



“You’re saying that’s a real person ... underneath?”:  
The Horrors of the “Inorganic”  
in Jaume Collet-Serra’s  
*House of Wax* (2005)

Robin Alex McDonald & Dan Vena

**ABSTRACT:** Picking up one win and two nominations at the 26<sup>th</sup> Golden Raspberry Awards for Worst Supporting Actress, Worst Picture and Worst Remake, it seems like *House of Wax* (2005) merits little academic attention. Although critical reception for the film was dismal, noteworthy public attention was given to the casting of Paris Hilton and to her memorable death sequence in which her character is impaled through the head with a pole. Although one can read Hilton’s involvement as a transparently desperate attempt to capitalize on the heiress’s cultural popularity at the time, we argue that the choice to cast Hilton – a celebrity who became well-known for her “plastic” or “fake” aesthetic – further emphasizes the narrative’s preoccupation with material forms and properties. Interpreting the film’s narrative as a classic tale of “good” versus “evil” (in which normative embodiment is coded as “good” and the desire to alter, re-configure, or de-“naturalize” the body as “evil”), this essay considers how *House of Wax* sheds light on normative fears of the body-as-object. It contends that in positioning desires for corporeal malleability as horrific or perverse, the film channels dominant cultural attitudes toward hyperfemme gender presentations and transgender bodies, both of which are discursively tied to the “inorganic.”

**KEYWORDS:** horror, skin, inorganic, Paris Hilton, trans reading.

**AUTHORS NOTE:** Robin Alex McDonald is a writer, independent curator and doctoral candidate in the Cultural Studies program at Queen’s University. Their academic and artistic interests span feminist, queer, and trans theories; theories



of collectivity, and “the social”; and affect and emotion. Their writing has been recently published or is soon forthcoming in *n.paradoxa*, *TheatreForum*, *nomore-potlucks*, and the edited anthology *Queering Visual Cultures: Re-Presenting Sexual Politics on Stage and Screen*.

Dan Vena is completing his PhD in Cultural Studies at Queen’s University. He is interested in visual and popular cultures, merging together trans, queer, and feminist approaches to horror cinema and superhero comics. He has published in *Studies in the Fantastic* and *Plant Horror: Approaches to the Monstrous Vegetal* (with Robin Alex McDonald). His forthcoming work will be featured in *Transformative Works and Culture* and *The Dark Side: A Supervillain Reader*.

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Picking up one win and two nominations at the 26<sup>th</sup> Golden Raspberry Awards for Worst Supporting Actress (Paris Hilton), Worst Picture, and Worst Remake, the 2005 post-teen horror-flick *House of Wax* seems to merit little academic attention. A loose remake of *Mystery of the Wax Museum* (1933) and *House of Wax* (1953), Jaume Collet-Serra’s directorial debut film follows twin siblings Carly (Elisha Cuthbert) and Nick (Chad Michael Murray), and their accompanying college-aged friends as they attempt to survive the night in an unsettling ghost-town. Organized into the usual cast of teen-slasher character tropes, the supporting ensemble is comprised of Carly’s desperate-for-commitment boyfriend Wade (Jared Padalecki), Nick’s burn-out friend Dalton (Jon Abrahams), and the sexually promiscuous couple Paige (Paris Hilton) and Blake (Robert Ri’chard).

The film begins in a kitchen interior in 1974. A toddler eats Cheerios in a high chair while a feminine person (assumedly the child’s mother, later identified as Trudy Sinclair) smokes a cigarette and pours boiling wax from a cooking pot into a mask mold. The quaintly uncanny domestic scene is interrupted when presumably the child’s father enters carrying a thrashing second child who is “really being a monster again today” (Collet-Serra, 2005). Immediately, a critical binary is established between the “good” child and the “bad” child, the latter of whom must be secured to another high chair with duct tape and leather restraints. The bruising around the “bad” child’s wrists makes clear that this obviously-traumatic event is

not a singular occurrence, but rather something that is interwoven into the everyday life of the family unit. The sound of the mother slapping the unruly child transitions into the title scene, followed by a subtitle indicating a forward leap to the “present day.” Here, we find Carly and Paige eating French-fries at an off-road diner while on route to a football game in Louisiana with Nick, Wade, Dalton, and Blake in tow.

