

Ways in which art that explores bodily functions creates feelings of anxiety and abjection in the audience, and why viewing this art is an uncomfortable experience.

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Abstract

To each ego its object, to each superego its abject.

- "Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection" by Julia Kristeva

This essay draws connections between the formation of one's ego and identity, the objectification of women, and feelings of anxiety and abjection prompted by the way female bodies - and female bodily functions - are presented in art, in particular art which causes laughter. It will focus on theories explaining why presentations of women in art which resist cultural norms can also create anxiety in the audience. The social customs surrounding bodily functions, and in particular the repression of conversation about them, will be analysed with reference to psychoanalysts such as Julia Kristeva, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, and Laura Mulvey, as well as the concept of anxiety as explored by Søren Kierkegaard. Also considered will be Bataille's theories of the 'accursed share' and 'unproductive expenditure' with reference to the social body and its waste, as well as the individual body.

The investigation of these theories will mainly consider *Work no. 660 (Shit Film)* (2007) by Martin Creed, and some of Marina Abramović's performances, including *Rhythm 0* (1974), *Breathing In Breathing Out* (1977), *Cleaning the House* (1996) and *Cleaning the Mirror I* (1995).

At the core of this essay will be an analysis of abjection, as defined by Julia Kristeva, in relation to these artworks. This analysis will show that works by Creed and Abramović create feelings of abjection in the audience by demystifying the female body in a way which could be interpreted as a threat to one's sense of self, but also by presenting women in ways they would not normally be seen; as subjects, rather than objects. This rejects and resists the way in which women are commonly represented in our patriarchal society. It also argues that the presentation of female bodily functions is frightening precisely because of their taboo nature, and that these things must only be seen or talked about if they are being fetishised for male consumption.

Bodily functions such as defecating and menstruating are explored in relation to humour in the essay's discussion of 'sick jokes', and Freudian ideas of humour as a defence mechanism against threats to the stability of a person's ego.

This dissertation suggests that the sight of bodily functions, in particular those of women, cause abjection in the audience because they contradict most viewers' ideas of how women should be presented - as clean, pure beings, rather than as monstrous and abject. Not seeing this in art when one has come to expect to see it represents an attack on the viewers' ideas of their own identity.

Ways in which art that explores bodily functions creates feelings of anxiety and abjection in the audience, and why viewing this art is an uncomfortable experience.

The human body in art, and in particular the female body, can be a source of tension and anxiety which is commonly expressed in the audience as either laughter or disgust.

In Martin Creed's *Work no. 660 (Shit Film)* (2007), exhibited recently at the Hayward Gallery, the viewer sees a young Asian woman squat in an empty white space, lift up her dress, and defecate. This video, along with two others of a man and a woman making themselves vomit, was displayed in the last room of Creed's exhibition, *What's the point of it?*, which the viewer *had* to pass through in order to exit the exhibition.

Many video installations are displayed on small screens on plinths with individual sets of headphones, so that watching them is optional, and also a private act, much like going to the toilet. Instead, *Shit Film* was projected onto the back wall of a large room, which made viewing it a shared public experience. This meant that watching a woman shit was even more uncomfortable, as it was completely unavoidable and experienced while in the company of complete strangers. This disjunctive synthesis¹ between public environment and private act opened up a space where the audience reacted either by laughing hysterically or by leaving the room in disgust.

Creed's video creates anxiety in the audience by employing humour as a tool – something which is universal to all people, just like the act of defecation. Members of the audience laughed more, or became more disgusted when they realised they were laughing at something taboo, which should not be laughed at or talked about in polite society. They then tried to suppress the laughter, which only seemed to cause it to become more hysterical. Although different people have different ideas about what it is acceptable to joke about, because humour is subjective, everyone in the audience is aware of the cultural norms and social conventions surrounding shit, and the humorous nature of the act of shitting in Creed's video “makes explicit the

¹ Adrian Parr, *The Deleuze Dictionary: Revised Edition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 79.

enormous commonality that is implicit in our social life.”² For the joke to be funny, everyone has to be in on it, which would not be possible if the video was intended to be viewed privately.

