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Résumé de l'article

L'auteur compare *The Brain That Wouldn't Die*, un film de série B de 1960, avec *Boxing Helena* (1993) de Jennifer Chambers Lynch de façon à montrer comment les spectateurs ne font pas que prendre la position sadique dont on a longtemps dit qu'elle était la seule position proposée par le cinéma hollywoodien mais tendent plutôt à se déplacer entre différentes positions, incluant la position masochiste. Les deux films racontent les fantaisies fétichistes d'un médecin : dans les deux récits, les protagonistes maintiennent en vie des corps de femmes démembrées. Ni dans un film ni dans l'autre n'est critiqué le désir qui produit ces fantaisies fétichistes. Jusqu'à un certain point, le conflit oedipien peut expliquer les névroses sexuelles des protagonistes. Cependant, les deux films encouragent le spectateur à des déplacements d'un personnage à l'autre dans le processus d'identification. Dans *Boxing Helena*, ces déplacements dans l'identification des spectateurs sont reprises à l'écran, proposant ainsi une critique du cinéma, de la théorie du cinéma et du voyeurisme.

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THE BRAIN THAT WOULDN'T DIE AND *BOXING HELENA*: DESIRE AND THE DISMEMBERMENT OF THE FEMALE BODY

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ABSTRACT

The author compares *The Brain That Wouldn't Die*, a 1960 B-movie with Jennifer Chambers Lynch's *Boxing Helena* (1993) in order to show how spectators not only take on the sadistic position which has long been thought to be the one position informing Hollywood cinema but tend to shift between different positions, including masochistic positions. Both movies relate the fetish fantasies of a doctor: in both narratives, the protagonists artificially maintain alive dismembered female bodies. In neither movie is the desire that produces these fetish fantasies clearly critiqued. To some extent, the Oedipal conflict might explain the sexual neuroses of the protagonists. However, both movies have the spectator shift the identification process from one character to the other. In *Boxing Helena*, such shifts in spectator identification are mirrored on the

screen, creating a critique of film, film theory, and voyeurism.

RÉSUMÉ

L'auteur compare *The Brain That Wouldn't Die*, un film de série B de 1960, avec *Boxing Helena* (1993) de Jennifer Chambers Lynch de façon à montrer comment les spectateurs ne font pas que prendre la position sadique dont on a longtemps dit qu'elle était la seule position proposée par le cinéma hollywoodien mais tendent plutôt à se déplacer entre différentes positions, incluant la position masochiste. Les deux films racontent les fantaisies fétichistes d'un médecin : dans les deux récits, les protagonistes maintiennent en vie des corps de femmes démembrées. Ni dans un film ni dans l'autre n'est critiqué le désir qui produit ces fantaisies fétichistes. Jusqu'à un certain point, le conflit oedipien peut expliquer les névroses sexuelles des protagonistes. Cependant, les deux films encouragent le spectateur à des déplacements d'un personnage à l'autre dans le processus d'identification. Dans *Boxing Helena*, ces déplacements dans l'identification des spectateurs sont reprises à l'écran, proposant ainsi une critique du cinéma, de la théorie du cinéma et du voyeurisme.

Vivian Sobchack states that often one cannot differentiate horror film from science fiction, but she does suggest a general difference: science fiction involves the threat of Man (humanity or some substantial part of it) and horror involves the threat to individual men (**37**). According to this definition, both *The Brain That Wouldn't Die* (1960) and *Boxing Helena* (1993) could be characterized as horror, although the former seems to have more in common with 1950s science-fiction B-movies while the latter aspires to a psychological inner drama with a Merchant and Ivory setting. Regardless how one ultimately defines these films, both situate the fear of a respected and recognizable individual (a doctor) at the core of their narratives. Given the rather extreme positions of aggressor and victim, the viewer is effectively denied a stable position or identification; thus, one is repeatedly un-settled. Through their processes of unsettling the viewer, these two films problematize the conventional

theories of voyeuristic sadism and narcissism, fetish and desire, while representing the conventions of the castration complex and institutional male power. This essay will focus on the narrative and psychological similarities in both films, arguing that Oedipal desire is the driving force within the texts, but it will also demonstrate how *Boxing Helena* critiques the cinematic narratives, structures, and assumptions that *The Brain that Wouldn't Die* depends upon.

