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ARTICLE

Mother's Milk and Menstrual Blood in *Puncture*: The Monstrous Feminine in Contemporary Horror Films and Late Medieval Imagery

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This film essay *Puncture*, by Rachel Frances Sharpe, and accompanying paper, by Sophie Sexon, examine the abject qualities of blood and breastmilk. The film and paper make comparisons between late medieval imagery of Christ's wounds and feminine tropes found recurrently in horror movies such as *Suspiria* (1977) and *Possession* (1981). The application of Julia Kristeva's theoretical notion of the abject and Barbara Creed's concept of the monstrous-feminine will demonstrate how blood and milk inspire a particular horror of the female body that renders the body monstrous. This can be seen trans-historically by comparing medieval to modern conceptions of abject maternity. The analysis will look at the fungible quality of milk and blood in historical contexts and their ability to create feelings of fear and repulsion towards maternal icons and women's bodies. This paper has been adapted from the original, presented at the *Fluid Physicalities* symposium at Birkbeck, University of London, in 2017.

VIDEO ARTICLE

Available to view here: <https://doi.org/10.16995/sim.256>.

Available for download here: <https://doi.org/10.16995/sim.256.s1>.

Introduction

When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk – harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail paring – I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire. Along with sight-clouding dizziness, nausea makes me balk at that milk cream, separates me from the mother and father who proffer it. “I” want none of that element, sign of their desire; “I” do not want to listen, “I” do not assimilate it, “I” expel it. But since the food is not an “other” for “me,” who am only in their desire, I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which “I” claim to establish myself.¹

This paper explores the role of milk and blood in both medieval art and contemporary film with a response to the film essay *Puncture*, as featured above. The paper applies Julia Kristeva's theoretical concept of abjection and Barbara Creed's definition of the monstrous-feminine to both historical periods in order to show how the female body is conceived of as abject in distinct cultural moments that have recognisable overlap.

The female body has a cultural and critical history of being conceived of as monstrous owing to certain maternal associations in critical and theoretical discourses. The conceptual notion of the female body as that which is monstrous is conceived via its fluid outpourings. The appearance of milk and blood remind us of the figure of the mother and her role in relation to us as distinct subjects. As Julia Kristeva has argued, the maternal female body threatens social order and semantic cleanliness in that it produces fluids which transgress the bodily boundaries of the flesh (Kristeva,

¹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), pp. 2–3.



Film still from *Puncture*, Rachel Frances Sharpe, 2017.

1980). The symbolic associations of mother's milk and menstrual blood induce a reaction of horror from the observing subject, who associates these fluids with a monstrous form of maternity.

The female body collapses the boundaries between self and other via reproduction. The reproductive capacity produces substances that bring the internal to the external; birthing, bleeding and breastfeeding. In socio-cultural terms, these traits cast the mother figure as an abject monster: that which dissolves the borders between the flesh and the world.

The abject refers to a subject's first distinction between self and other that is precipitated by certain fluids relating to the mother figure. I use Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic theory of abjection in *Powers of Horror* (1980) as it touches on both psychic and social states of self-awareness and identity formation. The abject is that which 'disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect border, positions, rules' (Kristeva, p. 2). For instance, a wound disturbs bodily order by rupturing boundaries, aligning it with the other 'corporeal orifices...constituting the body's territory' (Kristeva, p. 71). Certain abject substances including urine, tears, faeces, blood, semen and milk must be cast off, literally abjected, as they threaten social and bodily order. Abject reactions to such substances in later life include horror, disgust, vomiting and gagging, however, they also evoke some feelings of enjoyment which elucidate our strange attraction to horror films and gore. Kristeva posits that abjection is a crucial stage in psychosexual development, associating the abject with the Lacanian notion of *jouissance* that pre-dates the infantile mirror-stage, noting that

jouissance in itself engenders violent, painful, yet pleasurable passion. As Georges Bataille notes in *Visions of Excess*, 'extreme seductiveness is probably at the boundary of horror',² which is inextricably bound up with the obsessive act of looking at that which horrifies us. Historical comparisons of how abject substances relating to motherhood elicit a sexual response in the visual terrain of the modern horror film and medieval imagery help us to understand the sexualisation and objectification of the female body at this boundary of horror, which edges insistently towards pleasure.

Barbara Creed writes in *Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis: The Monstrous Feminine* (1993) that 'all human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject'.³ This paper interrogates this claim by comparing late medieval paintings and metaphorical imagery concerning Christ's wounds to the monstrous feminine as identified in two horror films: Dario Argento's *Suspiria* (1977) and Andrzej Żuławski's *Possession* (1981). Images of abject bodily fluids placed together frame by frame in *Puncture* (2017) with shots of medieval art and contemporary horror films show how such images inscribe a universalising historical idea of the monstrous-feminine, substantiating Creed's argument.

