
In the twenty-five years since she first arrived upon the Paris intellectual scene as the star pupil of Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva has produced a heterogeneous and well-respected body of semiotic and psychoanalytic writings. But while her theory has attracted admirers, it has not been so successful with followers. Unlike some of her contemporaries (particularly Jacques Derrida), Kristeva’s work has seldom been taken up, adapted or expanded by other theorists of literature, art, or cinema.

This adds to the novelty of *The Monstrous-Feminine.* Barbara Creed’s psychoanalytic reading of the female monster in horror films draws upon Kristeva’s theory of abjection as well as more familiar Freudian-Lacanian models. Creed notes that critics of the horror film, feminist or otherwise, have ignored the significant subgenre in which the feminine is portrayed not as victim or heroine but as monster. She finds that depictions of feminine monstrosity fall into two general categories, corresponding to specific Freudian and Kristevan psychoanalytic hypotheses. The Freudian relates female monstrosity to castration anxiety; the Kristevan, to the reproductive function and general association of the feminine with the corporeal.

With regard to castration anxiety, Creed takes the interesting step of monkeying with orthodox Freudian theory. She advances a hypothesis that Freud found analytic evidence to support, but ultimately...well, repressed: that of the mother as castrator. Following a path already cut by Erich Fromm and Karen Horney, Creed devotes a persuasive chapter to re-reading Freud’s study of “Little Hans.” She shows not only how the clinical material has been manipulated by Freud to support his oedipus-complex agenda, but how this manipulation obscures the role of Hans’s mother in his anxieties and phobias because Freud determined to fit his analysis to the oedipal model by casting the father as feared castrator. Creed gives an elegant and persuasive reading that places Hans’s mother in that role. The castrating mother as the root of man’s fears of woman may, she indicates, account for such widespread imagery and themes of female monstrosity as the *vagina dentata* and the culturally ubiquitous taboos relating to women’s sexual/reproductive role. Creed applies the threatening-woman figure to the consideration of typical representations of feminine monstrosity, identifying various manifestations of female agents of castration: the oral sadistic mother (the female-vampire film, i.e., *The Hunger*), the *femme castratrice* (the woman’s revenge film, i.e., *I Spit On Your Grave*), the castrating mother (i.e., *Psycho*).

Although sometimes unnecessarily scornful of more orthodox readings, Creed accomplishes what she sets out to with these interpretations. However, the limitations of her conventional approach to psychoanalytic interpretation of texts become evident she deals with Kristeva and the abject.

Kristeva’s “abject” refers to an intermediary infantile stage occurring between anarchic auto-erotism and acquisition of the (libidinal) object. This stage occurs prior to entry into the Symbolic, before language and before the fundamental distinction of Self/Other: the pre-oedipal period of (primary) narcissism or Lacan’s mirror stage. The imaginary body-unity realized by the mirror stage engenders a rudimentary ego, but the symbolic Father has yet to intervene. The subject, therefore, has not yet graduated into the realm of definition and opposition that arises as language and subjectivity in the Symbolic. At this archaic stage, the subject has entered into a form of object-relation, but this relation remains a projection of itself—an alter-ego—and has not yet acquired an “object” proper. Since the ego’s true self-definition is contingent upon differentiation from another (from its object), the ego is not just rudimentary, but insecure and unstable, and its borders remain permeable and transient. “The ego of primary narcissism is thus uncertain, fragile, threatened,” writes Kristeva. (Kristeva, 1982, 62) That is, at this stage, the ego does not have the means to secure the boundaries that constitute itself. In a constant state of being threatened with annihilation, the ego strives to separate and constitute itself as subject, a struggling played out on the level of the body, as a struggle to sort out the inside and outside of the body and to resist being re-incorporated into the maternal body.

