

Flowing Forms, Pt. 2: Virtual Bodies

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In a mediascape increasingly dominated by high budget digital animation, it's become ever more difficult to deny the importance of special effects to cinema and new media histories. Special effects bodies - spectacular assemblages of biology and technics – have long been critical to the material, affective, and experiential dimensions of our bodily engagement with media. Recently, a loose genre of televised and internet based media objects which both foregrounds and effaces a central special effects body has rapidly gained in cultural prominence – true crime media. Within true crime television and podcasts, the body as media is both critically central and buried under layers of obfuscation and distance. *Exploring the body as media in the case of true crime makes visible the biomaterial and affective dimensions of viewer (and listener) engagement, and helps situate these media bodies within a longer history of corporeal (and necromantic) cultural objects, including the murder ballad.* Moreover, situating the body as media in true crime as part of a long heritage of special effects bodies, both within and without audiovisual media, opens us up to exploring the potentialities of the gut as a knowing, feeling, and even imagining system as a way of rerouting media experiences beyond sight and cognition; violence, death, and decay as it relates to biological and technological structures; and ethical and practical questions raised by the lives and deaths of both human and digitally constructed beings.

My interest in taking up special effects bodies was initially spurred by the fact that the vast majority of work on special effects has focused on the conversion to digitally coded and animated effects work. The global renaissance of increasingly spectacular bodily special effects work, particularly situated around the opening, manipulation, and dismembering or decomposition of the body in scenes of gore, which took place roughly between the 1960's and 1980's has almost entirely fallen out of academic focus, and largely has not entered into related investigations of taste, embodiment, haptics, or genre studies of horror and exploitation film. In approaching this gap, I've attempted not only to situate the cinematic special effects body within the long legacy of spectacular special effects bodies, both animal and human, identifiable in histories of both criminal legislation and scientific experiment and demonstration (among others), but also to reinscribe biological materiality of all kinds into our interaction with both digital and analogue media widely conceived. To that end, I suggest the concept of the enteric imaginary: a queer intervention which attends to the hyper-presence of the gut – its experiential, emotive, and image-generating capacities - in the affective dimensions of bodily special effects. The concept of the enteric imaginary beckons us to approach what is expressly material, and what “matters,” in systems which are typically conceived of as invisible or immaterial—both within media and within the body itself. Drawing on queer and feminist interventions on the body and animal and environmental studies allows us to explore the intersection of technological and biological (and even spectral) apparatuses, conceiving of these assemblages beyond simple technofuturist, cybernetic

notions of “jacking in” or often ableist ideas of constructing superhumanity through prosthetic praxis.

In recent years, and partially enabled by a wave of successful podcasts, a multimedia genre that has long existed has seemingly skyrocketed in both popularity and visibility – that of true crime. Podcasts like *Serial*, *Last Podcast on the Left* and *My Favorite Murder*, television series like *Mindhunter* and *Wild, Wild Country*, and even an entire television network (Investigation Discovery) have found popular success, joining older stalwarts like the tell-all book and long running procedurals like *Forensic Files*. While each of these should be understood within their medium-specific contexts, it is worth considering as well their participation in the long historical lineage of true crime media, including the broadside and the murder ballad. It is also critical to consider their curious engagement with the spectacular (special effects) body, primarily that of the murdered or mutilated victim, which is in turn both obfuscated and placed at center stage of these media products. By bringing to bear a multifaceted investigative approach to the “crime scene” of true crime media products, which attends to the primacy of biomaterial of the body as media, and also to the very body-based (and heavily enteric) engagement we as viewers or listeners have with these objects, we can better interrogate the haptic and affective dimensions of this increasingly popular multimedia genre, and its material evolution across multiple biological and technological platforms.