

**The corpse and the body in Hollywood
classical cinema**
***The Body Snatcher* (Val Lewton/Robert Wise, 1945)**

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The corpse and the classical symbol

In Hollywood classical cinema, men and women died with their eyes closed. Who did they think such a colossal falsehood could convince? Perhaps only children and idiots, since it contradicts the most elemental human experience. And nevertheless, for many long years no voices were heard shouting and complaining in defense of a more realistic death. And the fact is, the question as to the credibility of death in the classic cinema is no doubt wrongly formulated. In Hollywood westerns, thrillers or dramas, death has a symbolic value. It is a knot in the story that works as a piece of knowledge that the story distils, and thus, after breaking onto the scene, becomes metaphorized. The result of a shooting, it culminates by giving this a meaning: the product of an ill-fated destiny, it converts into law and lesson for those who survive, and for the spectator himself. It is true that there is a dense instant, which is not just another consequence of the narrative situation that brings it about, and neither does it let itself be absorbed by its results (vengeance, duels or any other consequence). It does not cast doubt upon the plenitude of the ceremonial. With symbolized death, the wound, the loss, the memory, the end of the threat, it is all over. There is not, to put it one way, any place or time for the corpse. If we think it over, closing the eyes is precisely the most beautiful gesture that we can perform for our dead, both in order to represent the peace that we desire for them, by making their death resemble a restoring sleep and to avoid the unbearable quality of «their look».

Well, the surprising thing about the classic poetic gesture is that it transfers this ceremonial, discrete and pure act from the hand of the fellow man to that of enunciation, or if you prefer it another way, classical cinema elides the ritual gesture and makes this coincide with the very moment of the death. Perhaps this very fact is what gives the last words of the dying an unusual level of truth that refers to a register different from that which the same person used in his lifetime. His words, even those of the greatest of villains, are surrounded by the halo of death with a magic glow: mythical words, we could say, more than sincere words. And this density contributes to better perceiving the lack on which it was founded. What is in this ritual operation systematically elided, or stolen, is what remains left behind, heavy as a flagstone, as well we should know, after death has occurred: the stiff corpse.

Well, it would indeed be unsuitable to conceive the representational economy of classical cinema in as far as sex and violence are involved, without meditating on the system of self censorship that ruled the destinies of Hollywood for several decades: the *Hays Code* or *Production Code*. This code establishes a number of *Don'ts and Be Careful's* whose main aim is to handle the extent to which these two controversial aspects are represented narrative and visual awareness. It is well-known that the intent of the code in question is not just to legislate with regard to what is shown (even when it puts such emphasis

on this) but rather similarly extends to the evaluation of narrative questions and of their pragmatic function. It might be productive to stop looking at this code as a means for repressing things shown (in a merely prohibitive ideological sense) so we can instead understand the term repression in the psychoanalytical sense as given by Freud, whose meaning proves to be far more productive. Put in this way, the purpose of these rules and their effects vary radically. Allow us this slight detour.

For Freud, repression (*Verdrängung*) is the basic mechanism of the unconscious and consists of the operation whereby the subject keeps representations linked to urges away from the unconscious. But, this operation cannot help leaving its traces, even ordering behaviour and, above all, the discourse of the subject since repression and the return of the repressed are none other than one and the same thing. Lacan states this most explicitly: «*Verdrängung*, repression, is not the law of the misunderstood, it is what happens when something does not fit in on the level of the symbolic chain. Each symbolic chain to which we are tied entails internal coherence, that at a given time forces us to return to another *what we received*. Still, it may happen that it is not possible for us to return on all levels at the same time, and that, in other terms, the law is intolerable to us. Not because it is in itself, but rather because in the position in which we find ourselves a sacrifice is implied that proves to be impossible on the plane of meanings. And then we repress: our acts, our speech, our behaviour. But the chain, in any event, goes on circulating down below, expressing its requirements, calling to attention the debt owed it, and it does this by means of the intermediary of the neurotic symptom».¹

The operation that is deduced from repression is thus perceptible in the discourse, it constitutes its fundamental axis, and thus what is repressed fights to reappear in the chain of signifiers. We could conceive or what occurs with the Hays code in this way: its ruling, the obstacles that it imposes against display and narration constitute an operation of repression that, in spite of it all, will not be able —it is its law— to prevent what is repressed, continually returning in elusive, metaphorical shapes. It is thus that a mechanism of suggestions is generated that historiography denominates *classic sense of shame*. Its basic instruments are not so much suppression, (this is what would correspond in Freudian terminology to *Verwerfung* or foreclosure) as the starting up of the whole rhetorical range, preterition, ellipsis and above all metonymy and metaphor, in order to cover up what cannot cease to be announced in spite of prohibitions. We could affirm, in virtue of what we have said, that the Institutional Mode of Representation constitutes the effect in the discourse (transformations, metaphors, metonymies, litotes, ellipsis, etc.) of the prohibitions formulated or recommended in the Code of production. And since we are dealing with rhetorical figures, classical discourse would continually draw back the frontier, not so much in order to transgress the model (as would have been said some years ago with note of praise), as to establish this in the precarious position of rhetorical balance.²

In so far as horror films are concerned, this effect must be considered around three fundamental figures: firstly place the metamorphosis understood as violence imposed on the shapes of imaginary human identification, and particularly as a momentary suspension of such an anthropologically decisive distinction as that between what is animal and what human. In this sense, and to take just one illustrative example, the shame involved in the transformation of the woman into panther, that happens outside the visual field in *Cat People*, by Jacques Tourneur, 1943, (and the correlative of maintaining the ambiguity up of the doubt as to whether she has been operated on or not) contrasts with its invasion of the field and exhibition to everyone's gaze in all its intermediate phases in the film with the same name (in fact a remake) by Paul Schrader, shot in 1982).³ Secondly, the violence the human body is subjected to is restrained by an economy of movement (murders out of our view, metonymic effects from cause to effect between the murder weapon and the wounded body). This is radically opposed to the ritual of the knifing

¹ Jacques Lacan: *El Seminario. Libro 3. Las Psicosis*, Borna/Buenos Aires/México, Paidós, 1984, 1955-1956 text, p. 122.

