

Fragmented Fetishes:
Monstrosity and Desire in Women's Contemporary
Time-Based Art

Jenny Keane

Abstract

Horror connects to one of our most ancient and primal desires: Voyeurism. The imagery of death and evil could be a metaphor for art itself – the irrepressible desire to look. This paper will question how and why this concept of monstrous subversion, through the utilization of themes including the abject, horror films, and representations of the 'monstrous-feminine', have arisen at this time in women's art, particularly in time-based mediums. Throughout this paper I will concentrate on my own practice as an artist as well as discussing works by contemporary video artists Chloe Piene and Sue de Beer. These artists investigate the liminal state of the aberrant, visceral female body through cultural representations within the horror film, and rather than eschew the long-standing patriarchal perception of feminine monstrosity – the 'lack', these female artists appropriate and employ this transgressive mode of video art practice to engender new compelling ways of looking, and new subversive ways of seeing.

1. Introduction

Many feminists perceive the horror film as a negative representation of the feminine, and parallel to the discussions of pornography, horror films have been the object of feminist criticism as they were considered to promote violence against women by 'staging the spectacle of the ruined female body.'¹ While I am not attempting to dispute this theory, I wish to analyse the positive appropriations and subversions of the horror genre by female artists to explore the issues of female sexuality, and subsequently challenge the negative patriarchal perception of the feminine-as-monstrous.

Before I can begin to discuss the work of contemporary artists dealing with the tropes of horror, I wish to first analyse some of the psychoanalytical relationships between the feminine and the monstrous. Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject discusses the

¹ Pinedo, Isabel Cristina, *Recreational Terror - Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1997, p. 71

connection between the female body and the rituals of purity and defilement. Abjection can be defined as disgust that arises from the human psyche by looking at bodily wastes, blood, and the dead body itself. In her book *The Powers of Horror*, Kristeva talks about the connection of these repulsions to the feminine body. She argues that the maternal body is the first site of the abject; abjection is created in the separation of the child's body from the mother's. As the child must become part of the symbolic order of language, s/he must renounce the mother, so as to establish an autonomous subjectivity. This is done by 'ejecting the abject' and establishing a 'clean and proper body', denouncing the connection between the child and mother through feelings of disgust towards the 'indifferentiation' between their bodies. Abjection is that which disturbs identity, it is 'what does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.'² Thus the maternal body, and subsequently the female body in general, becomes a constant reminder of the possible loss of subjectivity, which equates to death. It is thus a potential explanation of the deep-rooted patriarchal fear of femininity.

Another fear of the female body could be explained by the threat of castration. Freud writes that the castration complex is a phantasy³ in which a child is puzzled by the anatomical difference between the sexes and subsequently believes that the female's penis had been cut off. The boy child thus believes that there is a possibility of his penis being cut off.⁴ Fetishism subsequently comes about from the disavowal of the woman's (mother's) lack of penis, and an object becomes the substitute for the missing penis.⁵ In *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, which is an analysis of classic film, Laura Mulvey sees woman as the image and man as the bearer of the look. This female figure however, connotes something that the 'look continually circles around but disavows; her lack of a penis, implying a threat of castration and hence unpleasure.'⁶ To combat this, the male must either be the sadistic voyeur, by re-enacting the trauma of the lack and 'investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery'. Or he must partake in fetishistic scopophilia, disavowing her castration and as such creating the image of woman as fetish - a replacement for the missing phallus. Due to the castration complex, both of these theories are based on the premise that 'woman-equals-lack.' Mulvey states that glossy images of women in magazines that produce 'flawless icons of femininity' are a symptom of the fetishistic disavowal of castration, they 'mask the sight of the wound, covering the

² Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of Horror - An Essay on Abjection*, Columbia Press, New York, 1982, p. 4

³ I use the term phantasy, in the Freudian sense, to show the 'subject as represented as a protagonist engaged in the activity of wish fulfilment'. Ref: Creed, Barbara, *The Monstrous-Feminine - Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Routledge, New York, 1993, p. 6

⁴ Laplanche, Jean; Pontalis, Jean B, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, H. Karnac Books Ltd, London, 1973, p. 56

⁵ Freud, Sigmund, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XXI, Vintage, London, 2001, p. 152-157.