Kristeva characterizes the condition of abjection in terms of an extreme feeling, remarking that it

is above all a revolt of the person against an external menace from which one wants to keep oneself at a distance, but of which one has the impression that it is not only an external menace but that it may menace us from inside. So it is a desire for separation, for becoming autonomous and also the feeling of an impossibility of doing so. (Kristeva, 1988, 135-36)

Thus abjection is a problem of borders, and Kristeva says that it is symbolized by imagery of confused or transgressed borders. For her suggested cinema of abjection, Creed draws directly upon Kristeva’s lexicon of abject symbolism, and especially on the female figure as the abject personified. Although there is some intertwining among them, Creed distinguishes three strains of the horror film’s typical imagery of the abject. The first is the genre’s characteristically obsessive fixation on depictions
of the body's gross physicality: the corpse ("whole and mutilated"), as well as the bodily ejecta such as "blood, vomit saliva, sweat, tears and putrefying flesh." (Creed, 10) The second category relates to the abject's problematic of borders, by drawing marked depictions of borderline states: between human and nonhuman (werewolves, etc.), between natural and supernatural, even between gender roles and sexual desires. (Creed, 11) Following Kristeva's lead, Creed also places the female body itself in this category as a signifier for "the border", because the female body signifies the abject state of anxiety about boundaries of the body. The feminine also pervades Creed's third category, the maternal figure as abject. This imagery revisits the archaic struggle for individuation from the mother. Particularly when we mark the significant inclusion of menstrual blood in the first category, the intimate connection between the feminine, the maternal, and the abject becomes clear—especially with regard to maternal femininity.

All this is, in a way, quite true to Kristeva, who draws explicit connections of the abject to the maternal in, for instance, abject rituals, which play out a dramatic conflict of paternal authority (culture, law, etc.) and the complex of nature/the physical/sexuality represented by the feminine. Creed transposes this ritual imagery directly onto several films. In these terms, for example, The Exorcist reads as

the world of the symbolic, represented by the priest-as-father, and the world of the pre-symbolic, represented by a pubescent girl aligned with the devil, clashed head on in scenes where the foulness of woman is signified by her putrid, filthy body covered in blood, urine, excrement and bile. (Creed, 13-14)

Creed proceeds through a few other well-known films, interpreting Ridley Scott's Aliens as a journey into the womb-horror of the dead maternal on the basis of H.R. Giger's gynophobic art direction, and then, the explicit development of this maternal theme in James Cameron's sequel, Aliens. Brian De Palma's Carrie is read as a saga of abjection mediated through the trope of menstrual blood and played out through an encounter with the mother/witch figure.

Creed's engagement with Kristeva is, well, vampirish. There is only a cursory discussion of the theory itself—less, in fact, than is offered in this review—and almost no account of the psychoanalytic logic underlying it. Her excuse—"a full examination of this theory is outside the scope of this project" (Creed, 8)—is particularly lame considering that the deployment of Kristeva's imagery of the abject controls so much of her interpretive agenda. Failing to situate the abject within the context of Kristeva's post-Lacanian prehistory of subject, the specific subjective and intersubjective conditions of the mirror stage (or primary narcissism), or the subject's relationship to her own subjectivity, Creed reduces the relationship between a complex and ambivalent subjective condition and its mode of symbolic evocation to a rather crude game of fit-the-paradigm. Given the extreme polymorphy of the abject symbol, this is not too difficult a task, but the comparative superficiality of Creed's theoretical stance causes The Monstrous-Feminine to occupy a fairly shallow stratum of film analysis.

Creed breezes through the texts, collecting imagery that fits her model of the abject and repetitiously confirms her thesis. To a lamentable extent, the Kristeva-based sections of her book are simply a catalogue of typical horror-film iconography arranged under the rubric of the abject. Her readings of the films themselves are thin, usually relying on basic plot and character and sometimes on art-direction. This is in marked contradiction to Kristeva's own readings of twentieth-century literature as abject art in Powers of Horror, which analyze the texts' communication with the abject as a product of textual strategies. Kristeva does not argue Dostoevsky, Proust and Joyce to be abject literature on account of abject imagery that may underlie it, but on the grounds of their texts' constructions and the space in which they position the reader. This is not to say that much psychoanalytic criticism doesn't fail to go beyond reading texts in a unidimensional manner, but rather that Creed's method pales in comparison to that of Kristeva, who is always acutely aware of questions of how the subject is constituted by the text, of how the text operates, of what one should call the text's own unconscious.