At a later point in the trip, Wade discovers his alternator belt has been cut, leaving him and Carly stranded while the rest of the Scooby-gang continue their journeys to the stadium. After being taken to a nearby abandoned hamlet in search of help, the couple stumble onto a run-down wax museum and peruse its freakish collection of waxworks. Although unbeknownst to Wade and Carly at the time, this gaudy art-deco edifice lies at the heart of what soon becomes their waking nightmare. A prized treasure of the late Trudy Sinclair, the museum is now operated by her two children, formerly-conjoined twins Vincent and Bo Sinclair (both played by Brian Van Holt), who continue to expand Trudy’s collection by preying on unsuspecting travelers and turning their corpses into wax mannequins. One by one, the group falls victim to the Sinclairs’ macabre craftsmanship until the two sets of twins (Nick and Carly / Vincent and Bo) face off in an epic CGI battle inside the house of wax, where Carly and Nick eventually emerge as the film’s victors.

While reception for the film was dismal, with some critics admitting to finding a guilty enjoyment in the young adults’ demises, noteworthy attention was given to the casting of Paris Hilton and to her memorable death sequence in which her character is impaled through the head with a pole. Proving to be the film’s one-hit wonder scream queen, Hilton, quickly became *the* must-see spectacle of the picture. Ironically, Hilton is actually featured very little in the film, having the least amount of on-screen time out of the principle cast. It seems that her entire purpose in the film is to die. Certainly, we can read Hilton’s casting as a transparently desperate attempt to capitalize on the heiress’s cultural popularity at the time, thereby boosting the film’s theatrical run and eventual rental revenues. However, within a film that revolves around the anxiety of material forms and properties (specifically of wax’s ability to both break-down and impersonate flesh), the choice of Paris Hilton – a celebrity who became well-known for her “plastic” or “fake” aesthetic – as a cameo further emphasizes the narrative’s preoccupation with the fragility of “the real.”

Interpreting the film's narrative as a classic tale of "good" versus "evil" (in which normative embodiment is coded as 'good' and the desire to alter, re-configure, or de-"naturalize" the body as "evil"), this essay considers how *House of Wax* sheds light on normative fears of the body-as-object. It contends that in positioning desires for corporeal malleability as horrific or perverse, the film channels dominant cultural attitudes toward hyperfemme gender presentations and transgender bodies, both of which are discursively tied to the "inorganic." In order to do so, we consider the film's representations of seemingly disparate phenomena – from two headed figurines, to oversized pairs of scissors, to human-wax mannequin hybrids – in an effort to contemplate how such images of medical horror paraphernalia and ambiguous materialities construct a diegetic world of semiotic uncertainty, such that the boundaries of flesh must be challenged and reconsidered.

### “Anyone need a hand?”

Often viewed as one of the trashiest or most trivial of film genres, perhaps only rivaled by pornography, horror cinema is frequently lambasted by critics and popular movie-going audiences alike for its reliance on seemingly artless and excessively violent or grotesque spectacles. While many may be happy to see this genre buried for good, it maintains the pesky ability to persist, to repeatedly return from the grave or, rather, the garbage heap. If anything, this throw-away genre seems to be one of the most recyclable in its refusal to be cultural disposed of, with the number of iterations in the *Halloween* or *Friday the 13th* movie franchises serving as a testament to the genre's internal proficiency to recycle its own material. Though efforts amongst film scholars to save the genre's reputation range in effort, with a stronger emphasis often placed on psychoanalytic interpretations (i.e. focusing on Freud's theories of the uncanny or repression), feminist film scholar Linda Williams (1991) offers an alternative approach that centres the (female) body as the locus of mimetic spectacle; the point of origin and departure for the horror film.

