

Institute of Art Design and Technology, Dun Laoghaire

***Annihilation of the Flesh: Re-Objectifying the Body***

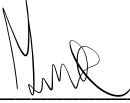
by

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**This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Hons) in Film. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.**

**Signed**  \_\_\_\_\_

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## Introduction

“The body must bear no trace of its debt to nature: it must be clean and proper in order to be fully symbolic. In order to confirm that, it should endure no gash other than that of circumcision, equivalent to sexual separation and/or separation from the mother. Any other mark would be the sign of belonging to the impure, the non-separate, the non-symbolic, the non-holy.”<sup>1</sup> This is how Julia Kristeva speaks of the body in its purest form. The reality, however, is that bodies are subject to defilement and decay. Only the soul - or the Cartesian mind - truly belongs to oneself and cannot be tainted by external forces. We have accepted this dualism and, in attempting to protect the soul at all costs, we have shunned and punished that which might bring harm to the encasing body - be it by depriving us of our perceived integrity through wounding or by threatening our very notion of what it is to be whole. But what happens when, faced with the inevitability of suffering and imperfection, the soul begins to desire the annihilation of the flesh it inhabits?

In this thesis, I aim to explore portrayals of Kristeva’s concept of abjection on screen, specifically focusing on *Crash* (dir. David Cronenberg, 1996), in order to understand the motives and opportunities it poses. I will argue that abjection is not bound to be a destabilising identity, offering instead a fertile ground for self-discovery and emancipation. To support this claim, I endeavour to undertake a detailed examination of this film, both at the narrative and visual level, and use this as a foundation to explore further examples of abjection in other works, drawing from the fields of psychoanalysis, theology, sociology and philosophy, as well as from films of the New French Extremity. Utilising my interest in and knowledge of cinematography, I will then argue that David Cronenberg’s stylistic choices and Peter Suschitzky’s camerawork pull the viewer into the possibilities of abjection whilst refraining from indulging in the shock value implied by the subject or making any sort of moral judgement in the process.

The first chapter shall clarify the concept of abjection and provide a narrative analysis of *Crash* and its characters. This will be prefaced by a brief overview of Cronenberg’s previous work, which is meant to establish that this is not his first brush

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<sup>1</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. (New York, Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 102.

with the realm of abjection, albeit his first portrayal of a voluntary return to it. Returning to *Crash*, I will explore the nature of the group's dynamics through a Sadean lens while particularly focusing on the female experiences. Deborah Kara Unger's character Catherine will take centre stage as she is most symbolic, and the antitheses of her personality are most relevant to the topic at hand. I will then delve into different films which illustrate this concept from a female perspective, where the women have the agency to willingly submit to abjection rather than performing as martyr-objects.

The second chapter will focus on the modernist quality of the image and elaborate on the reasons why certain visual choices were made in the process. I will argue that the cinematography denies the audience any gratification expected of it in order to appropriately convey the lacklustre approach of the story's protagonists. Stylistically, this is in line with the social and industrial developments of its time, marking a straying away from the visual artefacts of capitalism and playing into a decided cultural boredom with overstimulation and uninhibited access to pornography. I believe that on a metafictional level, the sheer adaptation of the novel *Crash* into a film furthers the point of the story by involving its viewers as voyeurs of the events unfolding. Lastly, I will touch on the absurdity of the controversies surrounding the picture upon its release, dismantling claims of exploitation and gratuitous sexual violence.

Having discussed the possibilities of abjection, this study will conclude with a historical perspective on past studies of abjection in horror films and assess their relevance in furthering feminist studies. I will then assert the value of continuing to bring fresh, nuanced works within this genre, which I aim to do in my own filmmaking practice.

## I - body & soul, and the many facets of abjection

The stark elegance of cold metal bent into precise form: the languid shape of a sports car, the sharpness of an aeroplane wing. No visible sutures or weldings, just perfect, emotionless machines, manicured and neat, among thousands of others like them, going at various speeds over ground, sea and sky, creating a delicate tableau of stark motion. It is against this backdrop that Catherine Ballard poses in the opening of *Crash*, an airbrushed model devoid of imperfections, when she bends over a jet and presses her breast against the cold curve of its wing. She is posing as though for a scripted fantasy, lacking autonomy or intent, as her clandestine lover takes her from behind.

Catherine and her husband James have reached a state of technologically-induced ennui; insofar as their lives have become choreographed to the clockwork rhythm of machines, they long to regain a semblance of organic humanity, and so they push each other to transgress and revel in each other's impromptu affairs. This is not enough to inspire desire in either of them. They are, of course, a synecdoche for post-industrial society at large; symptoms like envy of perfection can be traced back to early religions, but having the object of envy be something palpable, something man-made which is mute and deaf in its beauty, is only a recent development in human history, and its scale is growing larger every day. *"The gulf introduced between the world of technology and the world of organic appetite and mortality is so great, and the insistence of both worlds so constant, that we are faced with an endemic problem of how to live. It will be an ever-present, if usually unconscious, human wish to heal this schism, to make the antithetical poles somehow meaningful in terms of each other; and anything that promises to forge a relation will appear as an almost redemptive gift to alienated and schizoid human sufferers such as the personages of Crash."*<sup>2</sup> So their condition is a natural response to the obtrusive permeation of technology; we, too, are faced with this to an even greater extent, where the flip side of unrestricted access to information is an incessant demand for availability and personal data, the likes of which had been unfathomable before.