The Brain is the story of a young intern, Bill Courtner (Herb Evers), who experiments with limb replacement, going against the dictates of his father who is an established surgeon. The film opens with the father losing a patient because he would only use conventional medical practices; Bill then takes command and revives the man. Bill receives an emergency call from the family's country estate, which has not been inhabited since his mother died but has been serving as his laboratory; he then asks his girlfriend, Jan (Virginia Leith), the assisting nurse, to go with him and see his work. As they drive to the lab, he speeds up without real reason, in a manner which suggests a subconscious desire to crash, which he does, and in the process his girlfriend is decapitated. He retrieves the head from the burning car and carries it to his lab where he connects it to a series of clamps, tubes, and flasks. Bill then must find an appropriate body for Jan's head, and one of his old school friends reminds him of the woman with the "nicest body she's ever seen," Doris (Leslie Daniel), who is another friend from school and works as a body-only model because her face is scarred. Bill brings her to his lab and drugs her. Before he can remove Doris's body and attach it to Jan's head, Jan summons a monstrous creation (much like Frankenstein's monster in that it is a collection of body parts reassembled and given life) from the locked closet. The monstrous form knocks down Bill, inadvertently starts a fire and then carries out the still-unconscious Doris, ending the film.

Released in 1960, *The Brain* is a product of a period in science fiction and horror film that tends to reinscribe institutional order. Threats from outerspace or the unknown become metaphors for Cold War anxieties as well as fears about the threat to the nuclear family as women are moving into the workplace and fears about peoples of color gaining more "visibility" in America [**1**]. As such, these films generally function within a rather simplistic dualism, creating "good" and "evil" as identifiable combatants. In these films, specifically *The Brain*, directorial cinematography seems to go little beyond pans and close-ups. In the years between *The*

Brain and *Boxing Helena*, psychology becomes a much greater influence on directors—Alfred Hitchcock is one of the early advocates of the psycho-thriller—and we have the rise of feminism and *écriture feminine*. Another major difference in the two films is that the director of *Boxing Helena*, Jennifer Chambers Lynch, the daughter of film auteur David Lynch, is not looking merely to make a B-movie psycho-thriller; she is carefully crafting a film that, like her father's work, is a critique of the role of film itself, both as director and viewer.

Boxing Helena is, thus, a far more psychologically and technically complex film; this film is about another surgeon, Nicholas Kavanaugh (Julian Sands), who does new work in limb reattachment—one of the earliest scenes surrounds his reattaching of an eleven year old boy's hand. The film opens with a scene where Nick is a six to eight year old boy at his mother's house where he sees his mother with a man who is not her husband; the next scene is the mother's coffin being lowered into the ground. We then see Nick at the hospital saving the boy's hand; later he is to dine with his girlfriend, nurse Anne Garrett (Betsy Clark). Instead, he watches Helena (Sherilyn Fenn) through her upstairs window undressing and then having sex with Ray O'Malley (Bill Paxton). A few days later, he throws a party at his mother's house to which he invites Helena; she comes, dances in a garden fountain dressed only in her slip, and leaves with one of Nick's friends. Helena leaves her purse and the next day asks Nick to bring it to her at the airport. He intentionally takes her address book out of it, forcing her to miss her plane and return with him to his house. As she leaves the house, she is struck by a truck. Nick amputates her legs and then keeps her in his mother's house, isolating himself and Helena from all outside contact. Helena is trapped, and eventually, Nick amputates her arms and places her in a box-like chair. After a few sexual encounters, both of which Helena watches, Nick is caught; Ray finds them and pistol-whips Nick. As the Venus de Milo is crashing down on him, Nick wakes up from a deep sleep/state of unconsciousness in the hospital to find that Helena was brought there directly after being hit by the truck. We next see Nick lying awake, staring up at the ceiling; the film then flashes back to Helena undressing in the window, then his mother being buried, his mother with another man at her house, Helena in bed, Helena in her box, Nick as a little boy, and then the statue of *Venus de Milo*. The next scene is Nick waking up next to a nude woman, possibly Anne (or even his mother—it isn't clear), and then going over to the statue of *Venus de Milo* and resting his head against it—the tableau is like

that of a mother (*V de M*) kissing her son on the forehead, while the following statements echo in his head: "I am still haunted by my love for her . . . those dreams."

