Mirroring the genetic experimentation that its characters undertake, Eron Sheean’s film boldly explores the limitations of genre. Like all experimental procedures this has its share of flaws, writes Alexandra Heller-Nicholas, but there is also much to be learned from the results.
The swirling cells that split kaleidoscopically across the crisp white screen in the opening credits of Eron Sheean's debut feature film make his intent clear from the outset: science and art are inextricably linked. *Errors of the Human Body* (2012) traces a volatile story of lived personal experience within the less flexible world of scientific research, and it is the tension between the subjectivity of the former and the apparent objectivity of the latter that grants the film its gripping narrative propulsion. This tension also dominates the film's overall aesthetic; its prevailing cool palette of blues, greys and white creates a cold, clinical world where human warmth struggles to exist. But as the opening credits indicate, there is a way for these binaries to coexist. It is the search for this balance – between cold and light, past and present, science and art, joy and pain, denial and acceptance and, ultimately, even life and death – that provides the film with its ambitious thematic scope.

Sheean, who won the Melbourne International Film Festival Emerging Australian Filmmaker of the Year award in 2006, developed *Errors of the Human Body* in collaboration with the Max Planck Institute of Molecular Cell Biology and Genetics in Dresden, Germany. Having spent time there as artist-in-residence, Sheean's unique relationship with the institute allowed him unlimited access to the building, which was used as the film's primary shooting location. A Kickstarter funding campaign was launched in January 2011, and over three months attained just over its goal of US$25,000. This makes the film one of a new breed of feature films that turns to the public for financial support, offering a grab bag of incentives for private sponsors ranging from exclusive membership to the film's official website, through to receiving an executive producer credit on the final product.

*Errors of the Human Body* tells the story of Geoffrey Burton (Michael Eklund), a once-successful American geneticist whose career dwindled after the death of his newborn son and consequent separation from his wife Sarah (Caroline Gerdolle), now remarried and pregnant to another man. Desperate to save his failing career, Geoff used his son's fatal genetic mutation for research – even naming the condition Burton's Syndrome – and it is in the hope of salvaging his reputation...
that he accepts an invitation to join a cutting-edge genetic research facility in Dresden under the direction of Samuel Mead (played by an aged, uncharacteristically serious Rik Mayall). Here he is united with his one-time intern Rebekka (Karoline Herfurth), with whom he had an affair years earlier while he was married to Sarah. Impressed with Rebekka’s work, he discovers that the strange, pushy and ambitious Jarek (Tómas Lemarquis) is stealing her research and conducting mysterious experiments of his own in the building’s basement. Geoffrey then steals one of Jarek’s mice in an attempt to uncover precisely what the rival researcher is doing. When he is bitten and infected with a mysterious virus, the events triggered lead him to a conspiracy ending in his own physical and emotional collapse. In doing so, the shocking secret that had led Geoff’s life toward calamity is finally revealed.

**Into the wunderkammer**

Haunted by the demise of his marriage, the collapse of his career and his son’s death, Geoffrey’s decision to merge his professional struggles with the rare genetic mutation from which his child suffered is just one of the ways that *Errors of the Human Body* explicitly flags questions about scientific ethics. The intrigues that govern how the researchers at the institute interact suggests a far from utilitarian intent. They are at best ambitious (Rebekka) and at worst megalomaniacal (Jarek), while Geoff’s personal demons make it impossible for him to be objective about the research questions – both practical and ethical – that the trio face as they investigate the sensitive area of prenatal genetic screening. Although Geoff is careful to say he rejects eugenics from the outset, the film goes to great lengths to set, the film goes to great lengths to say he rejects eugenics from the outset, and his journey from vacant numbness to fury and eventual physical and mental collapse is framed less by romance or empathy than by the spectator’s own ‘scientific’ curiosity into his particular case study. The moral ambiguity surrounding Geoff positions the spectators themselves as investigators of sorts: with so much about his character unclear, the film encourages us to place Geoff under a microscope.

This notion of Geoff as a specimen – and one that specifically blurs the lines between science and art – is emphasised through one of the film’s most striking visual motifs, that of the wunderkammer, or cabinet of curiosities. Expressing her fascination with her axolotl research subjects early in the film, Rebekka proudly shows Geoff a wunderkammer she has in her apartment. As a scientific wonder that holds huge and untapped potential, Rebekka celebrates the axolotls. The idea of the cabinet of curiosities as a place to house unique or even freakish artefacts becomes a driving and recurrent symbol for Geoff, who ultimately believes that both he and his son deserve placement in such an environment because of the bitter narrative twist that propels the shock ending. Just as Rebekka places her anomalous research subjects in the context of the wunderkammer, the audience-investigator is encouraged to perceive their research subject – Geoff – in the same way.