Utilizing a theory of Kristevan abjection has the potential to be problematic.⁴ Feminist discourses relating to feminine 'otherness' have moved away from the conceptual abject in order to critique the negative and immobile values ascribed to the maternal through such a regimented essentialist biological focus.⁵ This analysis

² Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess; Selected Writings 1927–1939*, trans. and ed. by Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 17.

³ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 1.

⁴ Imogen Tyler's 2009 article refutes the theoretical demarcation of the maternal as abject. She argues that the theory in itself cannot support the notion that there is transgressive possibility in embracing abject qualities or abject parody by demarcating such qualities in the first instance. She supports a larger social and political account of abjection in its place that contests the dehumanising effects of abjection. See Imogen Tyler, 'Against Abstraction', *Feminist Theory* (2009) vol. 10(1): pp. 77–98.

⁵ *Studies in the Maternal* published a special issue in 2010 entitled 'M(O)ther Trouble: Motherhood, Psychoanalysis, Feminism.' Of particular note is Fanny Söderbäck's article which discusses Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) in which Butler critiques Kristeva's emphasis on biological maternal functions. Söderbäck defends Kristeva on the basis that her return to the biological aspects of the maternal body does not preserve essential notions of motherhood but rather displaces, renews and transforms the maternal body. See Fanny Söderbäck, (2010) 'Motherhood: A Site of Repression or Liberation? Kristeva and Butler on the Maternal Body', *Studies in the Maternal* vol. 2(1): pp. 1–15.

and video essay are not constructed as feminist critiques of abjection, monstrosity, and their relation to the maternal body. Rather, they signal the cultural moments where theoretical notions of abject maternity in the twentieth century may have had similar aestheticising resonances with creative works from the medieval period, both fraught with their own misogynistic structuring. To make such aesthetic comparison is more in line with queer theoretical works on time and affect that demonstrate where contemporary literature, film, and art meet medieval materials than contemporary feminist discourses that challenge the notions of abjection and monstrosity.⁶

I use the concept of abjection to historically contextualise a moment in theoretical discourse that has subsequent resonances in the horror films of the late seventies and early eighties. Kristeva's theory aligns with the rough time of production of these horror films, the film *Suspiria* being released in 1977, Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* having appeared in 1980, and the film *Possession* in 1981. I use this theoretical approach to support Imogen Tyler's argument that 'employing a Kristevan abject paradigm risks reproducing, rather than challenging, histories of violent disgust towards maternal bodies' (Tyler, p. 77). The use of the abject in this article demarcates, but does not critically challenge, a particular theoretical historical moment where the maternal body is characterised by a number of negative physical attributes. This has a direct relation to a late medieval history of the maternal body, where disgust typifies a reaction to the aspects of abject femininity that are imbued in representations of Christ.

Barbara Creed's theory of 'the monstrous feminine' appears somewhat later than the theory of abjection, in 1993, but distinctly exemplifies how maternal bodies are particularised within the horror genre, and imbued with historically negative notions of abjection. At the beginning of the 1990s various discourses were emerging around the notion of the female 'other' in anglophone feminist literatures. Feminist theoretical discourses sought to move away from the biological essentialism of the

⁶ For a theoretical contemporary account of queer asynchronies of time that allow for a positive 'erotohistoriography', see Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (California: Duke University Press: 2010). In a similar vein, arguments in favour of reclaiming a queer history of the medieval period can be found in Carolyn Dinshaw, *How Soon Is Now?: Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time* (California: Duke University Press: 2012).

monstrous in order to reconceive of the female body in materialist terms, for example in the concept of the female other as cyborg. Cyborg theory emerges around the same time as Creed's publication, with Donna Haraway publishing *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* in 1991.⁷ However, I focus here on the concept of the feminine monstrous as it aligns maternity with a fixed set of abject values that are concurrently symbolic, psychosexual, and in many cases, physical. I use this theory not as a tool of feminist critique, but to underscore a language of negativity surrounding discourses of maternity in the twentieth century that are historically congruent with medieval values and modes of representation. The hope is to demonstrate how these theories can be applied across time and across discipline, choosing to use theoretical frameworks that are roughly contemporary to the production of abject imagery in the horror films discussed here. *Puncture* bears the echoes, in other words, of the cultural moment where maternal abjection was at the peak of its monstrous manifestation, produced by male film makers that reified a biologically essentialist and abject feminine other.

