

Annika Mangschou Schiøth

Liberating Horror

*The body horror in Julia Ducournau's Raw (2016)
and Titane (2021)*

Bachelor's thesis in Film and Video Production

Supervisor: Christer Bakke Andresen

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Norwegian University of Science and Technology
Faculty of Humanities
Department of Art and Media Studies

Table of contents:

1.0 Introduction	4
2.0 The body horror genre.....	4
3.0 The Body horror and themes in <i>Raw</i>	5
3.1 <i>Justine's turning point</i>	6
4.0 The body horror and themes in <i>Titane</i>	8
4.1 <i>Unconditional love</i>	10
5.0 Stories about bodies told with bodies.....	11
6.0 Sympathizing with the monsters	13
7.0 Conclusion.....	16

Attachments

Attachment 1: Sources

1.0 Introduction

Throughout the years I have developed an increased fascination for the horror film genre. Despite the “gross” portrayal of blood, horror, and gore, I somehow stay glued to the screen. When I discovered Julia Ducournau’s body horror *Raw* (2016), it instantly became a favorite of mine. While making shocking headlines after screening, “Cannibal horror film too Raw for viewers as paramedics are called” (Gabbatt 2016), I truly found the film engaging, and I saw qualities in the film beyond the brutality. I felt excited and encouraged to see these approaches from a young, female director.

Recently, I watched Ducournau’s new feature *Titane* (2021) that won her the highly prestigious The Palme d’Or in Cannes, and it intrigued me just as much as when I first discovered her. It made me reflect on why these movies fascinate me so much, and what is it that I find so engaging about these brutal films that makes some turn away in sheer disgust? This takes me to the question I want to explore further in this thesis: *how does Julia Ducournau use body horror elements to tell her story, and why?* To answer this, I will investigate and identify the body horror elements in her two feature films, *Raw* and *Titane*. Furthermore, I will analyze and discuss how her movies work to convey their underlying themes to their audience, and why they are so engaging, despite their unpleasant approaches.

2.0 The body horror genre

To identify the body horror in Ducournau’s two features, we first need to concretize the definition of the term. In the article *The Sensuality of Presence in “Body Horrors”*: *Rethinking Body Genres in Documentary and Experimental Film* Borí Máté explains body horrors as “films that involve the element of a thrilling and shivering horror that causes instinctive reaction of disgust, fear, repulsion, and such like” (Máté 2021). As well as creating unpleasant sensations in the audience, body horror, or “biological horror” as Ronald Allan Lopez Cruz refers to it in *Mutations and Metamorphoses: Body Horror is Biological Horror*, is a genre trope that focus on scares generated by violations of the body. Typically, through mutations, or alterations of the body that is out of the norm (Cruz 2012).

In *Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess* Linda Williams points out specific characterizations that can help us understand the structures and forms of body genres. She discusses what we consider “gross”, and states that the conversation often addresses different categories of excess. She exemplifies how pornography, horror films, and melodramas are

often criticized for its excessive display of different emotions. “Alone or in combination, heavy doses of sex, violence, and emotion are dismissed by one faction or another as having no logic or reason for existence beyond their power to excite.” She continues to argue that by looking beyond the excess, or the “gross”, we might be able to explore its system and structure as well as its effect on the bodies of the audience (Williams 1991, 3). In the article, Williams does so by comparing the three genres mentioned, pornography, horror films, and melodramas. Williams points out that a coherent feature of bodily excess in these genres, is the spectacle of the body in intense emotion or sensation. For the horror genre, these emotions and sensations are often excruciating pain, violence, and terror. She continues by saying that another characteristic these body genres share, is the focus on what she defines as ecstasy. She explains ecstasy as the body “beside itself”, or as an uncontrollable convulsion. In horror films this could be fear, terror or screams of horror, or the body twisting in pain. Williams also states that traditionally, in each of the three genres, it is the female that has been the embodiment of the feelings, and that it is the female bodies that has offered the most sensational sight (ibid., 4).