Both Bill and Nick are involved in rather straightforward Oedipal struggles; this allows for two consequences: first, the Oedipal conflict explains some of the sexual neuroses of the protagonists, and secondly, if the sexual problems can be explained as basically Oedipal, then the dismemberment fantasy is more difficult to critique because it is part of a complex process of father/mother/son/lover relationships. While the father is not killed by the son in either film, he is supplanted. In *The Brain*, the film opens with the father's patient dying and the son aggressively establishing his place in medicine: "you've already lost your patient. Now let me save mine." The father argues against the son's experimentation, but finally concedes and the son does succeed in saving the patient. The son replaces the father/doctor—in a Lacanian sense, doctor represents patriarchal and institutional authority roles of the Father [**2**]—and then can move into the house of the mother. The father in *Boxing Helena* is never present, but the very first scene is the young Nicholas being told that he will "follow in your father's footsteps at the hospital." It is only after Nick takes over for an older and rather annoyed male doctor and sews the hand back on an eleven-year-old boy that he moves into his mother's house.

The role of the mother in *The Brain* is rather limited; she is only a presence through her marked absence. When Bill mentions that he is going up to the country estate, his father states that they should sell the place since no one has lived in it since his wife died. The elder doctor's statement clearly associates the house with the wife/mother; while the father seeks to put the house, and by association, certain memories of his wife, behind him, the son usurps the house for his own. In the struggle for the house/mother, the son has replaced the father. Because the mother is dead, the son uses/usurps the house, the domestic sphere, as a place of re-creation. In much the same way that Victor Frankenstein's laboratory is representative of a constructed, if not sterile, womb, so is Bill's lab. The site that represents the dead mother (Victor's mother was also dead) becomes the site where the son attempts to reconnect with the mother by becoming, or mirroring, the mother. Bill's attempt at recreating life places him in the role of mother, regardless of how perverted or distorted it may be. By re-creating life, especially in his mother's house, Bill

makes a futile gesture to enter into contact with his mother, and in the process, destroys himself.

In *Boxing Helena*, the role of mother is far more complex, and the Oedipal interactions are more convoluted. When we first meet the young Nick, we overhear a guest at his mother's party mention that he did not know that she had any children; this effectively represents the rejection by the mother of her roles, both the role of mother and of wife. For Nick, his mother has symbolically rejected him by not acknowledging him to any of her friends and has rejected his father by openly engaging in affairs with other men. As mother, she does not exist while he is alive; it is only after she is dead that he can recreate her as the "mother" he never had. Furthermore, throughout the film, we receive hints that the relationship between Nick and his mother has expressed itself as abusive within his subconscious [**3**]; periodically the mother appears as a sexual presence or as one who is abusing or reprimanding him. In one scene, after Helena has critiqued Nick's sexual inadequacies and he responds with, "If you were a real woman you'd lie to me about our sex," she answers by saying that she does not care about his feelings and begins to choke him; the camera then flashes from Nick's head to Helena's to Nick's to his mother's to Nick's and back to Helena's. We are not following any one character, but are placed in the position of Nick (in the past and the present) and Helena (present); we are placed in the position of victim (little Nick and Helena) and aggressor (mother and adult Nick). The disturbing thing about this quick succession of shots is that the viewer cannot situate him-/herself in any one space, and becomes, in effect, as helpless as Helena to do anything about his/her surroundings: we are boxed in the theatre, placed in a seat watching a narrative unfold. In this scene, the mother becomes implicated as a participant in a relationship which is both sexual and abusive. Helena, then, represents a surrogate for the mother figure he has lost, or the "mother" he never had. The relationship is based upon the power of and control over the body of the mother and the sexuality of the son; as the son attempts to desexualize the body of the sexually active mother, in his subconscious, she "punishes" Nick by not allowing him to mature sexually. It is only by having sex in his mother's house with Helena (as surrogate for the mother) watching that he is ever able to reach any state of sexual competence; in simple Freudian terms, he matures sexually when he vicariously connects with his mother. In Lacanian terms, he becomes the father.

Although Raymond Bellour considers all Hollywood narratives to be dependent at the textual level on the male Oedipal struggle (**Bergstrom 93**), this reading, especially considering the two films which I have chosen, severely limits the possibilities of the texts to function within or to critique narratives of desire outside the oedipal structure. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari discuss the role of desire of partial objects:

> Even since birth his crib, his mother's breast, her nipple, his bowel movements are desiring-machines connected to parts of his body. It seems to us self-contradictory to maintain, on the one hand, that the child lives among partial objects, and that on the other hand he conceives of these partial objects as being his parents, or even different parts of his parents' bodies. Strictly speaking, it is not true that a baby experiences his mother's breast as a separate part of his body. It exists, rather, as a part of a desiring-machine connected to the baby's mouth. (**47**)