⁶ Mulvey, Laura, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Palgrave, Hampshire, 1989, p. 21

lack with beauty'. She believes that in the horror genre, the fetish 'can crack open to reveal its binary opposition when, for instance, a beautiful vampire disintegrates into ancient slime.'⁷ Thus the horror film 'offers an abundant display of fetishistic effects whose function is to attest to the perversity of the patriarchal order founded on a misconception - the erroneous belief that woman is castrated'.⁸

In an attempt to explore the concept of the monstrous feminine in female art, I will look at the relationship between the work of contemporary artists dealing with horror and my own drawings based on horror films. Through an analysis of *The Exorcist* film as a case study alongside its film theory, I will endeavour to analyze the psychoanalytical exploration of abjection and fetish within the artworks. I believe that recent contemporary time-based art undermines the horror genre's negative connotations of the female body - the artists seek to revoke the concepts of fetish and 'the ejection of the abject' via narrative subversion.

2. My Art Practice

In a recent series of work, using graphite and Fabriano paper, I drew specific stills taken from horror films, and then licked out the 'horrific' element therein. Ironically, the pressure of licking caused my tongue to bleed and, in some cases instead of removing the drawn image of the blood, I replaced the fake blood with my own. I was 'helping' the image by removing its 'horrific' element, but I was also giving it a part of me - something that was just as horrific. I feel that the action is a removal of the metaphorical abject into the literal. For the drawing under discussion in this paper, I chose a still from *The Exorcist*. Both the film and the still I captured are very important to the understanding of the piece. I chose this film because I felt it evoked a sense of 'awakening sexuality', and the repression of it. Regan, the main protagonist, is a young teen, (pre-) pubescent and very innocent - her very nature as an adolescent evokes ideas of uncertainty, fluidity and liminality. In basic terms, she becomes possessed by something inside of her and she begins to 'change'. Barbara Creed discusses this by saying:

Connections drawn in the film between feminine desire, sexuality and abjection suggest that more is at stake than a simple case of demonic possession. Possession becomes the excuse for legitimizing a display of aberrant feminine behaviour which is depicted as depraved, monstrous, abject - and perversely appealing.⁹

⁷ Mulvey, Laura, *Some Thoughts on Theories of Fetishism in the Context of Contemporary Culture*, October, 65 (Summer), p. 13, cited in Fernbach, Amanda, *Fantasies of Fetishism - From Decadence to the Post-Human*, Rutgers University Press, New Jersey, 2002, p. 24

⁸ Creed, Barbara, *The Monstrous-Feminine - Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Routledge, New York, 1993, p. 5

⁹ Creed, Barbara, *The Monstrous-Feminine - Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Routledge, New York, 1993, p. 31

As Creed says, there is a fascination with the abject, as it is 'constructed as a rebellion of filthy, lustful, carnal female flesh'.¹⁰ I was interested in exploring this and so, for the image in my drawing, I selected the first moment Regan visually/corporally shows signs of her 'possession'. Her eyes roll back into her head, her face contorts, and she opens her mouth in a harrowing scream. I selected this still because it had an element of ambiguity, via the open mouth. Is this girl in pain? In pleasure? Afraid? When I stood back after licking the drawing, I was fascinated at how the layers of paper had formed to create almost concentric circles, replacement 'eyes', piercing eyes that stared at you even though there was just a void, or 'lack' left. Significantly, the eye is a common element in the trope of horror films; Giuliana Bruno believes that our fascination with looking causes us to have 'an attraction for the dark sides of the visible', and 'the imagery of death and evil could be a metaphor for art itself - the uncontrollable desire to look.'¹¹