Drawing from Carol Clover's earlier feminist readings of the genre, Williams positions horror (alongside melodrama and pornography) as one of the three "body genres" because of the physiological reactions it seeks to provoke from its audience. These reactions, Williams argues, are achieved through the spectacle of the (female) body on screen, whereby excessive emotion (as in melodrama), sexuality

(as in pornography) and violence (as in horror) overwhelm the spectator by depicting the body as both uncontrollable and abject. Importantly, as Williams notes, the success of these genres can be measured by “the degree to which the audience sensation mimics what is seen on the screen” (1991, p.4), meaning that the bodily excesses these genres depict are not merely gratuitous but *intentionally-gratuitous*, in that they aim to close the distance between the spectator and the object on screen. In following this formulation, we suggest that for *House of Wax* to function as a horror film, it must presume as its intended audience a viewer who understands any threat of (surgical) modification to their body as a “real” source of fear and anxiety. Among the potentially lengthy list of viewers who fall outside of this intended audience are trans/non-binary individuals (who may recognize the boundaries of the sexed/gendered body as more flexible than cis viewers), in addition to disabled, chronically ill, and/or *mad* viewers, as well as members of the extreme body modification community or of cultures with differing views toward bodily modification. The many reminders of the body’s materiality and its related capacity for transformation, disfigurement, or dissolution throughout the film is assumedly what is intended to produce the affective, memetic response in audiences. This response is therefore heavily dependent on audience members who are heavily wedded to their bodies as “natural” and coherent, and are able to see themselves in/as the “victims” represented on screen.

The film’s first alarming instance of “body-horror” clocks in at twenty-one minutes, serving as a transition from an exposition-heavy first act to an anticipated death-by-numbers second-act sequence. Before leaving for the big game, Carly and Paige slip away into the woods for a pre-road trip bathroom break, only to be confronted by the same putrid smell the group noticed when they arrived at their campsite. Determined to discover the source of the smell, Carly leads Paige further into the trees before falling down an embankment head-first into a large pit of rotting animal carcasses. While attempting to crawl out of the pit, Carly spots what appears to be a human hand rising up from the pile. Her horror is only temporarily alleviated when an ominous roadkill collector named Lester (Damon Herriman) arrives to dispose of several dead animals and explains that the hand does not belong to a human corpse but to a discarded mannequin buried beneath the rotting roadkill. Popping the hand off the mannequin and waving it to evidence its lifelessness, Lester shouts at Carly and the horrified group, “It’s not real, see?” emphasize-

ing that, within this world, appearances are not to be trusted (Collet-Serra, 2005). The motif of duplicity saturates the diegetic atmosphere to the extent that all matter is consistently placed into question: Is it flesh? Plastic? Wax? Furthermore, not only are appearances rendered untrustworthy but human flesh itself can be easily replicated, appropriated and even replaced by alternative materials. The stability of flesh (and by proxy, the human body) is rendered fragile in that it can rot (as the animal corpses do), whereas plastic and wax can endure (like the mannequin hand). This juxtaposition between organic matter and plastic, the latter of which literally sticks out like a sore thumb in this scene, is continually evoked to serve as the central source of visual horror in *House of Wax*.

Crucial to the film is thus a frightened preoccupation with competing surface level aesthetics and the potential terrors that can be buried underneath. As Carly's terrified reaction to the realistic mannequin hand illustrates, the confusion between the "real" and the "fake" or the "living" and the "dead" occurs when the material form of the body is robbed of its definitional transparency. Assumedly, bodies ought to reveal themselves as truthfully as possible; flesh ought to signal the human, just as the gendered body ought to be signaled by a particularly sexed morphology. This act of announcement, which in the case of the film is played out via the surface of the skin, is a precarious one at best. As Jack Halberstam notes, "skin is at once the most fragile of boundaries and the most stable of signifiers" (1995, p.163). A contradictory vehicle of malleability and assumedly stable meaning-making, the surface of the skin always carries the potential for disruption – the broken promise of the skin matched by the breaking wound to the epidermis. Thus, to encounter a form that approximates human flesh but is not is to undo the staunch investment in a stable ontology that can be easily discerned via sight. The idea that we cannot trust our own vision (the sense that ableist society tells us *should be* most trustworthy) to determine what something *is* not only serves to produce moments of terror and shock in *this* particular film, but is foundational to the genre of wax films and the horror genre overall.