For both Bill and Nick, the partial object does become the fetishized object of desire because the male is attempting to re-establish a tie with the mother through a surrogate and by re-creating the "mother" seeks to eliminate or add aspects which the original had and he did not want, or lacked and he desired. In *The Brain*, Bill looks for a sexually attractive body to go with the head of his girlfriend. The acceptance of Jan by his father, which in Lacanian terms is also an aspect of the Father—the representative of the law, order, and patriarchy—means that social order and integrity is maintained. Thus, he can thus have the socially appropriate wife, Jan, while he privately enjoys the sexuality which he intends to add—Doris is not admitted into the social order because of her disfigurement and her sexuality, but can be present *in body* if that body is concealed by her/Jan's clothing. The lack of sexuality in the mother—she is dead and we never see nor hear of any previous sexuality being attributed to her—is supplemented in Bill's choice for a wife when he attempts to put Doris's body on her.

Nick, in *Boxing Helena*, has a mother who already has "too much" and so he must remove those parts which he cannot tolerate, her sexuality as it is expressed to other men and her ability to hurt him physically/ psychologically. Although it is clear that Nick sees Helena as a sexual object throughout the film, her value as a sexual commodity is greatly decreased to her previous lover, Ray. When he enters the house and sees

Helena, he angrily tells Nick, "You made her a freak," and then after a few confused moments, Ray leaves. Nick is therefore successful: Helena cannot leave him like his mother left his father because he has made her desirable to no one but himself. At the same time that Nick is defetishizing Helena to others, he is creating his own fetish; the way in which he organizes and objectifies her is central. In this act, Nick becomes the scene's director; there is an eerie resemblance to the act of directing, one that echoes the films of David Lynch, such as *Eraserhead* and *Blue Velvet*, and their repeated moves to disrupt narrative through the exposure of the film *as film*. This critique seems generalized, not directed at any particular director or genre, but there is always the possibility that Jennifer Chambers Lynch does have an intended target.

Besides controlling the sexuality of the mother, Nick also renders her powerless to physically hurt him. After the scenes where Helena has thrown a few glass pieces at him and where she has tried to choke him (this is the scene where the mother's head is juxtaposed on Helena's body for a few frames), Nick amputates her arms. The mother/Helena is no longer physically threatening to him; she can neither run nor fight. Each threat that the mother had embodied for Nick has been removed in his re-creation of Helena; Helena is his idea of the perfect mother/lover: she is completely dependent, sexual, and will not harm him.

The object of desire in both films is the female body, or more accurately, the female sexual organs. In *The Brain*, we do not see Jan as the object of desire; what we see is Jan as the "pure" wife figure who Bill wants to conflate with the sexual figure of Doris (or some other "body") and ultimately with his mother. Bill's quest for the perfect body is purely scopophilic: he first goes to the Moulin Rouge bar to find a woman; he then picks up an attractive acquaintance from school; later he attends a beauty pageant; finally he meets with success when he finds Doris, the model. While it would seem that the predicament of Doris would automatically create a sympathy with the viewer, her first words are antagonistic: "You're all alike . . . I still hate all men." Even though she is correct, it may be difficult for a spectator to identify with her perspective. Her misanthropy allows a warped kind of justification for Bill's misogyny; it is, in a way, as if Bill fulfills her view of men as opposed to men like Bill created her view. In each of the episodes in which Bill is looking for a body, the viewer is evaluating the women from the same point of view as Bill, or the viewer is in a "neutral," although

still voyeuristic, position. These camera angles force the viewer into a complicity with Bill. At this point, the viewer is caught between fear and fascination: one's fear for the woman's predicament and one's fascination with danger, masochism, and/or watching.

While Bill is searching for a body, the head also "separates" itself from the sympathies of the viewer through its antagonistic and ultimately deadly interactions with the rather dim-witted assistant. Just as Bill controls Jan's fate, so also does Jan control the assistant's; the result of this is that the assistant is the ultimate victim, both of the doctor's failed experiments and Jan's revenge. Jan, as head, is mechanized; her hair is covered, her face is taut, and she appears threatening. No longer is she a conventional "damsel in distress," but like the pod people in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, she is now part of the horror; she is no longer savable. As our sympathies are drawn away from Jan, we are led to focus on the women who may become the next bodies/ victims; in doing this, we are led to participate in the splitting of the female into the sexual and the socially acceptable, privileging the mindless body.