Creed lists a number of monstrous tropes that define women in film:

The horror film is populated by female monsters [...] The female monster, or monstrous-feminine, wears many faces [...] woman as monstrous womb (*The Brood*, 1979); woman as bleeding wound (*Dressed to Kill*, 1980); woman as possessed body (*The Exorcist*, 1973) [...] the monstrous girl-boy (*A Reflection of Fear*, 1973) [...] Although a great deal has been written about the horror film, very little of that work has discussed the representation of woman-as-monster (Creed, p. 1).

Creed's analysis shows how women are commonly presumed to be constructed as the diametric opposite of the monster within the horror film genre when, antithetically, they themselves are constructed as monsters through this series of tropes. By historical comparison, the figure of Christ was commonly constructed as feminine

⁷ For a more recent account of how feminism has embraced and developed the concept of the feminine other, see Radhika Gajjala and Yeon Ju Oh, *Cyberfeminism 2.0*. (New York: Peter Lang, 2012).

in European late medieval devotional text and imagery. This female Christ was, by virtue of symbolic association with motherhood, also conceived of as monstrous. Looking specifically at the tropes of woman as bleeding wound and woman as monstrous girl-boy, I will compare and contrast the role of the abject in constructing these tropes, while discussing the imagery in *Puncture* that illustrates clear visual parallels between medieval and the modern images of the monstrous-feminine.

The Medieval Abject: Looking at Christ as a Mother

Kristeva notes that abjection is a crucial moment in terms of self-identification and identity formation, recognising that materials such as blood and breastmilk are those which transgress the boundaries of the flesh. The abject stage is characterised by the destabilising of known boundaries; a horror of insides becoming outsides and the shock of knowing the self to be separate from the previous bounds of the maternal. Many of the excretory functions, or symbolic icons linked to the abject, relate to the symbolic icons of motherhood. Blood and the open wound refer back to the moment of birth where subject-object relations are still ill-defined, and a pre-social infantile self cannot distinguish the boundaries between their own flesh and the mother's womb. Abject fluids must be expelled in order for the infant to make sense of its world and establish subject-object boundaries, which exist primarily in relation to the mother, and then, by extension, to the clean and proper self within society. The sight



Film still from *Puncture*, Rachel Frances Sharpe, 2017.

of maternal fluids such as blood and breastmilk create an abject reaction by threatening a return to disordered subject-object relationships and a loss of self-identity.

In some cases, the symbolic impact of abject fluids renders them interchangeable within the psyche. Kristeva lists and discusses the metaphorical import of many abject substances in *Powers of Horror*, and a large range of them recurrently appear in horror films intermingled with one another. The interchangeable abject quality of semen, milk, blood and tears was likewise a prominent feature in the iconography of the Middle Ages. The late medieval female body bore aspects of monstrosity as it was believed to be the inverted or imperfect version of the male body. According to Aristotle and Galen, women were considered to be the cold, wet and incomplete counterparts to the heat-generative dry male, therefore constantly seeking the heat of male bodies in a frenzied state of perpetual lust. The female body was characterised by this abject moistness which was inextricably bound up with moral judgements and impositions on female sexuality. Liz Herbert McAvoy recognises how the female body was a 'primary conceptual sign. In her capacity as misconceived or 'deformed' male, woman occupied a highly problematic cultural space and frequently became translated into an expression of cultural monstrosity'.⁸ Her moist qualities rendered her culturally inferior to her male counterpart.

Elizabeth Robertson describes how physicians believed the female ovaries to be an inverted form of the male testes and identifies that many physicians of the period believed in the Galenic theory of dealbation; a belief that breastmilk was created from blood transformed from within the body. Robertson identifies that this medical belief in the fungible quality of fluids bore out in the culture of the period as 'in religious texts the interchangeability of blood, milk, tears, and semen is often stressed'.⁹ This chimes with Creed's notion of woman as monstrous girl-boy, as the 'inverted' monstrous female was imbued with a number of negative attributes linked to abject fluids.

⁸ Liz Herbert McAvoy, 'Monstrous Masculinities in Julian of Norwich's A Revelation of Love and The Book of Margery Kempe', in *The Monstrous Middle Ages*, ed. by Bettina Bildhauer and Robert Mills, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), pp. 55–74, (p. 56).

⁹ Elizabeth Robertson, 'Medieval Medical Views of Women', in *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature*, ed. by Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), pp. 142–168, (p. 146).

