# An Interview with Dr. Xavier Aldana Reyes

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**Abstract**

Dr. Xavier Aldana Reyes is a Reader in English Literature and Film and a founding member of the Manchester Centre for Gothic Studies at Manchester Metropolitan University. His work has been instrumental in shaping the study of Gothic and horror across literature, film, and popular culture. Among his numerous publications, his first monograph *Body Gothic: Corporeal Transgression in Contemporary Literature and Horror Film* (University of Wales Press, 2014) stands out as a landmark contribution to the field, establishing his critical approach to the intersections of the body, affect, and horror aesthetics.

This interview centres on his most recent book, *Contemporary Body Horror* (University of Wales Press, 2024), which offers the first substantial study of twenty-first-century body horror. In this work, Aldana Reyes examines how motifs of transformation, disease, infection, and metamorphosis intertwine with biopolitics, necropolitics, and embodied identity, all through feminist, queer, and anti-racist frameworks.

Within the scope of our discussion, we explored the visual and haptic dimensions of body horror, its confrontational spirit, and the critical tools it offers for uncovering buried or uncomfortable cultural narratives. Aldana Reyes reflects on the genre's ability to engage with controversial ideological topics and considers its speculative and liberating potential in imagining bodily change. The conversation concludes with a brief look into his forthcoming book, *Body Horror* (Wallflower), expected to be published in 2026.

***FRAME:***

How do you think The Manchester Centre for Gothic Studies helped fill a gap in the academic study of body horror, and where do you see the field of body horror research in academia heading in the future? What areas do you believe remain underexplored or ripe for further academic investigation?

**Aldana Reyes:**

To my knowledge, I am the only person in the Gothic Centre who researches body horror in earnest. I wouldn't want to speak for my colleagues and their projects, so I will focus on my own work. I have been fascinated with this topic since I was a teenager. I am not sure if this is because, since I started to figure out my sexuality in my early teens, and as someone who has never quite fitted the standards of masculinity and fitness expected of me, I was always hyperaware of the way my body (and those of others) was affected and shaped by peer pressure, social (familial, educational, medical) expectations and the desire to not stick out. From a young age (I started reading *Goosebumps* and quickly graduated to Stephen King and Clive Barker), I was very taken with the transgressive aspects of horror, which would often cover topics that were still, at best, frowned upon, such as sexuality, violence, death. Horror, like literature and cinema more broadly, afforded me seductive vistas of different countries, worlds and ways of being. At the same time, I grew very aware of the derision reserved for horror and especially its most corporeal examples.

I cannot boil down my career to one single objective, but the desire to rehabilitate and legitimise the work of Gothic and horror writers and to demonstrate that texts dismissed by others as gross, exploitative fare conceal deeper meanings about us (what it means to be human, what it means to live in a body) can definitely be traced through a lot of my research. This ethos animated my first book, *Body Gothic: Corporeal Transgression in Contemporary Literature and Horror Film* (University of Wales Press, 2014), and it

is still very much present in *Contemporary Body Horror* (Cambridge University Press, 2024), as well as a few other projects I am currently developing. The success of *The Substance* (2024) has meant that the term "body horror" has reached a broader audience. This is great for people like myself, who have been fascinated with this subgenre and its ideological possibilities for years. It is always going to be a polarising subgenre, as it deals with topics and ideas most people would rather not think about or prefer to push aside and because its confrontational spirit can make its spectacle difficult to stomach for some, but it is great to see Fargeat's brilliant film gain recognition at the Oscars. While I do not place much value in the mainstream critical appreciation of films or novels, it is undeniable that prizes and awards can bring attention to subgenres, artists or products and make them more attractive and fundable.

***FRAME:***

How do you see the relationship between novels and films in shaping the genre's cultural impact? Does one medium allow for a deeper exploration of the body and its transformation? For example, how do Clive Barker's *The Hellbound Heart* (1986) and its film adaptation *Hellraiser* (1987) differ in this respect, and does the change in medium make one more effective than the other?