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<sup>2</sup> William Beard, *The Artist as Monster: The Cinema of David Cronenberg*. (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2006), p. 387.

*“The body is always with us no matter how alienated and empty we may be. It demands to be fed, it wants to fuck. It too is meaningless and confusing, we cannot integrate its urges into any ordered context. The body is denied by the technoculture around us, but it cannot be escaped; we cannot truly become machines ourselves.”*<sup>3</sup> And it is this envy, this inability to become a machine that gives way to a hatred of form and a yearning for its opposite: chaos, destabilisation, disarray. Though these occur naturally throughout our lives, facing them headfirst is a form of revolt in and of itself. *“It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection, but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.”*<sup>4</sup> This is how Kristeva speaks of abjection; let us clarify this term. Etymologically, the word *abjection* stems from a composite of Latin roots: *ab* meaning away, and *ject*, meaning to throw away, to cast off. This would allow us to interpret it as *that which is thrown away*. But what is *that*, and most importantly, what is *that* in relation to the subject? Abjection lies at the intersection between subject and object, and it is this border specifically that it disregards, which in turn causes simultaneous fascination and disgust in the subject. Take the example of a corpse. It is an object, yes, but one that had previously been a subject; this transition into objecthood reminds us, while perceiving it, of our own inevitable transition into objecthood, and more importantly, it distances us from it by affirming our quality as the subject. It is therefore not the cleanliness of the cadaver or lack thereof which induces disgust, rather our sudden perception of our own limited bodily integrity - which we usually take for granted - that provokes this sensation. Such is the case for sex, which generally involves an exchange of bodily fluids or at the very least an interaction between orifices, which are demarcations of the body that we would normally disregard. During this act, the subject mingles with the object while having its own physical integrity questioned, which prompts a realisation not only of the object’s bodily permeability, but of our own permeability and of our status as a subject. Kristeva argues that abjection is necessary in establishing one’s perception of oneself as an erratic way of distancing from the other while maintaining the distinction of self as developed in early childhood.

Barbara Creed elaborates on this, *“The subject, constructed in/through language, through a desire for meaning, is also spoken by the object, the place of meaninglessness – thus, the subject is constantly beset by abjection which fascinates desire but which must be repelled for fear of*

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 387.

<sup>4</sup> Kristeva, op.cit., p. 4.

*self-annihilation.*<sup>5</sup> If abjection threatens the identity of the subject by exposing its boundaries as fluid conventions, the subject will naturally avoid it and arm itself with the reactions it has been taught: repulsion, disgust, avoidance. Wounds filled with pus are sickening. Menstruation is to be dealt with privately. Sex is to be performed in shame, with the sanctity of marriage as a counterbalance to this gross necessity in creating new life. What I aim to expand on, given Kristeva's definition of abjection, is the aspect of fascination. As abjection is ultimately unavoidable, one might wonder what happens when, for whatever reason, the exciting curiosities of abjection outweigh the feeling of disturbance. When it becomes something to embrace rather than something to avoid.

Cronenberg would explore this potentiality in *Crash*, following a long track record of work dealing with involuntary interactions with abjection. He is best known for his development of body horror, and while this is a fairly accessible entry point into portraying abjection, it is not what I would like to focus on in this analysis. I believe his more abstract representations of abjection have greater use in understanding the philosophical and sociological mechanics later employed in *Crash*. One early example is *The Brood* (1979), where institutionalised wife Nola is revealed to be the source of mutant children committing brutal attacks. Her creations are bodily manifestations of her rage which act on her behalf. This is revealed to her husband Frank in a horrifying scene which involves Nola presenting him with her foetal growth, which she cuts loose and licks clean. "*Nola is like a creature in the wild, completely at home with her bodily instincts and reproductive functions. Frank's response is first to gag and then to leap at his wife and strangle her. Nola and her brood die.*"<sup>6</sup> This vicious, disgusted response when faced with the image of the mother had been the source of Nola's anger in the first place; her feelings of frustration and distrust had stemmed from a lack of attention in her marriage. Upon becoming a mother, and thus an abject figure<sup>7</sup>, her husband had become repulsed with her and ultimately cast her away to be treated somewhere private, out of view, where she could not disgust him anymore. When Nola uses abjection to her advantage and completely embraces her new bodily functions, this further horrifies Frank, who has now been completely excluded from the reproductive process; thus, he must destroy her.

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<sup>5</sup> Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*. (New York, Routledge, 1993), p. 20.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 51.

<sup>7</sup> The mother is at once subject and object, carrying within her another, thus becoming abject herself through her ability to create life within her own corporality.

