



Daymares: Luminous horror exposes the creepiness under the petty pacing of the day-to-day,

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(author: Alex Quicho)

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REAL LIFE

Oxygen, carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, and calcium all together make blood-red, bone-white — and pink, the warmest color. In Marguerite Humeau's *FOX P2* installation, pink colors the carpet that covers the dominating platform, lit above and below by fluorescents. All's soft and lustrous, like a mouth in a lipgloss ad. Something's not right. Up close, it looks like a discoloration, a stain that's been sun-bleached, scrubbed out. It's subtitled "Body Without Soul."

I'd sun-struck myself before seeing Humeau's exhibition. My friend and I had been tanning in a city park, snacking on raspberries in the sheared grass speckled with discarded corks and crushed eggshells. Paris was alive with activity, all up-spraying fountains and hard shine from iPads borne aloft to snap the glinting Grand Palais, teens on post-ironic Rollerblades sipping pressed juice by the Seine. To counter the delirium of summer, Humeau used a twist in the Palais de Tokyo's architecture as a sensory palate cleanser: A pitch-dark corridor preceded the installation of the "Biological Showroom," where skulls, whiter than device, glowed matte in the fluorescence. They appeared in stunted or triplicate mutation, the half-formed curiosities you'd find in museum formaldehyde. Wearing dreadlocks of tubing, each was hooked up to the facsimile of an organ: tanks of elephant tears, alcohol, the hormonal secretions of euphoria. The atmosphere was thick with a toneless thrum, and though the room was scentless, I got nauseated.

I didn't want to see what was inside outside of itself. Like a smoothie of entrails on the slaughterhouse floor, the rug was an organism unbodied. At no point was anything in the Showroom animated, though the white bounced the light back out and into me, touching the conical structures at the backs of my eyes. The pink was the "rose quartz" of supermarket veal, "a tremble of vulvar pink, the color of an innocent child's gums," stacked under the "same lights fluorescing a soured white," to borrow descriptions from Alexandra Kleeman's paradoxically dark debut novel, *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine*. It was a slab separated from the body, migrated and distended into a porous surface that was disgusting because of its susceptibility, flesh unprotected by skin.

"It's trying to create things that at first look very bright and attractive, but are actually horrific," Humeau says in the *New York Times*. "Luminosity is something I think of when looking at the Apple store; they sell light. To me, it's the same premise that many religions have sold: To become immortal, you have to become immaterial." As Kleeman puts it, "inside a body there is no light." Light is the opposite of a body, that dense and shadow-casting form, so it's associated with transcendence, our immortal coil.

Humans aren't attracted to illumination the way moths are to bulbs, but we do like illuminating what we're attracted to, making Hollywood "tinseltown" and Paris "the city of light." Bright light comforts us because of contrast, and high definition helps sort out what's what in the cosmic slush; focus and periphery act in concert to deliver an image that feels, for the most part, unquestionable. We do not enjoy murk, which breaks our trust with the visible world: When we can't place a rustling in the dark, the rest of our senses ferry in conflicting information. This is why horror has historically left so much to the imagination, hinging stories on forces that thrive on night's visual instability, and it's why nighttime is the perfect medium for predation.

But there's been a shift in terror — it's what I can't *not* see that disturbs. In a peachy desert, an orange jumpsuit supports a hostage's shorn head; the washed gray of the sky is cleaved by the glint of a blade that shudders in the stream, borne down by a body all clad in black. Vigilantes on motorcycles, their faces uncovered, lift matte handguns to make ruby red in the green of recent Davao rains. The same red appears on a freshly laundered white cotton T-shirt, its seep horrific under cop hands glimpsed too bright from the car's dim inside. I don't look away. In London, where the sky never really darkens, just goes tangerine, I'm not afraid of the dark because it's light that has me not sleeping, keeping tabs on the public executions that are happening in the Middle East or in the Midwest, six time zones each way. "Blue light" — of screens, fluorescents, LCDs — is a sun that never goes down, upsetting our circadian rhythms. Texturally it's thin, wan, and sickifying, a light that brings out the hangover in your face. It's made to expose, cueing us into building trust through clarifying our perception, though it leaves us, too, in plain sight. Spanning a spectrum of technology we think is safe because it makes us feel that way, whether we're sharing our location with an app to get a ride home or getting confessional with a friend via email, its omniscient eye comforts those with more to show off than to hide.

