

## The Brain

Such is the complexity of the brain that it is perhaps the only organ in the human body that is far from being fully understood. It is one of the organs that is essential to life, used as a legal determiner of death—the body with irreversible cessation of the brain is brain-dead—and it is a focus for suicides and murders, where there is an objective for the brains to be ‘blown out’. Even the living dead in popular fiction, who appear to be brainless, are best stopped by aiming for the brains. A precious organ, it is encased within the hard shell of the skull and any operation to repair its damage through brain surgery is viewed as requiring the utmost of skill. For horror films looking for a combination of gross realism and special effects glory, craniotomy has become a gory moment that is now shown in increasingly graphic detail, as viewed in a lengthy sequence in *Saw III* (2006), which will be discussed below.

The brain is the location of the mind and our intelligence, the centre of the nervous system, and the greatest source of our individualism, with thoughts, compulsions, emotions and memories controlled and stored by the brain, which also directs and conducts the processes and movement of the body. A reduced or missing part of the brain, through perhaps an accident, a stroke or a lobotomy, removes or lessens its effectiveness, and can alter or affect the performance of the body—as will be examined with a focus on a specific scene in Thomas Harris’s novel *Hannibal* (1999) and its 2001 film adaptation. Brain reshaping and experimentation will also be addressed with a consideration of H.G. Wells’s novel *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896).

Functions are compartmentalised within the brain, which is composed of different lobes and departments for specific abilities. Essentially, though, the body is managed in halves, the brain consisting of two hemispheres, the left and the right cerebral, which control opposing sides of the body. An imbalance can lead to brain duality, with such a body in internal conflict the subject of Robert Louis Stevenson's 1886 Gothic tale, *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, in which Dr Jekyll 'exhibits left-hemisphere attributes', whilst the monstrous Hyde 'embodies right-hemisphere traits' (Stiles 2014, p. 37). It forms the basis of an idea for the split self in Stephen King's novel *The Dark Half* (1989; adapted into a film in 1993), which will be part of a discussion on the exposed brain. The story concerns an author, Thad Beaumont, who writes under a pseudonym, and who finds his evil alter ego sharing his thoughts, feelings and pain. However, there was also the presence of an unborn twin brother, and parts of this parasite are discovered within Beaumont's brain during childhood surgery.

Despite its significance, historically the brain has been an organ overlooked, perhaps because it has been considered so unfathomable. Being seen as unknown and unfamiliar has been a factor in how the brain has been received, with its exposure from beneath a detached cranium especially displeasing to behold. Unlike the heart, to which the brain has often been contrasted, this is an organ that has not been embraced as sacred. As Scott Manning Stevens writes in his consideration of the body and Christianity, it is the heart that has been metaphorically transferred as 'an unambiguous symbol of love' (1997, p. 273), and he knows 'of no iconographic tradition depicting Christ's exposed brain' (1997, p. 276). The brain is aesthetically less pleasing, with its lumps and grooves of grey matter. With its chemical releases, electrical sparks and intricate internal workings, it has been labelled a machine and it is in some ways so alien to the rest of the body that it has inspired fiction in which the organ is imagined to be incredibly powerful, possessing an independence where it no longer requires a body, and able to control the minds of others whilst held in glass containers. The central texts that will be considered here are Curt Siodmak's novel *Donovan's Brain* (1942) and its screen adaptation in 1953, as well as those in 1944 (as *The Lady and the Monster*) and 1962 (as *The Brain*). The discussion will also include Roald Dahl's short story 'William and Mary' (1959), its television adaptations, and the films *Blood Diner* (1987) and *The Brain* (1988).

Fantasies of the brain have been explored most in science fiction, which imagines futures of unlocked brain potential or encounters with

other lifeforms of heightened intelligence. The giant brain bugs of the *Starship Troopers* series of films (1997–2012) have the power of telepathy and can absorb knowledge from humans. This is done through piercing the skull and then literally sucking out the brain, an idea perhaps inspired by the creature with a long forked tongue that sucks out brains in the Mexican film *The Brainiac* (1962), or the British production *Fiend without a Face* (1958), with its giant ‘mental vampire’ floating brains. Such fiction also includes the alien invasion film, *The Brain from Planet Arous* (1957), in which a giant brain takes over and controls the body of a scientist. Whilst it is a possession narrative, this film is related to the subgenre of body transplant fiction, with the surgical obsession of transferring a healthy or valuable brain into the body of another. These brain transplant movies appear across an array of Gothic narratives, and will be addressed with a focus on the films *Black Friday* (1940), *Monstrosity* (1963), *Brain of Blood* (1971) and *Get Out* (2017).