**Aldana Reyes:**

I do not think so, personally. Whereas cinema can avail itself of special effects, make-up and postproduction to alter indexical reality and offer new forms of fantastic corporeality, like the transformed bodies in *An American Werewolf in London* (1981), *The Thing* (1982), *The Fly* (1986) or *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* (1989), literature has no physical bounds. What I mean is that, while cinema always has to contend with the technical and budgetary limitations of a given period and context, written fiction can make our imagination travel wherever the writer is happy to take us. Multimedia artists like Clive Barker, who has written fiction,

directed films, painted countless pictures and developed games, exemplify how someone's outlook can travel quite seamlessly across distinct media. I would argue that Barker's *Books of Blood* (1984-85), which I encountered before any of his films, are just as powerful as *Hellraiser* (1987), which nevertheless continues to pack a punch for contemporary viewers. Body horror, therefore, and like the horror genre more broadly, makes the most of the medium wherein it's produced.

I could only skim the surface of the vast body of videogames that have developed body horror, from the *Dead Space* series (2008-2023) to *Scorn* (2022), or the brilliant *Alien: Isolation* (2014). Again, videogames have intrinsic properties that can enhance affect: the first-person POV, which aligns its camera with the player's line of vision, atmospheric sounds, the need for decision-making, and so on. At the same time, the narratives of videogames work differently, as they are generally based around quests, survival and the acquisition of weapons, and the stories are told in a more episodic fashion, sometimes through found documents. In short, I would not say that one medium is more effective than another, simply that they centre or privilege different aspects of embodiment. We live in a more visual and haptic culture than we did in the twentieth century, and the horror genre has been legitimised to the point that it is possible for filmmakers and writers to take bold swings with their stories, so I guess it makes sense that more body horror is being made now. The rise of independent publishers and self-published fiction has also made it easier for some of this material, which in some cases continues to be relatively niche and may have even been banned or restricted in the past, to find a wider audience.

***FRAME:***

In your analysis, body horror serves as a mirror to societal issues, visualizing processes of marginalization and behavioural policing. How do you perceive the activist potential of body horror in

contemporary media, and can you discuss instances where this genre has effectively mobilized audiences toward activism?

**Aldana Reyes:**

I am not sure I know of any instances where people have been mobilised by a specific body horror text to actual activism, if by this term we mean people demonstrating on the streets or demanding legislative change. I would be more inclined to see the rise in body horror texts as an indication of such activist thinking gathering critical mass and entering the cultural bloodstream, so to speak. It is not that queer writing or Black horror did not exist before, obviously, but that they have attained a level of popularity and ubiquity that is quite rare. I do think there is immense power in large, mainstream audiences being exposed to stories and characters they might not normally come into contact with otherwise—hence my argument about body horror helping us see others differently, through their struggles and in a manner that can hopefully transform our way of thinking and acting in the world. It seems incontrovertible that many of the texts I discuss in the book have been shaped by social movements like Me Too (and feminism, more broadly), Black Lives Matter (and anti-racist thinking) or Trans Lives Matter (and trans-activist thinking), not just in the stories they tell but in how they are told—where the emphasis is placed. In films like *Candyman* (2021) or *Get Out* (2017), we cannot even talk about subtext: the film is a message.

What seems new and exciting to me is these texts finding an audience beyond the communities and groups they depict. I am fascinated with the phenomenon of body horror written by queer, non-binary and trans writers—authors like Eric LaRocca, Alison Rumfitt or Gretchen Felker-Martin—appealing to a mainstream readership. Firstly, this is important for representation. As a young man, I latched on to writers like Clive Barker or Poppy Z. Brite because they featured gay characters with whom I could identify and work through my own feelings. Secondly,

being exposed to narratives that have remained peripheral at best is crucial if we are to normalise different ways of living—what Judith Butler refers to as "livable lives." And, in a decade marked by open hostility against trans people by several anti-gender movements, uncompromising texts can teach us a lot about tolerance and empathy. These narratives do not only find a home in body horror, of course, but I do not think it is a coincidence that body horror is on the rise. Many forms of discrimination are inscribed onto specific corporeal markers by patriarchal, colonial and religious prejudices and the social, economic and political forces that underpin them.