It was believed that women were capable of purging their excessive moistness, and therefore purging their inappropriate lustfulness, through menstruation. Therefore blood was both a generative substance and a fluid that had to be abjected in order to accord with certain moral impositions; a fluid that acted as a controlling mechanism depending on whether it was being produced internally or being expelled. Upon its expulsion from the body it gained symbolic transitional qualities that signified its monstrosity; the appearance of breastmilk reminding one that the female body had converted this substance from blood, and blood being a substance that signified the excessive lustful aspects of femininity. The property of creating transitional fluids is a particular quality of the monster that is evidenced in gendered terms in representations of the abject in both medieval imagery and modern horror films.

This particularly feminised form of monstrosity can be seen in artistic and literary iconography depicting Christ in the late medieval period, and it relates to a conception of the monstrous feminine that can be seen in modern cinema. Barbara Creed defines the monstrous feminine in film in saying that, 'the monstrous is produced at the border which separates those who take up their proper gender roles from those who do not; or the border is between normal and abnormal sexual desire' (Creed, p. 11). Christ's body inhabits this monstrosity by deconstructing proper gender roles in artistic representation. A common artistic trope in Europe from the twelfth century onwards was that of 'Jesus as mother', where Christ's body was imbued with a range of maternal qualities to associate his body with the capacity to physically and spiritually nourish Christian devotees. In an assessment of visual piety in the Late Middle Ages, Suzannah Biernoff writes that 'Christ's body is semantically unstable. It signifies excessively. And it is literally fluid in its outpourings of redemptive blood: an attribute often associated with the 'maternal Jesus'.¹⁰ Christ's semantic instability varies in a number of ways, but the feminisation of the body seems inherently wrapped up in the production of fluids. Christ's body assimilates femininity by manner of its bleeding, which mimics both lactation and menstruation, constructing Christ as an icon simultaneously capable of being a mother and a lover.

¹⁰ Suzannah Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment in the Middle Ages* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), p. 150.



Jacob Cornelisz van Oostsanen, *Man of Sorrows*, 1510, Museum Mayer van den Bergh, Antwerp. File reproduced by Wikicommons licence.

Caroline Walker Bynum's landmark text *Jesus as Mother* (1982) collates a wealth of textual and artistic sources from the medieval period which were intended to encourage a religious devotee to think of Christ's body in explicitly maternal terms.¹¹ Note that this text was also produced in a period coterminous with the publication of Kristeva's text and the release of the films analysed here; exemplifying a distinct theoretical-cultural moment in time in which scholars were thinking about the role of abject maternity. Images such as *The Man of Sorrows* by Jacob Cornelisz van Oostsanen demonstrate how bodily fluids intermingle and exchange in late medieval imagery. The tears from Christ's eyes seem to run down to become the blood upon his breast, and the blood from his wounds flows into the holy chalice to nourish and provide sustenance for the devoted, much like a lactating breast. The English abbot Aelred of Rievaulx uses a number of metaphorical images concerning Christ that resemble this; 'his outspread arms will invite you to embrace him, his naked breasts will feed you with the milk of sweetness to console you' (Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, p. 123).



Film still from *Puncture*, Rachel Frances Sharpe, 2017.

¹¹ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus As Mother: Studies in The Spirituality of The High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

Many of these metaphors emphasise Christ's capability as a consoling mother, however, there are passages where the substances issuing from Christ's wounds are fungible and, arguably, would inspire an erotic response:

Then one of the soldiers opened his side with a lance and there came forth blood and water. Hasten, linger not, eat the honeycomb with your honey, drink your wine with your milk. The blood is changed into wine to gladden you, the water into milk to nourish you. From the rock streams have flowed for you, wounds have been made in his limbs, holes in the wall of his body, in which, like a dove, you may hide while you kiss them one by one. Your lips, stained with blood, will become like a scarlet ribbon and your word sweet. (Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, p. 123)

This union with Christ portrays how a bloody and goring act – the repeated spearing of Christ's flesh – creates holes which the lover can enter and kiss. In a metaphorical gesture, the horror of the bleeding wounds is transported into an image of tenderness. There were, however, prohibitive cautions regarding wound imagery as it was recognised that sucking at these wounds which pour forth blood and milk might inspire an erotic response. Bernard of Clairvaux urges devotees that, 'if you feel the stings of temptation [...] suck not so much the wounds as the breasts of the Crucified [suge non tam vulnera quam ubera Crucifixi] He will be your mother, and you will be his son' (Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, p. 117). These wounds break down the barriers between appropriate and inappropriate sexualised responses to the body. Christ's body is entered by the protruding fingers and tongues of devotees, his penetrated wound encapsulating the monstrous aspects of motherhood by bleeding like a menstruating vagina or lactating like a mother's breast. *Puncture* shows comparisons between a shot of a finger pushing into the hardened skin of rotting milk and the finger that pushed into Christ's wound in Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* (c.1601). Both acts have an air of the horrific and the erotic by penetrating the whiteness of the flesh to signal an encounter with the dark and mysterious interior.