With this in mind, I am going to investigate how Ducournau uses the body horror characteristics in *Raw* and *Titane*, and how it works on the audience as well as how it portrays the underlying themes.

3.0 The Body horror and themes in *Raw*

Raw is a French coming-of-age body horror where we follow the sweet, lifelong vegetarian Justine at her first year in veterinarian school. Things take a dark turn when she is forced to eat raw animal organs as a part of a vet school student ritual, and she eventually begin to develop an insatiable desire for human flesh. Beyond the cannibalistic plot, the movie is a portrayal of Justine’s journey from having a child-like innocence, to her liberation as an independent young woman.

Justine is rapidly introduced to a chaotic student life and thrown into several freshman welcoming-rituals. It seems like Justine is the only one not embracing these rituals, but rather experiencing and portraying a great deal of stress and disorientation as she is pushed around by a chaotic crowd on a dancefloor. This makes us as the spectators feel like she is isolated, and that she does not belong there or feel comfortable in the situation. It is not until she finds her sister Alex, a final year student, that she is able to relax. Justine embraces her sister and

tells her: “And we’ll see each other all the time, like at home!” (translated) (Ducournau 2016). It is now clear to us that she feels safe around her family and finds comfort in what is familiar.

As a part of the second ritual, the freshmen, are drenched in animal blood, later forced one by one to consume raw rabbit kidney. Justine tries to explain she is a vegetarian but is denied a free pass. She calls her sister Alexa, but she tells Justine that she will be “Happy that she did it” while shoving the kidney into Justine’s mouth. In this scene we begin to unveil the body genre characteristics described by Linda Williams. We see the spectacle of the body in intense emotion, shown through Justine being utterly repulsed by the rabbit kidney as it is shoved down her throat, and eventually being so disgusted she throws up. In addition, it is a female, Justine, that is the embodiment of these feelings. This scene in the film is an important one, because it initiates Justine’s journey and growth, the rabbit kidney is the inciting incident. As mentioned, the movie is about Justine’s liberation. We can interpret the force-feeding of the rabbit kidney is a metaphor for how difficult it is to let go of the familiar and comfortable. As a lifelong vegetarian, Justine has lived a meatless life. Now, Justine is being force-fed into letting go of the familiar and thrown into the unknown.

The movie puts an emphasize on Justine’s innocence throughout the plot. Whether it is through showing us her hard-working school ethic, or that she does not follow the “hot-girl” dress code because she does not have those kinds of clothes, these scenes fuel our perception of Justine as an innocent, maybe a little naïve, teenager. Justine ends up borrowing a dress from her sister but wears them outside her own clothes. We can argue that this is telling us as the audience that she is refusing to embrace her sensuality.

3.1 Justine’s turning point

Throughout the film, we watch Justine go from the innocent rule-driven young girl, to gradually not being able to resist her deepest desires. Her body starts to transform, and she develops a flaming rash that makes the skin peel of her body as she scratches in desperation. It is as her own body is punishing her for not giving in to her cravings. When her hunger gets too bad, she restlessly chews her hair, resulting in a disturbing sight of her pulling out what seems like meters of tangled hair from her throat. As the audience, we twist in disgust at the unpleasant sight. It is almost like we feel the hair she pulls in our own throats. She starts consuming raw chicken meat, waking up in the middle of the night to eat in secret.

A turning point, or when Justine's transformation truly boils to the surface, is when her sister Alex accidentally cuts off her finger with a scissor. In complete shock over the sight of her bloody hand, Alex faints and drops to the floor. Justine carefully picks up the finger and studies it for a while. The music in the scene is a fingerstyle guitar that almost create a calm mood and atmosphere, contrasting the gruesome visuals of Justine inspecting her sisters cut off finger. As the audience, it feels like something is suspiciously peaceful about the situation. She starts licking the blood from the finger until she suddenly stops. The calm music now turns loud and disturbing, creating a sinister atmosphere as Justine realizes what she is doing. One can argue that the music accompanies Justine's inner emotions and puts an emphasis on her reaction as she finally gives in to her cravings and starts eating the flesh of her sister's finger. We as the audience now understand that she has left her controlled self behind and moved past the point of no return. She finally gives in to her deepest desires, revealing her true character.

