

**A Spectacle of Modified Bodies:
The Contemporary Grand-Guignolesque as a Feminist Challenge to
Somatophobia in *American Mary***

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What if you could make “five grand” in one night? Would you accept, even if it was illegal—even if you might be enticed to turn a single offer into an ongoing practice? In *American Mary* (2012), a horror film directed by the Canadian sisters Jen and Sylvia Soska, the protagonist, a medical student, takes such an offer but soon finds herself unable to come back to her normal life. *American Mary* centers on Mary Mason (Katharine Isabelle), a broke, aspiring surgeon who falls into the strange world of body modification (also known as “bodmod”) in order to obtain enough money to continue her studies. However, her life takes a dark turn when her oppressive medical school professor breaks her trust and rapes her at a party. After that traumatic experience, Mary is enticed by the earnings associated with bodmod surgery—and possibly the renewed agency she gains from this practice—and she leaves medical school to open her own underground clinic in the bodmod community. Focused on visceral surgical procedures that provoke affective meaning, *American Mary* offers a critical engagement with bodmod culture and normative patriarchal fears of the body as a site of transformation and (especially in the female body) adaptability. In its championing of bodies on display, *American Mary* is a Grand-Guignolesque horror movie that advances a feminist vision of erotic voyeurism where a woman can inhabit and be in control of her sexuality without being reduced by it.¹ *American Mary* explores

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the limits and limitations of body modification as a form of self-expression in order to show how our society's fear of the female body pushes unreasonable expectations onto women, and it concludes that we should instead celebrate and accept the diversity of bodies in our culture.

The Grand-Guignol was a French theater that, from 1897 to 1962, created its own genre of horror plays. Inspired by Emile Zola's political philosophy (Hand and Wilson, 2002: 3), the Grand-Guignol produced plays challenging bourgeois values while showing the daily life and struggles of the lower classes. Out of this naturalism eventually came a more strictly horror-focused theater, with some plays featuring surgical horror, especially those written by its most important playwright André de Lorde. Agnes Pierrot notes that the Grand-Guignol was described as the theater of blood, sweat and sperm (cited in Hand and Wilson, 2002: 3) for its horror plays mixed eroticism with underlying sexual themes. For example, one play, entitled *The Laboratory of Hallucinations* (André de Lorde, 1916) features a cruel brain surgeon who experiments on his wife's lover when he unexpectedly arrives in his clinic after being in an accident. Madly jealous, the surgeon discovers a letter from his wife letter in the man's pocket and proceeds to torture him through intrusive brain surgery. The Grand-Guignol's particular brand of horror became extremely popular, mostly for its visceral special effects and intense bodily spectacle. If the audience squirms at such a spectacle as offered above, it does so because of the play's appeal to the spectator's physical and emotional response as a way of touching upon common social and political realities—here, the intense emotions relating to human relationships and betrayal. I am interested here in three aspects of the classic Grand-Guignolesque tradition as it applies to *American Mary*: 1) its frequent focus on surgical horror as a motif that reminds the audience of its own bodily precarity; 2) its naturalistic content causing an affective bodily reaction in the audience; and 3), its combination of horror and erotic elements in its presentation of bodies and events.

The first two characteristics of the Grand-Guignolesque operate in *American Mary* together in ways that are closely related to one another. Mary is a struggling medical student who does not have enough money to pay for college, but she finds a solution in performing illegal body modification on people in the bodmod community. Mary's financial predicament and the extreme means she is forced to take to survive follow the naturalistic roots from which Grand-Guignol horror originates, highlighting wider social concerns. Most of the characters she interacts with are, like her, members of the lower classes struggling to live their daily lives. For example, Beatress (Tristan Risk) is a stripper at Billy's bar. We can suppose that all the money