Jenny Keane, *The Exorcist* from the Lick Drawing Series, Graphite on Fabriano Paper, Dimensions 100x70cm

When I had completed the drawing and the licking, I felt that while it referenced the possession, the physical lack in place of the eyes created by the licking also represented Regan's absence or loss of innocence. I feel that the action of licking the whites of Regan's eyes in the Lick drawing is also a removal of a lack. The lack was there already as the eyes were rolled inwards, and I erased the lack, which subsequently, and paradoxically created another one. Yet, somehow, the lack of a lack is a presence. In referencing Mulvey's concept of lack, does this presence create disharmony in the (male)

¹⁰ Creed, Barbara, *The Monstrous-Feminine - Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Routledge, New York, 1993, p. 38

¹¹ Bruno, Giuliana, *Public Intimacy - Architecture and the Visual Arts*, MIT Press, 2007. Pg. 90

voyeur's visual pleasure? The licked drawing might paradoxically invoke the image of Regan to return the look.

Barbara Creed describes Regan as a divided being; she writes that the 'possessed or invaded being is a figure of abjection in that the boundary between self and other has been transgressed'¹² - evoking abjection. While on the surface, *The Exorcist* seems to be a representation of a fight between good and evil, I feel that the real basis of the film is the unusual relationship between Regan and her mother. As Regan begins to show signs of 'possession', she becomes more sexual towards her mother, which evokes the incest taboo. Throughout the film, Regan is perceived to be 'innocent' of any sexual transgressions, but the facts discredit this. Firstly, Regan is almost thirteen and pubescent (which denotes a sexual awakening), and secondly, she has a very close dyadic relationship with her mother which is seen as a 'refusal of the mother and child to recognise the paternal order, (and) is what produces the monstrous.'¹³

While the main theme of *The Exorcist* is sexuality and 'a 'ritual' of purification that permits the spectator to wallow vicariously in normally taboo forms of behaviour before restoring order,'¹⁴ the Lick drawing displays these religious and sexual taboos for all to see, and because the image has been taken out of context, and is thus no longer part of the narrative of the film, the Lick drawings do not restore any kind of order or harmony. In fact, through the subsequent action of licking which doubles or literalizes the abject, I believe that the drawing disallows the purification/ejection of the abject, or the 'mask of fetish' to be (re)formulated.

I will now analyse a similar use of narrative subversion in the work of other artists.

3. Chloe Piene

The video and drawing-based artist Chloe Piene deals with representations of death, fear and the monstrous within her work. I first encountered Piene's work in a show entitled *Greater New York* in the PS1 Gallery, NY in 2005. Her short video piece was called *Blackmouth*. I was drawn to the piece by the sound - a guttural, masculine and almost sexual moaning. The video is short (2:51 mins), the background is black, and the static camera reveals hints of trees and the muddied ground of a forest. The low level lighting focuses solely on the main protagonist - a young girl presented in rich chiaroscuro, dressed in a muddy vest and knickers. The girl is rolling around, covered in dirt and leaves. She is in slow motion, moaning and writhing in the mud, her hair is wet with perspiration and dirt. The audience realizes that the masculine moaning is paradoxically emanating

¹² Creed, Barbara, *The Monstrous-Feminine - Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Routledge, New York, 1993, p. 32

¹³ Creed, Barbara, *The Monstrous-Feminine - Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Routledge, New York, 1993, p. 38

¹⁴ Creed, Barbara, *The Monstrous-Feminine - Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Routledge, New York, 1993, p. 37

from this young girl. As the audience watches, the girl kneels and begins to scream like an animal; her mouth opens wide – wider than physically possible. She then falls back on the dirty ground again, and the ‘normality’ of the situation returns. The sequence is then seamlessly looped.