*Dead Ringers* (1988) explores a different approach on identity. Gynaecologist identical twins Elliot and Beverly - who by nature of their profession deal with the abject body - share women by pretending to be the same person. This has created a merging effect, where although their bodies and minds are separate, they perceive their identities as one. When conflict arises over Claire, a woman Beverly gains feelings for, the balance the twins had so far maintained is corrupted. Beverly falls into a spiral of substance abuse, which Elliot seeks to correct by becoming intoxicated himself. Their now alternating conditions prompt them to realise the identity they have been sharing is abject and unsustainable. They must be separated - but having failed to develop a distinct sense of self during childhood, this is now impossible. If one suffers, the other has no choice but to follow. Beverly kills Elliot in a drug-induced delirium, and after realising what he had done, he himself joins his brother in death. The means by which Elliot dies are yet more symbols pointing towards the interference of abjection. Beverly had commissioned a set of grotesque new tools to operate on what he had hallucinated as mutant genitalia, organic-shaped metal instruments which he then uses to disembowel his brother. Thus, following the initial rupture of equilibrium between him and his brother, he had become disgusted by female genitalia as it reminded him of birth, of a much simpler time of union with his brother, where they could coexist under one identity. Once the illusion is destroyed, both are incapable of fully separating or fully merging again; and so they are both fated to die.

*Crash* is different, in that its protagonists *willingly* choose to explore the realm of abjection. In Cronenberg's liminal Toronto, the cocoon that the upwardly mobile Ballards have built leaves no room for imperfection. They tease each other with small deviances - Catherine bent over the exposed balcony, never wearing underwear - but neither dares to shake the foundation of their relationship to the core. "*From another angle we could simply say that technology has de-abjectified experience, and is even de-abjectifying the human body. It has banished the messy internal body with its visceral liquidity and its expelled or leaked fluids and waste substances. The external body, concomitantly, has been cleaned, smoothed, manicured, sheathed, and sculpted into an object nearly as artificial and impermeable as a machine.*"<sup>8</sup> Paradoxically, having unconsciously expelled abjection from their lives, they have become so much more drawn to it. What this lack of confrontation with disgust has achieved is an effect of self-diffusion; both James and Catherine have lost sense of their bodily integrity and have welcomed a merge with their environment. This, however, is a temporary state

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<sup>8</sup> Beard, op.cit., p. 388.

which comes with a counterpoint: when they do come across abjection again, its effect will be so much more destabilising.

When James crashes his car, he awakes with a fascination for the aftermath: bent metal, screws in his legs, scars and bruises that break his otherwise smooth complexion. He senses the eroticism of difference, abjection draws him further away from his doll-like wife and towards the sudden, all-consuming sensuality of ugliness. The potential of a crash is revealed to him as unlimited - its physical consequences are delicious because they are arbitrary, unpredictable, thus organic in nature and most importantly impossible to recreate. Helen Remington's grief and her anger with losing her husband at James' hands translate into vehicles for passion, as though desire corrects this serious accident by affirming life. Gabrielle's slit-shaped wound in her thigh presents a new possibility for penetration. Vaughan's violent coupling with James' wife is a sly invitation to retaliation by sodomy. The games they play do not follow the sexual standard, instead transgressing as if to reach pure, lawless lust.

Monogamy and heterosexuality are irrelevant in their microcosm, where they seem to only be guided by the incessant force of destruction, be that by their own doing or at the hands of others. That is not to say sexual preferences are ascribed a moral value or portrayed as a first step towards a spiral of violent urges, with the story rather focusing on sexual dynamics in abstract. Vaughan does not force James to watch him defile Catherine to establish his supremacy as the all-powerful male; this teasing comes from a place of submissiveness, as if pushing the limits to see what might happen to him in return. He is signalling to James that he has noticed his attraction to him and would like his full participation. Catherine sees this as well, and it is by creating a homosexual fantasy for her husband that they are able to achieve pleasure together at last. Only then is James able to proceed with acting on his perhaps subconscious desire to dominate Vaughan. *"Mutual aggression can never take place at the same time but only in a serial fashion, now me, now you, and the cock, the phallus, the sceptre of a virility which is not a state-in-itself, in fact, however phallogentric the notion of sexuality implicit in Sade's pornography might be, but a modality, is passed from man to woman, woman to man, man to man, woman to woman, back and forth, as in a parlour game."*<sup>9</sup> In fact, it has been previously observed that the group's dynamics follow a Sadean philosophy, inasmuch as the libertines (Vaughan, Gabrielle and Helen) seek to fulfil their own urges first but help each other out regardless of gender or status.

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<sup>9</sup> Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*. (New York, Penguin Books, 2001), p. 145.