In these stories, in which the physical brain is transferred, there is a relocation of the mind and soul. The brain in a container is imagined to have retained an ability to think, control, communicate and have an awareness of its existence. Scientists and philosophers have debated the location of the body’s soul and the divide or relationship between the heart and the mind and the body and the head, but as Stevens has noted, there is also a ‘mind–brain split’ (1997, p. 268), adding that the brain ‘seems tied to its own physicality and function, oddly separate from the more evocative term “mind”’ (1997, p. 278). The brain as the physical body part will be the primary focus of this chapter, whilst the mind in relation to the organ will be a secondary concern. In that context, this chapter acknowledges that there are significant horror fictions that depict madness or the psychic powers of the mind—telepathy, precognition, clairvoyance—for instance David Cronenberg’s film *Scanners* (1981), and the Stephen King novels *Carrie* (1974; filmed in 1976, 2002 and 2013), *The Shining* (1977; filmed in 1980 and 1997), and *The Dead Zone* (1979; filmed in 1983), but these are beyond this discussion.

## THE EXPOSED BRAIN

Rembrandt van Rijn’s painting of a brain dissection, *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Joan Deyman* (1656), celebrates the ‘execution of another thief: Joris Fonteyn’ (Sawday 1996, p. 154), but as Jonathan Sawday observes (1996, p. 155), it takes the top of this body’s exposed head

from Andreas Vesalius's anatomical sketch *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* (1543). In employing Vesalius's detailed work, Rembrandt sought to establish a realism in his art of a less dissected organ. As Sawday writes '[t]he images of the brain in the *Fabrica* were remarkable both for their clarity and the manner in which they showed how the complex dissection should be conducted' (1996, p. 155). He also believes that Rembrandt had been asked to show the surgeon's search for the body's soul and had 'set out to show the primacy of the brain in the investigation of what it was that constituted the human being', at a time when Cartesianism was 'very much a live topic' (1996, p. 157). The fresh corpse being dissected is positioned in such a way that the viewer is placed at the foot of the table on which the body lies, looking down its length from the toes to the head. Their sightline is directly drawn to the corpse's head, which is upright and with its scalp pulled down like flaps, exposing the brain. The anatomist stands behind, scalpel in hand, delicately probing at the divide between the cerebral hemispheres.

The historic, scientific and artistic value of this painting is unquestionable. Crucially, it is not a work of fiction, or horror, but it can be compared in some ways with the refinery of the brain dissection that is performed by the former surgeon Dr Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins) in the story *Hannibal*. In this fiction, Deputy Assistant Attorney General, Paul Krendler (played in the film by Ray Liotta), is drugged and positioned at the head of a dining table, whereupon the top of his skull is removed. 'Dr Lecter's method in removing the top of Krendler's skull was as old as Egyptian medicine, except that he had the advantage of an autopsy saw with cranial blade, a skull key and better anesthetics. [...] The pinky-gray dome of Krendler's brain was visible above his truncated skull' (2009 [1999], p. 549). Noted for his cannibal-culinary skills, Lecter then removes parts of Krendler's brain and organises the pieces for consumption, all the while keeping the victim alive: 'Standing over Krendler with an instrument resembling a tonsil spoon, Dr Lecter removed a slice of Krendler's prefrontal lobe, then another, until he had four. Krendler's eyes looked up as though he were following what was going on' (2009 [1999], p. 549). The author, Thomas Harris, prolongs the scene and Krendler's extreme predicament, by having Lecter approach the slices of brain as a delicacy being prepared in a cooking masterclass: 'Dr Lecter placed the browned brains on broad croutons on the warmed plates, and dressed them with the sauce and truffle slices. A garnish of parsley and whole caper berries with their

stems, and a single nasturtium blossom on watercress to achieve a little height, completed his presentation' (2009 [1999], p. 550). Rather ironically, the drugged and lobotomised Krendler concurs with the cannibal feast; "Smells great!" Krendler said' (2009 [1999], p. 550).

