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What Remains of Gregor: Body Horror, Identity, and the Slow Violence of the Body

Stephen Craig Finlay[26], University of Nebraska at Omaha, Carmin Austin[27], University of Nebraska at Omaha

Abstract: This essay reinterprets Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* through a phenomenological lens, positioning it as a foundational text in the tradition of body horror. Rather than viewing Gregor Samsa's transformation as mere allegory, the essay argues that Kafka offers an early and unnerving meditation on the instability of embodied identity. Through close readings of Gregor's altered appetites, shifting spatial awareness, and emotional estrangement, *The Metamorphosis* emerges not as a symbolic fable but as a visceral account of what it means to inhabit a body that no longer supports the self. Drawing from theories of abjection, posthumanism, and cinematic horror, the analysis places Kafka in dialogue with later figures such as David Cronenberg, exploring how both render the body as a site of ontological crisis. The horror Kafka articulates is not spectacular but domestic—located in the erosion of empathy, the failure of care, and the quiet violence of being rendered illegible. By tracing these elements across literature and film, the essay reclaims *The Metamorphosis* as a critical precursor to body horror's philosophical core: the dread not of monsters, but of the body's betrayal.

Keywords: Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*, body horror, phenomenology, abjection, embodiment, posthumanism

1. Introduction: Kafka, Estrangement, and the Body

> "In effect, the characteristic ambiguity and fluidity of bodily boundaries in modern horror is seen to be substantially different to the typical boundary-breaching of earlier periods, because it gives expression to postmodern experiences of social fragmentation and to the constantly threatening confrontation between embattled "selves" and the risky and unreliable world that they inhabit." (Tudor 1997, 459)."

It is deeply fitting that David Cronenberg, a filmmaker synonymous with the aesthetics of body horror, was invited to write the foreword to Susan Bernofsky's recent translation of *The Metamorphosis*. "I woke up one morning recently to discover that I was a seventy-year-old man," Cronenberg begins, deliberately echoing Kafka's famous opening. His framing underscores the deep continuity between Kafka's narrative and the thematic territory body horror would later claim: the fear of transformation, the loss of bodily sovereignty, and the dissolution of identity within the vehicle of the flesh (Cronenberg 2014). The most identifiable practitioner of the "body horror" genre, Cronenberg's films offer audiences intimate perspectives on traumatic violations of the body which, instead of occurring due to the intervention of external violence, occur internally. The violence and destruction of bodies in body horror films is enacted via involuntary transformation from forms human to forms horrible and monstrous. Cronenberg's 1986 film *The Fly*—a grotesquely intimate meditation on transformation and loss—functions as a modern analogue to Kafka's earlier, more restrained narrative. Yet both works probe the

[26] ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0005-1709-065X, email: sfinlay@nebraska.edu.
[27] ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0000-7733-0786, email: carminaustin@unomaha.edu.

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same phenomenological rupture: what happens when the body ceases to reflect the self? The enduring cultural grip of Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*—its ability to transcend disciplinary boundaries and remain a touchstone in literature, theory, and popular discourse—suggests that its resonance extends far beyond its plot or historical context. Despite its brevity, Kafka's narrative captures something essential and unresolved about the human condition: the fraught relationship between the self and the body, between identity and embodiment. In a letter to Milena Jesenská, Kafka confided: "I can't explain to you or anyone else what it's like inside me. How could I explain why it is so? I can't even explain it to myself" (Kafka Nov. 1920). This admission of inarticulable inner experience—of the self as fundamentally inaccessible even to itself—prefigures the existential and phenomenological crisis rendered so viscerally in *The Metamorphosis*.

Through this lens, *The Metamorphosis* becomes a pioneering exploration of how bodily change can estrange the self from its own being, making Kafka an unacknowledged progenitor of a genre defined by lived corporeal dread. While Kafka's novella has long been studied across disciplines—religion, philosophy, psychoanalysis, Marxism—it was not until the 1980s that feminist and affect-centered critiques began reshaping the critical conversation. As Nina Pelikan Straus noted in 1989, the sheer volume of Kafka scholarship had long obscured the absence of gender-based approaches. The delay reflects not just institutional marginalization, but a broader critical hesitation to read Kafka's abstract alienation as rooted in the lived body, and the slow-burn betrayal of flesh and function.

Although the term body horror was coined in the last quintile of the 20th century (Brophy 1983), the experiences of body horror have been a part of horror writing for much, much longer. Mary Shelley wrote of the internal experience of Frankenstein's monster as he learns he is an assemblage of parts salvaged from the dead, and Bram Stoker of the transformations of disease and anxieties over bodily contamination, sexuality, and degeneration embedded in the figure of the vampire. These early texts explore the horror of the body not as spectacle, but as ontological rupture—where identity is destabilized from within by biological, technological, or supernatural forces. Long before body horror became a named genre, it was already staging the loss of bodily coherence as a site of existential dread.