This scene is an example of "ecstasy", one of the body genre characterizations described by Linda Williams. As mentioned, Williams explains the term ecstasy with an uncontrollable convulsion, or the body "beside itself" (Williams 1991, 4). As discussed, we can argue that Justine was not immediately aware of her cannibalistic actions. It was as her mind was disconnected from her body, emphasized by the change in music and facial expressions as she finally realizes. Suddenly she is driven by the desires of the body, rather than the conscious mind. Justine is now, in fact, driven by ecstasy.

Another part of Justine's journey is the discovery of her sexuality. She eventually befriends her very sexually liberated roommate, Adriene, who she eventually starts to desire. Her hunger and desire are especially prominent in a scene where she is watching Adriene play football with his fellow students. The scene consists of close-up shots, framing Justine's stare, and point-of-view shots of Adriene, showing us what Justine is looking at. Because of this it is very clear to us that the intense stare Justine has, a stare we can interpret as desire, lust, and hunger, is pointed at Adriene. In the next scene Justine is seen dancing in her room, wearing the dress she borrowed from her sister, but this time without her own clothes underneath. She is now embracing the sensuality she earlier denied. She eventually ends up eating Adriene's leg, giving into the desireful instincts she had while gazing upon him.

In conclusion, we can argue that Ducournau uses body horror elements to portray the underlying theme of liberation in the film. Despite making the audiences guts wrench in several scenes following Justine's graphic hunger for human flesh, it can be seen as a metaphorical portrayal of how we as humans essentially are driven by instincts and primal desires, just as any other animal. Throughout the film she is surrounded by liberated people, from the animalistic behavior of the other freshmen, to Justine's sexually liberated roommate Adriene. All young adults who also have had to grow up and find themselves at some point. Where *Raw* uses bodily transformation to express Justine's her upgrowing, *Titane* on the contrary, turns the main characters body into something mechanical and inorganic.

4.0 The body horror and themes in *Titane*

Titane is the second feature film by Ducournau. As with *Raw*, the film uses body horror to convey the films underlying themes. In the film we meet Alexia, who had a titanium plate operated into her skull because of a car crash in her childhood. Years later, Alexia now works as a showgirl at a motor show. One night, after a show, a fan approaches Alexia and forcibly kisses her, making her brutally murder him. Now having to flee, Alexia hides in plain sight disguised as a boy that went missing several decades ago. We can argue that the movie, despite its graphic approach, is a heartwarming portrayal of family and unconditional love.

In the first scene of the film, Alexia as a child is sitting in the backseat of her father's car. The father seems excessively annoyed with her presence. They eventually crash the car, and Alexia must get a titanium plate operated into her skull as a result. The father stares at Alexia with a gaze of indifference despite the horrible brain damage he has caused her. This tells us as the audience that her father does not like Alexia that much, and this might be because he finds her abnormal and strange. The first thing Alexia does after exiting the hospital, is running towards the car, lovingly embracing it.

Alexia develops an abnormal relation to vehicles. We can argue that this relationship is a consequence of her upgrowing, and that she was disliked by her parents. Vehicles, like her titanium brain, is the only thing that seems familiar to her since she got the plate scolded into her skull. She is now part human, part vehicle, and seem to relate and be more drawn towards the mechanical side of herself. She is drawn to vehicles to the extent that she, in one scene, is seen having intercourse with a car after a show. This scene contains the body genre characteristics described by Linda Williams. We have the spectacle of the female body in

intense emotion, and bodily extasy shown through Alexia's sexual pleasure. We can argue that Ducournau uses these elements to elevate and emphasize the bond she has with vehicles. We as the audience now understand how incredibly intimate and strong this bond really is.