According to Michelle E. Bloom (2003), films that focus on the materiality of wax remain contingent on an affective experience of psychological dissolution defined by the confusion between reality and illusion (p. XIII). The wax film, in this respect, exploits not only the material incoherence of wax as a substance (which can be melted, molded, solidified, and reshaped) but also the unstable semiotic

value of skin itself to produce the necessary thrills and chills. To this extent, the wax film is a literalization of the basic horror formula, which, as Thomas M. Sipos (2010) contends must feature an unnatural threat within the context of a natural universe (p.6). The initial image of the pit, which serves as the film's first real scare, with its repulsive stew of tangled antlers, bloody carcasses, and emergent mannequin hand, sets up the film's fixation on ontological instability and the threat to the unnatural. Its location, just outside the town of Ambrose, is important geographically as a physical warning to wayfaring tourists of the macabre town to come, but also diegetically in that it sets up the film's central preoccupation with definitional uncertainty. As the audience moves with the characters from the pit into town, we become privy to the results of such categorical crisis.

### “It's a good knife.”

Described by the menacing roadkill collector, Lester, who first takes Carly and Wade into town, Ambrose was once considered “pretty nice before the interstate came in” (Collet-Serra, 2005). The visual image of the interstate cutting through the town invokes the idea of a surgical slashing whereby the original materiality of the referent is fundamentally altered beyond initial recognition. In this respect, Ambrose exists as a town post-transition, as a place marked by intervention that cannot return to its previous state. As Susan Stryker (1994) writes about transsexual surgeries, the body created by the scalpel's intervention is always “something more, and “something other” than originally intended by medical makers (p.242). While locating her observations in larger debates over the agency and autonomy of trans subjects, particularly in relation to the hegemonic and totalizing power of the medical institution, Stryker's words may also serve as an apt description of Ambrose's transition. It is the act of the cut, of the interstate rupturing the stability of a once “nice” town that serves as the moment of no return, and thereby creates a place that exists as something altogether Other. The cut both within the diegetic world of the film, and as localized upon the trans body, signals the exact moment of definitional confusion (the scar or suture becoming the site of both injury and healing), the very moment of ontological destabilization, and the origins of monstrosity.

It is the cut that causes the boundaries or structures of intelligibility to blur in the first place, and which figures as an overwhelming producer of narrative ten-

sion within the film. For example; Wade's fan belt is cut at the campsite; conjoined twins Bo and Vincent Sinclair were cut apart; Dr. Sinclair, the twins' father, was notorious for performing dangerous surgical procedures; Carly has her finger cut off by Bo; and Vincent cuts off Dalton's head before procuring his corpse. In a particularly visceral death sequence, Vincent surprises Carly's boyfriend Wade after Wade enters the siblings' home and rummages around the late Victor Sinclair's medical oddities and surgical tools. Creeping up through a loose floorboard, Vincent uses a pair of oversized scissors to snip Wade's Achilles tendon, resulting in a sudden gush of blood and Wade's immediate collapse to the ground. After Wade paws around the floor and nearby tables for something to defend himself, he is able to make it back onto his feet for only a moment before Vincent charges him. In seconds, we see three quickly edited close-up cuts of blades entering various locations on Wade's body and hear the sharp "snip snip snip" sounds of steel on steel.

The spectacle of Wade's death, with its clinical medical setting (Dr. Sinclair's old operating room), can be read in relation to an earlier macabre cinematic obsession with seeing the literal and conceptual dissection of on-screen bodies (Steinbock, 2012). Described as participating in a "culture of dissection" (Sawday in Steinbock, p.167), the backdrop of which the fascination with transsexual subjects like Lili Elbe simultaneously began to manifest, this early cinema of attractions took to showing the cutting up of bodies as a means of entertainment (Steinbock, p.168). The legacy of this fixation on the disfigurement of bodies can be seen in *House of Wax* (and the horror genre in general) such that instances of intervention become spectacularized, rupturing or interrupting the narrative in favor of showcasing "pure" cinematic violence. This interruption positions any act of cutting into the skin as a momentous, unexpected, or "unnatural" event; in the film's imaginary, all cuts lead to monstrous ending.