The desire of Nick is concentrated on the sexual organs and the face, and since faces are juxtaposed with other bodies—Helena's head is juxtaposed with Anne's body and his mother's head is juxtaposed with Helena's torso —the fetishized element seems to be the body. Luce Irigaray states in *This Sex Which Is Not One* that female sexuality is plural and located in/throughout the body:

> So woman does not have a sex organ? She has at least two of them, but they are not identifiable as ones. Indeed, she has many more. Her sexuality, always at least double, goes even further: it is *plural*. . . . But *woman has sex organs more or less everywhere*. She finds pleasure almost anywhere. Even if we refrain from invoking the hystericization of her entire body, the geography of her pleasure is far more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle. (**28**)

What Nick cannot understand is that he cannot control the female body or its sexuality by merely removing certain limbs; Helena can experience sexual pleasure without external physical assistance. In one scene, Nick brings a woman, who is dressed in the fetish lingerie of a prostitute, to the house and has sex with her. Meanwhile, Helena is behind a screen watching and appears to undergo orgasm while she is watching. One could either

assume that she is turned on by Nick's success, or she could be pleasuring herself—a representation of Irigaray's theory of the two lips of the vagina which touch themselves, creating pleasure complete in itself. Here, Helena becomes the viewer along with the audience, and the object is now the beautiful male body; the roles are reversed, and the female is the only enjoying it. Clearly, this is a critique of overly-simplistic theories of visual pleasure in film as well as demonstrating the possibilities for an inversion of the filmic hegemonies. In the 1990s, women directors had more opportunities and studio support than in the 1950s and 1960s, and thus opportunities for critique are also greater. Irigaray's notion of the female body is one of power, a power which Nick cannot appropriate because he cannot understand its diversity, multiplicity, complexity, or subtlety. This is not to suggest that she is free—her confinement in the house would counter that—but that her body and her sexuality are beyond Nick's capacity to commodify and control.

Much of the attempt to re-create or modify the female body can be traced at some level to the castration complex. In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey writes that the male has two means of escape from castration anxiety:

> preoccupation with the re-enactment of the original trauma (investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery), counter-balanced by the devaluation, punishment or saving of the guilty object; or else complete disavowal of castration by the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous (hence overvaluation, the cult of the female star). (**21**)

In both *The Brain* and *Boxing Helena*, the male protagonists act to mask the sign of castration: both men are doctors, both women are missing parts of their bodies, and both women become fetishes for the doctors. As doctors, Bill and Nick have the privileged social position of healer *and investigator* of the problems of the human body. Both men within their respective films demonstrate the ability to heal the (male) patients when other doctors have failed or lack the knowledge: Bill brings his father's patient back from the dead with experimental practices; Nick reattaches the hand of a boy with a new technique that he has devised. The male patients are saved, but the females are dismembered. The head is the only part of Jan which remains; what

effectively has happened is the removal of the "lack." Jan can no longer reflect or represent castration if she no longer has "no thing" to reflect. Jan becomes fetish, not of sexual desire, but of social desire; the disembodied head is not given any sexuality or sensuality (her hair is covered, her face is shown as pale, cold, and stern), but since it lacks sexuality, it becomes the socially desired attribute of the male seeking acceptance into patriarchal Puritan-American society. Likewise, Doris cannot reflect Bill's castration anxiety because she is always seen as having no head; the photographers and artists "decapitate" her each time they shoot or draw her—they never include her scarred face. By decapitating her, the males within the film can see her only as fetish; she is not a person, but a body which exists independently. Before any of her limbs are ever amputated, Helena represents, for Nick, castration, as it is defined by Irigaray, "the threat of losing the capacity for genital sexual pleasure" (**55**). She possesses and receives pleasure from a sexuality which he desires and lacks; therefore, he must mask her sexuality and make it dependent upon him for pleasure. The choice of Sands, a particularly non-macho actor, paired with the overtly sexual Fenn (Jennifer Lynch originally wanted Madonna, and when that fell through, Kim Basinger took the role, but she too backed out), seems to present Nick as surrounded by sexuality (Helena and his mother) and unable to know what to do. To find pleasure, then, he removes Helena's limbs, symbolically re-"castrating" her in a feeble attempt to assert his own masculinity; he removes her appendages to counter his sense that she and his mother have effectively removed the pleasure he can receive from his penis.

