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**The Sublime, The Disgusting and The Laughable, Thematics in Art & Visual
Convener and Seminar Leader: Dr. Michael Newall**

“How has the concept of abjection influenced contemporary (visual) art, and what criticisms have been made of this influence?”

Inspired by Georges Bataille, developed by Julia Kristeva, the concept of abjection appeared in 1980 on Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. The basis of the concept is derived from Freud's psychoanalysis, rather than psychology. The term 'abject' literally means “without any pride or respect for yourself”¹. In Kristeva's terms, abject is that which threatens the body –the physical envelopment-, threatens our sense of identity and threatens the sense of self. While these three threats are interlinked, most importantly, abject is opposed to “I” and highlights our frailty, vulnerability. As a verb, the act of 'abjection' means the process of ensuring our body and autonomy. It is a necessary process which is fundamental and healthy. Excrement, menstrual blood and corpse are the ultimate examples for the abject.

While the concept of abjection is mainly used in contemporary art theory, it's mutually relevant to the basic notions of humanity. Hence it can be referred to in any kind of art medium and art work. Considering the transformation art has gone through in the 20th century, one can postulate that 'abject' is the latest progression in the chain which involves the 'the age of mechanical reproduction', 'psychoanalysis', 'post-modernism' and '60's and 70's social revolution'. This chain of history and theory of art, hints that the concept of abjection has always been there at the core of art, but it was not depicted or demonstrated as it has been since around 1980.

Influence of abjection in contemporary art has been strongly criticized by many – mainly conservative groups. Abjection includes concepts which set the apex of the chain of experiments in the art world which aim to breakdown the dogmas. Negative criticism is inevitable for a concept which threatens the boundaries of the social structure. Paradoxically, the concept of abjection becomes the abject for the conservative society. This essay analyzes the emergence of abject in contemporary art – through 'the age of mechanical reproduction', 'post-modernism' and '60's and 70's social revolution' respectively -, the works of Cindy Sherman, Andres Serrano, Tom Savini and Rob Bottin, and the positive and negative criticisms on several of these 'abject' artworks.

Towards the end of the 19th century, the definite breakthrough in the art theory comes with the 'age of mechanical reproduction'. “For the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art, from its parasitical dependence on ritual... The instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production; the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice-politics... by the absolute emphasis on its

¹ Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English, Sixth Edition, Oxford University Press (2000)

exhibition value, the work of art becomes a creation with entirely new functions...”² These new functions of ‘the work of art’ stabled the modernist norms which helped modernism to replace religion in western culture. The early conventions and restrictions in art world were overcome. The narration was central to the works and the roles were fixed. Right and wrong were obvious and being specific was crucial to the art theory. Social structure and art theory were strongly parallel. The social divisions were strictly separated and so were the ‘high culture’ and the ‘low culture’. During this period, where limits and definitions are meant to be perfectly clear, mass production and consumption culture was launched in the 30’s – interrupted by the World War II – and became the ‘marketed glamour’ of Capitalism in the 50’s. Laura Mulvey, in her essay *A Phantasmagoria of the Female Body: The Work of Cindy Sherman*, says “American mass-consumption and the society-spectacle; a time when , in the context of the Cold War, advertising, movies and the actual packaging and seductiveness of commodities, all marketed glamour. Glamour proclaimed the desirability of American capitalism to the outside world”³. ‘Marketing the glamour’ grew into being the main narrative in socio-economic structure and in art theory. It was a period where there was no respect to ‘that which does not respect borders’.

The transition to the post-modernism was essentially a change in the narrative. Interpreted by some to be the death of the narrative, post-modernism was a response to art being specific. 60’s social revolution - rise of civil movements, feminism and homosexuality – was a sign that the norm of male white bourgeois was now under attack. On the other hand, issues like America’s failure on Vietnam, Watergate Scandal and Manson Family Massacre shattered the society’s belief in the government and society structure. The response of the new culture was inexorably reflected on the contemporary art. It was the collapse of the boundaries. The high and low cultures were not defined anymore. The post-modern art was about ‘nothing’ and it was without integrity. It was also a state of encountering ‘the worst’ a culture has to offer. There couldn’t have been a more perfect state for the concept of abjection to emerge and materialize.