In *Raw* the rabbit kidney was the inciting accident. Like *Raw* the car scene is important because it is the scene in *Titane* that initiates Alexia's bodily transformation. Ducournau uses the characterization of body in intense emotion to draw attention to and emphasize these important scenes in both of her films. For Justine, it was the gut-wrenching disgust of rabbit kidney, and to Alexia it is sexual pleasure. Both emotions on the opposite end of the spectrum, but that have in common that they mark the beginning of the characters bodily changes. She starts noticing her belly growing and motor oil leaking from between her legs, Alexia has been impregnated by the car.

The bond between Alexia and vehicles is so strong, she is unable to connect or have relationships with humans. She tries to engage a sexual relationship with a young woman named Justine, the same actor that played Justine in *Raw*, but ends up brutally murdering her and the rest of the household. After, she goes home and lights her father's house on fire, killing both of her parents. We can argue that these scenes edited together tells us that Alexia, to escape who she is, tries to develop ordinary relationships to people. She is unable to because of her upbringing that has permanently scarred her both mentally and physically. She blames her dad for it and despises him for turning her into the monster she has become. Thus, leading to her killing him, which allows Alexia to leave her old life behind and start again.

Alexia disguises herself as Adriene, another familiar name from *Raw*, the lost son of a grieving father. She shaves her eyebrows and hair, tapes up her breasts and growing belly, and finally, she brutally slams her face on a porcelain sink to break her nose. At the police station they offer the father, named Vincent, a DNA-test to prove whether Alexia is his son. He denies, claiming that he would recognize his own son. Despite his words, it does not seem like Vincent truly believes Alexia is his son, or at least he is not completely certain. In the last shot before the scene ends, we see Vincent's grieving face framed in a close-up looking at Alexia. He looks disappointed and let down, almost as he is trying to swallow the urge to cry. Regardless, it seems like Vincent takes this opportunity as a second chance at fatherhood, and accepts Alexia, or Adrien, into his home.

As Alexia desperately tries to hide her ever-changing body, it turns out Vincent has some bodily scars he hides as well. In a scene we see Vincent looking at himself nude with his body covered in bruises. He injects a syringe with steroids into his leg and starts flexing his muscles into the mirror, almost as if he is trying to convince himself of his strength. In the next scene he goes to work out but is not able to perform to his desired strength and collapses on the floor. This tells the audience that he might be trying to conceal his grief and decreasing masculinity. We can argue that Vincent has felt like a failure of a father for a long time, and by grieving he is feeling like a failure of a man and that he is not strong emotionally. Vincent is trying to conceal this by making himself strong physically. By clinging onto steroids and his muscles, he can prove to everyone, and himself, that he meets society's perception of masculinity.

4.1 Unconditional love

As Alexia's body continues to transform, it is impossible for her to hide her body any longer. She eventually starts lactating, and Vincent walks in on Alexia with her highly pregnant belly out. Vincent reacts with a chuckle, confirming to the audience that he always knew Alexia was not his son, but he loves her regardless. Alexia's body transforms further as she starts scratching her pregnant belly, making patches of skin fall off, revealing a layer of titanium beneath the skin surface. From her breasts it leaks motor oil.

Since Alexia's transformation into Adriene, she has not spoken a single word. In a scene, Vincent collapses on the bathroom floor because of a steroid overdose. Alexia sits down and embraces him and speaks her first words: "dad" (translated) (Ducournau 2021). Throughout their relationship, Alexia has slowly built up to Vincent's love. Now, we understand that she finally accepts it. We can argue that this is because Vincent sees the good in Alexia and accepts her for who she truly is. Throughout the film he takes Alexia with him to work as a firefighter. One day he allows Alexia to perform CPR on a dying lady, and Alexia ends up saving her. For the first time, she saved a life instead of taken one, and this is all because of Vincent. They bring out the good out of each other.

In the final scene Alexia gives birth to a half-titanium-half-human child. This metal baby can be seen as a new beginning for Alexia, a part of herself born again with a chance of a happy, normal life. Not only is it new chance for Alexia at an ordinary life, but it is giving Vincent

the opportunity to be a real father, something he always wanted, and something Alexia always needed.