Yet Kafka's narrative also participates in a much older literary genealogy. The transformation of the human body into nonhuman form has served as a metaphor for instability and punishment since Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, where bodily change mirrored divine judgment or emotional excess. Kafka inherits this topos but internalizes it: metamorphosis becomes not the result of a god's whim but of the body's own rebellion against the self. In this sense, *The Metamorphosis* transforms the classical mythic motif into a modern phenomenological crisis—one in which estrangement arises not from fate, but from flesh.

2. Theorizing Body Horror: From Kafka to Cronenberg

Peter Hutchings offers what should be the standard definition of the genre of body horror, writing that it presents "graphic and sometimes clinical representations of human bodies that were in some way out of the conscious control of their owners. In a sense, body horror describes the ultimate alienation—alienation from one's own body—but this has often been coupled with a fascination with the possibility of new identities that might emerge from this" (Hutchings 2009, 41). This definition foregrounds two essential elements that resonate across the genre: the terror of losing sovereignty over one's own physical form, and the ambiguous, often ambivalent promise of transformation that may accompany that loss. In body horror, the body ceases to serve as the container or guarantee of identity and instead

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becomes a volatile site of instability, mutation, or estrangement. Hutchings' emphasis on "new identities" is particularly important for understanding Kafka's contribution to the genre, since *The Metamorphosis* does not simply depict a monstrous transformation but forces the reader to witness the dissolution of Gregor Samsa's human legibility from the inside out.

Similarly, Cronenberg's cinematic narratives explore what it means to undergo bodily change that is both horrifying and revelatory—often raising questions about whether identity survives when the body no longer affirms it. In both cases, the horror is not just in the grotesque body, but in the slow unraveling of subjectivity that follows from its betrayal, whether through malfeasance of science, (*The Fly*), medicine (*Shivers),* or media (*Videodrome*). As philosopher Dylan Trigg writes, "what is central to the genre of body horror is the sense of the body dissolving boundaries between inside and out, self and other, and the living and the dead. In each of these dyads, Cronenberg has crafted an account of identity torn asunder" (Trigg 2011, 83).

Anastasia Romanova (2023) probes the philosophical dimensions of body horror in David Cronenberg's films through two key concepts: the "strange object" and the "problem of corporeality." These frameworks illuminate not only the grotesque aesthetics of Cronenberg's cinema but also offer a powerful interpretive lens for understanding classic literary works such as Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. Though separated by medium and historical context, Cronenberg and Kafka converge in their dramatizations of bodily dissolution and the destabilization of identity. Romanova's "strange object" denotes a hybrid form that unsettles normative distinction—bodily, spatial, and narrative. In Cronenberg's oeuvre, these appear as parasitic appendages or biomechanical fusions; in Kafka's novella, they are embodied in Gregor Samsa's inexplicable transformation into a monstrous insect. Gregor, like Cronenberg's protagonists, inhabits a body that is at once familiar and grotesquely other, provoking intense affective responses—revulsion, pity, fear—from those around him and from the reader. His altered form disrupts the family's spatial order and social equilibrium, converting his room into a liminal site of isolation and failed containment. Moreover, Gregor becomes a symbolic vessel: his body absorbs and refracts a host of anxieties—familial obligation, economic failure, and existential alienation. He is, in effect, a proto–strange object, his monstrousness emerging not from an external invasion but from within, revealing latent truths about the human condition.

Romanova's second theoretical axis—the "problem of corporeality"—examines how the body is experienced, constructed, and interpreted within a posthuman or technologically mediated framework. Although Kafka's work predates such discourse, *The Metamorphosis* anticipates its central concerns. Gregor's transformation erodes the subject–object boundary: while he retains memory, guilt, and longing, his insectile form renders him irreducibly other. His identity unravels in tandem with his bodily mutation, making his body a communicative medium — expressing exhaustion, noncompliance, and the erosion of agency in ways language cannot. His family's refusal to recognize his humanity literalizes a broader crisis of empathy and interpretability.

Romanova's argument that Cronenberg's films expose our entanglement in biological, technological, and affective systems finds early articulation in Kafka's depiction of the family as a closed mechanism. Once Gregor loses economic functionality, he becomes a grotesque remainder — his body stripped of utility, revealing the cruel logics of recognition and care. In both Kafka and Cronenberg, horror becomes ontological: a confrontation with the body as unstable, a site where subjectivity and social legibility are always at risk. This framework provides a powerful lens through which to revisit Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. Gregor Samsa's inexplicable transformation into a giant insect echoes Cronenbergian body horror in that it violently disrupts the protagonist's social and ontological status without external

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cause or resolution. The grotesque mutation renders Gregor's human identity illegible, mirroring Cronenberg's visual destabilizations of the human form as explored in *The Fly*. From a posthumanist standpoint, both Kafka and Cronenberg challenge the liberal humanist notion of a coherent, autonomous self. In critical theory terms, the grotesque body in both works enacts what Julia Kristeva discusses as abjection—where the breakdown of bodily integrity unsettles the symbolic order, evoking both horror and fascination (Kristeva 1982).