The group has moved beyond the aspiration to symmetry and machine-like function; knowing that is unattainable, they long to humanise the vehicles, to translate their becoming scrap into spiritual penance, because the only way to be one with the machine is by suffering *with* the machine. When they move and crash together they become encased in deformed exoskeletons which, though unfeeling, seem to share in their pain by becoming devoid of purpose. *“Even more satisfying unions are accomplished when the human body is imprinted with the hard edges and shapes of the car in the form of wounds, and when the automobile in turn is crushed and torn by a crash into an analogue of the wounded human body - deprived of its controlled design and machine functionality.”*<sup>10</sup>

This does not exempt the group from sexual dynamics, rather enforcing them further without the bounds of heteronormativity. It is always the men who drive, the men who tease their willing victims and eventually initiate penetration from behind, avoiding eye-to-eye contact. In fact, the exhaustive abundance of various couplings paradoxically saps the film of true erotic value; the frenzied sex scenes are portrayed in such a way that the viewer is unable to extract any pleasure for themselves. Though downright pornographic, with the lens almost always as voyeur, the lengths to which the characters are going fail to incite arousal, shaping instead a landscape of pathology, a clean, forensic examination of desperation, much like watching lab rats on cocaine.

Gabrielle triumphs in her condition. Her act in the showroom is a vignette of her ironic perversion. She exudes sexuality; not in spite of, but *because* of her crash complications, long clanky rods of iron which announce her presence only to surprise with the fuck-me-fishnets it adorns stretching under her mini skirt. *“Her presence is so theatrical, and her flaunting of it so brazen, that it contains its own ironic self-consciousness, and skates easily between witty self-satire and inflammatory concupiscence.”*<sup>11</sup> And so when she strolls into the glass-walled showroom with James, asking to have a look at a fancy new car, she cannot help herself but involve a baffled salesman in her tongue-in-cheek performance. James is her secret password into the surface world - polished enough to counterbalance her fetishistic image, deviant enough to derive satisfaction from her secret eager hand. *“I’m caught,” she says bashfully, playing the victim, playing into the notion that the disabled are to be pitied and doted on, playing the damsel in distress.*<sup>12</sup> Later, in a car (as we return to the

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<sup>10</sup> Beard, op.cit., p. 388.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 413.

<sup>12</sup> Violet Lucca, David Cronenberg: Clinical Trials. (New York, Abrams, 2024), p. 133.

nameless, timeless setting of sprawling machinery), she exposes her ridiculous new orifice, a strategically situated third labium on the back of her thigh, for James to fuck from behind. The backstory of her disability is never expanded upon, nor does it beckon the question of who she was before she joined the group. She is simply accepted as she is, with her pigtail braids and makeshift cigarette compartment in her leg brace; though James is briefly shown photos of her accident, there is no further enquiry into her past. It is clear she has embraced abjection and tailored its consequences to represent her needs.

Helen Remington serves as her opposite: a cold, guarded woman with an elegant demeanour, whose desire seems to come from a place of intellectual curiosity when we first meet her. Crashes fascinate her aesthetically, and it is she who introduces James to Vaughan's show. For James, she becomes a point of entry into the group - her sharp bob and formal attire do not match the posse's dishevelled look, but it is her disregard for her marriage and her status as a widow that interest James when he is most accustomed to the easy pleasure of adultery. Helen approaches abjection clinically, as if conducting an experiment on herself, emotionally detached and callous. We only catch a glimpse of her attitude softening when the group watches a tape together; she is so transfixed that even as she is touching both James and Gabrielle her eyes are still glued to the video source.

Catherine's behaviour is perhaps the best example of a fragile creature bursting at the seams with the desire to be set free from her condition. She is dependent on her submissiveness yet longs to escape it; her gaze is always elsewhere, seemingly unconcerned with whatever it is the present has to offer, at once desperately hoping for something to snap her out of it, to obliterate her perfect form and transform her into an object of desire. *"But behind it - and it is difficult to describe why or how one forms this idea - there seems a great reserve of desolation, an oppressed remnant of human feeling encased in layers of numbness and emotionally starved inertia. One sees this finally emerging, forced out bit by bit under pressure, in the astonishing sex scenes later in the film with Vaughan and with James. It is the suggestion of this underlying misery that prevents her deliberate transgressiveness of words and behaviour from rendering her cruelly inhuman. Nevertheless, the initial impression especially is of a lacquered insentient beauty, a sex-object and sex-subject of fabulous technical refinement."*<sup>13</sup>

This is why she lets Vaughan bruise her - not for her own enjoyment, but for the enjoyment of her husband, who may begin to desire her in her newfound ugliness, and who

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<sup>13</sup> Beard, op.cit., p. 397.

may appreciate her willingness to join him on the road to abjection. For a being so immaculate, the only possible release is a mangled, violent death, an accident so extreme that nothing usable remains of her model body, a complete return to decay where the inside is finally exposed. Her plight calls to mind Laura Palmer's fate in *Twin Peaks*; after uncovering brutal facts about her ongoing spiritual and physical torture, it is suggested that even if she hadn't killed herself, she may have chosen to die: "*Perhaps she allowed herself to be killed.*" However, as it is later revealed in *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* (dir. David Lynch, 1992), Laura Palmer had come much closer to abjection in discovering that the evil spirit Bob, who had been assaulting her for years, had been an extension of her father all along.<sup>14</sup> Though her subconscious had tried to avoid the truth, once faced with it, her only escape was death, so that she (in her physical body) might never have to face abjection again. Similarly, though Catherine is never an agent, always on the receiving end, she happily complies with what is projected onto her. In the final scene, as she sees James approaching in Vaughan's patched-up Lincoln, she unbuckles her seatbelt, signalling her wish to have her own crash. "*The annihilation of the self and the resurrection of the body, to die in pain and to painfully return from death, is the sacred drama of the Sadeian orgasm.*"<sup>15</sup>