The video takes an ordinary, everyday act and turns it into a spectacle. It is funny to see something so mundane, that we all do, made into a kind of perverted attraction in an art gallery. The video is humorous because it is situated in a place where one expects to view ‘high art’, or at least artworks which are deemed culturally and historically significant – and perhaps in most people’s minds, documenting the act of taking a shit is not culturally significant and does not warrant being displayed in an art gallery. Again, this illustrates that the video is funny, and produces laughter, because it juxtaposes two very different things: the setting and presentation of the video (a place where we expect to see ‘good art’) and the content of the video (an act not conventionally seen as ‘good art’), as well as the distinction between public setting and private act. Art which features bodily functions is often seen as humorous or anxiety-inducing because it confounds our expectations of art. *Shit Film* in particular exploits its dichotomous nature to challenge the audience’s expectations of the presentation of the female body in art.

Creed’s *Shit Film* creates an environment where cultural norms can be ignored, and where there is a temporary break in society’s repression of conversations about our bodily functions. Seeing the video with a group of strangers prompted conversations within the audience about bodily functions – not something one would usually talk about; especially not in public, or with strangers. This resulted in feelings of openness, togetherness and a sense of participation, which *should* be a pleasant thing; only this relationship with the other people in the room is turned on its head, and made into a thoroughly awkward experience when you are forced to remember that you shit, and so does everyone else in the room.

We like to pretend we don’t shit, because although it is something everybody does, we are taught from an early age that it is disgusting and must not be talked about. We are constantly trying to distance ourselves from our bodies, and are amused when reminded of its functions in such an obvious way. “I produce a

² Simon Critchley, *On Humour*, (London: Routledge, 2002), 9.

surplus of energy in laughter to cope with my inhibition when repressed unconscious material threatens to force its way through into consciousness.”³ Our collective unwillingness to discuss our bodily functions is the “commonality” Critchley writes about; Creed’s video reminds us of our awareness of the taboo surrounding shit to create laughter. In addition, “humour functions by exploiting the gap between being a body and having a body.”⁴ The subjects we see ourselves as (the bodies we *are*) are reduced to objects (bodies we *have*) in a process of abjection, defined by Julia Kristeva in “Powers of Horror” as a feeling one experiences when presented with something “I permanently thrust aside in order to live,”⁵ such as shit. Our bodies are objectified by the video - they become the body being presented to us in the video, and this creates feelings of abjection. Everyone watching *Shit Film* is aware of how it feels to shit and so the reaction to watching these acts is a bodily one as members of the audience recall personal experiences.

“The succession of tension by relief in humour is an essentially bodily affair. That is, the joke invites a corporeal response... Laughter is a muscular phenomenon, consisting of spasmodic contraction and relaxation of the facial muscles with corresponding movements in the diaphragm.”⁶ Critchley also describes laughter as an explosive loss of self-control, and compares this to other “moments of radical corporeal exposure”⁷ such as orgasms and uncontrollable crying. Such explosive laughter could be said to be a rupture of the barrier between a person and their body – the body takes over its person in an uncontrollable way, whereas usually people like to present themselves to others as being in control. This embarrassment at being seen laughing at something as taboo as shit is potentially what makes the laughter more hysterical. *Shit Film*, at the same time as reminding the audience of the boundary (or lack of) between being and having a body, and between subject and object, makes them laugh in such a way that it is easily transgressed.

³ Critchley, 75.

⁴ Critchley, 43.

⁵ Julia Kristeva and Leon S. Roudiez. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 2.

⁶ Critchley, 7-8.

⁷ Critchley, 8.

Shit Film also creates anxiety by making us laugh, but then subverting our expectations and attitudes towards ourselves: reminding us that we all shit, so we can no longer laugh at the woman in the video. This is abjection – the horror one feels when there is a collapse between self and other, and between subject and object.

This horror can be expressed as laughter, or joking. “Laughter is the sign of aversion, of horror. Laughter is the compromise attitude man adopts when confronted by something whose appearance repels him.”⁸ Shit is a part of our bodies, but at the same time separate from them, and it is something our bodies reject in order to keep working properly. “Polluting objects”⁹ such as faecal matter, urine, menstrual blood and other bodily fluids represent a threat to our idea of what we are like - “the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death.”¹⁰ Not only does the video create feelings of abjection within the audience, but the image of a woman shitting is, in itself, an abject one.