In his essay "Abjection and Body Horror" (2020), Reyes explores how horror foregrounds corporeality as both spectacle and critique—insisting that the body, once altered or abjected, becomes a space of ideological conflict. Kafka anticipates this by placing Gregor in a state of "abject exception," where his body no longer signifies humanity, and where the horror stems not from monstrosity itself but from the social mechanisms that refuse to accommodate it. Reyes situates such abjection as a form of cultural policing, whereby the non-normative body is cast out to reaffirm the illusion of coherence and order.

Some readings of *The Fly* position the film as a technophobic allegory—a cautionary narrative about scientific hubris and the dangers of bodily experimentation. While these interpretations account for the narrative's bioethical dimension, they often overlook the film's intimate phenomenological core. Brundle's tragedy is not merely that he "goes too far" with science, but that his body becomes an unstable locus of identity—a site of transformation he can feel but no longer control. Like Kafka's Gregor, Brundle inhabits a form that erodes the continuity of selfhood, straining language, intimacy, and memory. A phenomenological lens thus reveals a horror less about spectacle than about the unraveling of embodied subjectivity. Both Kafka and Cronenberg ask: what remains of the self when the body no longer answers to it? Rather than understanding *The Metamorphosis* and *The Fly* as separated by genre, medium, or era, a phenomenological approach reveals their shared investment in articulating the affective texture of bodily betrayal. What unites them is the way horror is experienced—incrementally, viscerally, and internally.

In this intertextual landscape, *The Metamorphosis* emerges not simply as a modernist literary artifact but as a malleable, transhistorical text capable of being reimagined through the lenses of feminist critique, horror theory, psychoanalysis, and media studies. Whether read as a philosophical allegory, a psychoanalytic case study, a commentary on modern alienation, or a proto-horror narrative, Kafka's work retains its uncanny power to elicit both scholarly engagement and cultural recognition—often without the necessity of direct textual familiarity.

Such a reading situates *The Metamorphosis* within a broader tradition of cultural texts that, while not generically "horror," nonetheless incorporate horrific elements to explore underlying anxieties about subjectivity, illness, aging, and the fragility of corporeal integrity. Kafka's narrative suggests a philosophical instability at the heart of the Cartesian divide: if Gregor's essence remains internally coherent but his body marks him as Other, is he still himself? Or does the body reconstitute the self anew, rewriting the internal subject according to external signs of monstrosity? This ontological instability is central to what makes *The Metamorphosis* resonant across genres and disciplines, particularly within comparative literary studies where thematic constellations often transcend rigid genre classifications. While this essay returns to bodily transformation across multiple registers—sensory, spatial, social—it does so to emphasize the layered phenomenology of horror: a recursive estrangement that deepens with each broken connection between self and form.

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3. Anxiety and Genre: Cultural Frameworks of Horror

The audiences who first viewed *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* in 1956 were steeped in Cold War anxiety and the rhetoric of infiltration. Don Siegel's film transformed ideological paranoia into alien invasion, using horror as a rehearsal space for collective dread. Later, post-9/11 horror such as *Saw* and *Paranormal Activity* would translate political fear and domestic precarity into images of bodily violation and haunted homes.

These cultural frames reveal horror's diagnostic power: it visualizes whatever a society most fears losing—security, stability, or bodily integrity. Kafka's *Metamorphosis* performs the same operation on an intimate scale. Where Cold War cinema externalized anxiety through monsters and aliens, Kafka turns it inward, locating paranoia in the home and the body itself. His horror is not geopolitical but domestic, not spectacular but slow, unfolding through missed meals, closed doors, and the quiet withdrawal of empathy.

As theorist Arief Hühn has noted, "As movies are generally thought to reflect the zeitgeist, horror movies can be seen as an indicator of what literally keeps society up at night" (Hühn 2019, para. 1). This insight affirms the genre's comparative utility: horror texts become diagnostic tools, illuminating the fears that haunt different societies across time and space. Ben McCann argues that the *Saw* franchise exemplifies post-9/11 American anxieties, transforming the human body into a symbolic site of political trauma, surveillance culture, and domestic instability. Through scenes of grotesque bodily violation, the films allegorize the erosion of civil liberties, national identity, and corporeal integrity in an era marked by Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, and a culture increasingly desensitized to institutional violence (McCann 2013).

