

The Last Frontier: the Abject

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Abstract

Cinema, as a representation of the real, explores human nature, as it permits creation, based on our intrinsic need for emulation, as the art of the abject, which exhibits its ability for the extrapolation of the human condition. This article reflects upon the question: does cinema emerge from the need to emulate and extrapolate on the human condition? Thereby, the abject is problematized, in the seventh art, as the ability to explore and push new boundaries that would permit the placement of the moving image as a field for human development.

Key words: Cinema; Fiction; Reality; Poetics.

*I need howling, a corrosive magma, an atmosphere of attack
capable of cracking the silence of the night.*

(Houellebecq, 2017, p. 59)

Human beings are a species of manias and complexes. We surround ourselves with our own angst and create constraints, such that the untamable need cannot eat away at us. While this may be normal, it does not cease to astonish. From these boundaries and construction of obstacles emerge the arts, as a bridge between the need to build and destroy. All artistic action is, by definition, an irruption, or a break that gives rise to creative action. It also reflects a need to feel that not everything ends in and within the body, that not everything has a uniquely physical barrier.

Plato, with brazen sincerity, proposed this in “Poetics”, that arts are fundamentally emulation. We emulate the mean, and incidentally, ourselves. Cinema, for example, takes this need for creation and emulation, and transforms it into the destruction of those limits that establish an alternate reality, a shadow over a cave.

Cinema uses this projection as a momentaneous reality, and uses all types of trickery to emulate “the real”, but also innate ideas, both adventitious and artificial, as proposed by Descartes. “The real”, thanks to the processes of natural domestication and exploration of that which is human, is shifted to a different category, in which the gods, witches, and science

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are all at the same level: as false as it is real. Cinema is a step from the abyss of the Sartrean “without reason”, and stops at this limit to explore multiple facets.

In the midst of the shadow-creation process, cinema has explored, gathered, and become submerged in the “nature of the human”: the arts leave their mark, and not only on the surface. During this process, genres and diversified the shadow forms have been proposed. Both genres and audiences. Of course, there are certain canons, but my job is not to delimit these -- quite the contrary.

With this text, I seek to problematize and unleash an enigma: if cinema emerges from the need to emulate and extrapolate that which is human (let us consider the extensive network that surrounds the body, and that which does not), as well as the abject, the central theme of this composition, which, according to Julia Kristeva (2004) is also most human, is cinema, and in fact, all art, not abject?

I do not know the answer to the question above, but will attempt to lend form to a possible hypothesis: the abject explores the last frontier, and cinema lengthens this, such that the limit is not disgust, but self-exploration (although this may sound like Cohelo). So let this text serve as a hanging head, or last phase of the transformation of the scientist into a fly.

In order to complete this text, each affirmation or definition that I employ or cite must also have cinematographic support. The selection thereof was as capricious and arbitrary as the text that you now read.

Origins

It is difficult to employ the etymology of a word as support for the explanation of a concept. However, I understand that analysis of the “origin” is to permit the preview an unknown reality. Words are living subjects: they are born and transform. So too is the central term of this text: the abject.

Abject: biectus is a Latin term that comes from the verb abiicere, which translates as, to “deprave” or “humiliate”.

These are five interminable minutes. The tunnel, the unremarkable attire, the heat. Then the gaze, the fall. The screams, blows, vexation. Gaspar Noé (2001) places us *irreversibly* facing a painful and distressing situation: a rape. As I watch, my hands tremble. My body reacts with both repulsion and fear. I am human, and am exposed to the human. The etymology proposes that the abject depraves and humiliates. I cannot think of a better mirror in which to reflect this than said heartbreaking scene.

This concept came to our language as abject, an adjective whose main significance is mentioned in the Real Academia Española dictionary:

Abject: refers to that which is in ruin or evil.

The 1980s was a strange era for cinema. It was fructiferous, but also frightening. Horror movies became *blockbusters* (these were not invented until E.T.). In the midst of this, a young

Sam Raimi (1981) proposed a movie that delved into the wicked: *Evil dead*. “That which is ruin” gave rise to another ruinous being, as the evil spreads to another. In this game, evil expands, like an illness, a religious view of sin as a contagion.