Shit, as Kristeva points out, does not respect the boundaries of our egos – it is something we are constantly trying to escape, but cannot, because it is a part of us. Shit, and other bodily fluids, are fundamentally opposed to one’s sense of self and the *I* - “it is something rejected from which one does not part.”¹¹ Feelings of abjection are often coupled with fascination, which then lead to feelings of shame – we fear and repress the abject and its threat to our sense of self, but we also identify with it, because “what is repressed cannot really be held down.”¹² We are drawn to the abject because without it we would have no way of understanding ourselves as subjects in the symbolic order. In order to deny the abject, we first have to recognise that it is a part of ourselves from which we cannot escape. Faecal matter, and other matter that exits the body gives rise to abjection, but this is necessary to a person’s development of a clean, pure self.

Kristeva’s psychoanalytical perspective suggests that an individual’s first experience of abjection is at the point of being separated from the body of the mother

⁸ Georges Bataille, “Madame Edwarda”, in *The Bataille Reader*, eds. Fred Botting & Scott Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 224.

⁹ Kristeva, 71.

¹⁰ Kristeva, 71.

¹¹ Kristeva, 4.

¹² Kristeva, 13.

and entering the symbolic realm - in order to become a subject, one must violently break away from the mother. Female bodies are often configured as abject and 'othered'. She suggests that this is because of a fear of female "generative power"¹³ and "the prohibition placed on the maternal body (as a defense against autoeroticism and incest taboo)."¹⁴ The body of the mother must be abjected and constantly rejected in order for an individual to form an identity and find their position within the symbolic order, despite the fact that a person will always have a connection with their mother's body. The constant rejection of the abject only serves to affirm its existence and the threat it poses to the boundaries of one's identity. The abject nature of female bodies and the denial of female subjectivity is perhaps why the performer in *Shit Film* is seen as so monstrous and disgusting. "That other sex, the feminine, becomes synonymous with a radical evil that is to be suppressed."¹⁵

However, for Kristeva, the corpse was the ultimate abject object - an ex-subject symbolising suffering, pain, decay and defilement, and inducing a reaction of horror because it reminds us of the finite nature of our lives and our materiality. Abjection occurs when one encounters an object which has been rejected the symbolic order and by socio-cultural norms - such as faecal matter - and seeing it elicits a collapse in meaning when the subject/object boundary is broken. This is what happens when the viewer sees the performer in Creed's video shitting - the viewers suffer a loss of ego, and become the subject of the video when they see someone doing something they do every day. We like to pretend we *have* bodies, rather than acknowledging that we *are* bodies, so when confronted with the uncomfortable truth that we are just like all the other bodies in the room, we experience abjection, because our idea of ourselves as unique, clean, pure beings is contradicted. "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."¹⁶ In this sense, identity, system and order are a person's ego, and its fundamental denial of the abject.

¹³ Kristeva, 77.

¹⁴ Kristeva, 14.

¹⁵ Kristeva, 70.

¹⁶ Kristeva, 4.

Laughter at sick jokes also works in this way; we laugh at them more because we know we should not. Cracking jokes is a nervous reaction to our surroundings when they threaten us or the stability of our egos. "Nothing is so sacred, so taboo, or so disgusting that it cannot be the subject of humour. Indeed, it is precisely those topics culturally defined as sacred, taboo, or disgusting that tend to provide the principal grist for humour mills."¹⁷ Alan Dundes uses quadriplegic jokes as an example of this defence mechanism against abjection, abject objects, and the unknown. Although it is considered taboo to joke about disability in a time where disabled people are fighting for access, inclusion and visibility in a predominantly able-bodied society, jokes and humour provide a more socially acceptable medium through which to express feelings of guilt or aggression to marginalised or under-represented groups such as disabled people, but also people of colour, LGBT+ people, and women. This relates to the way that these groups are often coded as abject, or something to be feared and rejected.