In *Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess* Linda Williams states: “In the classical horror film, the terror of the female victim shares the spectacle along with the monster. Fay Wray and the mechanized monster that made her scream in *King Kong* is a familiar example of the classic form” (Williams 1991, 5) This is where both *Raw* and *Titane* separates from the classical horror film as described by Williams. Instead of creating a spectacle out of the female being terrorized by a monster, Ducournau makes the female protagonists into the monsters themselves. As we have established, body horror is recognized by bodily transformations and mutations. We can argue that Ducournau transforms the characters bodies to metaphorically portray their struggles and internal emotional journey on the outside of their bodies. In *The Naked and Undead*, Cynthia Freeland explains how horror movies often aim to say something about us as humans: “many horror films offer subtler but equally grim verdicts about human nature and the predominance of evil” (Freeland 2000, 275). From touching on themes like liberation, growing up, family and unconditional love, *Raw* and *Titane* portrays these universal themes by using monstrous characters. We can argue that in a way, this is essentially telling us how we all have our own monsters. To Justine, it was her suppressed desires, to Alexia it was her childhood traumas, to Vincent it was the strive to sustain social norms of masculinity, and to us as the audience it is our own individual battles and demons we are fighting on the inside.

5.0 Stories about bodies told with bodies

Now we have established *how* Julia Ducournau uses body horror to portray the underlying themes in the films. While it is an effectful way to understand the characters emotional journey, it still does not answer *why* she chooses this graphic approach. Further, I will reflect on why these stories work as body horrors.

Linda Williams argues in *Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess* that body genres are often criticized because of the over-involvement of emotion. The movie manipulates the viewer by telling them what to feel too directly (Williams 1991, 5). Although this might be true in some cases, we can argue that there is an appeal to this as well.

The body horror approach is a stylistic choice. In *The way Hollywood Tells it: Story and Style in modern movies* David Bordwell discusses how, though we still build our plots out of the principles from the studio pictures of the late 1910s, modern filmmakers are increasingly concerned with the stylistic value of the film. We have developed new methods to how movies are shot, sounded and the edited with stylistic value in mind. “It is too easy to say that camera tricks and dazzling cuts are no substitute for full-bodied characterizations. Too easy and too misleading. We are simply too close to the popular cinema of today to read it correctly» (Bordwell 2006, 115).

The body horror style puts an emphasis on creating a spectacle out of bodies being mutilated or altered. In *The Naked and Undead* Freeland discusses why over-the-top visual gore makes remarkable spectacles and experiences. Freeland points out how, in graphic horror, it is often about the concept of sublime (Freeland 2000, 243). In *The Sublime in Cinema* Freeland defines sublime as something outstanding that evokes a combination of pleasurable and painful feelings of terror in addition to awe and elevation (Freeland 1999, 64). These types of approaches overwrite any kind of rational self and is something huge and overwhelming. In other words, we might understand body horror as a sort of stylistic attraction, something very distanced from our everyday life, and therefore appealing.

Freeland points out how it is unlikely that graphic spectacular horror leads to moral evaluation. Quite on the contrary, she exemplifies how we think it is “cool” that Leatherface from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) uses a chainsaw to depart bodies (Freeland 2000, 243). It almost seems like graphic horror provokes identification and/or a sense of attraction to evil sources. For *Raw* and *Titane*, this attraction might be the reason to why we engage in the plot and the main characters. We might think they are “cool” despite, or even because of, their violent actions that we would despise in our real life.

In *The Sensuality of Presence in “Body Horrors”*: *Rethinking Body Genres in Documentary and Experimental Film*, Borí Máté discusses how body horror has the ability to create a direct effect upon the viewer’s body. “They are body horrors directly addressing their viewers in cinematic perception via the senses” (Máté 2021, 26). We are all people living with and having a relationship to our own bodies. Ducournau, as we have established uses the body metaphorically to convey the characters emotions, and it is also effectful in creating unpleasant sensations in the audience. Making the audience feel something is a way of

engaging the spectators by creating a direct connection between the characters on the screen and us spectators.

