

# Trauma and Horror

## Anguish and Transfiguration

KELLY HURLEY

Later nineteenth-century psychology appropriated the term *trauma*, used in medical practice to denote a wound derived from the violent piercing of the skin, to describe a violent breach of subjectivity. Thus *trauma* came to refer to the violation of psychic boundaries (often conjoined with a physical violation as in the case of railway and industrial accidents), the event that caused the breach, and the symptoms that accrue after the breach. As the psychoanalysts Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis describe it, trauma is an “event in the subject’s life defined by its intensity, by the subject’s incapacity to respond adequately to it, and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychological organisation.”<sup>1</sup> The event instantiating psychic trauma is so shocking, so devastating, that the ego’s defenses are broken down, and the subject is powerless to resist the overwhelming impressions that flood over its barriers, or to manage the swell of affective distress that results. Moreover, trauma is a kind of infernal mechanism that cannot be stopped once it is set into motion; symptoms themselves (nightmares, hallucinations, psychosomatic illnesses, stress-induced illnesses) become in their turn instruments and agents of further trauma.

The abreaction (working-through) of trauma, one would think, should be furthered by the most painstakingly accurate representation of its inception and effects. However, contemporary trauma theorists have described the difficulty, perhaps impossibility, of a “true” representation of traumatic events, given that the very experience of trauma involves the derangement, even the shattering, of the subjective apparatus designed to process it. Traumatic events can only be understood belatedly and imperfectly; they give rise to repetitive dreams and uncontrollable flashbacks and generate this-is-what-happened stories characterized by disjunction and distortion and that describe, sometimes in great detail, things that never happened at all.

Thus, some trauma theorists argue, artistic works should not look to traditional representational strategies such as realism to describe the ways in which traumatic events break open and damage human subjects. The most faithful accounts of traumatic experiences, perversely, can be rendered only by means of narrative breaks and refusals, hyperbole and other modes of distortion, and displacement at one or more removes. Roger Luckhurst describes such a strategy, an emerging

“trauma aesthetic” in the contemporary novel: “Because a traumatic event confounds narrative knowledge, the inherently narrative form of the novel must acknowledge this in different kinds of temporal disruption. . . . Disorders of emplotment are read as mimicking the traumatic effect.”<sup>2</sup>

Horror, a genre whose stock-in-trade is ferocious excess, can be said to generate such perversely accurate representations of trauma almost naturally, one might say. Horror specializes in hyperbolic scenarios of human subjects in the throes of excruciating physical and psychic pain, and develops these scenarios by means of phantasmatic images and hallucinatory narrative sequences. Horror’s *métier* is the violent breach of body and psyche and the lurid display of the breach’s aftereffects: psychic entrapment, repetition compulsions, uncanny returns in the shape of literal monsters.

The genre is a savage one, hardly a diagnostician. It sets out cause and effect and aftereffect of traumatic experience but seldom offers anything in the way of a cure. In David Cronenberg’s 1979 film *The Brood*, it is not childhood trauma that births monsters but the therapeutic *abreaction* of childhood trauma accomplished under the supervision of a psychologist. In the horror text, once set in motion, the infernal mechanism of trauma can seldom be brought to a halt.

### Trauma and the Regional

The two essays in this section, while concerned with the traumatizing impact of large-scale disasters (civil war, economic collapse), suggest that one must focalize that impact more carefully by analyzing it within its specific regional context. Adam Lowenstein’s article on *Martin* is concerned with unsensational, slow-moving traumatic events, like the collapse of the Pennsylvania steel industry, that are not necessarily understood as traumatic despite bringing devastation in their wake. Interweaving fantastic elements (vampirism) with quotidian reality, George A. Romero’s film positions *Martin* as a kind of “vampire documentarian” whose sympathetic outsider-observer status aligns him with the viewer and allows both to chart the collapse of the dying rust-belt town of Braddock. Xavier Aldana Reyes’s discussion of *Insensibles* acknowledges the important role of recent horror films in helping Spain come to terms with the devastating internal strife wrought by the Civil War, but asks that we not read these trauma narratives as all of a oneness. With its foregrounding of Catalanian identity (the institutionalized and tormented children of the title are Catalan) and deft shifts between spoken Spanish and Catalan, the film continually reminds us of ongoing inequities and drives for independence that have been glossed over in the national discussion of reparation and reconciliation.