When her Miata swerves off the road, she survives largely unscathed; this is greatly unsatisfactory as she is once again just out of reach of total self-annihilation. Echoing his early words, James tenderly whispers, "*Maybe next time, darling. Maybe next time.*" - referring now to their failure to share in the ultimate crash, and ultimately, to his own failure in killing her. "*And on a purely iconic level, it leaves them both still beautiful, still frozen-faced, still rear-coupling. In the end, we must say again that the descent to abjection does not succeed. It does not transform the protagonist(s) utterly, it does not swallow and obliterate them; it leaves them alive and unfulfilled, not really so far from where they started.*"<sup>16</sup> The difference is that now that they have been exposed to the perverted pleasures of abjection, there is no turning back. Like Vaughan, their curiosity will certainly lead them towards death, as that is the only possible endpoint on the road to extenuating abjection. By ending their story with this failed crash, Cronenberg once again keeps gratification at arm's length from the viewer, refusing to frame it as a cautionary tale and rather leaving us to steep in a conflicting feeling of both fascination and dread.

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<sup>14</sup> It is important to mention here that Kristeva views the father as that against which the self, the subject is constituted, and it is he who represents the world of convention, of bodily integrity.

<sup>15</sup> Carter, op.cit., p. 150.

<sup>16</sup> Beard, op.cit., p. 415.

Catherine's longing for self-destruction is a perverse parallel of the religious discipline of mortification of the flesh. In the Middle Ages ascetics would deny themselves worldly pleasures to the point of absurd voluntary suffering, whipping themselves, fasting to the point of starvation, sleeping on cold, hard surfaces and welcoming torture as a gateway to martyrdom. Their purpose was to share in Christ's suffering, recognising the flesh as the vessel for sin, thus achieving penance through punishment of the body. The soul is the carrier of faith, but the soul will never know God's perfection as long as it is bound to sinful flesh. Saint Catherine of Siena was one of few who claimed to have received the stigmata - Christ's wounds on the cross - and though hers were invisible, they caused great suffering. She is reported to have drunk ooze from a woman's cancerous breast and would later in life be overcome with an inability to eat or drink, condition which ended her life and secured her canonisation. Even if under a different guise, I would argue that the practice of mortification of the flesh is still a practice of embracing abjection; the subject is a stand-in for the body of Christ, and just as Christ touched the leper and allowed Himself to be crucified, so must the faithful overcome reminders of their own mortality so that they might gain access to the ultimate diffusion of self, returning to the primordial status of being one with God.

Though it is not in the name of God that Catherine Ballard welcomes defilement, the reasoning remains the same: if the body cannot be pure, it must be perverted. What people of her time venerate is mechanical precision, beautiful architecture and efficient aerodynamics, features inaccessible to man's erratic physiology. Outwardly, she is close to doll-like smoothness, but this does not grant her spiritual perfection nor the attention of her husband. And thus begins her journey into sexual self-flagellation. *"There is no glory in this suffering; it is not an ode: it opens up only onto idiocy. Debility is that ground, a permanent one with Celine, where "intimate" suffering, both physical and psychic, joins with sexual excesses."*<sup>17</sup> Her presence on screen does evoke a sense of Christian symbolism; her face is often framed looking up or away as if searching for a higher power, and by contrast to Helen Remington and Gabrielle, who exercise some form of desire, she is akin to a martyr who will accept anything done unto her in the name of her faith - this, of course, being the desire to be desired. Regarding her graphic coupling with Vaughan, Lucca observes that *"the placement of the semen, like wounds themselves, is suggestive of stigmata: Catherine and James are forgiven,*

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<sup>17</sup> Kristeva, op.cit., p. 147.

healed, and reborn through this brutalizing act of cuckoldry. Scarification, branding, and other types of intentionally inflicted harm are often part of religious or coming-of-age rites.”<sup>18</sup>

*Crash* is a decisively male approach on the relationship with the body. That is not to say that it is inherently objectifying women, but rather having them complacent in objectification without assigning a moral value to their acts. Further down the line, the New French Extremity would welcome important additions to this subject, some of which benefit from female perspectives - that is to say, instances in which female characters gain agency over their bodies rather than being subjected to torture, to things simply *happening* to them.