² The subject of the code, its frontiers and its value as law was dealt with in a recent volume: *Prima dei codici 2. Alle porte di Hays*, published by the Mostra Internazionale d'Arte Cinematografica de la Biennale di Venezia, 1991. One could also consult, among recent material, volume 3 of *Cinegrafie*, october 1990.

³ See our article «Metamorfosis, Ciencia y Horror. A propósito de *The Fly* in *Arbor*, at present in print.

and the axe blow in the modern gory spectacle. Lastly, during the classical period, the representation of Gothic monstrosity held sway over the real monster. (*Freaks*, directed by Tod Browning in 1932, constitutes an exemplary case, but equally unusual: the dominant style has to be seen in the figures of Dracula, the Mummy, the Wolf man, etc). Real monsters, coming from genetic experiments, biology or some kind of organic degeneration stemming from epidemics are, on the contrary, the spoiled children of today's modern terror.⁴ There can be no doubt, in this process that we are that quickly summing up, the ostracism of the corpse is also an effect of the discourse: but the corpse in Hollywood films lives, though hidden away, in some place beyond the death that gave birth to it, to use a paradox of language.

The explosion of the corpse in modern horror films

But indeed, what is a corpse? The biological support of what is human when life has ceased to inhabit it. But this nevertheless forces us to make a rectification: it is the chemical, material support, we should say, getting rid of anything that refers to life. This is then something placed in the time elapsing beyond death, but closer to us than the ceremony that transforms the deceased into memory and symbol, that is to say, than what inscribes it in the chain of meaning, since it is well-known that humankind does this when it buries its dead and thus immortalizes them. The corpse, located between these two points in time, is presented as something crude, intolerable, heavy, in the same way as the dead body weighs more than a live one. Well, whether one likes it or not, such an object never existed in its material sense for classical cinema, though doubtlessly classical cinema did not in a certain way cease to talk about death. This often became a catalyzer for new emotions that dealt with it in the story (vengeance, duels, apprenticeship), even when its destinies varied between a staging of the wound (metaphorical) and an action caused by this wound (metonymic). In through this crack that is opened between full, pregnant symbolic death (which as we should quickly is not real death) and the testimony, the memory and the action or passion-effect, modern horror films and their fantasies find their way, broadening the gap more and more to the point of paroxysm. To sum up, the modern horror film has made the corpse one of its most suspect delicacies, one of its most forthright and obscene exhibitions.

We must for a moment step aside from what the corpse was in the represented field—that is, a live body—and also set to one side what it was for the story—a narrative function, one of the supports from which knowledge was dealt with. Let us consider, on the other hand, its chemical aspect, where science offers us its icy answer. In this way death is presented to us as the supreme certainty of biology, according to an incontrovertible law: everything that lives must die, and, in a scientific sense, death is simply the termination of cellular nutrition. As such, it must be understood as autointoxication of the organism, being brought about fatally by parts, that is, by tearing the body apart. In a technical sense, death could be said to be zero time for the corpse.

It is not altogether without interest to describe the field in which modern horror films situate their fantasies with regard to the corpse. For this purpose we could refer to the different stages of the chemical process undergone by the dead body.

Louis-Vincent Thomas distinguishes four of these: death, «carcassization», putrefaction and mineralization.⁵ It may prove very significant that modern horror films describes an itinerary that oscillates between «carcassization» and putrefaction, taking no interest in death nor in mineralization. The deficiency and disdain when dealing with the first of these is exemplified in a paradox: the figure of the omnipresent psychopath. Incapable of dying, his resurrections are multiplied in the face of all verisimilitude at the same time as the «other» death, that of other persons, turns out to be as plentiful

⁴ In recent years, the subject of AIDS has been devastating, not only for North American society, and its symbolic everyday habits, but also for its narrative and metaphoric constructs. The cinema of terror, that was already so keen on genetic mutations, has found a real gold mine in this syndrome.

⁵ Louis-Vincent Thomas: *The Body: From biology to anthropology*. México F.C.E., 1989, p. 13.

as it is lacking in intensity. Similarly, the story itself suffers from the same awful illness and is shown to be incapable of dying away, proceeding to resurrections that contradict any kind of discursive logic.⁶ In so far as mineralization is concerned, this represents a stage that is worthy of the human being in so far as the body becomes a sort of archaeology that is deposited in memory and history with no material intervention of life. Perhaps for this reason, it offers such little visual interest.

Why then should this putrefaction, this fearful birth of life after life, become the favorite motif of horror films, even if its first object were the corpse. It would be sufficient, to respond to this question, to direct our minds to the quantity of rituals that throughout history have attempted to eliminate or at least to neutralize the irrecoverable effects of this stage, doubtlessly the most degrading one, of human decomposition. But at the other end, and as proof of the opposite argument, it may be remembered that a large part of the perverse fantasies which literature has so often chosen are also found to lie around this stage of the corpse. The icily chemical description that Thomas offers may be of use to us to identify some of the most compulsive poles of attraction of the cinema of terror: «It swells up in an inordinate way, and can attain twice its volume, especially the eyelids, the lips, the abdomen and the scrotum. It is repugnant due to the brown coloured discharges, stinking and sickening, that come out of the nasal orifices, the mouth, the anus and at times from the ears. It emits foul gases that carry the bacteria of putrefaction. This phenomenon is given the name of *posthumous circulation*. The putrid fermentation does indeed produce plentiful water but also methane, carbon dioxide gas, nitrogen, ammonia, sulphurous hydrogen and trimethylamine. These gases cause a swelling of the corpse, and are produced in such quantities that if a release valve is not placed in the coffin, there is a risk of the latter's exploding. Lastly, it transforms the flesh, already soft and weak, into fetid, diffusing and rotten looking masses, with colors that go from a free bronze weft to a yellowish brown, then on to green, and afterwards going to black with plates of grey black that contrast with the white mould».⁷