As further parts of the brain are removed and cooked, Lecter continues to keep Krendler conscious, albeit a little delirious and blurry and abruptly breaking into simple songs: 'A second helping consumed most of the frontal lobe, back nearly to the premotor cortex. Krendler was reduced to irrelevant observations about things in his immediate vision and the tuneless recitation [...] of a lengthy lewd verse' (2009 [1999], p. 551). In the film adaptation, Lecter points out particular functions of the regions of the brain, with one lobe being 'the seat of good manners', which he submits Krendler will not miss. He also feeds part of a cooked slice of brain to Krendler, in an act of assisted autocannibalism, which is absent from the novel. Instead, Lecter's captive dinner table guest, Clarice Starling (Julianne Moore), who wretches at the ghastliness of the situation, is presented in the novel as evolving into a willing participant in the brain feast, asking for 'MORE [...] releasing in Dr Lecter glee he could scarcely contain' (2009 [1999], p. 551; emphasis in original).

The scene is quite unlike Peter Jackson's film *Bad Taste* (1988), in which bits of lost brain are unsophisticatedly stuffed back into the skull or scooped out and eaten with a spoon, or the nauseating *Bloodsucking Freaks* (1976), in which a woman has her brain sucked out with a straw, following the insertion of a power drill into her cranium. Instead, the horror in *Hannibal* is juxtaposed with high culture and refinement, which the film emphasises through evening dress, wine and classical music accompanying a candle-lit dinner. It makes the scene all the more disturbing and compelling. Rather like Rembrandt's painting, the viewer is drawn to the exposed brain of the man across the length of a table (see Fig. 2.1). The brain on display is the spectacle, Krendler's cranium lifted off like the neatly removed top of an egg. Lecter is the skilled anatomist, his knife poised over selected parts of the brain, for which he has the necessary knowledge to perform a dissection. Such is the scene's audacity and conviction, that online chat sites have continued to debate whether it is possible. Here, the exercise is not to uncover a deceased body's soul but to demonstrate the manipulation of the brain of a man not yet dead.

A similar demonstration occurs within a nightmare in *Hellraiser VI: Hellseeker* (2002), in which a man awakes in a hospital but then finds himself strapped to an operating table. The scene focuses on the drilling



**Fig. 2.1** The brain as a delicacy in a cooking masterclass in *Hannibal* (2001, directed by Ridley Scott)

of the saw and the cracking open of his cranium and then depicts the sadistic surgeon sticking metal needles into the brain as an exercise in directly triggering memories of pain in the patient. Like Lecter, this surgeon is focused on extending the torture, with the pins a reference to the pain permanently suffered by the chief monster Pinhead, whose facial and cranial surface is studded with nails. The scene is relatively short, with the patient waking in shock as the first nail is inserted. In comparison, the improvised brain surgery in *Saw III* is ambitious and unrelenting and lasts for nearly seven minutes. The chief organiser of the sadistic puzzles or traps that motivate the torture narratives within the series of *Saw* films (2004–2017), is Jigsaw (Tobin Bell), who by part three is in urgent need of brain surgery. A surgeon, Lynn Denlon (Bahar Soomekh), is kidnapped from a hospital and forced to operate.

Ian Conrich has written that in the *Saw* films, which he terms ‘survival horrors’, there are ‘expectations for gore’ and ‘the dynamics of space are paramount’ (2015, p. 116). Despite the unorthodox setting, in the back-room of a warehouse, *Saw III* creates a pseudo-operating theatre with the surgery preparation and process depicted in some detail, as Denlon flits across the room anxiously. As Conrich notes, the series is closer to

‘crime investigation television shows such as *CSI* (2000–), with their stylized knowledge and demonstrations’ of the violent act (2015, p. 117). A drill and saw are tested in advance, partly to show they are working and partly to establish for the viewer their brutal power. As part of the scalp and cranium are removed, brain-blood spattering the surgeon’s face as she drills through the skull, Jigsaw is kept continually conscious. Denlon maintains communication with Jigsaw, advising him of what she is doing, but this is also designed to relay to the film’s audience a pseudo-authenticity and a sense of realism. Moreover, mirroring Jigsaw’s attempts to remain still and conscious, is the viewer’s attempts to not look away from a spectacle that is extremely harrowing and that tests both the patient and the audience. Throughout the series, handpicked characters are placed in a confined space, from which they need to escape within a specified time limit and will suffer horrific self-mutilation in trying, with horrendous death the alternative for failing. The performance of body horror in Jigsaw’s surgery is also against the clock, with the heavy music, rapid edits, flash cuts and roaming camera adding to the intensity of the scene.