Chloe Piene, *Blackmouth*,
Single Channel Video, Duration 2:53

I believe that this video is an attempted representation of abjection, as Kristeva discusses that ‘the abject confronts us (...) with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of animal.’¹⁵ The lack of verbal language evokes the pre-symbolic, and the unnaturally large mouth subverts reality, similar to the physically impossible actions that Regan achieves in *The Exorcist*. The image of the girl in Piene’s video seems to be a very

¹⁵ Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of Horror - An Essay on Abjection*, Columbia Press, New York, 1982. Pg. 12

specific representation of a liminal space. Like Regan, she is between childhood and adolescence, and by the contortions of their young bodies, they are both the embodiment of the female monster.

In *The Exorcist*, the masculine voice of the possessed Regan is actually made by a woman, but like the girl in *Blackmouth* it is also perceived as male, as it is deep and overtly sexual. Discussing the sound of Regan's masculine demonic voice, Creed believes that that Regan's body is 'a body in revolt', she discusses that '(t)he film's rhythms and use of sounds and language, particularly Regan's snarling, grunting voice, exert a disturbing and powerful effect almost as if the film's semiotic (female) voice had overpowered its symbolic (male) one.'¹⁶ The voices of both adolescent protagonists are examples of the transgression of the borders between inside and outside, masculine and feminine, self and other. It is 'what does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous.'¹⁷ And like Regan, Piene's video's deep 'semiotic sounds' represents the relationship between femininity and language. Discussing this, Rosalind Minsky paraphrases the theorist Jacques Lacan by discussing that:

Woman has no existence outside language, and even within language she can represent only the 'lack', the negative, 'not man', precisely what man must never be. She has no existence or destiny of her own. She exists in language only in relation to the male sign, as what man is not, as the negative end of the binary opposition: of masculinity/femininity. (...) She is man's shadow, the one who carries the 'dark', repressed side of his nature, 'his lack'.¹⁸

In a very different context, Linda Williams speaks about the binaries between masculine and feminine. She discusses that in the horror film, the 'monster' and the female have a connection as they both have a different form from the 'normal' male perception of sexuality, and as both monster and female are Other to the male, they have somehow become synonymous with each other:

The power and potency of the monster body in many classic horror films (...) should not be interpreted as an eruption of the normally repressed animal sexuality of the civilized male (the monster as double for the male viewer and characters in the film), but as the feared power and potency of a different kind of sexuality (the monster as double for the woman).¹⁹

Similarly, I consider *Blackmouth* to be a representation of a patriarchal view of femininity.

¹⁶ Creed, Barbara, *The Monstrous-Feminine - Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Routledge, New York, 1993, p. 40

¹⁷ Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of Horror - An Essay on Abjection*, Columbia Press, New York, 1982, p. 4

¹⁸ Minsky, Rosalind, Lacan, in Crowley, Helen (Ed.), *Knowing Women - Feminism And Knowledge*, The Open University - Polity Press, Cambridge, 1992. Pg. 199

¹⁹ Williams, Linda, *When the Woman Looks*, in Grant, Barry Keith, *The Dread of Difference - Gender and the Horror Film*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1996. Pg. 20

Yet, rather than merely continuing the negative perception of feminine as 'lack', bloody, wounded, disgusting, and inarticulate, Piene actually presents the impossibility of the body - the overachieving mouth - as the real site of the feminine as sexual difference. It is the physical transcendence of the body that reveals the abject here; the action of the mouth evokes the multivalent, the mouth is presented as a metaphor for sexuality, language, and the site of the boundaries between inside and outside. This has a direct connection to the doubling/literalizing of the abject in the Lick drawings. The feminine is presented as abject and monstrous, but before it can be ejected, the abject is doubled via the overextended mouth. Just as the Lick drawings freeze the narrative of the selected films, Piene subverts narrative in her piece by creating a continuous loop. By constantly staging the feminine as not within the (masculine) norm and simultaneously as the physically impossible - the monstrous, Blackmouth speaks of 'potency' (to use Williams' word) or the powerful and fearful potential of alterity. But how is this done? I shall discuss another artist to examine this concept further.