### Into the Labyrinth

In horror labyrinths may be strange, elaborate structures whose dimensions one cannot chart, or twisting passageways that lead one down into chthonic depths. The labyrinth might also bring to mind Freud’s lament about the “unnecessary maze of sign-reading” he must negotiate as he struggles to define the tortuous workings of the unconscious by attempting to decode the confused ravings of hysterical patients who have lost the ability to say what they mean.<sup>3</sup> The articles on *House of Leaves* and *The Red Tree* describe the uncanniness of houses that subtly,

maddeningly reconfigure themselves and threaten to swallow their inhabitants, of landscapes whose features shift and endlessly recede. In Nandini Ramesh Sankar and V. Neethi Alexander's essay, the maze of sign-reading within which *House of Leaves* entraps its readers eventually leads them back through the guilt-ridden history of late twentieth-century America warfare, whereby the traumas of the hyper-mediated First Gulf War are occluded by the (by now) relatively legible atrocities of the Vietnam War. While the novel reenacts and thus critiques the inability of historical accounts meaningfully to depict and analyze complex large-scale trauma, it breaks down in its attempt to do so itself, despite its famously "fastidious self-reflexivity." Nowell Marshall also describes the trauma narrative as one that must be painstakingly decoded but argues that it eventually can be made to bear witness. In *The Red Tree* the gothic labyrinth is a space of horrific repetition (of acts of suicide, of the inability to process a beloved's suicide) for marginalized queer subjects, but shifting, uncanny gothic space may also be experienced as a malleable queer space that allows for the articulation of traumatized grief that cannot elsewhere be spoken.

Horror is a genre that invites its reader or spectator into a disturbingly *pleasurable* relationship with trauma, offering up trauma as a compelling spectacle to be consumed and even enjoyed. Catherine Belling's article negotiates a sign-reading maze of a different kind, as horrified affect spreads from reader to reader to reader (including Belling herself) within texts, across texts. Perhaps it is better to say that the article describes a contagion of uneasy fascination with accounts of the atrocities of history, here the 1937 Japanese invasion of Nanking, and invites us to explore the ethics of trauma-horror consumption. Focusing especially on the sensationalist thriller novel *The Rape of Nanking*, Belling describes atrocity literature as "ghost meat": un nourishing, discomfitingly irresistible, addictive.

### **Ecohorror, Ecotrauma**

The essays in this section remind us that to suffer from trauma is not purely the province of the human. Nor is the destruction of natural habitats traumatic only to the human beings who share them, though the concepts and vocabulary that trauma theory provides are of limited utility when one is seeking to describe ecotrauma from outside a human perspective. The human infliction of ecotraumas may stem from avarice or simply inattention and indifference, but Simon C. Estok also locates its source in ecophobia: disgust with the suchness, the sliminess, the energetic directiveness of the nonsentient, mindlessly proliferating plant world that underlies the modest subgenre known as "plant horror." As Estok reminds us, ecohorror, with its narratives of massive impending catastrophes, often emphasizes the pending threat to human control, human agency, rather than to the natural world. But novels like Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* Trilogy of New Weird novels, Jack Dudley argues, reframe the vocabulary of trauma theory—breach, rupture, the uncanny return of the traumatic-repressed in defamiliarized form—in nonanthropocentric terms. The strangely beautiful new ecosystem that develops after the enigmatic event pierces Area X can accommodate, but will not favor, the human, though humans may be able to experience the trauma that Area X inflicts on them as "positively transformative" as well as "painful."

### Trauma Media

Popular social media may exacerbate trauma, as in the case of the video-gamelike television coverage of the First Gulf War, but they also may forestall it by providing a means of critique. Stuart Lindsay's article describes how vaporwave music and its subgenres—haunted modes that sample and rework the most banal productions of contemporary popular culture (elevator music, lounge music, internet memes)—counter the disaffection and anomie of late capitalism, a kind of insistent low-grade trauma that Lauren Berlant calls “crisis ordinariness.”<sup>4</sup> These genres also deploy defamiliarizing techniques in their engagement with large-scale disasters like the destruction of the World Trade Center, techniques that allow the listener an alternate perspective to mainstream media's “spectacularization of traumatic-disaster memory.” Raechel Dumas also discusses “haunted technologies,” particularly the video camera, by means of which the protagonist of *Marebito* tries (and fails) to document and thus manage various types of traumatic experience. These include ontological trauma, whereby the protagonist confronts and attempts to deny his own animal origins as they are reflected back to him in the shape of a subterranean species of half-human monsters. However, ontological trauma that threatens to annihilate the subject nonetheless opens the door to “unanticipated becomings” and thus provides unexpected pleasure no less than horror.

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I conclude with images from the artists Giovanni Battista Piranesi and Hieronymus Bosch: protosurrealist images that can be read as providing two models of traumatized subjectivity, and whose unsettling, compelling beauty may also help us better approach the problematic question of the strange pleasure of trauma-as-horror. Piranesi is most famous for a sixteen-plate series of etchings produced in the 1740s and reworked in the 1760s: *Le carceri d'invenzioni*, usually translated as *Imaginary Prisons* and sometimes as *Prisons of the Imagination*. The subterranean prison interiors depicted in the prints are cavernously expansive, impossible to chart. Their stone walls have been built down to inconceivable depths (which are also perceptible as inconceivable heights), and the vast open spaces between the walls are crisscrossed with staircases, ladders, and even drawbridges. Massive archways frame more vastnesses receding into the distance, vastnesses also crisscrossed with stairways that lead to balconies or other stairways, or turn back on themselves—or lead nowhere, seemingly vanishing into the air.