Brightness tricks us into being unafraid. Just as we're encouraged to be hypervigilant at night, we feel protected by day. Crimes committed in broad daylight double our disbelief, undoing the trick of civil safety. The brazenness of a daytime murder especially unsettles because killing without cover reads like it can't be reasoned with. Its motive supersedes any promise of escape — a relentless quality that imbues what comes out of the shadows and doesn't shrivel in the sun with sickening power. In *Echoes*, Humeau stirred two grams of black mamba venom into yellow paint and slicked a gallery's walls until they went fluorescent with danger. The lighting made shadows virtually nonexistent, and though resilient fluids, from mother's milk to alligator blood, circulated in vessel-like tubing, the materials most demanding of attention had the potential to kill upon touch. It's the most literal iteration of her central concept, the latent entropy that undergirds our attractions: Just as "the carpet that looks comfortable and luminous in [her] Palais de Tokyo show is actually a disintegrated human body," so the pop-bright yellow in *Echoes* camouflages its foundational, fatal toxin.

In Nicolas Winding Refn's excruciating slasher flick *Neon Demon*, blood is high-gloss, leather is blacker than night, and blondes shine cheap gold under a vertiginous twist of sun by the pool. Jealously, anti-heroine Sarah (played by Abbey Lee Kershaw) likens Jesse (Elle Fanning) to sunshine. Jesse's freshness, photogenic and photosynthetic, drives her twinned rivals to murder and then eat her, yearning for *It Girl* immortality. Though the film begins in nightclub darkness, protagonal death brings unyielding daylight. Sun fills the white interiors of a Malibu beach house, its unspoiled bathroom tile giving a single, regurgitated eyeball the aspect of an ostentatiously plated amuse-bouche. In glamour's klieg lighting lurks the horror of having nowhere to hide. Like in Dario Argento's *Suspiria* or Alejandro Jodorowsky's *Holy Mountain*, candy colors saturate to culty, symbolic effect, hueing a liquid alienation that's heightened by sunlight or moonlight. Even the nighttime of *Demon*'s climactic scene is exposed by a full moon, its antagonists unhesitant in their all-seeing pursuit, recalling the inescapable terror in the day-lit *It Follows*.

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Southern California looks made for daytime horror, maybe because Los Angeles has always run on fresh blood. Its exurbs are where I picture Alexandra Kleeman's *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine* taking place, with its condominiums and supermarkets and parking lots, where summertime sameness becomes maddening. Here, the idea of real is what's fake, and self-presentation is less a front and more a performance that morphs into a different performance backstage. Setting up a dichotomy between surface and interior, the novel — set in the late '90s, when everyone watched television and "culture jamming" was resistance — makes full use of its central anachronism. On that level, the story's familiar: Beauty is only skin deep, and so shouldn't be trusted. Consumerism sets up a cycle of unfulfillment, refracting our desires from surface to surface. Screens are themselves an illusion and so an easy shorthand for deception. Suburbia is a purgatory that highlights its inhabitants' mortality.

Yet the stillness of its infinitude is timeless, filled with walking and driving and buying and starving. Instead of death — which would just return the body to the tiring cycle of life — it's the screen's illumination that dissolves time, making living bearable. Violence, by contrast, is dreamed as a way to puncture life's monotony, bringing the body's hidden dark up to its gleaming surface. When the book's protagonist, known only as A, is confronted by an employee-mascot that looks like all the other employee-mascots in the shadowless superstore, she sees herself "bear down on the micromesh that veiled the real, living eyeball beneath and press until it blackened. On the next day, I would search this town for someone wearing on his naked face the bruised eye that I had designed for him. From a swarm of identical heads, this inner head would become distinct to me, singular, a head with a personal connection."

Blood drains from the face when a person confronts what they fear — just as color drains from the landscape in visions of the apocalypse, ash-gray being the color swatch of planetary death. Yet since we shot the first human into space, we've associated the colorlessness of pure laboratory white with progress, using it on metals and plastics that read void-cool to touch. "Spacewalkers use white spacesuits because white is visible against the black background of space," answers NASA, helpfully. If NASA-white is pragmatic because it's most visible, it follows that black is the swatch of universal potential, hiding yet-unreadable systems, yet-unreachable lifeforms. Even black holes dribble data, leaving event horizons radiant with the faint holographic imprint of what's disappeared into them. Long-duration missions now present the problem of a solitude not previously possible on Earth — the psychological effects of which hasn't yet been documented in a non-carceral environment. At the Mars simulator on Mauna Loa, six would-be astronauts have to believe that their confinement is forever and that exiting the dome would result in certain death. The air, they imagine, is unbreathable, the climate inhospitable to the delicate micro-ecosystems of the human body, and the infinitude of the universe mediated only through an intimately known, everyday space.