**Genre and genetics**

Genre provides an additional level on which the notion of the wunderkammer can be understood in *Errors of the Human Body:* not only are the characters’ research subjects (as well as the main character) difficult to taxonomically define, but the film itself bleeds far too freely to allow it to be locked down to a single genre. While generic hybrids are far from rare, *Errors of the Human Body* is something different again: though it flags an awareness of generic traditions, it seems to do so only to deny a commitment to them. It is a not-horror, a not-thriller, a not-melodrama, precisely because it sets up expectations regarding each and then deliberately ignores them.

While this thematically syncs with the entire film in the sense that the movie itself becomes a curiosity, urging us to place it under a microscope, this brave and ambitious concept may have resulted in a drama that is too smart for its own good. While experimenting with generic expectations so as to add yet another nested layer around the film’s central notion of anomaly is admirable on paper, whether viewers are able to resist the pull of generic iconography is open to question. In particular, the image of Geoff’s Day of the Dead calavera-style make-up for the institute’s costume party (which is liberally used in the film’s promotional material), combined with the inescapable links to horror’s fascination with bioethics – spanning from Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, to the work of David Cronenberg, to films such as *The Human Centipede (First Sequence)* (Tom Six, 2010) – clearly encourage the viewer to position *Errors of the Human Body* in a horror context.

The film’s connection to the horror genre is reinforced by director Sheean’s role as co-writer of Xavier Gens’ *The Divide* (2012). Gens’ name will be familiar to horror fans: he directed *Frontier(s)* in 2007, a film that alongside *Haute tension* (Alexandre Aja, 2003) and *Martyrs* (Pascal Laugier, 2008) is a key horror film in the New French Extremity tendency. Such associations would certainly have played a role in garnering *Errors of the Human Body* a place in the Fantasia International Film Festival in Canada earlier this year, and in its appearance in genre press such as *Fangoria, Dread Central* and *Bloody Disgusting.* That the latter refers to the film as a ‘body horror’ movie in part illustrates the problem of *Errors of the Human Body*’s thematic attack on genre: clearly, genre is part of the language of film promotion, regardless of how much a film challenges such structures.

Like *Errors of the Human Body,* the scientific laboratory is a crucial site in *The Divide,* suggesting that a fascination in this area is part of Sheean’s
The absence of any possible victims makes it difficult to invest enough in any storyline concerning what happens to these people.

Errors of the Human Heart

This is not to say that genre film necessarily must conform to strict boundaries that reject experimentation; there is a long history of horror that pushes boundaries in spectacular, challenging and often highly controversial ways, from The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (Robert Wiene, 1920) to Eraserhead (David Lynch, 1977) to The Human Centipede. Even in the extreme case of the latter, however, there is a basic degree of pathos active in the viewing experience: horror is more than a cluster of iconographic markers – it requires victims or possible victims who have something done to them, or who are threatened with having something done to them. These are absent in Errors of the Human Body. This is not a mistake or an oversight, of course, because it has no intention of being a horror film per se, despite flagging its interest in playing with generic motifs.

What is absent, however, is a basic reason to care about the film’s characters. The absence of any possible victims makes it difficult to invest enough in any storyline concerning what happens to these people. While Eklund’s performance should be celebrated for the way he captures Geoff’s emotional numbness, he is exposed early on in the film as selfish at best: not only did he use his son’s death to further his own career, but there is a degree of hypocrisy in the fact that despite his rosy recollections of his life with his ex-wife Sarah, he was unfaithful to her and had a fling with his intern. Jarek verges on the moustachio-twirling villain of a silent melodrama, and Rebekka – while certainly the warmest character of the three – is ultimately just as selfish. Sarah and the dead child are the closest the film comes to having characters we genuinely feel for, but they are peripheral to the story being told, reduced to little more than narrative devices.

In its struggle towards reinstalling some kind of positive emotional life into its cold, barren protagonists, Errors of the Human Body implies that the eponymous error is emotion itself, and not just the biological glitches that cause our physical breakdown. In the isolated context of the cinema-as-wunderkammer, Errors of the Human Body is a fascinating and ambitious attempt to place itself as an art object under a scientific gaze, just as its central protagonist finds himself shifting from investigator into investigated. While its conceptually rigorous experimentation with genre may not be wholly successful in terms of fully engaging the demographic to which it has been marketed, more problematic are the nuts-and-bolts details of character development and spectatorial engagement. Despite these issues, Errors of the Human Body is a well conceived and visually beautiful film. If Sheean’s only real misfire is to attempt to punch above his weight, it bodes well for his future work.

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http://errorsofthehumanbody.com/

Endnote


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