Similarly, the collapse of the housing bubble in the early 2000s—an economic crisis that left many homeowners figuratively and literally trapped in spaces that threatened to ruin them—coincided with a marked resurgence in the haunted house subgenre. Films such as *Paranormal Activity* (2007) resonated precisely because they dramatized the home not as a site of refuge but as a locus of entrapment and spectral danger (Leyda 2016; Valencia 2017). The uncanny in these narratives emerges not simply from supernatural phenomena, but from the disintegration of domestic and economic security.

These intermedial and cross-cultural articulations of horror offer rich terrain for analysis. They demand a methodology attuned to allegory, genre migration, historical contextualization, and the semiotic plasticity of fear. Horror becomes a transnational language through which collective anxieties are externalized, confronted, and transformed into cultural memory. In this sense, horror is not merely reactive but constitutive—it helps shape the narratives through which societies make sense of their most profound and unsettling experiences. A text need not belong explicitly to the horror genre to function as an articulation of the fears horror so often thematizes. In fact, the incorporation of horrific elements into otherwise non-horror texts can serve to amplify, rather than dilute, their thematic potency. The grotesque, the uncanny, and the abject—concepts long explored by theorists such as Freud, Kristeva, and Carroll—function as discursive tools that blur the boundaries between genre and affect, between thematic content and readerly experience.

Yet the value of this cultural framing becomes clearest when we return again to Kafka's prose, where the horror of transformation unfolds with quiet intimacy. What makes *The Metamorphosis* endure is not its allegorical abstraction, but its visceral attention to the lived experience of bodily betrayal. In the following pages, we move into close readings of Gregor's evolving estrangement—from appetite to memory to affective disintegration.

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3.1 *Metamorphosis* as Body Horror: Estrangement, Memory, and Loss

One of the most compelling aspects of *The Metamorphosis* is its depiction of the evolving dissonance between Gregor Samsa's consciousness and his transformed body. This tension—between an enduring interior self and an increasingly alien physical form—structures the narrative's affective power. Early signs of bodily estrangement appear in his altered appetites. Once comforted by milk and bread, Gregor recoils from these familiar foods, discovering pleasure instead in spoiled scraps. His sister's attempts to feed him reflect both tentative care and growing revulsion, capturing how transformations of the body quickly corrode social intimacy.

"By the door he first noticed what had really lured him there: it was the smell of something to eat. For there stood a bowl filled with sweetened milk, in which swam tiny pieces of white bread. He almost laughed with joy, for he now had a much greater hunger than in the morning, and he immediately dipped his head almost up to and over his eyes down into the milk. But he soon drew it back again in disappointment, not just because it was difficult for him to eat on account of his delicate left side (he could eat only if his entire panting body worked in a coordinated way), but also because the milk, which otherwise was his favorite drink and which his sister had certainly placed there for that reason, did not appeal to him at all. He turned away from the bowl almost with aversion and crept back into the middle of the room" (Kafka 2003, 21)

This sense of continuity is disrupted when Gregor, now in the form of a giant insect, finds that his physiological appetites no longer align with his emotional responses. The joy he experiences at the anticipation of food remains intact, reflecting the vestiges of human desire, yet the bodily mechanisms through which that desire is now satisfied have changed radically. What once constituted comfort and nourishment for Gregor's human form now repulses his altered body. As such, the act of consumption—ordinarily mundane—becomes estranged, reconfigured by the alien biology that now determines his sensory world.

This estrangement deepens when Gregor overhears a conversation between his mother and sister about removing his furniture to accommodate his new mobility. Though practical, this proposal raises existential stakes: the emptying of his room would erase the last traces of his human past. His conflicted response—part relief, part horror—highlights the paradox of his condition. The space he needs as an insect becomes a symbolic void, one that threatens to obliterate memory and identity:

"As he heard his mother's words Gregor realized that the lack of all immediate human contact, together with the monotonous life surrounded by the family over the course of these two months must have confused his understanding, because otherwise he couldn't explain to himself that he in all seriousness could've been so keen to have his room emptied. Was he really eager to let the warm room, comfortably furnished with pieces he had inherited, be turned into a cavern in which he would, of course, then be able to crawl about in all directions without disturbance, but at the same time with a quick and complete forgetting of his human past as well?" (Kafka 2003,31).

In this moment, Gregor's desperate effort to preserve a single object: the framed print of a woman in furs, takes on poignant symbolic weight. Garish and sentimental, it nonetheless holds immense meaning as one of the last markers of his identity. No longer simply decorative, the picture becomes a relic—a stand-in for desire, subjectivity, and the bourgeois domestic life he once inhabited. His frantic effort to protect it reflects not just a clinging to aesthetic taste but a refusal to be wholly rewritten by his new form.

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This attempt to preserve a vestige of his former self, however, ends in catastrophe. In the chaotic aftermath of Gregor's effort to shield the picture on the wall, his mother suffers a breakdown, and his father misreads the entire episode as an act of aggression. Gregor's attempt to cling to a symbol of his humanity is thus perceived as monstrous behavior.