This detailed approach to the real nature of decomposition, guided by an unambiguously scientific frame of mind, has become imaginary speculation in horror films. Or, to put it in other words, modern terror films amplify the details here described to the point of provoking revulsion.⁸ Three fates seem to embody this imaginary projection of what science describes with the cold nature of a surgeon in the quote above: firstly, the constant exhibition of corpses in a state of putrefaction and their different stages of transformation (that does not in any way imply their state of death —this being extremely important). Putrefaction has been freed, in this sense, from its dependence on the medical death of the organism. For this reason we find such general presence of the paradox of the live corpse or the undead. The films of the living dead by George A. Romero, the remake made by Tom Savini, as well as Lucio Fulci's excessive sequels, are the perfect expression of what we are mentioning. Secondly, the appearance of cannibalism, often distant from any anthropological consideration. Like all alibis, it could be said that «flesh attracts flesh». Tobe Hooper's mythical films, starting with the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, literalize the ostensible «human butchery» metaphor, as is the case in some pieces of culinary sarcasm by Jackie Kong or Peter Jackson. Thirdly, the dismembering and loss of unifying forms of the body, the ones that are used to recognize this as something human and that sustain the founding image of its gestalt unity, the source of narcissism. Many films by David Cronenberg proverbially represent this case, that in another text we called the «fall of the body». Do we need to add that we are now beyond the limit in which desire can act? These bodies are completely de-erotized.⁹

⁶ The different and interminable chapters on the *Stalker Films* model, such as *Friday the 13th*, *Halloween*, *Nightmare on Elm Street* and some others, are the ideal expression of these conditions: a story that never dies away, that knows nothing of closure, the omnipresence of death with no metaphorical effects and the impossibility of the psychopath's death. In this respect see our book in print *Despedazar un cuerpo*, Madrid, Verdoux, 1995.

⁷ Louis-Vincent Thomas, *op. cit.* pp. 29-30.

⁸ We refer the reader once more to our article on *The Fly* and to the idea of revulsion taken from the text by Eugenio Trias *Lo Bello y lo siniestro*, Barna, Seix Barral, 1982.

⁹ In this section we omit titles of films that are quoted in our text entitled «Metamorfosis, Ciencia y Horror...» and in our book *Despedazar un cuerpo*, already mentioned.

The corpse in classical cinema: the limits of an absence

We affirmed above that classical cinema ignored the corpse in a strict sense. But this affirmation is at least a little inaccurate. It would thus be fitting to introduce some nuance that could better determine the loopholes and limits of this law, that is, the discursive operation to which we alluded above, and its rhetorical figures that play on the boundaries. Even though our analysis is centred on *The Body Snatcher* (Robert Wise, 1945) it would not be out of place to introduce a quick reference to another of the mythical films within the modest B series of Hollywood's fantastic genre, namely *Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1932). Both these films are representative of each of the most relevant cycles of B series films of the thirties and forties (Carl Laemmle for Universal and Val Lewton for R.K.O. respectively). Also the novelistic sources (Mary Shelley in the first case, Robert Louis Stevenson in the second) provide the Gothic frame that helped to create the enveloping visual atmosphere required for this type of stories. Furthermore, both films have scientists obsessed by the study of life and death as the driving force behind the plot. It is not strange in the slightest that the corpse should come forth to meet them.

We must clear up this question: this is no longer a matter of deaths, but of what follows on from these, that is, the world of dissection, of dismembering, of the torn up body. It is clear that both films are found on different registers: *Frankenstein* talks to us of an electrical apotheosis, of a metaphor about the Promethean creation of life that seems to bury the discourse of the dead body that we talked about. Nevertheless, it is enough to look at the film closely, setting aside current clichés, to be blinded by its material evidence. *The Body Snatcher* comes forward under a much more asphyxiating and raw face: here science has nothing to do with alchemy or electricity, there is no Gothic ecstasy. It is instead the most straightforward expression of the world of medicine and its encyclopedia, the corpse.¹⁰

Frankenstein: parts of a body

Frankenstein has repeatedly been interpreted as the empire of the metaphor of the creation of life, imitating God. But this criteria has stood in the way of the brutally tangible perception of another discourse circulating through the story: that of the dead body. Effectively, the enveloping Gothic atmosphere, the contrasting lighting, the isolated tower in which the birth takes place, the breaking of the storm, are all unambiguous signs that will soon be enshrined in history as stereotypes of romantic fantasy. However, such traits do not manage to completely hide another motif that flowers with surprising rawness during the first part of the film in a disquieting way, which would be almost unbearable if it had not been transcended by the Promethean allegory. We shall read the start of this legendary film in its materiality: a travelling shot moves on from several persons who are looking at a place off screen beyond the lower edge of the frame. Just a little further on from said edge there is a corpse, still warm and about to be buried. Just a few shots farther on there is another body, the inert corpse of a hanged man, with a broken neck, now within the frame and with no beating about the bush. But above all one should retain the long and euphoric ceremony of the craftsman composition through dissection of the new being, or better said, of the new body (even before life is breathed into it).

We shall not deny that the electric sensationalism of the romantic sky or the failed magic of this surgical operation, half-way between science and alchemy makes the perception of the corpse in its material state somewhat difficult. And it is nonetheless true that the direction of the story early on toward the dialectic between life and death, from the monstrous to the human, seems to cover the presence, with a veil the presence, otherwise quite evident, of a dead body that displays with no shame whatsoever the cuts, the scars

¹⁰ Et ce dévoilement impliquait à son tour comme champ d'origine et de manifestation de la vérité l'espace discursif du cadavre: l'intérieur dévoilé. La constitution de l'anatomie pathologique à l'époque où les cliniciens définissaient leur méthode n'est pas de l'ordre de la coïncidence: l'équilibre de l'expérience voulait que le regard posé sur l'individu et le langage de la description reposent sur le fond stable, visible et lisible, de la mort. (Michel Foucault, *Naissance de la clinique*, Paris, P.U.F., 1963, p. 200).

and the remains that give away his fragmentary past.¹¹ A body that is, when all is said and done, a recomposed body, made by «bricolage» and bears on it, both printed and readable, the marks of its suture, of the sewing together of its parts. Now, this fragment of *Frankenstein*, that is indeed in no way marginal, puts its imprint onto the rest of the film: a corpse is on the rampage and the traces of its birth are, though transcended, nonetheless visible.

