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Submission ID: 1903141

Module Name: Coexistent Perspectives

Module Code: ADAA7000

Course: MA Contemporary Dialogues: Photography

Module Tutor: Rob Jones

Word Count: 4111

Theme 2: De/constructing the Human: Self, Identity and Other

'Oozing Borders: Abjection and the Feminist Reclamation of the Grotesque

Body'

Abstract

This essay seeks to examine the theory of abjection concerning the female form, and the patriarchal belief that women are more subject to their bodily functions than that of their male counterpart. Focusing on the abjection and societal taboo of the female's bodily functions and bodily fluid; menstruation, the pregnant body, lactation, etc. This will be investigated by looking at themes such as Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection (as written about in her text *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*), feminist themes within posthumanism, the abject body as a liminal space, the deconstruction of Jacques Lacan's notion of the 'Symbolic Order' and the grotesque body as a political device for feminist reclamation. These themes and discourses are deployed to investigate the works of artists Francesca Woodman and Helen Chadwick, dissecting how each artist creates a sense of the abject within their work by disrupting and untangling ideas of birth and death and how the abject woman challenges morality by representing both, body horror, the unruly body and the feminine ideal. By using their own body as a tool, surrounded by symbols of decay, meat and hair, derelict spaces, and the borderless merging of their form into that which surrounds it, each artist shares similar sensibilities when looking at their works through the lens of encountering and questioning the abject, displayed through widely different themes and aesthetics.

Oozing Borders: Abjection and the Feminist Reclamation of the Grotesque Body

This essay will deconstruct the works of Francesca Woodman and Helen Chadwick, seeking to understand how each explores Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection through different thematic discourses. In order to do this, other themes need to be considered to unravel this, such as posthumanism, feminism, the body as liminal space and the grotesque. Liminal is defined as "between or belonging to two different places, states, etc." (Cambridge Dictionary). It is on the threshold of being and becoming, it is the transitional period of whatever is at hand. "How concrete everything becomes in the world of the spirit when an object, a mere door, can give images of hesitation, temptation, desire, security, welcome and respect." (Bachelard, 1994, p.224). A door being on the threshold of transition from one room to the next, represents the liminal, as Bachelard writes of this object having connotations, with it being on the cusp, it draws us in, its alluring and confusing in its nothingness and everythingness, all at the same time. This ties in with abjection and the female anatomy. The abject is liminal, it is in-between repulsion and desire, intrigue and avoidance. Just like Bachelard's door, it evokes an array of emotional conflict within our unconscious mind. It forces us to face ourselves, the borders of our existence and the disruption of what we think we know and are comfortable with. "Such wastes drops so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit- *cadere*, cadaver." (Kristeva, 1982, p.3). Kristeva's abjection forces us to think about how and why our body often reacts in disgust to certain things, not necessarily related to bodily functions, but this is at the centre of this essay.

Historically, women have been subjected to excessive judgement and shame when it comes to natural bodily functions, such as menstruation and the pregnant body. Accusations of the

female body being more subject to its functions, ruled by the material body instead of the intellectual mind, because the intellectual mind is “masculine”, we see this when we look at how Cartesian Dualism and the mind/body dichotomy is written about by male philosophers. Cisgender men baulking at the audacity for women to have a function that once a month results in blood. Think of the Wandering Womb, the Freudian belief that women’s wombs roamed their bodies wreaking havoc and rendering the woman hysterical! “‘Woman’ is often made to signify bodily-ness in opposition to masculine intellect (...) and the female body (...) as alien, eruptive, dangerous and excessive..” (Malson, 1997, p.233). The excretion of bodily fluids in the female anatomy (mensuration, the process of birth, breastfeeding, discharge) has thus frequently positioned the women as “abject” in a patriarchal society, cast into the Other, threatening the borders of identity in its unstableness and unconfinement within flesh. “Woman has ovaries and a uterus; (...) conditions that locks her in her subjectivity; some even say she thinks with her hormones. (...) Man vainly forgets that his anatomy also includes hormones and testicles” (de Beauvoir, 1956, p.15). The patriarchy has made sure to remind men that they are not as subject to their bodies as women, treating them as unruly, and making no attempt to assess their own inner workings, for the woman is not “intellectual” as he is, so thus cannot escape her own functions as he can.