4. Sue de Beer

Addressing similar themes, Sue de Beer's work focuses entirely on the tropes of the horror film. Her work is also decidedly based on psychoanalytical theories of sexuality; the video installation I will be discussing, entitled Black Sun, is a reference to Julia Kristeva's book of the same title. The book discusses the 'yearning sadness that drives us to find a substitute love object to compensate for a loss or wound'²⁰ - the loss of the maternal object, which again, goes back to same time that the first abjection (of the mother) takes place.

This installation consists of two video pieces, which are played side-by-side within a large wooden construction shaped like a pseudo-gothic house - an intentional, poorly made parody of a film set which recalls anthropomorphic dwellings from films such as *The Haunting* and *Psycho*. With much of the actual on-screen narrative taking place in this fabricated setting, there is an uncomfortable sense of duplication and dislocation - one is aware of being within the gallery, whilst at the same time being on the film set which is a building, while watching that same building on screen - this multiple doubling evokes a sense of the Freudian uncanny. Another layer of the uncanny is presented in the representation of the house itself; Freud discusses the house as a metaphor for the female genitals, our first 'heim' or home - the womb.²¹ The two-channel video projection further represents the concept of the double, in which the images on-screen constantly and

²⁰ Berwick, Carly, *Daughters of Darkness*, Sue de Beer Articles - Filmcomment, <<http://suedebeer.com/berwick.html>>, 2005, (accessed 25th September 2009).

²¹ Freud, Sigmund, *The Uncanny*, Penguin Books, London, 2003, p. 151

sporadically oscillate between different views. One view is a mirroring effect between the screens, where the image on one screen is the exact mirror image of the other. The second view on the screens shows a single image divided into two by the split in the projections. The third view is of a perceived double image, which appears to be the same on each screen, but while watching, one realizes that there is a slightly different perspective on each screen of the action taking place. The double screen with these shifting perspectives creates a sense of jarring multiple identities.



Sue de Beer, *Black Sun*,
Double Channel Video Installation,
Duration 23:00

The confusing and repetitive narrative accentuates a similar sense of complexity. In a similar vein to Chloe Piene's work, there is a looping and self-reflexive narrative. And like *The Exorcist* Lick drawing and Piene's *Blackmouth*, the video invokes childhood adolescence, and awakening sexuality. Divided into three ages, eleven, seventeen and twenty-eight, *Black Sun* opens with an eleven year old girl dressed in nightclothes walking up a set of stairs towards an older woman (her mother?) who is asleep. As she reaches the top of the stairs, the young girl slowly opens a door - but the screen fades to black halting the narrative. de Beer's girl is entering a forbidden world, a world of adulthood, of female sexuality, of secrets and masks.

In the second part of de Beer's video the girl at seventeen is in a graveyard, dancing, drinking, flirting and laughing with a boy. Here we are also aware of the frightful sexual awakening that haunts the first section. As the girl is left alone among the (wooden) gravestones, she dances and performs a striptease down to her black lace underwear - invoking the 'monstrous' internal sexuality that she now begins to feel. In the third act the girl, now twenty-eight, alone on an airplane, applies make-up and sits pensively on the aircraft, which is a powerful metaphor for the liminal. It seems as her thoughts return to her childhood, as she is now again walking up the stairs of the haunted house (another from of doubling and repetition), opening the door and entering the room that she was prevented from doing before. She has become what was within the room. Her mother. Yet she is both her mother and herself, an allusion to the pre-symbolic state - it is again, like Regan in *The Exorcist*, a 'refusal of the mother and child to recognise the paternal order, (and) is what produces the monstrous.'²²

Rather than alluding to the fetishized 'lack' of the castrated female, this impenetrable door that the girl finally enters, recalls the concept of the *Vagina Dentata*, which is the myth of the 'castrating female', as Creed notes:

A (...) visual motif associated with the *Vagina Dentata* is that of the barred or dangerous entrance. The *Vagina Dentata* is (interpreted as) an expression of the dyadic mother; the all-encompassing maternal figure of the pre-Oedipal period who threatens symbolically to engulf the infant, thus posing a threat of psychic obliteration.²³