"Thus, Gregor now had to find his father to calm him down, for he had neither the time nor the opportunity to clarify things for him. And so he rushed away to the door of his room and pushed himself against it, so that his father could see right away as he entered from the hall that Gregor fully intended to return at once to his room, that it was not necessary to drive him back, but that one only needed to open the door and he would disappear immediately" (Kafka 2003,35).

In this moment, Kafka captures the cruel irony at the heart of Gregor's transformation: that gestures meant to communicate peace, remorse, or recognition are instead interpreted through the grotesque semiotics of his new form. Gregor has not merely lost language—he has lost access to the shared symbolic order that allows bodies to be read as intelligible and non-threatening. What remains is not simply abjection, but misrecognition: a horror grounded in being rendered not only unhuman, but unreadable.

Whereas his earlier change in diet had signaled a relatively superficial shift—an accommodation to new sensory appetites—this confrontation with the loss of his furnishings signals a deeper existential crisis. What is at stake is no longer taste, but memory; not preference, but personhood. The battle over the room's furniture becomes a struggle over the preservation of his humanity. Later in the narrative, Kafka offers a moment of unexpected emotional clarity: Gregor's response to his sister's music. Though physically degraded and socially exiled, he experiences a sudden aesthetic and affective reawakening: "And yet his sister was playing so beautifully. Her face was turned to the side, her gaze followed the score intently and sadly. Gregor crept forward still a little further and kept his head close against the floor in order to be able to catch her gaze if possible. Was he an animal that music so seized him? For him it was as if the way to the unknown nourishment he craved was revealing itself to him" (Kafka 2003,44).

This passage dramatizes the ontological ambiguity at the heart of Kafka's horror. Gregor's body has become wholly Other, but his inner life retains traces of longing, aesthetic sensitivity, and emotional need. The sister's music acts as both a trigger and a test: it summons what is left of Gregor's humanity while underscoring his irreparable distance from it. He craves recognition—not just visually, in seeking his sister's gaze, but metaphysically, through some confirmation that he is still intelligible to others and to himself. Kafka thus stages the horror of abjection not merely through revulsion or decay, but through unresolved tenderness—remnants of human affect flickering within a body that no longer supports their expression. The "nourishment" he seeks is not food, but communion: an affirmation that despite his altered form, some part of him remains capable of feeling, meaning, and being, and he seems to reach desperately for these as a counterargument to his own physical form.

These moments capture episodes of profound fracture between perception of self and actuality of self. Far from unique to Gregor, these are universal human experiences. The body transforms and deteriorates and our interior selves so often cling to belief long after they evidence themselves in fact. Estrangement is not only physical but mnemonic and emotional. The horror lies not in Gregor's loss of human speech or mobility alone, but in the creeping dissolution of personal history, of affective ties, of the very coordinates that once made life intelligible. In this way, *The Metamorphosis* offers a chilling meditation on the slow violence of abjection—how even gestures of care can become vehicles of erasure when the body no longer signifies within normative frameworks.

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3.2 Horror as Universal Lived Experience

Although *The Metamorphosis* is not generically positioned within horror literature, it mobilizes many of the affective strategies and tropes associated with the body horror tradition. As biologist and critic Ronald Allan Lopez Cruz observes in his analysis of David Cronenberg's *The Fly* (1986), body horror "finds strength in the way that it goes against what is considered normal anatomy and function in biological species (not limited to human): that it is indeed biological horror" (Cruz 2012, 161). His formulation situates body horror as not merely a genre or aesthetic but a mode of representation that foregrounds the instability and vulnerability of embodied existence. Cruz's discussion spans several canonical entries in the body horror canon, including *John Carpenter's The Thing* (1982), Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), and Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979). In each of these texts, characters confront the collapse or distortion of biological norms through traumatic metamorphoses, forced gestations, or invasive contamination. The horror arises not solely from external threats, but from within: the body becomes a site of unknowability, of betrayal, of becoming-other.

In Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, the transformation lacks the emotional spectacle typically associated with cinematic horror. Gregor's response is not one of visceral panic or existential despair; rather, his primary concern lies in the potential consequences for his job—a reaction that satirizes the dehumanizing effects of capitalist labor and bourgeois responsibility. And yet, by narrating Gregor's experience from within his transformed perspective—through his compound eyes, so to speak—Kafka invites the reader to inhabit the uncanny space of bodily otherness. The text induces a kind of readerly body horror, not through sensationalism but through an affective estrangement that renders the familiar (food, family, the body itself) suddenly foreign.