*In My Skin* (dir. Marina de Van, 2002) follows a successful young woman who begins using her flesh as a mechanism of defiance. She cuts into her flesh and eats pieces of her skin to the horror and dismay of her partner, who is revolted at the thought she would do anything to take away from her beauty. Her impulse is driven by a desire to eliminate belonging to the external - to male figures and ultimately to the societal standard imposed on her by her status. What is of note is that the cinematography does not exploit her for shock value, but rather creates a surprisingly intimate portrayal of a woman seeking refuge within her own flesh. Her self-harm is delicate; she takes great care of the thin strips of skin and seeks to preserve them, and though her acts see her descending into a mutilated animal, she becomes increasingly disinterested in her body as an object to be presented to the world for judgement, rather focusing on her closeness with herself, further eliminating any external gaze. “*In her private world of self-cannibalism, she lives by impulse, cutting her skin, eating portions, and discovering a new and tender intimacy with herself as she hugs her body to herself. By incorporating parts of herself—in acts of extreme self-mutilation—she exists in a relationship of total oneness with herself.*”<sup>19</sup> Esther is an agent of her own destruction, and what guides her is not the desire for closeness to God, but the desire for closeness with her own spirit - the only thing which cannot be claimed by those around her. Thus she gives in to abjection, paradoxically for her own survival.

Another example of abjection as a means of survival is *Raw* (dir. Julia Ducournau, 2016). Aspiring veterinarian Justine discovers a newfound craving for human flesh after a lifetime of vegetarianism. Her desire mirrors any young adult’s journey in sexual discovery,

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<sup>18</sup> Lucca, op.cit., p. 134.

<sup>19</sup> Barbara Creed, *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine*. (New York, Routledge, 2022), p. 129.

with initial shock and clumsiness ultimately giving way to acceptance. But there is nothing of the gendered hierarchy of sex in her passion: “As she enters the dark night of abjection, tearing down the prohibitions placed on her, surrendering to her bloody appetites while devouring her victims, the female cannibal undermines the patriarchal order of law and language. In particular, she undermines the principle of bodily integrity which is so central to the definition of what it means to be male and human.”<sup>20</sup> The female cannibal evens the playing field of patriarchy, stripping her male victims of bodily autonomy in a manner which had been previously exclusive only to other men. Justine shares this condition with her mother and sister, reason for which she had been brought up as a vegetarian. This reveals a matriarchal family dynamic, where the father is forced to comply with his wife and daughters’ hunger for human flesh, symbolically dethroned from his position as head of the family and unable to control their urges. Symbolically, cannibalism is its own form of bodily autonomy, even as it imposes over the integrity of others; in Justine, it is a physical requirement which needs to be met. Abjection once again becomes a tool for survival.

*Trouble Every Day* (dir. Claire Denis, 2001) follows the same condition of the female cannibal, though from a male-driven narrative. Coré, wife of dr. Sémeneau, suffers from an illness which causes her to thirst for flesh. This has seen her locked up away from the world as he struggles to find a cure. Whenever she does break free, she finds victims with which she engages in violent sex before ripping them apart and consuming them. Her husband obediently disposes of the bodies and cleans her up before reinforcing her cage. Lust is once more transformed into violence as an uncontrollable urge, now targeted at the white male in an unconscious act of symbolic clean-up. Barbara Creed remarks, “*inadvertently she is attacking the ‘Great Society’ and all it represents. Coré’s revolt is feminist in that it presents a terrifying face of the monstrous-feminine who on her journey into the dark night of abjection rips apart civilisation’s patriarchal mores and racist values.*”<sup>21</sup>

What is of note is that all aforementioned examples lack the shock value expected of their themes. Marina de Van’s approach is intimate and tender, choosing always to connect to her protagonist through an understanding lens, never exploiting her journey to oneness with herself as that would fall in agreement with the external figures which she longs to escape from. Julia Ducournau portrays Justine’s discovery of her inherited condition as a coming-of-age story rather than a horror film. And Claire Denis, as per her

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 128.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 134.

poetic legacy, affords Coré humanity when she paints with the blood of her victims; even in her state, she is interested in creation and taken care of by her husband. In illustrating the different forms abjection can take, these filmmakers have tapped into hypotheses of otherness as symbols for self-fulfilment.

## II - delayed climax and teleshopping modernism

Just as Cronenberg denies James and Catherine their full descent into abjection, the audience is denied pleasure at every step. For the abundance of sexual couplings, it is jarring that not a single one is concerned with intimacy and therefore not conducive to arousal but strained curiosity at best. Indeed, in this sleek 70-page script the myriad of sex scenes are not marketable intermissions - otherwise easily removed from the grand narrative - but sequences crucial for character development. Paradoxically, we learn more about the Ballards' will to abjection *only* through their sexual impulses. This is not a byproduct of adapting the book, which was originally set in a futuristic if not atemporal London, but a deliberate choice in line with the industrial and technological developments of the 1990s.

Baudrillard prophetically remarks, "*only the doubling, the unfolding of the visual medium in the second degree can produce the fusion of technology, sex, and death.*"<sup>22</sup>, and though he is referring to Vaughan's dossier of accident photography in *Crash* the novel, the same applies to Cronenberg's film if not at a greater extent; the medium *is* the project. By witnessing Vaughan's group engage in their crashes and their sexual acts, we become *part* of it, taking Vaughan's place as voyeurs and curators of these experiences. We might not be willing participants, and we certainly cannot gather any fulfilment from the footage, as Cronenberg has made sure to sterilise the image of any possibility of emotion or intimacy, but we are still entrenched in their games for the duration of the picture, like Vaughan's reenactment crash spectators that scurry away when the police arrive.