The brain surgery in *The Dark Half* is so disturbing that the assisting nurse flees the operating theatre. Discovered within the prefrontal lobe of a child’s brain is part of another human: ‘[p]rotruding from the smooth surface of the dura was a single blind and malformed eye. The brain was pulsing slightly. The eye pulsed with it. It looked as if it were trying to wink at them. It was this—the look of the wink—which had driven the assisting nurse from the O.R.’ (King 2011 [1989], p. 10). And the eye was not all that was uncovered, ‘[i]n addition to the eye, they found part of a nostril, three fingernails, and two teeth. One of the teeth had a small cavity in it. The eye went on pulsing and trying to wink right up to the second when [...] the needle-scalpel [was used] to first puncture and then excise it’ (2011 [1989], p. 11). In the film, as part of the cranium is lifted, the surgeons express astonishment at what they see and on touching the dura with the scalpel the surface slightly parts to reveal the eye looking out. The parasite, that becomes an ‘abortion’ (2011 [1989], p. 13), is an uncanny twin, an unwanted and unfamiliar fragmented form that has remained hidden, feeding off its brother, until the lifting of the cranium reveals its existence. The tooth with a cavity suggests it had perhaps been alive and consuming, whilst indicating the incomplete foetus’s decay. The blind eye also suggests deterioration, with its ‘winking’ animating a parasite that is apparently dead.

## BRAIN EXPERIMENTS

Within Gothic fiction, the exposed brain is most visible in surgical narratives. Such tales often present the unethical and unorthodox work of practitioners in hospital horrors such as Robin Cook's novel *Brain* (1981), or as lone scientists working in a private laboratory pursuing a mad obsession. *Brain* is another of Cook's medical crime horrors, drawing on his knowledge as a qualified doctor, in which a respected neurosurgeon is found to be conducting brain surgery on unwitting test patients in experimental operations that leave some with their brain removed. The extraction of the brain occurs most in transplant horror films, in which the organ is swapped between bodies that emerge as incompatible. A progenitor for the horrors of modern surgery is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818), which actually never mentions the transfer of the brain into the assembled creature. Universal's production of *Frankenstein* (1931) developed this aspect of the story, with the creature unexpectedly receiving the abnormal brain of a criminal. As an explanation for the creature's murderous urges and its compulsion to destroy, the aberrant organ allowed the film to explore questions of recidivism, degeneracy and the unhealthy body, which were particularly prevalent at the time. Susan E. Lederer observes that this plot device is highlighted in the film in a scene in which a professor lectures to students. The lecture is on 'cranial anatomy, and locates the depravity of a criminal in the malformations of his brain: "These degenerate characteristics", Professor Waldman informs his class, "check amazingly with the case history of the dead man before us, whose life was one of brutality, of violence, and of murder"' (2002, p. 39).

Such is the significance of the brain that it is one of the last parts of this monstrous body to be assembled. As Stevens argues, it 'may seem to be our last irreplaceable organ—a part uniquely "us"' (1997, p. 278), with the various screen versions of the Frankenstein legend collecting the organ from different 'donors' and each thereby influencing the creature's interactions. In the 1994 film *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, the brain acquired for the creature is from Waldman, giving him a degree of intelligence, the ability to speak and to learn quickly. It actually reconnects him to the way he was portrayed in Shelley's novel, in which he appears as a polyglot. Within the Frankenstein films, the difference between speech and being a whimpering, grunting or mute monster is a sign of its intelligence. In the 1931 film, the intended normal brain



