

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Pregnant Men Were a Movie Punchline. Now They're Horror Villains.

The idea of the pregnant man has long been mined for Hollywood comedy. This summer, he becomes a menace.



By Amanda Hess

Aug. 5, 2022

When I was four months pregnant, just as my midsection had grown vast enough to convert my pregnancy into a public event, I escaped to the movies. I saw “Men,” Alex Garland’s May horror film about the young widow Harper (Jessie Buckley), who sets out on a restorative countryside getaway only to be terrorized by a village full of unsavory male archetypes — pervy vicar, passive-aggressive nice guy, condescending cop — all played by Rory Kinnear.

Near the end of the film (spoiler alert), one of these men spontaneously sprouts a distended belly much like my own. A slimy slit ruptures between his legs, and one of the *other* guys slithers out of the hole. He grows a belly and births a third guy, who grows a belly and births a fourth guy, and so on, until the film’s full cast of men has replicated at Harper’s feet.

A few weeks later, I was beached on my bed at home, watching a screener on my laptop for Andrew Semans’s “Resurrection,” when I was again confronted by the specter of a menacing pregnant man. The thriller, which debuted in theaters last week, follows the tightly wound corporate hot shot Maggie (Rebecca Hall), who unravels when she spots David (Tim Roth), a man from her past. Maggie reveals (more spoilers!) that 22 years ago, David lured her into an abusive relationship, impregnated her and *ate their baby*. Now he informs her that the little boy he gobbled is gestating in his gut and missing his mommy. “He’s moving,” David tells Maggie, handling his middle-aged paunch like a baby bump. “Would you like to feel him?”



In Alex Garland's "Men," a young widow (Jessie Buckley) is terrorized during her countryside getaway by a village full of unsavory male archetypes (all played by Rory Kinnear). A24



Andrew Semans's "Resurrection" follows a corporate hot shot, Maggie (Rebecca Hall), who unravels when she spots a man from her past (Tim Roth). IFC Midnight

So the horror villain of the summer is the pregnant man. He represents the patriarchal domination of women, or maybe the cyclical nature of male violence, or maybe the surreal outer edge of psychological trauma — but whatever he's supposed to signify, he implicates me. My pregnant state, grafted onto these men, is pitched as the apotheosis of grotesque social commentary, a sight meant to be so bizarre, disturbing and deep that it is preserved for the crowning spectacle of a horror film.

Pop culture has long been obsessed with the prospect of male pregnancy, though it has mostly been used as a comedic gambit, as in the dismal 1978 farce "Rabbit Test," the sentimental 1994 rom-com "Junior," or the elaborate rollout of Lil Nas X's 2021 album "Montero," during which he traipsed around the internet sporting a photorealistic bump before simulating birthing an LP. Of course, some men can and do become pregnant — trans men — but works that exploit the idea of the pregnant man rarely acknowledge the reality of the pregnant man. He must exist purely as a fantasy, a counterfactual, a metaphor. Like a mythical boogeyman, he has stalked the culture for generations, occasionally appearing to impart a lesson on gender relations in his time. Now he has shape shifted from a clown into a creep — a visceral interpretation of male control over women's bodies.

Over the past several weeks, I watched many of the artifacts of the pregnant man genre. I started with "Rabbit Test," Joan Rivers's misanthropic comedy in which the aimless bachelor Lionel (Billy Crystal, in his first movie) miraculously conceives after a one-night stand with some pushy broad. Released at the tail end of the second-wave feminist movement, "Rabbit Test" is a movie about the scrambling of gender roles that only reinforces how rigid they still are.

Its “first pregnant man” conceit is just a setup for a carnival of broadly racist and sexist scenarios that evinces little interest in the reality of pregnancy itself. Lionel hardly looks pregnant, he hardly feels pregnant, and as his due date approaches, he is not concerned about how he is going to become un-pregnant. “Rabbit Test” is so incurious about women’s experiences that it doesn’t even bother exploiting them. It’s just a movie about a guy with a pillow under his shirt.



“Rabbit Test,” starring Billy Crystal and Doris Roberts, is a movie about the scrambling of gender roles that only reinforces how rigid they still are. AVCO Embassy Pictures, via Photofest

That shifted a little with “Junior,” the 1994 rom-com in which an embryo is implanted into Arnold Schwarzenegger’s musclebound abdominal cavity. “Junior” is from the “Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus” era — a time when men and women were pitched as fundamentally different organisms, but when men who attempted interspecies communication were praised for accessing their “feminine sides.” Schwarzenegger (playing, naturally, a scientist) literalizes the trend when he is impregnated as a part of a clandestine medical experiment, pumped with estrogen and reduced to a maternal cliché. Suddenly he is craving pickles with ice cream and weeping at Kodak commercials.