To conclude, Julia Ducournau puts an emphasis on creating a stylistic spectacle of the mutilation and alteration of the human body. Even though horror movies get criticized for over-the-top emotional cues, we have established that body horror creates a sort of attraction to the audience because it describes universes that are so far from our everyday life. Therefore, we even engage in the gruesome characters we otherwise never would have done. Body horror is also appealing because it can connect us to the characters directly through our senses. We feel what the characters feel, how unpleasant as it might be. These are qualities that might have fallen short, had Ducournau chosen a different genre or style, and therefore *Raw* and *Titane* are effectful and engaging in their approach as body horrors. They are essentially stories about humans told by using what we are all very familiar with, our bodies.

6.0 Sympathizing with the monsters

In the introduction I mentioned how a great part of my reflection upon watching these moves was the question of why I found them so engaging despite the brutal approach. As we have now established, body horror is engaging because it creates an attraction, spectacles beyond anything we see in our everyday life. It is, however, not only the stylistic approach that makes a movie engaging. Berys Gaut argues in *Identification and Emotion in narrative film*, that the audience emotional reaction to a film often revolve around identification, and how much we relate and identify with the characters. Gaut continues to mention Murray Smith and his idea that sympathy is a big part of our identification and engagement with the characters on screen (Gaut 1999, 200-201). Sympathy can be described as feeling *for* the characters (Laine 2000, 74)

In *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema* Murrey Smith discusses what makes a character engaging to us as the audience. Smith breaks down the theory of engagement into three specific concepts: recognition, alignment, and allegiance, also known as the sympathy structure (Smith 1995, 73). Furthermore, I will look at the protagonists in *Raw* and *Titane* in the light of the sympathy structure to investigate why we engage in these characters.

The first concept, recognition is the most basic level. It is defined as the moment we as spectators recognize a character as a coherent and individualized part of the plot (Smith 1995, 82) In *Raw*, we are not immediately introduced to Justine. We are first introduced to her sister Alexa, as she throws herself in front of a car to make it crash and to kill the people inside. A clue telling us that Alexa is also a cannibal, as we figure out later. It is not until the next scene we reach the level of recognition. Justine steps into the close-up frame and delivers a line. Now we understand she is an individualized part of the plot. In *Titane* we are first introduced to the young version of the protagonist Alexia. After the title sequence we see a close-up of grown Alexia and we reach recognition. We understand that it is her because the camera focuses on her recognizable scar on the side of her head.

The second concept is the level of alignment and is described as the process in which we as spectators have access to their actions, and what they know and feel. When we know *why* they act and what they think, we reach alignment (ibid., 83). This knowledge about a character forms the base of developing feelings of sympathy. I have earlier talked about two important scenes in *Raw* and *Titane*. The first one being Justine's turning point, when she eats her sister's finger, and the second one is when Alexia has intercourse with a car. We can argue that we reach the level of alignment in these scenes. In *Raw* Justine starts off as sweet and innocent and acts accordingly. This is, however, not her true character. Justine eventually starts eating raw animal meat until she finally eats her sister's finger. This is what Robert McKee describes in *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting*, as character revelation. McKee explains character revelation with the reveal of true character, a disclosure of the hidden nature that is concealed behind a façade of traits (McKee 1997, 103). In this scene Justine eats human flesh for the first time, and it seems, as I mentioned, like this is just as much of a character revelation to Justine as it is to the audience. Justine does not seem to initially realize what she is doing. She, and we as the audience, understand that her desires are so strong she is no longer able to resist them. Now, we reach alignment, and understand her actions from here on out. In *Titane* Alexia seems to ruthlessly murder people she meets. It is not until the car scene we as the audience begin to understand why. In this scene, as I mentioned, we understand the true connection she has with vehicles, and we see that she is more drawn towards this side of herself. Therefore, she is unable to connect with other people. While the murders are not necessarily justified by the audience, we begin to understand why she act and what she thinks, meeting the level of alignment. Everything she does after this makes sense in the light the scene sheds on the character.