was accidentally damaged by Frankenstein's assistant, Fritz (Dwight Frye), who supplied the abnormal brain as a replacement. It is parodied in *Young Frankenstein* (1974), with the imbecilic assistant, Igor (Marty Feldman), breaking into a Brain Depository, dropping the brain labelled 'scientist and saint' and replacing it with one that he believed belonged to Abby Normal, but is labelled clearly with the warning 'DO NOT USE THIS BRAIN!'. The moment in the 1931 film is crucial and not only defines the creature's identity but establishes a direction for the screen versions that follow. *Son of Frankenstein* (1939) presents the unruly creature as unable to talk, so the transplant of a 'better' brain in the sequel, *The Ghost of Frankenstein* (1942), adds speech and even the voice of its donor, Ygor (Bela Lugosi). But Ygor, a crazed graverobber, is a bad choice for the creature's brain, when three quite different brain options were considered within the diegesis of the film—the others being a doctor, and a young girl.

The girl's brain is the creature's choice, and whilst such an idea would take the transplant further into forbidden territory, its desire for a brain of innocence and youth seems appropriate for a newly born. In *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948), Wilbur Smith (Lou Costello) is targeted as the new brain 'donor'. Costello's characters in his films tend to be immature, so in this Frankenstein adventure he is seen as the perfect brain for the troublesome creature; as a devious assistant advises, a brain 'so simple, so pliable, that he would never oppose his master'. The idea is explored most creatively in the Frankenstein-esque/Pygmalion-esque novel *Poor Things* (1992), by Alasdair Gray, in which a man's wife-to-be has supposedly been brought back to life, following her drowning, with the aid of a transplanted brain from her unborn child. It means that the 26-year-old woman, Bella Baxter, is infantile, but her knowledge grows quickly as she absorbs from her new life and surroundings. On meeting his wife-to-be for the first time, Archibald McCandless, observes that '[o]nly idiots and infants talk like that, are capable of such radiant happiness [...] She only looked thoughtful once', but he is corrected by his host and her creator, the surgeon Godwin Baxter, who advises, '[h]er mental powers are growing at enormous speed. Six months ago she had the brain of a baby' (Gray 2002 [1992], p. 30). In a reversal of the situation in which a child is born as the mother dies giving birth, the donor here appears highly appropriate; '[w]hy should I seek elsewhere for a compatible brain when her body already housed one?', asks Godwin Baxter (2002 [1992], p. 42).

The brain as a complex organ may be the last of the body's transplants to be mastered, but in Gothic fiction it has led to a plethora of operations. In *Black Friday*, a gangster's brain is transplanted into an academic's body; in *The Monster and the Girl* (1941), an executed gangster's brain is transferred into a gorilla, enabling him to seek revenge on rival gangsters who framed him for murder. A female brain is transplanted into a gorilla in *Captive Wild Woman* (1943); an evolved brain is transplanted into a thawed prehistoric caveman in *Return of the Ape Man* (1944); an elderly woman's brain is prepared for a transplant into a young woman's body in *Monstrosity*; a white district attorney's brain is transplanted into a black man's body in *Change of Mind* (1969); a dying Arabic prince's brain is transferred into a simpleton's body in *Brain of Blood*; a young woman's brain is needed for a disabled woman's body in *Blood Relations* (1988); and the bodies of African Americans are used for the transplanted brains of rich white folk in *Get Out*. In these films, as with other transplant fiction, characteristics of the deceased body remain held within a part of the anatomy, with *Black Friday* and *Get Out* presenting two minds in one body; the mind of the dead locked deep inside, and alongside the living, where it is either contained or released through hypnosis.

Compared to the transplanted heart, hand or eye, there is more of a logic in depicting the brain containing the memory, soul or individualism of the previous person. But these films are arguably more about the body than the brain. The brain transplant is often one scene conducted amongst the advanced machinery—the bubbling, beeping and sparking equipment—that appears necessary for the obsessed scientist to perform. The operation takes place because often a healthier or stronger body is required, that will permit a brain trapped within a disabled or dying body to continue. 'To start life again in a brand new body', as the narrator states in *Monstrosity*. The forced marriage of body and brain in these Gothic relationships is clearly disharmonious, with the mind of the deceased in conflict and challenged by a body that is clearly not their own: held within the body of another race, a body of another level of intellect, or of another species, such as a hairy gorilla or even a cat, into which the brain is transplanted at the end of *Monstrosity*.