If there can be any doubt in this respect, it would be worth the reader's while to look at a scene from the sequel filmed by the same James Whale in 1935, *The Bride of Frankenstein* in which the opposition between the two factors involved here the corpse and the Promethean metaphor is shown with didactic mastery. The sinister Doctor Pretorious, undertaking a compulsive piece of research as to the secret of life, shows Henry Frankenstein the results of his investigation, consisting of a series of miniatures kept in glass jars that embody fairy tale characters (the king, the queen, the dancer). Something is lacking, the gloomy doctor points out hurriedly, to make these results comparable with the achievements of Frankenstein: the size. But such a conclusion is only partly satisfying, since the ultimate difference has to be seen in the fact that these little creatures are neither men nor women in reality, that is, they are not corpses and have not previously been torn up. To sum up, there is nothing in this discovery that goes back to the corpse and openly flaunts its trace. Just the opposite happened with the creature that Frankenstein created. The latter rightly replies that: «this is not science, it is black magic». We could in this affirmation sidestep the moral and ethical disqualification of the rival, to put the accent on the blatantly material, corporal state of his work, furthermore made with broken pieces. Only in this sense does Frankenstein's work have the right to be called science. To talk of the monster, and the film does so in a recurrent way, is no more and no less than a way of avoiding what *Frankenstein* lives in: the corpse.¹²

The birth of medicine and its remains

Based on a Victorian horror story by Robert Louis Stevenson, "*The Body Snatcher*" tells a story that takes place at the lower edge of medicine, namely its relationship with surgery, dissection and even forensic science. Here we are right in the middle of the dark field of research and experimentation where scientific knowledge faces the corpse, that is, the remains left by death. It is no simple coincidence if the film is criticized for its lack of poetry, as opposed to other works by Lewton, such as *I walked with a Zombie* or *The seventh victim*.¹³ We will quickly go over the story, since we shall have to be familiar with its ins and outs. In 1831 professor MacFarlane (Henry Daniell) is the head of a prestigious school of future doctors in the city of Edinburgh. Among his disciples is young Fettes (Russell Wade), with limited economic resources, who becomes his assistant, and for this reason has access to the most terrible side of medical research, the part that is undertaken among corpses (their dissection, obscure origin and profanation). Fettes is thus forced into exchange deals with Gray cabman (Boris Karloff) the lugubrious supplier of corpses, whose relations with doctor MacFarlane go back to a remote and highly suspect past. As the story goes on, Fettes gets deeper into a drama of corpse profanation and even of murder, at the same time as sinister echoes are revealed in tiny doses as regards the relationship with MacFarlane and that which the latter maintained with Gray and another famous doctor whose name appears in criminal records. In his desire to cure a poor handicapped girl, Georgina, Fettes asks Gray for a body urgently in order to undertake a necessary experiment and unwillingly provokes a murder which, given the conditions, he cannot report. Georgina, after being operated on by MacFarlane, is seen to be incomprehensibly incapable of walking, even though all her tendons and muscles are in the right places. Only at the end a double denouement will come about: MacFarlane,

¹¹ The make up work done by Jack Pierce obviously softens the raw nature of these bodily marks even through its very excess, which paradoxically makes them less real. Their weight is nonetheless moving.

¹² *The Bride of Frankenstein* would cover this presence of the corpse even more by means of tubes and retorts. The effectism of the planning that comes from the technical aspects of the operation and the stereotyped scenography attenuate the sinister effect of the composition. In fact, this enunciative attitude contrasts with the electric moderation that had characterized the construction of the first monster in *Frankenstein*. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to underline in all its fatality the horrifying brush between the two remnants of flesh at the end of *The Bride*... the man-corpse and the woman-corpse. This is something that cannot be absorbed by the comfortable allegory of Prometheus and that inexorably unleashes the catastrophe. Because at the heart of these two films there is something threatening, the tip of an iceberg that would take still some decades to be displayed on its actual huge scale.

¹³ See Joel E. Siegel, *Val Lewton. The Reality of Terror*. London, Secken and Warburg/B.F.I., 1972, p. 154. We will add that the script is signed by Philip MacDonald and Carlos Keith, pseudonym of Val Lewton, who completely rewrote it.

the prisoner of a past that makes him Gray's slave, murders the latter, but straight afterwards goes mad and falls to his death on a stormy night. On her side, Georgina, thanks to a «miracle», will walk again.

Two structural facts should be born in mind: the first of these refers to Macfarlane: the second to the itinerary undertaken by Fettes. In spite of it all, we will see that both are closely linked. With regard to the first of these, nothing in the doctor reminds us of the fanciful scientists obsessed by creating life who abounded in the thirties in Universal cinema. The one here presented is, strictly speaking, a surgeon, a dissector and so much so that one can suspect that he only knows how to deal with corpses, and is incapable of operating on and curing live people: «You can't reconstruct a life in the same way as you stick fragments together» Gray sneers at him. Still, there is no doubt that the most fascinating part of *The Body Snatcher* is its arrangement in the form of an initiatory journey to the depths in which medical science is nurtured. Or rather, to the murky «inhuman» dealings in which pathological anatomy sticks its roots to find its scientific foundation. Indeed, the story is arranged like a *Bildungsroman* in which, from the experience of horror, Fettes is given a lesson that can humanize his sordid contact with corpses and purge crime itself. Because a story is an experience that is different from the scientific experience, since as a web that assembles the imaginary and the symbolic, it gives cover and meaningful shape to phenomena like crime, guilt, expiation: guided by its basic weapon of movement —metonymy, it can build a metaphor on this series of events. This, and no other is the power of stories and the reason for which knowledge and experience are transmitted through them.