The work of Cindy Sherman is one of the most interesting examples of the influence of the abject due to the strong transformation of her art. Her career begins in 1977 with the famous *Untitled Film Stills*; a series of simple black and white images where each depicts an imaginary film still where Cindy Sherman, herself, is the object posing as various imaginary female film characters. “She used popular culture as her source material without using theory as a commentary and distancing device. ... She won immediate attention from critics who welcomed her as a counterpoint to feminist theoretical and conceptual art.”⁴ However this immediate attention and welcome later attempted to rule Cindy Sherman’s work just like any other mainstream artist-fame relationship. But she responded. Sherman’s later work was with colour images and interior spaces, drawing the attention to the sexuality of the woman in the images. As the fashion industry tried to moderate her new work, Sherman’s next work was even more ‘not respecting the fashion industry’. She used bizarre and eerie make-up to focus on the feeling of disgust and sometimes replaced the subject woman with plastic body parts. Finally in 1984, the image of the woman disappeared from her

² Benjamin, Walter., *The Work of Art in The Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Illuminations, (The University of Kent - hand-out from the course HA301 - during the 2003-2004 academic year)

³ Mulvey, Laura., *A Phantasmagoria of the Female Body: The Work of Cindy Sherman*, New Left Review, no. 188, pp. 137-150

⁴ Ibid.

work completely. *Untitled Film Still 175* is a mere composition of garbage, puke and scattered remains of food.

This transformation in Sherman's work is an example of abject taking over and conquering the self. Cindy Sherman was never a photographer; she has always been an artist who used photographs. She's an artist who searches for the origin; the origin of herself, the origin of her art, the origin of the society. She demonstrated the 'abject' and still was not cast out of the society in any level. With the help of the political and social conditions of her day, she is amongst the very few lucky ones who came a long way in his/her journeys. She was lucky because she threatened the very industry who welcomed her in the first place and survived; moreover she is praised like only few other artists are in the contemporary art world.

Andres Serrano is an American photography artist who has immersed himself into the abject. His work shows deep influences of abjection but in a more blazing manner compared to Sherman's work. He usually uses very conventional techniques. However, his works include images of homeless people, morgue photographs, and photographs of burned and fatally wounded people. Moreover some of his most famous works are plain depictions of blood and semen. His most famous (notorious) work is titled *Piss Christ* (1987). One might look at the image – which is just a crucified Jesus image in heavy tones of orange – and wonder what the controversy is about other than the title. *Piss Christ* is not an artwork which offers any abjection or any other post-modern or psychoanalytic theme. What creates the controversy with this artwork is how the image was actually constructed. Serrano places a plastic crucifix in a glass of his own urine and photographs this and titles it *Piss Christ*. The controversy is about the non-fiction not the fiction. Serrano goes a step beyond what John Waters did with the famous feces-eating scene in *Pink Flamingos* (1972) (where the actor Babs Johnson actually chews a spoonful of dog feces in front of the camera). What John Waters created was a scene of abject and he obtained this scene through a real-life performance of abjection. What Serrano does is plain drawing attention to the actual, non-fiction abject performance involving his own urine. *Piss Christ* is just an advertisement for the performance art Serrano did while isolated from any audience.

French psychoanalyst and psychiatrist Jacques Lacan implies that identity is a fiction created by language. Postulating on this, one can claim that Serrano is sacrificing his identity for his art theory. "Ironically, it is this self division between self and not-self which institutes the very notion of the excremental"⁵. On the other hand, Serrano receives strong negative criticisms. *Guardian* art critic Adrian Searle mainly calls attention to Serrano's non-fiction actions; "Serrano was let into the morgue, to make his photos of the stillborn, barbecued burn victims, Jane Doe shot by the cops, Aids deaths and suicides. The morgue photos have little of the necrophiliac nastiness, say, of Joel Peter Witkin, and frequently, his pictures of dead babies have that sentimental Victorian air, not of death, but of perpetual sleep."⁶ Searle refers to the work of Serrano as 'the negative energy' and continues about the context of Serrano's work; "All these images have been theatricalised in some way. Instead of death, he rubs our noses in texture, sheen, shapes, gorgeous gore, strong meat in strong light."⁷ What disturbs Searle is certainly the abject content of the works, how they were done and he finds this 'threat' very dispiriting in his own words; "There's something dispiriting about this show, which probably couldn't make Serrano look worse if it tried. It's a quick tilt round the curve of sex, death and dressing-up. The