The third and final level in the sympathy structure is allegiance. This level is the moral evaluation of the characters by the spectator. This depends on the spectator having sufficient information of the characters state of mind, and an understanding with the context of the actions they do. We eventually understand a character's moral stand through their actions. (Smith 1995, 84). One can argue that we reach allegiance in the final scene of *Raw* where it is revealed that Justine's parents also are cannibals and that it runs in our family. Her father tells her that he is sure she will find a solution. We understand now that Justine did not kill and eat people because she thinks it is right, she is just genetically built that way. We reach the level of allegiance in *Titane* when Alexia refers to Vincent as her dad for the first time. Now we understand that she is not unable to love, but she has just never connected to anyone because no one has accepted her and treated her like Vincent has.

These three concepts in the sympathy structure help us the audience understand the characters we are watching, and eventually decide if we sympathize with them or not. One might argue that despite reaching all three levels, that these characters actions are so horrible and unforgiving that we should not sympathize with them regardless. However, Murray Smith argues that to understand a situation and a character internally, we do not necessarily need to identify with the protagonists. More important is that we feel like the characters response in a scene is appropriate to a situation. Smith exemplifies this with the horror genre and how, if we share the same culture as the characters, we can easily understand why they find the monster unnatural. "We respond not simply to the monster, as the character does, but to a situation in which someone, who is horrified, is under attack" (ibid., 78-79). As with *Titane*, we do not justify Alexia killing a fan early in the film, but we respond to her protecting herself from sexual harassment. In *Raw*, we do not justify Justine eating humans, but we react to Justine's struggles to fight her desires in a world where cannibalism is genetically inherited.

In *Empathy, Sympathy and the Philosophy of Horror In Kubrick's THE SHINING*, Tarja Laine also discuss why we feel sympathetic to characters we find unpleasant. She explains how the characters, despite their unjustifiable actions, have sympathetic traits that evokes our emotional responses. She exemplifies how we in Thomas Vinterberg's *Festen* feel sympathetic towards the pedophile father when he asks his family and friends for forgiveness. This is because we can understand how it feels to feel shame and be negatively exposed to others (Laine 2000, 74). Likewise, we might feel bad for Justine because we know what it is

like feeling like you do not belong, and we might feel bad for Alexia because we know how it feels to be left out, not understood by other people.

In *The Antihero in American television* Margrethe Bruun Vaage discusses how suspense can affect our morality while watching fiction. She exemplifies how we feel stressful when the antihero is in a suspenseful situation even though the characters actions are morally wrong. We still want him or her to make it (Vaage 2015, 64). Even if we do not identify with the two antiheroes in *Raw* and *Titane*, and that their actions are morally wrong, we can argue that a suspenseful plot is also a way of engaging the audience. Vaage explains this with the term empathy. She defines empathy as feeling *with* the character. An example from *Titane* is when Alexia chases Justine and the rest of the household, we latch on to the stress that is portrayed in the suspenseful scene. Vaage differentiates between two types of empathy. One of them being *imaginative empathy*, where we put ourselves in the characters situation by imagining what it is like to be him or her. I would argue that the chasing scene described above is imaginative empathy because we visualize the stress Alexia experiences. The second one is what Vaage describes as *embodied empathy*, which is when our body physically reacts to the characters feelings portrayed (ibid., 65). This could be through facial expressions, small reflexes etc. We could argue that the audiences experience while watching body horrors heavily consists of embodied empathy. As we have established, body horror has the power to engage the audience through our senses. When the characters in *Raw* and *Titane* experience bodily harm, we physically feel it. We might twist and turn in our chairs with our faces wrenched in disgust as we watch the characters suffer physical harm. In other words, we experience empathy with the antiheroes.