Figure 1

In much of Francesca Woodman's self-portraits, we see her immersing herself, and her body, within the space she occupies. In *Self-Deceit #4* (fig 1), 1977-1978, we see her naked figure merging with the wall, the mirror she's holding over her face reflects the abandoned room back onto her body, seemingly in a gesture to let her body seep into the water-damaged walls to become one. "It is not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order." (Kristeva, 1982, p.4). Woodman is disrupting the borders of both the room and her body by attempting to merge the two together.

The mirror also has the opportunity to represent Woodman's attempted regression to a time before the Lacanian notion of the Mirror Stage. The derelict house she is in is liminal and

abject, the rotting wall has a flesh-like appearance, “the mother and child relationship was marked by the untrammelled pleasure in playing with the body and its waste” (Liu, 2004, p.28). Kristeva suggests that the mother also represents the ambiguous nature of abjection, a time before we begin to enter the world and undergo the transition into the “Symbolic Order”, we can see the liminal aspects of Woodman’s image as representing the in-between space of the womb. If we see the derelict room as symbolic of the womb, which in itself represents a liminal space, then Woodman represents herself in complete vulnerability in her nudity, as we are when we are in the womb and entering the world, she is seeking to absolve the ego, seeping back into the room/womb which represents the liminal abjection of the mother and a time before we come to reject the abject that is present in all of us (yet particularly projected onto the female anatomy).

Jacques Lacan suggests that when, as children, we begin to enter into the world of language and social norms we are entering the Symbolic Order. Within the Symbolic Order, to put it simply, we begin to learn how to act within society in order to fit into the order, and not to position ourselves as the other. The abject, in its unstable and borderless nature, threatens the very borders constructed by Lacan’s Symbolic Order. Woodman often positions her body in images in a state of in-between, breaking down symbolic dichotomies that also structure and ensure the unbreaking down of the symbolic order and of mind/body dualism. She is not afraid to disregard and challenge the I/not-I dichotomy. Presenting in suspense between two dichotomies threatens the symbolic order that mediates with so much constraint how a female body should present to the world. Again, assuming the belief that the room she is seeking to merge with symbolises a return to the womb, Woodman is thus rejecting the symbolic order and the projection of the correct way to be “feminine”. The

female body, unlike the male, represents the possibility of birth and of death, threatening the perceived order, and further casting woman into the role of “other” outside of the borders of what keeps society functional and unchaotic.

However, it is worth mentioning that the idea of the Symbolic Order exists as such simply because we let it. Society constructs itself sets of rules that erect the Symbolic Order, it is not static. As we change throughout time there are new Orders erected again, and again, the rules of which are ever-changing. Lacan’s “Big Other” who ensures the containment of the Symbolic Order can be looked at as a sort of third presence in one’s life, the presence that looms over the conforming entity, forcing them to confront desire beyond the supposed “Mirror Stage”, a desire that because of the constraints of the Symbolic Order can never be attainable. If we, as humans, are as Lacan may call incomplete, then any desire we seek is not going to make us whole. “...yet the only thing that really exists are these individuals and their activity, so this substance is actual only in as far as individuals believe in it and act accordingly” (Žižek, 2006, p.10).

So, prior to the mirror stage, we are unaware of what it means to conform and perform in order to stay within the borders, and these borders are exactly what the abject threatens. A child does not know yet that the body is a hinderance, the child is tactile and explorative, untethered by the weight of their being and the borders they must learn to contain it in. In this essence, we can see how Woodman explores the space within her images in a way that seeks to free our preconceived notions of how to behave, she lets go of any preoccupation with hiding her nudity, seeking to free herself from the male-gaze and instead the skin is her vessel in which she can explore, move and merge with.

“The assumption that the symbolic order is a condition of sanity is generally accepted (..) any attempt to call on a presymbolic realm to recover an unmediated “femininity” before the law is now thought to be untenable (...) the alternative of the symbolic order is psychosis” (Jacobs, 2007, p.9).



Figure 2

In her image, *Untitled* (figure 2), 1976, we see Woodman sat, looming over an imprint of what is presumably her body. The imprint gives the impression of a cadaver that has remained positioned on the floor as its bodily fluids decay and seep into and hydrate the wood beneath it, leaving a silhouette behind. “Freud describes the death drive in terms of just this ambivalent attraction towards what is unpleasurable” (Fisher, 2016, p.32), is Woodman

seeking to come closer to death in this image? Is she seeking pleasure in the unpleasurable? Is she seeking to decay as her silhouette is? Or is it instead the acceptance of living in the abject, borderless skin of her body, one that seeps, oozes and excretes bodily fluids? Is she reclaiming the abject as something one should not find unpleasurable or detestable to start with? As we know, the mother and the abject are interchangeable, a woman's anatomy is both marked by the possibility of giving and nourishing life as well as death and decay.