A consequence of Creed's failure to interrogate the theoretical constitution of abjection is that there is very little account for the viewing subject herself anywhere in The Monstrous-Feminine. Creed seems to assume an impersonal, perfect universal "receiver" like that of, say, structuralist semiotics. This results in the peculiar absence of any significant consideration of the gender of the subject who experiences the abject film. Creed argues on behalf of a category of films depicting woman made monstrous "almost always in relation to her mothering and reproductive functions," (Creed, 7) but ignores that psychoanalytic theory posits categorically different male and female positions in relation to the mother, differences in the mother's disposition towards male and female offspring, and a certain tension within the mother herself with regard to her own sex. Although sex and/or gender are irrelevant during the mirror-stage period to which the abject pertains, it is obviously and inescapably in the context of gendered (post-oedipal) subjectivity and relation to the mother that the abject is revisited through its specific symbolism. Once the subject has traversed the mirror stage and entered full-fledged libidinal relations, all
relations are refracted through a gendered subjectivity—even though some states may be rejections of an archaic, pre-gendered stage (as is the case with abjection). The subject’s entry into the Symbolic is entry into a gendered universe; her universe is cleaved into a “feminine” Imaginary (related, and in some senses corresponding to, the subject’s experience of the mirror stage) and “masculine” Symbolic.

All this is a convenient omission for Creed, because it masks the scarcity of any account on her part for sexual desire. Unquestionably a curious absence for a psychoanalytic reading, the omission exposes the reductionism and selectivity of Creed’s approach. Of course, by psychoanalytic logic there is no reason to impose any kind of “either-or” rule with respect to interpretations of desire versus fear. Nonetheless, Creed presents her arguments in such a way as to make desire invisible. For example, in arguing for the female vampire as yet another figure for the abject, she shapes her reading to fit the abject type to such an extent that there is no acknowledgement of the very prominent eroticism of the vampire figure, although this is a feature that strikes us as more essential than whatever abject connotations the association of blood and vampires carry.

Overall, what Creed ends up asserting is the hardly revolutionary statement that the horror film is the site of transgression against order, law, decency, propriety, and the integrity of the body—i.e. the horrible is what offends what is represented by the Symbolic order and the nom-du-père. She simply brings Kristeva’s abject to bear as terminology for the various (feminine) manifestations of this transgression. That is, she follows (or, perhaps, caricatures) Kristeva in reasserting the monolithic psychoanalytic schema of male-female, doubtless the most controversial point of any intersection of feminism and psychoanalysis. None of what Creed has to say is out of line with Kristeva; she seems to get her theory right, and, if anything, is too-faithful a reader of Kristeva and her model of abject cinema is founded upon a mere literalization of the theory to which it subscribes. It is, then, a straightforward extrapolation of a linkage of the abject to contemporary horror imagery. Creed’s book brings nothing at all to a critical reading of Kristeva, and offers little to stimulate a wider Kristevan film criticism. Perhaps a more versatile and truer application of Kristeva’s thought would not be drawn so much on a semiotic readings like Powers of Horror, but rather on Kristeva’s works of semiotic theory, if somebody could perform the (formidable) task of adapting her full semiotic/symbolic schema to film.

NOTES

1. Creed first developed her Alien reading in “Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine—an Imaginary Abjection,” Screen, 21/1, January-February, 1986, 44-72. This prescient analysis appeared some years before the release of Aliens.

2. Kaja Silverman’s fastidious critique of Kristeva in The Acoustic Mirror points out Kristeva’s theory of the semiotic chora betrays a marginalization of the feminine that is comparable to, if somewhat less overt than, the status of women in the tradition of Freudian psychoanalytic thinking to Kristeva is an unapologetic (if idiosyncratic) heir. As such, she is subject to many of the same feminist objections as her theoretical forebears, which is partly Silverman’s point.

REFERENCES


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