By proposing that the fetish situates the spectator in the theatre as opposed to on the screen during its presence, the critic allows the desire for the fetish also to exist within the spectator as simulation. This ultimately means that the spectator is not critiqued, only the director is. But the director, producer, or writer is not the only one who has the fantasy or desire for the fetishized body. Georges Bataille comments that it is common knowledge that "[*v*]*ice is the deep truth at the heart of man*" (**184**). For vice to be a "deep truth" requires of it more than a simple desire; sadomasochism, cannibalism, and incest are just a few of the more disturbing desires which Bataille discusses. If these desires become represented as fetish, then the critic is missing what may be a far more sinister element of the cinematic creation of sexual and power politics. Similarly, Deleuze and Guattari mention that "fantasies are group fantasies" (**42**). Why is it that the fantasy for the fetishized body is the cause for

the spectator's removal from the reality of the screen? Would not the fetish, instead, be the mechanization for the further incorporation of the spectator into the fantasy of the film? Constance Penley, in her critique of the bachelor machines, [**4**] suggests that they clearly remind us of film. Given her definition of the bachelor machines, one can recognize the parallels and the desires involved; the real significance in the desire of the fetish does not seem to be mere objectification, but a more literal and violent recreation of the female body, at times sadistic and dismembering. Admittedly, the fetish metaphorically separates the woman from her body, but it may well go beyond the metaphoric; and furthermore, the fetish does not necessarily imply a parallel separation of the spectator from his reality.

The female body as fetish clearly appears in both films, but the desire which produces such a fetish does not seem to be critiqued substantially within either film, or if it is, it seems to be undermined by the endings of the films. [**5**] In *The Brain*, there are two fetishes: the social fetish, Jan, and the sexual fetish, Doris. As I have proposed earlier, Jan represents the socially acceptable woman, and the desire for her is a desire to be accepted by the Father. There is no sexual desire for the head, but there is the knowledge that if she is joined with a sexual body, then Bill will have a partner who is both socially acceptable to the outside world and sexually desired by the individual.

The use of fetish in *Boxing Helena* is far more obvious, and thus there is the possibility that it is being critiqued within the text. We can clearly see the use of the fetish from the beginning through the strategic shots of the marble copy of the *Venus de Milo* which sits in Nick's mother's house (which becomes his). The original which stands in the Louvre represents in the history of Western art and aesthetics an ideal of beauty and form. Auguste Rodin, himself a sculptor who frequently created finished sculptures with missing limbs, said of the *Venus de Milo*, "This work is the expression of the greatest antique inspiration; it is voluptuousness regulated by restraint; it is the joy of life cadenced, moderated by reason" (**Gsell 214**). We can see in these remarks the clear fetish for the female body; in it Rodin sees the greatest inspiration of the Greeks and a joy of life. The female body as art becomes the object of male artists. In much the same way as Rodin creates sculptures, Nick "creates" Helena: he cuts off her legs and arms and then situates her in carefully framed *tableaux*. After he has amputated all her limbs, he constructs a throne-like box in which to place her. In a frightfully telling scene, Nick dresses Helena in

a white gown and places her in her box on the table where she is surrounded by white flowers. The image evokes both wedding and funeral as well as religious altar; connecting marriage for the woman with death as well as connecting the art/religious object with death creates a space of critique. The scene is remarkably brief, but if the spectator is aware of all the imagery and motifs which seem to converge, then s/he can read this scene as one which posits that religion, marriage and high art, all constructions of patriarchal society, represent or function as death for the woman within the society and signify a control of the female body.

If there is a critique of the desire of dismemberment or the objectification of the female body within either film, it ultimately seems negated or diminished by the ending. Angela Carter suggests that any explicit sexual relation creates its own critique by its very existence:

> sexual relations between men and women always render explicit the nature of social relations in the society in which they take place and, if described explicitly, will form a critique of those relations, even if that is not and never has been the intention of the pornographer. (**20**)

To some extent, I find considerable validity in this argument; pornography, or any other material which produces rapture in its viewer, does form an unintended self-critique by its very existence. The question which must be asked, however, is: "who reads the text as self-critique?" If only those opposed to such representation or expression of desires read it as critique and those who engage in the pornographic desires miss the critique, then does it really critique itself? For a text to be a critique of itself, there must be some marker within the text which would create a disturbance in the reader/ viewer, not necessarily something which would make the reader aware of the critique, but something that would disrupt the narrative and not allow the reader simple and non-responsible egress.

