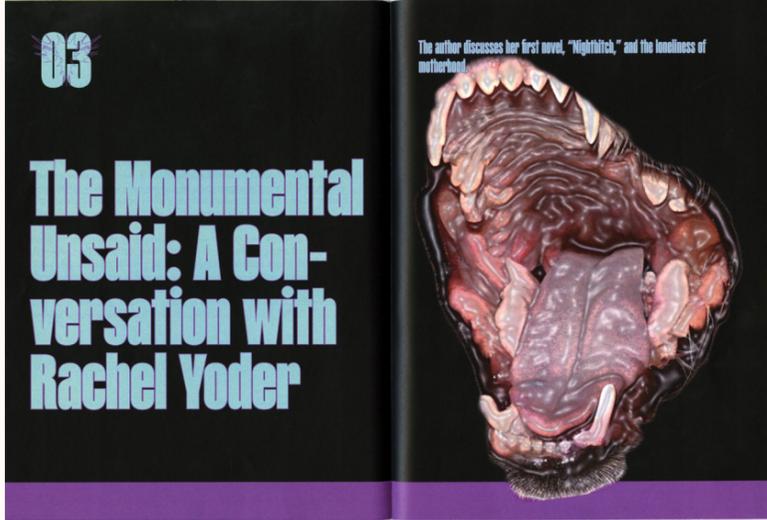
BLOOD, GUTS, AND GIRLHOOD

ema, female bodies function as the site for such mutilations – as a locus of fear and pain. There are long, gratuitous shots of women in peril, sexualised acts of violence, the penetrating blade of a male killer. Body horror, with its emphasis on the consciousness of terror, is able to respond to the treatment of female bodies and pain. One of the very earliest instances of this occurred in David Cronenberg's 1983 film *Video Drome*. The film begins with scenes of graphic sadomasochism and torture, as the protagonist, Max Renn, discovers 'Video Drome' – a broadcast of snuff films we would now associate with dark corners of the internet. Max, a sensationalist network director, be-



BLOOD, GUTS, AND GIRLHOOD

lescence is hyperbolised through monstrous encounters with PMS-induced bloodlust. It's a trope with the potential to be both incredibly demeaning, and remarkably feminist. The difference, I believe, can be negotiated through explicit emphasis on the duality of the female body as an object of subjugation for its assumed weakness, as well as for its perceived threat. This is how body horror can be used as a process of 'othering' to identify and explore female bodily experiences and psychological landscapes. Movies like *Giinger Snaps* (2000) and *Jennifer's Body* (2009), straddling the genres of the supernatural body horror and young adult coming-of-age, inaugurate a playful,



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In the novel, Yoder explores mom culture, gender roles, and, above all, the warning dialices contained within the experience of motherhood. About these dialices, Yoder writes: "She would never wish Nightbitch on another mother, certainly not, for while real-mom-my-time had its fun, its vitality and power and brassiness, at its core it was something very private and sad, those deeply held dreams that a mother had tucked into a cold, dark corner of herself" in a story that gives full voice to the innumerable nuisances, exhaustions, shocks, and injustices of motherhood. Yoder manages to create a lively tale that feels both bitingly fresh and somehow as old as time.

SARA PETERSEN: Despite being famously unhappy and bored as a stay-at-home mother, *Nightbitch* frequently tries to convince herself of the rightness of this arrangement (after all, her husband "had a job [...] he made money"). But then this line appears: "She stood with the babe in arms and watched him back the car from the driveway." How does this archetypal image and your own experience of early motherhood inform *Nightbitch*?

RACHEL YODER: That image of the mother with child watching as her husband leaves is a classic one that you can find repeated endlessly in all of literature. The image is also holy – the Madonna, who was also abandoned (that's a sacrilegious analysis, I realize, but pragmatically, it's the truth), though I would argue that the mother-child bond is the holy part as opposed to the Mother Alone. (I do wonder what the cultural value of having the Mother Alone as a holy image is. I am very suspicious of it. It seems to be of value to the patriarchy.) For me, this image is actually the mother's greatest fear: the abandoned mother left to

THE MOMENTAL UNSAID

care for her child. I didn't know to fear this image before I had my own child. I consider myself independent, quite happy to be alone for long stretches of time. I am a writer, after all. Yet when my own husband's job demanded that he be gone each week, his ceaseless departures felt nearly criminal after the birth of our son. I was in the house, with my son, lonely in a way I had never been before. I craved the wisdom of community when presented with this mysterious, mewling little creature, yet the best I could do was sort of wander through mommy-baby activities, unable to connect meaningfully with other moms, completely isolated. My early experience of motherhood didn't so much inform the character of *Nightbitch* as it is *Nightbitch*. It was my way of processing the catastrophe of marital division in early motherhood and my deep, animal desire for protection and togetherness.