I

Remember how painful it was to grow up. Your bones stretched and become thinner. I can imagine the inner crunching of my femurs. At 11 years of age, I suffered from inner pain, deep within, that burned my marrow, and caused the spongy tissue of my bones to throb. I spent several years like that, suffering on the inside, consuming pain killers indiscriminately. That experience made me me.

According to Julia Kristeva (2004), the abject is that which one must shed, in order to become oneself. That self is, then, the product of a mutation. The paradigms and schemes (and even the body) transform, in order to reach a limit beyond the primal chrysalis.

I was submitted to pain and changes, so too was the scientist from *The Fly*, by David Cronenberg (1986): a body submitted to profound mutation, so as to crush the human and reveal a new being, a fly that acts as an analogy for Sartre’s *The Flies* (a non-explicit relationship observed). The flies, as they react and accumulate, explore garbage, and inhabit spaces that we ourselves reject for domestication. In *The Fly*, and Kristeva’s (2004) affirmation, it is shown that the abject is necessary for evolution.

Kristeva describes the expulsion of that considered abject, as a necessary condition for sexual, mental, and social identity education. “The child must renounce a part of themselves in order to transform into their ‘self’. They must learn that shit, pee, and vomit are dirty substances, not objects of pleasure” (Kristeva, 2004, p. 66).

I do not know when I learned this that Kristeva (2004) discusses, perhaps it is an unconscious process, and as such, memory thereof is futile. However, I can feel the repulsion that they generate. I ask myself from where said indoctrination stems. When do we learn that shit, should not be touched, likewise with vomit and urine? Perhaps this comes from our egocentric race, which is repulsed by that which we expel. Despite the repulsion, there is always the temptation.

Temptation employed as support by Pier Paolo Pasolini (1976) in his piece, *Saló*. Therein, Kristeva’s affirmation is supported, but as the need to overcome it. Pasolini adapts the novel *The Marquis de Sade*, and is condemned because he is not true thereto, in this primeval, “pre-self” era, in which these formed part of us, and we did not reject them. *Saló* is a journey to a primary time, and as such, is profoundly abject.

In the midst of this process, the self will arrive (let’s call it the path of abjection), as proposed by Kristeva (2004), and “...the initial efforts toward the future subject are taken, in order to differentiate them from the maternal entity, to separate them from the pre-oedipal mother” (p. 85). This author launches, in her text, “The power of horror”, a complex affirmation: firstly, she explains that the “subject” occurs in the future, and so, in this first stage, the child has not identified with themselves. This fact generates a type of depersonalization in childhood (for example, as Kierkegaard would say, the question of the “self” does not exist for those who make it an entity), and to one day be able to become themselves, they must sever ties with their mother.

Vivian Gornick (2017), in *Apegos feroces*, delves into this rupture of the mother-daughter relationship, and puts forth the idea that the tension between them forms part of a mutual discovery process. I also experienced that process. My mother threw objects at me, and I threw mental insults at her. I had to hate my mother in order to, in part, oblige Freud and Kristeva. It was a complex, but enriching period. I became a “subject”, thanks to that breaking point between my mother and I. However, the abjection proposed by Kristeva also has another side, and this exploration is performed by Takashi Miike (2001) in *Visitor Q*.

In said film, Miike (2001) explores abjection in reverse order: the “pre-oedipal” link is not broken, as with the protagonist of *Carrie* (De Palma, 1976), rather it is mended. Here, Kristeva (2004) loses validity, as once the “subject” becomes their “self”, they do not remain, but rather return. In this apparent reversal, they discover abjection as a conscious, painful process. For this reason, the characters in *Visitor Q* grant us a beautiful final image, in which the children of the Japanese house return to their mother’s bosom, thus, returning to the first stage to traverse, once again, the “path of abjection”.

Responses

“The advent of one’s own identity demands a law that mutilates. Thus, nausea, displeasure, and horror are the signs of the first repression. Repression establishes the self, and situates it as a subject in the symbolic system...”, affirms Kristeva (2004, p. 27). The body generates overwhelming physical reactions before the mutilation stimulus, but this action is necessary in order to achieve this new role, “subject” within the “symbolic system” of the “self”.

Vomit occurs in weak bodies. Mine succumbs constantly to this, and it serves as part of a cleansing and expulsion. It also occurs thus in *The Exorcist* by William Friedkin (1973). In said film, vomit appears and acts as a body inhabited by an external being. It lays bare the need to exteriorize the way in which the interior is invaded, and simultaneously works as a blaspheming element. Abjection, in this movie, exposes the audience to the compelling sensation of removing that which is internal.