7.0 Conclusion

Raw and *Titane* are two modern body horrors that uses the genres elements and characteristics to portray the underlying themes of liberation, growing up, family, and unconditional love. These themes are portrayed by using the protagonists everchanging bodies to show us how these characters feel emotionally and internally. This approach is engaging because it shows us something that is so far from our everyday life, it becomes a spectacle and an attraction to the audience. In addition to that it connects us with the characters because as we are more forgiving and drawn towards evil entities in graphic horror. By looking at the characters with the sympathy structure, we even relate and sympathize with Justine and Alexia as they turn into horrid monsters, because we eventually begin to see the human in them, concealed under

their beastly facade. Julia Ducournau shows us that it is possible to engage in the most “gross”, gory, and bloody films, and that it is even possible to relate, sympathize, and feel empathy with the most gruesome, violent, and dreadful characters. Maybe this is Ducournau’s way of showing us that we might not be as different from these characters as we initially think, and that we even share some of the qualities with the monsters that scare us so much in horror films.

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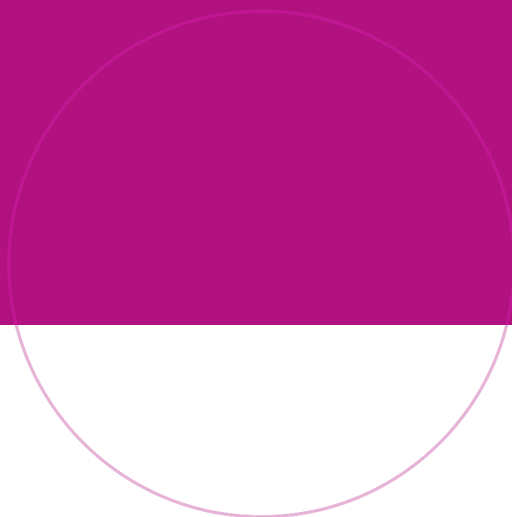
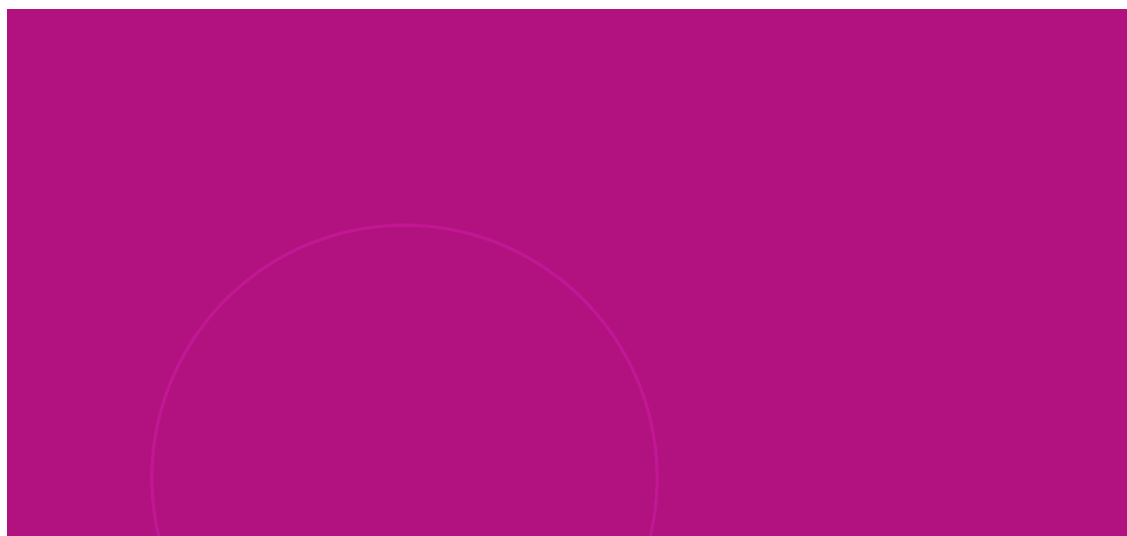
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