"...as a force that threatens to reincorporate what it once gave birth to (...) all pervasive, all encompassing – because of the constant presence of death" (Creed, 1993, p.28). When Barbara Creed writes of the Archaic Mother in her seminal text (the irony is not lost in the use of the word seminal, both referring to influential works and related to semen, a bodily fluid associated with male anatomy that seems to have escaped the abjection that female-associated bodily fluids have not), *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, she threatens the reabsorption of life, she is symbolic of both life and death and total extinction. This disrupts the notion of the feminine ideal of the caring, nurturing mother, the societal and patriarchal archetype, and thus threatening the symbolic order.

We look at Woodman looming over her body, the positioning of her legs above the head of the silhouette creating a birth-death juxtaposition, the figure on the floor gives the impression of entering the world through her, and counteractively leaving it through her, too. The room, then, creates the space for this life/death dichotomy to interact. "The regenerative element is what makes the abject attractive as well as repulsive" (Pickard, 2020), abjection is not only death but also life, it is in-between, it is teetering on the edge of both. Think about mouldy food, while yes, we are disgusted when our eyes meet the blue and green fluffy colonies of mould, we are also drawn into just that. The abjection of the rotting food is the rebirth of it,

the life it gives to the process of the rot, the mould, the flies that feed on it, it is reborn into an ecosystem of life again. Woodman is not afraid to confront her body, to accept it in all its abject horror not in a way of defeat, perhaps in a way of knowing, in a merging that transcends the messy borders of mind and body, as a form of rebirth.



Figure 3

According to Freud, that which is *uncanny* or in his native language, *unheimlich*, contains certain characteristics that make it as such. Creed sums these up, and there is one, of the three, I want to bring forth to help dissect and compare the abject nature of Helen Chadwick's work compared to Francesca Woodman's. Firstly, "...a feeling associated with familiar/unfamiliar place, losing one's way, womb phantasies, a haunted house" (Creed, 1993, p.53). We all begin life the same, tucked away and nourished in the safety of the womb. What is the connection between "womb phantasies" and experiencing something both unfamiliar

and familiar? To Freud, men (or as he puts it “neurotic” men) often experience female genitalia as uncanny, therefore making anything that appears yonic in any way capable of the potential to appear as uncanny. This is because, according to Freud, the womb represents a place that was once home but now is not. So instead, it suspends the male in a space of unsettlement, which one could argue contributes to the excessive male abjection of that which resembles the female reproductive system, if he cannot understand or return to it, then he must, instead, be repulsed in his abject reaction, in order to continue inside the borders of his perceived place in the world. Of course, much of Freud’s writings are extremely dated (and downright strange), but they often represent the misogyny and Othering of women of that time, which still seeps endlessly through decades and decades to the present day.

In Chadwick’s work, *Enfleshings I* (figure 3), 1989, the viewer is confronted with a lit-up fleshy, bloody image, an image which in its fleshy folds and concaves could suggest an image of a vulva. The bloody nature of the image also brings to mind the image of a post-birth scene “...the act of birth, the amniotic fluid, afterbirth, the blood, and the hormonal changes and lactation which follows, stand at the pinnacle of that which signifies abjection...” (Ussher, 2006, p.81). Abjection of the pregnant body is perhaps a prime example of the conflicting nature of abjection, while men may view pregnancy as a sign of fertility in a partner, why then, is the pregnant woman historically viewed as impure and grotesque, and until the latter half of the 20th Century men rarely witnessed the birth of their children. “the pregnant body takes up space, literally and metaphorically. More space than a woman is expected to occupy.” (Ussher, 2006, p.84). The pregnant body is the ultimate body that does not hide itself under illusions of a perfect, sealed body that is only present to host the mind, and this

threatens the privileged man who cannot face his own abject body. Perhaps it is the fact that in pregnancy and childbirth, going back to Creed and the Archaic Mother, both represent a cycle of life and death, a liminal body in transformation. The rawness and texture of the image also evokes the same repulsion we often encounter when touching and viewing raw meat. William Miller comments on the the flowing nature of the abject in terms of death, decay and the suspended nature that abject renders them...“The gooey mud, the scummy pond are life soup, fecundity itself: slimy, slippery, wiggling, teaming animal life generating spontaneously from putrefying vegetation” (Miller, 1997, p.40-41).