In *Puncture* we see a range of medieval paintings and manuscript illuminations which focus specifically on Christ's wounds. In medieval contexts, Christ fits Creed's

filmic trope of woman as bleeding wound via metonym, whereby his whole body is translated into one powerful devotional image of a bleeding wound. There is symbolic proximity of the wound to the female labia and vagina in late medieval imagery. Michael Camille writes:

Medievalists, recently freed from a tyrannous propriety that for so long obfuscated the body as a site of cultural meaning, are at last able to describe and trace this verbal and visual gender-bending, where parts of Christ's body, such as his wound, as depicted in fourteenth-century Books of Hours, becomes a vast vagina-like object of desire, a transference of the dangerously open body of woman in all her horrifying 'difference.'¹²

It would have been appropriate for late medieval devotees to adore the Christ wound as part of Christ's male body. Wound images show signs of having been touched, kissed or rubbed in medieval manuscripts. However, the capacity to induce both horror and erotic response arises from its feminine symbolic association with the vagina. Kissing the manuscript but could render erotic abject reaction to Christ's feminised body.

Looking at the Loftie prayerbook shown below, the five wounds of Christ show evidence of having been touched by the lips or fingers of the devotee, noting in particular the abrasion of the pigment in the lower two wounds. These images are painted on parchment made of dead animal skin.¹³ This material use circumvents any moral sense of medieval social transgression. Touching animal skin would not have presented the same threat as scandalously touching human skin, and as it is not living flesh it would not have verisimilitude to a human body. However, the devotee could have traced hairs and folds in the vellum to imaginatively bring this skin to life,

¹² Michael Camille, 'The Image and the Self: Unwriting Late Medieval Bodies', in *Framing Medieval Bodies*, ed. by Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), pp. 62–99, (p. 77).

¹³ For more on the uncanny effect of using animal skin to represent human skin in medieval books, see Sarah Kay, 'Legible skins: Animals and the Ethics of Medieval Reading', *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies* (2011) 2:1, pp. 13–31.



Five wounds of Christ, *Loftie Hours*, Baltimore, Walters Art Museum, Walters Ms. W.165, *Loftie Hours*, fol. 110v. Image supplied under creative commons licence by The Digital Walters.

this monstrous skin which is imbued with abject erotic significance. Mark Amlser writes that:

A reader wouldn't actually have to read the book or even the words on the page to affectively respond to the image [...] The reader's hand or lips search

the image on the page, the dark space ambiguously depicting the wound (vulna) as vagina (vulva), with a reading gesture at once sacred, erotic, scandalous, and transgressive.¹⁴

In this private devotional gesture, readers could animate the red pigment of their prayer books by mixing it with their own fluids such as saliva and sweat; animating the blood of Christ on the page and arousing feelings of abjection by kissing dead animal skin.

The Modern Subject; Looking at Mothers in Film

Puncture draws our attention to the affinities between eyes, mouths, and wounds, foregrounding the symbolic vaginal potentialities of all three, and relating to Georges Bataille's comment that 'it seems impossible, in fact, to judge the eye using any word other than *seductive*' (Bataille, p. 17). The eye, the open mouth, the open wound and the vagina merge with one another and overlap in *Puncture*. Images from medieval manuscript illuminations are placed comparatively next to images of bleeding wounds.

The most explicit comparison between the two in *Puncture* is between an image of Christ's vertically orientated side wound in the Psalter of Bonne of Luxembourg (c.1348), and the following shot of scored and bloodied flesh which echoes an early scene in Dario Argento's *Suspria*. At the opening of *Suspria* a young woman named Pat Hingle is stabbed in the heart repeatedly. The film lingers on an intense close up of Hingle's stabbed heart which lies open in the wounded whiteness of the flesh of her chest, resembling the interior of the vagina and cervix. It is impossible to ignore the vaginal and erotic connotations of such imagery, particularly in horror films invoking the trope of woman as bleeding wound.