The brutality and gruesomeness of each sexual interaction are elegantly contrasted by the precise camerawork, as if to say defilement cannot triumph over the minimalist beauty of its medium. It is a clean microscope under which we observe something akin to an infected, mutated germ of a creature begging to be killed. "*To invest virtually the whole look of the film with what in previous films had been identified with a condition of emotional dessication, a pathology of emptiness, is to regard the dualist battle between over-repression and over-liberation firmly from one side of the divide. That is, the film itself cannot escape from the cold grip of its own high-modernist aesthetic no matter how much it might intellectually admire, or even*

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<sup>22</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*. (Michigan, University of Michigan Press, 2010), p. 117.

hopelessly yearn for, the messy unrepression of crashes and their uglified spokesman Vaughan. The transgressive heat of all the crashes and all the sexual couplings in the film is not enough to raise the temperature significantly.”<sup>23</sup> Catherine’s perfect body exposed nonchalantly on their balcony while she gazes out to the hundreds of cars below is a studio postcard, a frame so clean it understates her desire and becomes representative of their useless struggle to break free from their perfect mould.

But Cronenberg does not make use of elegant camerawork merely to juxtapose its messy narratives. He has not given up his preference for form nor his aspiration to aesthetics. He has not entered James and Catherine’s contract, and neither have we. “*The film’s power to disturb lies in its apparent coolness, its refusal to get too excited. When so much of contemporary cinema is in a permanent state of premature ejaculation over nothing, Crash gives us every reason to boil over, but continually chills the blood. Unable to seek refuge in the delirium of a fever, the viewer is therefore consigned to an unsettling state of total awareness in the face of delirious behaviour.*”<sup>24</sup> By forcing the audience to detach emotionally, to witness self-destruction from the comfortable seat of the cinema, he has mirrored not only his own resignation to ambiguity, but ours too: we are content with appreciating the story and its characters from a safe distance, seeking in them symbols as if regarding a beautiful Christian painting. It is surprisingly easy to forget the unorthodox nature of the acts portrayed, and that is the point Cronenberg is trying to make: complacency and desensitisation have become so common in the visual media of our age that we are willing to consume endlessly that which is manicured enough to soothe our pattern-seeking brains.

The frames carry something of Malick’s existentialism, where the vast concrete landscape of the highway leaves space for us to reflect, and to assign reflection to James and Catherine, as if they are not the subject, instead joining us in an abstract voyeurism of nothingness. They may as well not be present at all, and we’d be left with a tongue-in-cheek *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982), whose title might as well serve as a subheading for *Crash*. But where *Koyaanisqatsi* uses refined imagery of endless highways coupled with intimate shots of the people inhabiting this gigantic world, *Crash* further distances its viewers by merging its subjects with their environment. Take, for example, the shot of James in the car coming home from the hospital. Traditionally, in order to immerse the audience into James’

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<sup>23</sup> Beard, op.cit., p. 418.

<sup>24</sup> David Cronenberg and Chris Rodley, *Cronenberg on Cronenberg*. (London, Faber and Faber, 1997), p. 189.

pensive, post-crash state, a close-up from inside the car would have been called for; Cronenberg chooses instead to dramatically distance the camera from him, reaching an exterior high angle which seems to trap him inside the car, as though from the point of view of a CCTV unit. *“It is a completely 'unnatural' angle, its rigidity of composition strongly contrasted with the movement of the car down the road and its modernist 'artiness' further emphasized by the reflective surface of the window behind which James sits. It is an altogether striking image because of its insistence on pursuing something other than narrative utility and because of its severe, abstract beauty.”*<sup>25</sup> But what exactly do I mean by referring to Suschitzky's cinematography as *teleshopping modernism*?

Modernism, as understood in photography, has encompassed compositions moving away from imitating paintings and towards capturing the world as it is - or as it was between the 1910s and 1960s. Images often focused on industrial machinery, using sharp focus and high contrast, thus creating abstract, often geometric landscapes with clear straight lines and proportions. Embellishments would often come from the choice of framing, that is, from the form rather than its content. Photographers would use unconventional angles and extreme close-ups to convey pictures better reflecting the reality of a changing environment. The development of industry was the primary catalyst for this movement, and it seems only fitting that Cronenberg would implement certain elements in a picture that is so dependent on the visual vastness of technology. However, given the violent and sexual content of the script, it would have certainly been easier for Suschitzky to shoot it as an action film, with massive collisions, explosions and over-the-top sex scenes.