It is not by chance that Fettes, after his descent to the hell of these unbearable remains of medical knowledge, thus sentences his master: «He taught me the mathematics of anatomy, but he couldn't teach me the poetry of medicine». This is a beautiful and accurate description of what is at stake. On one side is the accuracy of an approach to reality that desires to be exhaustive: its instrument is analytical decomposition and its object is the anatomy. To see beyond what is visible, the practice becomes necessary in the dissection of corpses, with indifference to their human condition.¹⁴ In reality, our scientific experience of the human body comes from the study of corpses and consequently, death is found necessarily implied in our conception of the human body. Right at the other side, the worthiness of medicine is affirmed for its poetry, that is, spurred on by the desire of those still living and subject to, or rather, sustained by, the passion for life. It is here that the real quality of the torn body comes up with its name, put at the service of curing and progress — to sum up, symbolized. It is still necessary to point out that this last passion which could in fairness be called ethical is only born in a second stage, after the frightening experience of the dead body, or even better, in order to recover this, to give it meaning. The written words that end the film state the following «It is by error that man is uplifted. It is through tragedy that he learns. All the roads of knowledge start in darkness and end in light»: The journey made by Fettes is an accurate testimony of this truth: a truth that is nothing more than one of the most obscure descents in search of reality undertaken by classical cinema, even when the rise to the surface is called to symbolize that journey, or more accurately, to stand aside from it forever. Let us then follow this traumatic journey into horror through its own steps and images, since the access route to the universe of the (uncanny) has its origin in the world of the nightmare. Could this be by chance?

The veil before the ineffable

Fettes is appointed MacFarlane's assistant. Accompanied by his master, he enters the Anatomy classroom, located in a sombre basement full of diverse drawings of the human

¹⁴ Is this not the operation that lies beneath all knowledge about the real? Decomposition. Analytical cubism itself would install this ripping apart at the dawn of the avantgarde, and it is not in vain that the most generalized practice in this period of metalinguistic traits should be the montage (photo montage, collage, amalgam, heterogeneity, shock montage). In this respect please see our *Teoría del montaje cinematográfico*. Valencia, Filmoteca Valenciana, 1991.

body and of its vital functions, used for illustrating the classes. MacFarlane starts to explain to his student some delicate details that the latter, in his medical «virginity» does not yet know, and that deal with the basic tools of the trade, dead bodies, in a period in which the law prohibits their use in schools, as well as the practice of dissection.

—«Do you know where we get the bodies for dissection?»

—From the municipal council.

—That's what the law stipulates...»

A primary essential truth is to be revealed to the young disciple, a path is to be pointed out as being the first stage of the journey. It is surprising that the montage opts for eliding this, or rather, putting in the place of this sordid truth a dry linkage that suppresses at the same time the sight of the place where the corpses are hidden and the words proffered by the master about these. Let us look at this in detail.

While MacFarlane speaks the words that we have just quoted, both characters go farther in behind a curtain that divides the basement into two parts. There are a ferm bars of music and the camera approaches the curtain without going beyond, thus leaving the protagonists out of sight (figure 1). There is almost complete darkness that links on, by chromatic similarity, to a dive onto the ground of the cemetery. It is pitch dark and now the sound track lets us hear the noise of horses' hooves. The camera starts to move upwards until it stops by a little dog standing beside a grave (figure 2).¹⁵ The noise can still be heard off the screen. Then there is a shot covered with shadows: in the background, the wall of the cemetery, to the left of the frame, the hinges of the gate squeak and one can make out the profile of a man with a spade on his shoulder (figure 3). The dog growls, off the screen, whilet the shadow leaves the field of view on the right. On the other side Gray's dark body comes on. The dog barks; it is out of sight, and more concretely, beneath the lower edge of the frame. Gray furiously lashes out in that direction and the barking ceases abruptly. An angle shot onto the earth into which the pick sinks. We should insist on a fact we already know: this is not any ordinary earth, but that of the cemetery, the earth that gives refuge to the corpses that are now going to be dug up and profaned.

As can be seen, the economy of this fragment is highly synthetic and works mostly by taking advantage of materials already introduced (the dog, the horses' hooves, the shadows that seem inseparable from Gray) in order to make the meaning denser, that is, by fashioning the connotations. But, furthermore, these meaningful elements are shown duplicated in their images (shadows and volumes) and their sounds, accentuating the asynchrony and playing with the contrasts. This traumatic way of getting inside such a sombre place as the cemetery cannot be by chance: the first scenario of the film, this is also the place where the corpse is still honoured by the ceremony of burial. Here there is a frontier whose crossing appears more in accordance with the turbulence of dream life than with the naturalization of the narrative story. It is perhaps for this reason that the existence of dividing lines (from the anatomy room to the secret storage room for the corpses, from the earth to what lies inside it...) is accentuated, to systematically disregard what lies beyond said frontiers: the reality of the corpse. In this uncanny ceremony of shadows and profanation access only seems to be possible through the most disturbed type of dream, the nightmare.

Let us continue with our analysis. The last shot mentioned links on with an angle shot onto Fettes turning over worriedly in his bed (figure 5). Only now, and with retrospective effect, can we affirm the nightmare-like nature of what preceded this. This straightforward linking mechanism throws us into doubt, in spite of it all. Is this a retroactive conversion of the shots that we have just seen, so dense in their image and sound, to the transcription of his nightmare? The atmosphere loaded with the excess of shadows seems to confirm this. But the answer is not so obvious. Is it, on the contrary, a parallel montage that makes those sombre images coincide with sudden bodily excitement? It is difficult to answer, since the film decided not to make the nature of this link explicit. But if one

¹⁵ These were already heard at the beginning of the film, and so this is like a parallel that takes one back to Gray's coach. The dog also recovers the initial sequence in which we were told that this little animal, faithful to its owner, would not leave the grave in which he had been buried.

thing is absolutely clear, it is that the suspension of narrative time and space occurred just at the time when the unrepresentable appeared: it is up against this frontier, faced with the reality of the corpse that representation hesitates, pretending not to know if to offer one the unrecognizable statute of the real or to make this depend on those remains of reality that live in the dream world in the form of the nightmare. It is at this point that one hears the horses' hooves clattering off the screen as we had previously heard. Could this be an incomprehensible parallel with what came immediately before? Is it a statement of the impossibility of being absorbed by the narration? Is this a sinister convergence of the dream with what has just been seen?