"What'd I tell ya, huh?  
Ain't your work more real now?"

Before Wade's death, when Carly and Wade initially explore the House of Wax, they find amongst a collection of oddly posed mannequins a small collection of figurines with human heads and lizard bodies perched on the mantel. Curious about



the objects, Carly turns one over and notices it has been signed “Vincent.” As horror theorists like Xavier Aldana Reyes (2014) and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (1996) note, the hybrid anatomy of most monsters, their resistance to easy or clear-cut classifications or definitions, is inherently disturbing (Reyes, p.4). In his seven theses of monsters, Cohen (1996) argues that monsters are in fact definitionally constituted by this hybrid ambiguity, suggesting that the monster: “is the harbinger of the category crisis” (p.6), “dwells at the gates of difference” (p.7), “policing the borders of the possible” (p.12), and “stands at the threshold of becoming” (p.20). In *House of Wax*, the amorphousness of monstrosity leaks into the diegetic environment, as signaled by the figurines that adorn the museum, enveloping the characters into a world of formal and semiotic uncertainty. Stephen Hunter’s (2005) observation that the film envisions a “wax-normative world” helps to elucidate this universe’s horrific blurring of categorical distinctions, exposing our own world’s desperate insistence on arbitrarily-defined systems of meaning (n.p.). The fluidity and moldability of wax – as well as its hybrid state as both/neither a liquid and a solid – make it a fitting metaphor for trans and non-binary, genderfluid, genderfuck, or otherwise gender non-conforming individuals who upset distinctions between ‘male’ and ‘female’ genders and/or sexes. The connection between “unclassifiability” and monstrosity thus reveals deep-seated cultural anxieties that gender deviance will lead to the undoing of all world order, or what Gayle Rubin (1984) calls the “struggle over where to draw the line” (p.154)

Playing both monster and maker in this film, the creator of the figurines, Vincent, serves as the physicalization of this undoing. Although Vincent is gendered using masculine pronouns and titles (i.e. as Bo’s “brother”) throughout the film, their many feminized physical and performative traits support aforementioned ideas of the monster as an inherent troubler of normative categories. It is worth noting, for instance, that following the surgery Dr. Victor Sinclair performed in order to separate his conjoined children, Vincent re-crafts their own face to create a softly-contoured wax mask framed by long tresses of dark hair. Furthermore, following Paige’s maiming of Vincent’s face during a struggle, Vincent returns home, enters the kitchen, picks up the metal toaster, and proceeds to use its reflective surface as a mirror while they re-shape their wax cheek with a hot spoon in a manner reminiscent of applying make-up. Combined with our introductory scene to Vincent’s wax-making methods, which depicts them meticulously sculpting the

breast area of a (culturally-intelligible) female wax figure, Vincent's efforts to (re-) produce their own looks in a feminized or gender-fluid manner lends a potential trans reading to this character, a reading that is further strengthened by turning to Stryker's (1994) essay, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage."

In Stryker's renowned essay, the author draws connections between Frankenstein's monster and her own experiences as a transsexual woman, particularly as each relates to the technologies of medical science that enable the existence of both ways of being. Like Stryker and Frankenstein's monster, Vincent's "monstrosity" (a word which Stryker re-claims in order to dispel the shame of being discursively linked with "non-human material Being" [p.240]) was also born from scientific experimentation when their face became disfigured through the separation surgery; Vincent is also largely silent throughout the film, and is therefore subjected to the labelling of their identity by others; they compile newspaper clippings about their surgical history akin to the monster who reads Frankenstein's journals and Stryker who mines medical archives; and, perhaps most importantly, both Vincent and their waxwork creations disturb the boundaries between flesh and wax, creation and destruction, pleasure and horror, "natural" and "unnatural."