Dundes explains that able-bodied people may not know how to address disabled people, or talk about disability, and may experience some guilt or embarrassment at being able-bodied when meeting a quadriplegic person, for example. In this sense, jokes about disabled people and disability function as an expression of discomfort or irritation at having to accommodate people with disabilities, and also a way of relieving tension in an awkward situation. Perhaps it could also be argued that such jokes spring from fear, or asserting and affirming one's dominance and privilege over disabled people. "No-one likes to be reminded of human fragility and frailty,"¹⁸ so jokes are a way to relieve the fear one might experience when being reminded of these things. It could be argued that jokes about disability have emerged as a way of dealing with the feelings (of abjection) which able-bodied people experience when seeing disabled people in the public sphere, and being reminded that it is entirely possible for able-bodied people to become disabled (by losing limbs, through degenerative diseases and so on). This kind of humour does not necessarily function as an escape from reality, as self-deprecating

¹⁷ Alan Dundes, *Cracking Jokes: Studies of Sick Humor Cycles and Stereotypes*, (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1987), 19.

¹⁸ Dundes, 18.

humour might, for example, but operates instead as a way to deal with harsh, frightening realities – the realities of our own materiality and frailty.

Dundes goes on to write about racist jokes and, in particular, Auschwitz jokes. Such jokes seem to contain an aggressive element, but also involve overwhelming anxiety about oppression, death and dying – things which we are all scared of. “These jokes may be a form of bravado – a kind of necessary defence mechanism – designed to articulate genuine fears and at the same time partly allay terror through humour.”¹⁹ Freudian approaches to humour and jokes support the idea that humour is a release, and that laughter is a letting go of excess nervous energy when confronted with something abject, which represents a threat to the ego, such as *Shit Film*. Laughter is a bodily reaction to these things when one feels threatened. Laughing at the oppression of marginalised groups who have been ‘othered’ by the society we live in, and its conventions, could also be seen as a defence mechanism, because the joke offers a kind of insight into what it might be like to be on the receiving end of such oppression. For example, it could be argued that jokes about feminism and women’s rights movements are told at the expense of these groups as a knee-jerk reaction to being forced to reconsider one’s privileges in a society where women are still denied many basic rights, purely on the basis of their gender – and the same goes for other under-privileged groups. Jokes about feminism may come from an anxiety that your rights might be infringed upon in the same way women’s rights frequently are, and a fear that you might also be laughed at in the same way you laugh at women and the sexist jokes aimed at them.

Rod A. Martin, in “The Psychology of Humour: An Integrative Approach” cites Charles Gruner when writing about aggression in humour. In jokes, there is always a winner and a loser, especially in jokes where there are put-downs, derision and degradation. People use wit to express prejudice and make other people, for example, disabled people or gay people, feel inferior for resisting cultural norms and social conventions and asking for changes in the way they are perceived. Gruner thought that all jokes contained some aggression; even seemingly innocuous riddles and puns that involve word-play, as they can be seen as ways of ‘beating’

¹⁹ Dundes, 19.

your opponent in conversation and affirming your superiority and intelligence. He also argued that aggression was present even in light slapstick comedy and practical jokes, because although they differ from 'sick' jokes in content and language, they are still based around the idea of a contest, with winners and losers. Being able to understand a joke you are being told "gives the listener a feeling of superiority and victory, presumably over hypothetical others who might not be able to understand it, perhaps due to their lower intelligence."²⁰ Thus, even scatological jokes and other apparently non-aggressive jokes are based on some sort of aggression.²¹

In addition, Alan Dundes discusses the emergence of what he calls 'joke cycles', and ties them to notable shifts in thinking over the last 60 years, such as the telling of anti-black jokes during the civil rights movement in America and the telling of sexist jokes and 'dead baby' jokes in response to feminism and current debate about abortion legislation. He points out that because of this link between humour and historical events, jokes cannot come from a "cultural vacuum"²² and that it is important to pay attention to what people are laughing at, and why, because this is an indicator of how society as a whole feels about certain topics. "As dreams provide essential outlets for the anxieties of the individual, so joke cycles serve a similar role for the society at large."²³ Freud also believed that jokes served as a defence mechanism in response to feelings of anxiety, and also as an outlet for deep-seated unconscious desires which would not normally be expressed, much in the same way that dreams function. It is also interesting to note that parts of the human body and its functions are often used as insults or swearwords – cunt, fuck, shit, piss, and arsehole, for instance. Perhaps these words are considered so revolting because of what they refer to, but also because they reveal our attitudes to our bodies – we consider these words insulting and taboo because they refer to things which remind us of the material and sometimes disgusting nature of our bodies, which we find it so hard to talk about.