The extreme nature of the brain surgery places these tarnished surgeons more often in isolated laboratories, such as under a mansion or a rural homestead in *Monstrosity*, *Blood Relations* and *Get Out*, where their unethical practices may proceed undisturbed. In *Brain of Blood*, the work is described as an 'illegal experiment' and is performed with utmost

secrecy; the surgeon in *Black Friday* is executed in the electric chair for his ‘illegal operation’; whilst in *Monstrosity*, the doctor has rigged the mansion and the laboratory to explode in a nuclear reaction if his work was to be discovered by the police. Essentially, these films are modern takes on classic Gothic literature, combining elements of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde (most explicitly in *Black Friday*), Frankenstein (in, for instance, *Brain of Blood*) and Dr Moreau (most clearly in *Captive Wild Woman*).

*The Island of Doctor Moreau*, by H.G. Wells, is a Gothic novel that was written in a period following Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859), and when advances in neuroscience—which Stiles calls a ‘watershed’ (2014, p. 2)—were finding ways to understand the plasticity of the brain and the uniqueness of the human mind. Such advances were being achieved in part through the horrors of vivisection and experimentation on the brains of live animals, which, as Stiles argues, had ‘philosophical ramifications [...] irrefutably demonstrat[ing] the similarity between men and beasts’ (2014, p. 12). Wells, who had studied biology under a student scholarship, was very aware of these practices. He also could not have avoided coverage of the notorious 1881 trial of neurologist David Ferrier, who was accused of breaking the Anti-Vivisection Act of 1876, with his horrific studies (see Stiles 2014, pp. 12–13). Wells centralises this work within *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, in which a deviant scientist has removed himself from society in order to continue his controversial experiments in vivisection. This involves altering the brain of animals in order to create human-animal hybrids, termed ‘Beast People’. As Moreau advises, ‘[t]hen I took a gorilla I had, and upon that, working with infinite care, and mastering difficulty after difficulty, I made my first man. [...] With him it was chiefly the brain that needed moulding; much had to be added, much changed’ (2005 [1896], p. 76).

Moreau becomes a self-made God, remaking creatures to his own design and controlling their minds so that he is worshipped and his laws obeyed: ‘he had infected their dwarfed brains with a kind of deification of himself’ (2005, [1896], p. 59). Stiles argues that *The Island of Doctor Moreau* was ‘self-consciously situated’ by Wells within an emerging Victorian fashion for equating genius with insanity and which developed into a ‘tradition of Gothic mad scientist fiction’ (2014, p. 127). The Victorians ‘pathologized genius’ (Stiles 2014, p. 126) as eccentric, dishonourable and evil operating on or beyond the boundaries of law and society (see Frayling 2005). But Wells was also interested in theories of evolution and in his work there is what Stiles describes as a ‘nightmarish

vision of the massively over-evolved brain' (2014, p. 119), which extends across his novel *The Invisible Man* (1897) and morphs into the 'amoral, top-heavy Martians and lunar inhabitants' (2014, p. 120) of *The War of the Worlds* (1898) and *The First Men in the Moon* (1901). The enormous brains of highly evolved aliens continue into films such as *This Island Earth* (1955), *Invasion of the Saucer Men* (1957) and *Mars Attacks!* (1996). In these films, the brain is so impressive that it is on display and often wide open, a fantasy that is narrativised in other fiction in which the organ is independent and excels outside of the body.

### BRAIN POWER

The brain that functions without a body is often imagined to have evolved and developed powers, especially the ability to control others through its enhanced mental capacity. Mind control is a common theme in Gothic fiction, with individuals killed or compelled to kill whilst under the influence of an external force. In the horror-comedies *Brain Damage* (1988) and *The Brain* (1988), such control occurs through hallucination. In the former, an addictive hallucinogenic is administered to the cerebral matter by a creature that is then rewarded with human brains on which it feeds. In contrast, the latter film has a rampaging giant brain with tentacles, claws and a large mouth with razor-sharp teeth, which consumes humans whole; 'that's food for thought', quips a malevolent scientist as the brain eats its first victim. This brain is first seen at the Psychological Research Institute, contained in a vat with fluids and electrodes keeping it alive, as it hypnotises patients through brainwaves and television monitors—a concept that has elements of the films *Halloween III: Season of the Witch* (1982) and *Videodrome* (1983). 'Clear your mind', a patient is advised, as the hallucination is transmitted.