Yet for all of their breathtaking expansiveness, the *carceri* are utterly claustrophobic. They are dark, dank underground labyrinths from which one can find no exit. They are structures designed for the administration of torment. While the human eye cannot negotiate the immensity of the imaginary prison, its attention can be fixed by disturbing details of the sort we find in the first print in the series (fig. 1). Giant wooden beams, with rows of protruding spikes, set into the stone walls. Coils of rope and hanging chains, and iron rings to which ropes and chains could later be attached. A body in anguish: a human figure, its mouth a rictus of

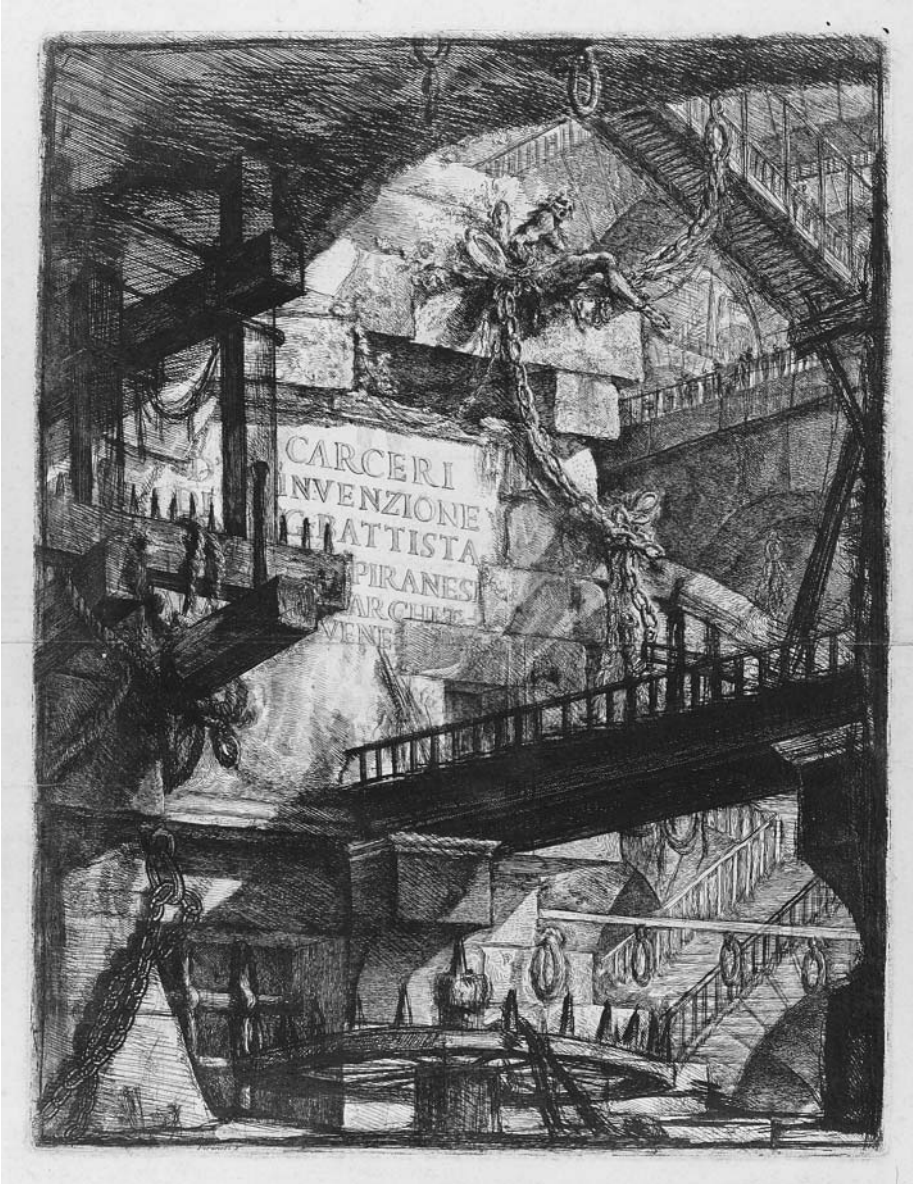


Figure 1. Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Le carceri d'invenzioni* (*Imaginary Prisons*, 1761), title plate.

pain, that almost seems to grow out of a high wall but is in fact manacled to it. A low banded door that may conceal a microprison, a cell too small to stand up in. A spiked torture wheel awaiting use.