This literary strategy aligns The Metamorphosis with other works that blur the lines between modernist alienation and genre horror. In reading Kafka alongside later cinematic expressions of biological disruption, one observes a shared thematic concern: the instability of embodied identity and the terror of becoming unrecognizable to oneself and others. Initially, Gregor registers dissonance through failed appetites, and evolves into new facets of disconnection. Whether manifesting as a monstrous parasite, a hybrid birth, or an insectile shell, the transformation of the body marks a crisis of legibility—social, affective, and ontological.

Thus, while *The Metamorphosis* resists easy categorization, its engagement with the aesthetics and anxieties of body horror allows it to converse across temporal and generic boundaries. It is this capacity to evoke horror without declaring itself as such that renders Kafka's work especially compelling for comparative inquiry—at once modernist parable, philosophical allegory, and proto-body horror narrative. The act of consuming cheese through mandibles rather than lips, of finding joy in rot and revulsion in freshness, becomes emblematic of a deeper philosophical meditation on embodiment, identity, and the fragile coordinates of the human.

In this light, Gregor's desperate later attempt to save the framed print of the woman in furs acquires poignant symbolic resonance. This painting, garish and kitsch as it may be, stands as one of the last remnants of his human identity. It is not merely an object of aesthetic or erotic value, but a metonymic relic of his former self—a vestige of desire, sociality, and bourgeois domestic life. His frantic clinging to the image is a resistance to being fully overwritten by his new biological form. It is a moment of affective insistence, a refusal to capitulate entirely to the insectile logic of his body.

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Such tensions exemplify what would later come to be identified as the defining characteristics of body horror—a genre that, although not formalized until decades after Kafka's writing, finds in *The Metamorphosis* a clear forerunner. Film critic Robin Wood's oft-cited assertion that "normality is threatened by the monster" (Wood 1979, 14) encapsulates the basic structure of horror narratives across media and eras. In *The Metamorphosis*, however, the monstrous is not an external invader but an internal transformation. The threat to normality arises not from the Other, but from within the self—a crisis of identity, memory, and embodiment.

This is, perhaps, why horror has proven such an enduring framework for examining both collective and individual anxieties or, in Wood's reading, the return of a repression in the form of the monster (Wood ibid.). Whether during the Cold War, when nuclear annihilation and ideological infiltration seemed imminent; during the Vietnam War, with its language of "quagmire" and irreversible entanglement; or during the financial devastation of the housing crisis and Great Recession, horror narratives have emerged in moments when the boundaries of normality are under siege. They provide narrative scaffolding through which cultures can stage, witness, and work through their disorientation.

The central question, then, is what anxiety animates *The Metamorphosis*—what persistent cultural fear accounts for its continued resonance, especially in relation to horror? Unlike other historically contingent anxieties, which tend to subside or shift as sociopolitical conditions evolve, Kafka's narrative taps into a far more enduring human concern: the ontological instability of the body itself. Across cultures and epochs, one truth remains inescapable—the human body is not static. It ages. It declines. It betrays. It dies.

This awareness is not merely abstract; it is viscerally inscribed into lived experience. Unless death comes swiftly through accident or violence, it is the body itself—failing, breaking down—that will ultimately usher in the end of the self. In this sense, *The Metamorphosis* speaks to a universal dread: that no matter how vibrant our personalities, how rich our inner lives, it is our biological form that shapes and finally determines our fate. The horror here is not one of narrative spectacle or supernatural intrusion, but of biological determinism—a genre-defining terror in its own right.

These readings open pathways toward broader reflection on aging, disease, and corporeal vulnerability in global literatures. The slow, inexorable loss of human distinction in Gregor's case parallels cross-cultural myths and narratives of decay, from classical metamorphosis myths to contemporary stories of dementia, disability, and terminal illness. What unites these narratives is the confrontation with what philosopher Drew Leder calls "the dys-appearing body," (Leder 1990, 83), the body that ceases to function transparently and instead becomes a visible, obtrusive object of distress.

In *The Metamorphosis*, Kafka thus prefigures an entire mode of literary and cinematic inquiry that would later find expression in horror and science fiction. His novella reminds us that horror need not be bloody to be brutal, nor monstrous to be terrifying. The true horror lies in the body's capacity to change without consent, and to erase memory not with violence, but with quiet, physiological inevitability. Here, his bodily illegibility signals a social death as much as a physical one.

As Gregor's condition deteriorates, the family's fortunes appear to improve—a cruel reversal that marks the final phase of his estrangement. Their transformation, unlike Gregor's, is socially legible and economically validated: they work harder, save money, and begin planning a future without him. But Kafka introduces a bitter irony here, cloaked in the sterile language of social mobility. "What the world demands of poor people they now carried out to an extreme degree." The father now flatters petty bank officials, the mother toils in domestic drudgery for strangers, and the sister, once tender, responds to every customer's call. Their new roles offer no liberation, only reclassification. Like worker drones, they

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have adapted—physically and behaviorally—to survive under the logic of capitalism. This parallel metamorphosis is not redemptive but insectile in its own way.