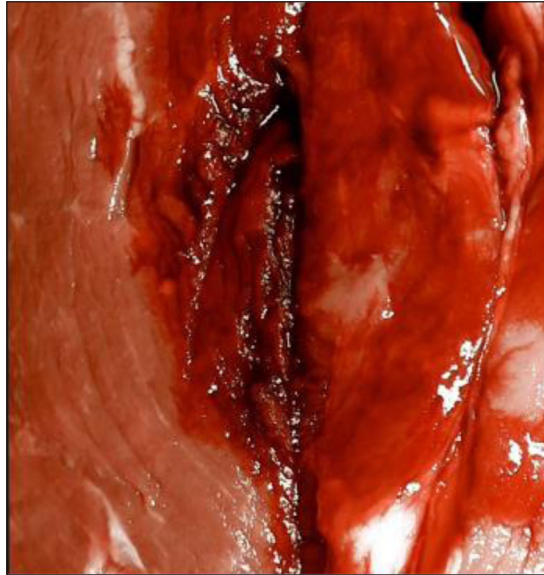
The horror film offers apt visual terrain to examine the effect of abject fluids in proximity to the female body. Creed notes that the horror film abounds with images of abjection when it addresses sweat, vomit, blood and gore (Creed, 1993). Noting

¹⁴ Mark Amsler, 'Affective Literacy: Gestures of Reading in the Later Middle Ages', *Essays in Medieval Studies* 18, no. 1 (2001): pp. 83–110, (p. 98).



Psalter and Prayer Book of Bonne of Luxembourg, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Cloisters MS. 69.86, fol. 331r. Image reproduced by Wikicommons licence.

how this relates to theoretical abjection, she writes that, 'in terms of Kristeva's notion of the border, when we say such-and-such a horror film 'made me sick' or 'scared the shit out of me', we are actually foregrounding that specific horror film as a 'work of abjection' or 'abjection at work' – almost in a literal sense' (Creed, p. 10). I wish here to focus specifically on the abject qualities of a film that is referenced in *Puncture*: Andrzej Żuławski's *Possession* (1981).



Film still from *Puncture*, Rachel Frances Sharpe, 2017.



Film still of Pat Hingle's stabbed heart from *Suspria*, Dario Argento, 1977.

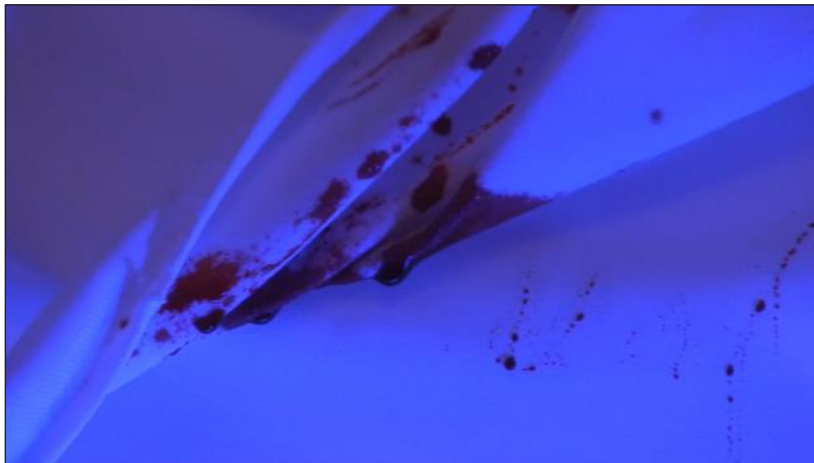
Possession focuses on the breakdown of a marriage between a woman called Anna and her absented husband, Mark. Mark uncovers an affair that Anna is having with her lover Heinrich. However, it transpires that Anna is also having an affair with a horrific creature composed of pulsating and oiled flesh that appears to excrete milk and blood. Anna repeatedly comments that she has made love to the creature, and in doing so, the creature has not only entered her, but it has bodily possessed her, bidding her to do its murderous will and to neglect her husband and her son.



Still image of the creature from *Possession*, Andrzej Żuławski, 1981.

To return to Creed's remark on how the border is central to our construction of what is monstrous, this idea can be applied to the monster in the film. It transgresses borders by portraying mixed gendered characteristics and by inspiring unnatural sexual desire. Creed writes that 'most horror films also construct a border between what Kristeva refers to as 'the clean and proper body' and the abject body, or the body which has lost its form and integrity' (Creed, p. 11). The monster in *Possession* is a perfect example of this, as it presents as a male-female hybrid in its formlessness. It nestles within the folds of a bed or a wall resembling a vagina, yet has a protruding phallic head that can elongate at will. It resembles living, pulsating flesh as it appears to breathe and lactate with virulent life force, but also resembles mottled dead skin in its pale coloration and rotting appearance. It simultaneously looks like a baby being born as it is covered in natal fluids, yet it also resembles the fleshly interior of the womb turned out to the viewer's eye. Anna's possession by the monster causes her to replicate some of these features, thus transferring monstrous qualities to the female body. However, this visual effect reinstates how certain abject qualities of femininity and maternity are 'naturally' monstrous by layering the functions of bleeding and lactating onto the horrifying creature. Creed notes that because of the relation between the feminine and the menstrual, women have an insuperable relation to the abject, and this is borne out by Anna's body which bleeds and lactates profusely.