In *Boxing Helena*, the critique, while it may exist, is subverted by the endings, first where Nick regains consciousness and then when he wakes up. In both endings, he is safely out of his dream and free of the responsibility. Likewise, the spectator is freed from any responsibility and then *can* identify with the protagonist because the entire episode is just a dream. There was no physical violence, and therefore there are no real consequences. The spectator can leave the theater with

the knowledge that the fantasy is safely fantasy; there is no reality for which s/he could be held responsible. The film concludes after Nick has gotten out of bed, walks over to the *Venus de Milo* with the statements "I am still haunted by my love for her. Those dreams" echoing through his head, and bows his head to the statue so that his forehead is against its lips, creating the appearance of a maternal kiss. To be haunted by love and dreams suggests that the fantasy is not completely desired, if desired at all; the fantasy becomes nightmare. Can this be a critique if, when Nick is shown outside of his dream, he is not the sadistic aggressor but instead the victim of dreams, stemming from his relationship with his mother, that he cannot escape. The threat in this film is psychological, at times making it more sinister than *The Brain*, but also making it more difficult to define. We all have desires that we do not enact; if they stay within our minds, are they okay. If they stay on the screen and are not transferred to "real life," are they okay? Lynch does not seem to answer these questions, but leaves them open, forcing the viewer to at least consider their consequences.

In *The Brain*, there does not seem to be any critique of masculine desire; neither does it have the stock Hollywood ending where good is rewarded and evil is defeated. At first it may seem like the ending provides the death of Bill and thus of his desire to recreate the body; however, he is only unconscious and the fire has not spread from the lab table when the film abruptly ends. Of the two living characters within the room, [**6**] it is only Jan who one could really say is going to die; there is a definite sense that Bill may survive. *The Brain* begins with a man being brought back from the dead; Jan is decapitated and burned, and yet she "survives"; can the viewer really believe that a small lab fire and unconsciousness will mean the death of Bill? If Bill does not die, then the desire/fantasy survives and the only victim is Jan, who, because she has moved into a non-sympathetic space of aggression against the assistant, is not really seen as innocent at the end. The ending, as horror film, allows the viewer to exit the theatre to a fear that the threat has not been contained; however, the threat does not seem to be the desire, or the subconscious, but the man himself, Bill.

While I have mentioned earlier that the role of the spectator is one of identification with the protagonist, that identification is only one facet of the process. Although Mulvey, in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," describes the spectator of narrative cinema as primarily sadistic male, criticism since 1975, including

her own has expanded the investigation of the viewer to include female viewers and more complicated male viewers. This expanded criticism is vital because, even though the majority of viewers of horror films are young males, there is still a significant percentage of the horror film audience which is young females (**Clover 6**). Clover uses the analogy of dream interpretation to help demonstrate that viewer identification can be both with the attacker *and* the attacked:

> just as attacker and attacked are expressions of the same self in nightmares, so they are expressions of the same viewer in horror film. We are both Red Riding Hood *and* the Wolf; the force of the experience, in horror, comes from "knowing" both sides of the story. (**12**)

This observation enables one to explain spectators in terms which do not simply reduce them to sadistic males or masochistic females. In *The Brain* and *Boxing Helena*, the viewer is provided with the standard attacker and attacked characters, although each is an extreme position: obsessed experimenter or mutilated experiment. What makes these films engaging may be, at one level and to one audience, a desire to control or create the female body, but what seems more likely is that the viewer shifts perspective throughout the film or embodies both perspectives.

At the opening of *The Brain*, Bill represents the progressive healer with whom the audience can align. As he is driving recklessly up mountain road, he becomes terrifyingly maniacal. If the viewer acknowledges the terror, then s/he is placed in the space of Jan. Once Jan is decapitated, the viewer is placed in the very awkward position of lacking a viable character with whom to associate. Fortunately, this dilemma does not last long. Bill is soon looking for a woman to become Jan's body, and the viewer shifts associations to the various women, even though the camera reflects either Bill's or an "objective" perspective. Given Doris antagonistic first remarks, there is the possibility that the viewer may maintain Bill's perspective, or once again, lose a viable space. Once Doris becomes more amenable, the viewer can align him-/herself with her, which then becomes a masochistic or sympathetic move because the viewer knows Bill's intentions.

While much film criticism has insisted that viewer identification is dependent upon the camera position, in *The Brain*, as well as in some other horror films, even when the camera (and thus the viewer) is situated in the

attacker, the audience still can identify with the attacked or threatened individual. The viewer, from the site of the attacker, can also see and feel the terror of the one being attacked. This alignment is not so much narcissistic as it is merely a reflection of one's (un)natural fears and paranoias. Clearly, all members of an audience do not align with this perspective—there are frequently isolated cheers or remarks of encouragement when an attacker is approaching his victim—but there are generally greater numbers of gasps which would indicate a parallel alignment of audience members with the victim.