Although Vincent's categorical disturbance positions them as monstrous, it is arguably the rage that they harbor toward their "victims" that makes them not only a psychological threat (i.e. a threat to one's normative worldview) but also a physical threat (i.e. one that could do literal damage to the body.) For Stryker, transgender rage is fueled by the exclusion of transsexuals from the "human community" and is thus appropriately directed at the "conditions in which [they] must struggle to exist," thereby constituting a powerful affect through which trans people can resist dehumanization and oppression (p.238). However, in *House of Wax*, "transgender rage" is shown as motivation for extreme acts of violence and murder as well as a source of perversion. Although both Bo and Vincent commit such murders within the film, it is Vincent who goes one step further by actually "desecrating" the corpses by making them the infrastructures for their wax mannequins. In doing so, they not only expose the body as a type of raw material, but also carefully recycle its form into an eerie hybrid of organic-meets-inorganic; an uncontrollable modelling process that defies categorical boundaries.

## “Hey, you guys gonna have sex?”

Within a diegetic environment in which the theme of the moldability of bodies and fears of non-normative corporeality pervade the entire visual and narrative structure, Paris Hilton's death sequence, which sees the heiress face off against (trans) monster Vincent, becomes *the* must-see moment of the film – not least because of the celebratory audience reaction. In providing a synopsis for this sequence, it is difficult to untether the off-screen individual from her on-screen persona as the entire ‘pleasure’ or impact of this sequence depends on its textual dissolution, an outright bleeding of reality into fiction whereby Paris-as-star and Paige-as-character collapse into each other.

Paris/Paige's death sequence begins when she is awoken by a breeze entering her camping tent through its open flaps. Upon flipping the switch on her lantern, she (and the audience) is met with a close-up of Vincent's hollow-eyed face, made all the more frightening by its mask-like quality. As the sequence continues, Paris/Paige escapes the tent and sprints into a nearby parking garage where she arms herself with a long shaft of piping. She flees along a grated catwalk until her bare heel is punctured by a knife shooting up from beneath the grates. She lands face-down on the grate and nearly misses being stabbed again, this time in the breast and hands (Paris' costuming in pink lingerie and an open bathrobe make the scene's blocking particularly apparent). Finally, she retreats into an unlocked car where she manages to wound the side of Vincent's face with the pipe. Causing merely superficial damage to her attacker, she escapes from the vehicle but is soon impaled through the forehead by the same pole. Dying, she falls forward onto her knees, blood spurting from her wound onto the pavement below.

Allegedly, cinematic audiences across the country erupted into applause at Paris's character's death scene. As one movie critic wrote at the time, “Audiences will flock to [see this film] for two reasons – either they want to see Paris Hilton in her undies, or they want to see her horribly killed” (O'Hara, 2005, n.p.). Even Hilton herself was excited by her on-screen debut, speaking openly about having the “coolest death scene in the movie” (Smithouser, n.d., n.p.). According to another review, promotion for Hilton's appearance in the movie even inspired a line of “See Paris Die” t-shirts (Smithouser, n.d., n.p.), which moviegoers could presumably wear as they watched Hilton meet her Teen Choice award-winning end.

We cannot help but attribute a significant portion of this reaction to Paris's then-status as the pinnacle of wealth and ostentation, but the desire for a class revolution does not alone explain such a joyous response. Incited not only by the violent death of a woman, but specifically of a high-femme, heavily made-up and platinum-blond woman, audience glee exposed the widespread cultural vitriol for Hilton's doll-like "plastic" femininity. Though Paris has denied having any interest in pursuing actual plastic surgery, noting that she is "very proud" to be "all natural," her alignment with Barbie dolls lends her a kind of iconic plastic aesthetic within the popular imaginary (Pasquini, 2016, n.p.). Cemented by her 2015 photoshoot for the Italian luxury brand *Moschino*, in which the star posed in a Mattel-esque-patterned jumpsuit throughout an all-pink playhouse, Hilton's quintessential "plastic" look has been integral to her persona throughout the new millennium. She has explicitly stated that Barbie is her fashion icon and that she takes any comparisons to the classic figurine as a compliment, revealing her enthusiastic embrace of the objectification that comes with being a high-profile celebrity as well as the intentionality behind her performance of herself-as-doll.