EXPOSE

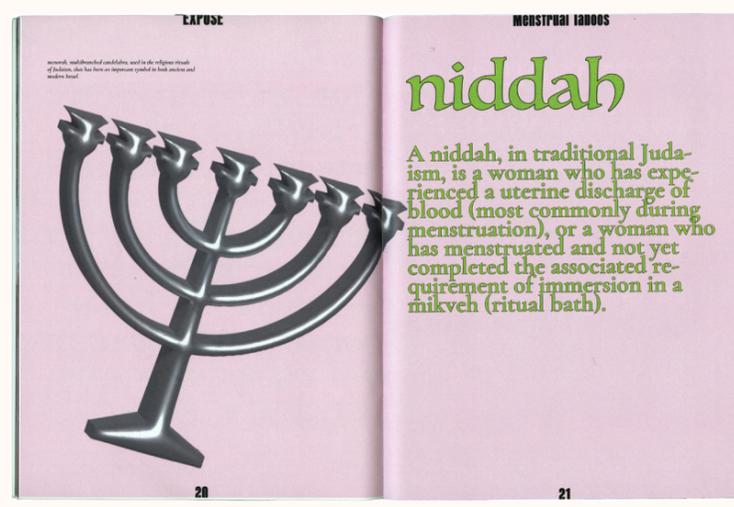
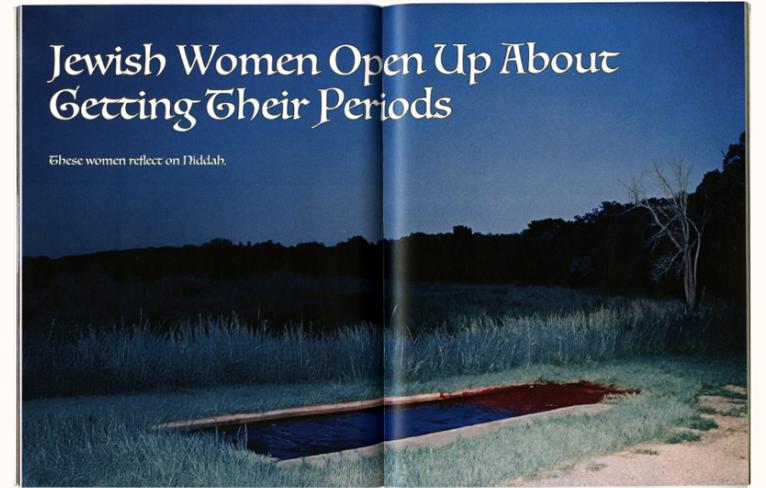
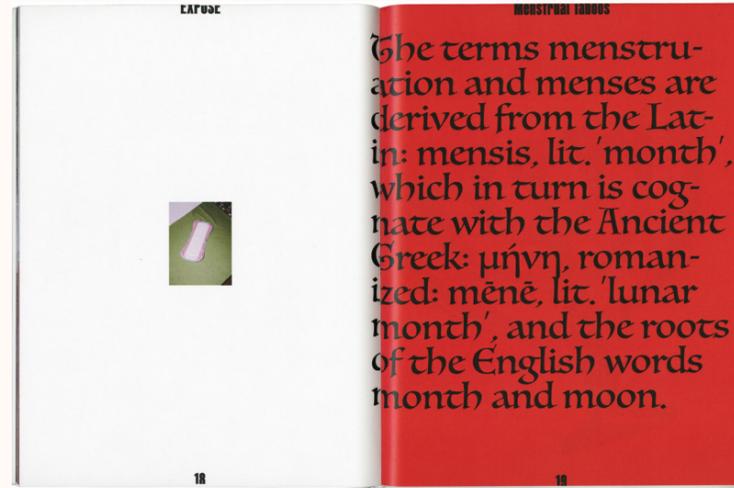
THE MOMENTAL UNSAID

When I was in labor, during a particularly gnarly part when the baby needed to turn and couldn't, I started to scream with each contraction. These screams grew so intense that my husband, on the verge of passing out, had to leave the room. "I've never heard those sounds come from a human before," he later commented. During labor, I better understood what the word "torture" meant. I felt a deep, psychic empathy for people who had died from torture. I understood their suffering. And then, at the end, I had a baby that I had grown in my body. I pushed it out of a small hole, which is fucking crazy. Do you see how powerful this is? Honestly, how are men not terrified of us? And how is the world not exactly as women would have it?



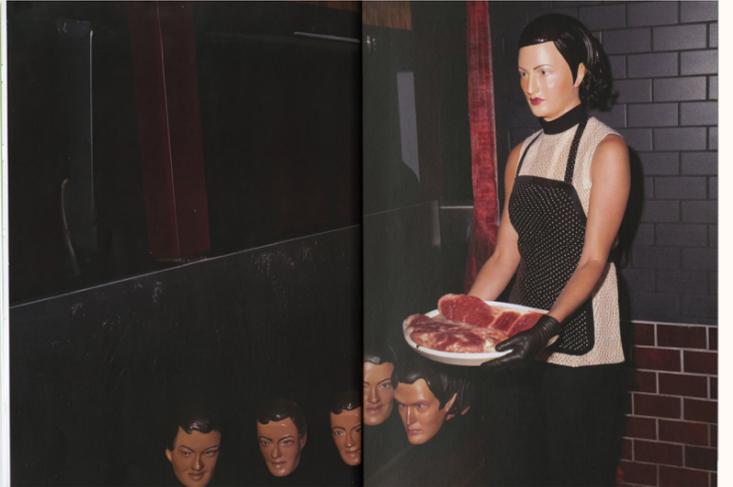
Issue One: Body Horror and the Female Experience

Special Section: Menstrual Taboos



Issue One: Body Horror and the Female Experience

Photo Essay: Photos Related to Body Horror



All the photos are generated by AI, and then edited by me.