²⁰ Rod A. Martin, *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach* (Burlington: Elsevier Academic Press, 2007), 46.

²¹ Martin, 46.

²² Dundes, 94.

²³ Dundes, 95.

The fact that the person in *Shit Film* is female is also significant, as talking about defecating and other bodily functions is considered a typically male act: it is taboo to talk openly about shit, but it is more controversial to do so if you are a woman. People like to pretend that women don't shit, because patriarchal society ignores woman's capacity to be disgusting, and expects women to live up to unachievable standards of beauty so that they look stereotypically feminine and sexually available to men at all times. When women choose to contradict this and reject patriarchal ideas of what women are or should be (think of the stereotype of feminists as butch women with hairy armpits) and talk openly about their bodily functions, society demonises them and 'others' them, because they are not considered socially acceptable. By presenting a woman in the act of defecation, Creed demystifies the female body and contradicts the presentation of women which is prevalent in the media today – thin, white, conventionally attractive, powerless, and presented as an object to be consumed by men. The feelings of vulnerability, anxiety and abjection which results from having one's body objectified by *Shit Film*, and watching it as part of a group, may be intensified by the fact that we are aware of the constant objectification of female bodies in the media. In a world so saturated with these images, which serve to naturalise and legitimise this demeaning attitude to women, it seems unnatural and frightening to be confronted by a presentation of a woman so unlike what we are used to seeing in the media.

In the introduction to her book "The Monstrous-Feminine", Barbara Creed discusses how female monsters are prevalent in horror films, but neglected in feminist writing about film, and that women are usually presented as victims of male monsters. However, she writes that "all human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject."²⁴ The female body has long been constructed as 'other' and something to be feared and controlled – in order to placate male fantasies about women, we must not talk openly about our terrifying, horrific and abject bodily functions (like shitting and menstruating – we may only talk about these topics if they are being sexualised for male pleasure) or we are seen as monstrous. Perhaps

²⁴ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, (London: Routledge, 1993), 1.

female monsters are scarier because they are female; it is unsettling when women are presented as the victimiser rather than the victim. Again, we are used to seeing women fulfilling the role of helpless victim, and when we come to expect to see a woman presented like this, but do not (like in *Shit Film*) it is shocking. Women in art were, historically, nearly always presented as objects of male desire through the lens of the male gaze, and female bodies were often romanticised and idealised to the point of being anatomically incorrect. In a field often dominated by discourse surrounding beauty, and what constitutes it, it is interesting to find a piece of artwork like *Shit Film*, which rejects the outdated idea that women must play the role of a beautiful and powerless object in an artwork.

In Laura Mulvey's essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", the author argues that the 'patriarchal unconscious' constructs female characters in film as victims who need to be rescued by male characters, and that not only is the act of looking itself pleasurable for male viewers, but that men may also derive pleasure from watching films because it reinforces their ego. The dominant patriarchal order configures women in mainstream film as weak and passive - to be looked at - whereas men are active, and do the looking. According to Mulvey, women in film are rarely, if ever, allowed their own personality or subjectivity. Women are used as objects in films to provide a pleasurable viewing experience for men, and even when they are not presented as overtly sexual, they are regarded as erotic subjects of male desire. She comments that Freud observed scopophilia (the pleasure of looking) in very young children and argues that young boys are taught to view women and their bodies as erotic objects from an early age, and that this is founded upon the natural curiosity displayed by children about the bodily functions and genitals of others. Scopophilia, Freud thought, was an important component of sexual development and helped to define a child's early ability to relate to other people and objects. Mulvey also argues that the fetishisation of women's bodies related to the psychoanalytic idea of castration anxiety.

Films, in particular conventional 'blockbuster' films, where there is a male protagonist who always saves the day and always gets the girl, reinforce and strengthen the male ego by allowing male viewers to identify with their ideal ego

on-screen. "Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning."²⁵ Women in films are therefore seen as nothing more than props, through which men can fantasise over their ideal identities.