In *Boxing Helena*, viewer perspective shifts as well from attacker to attacked, but here it is more carefully scripted by camera positioning and ultimately creates stronger masochistic associations. Clover identifies this type of response in her discussion of masochistic fantasy:

> I would suggest that the correspondence is a masochistic fantasy; that people who make movies sense the iterative "my-turn-is-coming-soon" quality of victimization fantasies; that they consciously exploit the proved willingness of the viewer (proved because he keeps paying for it) to imagine himself as a "next victim." (**221**).

Although *Boxing Helena* is hardly a "victimization fantasy," almost any identification a viewer within this film would make could be described as masochistic. In *Coldness and Cruelty,* Deleuze critiques the role of the mother in masochism, a role which we will see bears striking resemblance to Nick and the subconscious recreation of his mother:

> But when it is linked with the image of the mother, the castration of the son becomes the very condition of the success of incest: incest is assimilated by this displacement to a second birth which dispenses with the father's role. "Interrupted love" is an important feature of masochism . . . its function is to facilitate the masochist's identification of sexual activity with both incest and second birth, a process which not only saves him from the threat of castration but actually turns castration into the symbolic condition of success. (**93-94**)

It is Nick's incestuous desire which drives the plot and yet continuously interrupts and disrupts his desire for sexual union; the desires, in effect, actively destroy each other, and in the process, "destroy" Nick. Since culture

instills, through the mother, the idea of castration and thus initiates the castration complex, it is the mother who symbolizes the threat, but it is also she whom he desires sexually. Here again we have the counteractive anxiety and desire; by "castrating" (amputating) his mother/Helena, Nick has created a symbol for his success. One must recall, however, that his success is masochistic; he succeeds as he destroys himself (and Helena). If the viewer is to assume any identification with Nick, then this identification would also be masochistic. Since we are aware of Nick's sexual anxieties from the outset, to associate ourselves with him would be to consciously/subconsciously take on his neuroses. It would be similarly masochistic for the viewer to associate with Helena; while there is some sympathy for the victim, to associate with her would be to put oneself in constant danger of being dismembered. Since both of the major characters represent potentially masochistic perspectives for the viewer, where can the viewer reside that is either "neutral" or only sadistic? Obviously, one does not reside in one character in these films; one shifts, and in *Boxing Helena*, this shifting is mirrored on the screen, creating its own critique of film, film theory, and voyeurism, and possibly, subject position and binary reductionism.

Although masochism is the desire that seems to drive both *The Brain That Wouldn't Die* and *Boxing Helena*, they are also dependent at some level on sadistic desire/pleasure existing within the viewer. Both attract and repel the viewer, force associations and disassociations. The difficulty in these films is realizing there is not a stable and viable perspective from which to watch, and that seems to be the final critique of the films. One cannot merely claim that certain narrative film cuts make the viewer conscious of the filmic nature of his/her experience; one is always *in* the film. The instability comes when one recognizes that film cannot be singularly narcissistic: Lacan points out that the mirror of identification is a *series* of *mis*-identifications. The individual in the mirror stage is continually seeing him-/herself in others. Identification is created not by one reflection, but by many. Similarly, one will never see oneself reflected, but multiple reflections of many different elements of oneself, from the frightening to the mundane.

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NOTES

1. See Michael Hardin's "Mapping Post-War Anxieties onto Space: *Invasion of the Body Snatchers and Invaders from Mars*," ENCULTURATION 1.1 (1997) http://www.uta.edu/huma/enculturation/1_1.

2. One of the clearest examples of this is the husband/doctor John in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story, "The Yellow Wallpaper."

3. I place the abuse in the subconscious because that is the only place within the film that it appears; we only see the mother in the son's dream. A psychoanalytic approach would suggest physical and/or sexual abuse, but it could not be conclusive.

4. "Bachelor machine" is a term taken from part of Marcel Duchamp's "Large Glass: The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even." Penley states that "the bachelor machine is typically a closed, self-sufficient system. Its common themes include frictionless, sometimes perpetual motion, an ideal time and the magical possibility of its reversal, electrification, voyeurism and masturbatory eroticism, the dream of mechanical reproduction of art, and artificial birth or reanimation" (**57**).

5. The "director's cut" of *Boxing Helena* supposedly lacked the printed ending. Without the dream ending, the film possesses what I would argue is a rather clear and strong critique of desire for the fetishized female body.

6. The assistant is dead in the corner and his one good arm has been torn off, assumingly by the monster at the insistance of Jan.