***FRAME:***

In the chapter "Embodied Identity," there seems to be more optimism, and a great deal of emphasis placed on the transformative dimension of queer body horror as a liberatory force. In the section on Black body horror, the endings and tone overall tend to be far more pessimistic. How do these contrasting tones—optimism in queer body horror and pessimism in Black body horror—affect the genre's alignment with traditional horror conventions, which often focus on fear and dread?

**Aldana Reyes:**

It is interesting to learn that this is the way the sections may be perceived by readers. I followed the same approach in both sections, starting with the social and political construction of gender and sexuality, in one case, and race and ethnicity in the other, and how they are filtered through body horror in order to denounce different forms of epistemic violence. I then moved on to analyse fiction that is more hopeful in its conclusions and vision, which is captured in the narratives' concerns with transformation. I ended the race section with *Sorry to Bother You* (2018), which strikes me as a call to arms and thorough denouncing of white supremacy and the economic logic that supports it. I could have chosen to focus on more progressive texts, by drawing from the

Afrofuturistic imaginary. In the end, it was as much a question of spatial constraints as it was one of genre. To what extent is some of that material body horror? It strikes me that horror is always caught in a bit of a double bind when it comes to its political intent, as a genre historically premised on the generation of fear on its viewers. If it diverts too much into fantasy and utopia, it can easily become something else (if just as culturally valuable). I have tried to respect body horror's irreverent attitude towards neatly demarcated genre boundaires and hybridity, but I felt it was only right to maintain the conversation solidly placed within discrete genre lines to avoid confusion or conclusions that would be too general.

I would hesitate to suggest that queer body horror is more hopeful or optimistic than Black body horror. It is perhaps true that trans-authored body horror is more interested in the speculative and liberating aspects of change. As I explain in the book, I think this has to do with this community's perception and experience of the body, especially for those artists that engage directly with the notion of transition. The body in those fictions is perhaps less fixed by materiality and the holdups of cisheteropatriarchal society. The larger point I was trying to make is that body horror has been used metaphorically to deal with the limitations of corporeal discourse, as generated socially, medically, legally and so on, and the potential to imagine things differently, which body horror is inherently interested in due to its intrinsic connection to mutation and metamorphosis.

***FRAME:***

How do you perceive the representation of disability within the body horror genre, and how might a more widespread engagement with the genre contribute to the wider field of disability studies and/or help broaden the general public's understanding of disabilities?

**Aldana Reyes:**

The portrayal of disability is another paradigmatic example of the conundrum horror typically finds itself in due to expectations placed on the genre. Historically, and particularly in the early twentieth century, during which horror cinema was finding its feet and establishing its basic parameters, monstrosity became deeply associated with disability. The reveal of the monster's horrifying physique (an indication of its evil qualities) in many of the canonical films made by Universal, for example, became an integral part of the specular logic of the genre, and that form of fear was premised on physical qualities like disfigurement, missing body parts, speech impediments and the like. This history has been covered comprehensively by scholars like Angela M. Smith. Looking back from our vantage point, it is sometimes easier to feel pity for those monsters, rather than fear. I mention this because I do not want to exonerate the genre from its potential complicity in perpetuating eugenic principles.

More contemporary body horror is aware of this history, however, and presents disability differently, often dwelling on the construction of corporeal difference and advocating for inclusive practices, typically centring characters whose bodies are not majoritarian or neurotypical. There are also films where particular physical impairments are ameliorated through technology, such as *Update* (2018), or where characters with disabilities take centre stage, like the thriller *Run* (2020). It is a difficult terrain to monitor, however, because body horror has historically tended towards corporeal spectacle. I am thinking of a film like *The Elephant Man* (1980). The line between paternalistic voyeurism and respectful empowerment can be thin at times. Still, I do believe many body horror texts prompt us to think about the body and its limits, and therefore about what we normalise and turn into convention.