The Institute promotes a programme called Independent Thinking, which is anything but, and acts as a front for a brain that grows the more it consumes, once it is free. In *Blood Diner*, a restaurant serving the best 'brain food' (which unbeknown to customers is human flesh), acts as a front for the exhumed brain of a serial killer. Floating in a glass jar in the restaurant kitchen, it instructs and guides two brothers in the collection of body parts that need to be stitched together in order to resurrect an ancient evil goddess (see Fig. 2.2). As a brain that has ambitious plans, it needs to observe progress, so it comes with a pair of functioning eyes, yet it also relays plenty of advice, despite having no mouth. The uncanny



**Fig. 2.2** The all-seeing exhumed brain of a dead serial killer in *Blood Diner* (1987, directed by Jackie Kong)

nature of this animated disembodied brain, barking orders accompanied by profanities, is more absurd than disturbing and is reminiscent of the incongruity of *The Man with Two Brains* (1983), in which a brain surgeon falls in love with a brain in jar. He takes this brain on picnics, including afternoon boating, where he declares his love: ‘you’re the most complete woman I’ve ever known’.

Roald Dahl’s ‘William and Mary’—filmed twice for television for *Way Out* (1961; USA) and *Tales of the Unexpected* (1979; UK)—is a short story that is also about inseparable partners, where death does not necessarily mean the end of the marriage. When he dies, William’s brain is sustained in a jar by a ‘magnificent neuro-surgeon’ (Dahl 2011 [1959], p. 23), who had offered him the chance to keep it ‘alive and functioning as an independent unit for an unlimited period’ (2011 [1959], p. 25). The process is explained in some detail over two pages of the short story and at times using scientific language, as if Dahl is presenting a level of plausibility to his fiction:

we’ve got the upper half of your skull off so that the top of the brain, wrapped in its outer covering, is exposed. The next step is the really tricky

one: to release the whole package so that it can be lifted cleanly away, leaving the stubs of the four supply arteries and the two veins hanging underneath ready to be re-connected to the machine. (2011 [1959], p. 30)

The ability for William's floating brain to communicate is debated in an exchange that is darkly comic, with the neurosurgeon promising an eye. Thought communication will be possible through 'an apparatus somewhat similar to the encephalograph' (2011 [1959], p. 33), interpreting electrical and chemical emissions. William insists also on having an ear—'I want to listen to Bach' (2011 [1959], p. 32)—but is told firmly that would be impossible.

In life, William, a university professor, is a controlling man, and he is depicted as particularly obnoxious in the *Way Out* episode. The irony in this story is that, unlike other fiction in which a brain is kept alive in a jar, he now lacks power, or any ability to control others, and is described as 'so helpless' (Dahl 2011 [1959], p. 43). His eye just stares at the ceiling all the time—'[t]he ceiling isn't much to look at' (2011 [1959], p. 41)—and the electronic waves on the machine illustrate his frustration. There is nothing beautiful about this supposed wonder of science—the doctor warns William's wife, Mary, that '[h]e's not very prepossessing in his present state, I'm afraid'; she responds, 'I didn't marry him for his looks' (2011 [1959], p. 40). When Mary sees the brain, it 'reminded her of nothing so much as an enormous pickled walnut' (2011 [1959], p. 41). It seems so obsolete that the episode of *Tales of the Unexpected* does not even show the brain, which is held within a metal container, on top of which the eye peers out of a small glass dome. In this version, it becomes a haunting remnant of a body gone, the dreadful eye that refuses to die that is reminiscent of Edgar Allan Poe's short story 'The Tell-Tale Heart' (1843). For at home, William's armchair in which he used to sit 'had a depression on the seat of it, made by his buttocks over the years' (Dahl 2011 [1959], p. 20). Taking this further, in *Tales of the Unexpected*, Mary is left feeling 'he's looking at me', even before she learns that he had been saved by the neurosurgeon. But with William dead, Mary, his 'widow', is able to smoke, drink cocktails, wear lipstick and watch television—the things that she was previously prohibited from doing. In an act of defiance, she blows smoke from her cigarette into the eye of the brain and tells it/William, 'from now on, my pet, you're going to do just exactly what Mary tells you' (Dahl 2011 [1959], p. 45).