Anna's sexual attraction to the monster seems incomprehensible given its horrific and hybrid nature. However, this sexual union is important in order to ensure that Anna is invested in the destruction of anything that threatens reproductive capability within the narrative. The monster commands her to eliminate any threats to the nuclear family model and in doing so, replaces not only the husband and father, but also engenders itself as a protective mother that instills heteronormative order within the plot. The first two characters that Anna murders by the monster's command are the detective who uncovers Anna's affair with the creature and his male partner Zimmermann; those whom threaten the heterosocial order by virtue of their homosexuality. The next is the Anna's previous adulterous lover Heinrich, thus eliminating the threat to the homogenous family unit. Anna then slits the throat of her friend Margie, who originally attempted to help Anna cover up her affair with Heinrich, and who has threatened the social order of the family unit by sleeping with her husband. The murders all feature abject fluids, for instance, Zimmermann is beaten to death with a jar of milk, and Margie dramatically bleeds to death. The film relies heavily on the use of abject fluids to inspire horror and fear, which is then focused back on Anna's maternal body. The way Anna excretes these fluids throughout the film constructs a clear image of the monstrous-feminine by associating her body with death, destruction and lust.



Film still from *Puncture*, Rachel Frances Sharpe, 2017.

The colours associated with Anna's clothing throughout *Possession* are mirrored in the fabrics and lighting of *Puncture*. Whiteness symbolises innocence and virginity, blue symbolises motherhood and Marian imagery, and red symbolises blood and the disorder that ensues when the female body transitions from virginity into motherhood. In *Puncture* we are unable to ascertain what is blood and what is milk on blue and red-lit fabric. Images of blood, milk and tears mix with one another and excrete from female eyes and mouths in a variety of film clips, bringing with them their own red, white and blue fluid associations. The films clips are juxtaposed with images from Rogier Van Der Weyden's *Descent from the Cross* (c.1435) portraying the open vaginal wound in Christ's hand and the Virgin Mary weeping in her blue dress. The comparisons show how colour associations from late medieval paintings retain their meanings when transferred to contemporary contexts.

The colour scheme of Anna's clothing within *Possession* demonstrates the monstrous contradictions that exist within the mother, particularly in the figure of the Virgin Mary. In *Possession* Anna always wears a blue dress which contrasts with her pale white skin and bright red blood. Anna's blue dress produces Marian echoes, signifying her status as primary maternal figure. Her character struggles between the polar extremes of being the Virgin Mary and the monstrous female. The mixture of red, white and blue perfectly expresses the contradictions in this Marian representation; if Anna is a mother and a virgin and a lover, the fluids her body produces are at odds. She must menstruate and produce milk while still maintaining virginity and purity against this fluid disorder.



Still of the shard in Pat Hingle's arm, from *Suspiria*, Dario Argento, 1977.

Puncture foregrounds the virgin-lover contradiction by focusing on film stills taken from Argento's *Suspria*. Early in the film, a young girl, Pat Hingle, is stabbed to death while wearing a white gown; her white flesh punctured by shards of blue glass that contrast starkly with her flowing red blood. The colour contrasts symbolically associate whiteness with innocence and virginity. Hingle's murder symbolically changes her representational role from that of being a virgin into a monstrous object of unspeakable feminine horror. The violent stabbing scene is metaphorically reminiscent of the loss of virginity. The intense focus on the opening of her chest reveals a bloodied wound and a pulsating heart which looks not only like a vagina, but also like the pulsating monster in *Possession*. For both Anna and Pat, what makes them monstrous is a proximity to a pulsating dark interior wound, and to a metaphorical loss of virginity which threatens the boundaries of social order. Hingle is penetrated by blue shards of glass; the institution of motherhood visually penetrating her white flesh in symbolic association with the colour blue. These colour schemes recur repeatedly across time and show how feminine monstrosity is depicted as an awkward juxtaposition of roles; it is impossible to be a virgin, a lover and a mother simultaneously in one body. The horror of this plays out in the mixing of the abject fluids of breastmilk and blood staining Anna's blue gown in *Possession*.