Perhaps here one could mention the analysis that Freud made of his dream known as the «*Injection of Irma*» in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. On this subject he indicated the existence of a knot irreducible to interpretation and to the cognizable to which he called the *umbilical cord of the dream*. It would be Lacan who would convert this black, ineffable point of the dream into the real on studying in depth the same Freudian dream. Lacan distinguished between two parts in the Freudian dream: one that came out from the head of the jellyfish, in the terrifying revelation of something unnameable, located in the dream at the back of a throat, but that was nothing other than the abyss of the feminine organ from which all life comes, but also the image of death in which everything ends: «There is then the distressing appearance of an image that sums up what we can call the revelation of the real in its least penetrable aspect, of the is real with no possible mediation, of the ultimately real, of the essential object that is no longer an object but rather something before which all words falter and all categories fail, the object of anguish par excellence».¹⁶ This is the knot that the corpse occupies in Fettes' dream: impenetrable and at the same time radical questioning of the judgment of the desire, the unbearable quality of this nightmare cannot come out except in the abandonment of sleep.

Fettes thus awakes and gets up. There is a shot of the whole room and link with Fettes' movement on getting up (figure 6). The hooves can still be heard, seemingly outside. He goes towards the window. There is a further link in the movement of opening the window, now from the outside (figure 7). The sound of the hooves stops. There is on angle shot of Gray's coach stopping outside MacFarlane's residence, where the assistant also lives (figure 8).

The noise of the hooves has then suggested a very subtle parallel, but at the same time has carried out an ellipsis by omitting the point at which the corpse was dug up. There is something more important echoing here: the conversion of the density of the first shots of the sequence under the pattern of the nightmare, and not only into the interior discourse, but also to its disturbance. The staging here swings on a limit of what is representable (according to the symbolic understanding of classical cinema) embodied in the most material quality that horror can sustain: this is none other than the moment the disinterred corpse appears, the core, in reality of the operation. And it is this, in the end, that is elided, even when it has managed to mark the image and the sound with the power of its irradiation. It is there for the story, but not there for the eye.

After two shots of Fettes, there is a third one of the coach, now seen in a long shot (figure 9). Reverse-shot of the stairs of the basement. A new framing —Fettes goes down to the anatomy room (figure 10). Again, off screen, knocks at the door can be heard. The camera takes a panoramic shot to the left accompanying Fettes. It is then that we find an exemplary shot. We are in the complete darkness (figure 11), forced to consider as a careful parallel with the shot of the curtain analyzed above. In the same way as what happened there, a limit for the gaze is underlined, beyond which there is something irrepresentable. Now, however, instead of insisting on the opacity that led to the nightmare (a way of penetrating into the terrible truth), the scene opens up, although not to the real, but to its metonymy. The door opens like a curtain from right to left to show a static figure waiting. It is Gray carrying a sack on his shoulder. Here we can see how the way

¹⁶ Jacques Lacan: *El Seminario. Libro 2. El yo en la teoría de Freud y en la técnica psicoanalítica*. Barna, Paidós 1983. P. 249, text from 1954-1955.

in which the corpse is shown is used to the utmost: not only is it there but the darkness, (that has chromatic parallels with that of the cemetery) discovers this, lightly covered, veiled, but making its presence noted, already in the frame (figure 12). So, the metonymy that we were speaking about is the dead body itself, but not at the time of its exhuming, and furthermore it is duly covered. In other words, from the narrative standpoint, what now calls us is a metonymy of profanation, but in its bodily materiality going beyond the decorous economy of any rhetorical figure. In this scenario the first meeting of Fettes with the fearful Gray occurs. It started with a dream-like assimilation, but unambiguously ends in wakefulness. Because Gray not only knows about death (knows?) but also about it leaves behind: the corpse.

Both heave the corpse across the dark room, whilst Gray continually refers to the body as a «specimen in good condition». His insistence, his ironic coldness wrapped in a language with such a strong flavour of the commercial transaction proves even more petrifying for Fettes. With the corpse spread out onto the dissection table a neutral transaction is carried out: the corpse for money (figure 13). Gray displays deep knowledge of his trade and of the key elements of the transaction (figures 14, 15, 16 and 17). This is an ideal metaphor of the neutrality of the signs, and added to it is the slight particularity of death as a substrate of the economic agreement: once again, not an understandable death, but rather its remains. There can no longer be any doubt: Fettes' apprenticeship has started. For this reason, after concluding the business, Gray says: «And may this be the first of many profitable meetings». Scared stiff, but without uttering a word, Fettes watches the coachman leave the place. Only then, a laugh is heard *out of view*. This is MacFarlane, who gives his judgement on the lesson contained in this experience, converting it into the first link in a chain down into the hell of medicine, a piece without which no lesson could be transmitted: « Well, well, my boy, the first meeting with the redoubtable Gray. You can councheekt it in your medical career». (figure 18) A medium shot presents Fettes' stupor, as he filters the impact of the scene (figure 19). Fade out into blackness.

This is the first stage of an uncanny apprenticeship. The morning, Fettes will stumble onto the traces of what happened in his dream and onto the rhetorical figures that emerged from this: the grave actually profaned and the dead dog.

The treatment of the horrifying

As a result of what happened, Fettes determines to give up his studies. The words with which MacFarlane responds contain a knowledge and a treatment of the horror that his disciple has experienced. In other words, MacFarlane displays —we noticed this before with regard to the meeting with Gray— a knowledge of enigmatic origin that he puts at his pupil's service in order to point out to him a path that will have to end with the separation of the disciple from the master, as fatally happens with all apprenticeships. But to give this teaching some credibility, MacFarlane has to shatter something of his own, something that belongs to his past and to his wound, but which does not stop there, but rather configures the dark side of his present, the impossibility, if you will, of his redemption. «I too was an assistant once and I had to have dealings with people like Gray». MacFarlane utters something that commits himself, since the past that he evokes still in such a sterilized way is —we will soon know it— the source of his tragedy and explains his absolute dependence on Gray, as well as the irreversible ruin of his world. But from a narrative point of view, the reply that MacFarlane gives is far more complex.