⁵ Fletcher, John and Benjamin, Andrew., *Abjection, Melancholia and Love*, Routledge, London (1990)

⁶ Searle, Adrian., *Negative Energy*, The Guardian, Saturday October 13, 2001

⁷ *ibid*

last image is the first - the Stars and Stripes flag with a trickle of blood, a limited edition in aid of the victims of September 11th. Heavy content and a crass image: I keep thinking Serrano can do better than this, but then again, maybe he can't."⁸

The non-fiction construction of an abject artwork seems mutually to be the next level within the concept of abjection. This is most evidently seen in the works of the landmark special make-up effects artists Tom Savini and Rob Bottin. Receiving a completely different respect and attention when compared to Sherman and Serrano; Tom Savini and Rob Bottin are the creators of the most important scenes, creatures and various embodiments in the making of the prolific films concerning the concept of abjection.

As it's mentioned earlier in this essay, the concept of abject has been always in the core of art, in the core of many tales and myths since it's ultimately an exercise in searching for the human origin. But it has always been rather forbidden to demonstrate the acts which include the abject. The abject has been a cardinal component of the horror and fantastic story. But the depictions and theatricalisations have always lacked the practice of showing the abjection. It was always hinted but hidden. "The violence in most American movies is of a curiously bloodless quality. People are shot and they die, but they do not suffer. The murders are something to be gotten over with, so the audience will have its money's worth, the same is true of the sex. Both are like the toy in a Crackerjack box: Worthless, but you feel cheated if it's not there."⁹

60 years into the 20th century, the audience was introduced to the 'abject blood' for the first time in *Psycho* (1960) – and remember, it was black and white. During the 60's, Herschell Gordon Lewis' gore flicks have demonstrated scenes where internal organs being torn out of the bodies' of the victims. These scenes were utterly fake but still, extremely unusual. However, Herschell Gordon Lewis' films were "low-culture" and not considered art during its time. In 1968, the low budget horror film, *Night Of The Living Dead*, was the first "not-so-low-culture" movie depicting gore. On the screen, people were being devoured. The audiences were confronted with the non-fiction act of some actors violently munching on some raw meat. The level of disgust was seminal. In 1968 there were actors munching raw meat, and next thing you know, in 1972 there were actors munching dog feces and again in 1972 there were actresses performing deep throat oral sex – in non-fiction, and in mainstream artworks/films. And after that, in the 70's and 80's "blood scenes", "mutilation scenes", "cannibalism scenes", "rape scenes" and "any imaginable disgusting scene" was 'something'. Some films were financially relying only on these scenes. Some scenes were becoming more popular than the films. It was during this time, Tom Savini and Rob Bottin created some of the most amazing works of abject. And the criticisms were equally loud of course.

Tom Savini is the artist who collaborated most famously in the cult films *Friday The 13th* (1980), *Maniac* (1980), *Dawn Of The Dead* (1978) and *Day of The Dead* (1985). Having a Vietnam background, Savini delivered the most memorable and shocking scenes of dismemberment and mutilations with a pinch of black humour. Savini shared with the audiences what he was exposed to during the war. And he certainly left his mark on the popular culture. The EC-Comics-sense-of-humour, and the repetition in his works was a sign that the Vietnam veteran Savini,

⁸ ibid

⁹ Roger Ebert, Chicago Sun-Times / September 25, 1967

was not trying to disturb the audiences but rather trying to numb them to a reality of life (which is one of the aims of the performance of abjection – to get used to the disgusting realities of life). George A. Romero's *Day of The Dead* (1985), takes place in a military base where a group of soldiers experiment on captured zombies, rather abusing them. When finally the base is invaded by the zombies, the death of Commander Rhodes delivers a sublime parody of abjection. A symbolisation of the fall of the lord/order and rise of the chaos, finally zombies hunt Rhodes down and bring him on the ground. Rhodes' stomach gets torn open by the swarming zombies who immediately begin eating him. Rhodes, still alive, screams in great fury at the zombies who eat his internal organs: "Choke on them! Choke on them!"