"The father bought breakfast to the petty officials at the bank, the mother sacrificed herself for the undergarments of strangers, the sister behind her desk was at the beck and call of customers… And the wound in his back began to pain Gregor all over again, when now mother and sister… sat cheek to cheek… and when his mother would now say, pointing to Gregor's room, 'Close the door, Grete,'" (Kafka 2003,39).

Here, Kafka links physical suffering with emotional exclusion, and domestic tenderness with bureaucratic cruelty. Capitalism's slow violence has completed its work: Gregor is no longer just abject—he is surplus. The horror, finally, is that his death will be neither noticed nor mourned, that even though he is still, he believes, internally Gregor, the final verdict of this question has long since been rendered by the world, regardless of which touchstones to which he may yet cling.

As Gregor declines, his family ascends—adapting, economizing, and ultimately excising him from their lives. This inverse arc, where their survival depends on his erasure, mirrors the dehumanizing logic of capitalism itself. In what follows, we turn to the family's metamorphosis: a transformation no less profound than Gregor's, but one that is rewarded rather than punished. And yet, Kafka does not allow this arc to end in simple alienation. In his final hours, Gregor is filled not with rage or despair, but with love—a final act of interior humanity that complicates the text's horror. This last movement examines Gregor's death not as the conclusion of monstrosity, but as a site of unresolved identity: a moment where the soul lingers even as the body fails.

In this light, *The Metamorphosis* operates not just as modernist fable but as an early articulation of what Reyes calls "corporeal transgression"—a horror grounded not in spectacle, but in duration, illegibility, and affective unraveling.

4. Body, Disease and Dying

In "The Invisible Giant, Dracula, and Disease," Martin Willis argues that Dracula allegorizes the medical and cultural anxieties of late Victorian Britain by framing vampirism as a metaphor for infection. Rather than privileging a single medical model, the novel engages with the collapse of confidence in contagionism and miasmatism and the rise of germ theory, dramatizing a moment of epistemological instability in disease science (Willis 2007, 302–303). Characters like Van Helsing embody this uncertainty, blending folk remedies with modern medical practices. Crucially, Willis shows how Dracula reflects fears not just of physical contamination but of social disorder: disease becomes a vehicle for anxieties about gender, class, and imperial vulnerability. Lucy Westenra's decline, framed through failed medical intervention and hereditary weakness, marks the body as a contested space where illness signals both personal degeneration and cultural threat (Willis 2007, 315–316). By mobilizing conflicting theories of infection, Dracula reveals the Victorian body politic as fragile, porous, and increasingly destabilized by the invisible forces it cannot fully understand or control.

This same preoccupation with the body as a site of uncontrollable transformation extends into Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, where disease is not a literal contagion but a symbol for the slow, inescapable deterioration of the self through aging. While Dracula's vampirism externalizes the fear of infection and societal decay, Gregor Samsa's abrupt and grotesque transformation into a monstrous insect internalizes a more personal, existential terror: the inevitable betrayal of the body. His metamorphosis can be read as a nightmarish allegory for aging, a process that strips away autonomy, dignity,

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and identity no matter one's desires or efforts to resist it[28]. Gregor's helpless decline — his growing inability to move, to eat, to speak — mirrors the physical and psychological disintegration that often accompanies old age. His family's growing revulsion and neglect only deepen the horror, reflecting society's discomfort with the aged and infirm. In this way, *The Metamorphosis* offers a bleak meditation on the "disease" of aging: an irreversible transformation that alienates us from others and ourselves, and one that ultimately ends, as with all illnesses left untreated and unacknowledged, in death.

In his elegiac essay "A Thing About Cancer", Clinton Crockett Peters turns to John Carpenter's The Thing to articulate the ineffable experience of witnessing his father's death from cancer. He writes that "cancer, in its weird way, is an apex predator and a demon possessor," likening it to what H.G. Wells once described as "a blind fate, a vast pilotless mechanism" (Peters 2020, sec. 7, para. 2). The alien creature in The Thing, which assimilates and mimics its hosts until they are no longer recognizably themselves, becomes for Peters a metaphor for the silent, incremental horror of corporeal disintegration—one that renders the familiar body foreign and overtaken. Like cancer, and like aging itself, it "tears bodies apart, feasts on our organs, becomes us." This invocation of bodily betrayal—of a self gradually usurped from within—resonates powerfully with the affective logic of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, which portrays Gregor Samsa not merely as transformed, but as overwritten by the silent logic of his new biological form.

And yet, in Kafka's final rendering of Gregor's death, there is no spectacle—no gore, no screams, no horror in the cinematic sense. Instead, we are left with something hauntingly human: not the extinguishing of identity, but a last gesture of love.