***FRAME:***

As you mention in your monograph, body horror has become more personal throughout its evolution, coming to reflect personal traumas and underrepresented/marginalized voices. Unlike the othering that can be observed in "abnormal" bodies: zombified, mutated, mutilated or ill that immediately confront the audience with "what is wrong with them," there is also a type of body horror that is more subtle. For example, in *Black Swan* (2010) there are some instances where the body appears horrific, "ankles cracking and succumbing to body weight," (Reyes 56) but the body on the surface is not necessarily "othered." Likewise, in the short story "The Husband Stitch" (2014), the horrific aspect of the body is only revealed at the end of the story. In both cases the psychological horror is deeply embodied but the visceral images do not determine the body horror messages of the stories. Do you think that the future of body horror is going to be more abstract, or do you think that the voyeuristic aspect of body horror is essential for delivering its messages, and ultimately, part of the genre's appeal?

**Aldana Reyes:**

I am not sure that a film like *Black Swan* wears its body horror credentials lightly. After all, it follows Nina's transformation into the Black Swan, emphasising moments of corporeal change (perhaps figurative or hallucinated) throughout. But I suspect you have hit on something quite crucial here, which is the reach of body horror. It is definitely true that it is becoming ever harder to delimit body horror. The term has always been a little retrojected, tendered in hindsight to films that can be described using other labels (monster movies, werewolf films, possession films, space horror). Equally, at a time when genre boundaries are less policed by the industries that publish and produce these texts, body horror can become a main element in larger narratives. I am thinking of films like *Love Lies Bleeding* (2024) or *I Saw the TV Glow* (2024), which I have called body horror because that has

been the focus of my reading, but which are too complex to be distilled into just one all-encompassing category. To me, what this indicates is that body horror has become a cultural strategy to negotiate the violence of biopower on certain bodies—the bodies of women, in the cases you highlight. In other words, there is less concern about encasing texts in a specific genre, and much more interest in telling a specific story. Body horror can provide a shorthand, ready-made language born out of its anxieties around corporeality, subjectivity, identity, change and the abuse of power. I remember listening to an interview with Finnish director Hanna Bergholm, the mind behind the amazing *Hatching* (2022), who explained that she did not set out to make a horror film and that she did not see herself as a horror director. The genre simply offered her the tools through which best to tell a story about school bullying, bad parenting and the social pressures of growing up as a teenage girl.

To answer your question, then: although I do believe the scopophilic pleasures of body horror are undeniable—witness, for example, the publicity campaign behind the more recent *Together* (2025)—what we are seeing is that its aesthetic preoccupations hide personal and social concerns. Horror has always been political, but since the success of *Get Out*, filmmakers have had more license to delve into controversial ideological topics. For myself, I think this is exactly the breath of fresh air the genre needed, not least because many of these texts are being made by individuals from communities that have not always had easy access to the cinema industry.

***FRAME:***

In the section of the monograph entitled "Diseased Bodies" you touch on the proximity between the apocalyptic futures depicted in zombie fiction, and the present and potential futures of the climate crisis. Could you elaborate on how body horror narratives could address anthropogenic climate change and the sixth mass

extinction, particularly in depicting human complicity and the potential consequences for humanity's future?