This quote is reminiscent of the function of the need to reject the abject mother. But these castrating female genitals also link abjection with the fetish. Creed discusses the threat of castration, which can take two possible conclusions. The first is what produces the fetish,

²² Creed, Barbara, *The Monstrous-Feminine - Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Routledge, New York, 1993, p. 38

²³ Creed, Barbara, *The Monstrous-Feminine - Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Routledge, New York, 1993, p. 109

the horror that the female is 'castrated' and the subsequent disavowal of this through a fetish object as I have discussed before. The other is the Vagina Dentata, the 'castrating vagina' that Freud rejects, but which Creed believes is another possible explanation for the use of the fetish object. The fear of castration via the vagina thus returns again to the female body as site of the horrific - not as 'lack', but as the monstrous potential to create a lack in the male. I subsequently believe that my use of the mouth to destroy the image of the horrific in the Lick drawings, and the overachieving mouth in Chloe Piene's video, link to the door in Black Sun which connotes the girl's realization that she is not lacking - they all represent patriarchy's fear of the feminine other, as the fear of femininity's potential power.

As I mentioned before, the use of double screens and multiple perspectives present the shifting sense of identity; there is no fixed sense of self for the protagonist, or indeed, the audience. Through the constant disorientation that the audience feels within the installation, the piece attempts to destabilize the concept of the cinematic experience by the multiple filmic views, and the image of the girl is fractured and fragmented both physically and psychologically which does not lend itself to any form of the creation of fetish. Similarly, the concept of 'ejecting the abject' maternal body is not possible in the video installation, because the mother is metaphorically omnipresent throughout the piece - the inherent desire for the mother is constantly invoked in the image of the house and in the very title, Black Sun. Like the Lick drawings and Piene's Blackmouth, de Beer presents this shifting identity of femininity in opposition to the 'order' of patriarchy, and shows the nature of femininity as ultimately liminal.

5. Conclusion

While the horror film is an attempt to bring about a confrontation with the abject so as to 'eject the abject and redraw boundaries'²⁴ between self and other, inside and outside, what I have attempted to show is that the break down of the narrative in these three works is the key to the subversion of the horror film. By not allowing the cinematic tropes to restore order, this subversion dissolves borders or limits, and represents liminality.

More importantly, what is explored in the horror film is the patriarchal disavowal of lack that frightens and attempts to dislodge the subjectivity of the male viewer. What about the female viewer? Laura Mulvey, while discussing a feminine curiosity of the female body via the myth of Pandora's box, believes that Pandora's desire to look in the box, instead of being the 'displaced representation of the female sexuality as mystery and

²⁴ Creed, Barbara, *The Monstrous-Feminine - Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Routledge, New York, 1993, p. 14

threat', actually represents the 'self-reflexive desire to investigate the enigma of femininity itself'.²⁵ As such, women artists employ these challenging modes of monstrosity, abjection and horror to engender new compelling ways of looking, and new subversive ways of seeing the female body. Rather than eschewing the long-standing patriarchal perception of feminine monstrosity - the 'lack', Sue de Beer, and Chloe Piene open up desires that are generally hidden - that which is presented as 'horrific' in films such as *The Exorcist*. The appropriation of monstrosity by female artists seem to have a cathartic effect, they are reclaiming the concept as a means of self-empowerment - as 'the foul impulses of horror lie not in the movie but in the spectator.'²⁶

²⁵ Mulvey, Laura, *The Myth of Pandora - A Psychoanalytical Approach*, in Pietropaolo, Laura, *Feminisms in the Cinema*, Indiana University Press, 1995, p.10-11

²⁶ Clover, Carol. J, *Men, Women and Chainsaws*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1992. p. 195

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- Jenny Keane is a video installation and drawing-based artist. She is currently a Graduate Researcher at the University of Ulster, Belfast, where she is undertaking a practice-based PhD in Fine and Applied Arts.