These cult films, were strongly criticised, despised and mostly banned by several authorities all over the world, especially by the British Censors. Moreover, some films were not banned but cut. The footage cut usually contained depictions of abject; works of Savini. A very important issue here is that films like *Friday The 13th* (1980), *Maniac* (1980) and *Dawn Of The Dead* (1978) have that 'low-culture' quality. This gives them a big disadvantage when judged by not-post-modern critics who still hold that border between low and high culture very strong.

While Savini concentrated on mutilations, spurting of the blood and tearing up the human body, Rob Bottin's work was creating the 'unique abject bodiments'; any unimaginable creature or being that is opposed to the 'self'. Bottin was the main special make-up effects artist in the milestone films like *The Fog* (1980), *The Howling* (1981), *Robocop* (1987), *Total Recall* (1990), *Se7en* (1995) and *Fight Club* (1999). His artwork includes; 'man-to-werewolf transformations', 'decaying human bodies', 'people blown to bits by heavy machine guns', 'a partly-disintegrated man after falling into toxic waste' and 'a corpse of victim who was fed to death'. While he has created many depictions of 'the bodily disgust', his most relevant work is 'the Thing' in the John Carpenter's film *The Thing* (1982).

The Thing is probably the best content for understanding the abject identity of Bottin's indefinable special effects. The fictional concept of the alien life form in *The Thing*, sums up the notion of post-modernism and abjection. The Thing is not a monster, it's not a creature, it's not even clear if it's a singular or plural being. Questions about the Thing like; how it works, what it aims, how does it survive, etc... are misleading. Thing is a pile of dogs, humans, insects all merged into one omni-symbiotic, fluid-like, life-form...-like... thing. Carpenter wanted to create a being, an entity that's beyond any monster or alien description; a pure threat to humankind and nothing else. A threat that does not fit any definition of an object; just the abject!

'The abject' in horror films is best reviewed by Barbara Creed. Creed focuses on the crucial notions of 'blood', 'vomit' and 'excrement' disturbing the system and order. 'Blood' especially is a dubious element. It is a sign of health and order when inside the body, and it is a sign of death and chaos when outside the body. 'Vomit' and 'excrement' have the same notion;

"They signify a split between two orders: the maternal authority and the law of the father. On the one hand, these images of bodily wastes threaten a subject that is already constituted, in relation to the symbolic, as 'whole and proper'. Consequently they fill the subject – both the protagonist in the text and the spectator in the cinema – with disgust and loathing. On the other hand they also point back to a time when a fusion between mother and nature existed; when bodily wastes, while set apart from the body, were not seen as objects of embarrassment and shame. Their presence in horror film may invoke a response of disgust from the audience situated as it is within

the social symbolic but at a more archaic level the representation of bodily wastes may invoke pleasure in breaking the taboo on filth – sometimes described as a pleasure in perversity - and a pleasure in returning to the time when mother-child relationship was marked by an untrammelled pleasure in playing with the body and its wastes”¹⁰.

The work Kristeva and the work of the artists mentioned in this essay - and many others who deal with bodily disgust - will always be abject to the society where things like excrement, blood, corpse, vomit, half eaten food and saliva are not only disgusted but also forbidden to mention. The artwork which demonstrates abjection, paradoxically itself becomes an abject for the society. Abject is not liked, not welcomed. Yet it is a necessary and a healthy part of life. It is a part of life! There’s an intriguing hypocrisy in the social structure of the mankind. That’s why the family, which is the smallest particle of this social structure, is often a social claustrophobia. As long as this hypocrisy remains, the concept of abjection and the ‘abject’ – what is fundamental for survival - will always be considered indecent and immoral. Yet through the abject art, society will learn about the ‘abject’. Learning about the ‘abject’ is the key point for benefiting from what Guardian critic Searle reasonably refers as ‘the negative energy’. If we don’t benefit from this ‘negative energy’, the social claustrophobia will always be upon us. The paradox is slowly unfolding for over a century now but it’s still surely the tip of the iceberg; uncovering this iceberg is still a solid utopian prospect.

¹⁰ Creed, Barbara., *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Routledge, New York, (1993)

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