When Dahl wrote his short story he was apparently unaware of Siodmak's 1942 novel *Donovan's Brain* (see Treglown 1994, p. 123). That said, it does read as a subtle subversion of the earlier text, taming and domesticating an organ that, in *Donovan's Brain*, has the power to kill and journey through a surrogate. Donovan, like William, is a commanding man, but the intellectual knowledge of the latter is now the brain of a wealthy megalomaniac, who dies with important financial and judiciary business unfinished. Whereas William's brain is helpless and at the mercy of his rejuvenated wife, Donovan's brain grows in strength and size and has the power to control the minds and bodies of others. William's brain can see with its solitary eye, but the view is redundant; Donovan's brain has no eyes, yet its sight is strong through the acquired vision of those it possesses. The surgeon, Patrick Cory (Peter Corrie in *The Brain*), that removes Donovan's brain following a plane crash, does so with the aim of progressing his experiments into understanding the abilities of the organ, as opposed to aiding an extension to the life of the businessman. But Cory becomes so controlled by the brain, which is transmitting its will through telepathy, that he finds he writes messages whilst unconscious, he replicates the dead man's signature, and begins to talk like the man, walk like him (with the same limp) and even undergoes a reshaping of his facial features.

Only in the British film version, *The Brain* (1962), is the face of the businessman (now called Max Holt) seen, and even then it is in the form of a painting, executed by Holt's son and filled with his contempt for his father. One painting is a Dali-esque grotesque, transposing Holt's head onto a bird. The second is an expressionistic portrait that would not be out of place in Dorian Gray's attic. Without these artworks, the businessman in these versions of *Donovan's Brain* would be faceless. The prominence of the brain in these stories has led to the face being stripped away, leaving an organ of such magnitude that it can continue to express an individuality, an independence and a will. Of the three screen adaptations, the 1953 film *Donovan's Brain* most emphasises the organ, placing it in the foreground of shots or to the side and just behind a character. It pulses and glows when awake, like a radioactive creature; bobs energetically in the fluid in which it floats when agitated; and 'speaks' through an encephalograph that monitors its electrical activity, which is described in *The Lady and the Monster* as 'the brain's satanic vibrations of evil'. This lifeform evolves though at a rapid rate, becoming increasingly alien, and reaches a point where it can seemingly no longer be contained.



Cory declares that '[i]t looks horrible. A whitish-gray formless mass, which grows to the edge of its container. I would not be surprised if it suddenly developed eyes and ears and a mouth! It is monstrous!' (Siodmak 1969 [1942], p. 154).

Controlling the minds of others, the brain has no need for its own body, but it leads to a state of schizophrenia for those possessed who attempt to combat its growing strength. As Cory describes, '[f]irst I have the strange sensation of another will compelling the movements of my hands and feet, commanding all the motor responses of my body. Then other thoughts than mine enter my mind [...] I live a double existence [...] a person whose personality is split' (Siodmak 1969 [1942], p. 51). As Gothic fiction, the story presents two minds competing for the control of one body, and a monstrous disembodied organ—a fragment of a man deceased—growing in size as it is kept alive and fed. As science fiction, the story imagines the untapped capability and power of the brain. The story is also in the tradition of film noir and is an investigation by the brain, through its control of Cory, to seek answers to the hostile actions of former associates.

Meanwhile, the surgeon is leading his own investigation, albeit one that is scientific, into understanding what he believes is the beauty of the human brain. 'If I could study its thinking, I might learn about the great unsolved riddles of nature', mused Cory (Siodmak 1969 [1942], p. 30). But as Cory's colleague warns, '[y]ou're dealing with a power you might not be able to control [...] Brain-power is unlimited, and unpredictable' (1969 [1942], p. 44). Knowledge is power but, in these Gothic fictions, the wonders of human nature hold untold dangers. The unknown organ that is the brain, which contains the mind and perhaps the soul, is a part of the body that is at once the source of individuality and a power which is possibly greater than the body in which it is contained.

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