Science fiction's *white void* reverses this relationship. Hermetically sealed rooms emptied of visual cues stand in for a claustrophobic afterlife, which goes on forever though nothing in it is unknown. The white void is what you see when you wake up in the construct and realize that what you feel isn't real. "Your appearance now is what we call your residual self-image," says Morpheus in a line so canny it's tempting to call it prophetic. "It is the mental projection of your digital self." In the George Lucas B-side *THX 1138*, the white void's foreverness is played up into psychological persecution, a prison without the slapstick possibility of a jailbreak. And the ornately appointed white room in *2001: A Space Odyssey* is a literal waiting room, where the mind in the body witnesses its own death in the last step before transcendence.

Like Humeau's in *FOXP2*, Stanley Kubrick's future aesthetic was thoroughly researched by a cadre of aeronautical experts, who advised on the construction of instrument panels or the behavior of sunlight in space. If the film is enduring in its disquiet, it's because its fine detail circumvents kitsch. Instead, its space-age luminosity foretells a threatening sentience that's close enough to real life. In 2015's *Ex Machina*, the protagonist android is nakeder than naked; where her uterus ought to be, there's transparency and a twist of future-blue light. It's a riff on the Macbook's sleeping heartbeat, the indicative blink of the power button. It means, I'm present, standing in for life-force in an inanimate mass. Eerie, because it signals foreknowledge, response.

"Dread is just memory in the future tense," says Donald Winnicott. It's the indicator of a threat just around the bend of our perception, a piece of evolutionary noise that pricks the inkling of premonition — or, as China Miéville puts it, "an accidental by-product of sentience meets mortality." The more accurately we represent the future, the more we dread its arrival. As the white void extends into eternity, our vision of the future narrows down to what we can't escape from today. What was once sealed firmly into the realm of speculation is drawing closer to reality, from the colonization of new planets as an exit plan for this one to intelligent robot assistants who build memories of our memories. To witness these developments is to confront the cloudiness of its ethics — problems that, as they appear, outpace existing judicial systems. Americans are divided about the prospect, statistically split down the middle in their feelings of optimism versus horror about what's to come.

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It's a split we take for granted, or claim to be nonexistent. After all, we live and love in our screens, don't we, cracking jokes and arranging for deposits, our bodies secondary to the interface. But the disembodiment that we associate with life lived via iPhone is part of a physical supply chain that begins in the strip mines of the DRC and exists maybe-forever in server farms picked for their chilliness and political stability. Accelerationism implies tech will eventually give us everything: We'll find a way to manufacture love, live forever, and raise the dead, though the basic fear is that we'll lose what can't be scaled or quantified, like art or the sublime.

Humeau looks at the dreadful promise of this optimism, a future inextricable from the humanimal cost of its advancement. Over the span of her career, she's resurrected extinct creatures to sing their own dirge, made Cleopatra a vaporwave pop-star, and created lovesick robots who secrete attraction pheromones and sing mournful mating calls at each other through a chemically castrating fog. In doing so, she's adopted the visual language of the industries that spawn "innovation," from biotechnology to aerospace engineering. It's all very 20th-century sci-fi — and there's speculation about just how much our past visions of the future have inspired the aesthetics of now. Humeau's biomorphic forms recall all kinds of sci-fi tropes, from the alien in *Alien* to Hal, but their looks are also necessitated by their function. A graduate of the Royal College of Art's Design Interactions program, she's collaborated with engineers, biologists, roboticists, surgeons. All together, their efforts appear as part of today's ecosystem of "clean design" and "clean web" movements, which compromise diversity for an efficient experience. But Humeau's curious result is the opposite of the purgative hygiene of both tech and the state, opening rather than closing lines of inquiry into how we'll live with our future.

In 1982, Steve Jobs and Hartmut Esslinger of Frog Design settled on the "Snow White" design language in order to give Apple products their coherent visual vocabulary. Their decision sprang from two things: Changes in assembly-line technology meant plastics could finally be manipulated into ergonomic curves, and Jobs, ever the Northern California boy, began to see dollar signs in the Zen-ish turn of the coast. Preaching asceticism, he wanted objects that were "bright and pure and honest about being high-tech." Darkness was to be banished in the future of Apple's enduring vision, and this cleansing pursuit necessitated a move from work ethic into lifestyle. The rhetoric is all too familiar now. Good "user experience," whether we're talking onscreen or off, narrows the infinity of choice into a handful, and the supposedly freeing ideology of living onscreen is really one of control. ●