We are all born attached to that which Kristeva calls the abject. Like Woodman, this image seems to pose Chadwick’s declaration that she is not afraid to disrupt the Symbolic Order by resurrecting the unconditioned mind of a new-born, a mind which has yet to know of the stern boundaries we must not cross in order to function in the outside world, between life and death, the mind and the abject body. The image itself possesses a liminality in its uncertain form, is it contracting? Is it moving? Are we inside of the flesh? It could potentially be the inside of the womb, like Woodman’s mouldy, derelict wall. “The body must bear no trace of its debt to nature: it must be clean and proper in order to be fully symbolic.” (Kristeva, 1982, p.102). Here, then, we see Chadwick using the grotesque, fleshy, incomprehensible, meaty imagery to mark a rejection to the notion that we are pure and fixed bodies existing without any marker of our bodily fluids and innards.

The grotesque, as seen in the work of Chadwick, challenges us in the way it confronts us with our animalistic nature, we are not pure and undirtied simply because we think we are more intellectual than animals. This applies to all genders, although as discussed, burdened on women more, it is all of us who are confronted with the abject. Here, we begin to see themes of posthumanism, as Haraway states, "...nothing really convincingly settles the separation of human and animal" (Haraway, 1991, p.156). Posthumanist thought challenges the anthropocentrism humans have constructed; we simply must be the centre of the universe! We are, through scientific advancements of studying other organisms beginning to see "...modern organisms as objects of knowledge and reduced the line between humans and animals to a faint trace re-etched in ideological struggle or professional disputes between life and social science." (Haraway, 1991, p.157). Posthuman feminism brings together posthuman thought and feminist thought, that being the decentring of "Man" as no longer being the centre of all.



Figure 4



Figure 5

In Chadwick's series of images, Meat Abstracts, we further struggle to differentiate between what is human and animal. She seems to create intangible webs between her own body and the raw meat that surrounds her, embedding what we think could be impressions of herself, merging with the grotesque. In Haraway's seminal text, A Cyborg Manifesto, we come across this idea of the hybridity of humans, a proposition for the future in which we are interlinked with machines and organisms, which in a way is a body perpetually in transformation, machines are continually ever-updating, but as are our neuropathways, our skin as it ages, all of our outer and internal anatomy is in constant flux. The abject is not lost on the Cyborg, but perhaps focusing too much on the machine can be seen as a sort of cleansing of the grotesque, removing it instead of embracing the shared liminality of bodies across all spectrums of genders and species. We could, propose instead, the future of the Grotesque Cyborg. The Grotesque Cyborg, instead, emphasises the messy, fluid, abject nature of the body, allowing the corrosion of gendered social constructs around a "fixed" way to conform. We can extend the "cyborg" borders, further breaking down the structures and seeping into the deconstruction of the patriarchal system that governs the oppression of women and their bodies.

In her image, *Meat Abstract [hair and light bulb]* (figure 4), 1989, there is something extra striking about the use of her hair next to the flesh that appears connected to her, intertwined in a lightbulb, as if saying that the dead flesh is a sort of attached like an added accessory organ, that is also reminiscent of a baby attached to an umbilical cord. The raw meat juxtaposed with the long flowing hair creates an uncomfortable, confronting atmosphere. When we think of depictions of Renaissance paintings with women having long, flowing locks

of hair that seem almost too perfect, we don't picture images of death and decay, we think of youth, wealth and beauty. Here, Chadwick transforms the long, flowing locks into the abject. When we think about it, hair is perhaps one of our most abject, liminal features, it occupies the space clearly between the borders of our bodies internally and externally, partially under our skin, protruding out.

"In the corpse, hair may no longer be read as a sign of cosmetic beauty. Hair becomes a bodily part that is closely related to the abject. Hair is defined as a bodily waste element, which even transcends the death of the subject, as it continues to grow even after we are dead." (Gutiérrez-Albilla, 2008, p.72)

Hair is one of the first things many of us think of when we picture the ideal and ultimate patriarchal mode of the "feminine". From a young age, it is instilled in us from societal norms that surround us that boys should have short hair and girls should have long hair. But in the corpse, like in the image of Chadwick, the hair no longer represents signifiers of youth, beauty and femininity. Women's hair, both head hair and bodily hair, is policed under the scrutiny of the patriarchy. Monstrous depictions of women in horror often reveal hairy women, with unkempt bodies, not something that is unnatural, instead, telling us that women are only one unshaven armpit away from revealing their true monstrosity. Many of us have bared witness to a cis-gendered man stating something along the lines of, "It's just a hygiene thing, I like women who shave", while sitting there in hypocrisy with his hairy arms folded over his chest in a defensive stance ready to argue that there is no patriarchal reason he may think this way. Thus, body hair is subject to the corrosion of borders through abjection in yet another way that the man is exempt from.