she used to get her modifications comes from her working-class job, where she can put her modified body on display. Beatress's bodmod aesthetic is, in other words, potentially part of a statement and political stance on the viability and legitimacy of sex work; she performs both with and *through* her modified body. The film also embraces the Grand-Guignolesque's preoccupation with surgical horror, in ways that are fairly obvious. Yet, it is less the fact that Mary is a surgeon than the terrifying precision with which the surgical procedures are filmed that render the film Grand-Guignolesque in this respect. Most of the operations are shown graphically on screen. The camera follows the scalpel and other instruments with clinical detachment. Blood is drawn, tissues are shown as the blade cuts through them, and the needle bites into the fresh skin as the patients are slowly sown up by Mary. The scenes are very haptic, since the details of fleshly vulnerability and brute potential for bodily change affect the spectator's body through visual cues that activate the aural, the tactile, and olfactory senses, all of which are typically less prioritized than sight (Marks, 2000). The surgical horror scenes in *American Mary* are spectacles, moments of attraction that draw out narrative cause-and-effect to focus on sensorial effects. Tom Gunning explains that the cinema of attractions is composed of "a series of visual shocks" (1989: 116) in which "it is the incredible nature of the illusion [of the attraction] that renders the viewer speechless" (1989: 118). The cinema of attractions stems from circus performances, such as freak shows and magician acts, as they played on—and directly addressed—the audience's curiosity and amazement with bodies pushed to extremes, whether twisting, flying, and suspended in mid-air, or the naturally non-normative body of the "freak." As with the "illusions" of the circus attraction, *American Mary's* viewers know that the surgeries are staged, but they *look* terribly real, and that makes it so amazingly visceral. No matter how horrifying these spectacles might be, they capture the viewer's attention in a way that garners audience curiosity for even more extreme sights to follow. One needs only to think about the scene where Ruby (Paula Lindberg) undergoes surgery. Ruby, a fashion designer and bodmod enthusiast, seeks out Mary because she wants her nipples removed and her lower parts sown up to resemble a doll. The camera lingers on the skin of her breasts in extreme close-up, as Mary's scalpel slowly cuts into the flesh. Blood is drawn slowly, seeping out in a syrupy stream from the cut skin, before the film changes to even closer shots of skin. The pores of the skin and the different textures between nipple and skin are laid bare to see. The scene's acute focus on the blood, on the gore, on the metallic instruments used to cut and destroy the skin attaches it to the Grand-Guignol cinema's focus on bodily vulnerability

and extremes, on attractions-based moments that halt narrative to court the senses. The surgeries are a spectacle on which the audience is enticed to gorge itself. According to Linda Williams, in such moments, “body genres” encourage a relationship between the film and the body of the viewer, who reacts “in an almost involuntarily mimicry of the emotion or sensation of the body on the screen” (2004: 4). In this sense, the audience members of *American Mary* allow themselves to be *modified* (if momentarily) by the horrors shown on screen. One spectator might hide his eyes in order to escape the gore while another might cringe in disgust when the scalpel cuts into Ruby’s flesh. The peaceful, almost meditative, classical music accompanying the surgery scenes adds a touch of irony to the horror, an unsettling softness to the opened flesh and blood that otherwise fills the screen. The two elements don’t at all belong together: the regular rhythm of the music notes clashes with the opened flesh and bodily fluids shown, which creates horror. The extreme surgical close-ups again encourage the spectator to recognize the hapticity of the film, taking in the experience of the scene with their entire body. In this way, *American Mary* affects its audience in a similar way to the Grand-Guignol plays, as both unsettle the viewer’s equanimity via the horrors presented. The Soskas use such moments of attractions to shock spectators into an awareness of their feminist perspective on the body, confronting them with the gruesome sight of a body being sculpted as a reaction to oppressive social forces.

As I mentioned earlier, *American Mary* combines such spectatorial curiosity around what most would find disgusting, with an equally intense eroticism. The film’s combination of eroticism with horror and disgust as a kind of appealing cocktail suggests once again its Grand-Guignolesque strategies around voyeurism. Linda Williams, a scholar who has looked into the use and representation of bodies in horror and porn cinema, asks, “what is a film, after all, without voyeurism?” (Williams, 732: 1991). While Williams is discussing body genres in cinema more broadly, I believe her question is even more essential to horror films, especially those that combine eroticism with the usual horror, awe, and disgust that echoes the Grand-Guignol tradition. Indeed, in *American Mary*, the titular heroine is not only a skilled surgeon, but is also young, sexy, and powerful. While she is often dressed in revealing outfits that accentuate her curves and breasts, Mary is not presented as solely an object of desire to the audience (See Figure 1 below). That Mary dresses and presents herself in a highly sexual way that occasionally borders on fetishistic, even while performing surgeries, is part of the film’s darkly comical irony. The Soskas don’t shy away from presenting Mary as a sexual entity. Her