"He remembered his family with deep feeling and love. In this business, his own thought that he had to disappear was, if possible, even more decisive than his sister's. He remained in this state of empty and peaceful reflection until the tower clock struck three o'clock in the morning. From the window he witnessed the beginning of the general dawning outside. Then without willing it, his head sank all the way down, and from his nostrils flowed out weakly out his last breath" (Kafka 2003,49).

This moment—stripped of dialogue, judgment, or pity—complicates the narrative of horror. Gregor is still capable of memory, affect, even self-sacrifice. If he is no longer fully human in form, he remains so in affective structure. For Kafka, bodily abjection does not necessarily mean the extinction of the self. The horror of The Metamorphosis thus ends not in spectacle, but in ambiguity: Was Gregor an insect, a man, or something else entirely? In this refusal to resolve the question of identity at the moment of death, Kafka gives us a horror rooted not only in loss, but in the persistence of humanity despite bodily ruin.

The daily reality of aging—the imperceptible but relentless accumulation of change—mirrors this horror of internal alienation. We wake each morning, as Peters notes, one day further from youth, one day closer to death, each moment marked by the quiet erosion of the familiar self. What once brought joy—foods, rituals, symbols of youth—begins to ring hollow, detached from the affective resonance it once held. This is the condition Kafka renders so unnervingly: a protagonist whose desires, sensations, and physical capabilities change without explanation, even as his consciousness continues to grasp toward the remnants of his former humanity. And yet in *The Metamorphosis*, strangely, there is hope. The betrayal of the body need not entail losing the soul as well.

[28] For a thorough examination of aging as a source of horror in cultural texts, see Guimarães, J. P. (Ed.). (2025). *Fear of aging: Old age in horror fiction and film*. Columbia University Press.

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Gregor's quiet passing does not resolve the story's horror but reframes it. *The Metamorphosis* refuses to classify its subject as man or monster, patient or pest. Instead, it dwells in the liminal space where identity flickers between forms. In concluding, we reflect on what Kafka reveals about the instability of the body, the limits of empathy, and the inescapable horror of change.

Across literature and film, across genres and generations, works discussed here converge on a central preoccupation: the horror not of violence or monsters, but of change itself. The body, once assumed to be the vessel of selfhood, emerges instead as the agent of its undoing. Whether in Kafka's silent monstrosity, Cronenberg's grotesque metamorphoses, or Carpenter's parasitic imitation, the texts discussed here evoke an anxiety that is both personal and universal—that our bodies will, inevitably, betray us; that our desires, sensations, and identities are ultimately contingent upon the biological form we inhabit. Traumatic physical transformations are an inescapable fact of living. Each time we inhabit these stations of living, we change, and we fear that the next transformation, arriving as they always do uninvited, will be the one that robs us of our true selves along the way.

5. Conclusion

The Metamorphosis endures not because it explains transformation, but because it refuses to. Gregor Samsa's insectile body is never rationalized, never named by science, and never fully assimilated by his family—or by the reader. What Kafka offers is not a symbolic key, but a sustained encounter with ontological uncertainty. The horror, as this essay has argued, lies in the slow unraveling of Gregor's legibility: his body ceases to signify within the codes of care, work, and kinship, and in doing so, reveals how precariously identity rests upon physical form. In Gregor's case, he finds his sustained humanity through love, right up until the end. May we all be so fortunate.

By reading Kafka's novella through the lens of body horror, we see how literary realism and genre fiction converge around shared questions: What does it mean to inhabit a body that no longer corresponds to memory, desire, or language? How do we respond to forms of embodiment that defy normalization? Kafka anticipates the genre's central preoccupation with these questions, but his approach is striking in its restraint. We find a world where horror is quiet, domestic, and bureaucratic—unfolding through missed meals, shifting furniture, and the soft withdrawal of empathy. In this way, *The Metamorphosis* speaks not only to the genre of horror but to its philosophical core. The terror it captures is not just about monstrosity but about change: the body that betrays, the self that dissolves, the slow violence of becoming unrecognizable. Whether read alongside Cronenberg's cinematic mutations, posthumanist theory, or cultural critiques of aging and illness, Kafka's text continues to resonate because it names a fear that is both intimate and inescapable—that we are always becoming, and that what we become may no longer be ourselves. Ultimately, Kafka's phenomenological horror reminds us that to inhabit a body is to risk its failure—a truth as ancient as Ovid and as contemporary as Cronenberg.

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Biography of the Authors

Stephen Craig Finlay is the Open Educational Resources and STEM Librarian at Dr. C.C. and Mabel L. Criss Library at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. He has published widely in areas including cultural criticism, librarianship, disciplinarity, and student success assessment.

Carmin Austin is currently studying fine arts at the University of Nebraska at Omaha and is an assistant in the Creative Production Lab, a makerspace at Criss Library, where she specialized in 3D printing and modelling, video and audio production and game design.

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