

The Fungus Among Us: Zoosemiotics and the Fuzzy Boundaries Between Human and Inhuman Body-Architecture in Science Fiction Horror Cinema

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Abstract

The invasion and transformation of the human body by a hostile alien “other” is a salient theme in Sci-Fi Horror cinema. The alien invaders in many films are readily identified as bipedal or insectoid; in several films from the mid-twentieth to the early twenty-first century, however, the invasive “other” begins as a microscopic spore and blooms into a horrifying and amorphous fungus. In films such as *Mutiny in Outer Space* (1965) and *The Green Slime* (1968), human beings land on the moon and an asteroid, respectively, and unwittingly bring foreign fungal spores back into the human environment where they multiply uncontrollably. *The Unknown Terror* (1957) and *Matango* (Attack of the Mushroom People; Fungus of Terror, 1963), feature earthly fungi created by irresponsible scientists who have manipulated nature either through fungal experimentation or nuclear radiation. In the 2008 film, *Splinter*, the fungus is a product of the earth itself, a force of nature that counts humans among its favorite hosts. Whether extraterrestrial or terrestrial, the fungal entities in all of these films function by penetrating the human body, using it as a locus for consumption and geometric reproduction, and transforming human flesh into a fungal “other” in the process.

This essay will examine the role of fungus in Sci-Fi Body Horror through multiple lenses, including the zoosemiotics of Thomas A. Sebeok and the semiotics of abjection outlined by Julia Kristeva, both of which argue that fungus is the ultimate inhuman other. According to Sebeok’s theory, fungus is the alien entity in the “plant, animal, fungus trichotomy.” Unlike animals and to a lesser extent plants, both of which facilitate the construction of the environment, fungi are decomposers whose growth signals death and decay. Collective and amorphous, fungal colonies respire anaerobically, reproduce asexually by digesting fetid matter and shooting invisible spores into the air. From the perspective of Kristevan abjection, fungal penetration and replication inspire a semiotic revulsion linked to the realization that our bodies are open to invasion and will one day be stinking and gelatinous,

first a corpse-food for fungus, then a part of the fungus, one with nature after all. The infected and fungoid human body contests Cartesian constructions of embodiment, blurring the false boundaries between the “rational” machine-body, the “hermetically-sealed” human-built environment, and “chaotic” nature, ultimately revealing layers of reciprocal penetration, colonization, and consumption. In each of the films above, fungal invasion likewise calls into question the role of humans as an infectious agent on the body of our own planet, consuming resources and laying waste to nature in the Anthropocene. While humans are able to control the fungal outbreaks in twentieth-century Sci-Fi Horror films, *Splinter* (2008) gives the fungus the upper hand, suggesting that human hegemony is near its end, and the day of the eco-gothic “Slithersucker”—a sentient and carnivorous slime mold proposed in *The Future is Wild* (2003)—is creeping ever closer.

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