Figure 1: Mary (Katharine Isabelle) about to perform a surgical procedure in *American Mary*

outfits—latex, leather, zippers—are closer to fetish wear than to a surgeon’s blousy, bulky scrubs. It is in part the extremely sexual way that she presents herself while doing otherwise very clinical work that Mary *owns* her sexuality. The Soskas’ camera never lingers on her curves, as the viewer’s gaze might wish to. If she is dressed in a way that sports leather and latex and shows skin, then so be it. Jen and Sylvia Soska champion powerful feminist women who dress however they wish. The camera keeps a certain holistic distance from Mary in a way that allows her to be herself throughout the entire movie, no matter what she wears. The way of filming challenges the male gaze that usually reduces women to their sexuality, which creates a different sensual eroticism during the movie in that Mary’s body becomes a part of the self-expression of a woman of sublime confidence. Mary’s curves dare us to check her out, to gorge on her body in the same way the film asks us to gorge on the gory details of her profession. I found myself immersed in the spectacle of Mary and sometimes having to snap back to the film’s narrative. *American Mary* consistently makes me aware of my role as a voyeur peeping at the presented attraction. As in Grand-Guignol plays, the eroticism here is born from a combination of gazes at Mary, at her work, and at Mary’s own “extreme” body “looking back” at us. The Soska twins are thus conscious of the effect they are

creating, as they masterfully handle scenes where Mary is not only the center of attention, but *confronts us* with that fact. The cumulative effect of the film's careful presentation of Mary's powerful presence on the spectator is highlighted in a scene where Billy (Antonio Cupo), the owner of the bar who first employed Mary, daydreams about her on the stage of his bar, dressed in black undergarments and dancing for him. The underlying sexual tension between Mary and Billy is rendered rather absurd here in that it is clear that this is only Billy's *idea* of Mary—of Mary as represented through Billy's own desiring gaze. This is Mary as object of male spectacle, not the powerful sexualized self she projects outside of Billy's fantasies. The distinction between the way characters view Mary and her true, highly sexual identity is one of the ways the Soskas use Grand-Guignolesque strategies to create a healthy feminist eroticism that adds style and critical substance to the film.

American Mary's critical, feminist horror is thus also related to contemporary Western society's fear of the body, also known as somatophobia. Elizabeth Grosz, a cultural studies scholar, observes that "philosophy has established itself on the foundation of a profound somatophobia" (1994: 5). This worldview especially affects women's bodies, as they are always changing, and therefore seen as shifting, liminal, even *unstable* through a patriarchal lens. There is the aging body, the pregnant body, the menstruating body—all of which cause fear, and the latter two of which are the exclusive domain of the female body. Somatophobia extends as well to bodmod culture and the resistance to, or even immediate dislike of, those partaking in physical modifications for aesthetical purposes. In other words, the bodmod culture embraces the always-changing body most people have grown to hate or fear because it reminds them of difference. The intense dislike towards bodmod also comes from societal oppression. Scholar Robin Wood discusses the link between cultural oppression and repression, explaining that "surplus repression is specific to a particular culture and is the process whereby people are conditioned from earliest infancy to take on predetermined roles within that culture" ([1986] 2004: 108). That is, under constraining conditions imposed upon us by society, parts of ourselves are repressed as we acclimate to "acceptable" social standards, and adapt to conform to socially sanctioned, normative ideas, beliefs and thoughts. However, all that is repressed, and the trauma caused by it, always comes back to haunt the world. Whether it be created by a single traumatic event (for example, Mary's rape by her mentor, discussed below) or a lifetime spent repressing a part of your own self in order to belong with others (certainly inherent in the male-dominated profession Mary has chosen), this harmful

trauma comes back to torment the subject in most horrible ways. In *American Mary*, Mary faces a traumatic event that unleashes a part of her that she has kept secret, repressed deep in her mind and body, when her professor videotapes his rape of her at a party after she was drugged. She leaves the scene of the crime without a word, without blinking. In the elevator, after her escape from the scene of trauma, her gaze is fixed, focused, showing Mary's apparent readiness to air out some of the repressed anger she has harboured. In the next scene, at Billy's bar, Mary appears dressed in her usual outfit, wanting to "make five grand." Now both broken by the trauma and somewhat freed by it, she tortures her professor, which propels her into an underground surgical career. She even experiments on her professor's body. Before, she was somewhat scared of operating on people, but now she has embraced her role like a modern version of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mister Hyde* (1886), accepting that she is both Jekyll and Hyde. She had been afraid of modifying human bodies prior to taking up the bodmod knife, but now she builds a career on sculpting those very bodies. In this way, Mary works her way out of her own somatophobia and also helps others free themselves from it by creating the bodies they want to inhabit. After all, those who have chosen to embrace such peculiar aesthetical tastes are perceived as threats in a society that shuns those whose bodies challenge conservative bourgeois norms. They are alienated by mainstream society solely because they refuse to police their bodies in the same way as most do, and thus do not experience somatophobia in the same manner, if at all. Body modification enthusiasts decide to opt for a different source of acceptance: an excessive and performative version of themselves. Beatress is a good example of such a view: she wants to be on the outside what she is on the inside and has achieved such an appearance through surgical operations in the bodmod community. Ruby also goes to great lengths to become what she wants to be: a doll that is safely outside the zone of all possible sexual desire. There is also the film's directors playing the twins (Jen and Sylvia Soska), who come to Mary for surgery. Initially, it seems that they want a physical transformation that will turn them into Frankenstein-like Siamese twins. But their sisterly love takes them only as far as asking Mary to exchange their left arms, bringing them freakishly even closer to one another as twins. And of course there is Mary herself, whose very presence and extreme manner of dress suggests another performance of identity that—without fleshly modifications—challenges normative thinking around, among other things, what a professional should look like, or how those attached to sanctioned institutions like medicine should behave.