But that is what neither director nor cinematographer looked for; Cronenberg declared, *“We did no slow-motion shooting; everything was done at 24 frames, and it was a very deliberate choice. Two of the most photographed things in movie history are sex and cars. For reasons of both personal ego and cinematic tone, I wanted to shoot those things in a way that no one had ever seen, but not in a spectacular way. This required us to make many small aesthetic choices, such as mounting the cameras on the cars just off the normal axis, or splitting the frame with the guy driving the car on the left and the roadway on the right.”*<sup>26</sup> And these choices were not forced by the film's humble - as compared to other Cronenberg pictures, but more importantly, to Hollywood pictures generally - budget, but rather made in line with the philosophy of its

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<sup>25</sup> Beard, op.cit., p. 417.

<sup>26</sup> Stephen Pizzello, “*Crash: Driver's Side*”. *American Cinematographer*. (Vol 78, April 1997)

characters. Visual media had already been overrun with pornography, ranging from soft, family friendly adverts on billboards to hardcore orgies to be loaned from any video shop; no use catering to this already desensitised audience. No use milking eroticism for engagement, especially not when said eroticism is a result of unorthodox paraphilias. The viewer is then destined to watch *Crash* unimpressed, consuming it in the same manner he would consume late night talk shows or nonstop teleshopping. It is something beautiful to look at and easy to follow, but it fails to culminate in arousal given the lethargy of its characters.

*“The value of Crash the film is easy to overlook. It belongs to its own time, not to Ballard’s 60s. It belongs to a climate of pre-millennial boredom. It’s a novella of the last days. (...) Post-surveillance anti-drama. The death of excitement. A riposte to Hollywood’s mega-budget prostitution of the senses. We have to learn to endure boredom to the point where egoless enlightenment can be achieved.”*<sup>27</sup>

Upon release *Crash* caused widespread controversy, much like its literary source, with critics deeming it exploitative in nature if not downright dangerous for audiences. As per the conservative tradition of the United States, viewers were warned it might prompt teenagers to engage in dangerous driving and encourage possible copycats to create their own masochistic car fetish cults. In Cannes, Francis Ford Coppola - who was the president of the jury at the time - blatantly opposed its selection for an award, quoting its explicit sexual violence. The film did, however, go on to receive the Special Jury Prize. And as for the accusation of exploitation - this concern certainly requires a misinterpretation of the movie. Not once is queerness made the object of ridicule, nor are polyamory or disability. In fact, the only otherness Cronenberg dwells on is that of the car crash, and in doing so, it only revels in its infinite erotic possibilities.

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<sup>27</sup> Iain Sinclair, *Crash*. (London, British Film Institute, 1999), p. 57

## Conclusion

Abjection has been widely used by scholars as a framework against which to examine horror films. Barbara Creed was among the first to tackle Kristeva's concept in depth in her 1993 book "The Monstrous-Feminine", focusing on the portrayal of women as perpetrators rather than victims in a genre that had long been dominated by figures of monstrous men. She would further expand on this in "Return of the Monstrous-Feminine", this time broadening the scope of her research to include films which do not neatly fit in the horror genre as we know it. When reading works on *Crash*, I found many academics to be using Kristeva's definition as a given starting point through which to interpret the picture. Though most of David Cronenberg's body of work deals with abjection, *Crash* stood out to me because of the voluntary approach its diverse characters take in exploring this concept. What was more important to me, however, was the dichotomy I found in Catherine Ballard: she at once longs to become an abject figure and fears becoming an agent herself. Thus, she cannot be positioned neither as victim nor as antagonist; and in the matter-of-fact sense of the word, there *are* no antagonists in *Crash*. I have thus endeavoured to explore the complicated relationship one might have with approaching abjection.

Unlike Kristeva, who recognises the necessity of abjection in the development of the self but deems it an unavoidable, recurring fact of life, I have argued that the decision of the subject to submit to abjection holds powerful opportunities in and of itself. This sudden, if not seemingly useless bestowal of agency is what gives the subject a sense of control over an otherwise uncontrollable event. My flesh will decay - I might as well cut it open myself. This radical acceptance, reactionary as it may seem, holds in it something of the old religions, reason for which many of the characters previously discussed bear symbolic resemblance to ancient figures. The limbo in which Catherine Ballard finds herself - ready to surrender to abjection but unable to take the necessary steps herself - is one I, too, find myself in sometimes. As such, this is something I would like to explore further within my own filmmaking practice.

I am drawn to films which question our standard of perception, stories without clear heroes and villains, where characters are just as flawed as we are. I believe body horror as a genre still has very much to offer, and I plan on discovering where it might take me in my future works. Cronenberg has often chosen a minimalist visual approach, one

that does not exploit its subjects but merely shows them as they are; his works are noteworthy examples of a filmmaker aware of the line between shock and value in horror, never giving in to exploitation for the sake of easy gratification.

This study has proved that meaningful insights can be gained from an analysis of abjection and our capacity to be open to experiencing it. Though it may seem that the ultimate trajectory of abjection leads to death, I have argued that we might find a fulfilling balance between that which is revolting and that which fascinates us. Through my unpacking of the underlying themes of *Crash*, as well as my reflection on its inventive, dialled-down cinematography, I hope I have clarified why this picture is so important in our understanding of abjection.

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