In Renaissance art, we also see an ethos in the way philosophers and artists saw the body at the time, completely separated from the mind. After all, the goal of Christianity and many religions is to ultimately free the soul/mind from the body it is hindered and subject to. “The images of the grotesque body are precisely those which are adjected from bodily canon of classical aesthetics. The classical body is...monumental, closed, static, symmetrical, sleek...” (Russo, 1995, p.8). Feminist artists, like Chadwick, making art that brings the abject to the forefront are dissolving the complete separation of mind/body. Her series, *Meat Abstracts*, dissolves the borders of internal and external anatomy, and inversions of our state of being poses to us questions about how we function and the connection of our body and mind. In *Meat Abstract [heart and flame light bulb]* (figure 5), the raw organs are enmeshed with the image, merging together, she is wearing the grotesque as a sign of an unapologetic rejection of the sealed, impenetrable body.

“Grotesque art” as a feminist aesthetic, then, is also an act of protest, a reclamation of the abject body and the inclination for the abject to be applied to female anatomy. Creed in *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader* states, “Unlike the male body the female body is penetrable, changes shape, swells, gives birth, contracts, lactates, bleeds” (Creed, 1999, p.113). Going back to the *Monstrous Feminine*, Creed talks of the tendency for men to become sort of feminized in order to become monstrous, whereas the female’s body is already viewed as such, as mentioned in the previous paragraph in regards to body hair. Although Chadwick confronts and deconstructs the borders of social order differently from Woodman, both artists challenge the female form by dissolving the confines to which the

patriarchy has delegated its anatomy, the anatomy that is abject and subject to societal objectification and demoralisation.

In conclusion, while the works of Helen Chadwick and Francesca Woodman are both aesthetically and compositionally very different in the way they present, both still offer us the visceral sense of the corrosion of identity and the borders of the body we occupy. Woodman's liminal photographs occupy a profound space of her body converging with her surroundings, the room as much a part of her as she is of it. In doing this, we see that she is not afraid of the limits of her body, or the limits the "Symbolic Order" imposes on it and because of this, her images occupy that space in which abjection lives. Instead of giving in to the pressure to endlessly attain the ideal feminine body, one without oozing or orifices, Woodman embraces her active deconstruction of it and emerges as a force that cannot be contained, breaking free as untethered to any construct of the "feminine", and crawling up the walls of her body mirrored and dissected within her self-portraits.

Chadwick, in contrast, dissects the body to unravel an inverted and grotesque hybridity that also protests the borders of her skin in a patriarchal society that dictates the containment of the female body and its functions. She is immersed in an unfiltered and uncontainable carnal embodiment and breakdown of the anthropocentrism of the world. She utilizes the human reaction to the grotesque, one of disgust at the threatening nature of it, that seeks to dissolve a hierarchal structure of humans (especially the cis, white man) who think they are immune to the breaking down, unruly, and unreasonable laws of our anatomy. Contemporary feminist artists continue to occupy the borderless realms of the grotesque and take back autonomy by using their bodies to make political statements that threaten and protest the subjugation

and horror projected onto the woman and her natural functions. It is the reclaiming of our excess, and revelling in the unease such border dissolving reclamation causes those that are unwilling to accept their own abject nature.

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Figures

Figure 1: Woodman, F. (1977-1978) *Self-Deceit #4*, [vintage gelatin silver print], Nation Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh, available at: <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/85848> (accessed 06/12/23)

Figure 2: Woodman, F. (1976) *Untitled*, [gelatin silver print], available at: <https://woodmanfoundation.org/artworks/untitled-14> (accessed 06/12/23)

Figure 3: Chadwick, H. (1989) *Enfleshings I*, [transparency on lightbox], Tate, London, available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/chadwick-enfleshings-i-t06876> (accessed 07/12/23)

Figure 4: Chadwick H. (1989) *Meat Abstract [hair and light bulb]*, [polaroid photograph], Victoria and Albert Museum, London, available at: <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O83168/meat-abstract-hair-and-light-photograph-chadwick-helen/> (accessed 07/12/23)

Figure 5: Chadwick H. (1989) *Meat Abstract [heart and flame light bulb]*, [polaroid photography], Victoria and Albert Museum, London, available at: <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O83166/meat-abstract-heart-and-flame-photograph-chadwick-helen/> (accessed 07/12/23)