Figure 2: Ruby (Paula Lindberg)

So many aspects of *American Mary* relate to the issues of body image and somatophobia, especially towards the female body. In the remainder of this essay, I treat each of the above cases in more detail. First, there is the character who is at the top of a popular fashion line called Ruby “Realgirl.” Ruby is striving for a distanced, doll-like beauty that she sees as desexualized (See Figure 2 above). She asks Mary for her nipples to be removed and her genital parts modified to look like a Barbie doll. The Soskas here push an aesthetic desire to the extreme by making Ruby desire something greater than simply beauty. Ruby explains her view to Mary: “I’ve never had any of these surgeries to become a sexual object. [...] Dolls are not usually looked at in a sexual manner. [...] A doll can be naked and never feel shy or sexualised or degraded.” Ruby’s problem is with how women’s bodies are viewed, and pushed to look a certain way to be accepted. The only solution she has found is to change herself in a desperate attempt to remove the aspects of her body that she believes to be sexualized. Ruby’s desperation derives directly from the trauma caused by a patriarchal society afraid of the female body, especially of its power to change, its inherent adaptability. Grosz’s words mirror Ruby’s: “patriarchal oppression [...] justifies itself, at least in part, by connecting women much more closely than men to the body” (1994: 14). In our world, people fear being too fully embodied. Women especially face impossible expectations to which Ruby’s actions are a response: girls need to look like Barbie Dolls to be fully rewarded by consumer society. Ruby is so sick with somatophobia that she is ready to do anything to escape it, however much she becomes a grotesque embodiment of it. To the viewer, such a transformation is uncanny in its manifesting in the body the idealized standards normally

made manifest in a toy. The heavy, horrifying nature of the surgeries Ruby has to go through to free herself from society's expectations by confronting them is made clear by the directors' detailed way of filming the surgeries. Ruby creates an unnatural body for herself to hide from the less-controlled female body she is so afraid of. In this Grand-Guignoleque spectacle, the Soskas satirically show both sides of the bodmod spectrum: Ruby, who goes all-out in order to finally escape her internalized somatophobia, and other people, like Beatress, who use this fear to their advantage in order to attract people's voyeurism.



Figure 3: Beatress (Tristan Risk)

Beatress, a stripper who chooses to modify her body for aesthetic purposes that seem to enhance the culturally normative features of her body, seems at first glance to be the very opposite of Ruby, even though the two present some similarities in their beliefs that people should be able to look the way they want to, whatever the price (both monetary and corporeal) might be. However, unlike Ruby, Beatress is empowered by the erotic attention she attracts. Never is she offended by Mary's confused and slightly disgusted reaction to her body, and instead seems to take pleasure in Mary's skeptical gaze. Because Beatress is a stripper, her modified body is often on display, center-stage, for those who gaze upon her for voyeuristic pleasure; and Beatress receives reciprocal pleasure from being the center of an objectifying attention. She becomes a Grand-Guignolesque attraction herself using her body modifications, which have made her into a real-life Betty Boop-style sex object (See Figure 3 above). It is the proportions of Beatress' features that