Importantly, Hilton's ability to approximate the Barbie-doll aesthetic is only made possible because of her own whiteness – what Colin Salter (2013) refers to as whiteness's "ability to absorb any potentially destabilising challenges" (p.48). As Salter notes, "The malleability of whiteness, its variability and changing contours, is located in its ability to adapt [while] the normativity of whiteness, the apparent universality, is rooted in an ability to absorb (co-opt) difference, in adapting to changes and societal variations" (pp.47–48). Thus, for the most part, the potential threat of Hilton's 'un-organic' hyperfemme gender presentation is mitigated by the adaptivity of her whiteness (in contrast to the static-ness that is demanded of the [racial] stereotype [Bhabha, 1983]). That said, though whiteness affords her a certain amount of cultural leverage in approximating the "Barbie" aesthetic, Hilton's practice of self-objectification does not render her impervious to misogynist critique (if anything, it seems to construct her as a "proper" target of this vitriol).

For instance, the hypersexualization of Hilton – most notably following her infamous sex-tape, *1 Night in Paris*, released one year prior to the premiere of *House of Wax* – is intimately bound up with her identity as a woman and the highly-gendered process of (self-)objectification. The lengthiest shot in her character's death-scene in *House of Wax* is a low-angle view of her lifeless, blood-streaked face im-

paled by a pole. As one YouTube commenter's remark that this "isn't the first time she's taken wood though [sic] the face" (ACJ97F, 2016) evidences, the penetrative element of this death sequence is likely intentional. The scene ends with Paris on her knees, propped up by the pole through her forehead. Her killer takes out a handheld video recorder and proceeds to film her corpse, further conflating Paris' real-world sex-acts with her character's spearing. In displacing sex onto the violent act, the supposed "clean-cut" ontological structure of the film is destabilized and the picture is solidified as a "skin flick;" a part-pornographic-film, part-horror-film wherein the surface of the body becomes "the movie screen, the destination of the gaze, the place that glows in the dark, the violated site of visual pleasure" (Halberstam, 1995, p.165). Here, hypersexualization and objectification work in tandem to de-humanize Hilton, thus justifying the violence against her character (further emphasized by comments on her death scene Youtube video, including one commenter's statement that it's "Too sad that it's just a movie" [Dark Angel, 2016], and another's response to the question "Why would you want the death of a human being?" [Diego Castro, 2016] with "paris hilton is human being? [sic]" [musyarofah1, 2016]).

### "They had three."

During the climax of the film, Carly and Nick murder Vincent and Bo as a raging inferno engulfs the house of wax, destroying the corpse-mannequins inside and flooding the streets of Ambrose with molasses rivers of melting wax. Effectively restoring the Symbolic order, this ending serves to vanquish the "wax-normative" universe of the film and re-position flesh-centric corporeality as "naturally" superior. But as with many horror films, *House of Wax*, refuses to provide any true sense of resolution. In the final scene, Carly and Nick are driven out of Ambrose in the back of an ambulance while a police transistor radio can be heard as a voiceover: "Sheriff? ...Ran the Sinclair family through the CDIC. Trudy and the doctor didn't have two sons. They had three." (Collet-Serra, 2005) At this point, the ambulance drives past the roadkill-collector as he feeds his mutt from the back of his pick-up truck, cuing the audience to re-read this character as a third Sinclair sibling.

If the film is read as an expression of cisgender anxieties about the instability of genders and bodies, then this ending succeeds in interrupting the binary set-

up of two sets of twin siblings with the unsettling possibility of a “third;” an apt metaphor for the ways in which trans/non-binary identities haunt the fictitious cisnormative sex/gender binary. Indeed, as this essay has sought to demonstrate, the fears associated with surgical modifications, the (gender ambiguous) monster, and the hybridization of flesh and wax only exist because they play into a deep-seated knowledge that the “natural” structural and semiotic coherency of the body is an illusion. As Stryker’s (1994) warns: “the Nature you bedevil me with is a lie. Do not trust it to protect you from what I represent, for it is a fabrication that cloaks the groundlessness of the privilege you seek to maintain for yourself at my expense” (pp.240–241).

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