This reply fulfils a role of narrative continuity through the repetition of the past. Nothing could be more logical: if we are talking about teaching, MacFarlane's words aspire to Fettes' undertaking the role that was given to him beforehand. Something in the story

therefore tends towards repetition. But, we must remember, since it is of the greatest interest, that this is the repetition of a story we are not aware of, since it has not yet been told to us. So the events that are called upon to return are only alluded to and always in small doses. What does the plot that links them together consist of? Firstly, this is a terrible story in a double sense: it does not seem to be able to be spoken of, and nevertheless leaves indelible traces, to the point that it still pursues the person who underwent it. Secondly, MacFarlane will appeal to this story as the source of truth, as the pattern for his wisdom, each time Fettes threatens to give the profession up. In other words, a tragic past becomes a unique guide for the story and furthermore transcends to a universal condition, inseparable from medicine, from the struggle for life. It is something like a secret plot, that guides the story through the channel of repetitions and separations, and that leaves its milestones strewn throughout the film we are watching, not in a linear way, but through its slow but inexorable emergence. MacFarlane could not conclude his explanation in any other way: «You'll see it as I do». More than this, the story MacFarlane lived through has saturated his present with a tragic value out of which he cannot escape except through delirium: his link to Gray, the ignominious story that joins him to his wife Meg (Edith Atwater) who pretends to be his housekeeper.

In any case, Fettes' apprenticeship does not become a repetition of history, since the young man does not depend only on MacFarlane's teaching. So that the past be not repeated, and that the story be possess that free will from which all credible events seem to come, Fettes has to hear, listen to and learn from other sources. Firstly, Fettes is the central cause of an infantile subplot (like the one that joins him to Mrs. Marsh —Rita Corday— and to the girl Georgina—Sharyn Moffett). Secondly, he lives alone with his knowledge of a criminal error that implies his guilt in the murder of a blind singer. Thirdly he is implored to by poor Meg, who warns him and begs him to flee. But fourthly and more than anything else, Fettes is also the observer of an unsustainable and tense dualism: that which shackles Gray and MacFarlane together until death. In the combination of these four elements is the motive that turns the story away from the desired repetition envisaged by MacFarlane. Here lies the secret through which the story, instead of leading to the compulsive repetition of the past, (which would locate this in the realm of tragedy) can depart from this and hang onto the fortunate and saving expression pronounced by the protagonist, which thus redeems medicine itself.

As in a mirror

The central episode of the apprenticeship will swing between two characters who possess knowledge about corpses. One of them, MacFarlane, knows how to dissect these and teach the secrets of the real, while the other's knowledge reduces them to a transaction, without worrying about profanation. But, if we conceive them as pieces in turn of a broader plane of knowledge, there is simply a complementary aspect between these two characters, and this will be confirmed and displayed in the light of another movement, the one which relates the fall of Fettes. We shall thus stop to look at a scene that brings the three characters together.

One night, Fettes and MacFarlane head to an inn in order to talk of medical matters. While they get warm at the fire where an animal is being roasted, a voice is heard off screen: «It's a good specimen, eh, Toddy» (figure 20). The emergence of the voice converts the homely look of the inn and the succulent meal into yet another gatecrashing entrance by the corpse. And it is not by chance that the figure in the reverse shot, that is of the complete inversion of the space, underlines the presence of this character. Fettes, not knowing of any relationship between them both, becomes a surprised observer, confronted by what is happening. The montage of the scene is highly eloquent, in so far

as, starting from a establishing shot that focuses the three characters sitting around the table, (figure 21) it subtly but also simply organizes a scheme based on the shot/reverse shot, from which Fettes is excluded. (figures 22 and 23) We know that the shot/reverse-shot encloses a space by its reversing nature and makes the elements that are not brought into view in either of them opaque. This happens with particularly good results in this scene, in which the announcing closes the scene on the exchange between Gray and MacFarlane. The forgetting Fettes, who breaks into the duality that is knotted only sporadically, which also underline surprise at what is said or even his mere opacity. Let us look at this succinctly.

There is a group shot of the three characters at the table. Fettes (figure 24). Then there is a pattern of shot (Toddy) reverse-shot (Gray) that is set as the pattern for the dialogue sequence in whose words past and present are linked together¹⁷ until Fettes intervenes to introduce a new subject of conversation, an event from the present and not from the past (figure 25). This deals with the girl, Georgina, who suffers from paralysis: on her mother's behalf he asks MacFarlane to carry out the operation. After this intervention there is the previous alternating of shot and reverse-shot, by means of which Gray intervenes in the case, though he slips in references that only have meaning in relation to the mutual past of the characters. Again a shot of Fettes marks the effect caused in him by such highly enigmatic words as those he is hearing. The sequence ends with the shot of Fettes filtering the events that have just occurred and above all, the enigmatic words that were said.¹⁸

Guilt and expiation: the symbolic movement

In spite of the depths he has gotten himself into, Fettes still keeps the hopeful dream of a curative medicine intact, whose sole and sublime end is that of curing the sick and bringing life, instead of merely dealing with death and corpses. For this reason, he acts on behalf of Georgina, wrenching from MacFarlane the promise to operate on the girl right in the middle of the tense conversation with Gray that we have just been looking at. This leads to a tragic paradox that will constitute the fundamental item of conviction for Fettes. The undertaking of this operation requires an additional study of the spinal column. To do this, a body is necessary. Here we find the two conditions that Fettes alluded to previously tied together: the sordid dealings with death for the purpose of restoring the poetry of medicine. Isn't this what the film had been showing us up to now? For once (and just this once) Fettes takes the initiative and becomes a mediator between Gray and MacFarlane: he goes to the former to ask him for a corpse that will be of use for his master to practise on and discover the key to saving Georgina. This then is the drama. We must retain the progression in Fettes' behaviour: the first time he penetrated into sordidness through the discourse of the nightmare and its metonymies. The second time he had access to a past filtering through the conversation of a game of doubles. The third time, nally, he plays the main part in the narrative action and consequently will turn out to be what unleashes death. Let us examine, though synthetically and somewhat elliptically, the sequence in which Fettes' protagonism takes place and the murder indirectly caused by him.

The night scene opens on an alley (figure 26). Off screen, a woman's voice is heard singing, the same voice as has been heard at points throughout the story.¹⁹ This is a blind beggar woman (Donna Lee). Fettes appears and the camera pans along with him until it comes across the singer (figure 27). Fettes asks her where Gray the coachman lives and goes on to the background of the field. The camera remains beside the woman, who goes on singing (figure 28). There is a long shot of the street through which Fettes is making off. The song can still be heard, at the same time as some orchestral music. A

¹⁷ It would be better to say that the present is spoken of in a key that untiringly goes back to the past, the only time when what was said starts to have a meaning and shows the chains that keep MacFarlane a prisoner.