On the other hand, Jean-Paul Sartre proposes, in *Nausea*, the sensation of wishing to vomit as a form of prevention and distancing from the world. It is a barrier that the character creates to stay on the edge of a world that, effectively, disgusts them. In this dimension, Kristeva’s (2004) proposal is taken a step further: to things, people, and anything that surrounds the subject.

Three

Religious tradition divided us in two: body and soul. Later, psychoanalysis divided us into three: the Id, ego, and super-ego. Three elements within a single subject, constantly at odds. Within this same psychoanalytical structure are the three stages of the “subject’s constitutive process”: the oral, anal, and genital phases. These three, says Kristeva (2004), must occur in the midst of the process of abject exposure.

Feeding forms part of the port of entry and exit. It is in the oral stage in which this tie is created, and this process, which, according to Kristeva (2004), begins, to initiate experimentation with the abject.

Holocausto caníbal by Ruggero Deodato (1980) explores this need to eat, but takes food to a place it should not inhabit: a discourse on cannibalism, culture shock, and violence as “subjective” elements. We see mutilated, cooked, hunted bodies paraded by. Humans being fed humans, and the elevation of the abject to the bodily level.

The second stage is the anal stage. Therein, “in accordance with socio-cultural circumstances, bodily waste is considered abject” (Kristeva, 2004, p. 87). As expressed above, our society has created a link of repulsion with that which our bodies excrete. Shit is, perhaps, the most hated of all, as it contains six billion bacteria. The septic isolates, and cinema opens a window.

El ciempiés humano by Tom Six (2009) unifies, in his movie, morbidity with the first two stages: oral and anal. An experiment causes exploration of the relationship between power and submission, and takes the disgust for these to a new level, in which food is that which is excreted. The stages are joined, and are indistinguishable.

Lastly comes the genital stage. Therein, the abject emerges, in the form of sexual differentiation (Kristeva, 2004), and in accordance with Freud, also in the forms of exploration and identification.

This point, in my vital experience, is where the truly complex arises. Sexuality addresses margins classified more as taboos and impositions than “stages”. We have a binary creation of gender and genital imposition on sex: man/woman. We must conform and live in one or the other.

Ambiguity does not exist, but cinema explores this, posing an alternate possibility. Jörg Buttgerit (1993), in *Schramm*, complicates the genital stage. He proposes a displaced, paranoid, and obsessive character. Therein, both man and woman are Satanized, and both types of genitals must be suppressed and generate disgust. The penis and vagina are presented, in this film, as monstrous figures, in part, owing to desire, and in part, to disgust.

Transgression

If these three stages are observed, and that proposed above is considered, one may arrive to a fundamental conclusion: “abjection is related to cultural discourse: art, literature, philosophy, etc. It connects with transgressive practices in general, with the experience of crossing limits and managing prohibitions” (Kristeva, 2004, p. 101). This arrival to the limits is also to exceed them. The abject, then, is the last frontier, and surpassing them would be to cross over to a different state of “self”.

Hal Foster (2001) arrives to a similar conclusion, “...both spatially and seasonally, abjection is the condition in which identity is found to be perturbed, in which a collapse in meaning is produced” (p.45).

This collapse in meaning, and practice of transgression includes movies such as *Videodrome* by David Cronenberg (1983) and *Raw* by Julia Ducournau (2016). Both explore the transgressing dimension of human beings: they demolish limits, extrapolate, and sublimate desires. *Videodrome*, from a metaphysical fantasy of the “soul” abandoning the body, in which the

journey contributes to the body, modifying it. *Raw*, by way of exploration of instincts and desires which cannot be dominated. It ends in a sincere exposition of the subject.

Thus, as proposed at the beginning of this composition, cinema permits that this abjection be transformed into a process of personal exploration, of opening frontiers and the problematization of common spaces.

It is, as Houellebecq (2017) says, in his poem, which serves as an epigraph “capable of cracking the silence of the night” (p.59), and submitting to this subject which has been transformed, and a constant regression to their pre-self origins. An eternal return to one’s origin: the ouroboros biting its tail.

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