“Junior” is built on a sight gag: pregnancy as a laughable twist to Schwarzenegger’s herculean form. But pregnancy has the power to render any body ridiculous. And yet, as I trudge down the street, my increasingly preposterous dimensions inspire such affirmational outbursts from strangers that I feel at the center of an immense gendered

conspiracy, where the self-evident absurdity of my physical situation is instead pitched as the cheerful apotheosis of my life as a woman.

Maybe that's why, watching "Junior," I was struck by the sensitivity of Schwarzenegger's performance. Though he is dropped into a parade of offensive scenarios (there is an interminable sequence of shoddy drag) and fitted with a limited emotional range (pregnancy is uncomfortable and confounding, never degrading or grim), he endures his ludicrous situation with unexpected grace. His pregnancy makes him not into a joke, but a father, and a plausible love interest for Emma Thompson. And when he hurls a rival scientist across a laboratory and fashions an abortion rights slogan into a steely Austrian-accented catchphrase — "My body, my choice" — it feels earned.



In "Junior," Schwarzenegger's surprisingly sensitive performance as a pregnant man makes him a plausible love interest for Emma Thompson. Universal Pictures

If Schwarzenegger's baby in "Junior" were real, she would be older than the 23-year-old Lil Nas X, whose own interpretation of pregnant imagery exists on an elevated plane. The campy visual world of "Montero" — which also finds him riding a stripper pole into hell — seems unbothered by gendered expectations at all. Like Billy Crystal's in "Rabbit Test," Lil Nas X's prosthetic belly is just a costume, but this time it's worn by a queer pop star rapaciously churning cultural shibboleths into internet chum.

Now, just as Lil Nas X has chucked the pregnant man into the recycle bin, the movies have reclaimed him and primed him for a heel turn. Hollywood's comic interpretation of the pregnant man always masked some deeply misogynistic ideas, and now they have emerged from the subtext to define the character himself.

"Men" is a film that does not challenge the gender binary so much as wallow in it. Harper's ill-fated getaway is suffused with dour shots of fertility idols and portentous biblical references; before she is terrorized by a pack of pathetic and violent men, she chomps an apple she's plucked from someone else's tree. Garland, the film's director, has said that "messing around" with ancient masculine and feminine symbols led him to the image of "a guy with a vagina on his chest." When that vagina births a succession of bad guys, rendering them all as laboring parents and mewling babes, it reads as a kind of misanthropic final judgment, as if men abusing women is a grotesque but ultimately inevitable cycle.

The imagery of "Resurrection," on the other hand, originates from nowhere. There is no mythical antecedent to David smugly carrying his beer gut like a womb. He requires no padding or prosthetics. He just asserts that there's a baby in there, and he does it with such psychological intensity that Maggie starts to believe him. Watching Roth's riotously unsettling performance, I felt freed from the reality of my own pregnant body, and also a little bit won over. David's

claims are ridiculous, but so is pregnancy. Though I am of course aware of the biological process through which babies are made, it still feels so supernatural that if you told me that people get pregnant by gobbling up live infants, I might believe it.

After plodding through decades of pregnant-man tropes, “Seahorse” — a 2019 documentary that follows Freddy McConnell, a British journalist and trans man, as he conceives, carries and gives birth to his first child — came as a welcome relief. Finally, the image of the pregnant man is freed of the distortions of comedy, horror and metaphor and presented simply as a human experience. As McConnell endures the physical and mental trials of pregnancy, he must also contend with intense social pressures: He feels alienated from other men, patronized by women, ignored by medicine and estranged from his own identity.

The backlash against gender-neutral language like “pregnant people” — and the assertion that it somehow “erases” women — is unintelligible to me. It is the coding of pregnancy as the paramount expression of femininity that make me feel expunged. The gendered constructs of pregnancy work differently on McConnell’s body than they do on mine, but I identified closely with him. He describes pregnancy as a process, and that is clarifying. It is not an extension of my personality. It’s just the wildest thing I’ve ever done.

For me, the most unsettling image in the annals of pregnant-man movies came at the end of “Men” — not the birth scene, but the one that followed. Throughout her weekend of horror, Harper is in touch with a friend, Riley, who becomes so concerned for Harper’s safety that she drives overnight to find her. When Riley steps out of the car, we get the film’s final reveal: She’s pregnant! If pregnancy represents horror in a man, it is meant to signal the opposite in a woman — she must be nurturing, preternaturally understanding, good. I don’t know what I’m supposed to think about that, but I know how I felt: like a punchline to an old joke.

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A version of this article appears in print on , Section C, Page 1 of the New York edition with the headline: Pregnant Men Shift To Movie Villains