Still image of Anna's breakdown from *Possession*, Andrzej Żuławski, 1981.

In *Possession*, one of the expressions of Anna's bodily transgression of gendered boundaries occurs in relation to Christ's iconography. In a church scene, there are explicit visual links drawn between Anna and a carved wooden figure of Christ. The composition of the film depicts her with the same flowing hair as the Christ figure in a shot-reverse-shot sequence. Standing beneath the carving, Anna makes near animalistic sounds. In this moment she resembles the male Christ depicted on the cross. However, her animalistic sounds also resemble the grieving virgin Mary who is unable to annunciate pain and suffering. This scene of gender transgression where Christ's male body is layered over Anna's female body precedes a scene of complete psychological and symbolic collapse in the passenger tunnel beneath a subway station. Anna breaks down in a screaming miscarriage of milk and blood moments after she has left the church. This horrific scene resulted in a ban on the film's screening in many European cities and in the UK.¹⁵ It was rendered so disturbing not only by virtue of Isabelle Adjani's striking improvised performance, but by the extreme use of fluids. Anna screams and writhes, beating her body against the walls of the subway tunnel. There is a veritable effluence of blood and milk that seeps from concealed bags attached to Anna's body which burst all over her blue gown and flood from between her legs. The sheer excess of the scene confronts misogynistic fears concerning maternal bodies; that there is something truly and horrifyingly abject about a body that can produce such a volume of fluid.

Kristeva argues that the abject is necessary to establish order in the subject's world as it embeds a fear of collapsed subject-object boundaries and, ultimately, of death. Abjection provides a crucial moment of dis-identification with the mother that signals an entry into the symbolic order for the subject. However, the abject repels using the same gesture by which it attracts. Childhood abject associations are relics left in the psyche that later invite eroticised horror at any of the symbols associated with motherhood and femininity. As Creed writes, 'although the subject

¹⁵ For more on Isabelle Adjani's performance in the film and its legendary status in film history, see Matty Stanfield, 'Does Our Subject Still Wear Pink Socks? or The Importance of Andrzej Żuławski's *Possession*', *Art Opinions* [<https://mattystanfield.com/2015/07/06/does-our-subject-still-wear-pink-socks-or-the-importance-of-andrzej-zulawskis-possession/>] article accessed 15th December 2017.



Film still from *Puncture*, Rachel Frances Sharpe, 2017.

must exclude the abject, the abject must, nevertheless, be tolerated for that which threatens to destroy life also helps to define life.' (Creed, p. 9) This is an attempt to explain our fascination with and attraction to scenes of maternal abjection; a fascination that has symbolically played out for hundreds of years in terms of visual art and metaphorical language. Abject fluids feature often in the symbolism of theological imagery as Christ's blood is shed, flowing like mother's milk to cleanse all sins. The abject plays a role in medieval Christian imagery and narratives as much as it does in contemporary horror movies where the bleeding, lactating body is both a reminder of our maternal origins and a depiction of a body that is imbued with eroticism by means of pushing the boundary limits between the internal and external.

The associations between vomit, blood, bile, faeces, urine, sweat, tears and semen point to one another as fungible materials, and they highlight the exchangeable orifices of the body, particularly in terms of the feminine-monstrous. The representational appearance of these substances makes monstrous the body issuing them. The film essay *Puncture* provides clear visual comparison between medieval images and images from modern horror films to support Barbara Creed's claim that 'all human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine' (Creed, 1993, p. 1). In the case of mother's milk and menstrual blood, the mother's body is historically inscribed with the features of the monstrous feminine by production of abject fluids. The images in *Puncture* aestheticise a particular moment in film history where the

disembodied and suppurating parts of the female body were intently focused upon to evoke a particularly horrific construction of maternity. This moment had historical precedent in the medieval. The theoretical application of abjection to medieval materials and comparative visual analysis demonstrates that this misogynous monstrosity is by no means an isolated creation of modernity but has far farther reaches in the historical imaginary concerning maternity that can be brought to light by creative means.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

Author Information

Visual artist Rachel Sharpe (b. Blackpool, 1988) graduated from the MFA at The Glasgow School of Art in 2017. Sharpe will be exhibiting her current project 'How Strange When an Illusion Dies' at Leith Theatre, as part of the Hidden Door Festival in Edinburgh, May 2018. Recent exhibitions of work include the group show 'Pokey Hat' for Glasgow International 2016, and 'Who Owns the Cone' at the Likky Ruth Project Space in Brooklyn NYC.

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