**Aldana Reyes:**

This has been the larger task of ecohorror for a long time, at least of the kind that does not simply vilify nature, by which I mean the "revenge of nature" stories where we project guilt back on to a dangerous fauna or flora we must combat in order to survive. Those narratives can sometimes reify the "us vs. them" binary that has been thoroughly dismantled and deconstructed by contemporary filmmakers, writers, artists and philosophers. Theories of entanglement and oneness with nature now pervade much of the green and blue humanities, as they have come to be known, and at a time when human impact on the planet's ecosystems seems undeniable, we are shifting towards stories that portray us as an integrated part of nature and vouch for custodianship of finite natural resources. The gnarliest of body horrors, like the fungal hybrid fictions I mention in the book, propose mycelial transformations in which the human and the non-human become one. And *Annihilation* (2018), a symptomatic film in many ways, goes one step further through its portrayal of the Shimmer, a richly symbolic doppelgänger for the Anthropocene. For example, the DNA splicing of the wild "animals" reminds me of the detrimental effects that microplastics are having on ocean creatures. I thought David Cronenberg's *Crimes of the Future* (2022) encapsulated this state of affairs with his usual foresight: pollution is transforming our environment more rapidly and decisively than ever before and, in turn, this will lead to new forms of adaptation. The film proposes a futuristic vision in which biological evolution has advanced at an impossible rate, but the idea is prescient and important nonetheless. Ultimately, we are nature, so our actions will necessarily impact our bodies— if not ours, those of our descendants.

***FRAME:***

Body horror has been associated with the uncanny and the figure of the manufactured human/doppelgänger since the publication of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), perhaps for even longer. As artificial intelligence becomes more ubiquitous in everyday life, how might body horror respond to or comment upon this technology? Considering examples like *Detroit: Become Human* (2018), a narrative video game in which players play as android characters, or films like *Ex Machina* (2014) and *Upgrade* (2018), how do you envision AI influencing the evolution of body horror narratives, and what themes do you anticipate will emerge from this fusion?

**Aldana Reyes:**

This is something I was only able to touch upon in *Contemporary Body Horror*, but I have been writing about the topic for my next book, *Body Horror* (Wallflower), which I hope will be out by 2026. The AI apocalypse that has been prophesied in the media very actively for at least the last couple of years (and which is already having very real effects in areas like job application screening) is quite similar to the "rebellion of the machines" narrative evident in sci fi/body horror crossovers like *Westworld* (1973) or *Demon Seed* (1977). Like *Frankenstein*, at least in the case of its cinematic offspring, there is an inherent fear of the creator being outsmarted and annihilated by the creation. It is an idea that goes back to ancient Greece and the notion of technology as expansion of the human, as a tool that helps us master and transform nature. It is a motif that has grown stronger with the possibility of sentient artificial intelligence, which, experts warn, could take over and even destroy us. Films like *The Beast* (2023) and *I Am Mother* (2019) imagine just such de-anthropocentric futures, and of course, *The Matrix* (1999) gifted us that astonishing and inspired conceit of human bodies being farmed for energy by their own creations.

Much of the debate, as I understand it from my modest position as a humanities scholar, seems to come from the same sources behind much of the medical, scientific iconography of body horror:

the figures of the mistrustful corporation (interested primarily in profit, if under the guise of progress) and the hubristic mad scientists who have not stopped to consider the implications of their experiments. It is a familiar narrative. Part of the outcry is not the existence of AI, but the fact that we are not putting safeguards in place to monitor the impact and reach of such technology, unleashing it into the world before we have mapped out its effects. I hate to sound like a doomsayer and end on a pessimistic note, but I wonder if, much as the zombie apocalypse craze of the early twenty-first century anticipated many aspects of living through a worldwide pandemic in 2020-2023, we might be quickly marching into another long-told prophecy. I am less worried about machines literally killing us than I am about the social and economic destabilisation that could be brought about by mass unemployment and the harnessing of power into the hands of a few tech companies. I suspect these narrative concerns (the role of the human in a future in which our fallibilities have made us redundant, the management of overpopulations within a context of dwindling natural resources, and the corrupt misapplication of power for the purposes of monopoly and control) will continue to be explored by future body horror artists, which will very likely lean even more heavily into the lack of differentiation between creation and creator and the superfluity and expendability of the human.

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