make Mary feel uneasy. Her lips are pluckily full, her eyebrows almost nonexistent, her eyes gaping wide, and her nose too small for her face. Her body follows the exaggerated shape of an hourglass. Mary is used to body modifications that remove and cut pieces of skin aesthetically, but Beatress has changed in a way Mary does not expect: she looks out of this world, almost inhuman, a cartoon lady in a gritty, degenerating world. Since Beatress accepts herself because of her body modifications, she strives to help others achieve their own physical adventures, like with her friend Ruby. Yet Beatress suffers as well from society's somatophobia: she has felt so horrible in her own body in the past that she has had to change it in order to provide something *extra* for those who would consume her body with their gaze. She feels the need to become a sexualised icon in order to feel accepted, desired—though in doing so she, like Ruby, ultimately turns herself into a grotesque parody of beauty standards. That is, if Ruby rejects the sexualized parts of her female body in an attempt to escape an internalized somatophobia, Beatress embraces these to the extreme. Mary's uneasy reaction to Beatress's overall appearance seems to model the response the viewer is meant to feel regarding her uncanny features. That feeling of rejection one feels towards the woman who is the very portrait of a universally accepted sex icon creates a critical distance in the spectator, who is encouraged to ask: If one way to be accepted is to correspond to the ideal, then why does Beatress' appearance unsettle so much? The very foundation of the perception of women's bodies is shaken when one reflects on this satirical portrayal of a bodmod enthusiast. After all, Beatress intentionally becomes an attraction, a thing one glances upon with pleasure while knowing that it is fake, unreal. Her amplifications of this illusion and fakery have made it so that her customers can gaze upon her with amazement mixed with fear. Since Beatress is "more" than a simple woman because of her modifications, some discomfort exists in the spectator's heart when gazing upon her. She has turned herself into a "freak," a monster who reveals a culture's supposedly paradoxical fear and attraction in gazing upon the unusual, like the bodies one gazes up on in a carnival. One looks at her voyeuristically with curiosity and with a little disgust towards her cartoonish face and other uncanny features. Beatress's body and career choice combine the Grand-Guignolesque extremes of horror and eroticism, but somatophobia stops her from being anything more than a "freak" on stage: one who both attracts and repels the spectator. It is unclear if she ever will be able to escape the somatophobia of those gazing upon her modified body, or her own in inhabiting such a body. One cannot help but wonder if one must really go this far, modifying their own body so drastically, in order to be able to accept

oneself. The question that underlies *American Mary* thus becomes, *what are the limits of body modification?* And are either of these cases—Ruby’s doll-like de-sexualizing, and Beatress’s grotesque exaggeration of the same—in any way a challenge to the norm, or the ugly product of it? If we look at it from a purely aesthetic point-of-view, the film presents its audience with a different world of beauty without judgement, which seems pretty harmless, as one could speculate that most people are happy with their modifications in the bodmod community. However, when somatophobic values cause one to make irreversible changes to oneself as a reaction to oppressive notions of what the body—and particularly the female body—should be, do, and look like, such endeavours seem anything but harmless.

In *American Mary*, Jen and Sylvia Soska show that body modification might seem like a challenge to consumer capitalist society’s somatophobia, but they remind the spectator of its tragic realities too. Indeed, Ruby’s husband (Travis Watters) is horrified by her transformation. Instead of being understood, Ruby has to suffer a brutal rejection from one of those she loves. Her husband is disgusted by her appearance. He is so angry to have lost her that he tries to kill Mary. He is eventually killed by Mary in a fight that fatally wounds Mary. Neither wins: while Ruby ultimately learns that most will not accept her now that she is “free,” Mary, like a bodmod Dr. Frankenstein, ends up indirectly killed by her creation. As her last breath passes her lips, Mary is shown in a process of adapting: she sews her wounded belly up, in a final body modification that might save her life, allowing her to survive in a world that rejects the very existence of those like her. However, she fails and dies. In a quintessential Grand-Guginol ending, the movie closes on a tapestry of death: Mary’s own modified body immobile on the cold floor. As shown by this final scene where Mary’s corpse is the central attraction, Jen and Sylvia Soska do not reject the body—it is central to the film. Instead, the directors challenge the values behind the somatophobic perception of those bodies that are modified every day, either to fit into, or resist societal standards. Along with Grosz, they believe that “what needs to be changed are attitudes, beliefs, and values rather than the body itself[. . .] the ways in which the social system organizes and gives meaning to biology that is oppressive to women” (Grosz, 1994: 16, 17). *American Mary* offers a feminist critique of the way patriarchal perceptions of the body oppress women through the desires of characters like Beatress and Ruby, and the complicity of characters like Mary.

American Mary is a Grand-Guignolesque film that mixes surgical horror with voyeuristic eroticism. It uses body modifications as attractions to explain how somatophobia traps women into fearing their own changing bodies with

life-changing surgical operations as their only escape. The visceral surgical practices in the film ask us to question the limits and limitations of body modifications as a potentially critical reaction to patriarchal society's somatophobia. The Soskas both champion feminist voyeurism and the acceptance of bodies, especially those bodies that resist attempts to control them, while also staging the uncontrollability of bodily creations as dreadfully and fearfully Grand-Guignolesque.

Notes

¹ This essay was inspired by courses taught by Mario DeGiglio-Bellemare at John Abbott College in the Winter and Fall of 2018, which touched upon the place of the body in film, especially in the horror genre, and the Grand-Guignol as a theoretical framework for understanding horror cinema.

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