¹⁸ It should be remembered that the sequence of the meeting with Gray in the basement also concludes with a medium shot of a thoughtful Fettes followed by a fade art. This parameter will be used on several occasions, which is not surprising if we bear in mind that this is a story about apprenticeship.

¹⁹ A new demonstration of density and taking advantage of the elements of the story. With this song the film started and with this we gained access to the outdoor shots of the city of Edinburgh. After the murder, the soundtrack takes this up again in the form of discordant music that is heard in Fettes' disturbed mind.

travelling shot goes with Fettes on his nocturnal journey until he comes across the sign which indicates the Gray mansion. The sign is visible. In its movement, from the inside, the image offers us a shot that is loaded with connotations. In the foreground waits the cabman (which is already associated with the corpse); in the background, Fettes crosses the threshold. (figure 29). There is a medium shot. (figure 30). The head of Gray's horse enters the field unexpectedly, frightening the young man. A panoramic accompanying shot to the left. We are omitting some shots in order to get to the point.

There is a new in-depth composition of the field in the foreground, Fettes in the background, with the door open, showing Gray's room. We are here before a sort of inversion of the shot that we mentioned in the first sequence when the door of the classroom opened to start the scene with the corpse. But here, a difference can be seen: in the visible scene Fettes is included. There is nothing strange about this, since also from the narrative point of view, his implication in the plot of the corpses has arisen. Then the conversation between the two characters takes place, dealt with by shot/reverse-shot, in which Fettes asks for a body, urgently. To cut things short we shall omit the description and analysis. But we cannot fail to mention the end of this part. Fettes leaves the scene and the voice of the singer in the street can once more be heard (it had been absent during the conversation between the young doctor and the coachman). This is like a call for Gray, who has just alluded to the difficulty of finding any more corpses at that particular time. But is it also a means for the enunciation to force the continuation of the sequence.

There is a new frame through a window of the Gray mansion that opens onto the outside. From the background, Gray draws near and leans out. There is a shot arranged in a very complex depth of field: in the foreground, the figures of Fettes going off and, to the right, the singing beggar woman. (figure 31). The voice can be heard more clearly now. These two characters cross and disappear, each one from one edge of the frame. Then we return to the previous shot: a travelling camera slides towards Gray's thoughtful face, as he insistently watches the place where the woman has disappeared and from which her song can still be heard. (figure 32). The window closes. Once more, before the critical point, a dark screen. A angle shot onto the cabman: in the foreground, the horse. Nevertheless, now it is completely covered in shadow, unlike when Fettes came across it. «Bad news my boy» says Gray to the horse «we have to get out again».

There is a link with the outdoor shot. A long shot. The singer moves into the darkness of the background, going under an archway. (figure 33). Her voice continues to sing the song. Then the horses' hooves start to be heard. The woman disappears into the fog, whilst Gray's coach follows her, also being absorbed into the darkness. The field is left empty, though we still hear the song. (figure 34). Abruptly, the song is cut short. There is absolute silence, linked to Fettes taking notes at his desk. Off screen, Gray's horses' hooves can once more be heard. What follows is a careful parallel with the sequence that we analyzed above. Fettes, after examining the body, still warm, of the beggar woman (completely out of the view, to the lower part of the frame) is horror struck and after Gray's departure compulsively looks at this once more.

We are set before the extreme point of the young doctor's experience: he was the cause of this crime and his medical poetry was not able to prevent the sordid mathematics of anatomy. Once more, MacFarlane appears, is forced to ward off Fettes' distress, giving his approval to the siege that is hemming him in. The solution that he offers him to obtain the corpse's silence, so that it is unidentifiable, is literally terrible: dissection. This is the way —medical or criminal— to get rid of the traces of the murder that has been committed and avoid any responsibility of it.

The infantile side of the poetic redemption of medicine

In spite of it all, this terrible death is not only a murder episode. It also has a tragically positive side (for this reason it is tragic): the possibility of saving Georgina. This is what Fettes literally has to transform: with the knowledge that he has assimilated he could only fall into pure repetition of the past, by becoming a new MacFarlane. Why doesn't this happen? For two reasons: because Fettes encounters the magic, symbolic master formula (the poetry of medicine, the mathematics of anatomy, that connects what is horrifying with what is symbolic: because someone pays the price for him. In the story there has to be a grief and a loss. So that someone can conquer and be left clean, the sin must be paid for. It is at this point the MacFarlane's tragic fate intervenes: his fall into delirium and the saving-curing of Georgina.

But, are there no traces of the terrible side? There are, both for the spectator and for Fettes, since the symbolic greatness of classical cinema will consist in this: that the horrifying appears in order to be covered up. In other words, Fettes' sin has been purged by MacFarlane (who in fact took this up to the level of teaching and turned it, through his weakness and tragedy into a way of life) and redeemed by Georgina, who in her innocence knows nothing of this secret side of medicine. This can thus be read as the pronouncement of duality: the poetry of medicine, the mathematics of anatomy, identifying this with its two poles: MacFarlane, the master of dissection, prisoner of the mathematics of anatomy, and Georgina, unaware of all this. This is the glorious redeeming result of the poetry of medicine. But alone, in the middle of it all, aware of medical duality, but redeemed and cleansed by what another has paid, Fettes can be a witness of transcended pain, of the symbolic conversion of the work of medicine, even when he is not unaware of its sordid origins.

A beautiful metaphor consumes this redemption. Georgina dreamt of a white charger, so that whenever she heard the hooves rattling over the road she thought she was in presence of this magic apparition. But as we know, she wasn't, that the hooves are those of the sinister Gray. At the end of the film Georgina hears the sound of hooves and thinks once more that this is her dream horse. It is then that the miracle occurs: Georgina manages to get up and walk (before, even with anatomical correction, she was unable to do this). Concentrated in this beautiful metaphor we find Fettes' liberation, his apprenticeship, that is to say, his wound.