Barely discernable humanlike figures crowd the distant passageways and stairs. It is difficult to tell whether they are at rest or in transit. Perhaps they are prisoners left free to climb and descend, climb and descend, the endless staircases that lead nowhere. Perhaps they are aficionados of trauma, gathering together to be the

spectators of new tortures about to be staged. Perhaps they are figurations of the self-in-torment, endlessly multiplied. Perhaps they are ghosts. They haunt the immense space but do not humanize or focus it.

As literal prisons the *carceri* speak to the cruelty of past and present city-states and their inquisitors, or anticipate worse ones yet to come. As *imaginary* prisons, they have been read as figuring the psyche, also in its own way vast and unchartable, and also a distressingly claustrophobic space—a low enclosed cell from which there is no escape. Here I offer them as figurations of a traumatized subjectivity that has learned (unknowingly, unwillingly) to manufacture its own machines of torment and administer them on itself. Like the *carceri*, the machinery of psychic trauma produces not only the grinding monotony of unending repetition but also astonishing variety—of symptoms, of nightmares, of anguish. Translated into horror, these may reveal a certain disturbing and unexpected beauty.

Astonishing variety, this time of bizarre and hideous monsters, also crowds Bosch's triptych *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (ca. 1501). Vicious homunculi, giants, strange admixtures of humans-becoming-animal or animals-becoming-human, indescribable creatures one might find in the stories of H. P. Lovecraft or on the canvases of Francis Bacon: the panels' landscapes and skyscapes and half-ruined structures are clamorous with restless abominations. At the top of the left panel we see Saint Anthony, who has been taken up into the sky by demons, lying flat on his back and rigidly still, his hands clasped in prayer and his eyes cast heavenward (fig. 2). He is supported by the body and wings of a giant frog, its arm-fins stretched out as if in crucifixion, and accompanied by other strange companions: a grinning and clawed mantalike creature, sharp-toothed flying fish, a fox-human composite that snarls and snaps at the saint, uncouth Rabelaisian human (or humanlike) beings, a small, energetic, indefinable thing clutching a scythe. All fly through the air rapidly, impossibly.

Carl Linfert comments on the hermit saint's pious stoicism and "steadfast composure." Thanks to "that insensibility which comes through mystic contemplation," Saint Anthony is "scarcely conscious here of being ravished into the heavens."<sup>5</sup> But the saint's blank, staring eyes and rigid posture could be understood as denoting shock rather than calm stoicism. By this reading, Bosch's Anthony can stand as another figuration of the trauma subject as articulated within the mode of horror. To be traumatized is to be entrapped within *carceri*, within chaotic, claustrophobic psychic spaces, but it is also to be taken out of oneself—pitilessly torn away from ordinary life and ordinary identity and rapt aloft by monsters, those objective correlatives of psychic damage and psychic pain. All that was known and familiar has become uncanny and is now animated by a pulsing and manic demonic energy.

At the beginning of *Acceptance*, the third volume of VanderMeer's trilogy, the character known as the psychologist lies slumped next to the lighthouse. She has died from her terrible injuries, as we know from the first volume, *Annihilation*, but human beings in Area X are not allowed the quietus of simple death. All are tortured into strange new bodies and subjective states, like the beast-people in H. G. Wells's *Island of Doctor Moreau*. The incomprehensible nonhuman force that now controls



Figure 2. Hieronymus Bosch, *Triptych of the Temptation of Saint Anthony* (ca. 1501), detail. Oil on panel, 131 × 228 cm. Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lisbon. Photograph by Werner Forman.

Area X—perhaps not sadistic like Moreau but just as relentlessly curious—is a masterworker in biological plasticity and seems to enjoy experimentation.

Gradually the psychologist becomes aware of a disquieting “whispering” and realizes that she is not alone. She narrates her experience in the second person: “A kind of alien regard has twinned itself to you, easily mistaken for the atoms of the air if it did not seem somehow concentrated, purposeful. Joyful?” The psychologist is taken into the air by an entity, a power, a *something*: a fully sentient, inquisitive, not-at-all-human force that wrests her aloft and animates her and reshapes her and brutally interrogates her as it drags her unresisting through the sky. “Rising up across the marsh, flickering up in green-glinting reflections against the sea and the shore. . . . Taking aim for the sun, the lurch and spin of it.”<sup>6</sup> To ride the currents of the air with monsters, one’s eyes dead with shock and physical pain. Who could ever want this? Who could *not* want it?

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**Notes**

- 1 Laplanche and Pontalis, *Language of Psycho-analysis*, 465.
- 2 Luckhurst, *Trauma Question*, 88. Luckhurst notes that this “trauma aesthetic” is in danger of becoming its own orthodoxy.
- 3 Breuer and Freud, *Studies on Hysteria*, 93.
- 4 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 10.
- 5 Linfert, *Hieronymus Bosch*, 74, 78, 76.
- 6 VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 7.

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