Arguably, Creed's video creates anxiety and disgust by subverting traditional filmmaking conventions and presenting a woman in the act of doing something most viewers choose not to imagine a woman doing, because it contradicts their idea of how women should look and act. Instead of re-affirming the male ego, which is what most films are made to do, according to Mulvey, Creed's video does the opposite and causes members of the audience (both male and female) to experience feelings of abjection. Pornography, in a similar way to other kinds of film, caters to voyeuristic sexual instincts by allowing viewers to watch someone engage in sexual activities without having to interact with them directly, in such a way that their 'Ideal-I' is reinforced.

Lacanian psychoanalysis regarding the 'mirror stage' supports many of Mulvey's claims that cinema functions as a mirror of our patriarchal society. Lacan's writing on the mirror stage describes the moment at which young children are able to recognise their own image in a mirror as critical in the constitution of the "I" - a person's ego. "The *I* is precipitated in a primordial form before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as a subject."²⁶ The child's sense of self, and its identity, is affirmed by this experience well before it is able to define itself in relation other objects and people around it, much like the 'scopophilia' Freud observed in children. The image the child sees in the mirror is the "Ideal-I" - its idea of what it is like, or wants to be like - and Lacan suggested that after the mirror stage, a person will frustratingly forever be trying reconcile this ideal with reality, because they can

²⁵ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 15.

²⁶ Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience" in *Écrits, A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan. (London: Routledge, 2001), 503.

never live up to their Ideal-I. It could be said that the splitting of the ego that occurs when one looks in the mirror and realises, again, that the mirror-image and the self can never be one, results in feelings of abjection and anxiety. Abjection makes clear the difference between self and other; just like how looking in a mirror and realising you are not really the mirror image also distinguishes these two things. The mirror stage enables a child to make this distinction, and to understand that the gap between one's actual bodily self and the reflection in the mirror can never be bridged - who a person thinks they are, who a person is, and who they are to other people are all different parts of a person's identity that do not quite fit together, which is the cause of the frustration and perhaps why people often seek out things - such as certain kinds of films - which reinforce their idea of who they are or want to be. When presented with something as dangerous to the ego as *Shit Film*, which does the exact opposite of reinforcing a person's Ideal-I, people experience abjection instead of affirmation.

People express their idea of who they are to the people around them, but can never see themselves exactly as others see them, and this is something that pornography and other films allow their viewers to experience as they identify with the characters on-screen, or assimilate the ideas they are presented with into their identities. They can only define themselves in relation to the people and objects surrounding them, and can never become 'other'. This is why people laugh or are shocked when hearing a recording of their own voice or seeing themselves from a strange angle. Reality - how you are seen by others - is a threat to the consistency of the Ideal-I, or the imagined self.

As illustrated by Lacan's pigeon analogy, we long to see our imagined selves mirrored in other people so that we might get an idea of how we appear to others. The audience of *Shit Film* may expect or want to see something affirmative that reminds them of themselves, but this is not the case. They do see something that reminds them of themselves - the act of shitting - but this is something they do not want to be reminded of. The subversion of this expectation creates anxiety, abjection or laughter in the viewer when they are confronted with a part of themselves they prefer to ignore.

In accordance with Mulvey's essay, Creed's video acts like a mirror, because although we are not seeing a reflection of ourselves in it, we see something we do every day, and become something other than what we think we are; an abject object. At the same time *Shit Film* functions as a disruption of mirror-vision - "The objectness of the object is attenuated as the subject, seeing itself as others see it, comes to occupy the object's place as well as its own. Simultaneously occupying its place and the object's, the subject departs from itself. The subject-object symmetry of mirror-vision is broken."²⁷ The viewer is simultaneously configured as an object but also becomes the subject of the video. This disruption of the subject-object distinction is what creates anxiety in the viewer, which can emerge either as disgust or laughter.

In the introduction to "Fetishism", Freud posits that no man has ever seen female genitalia and not been scared or anxious, because as a young boy it is a shock to see a naked woman, and realise that she does not have a penis. This puts the fear of castration into the boy's mind and, according to Freud, repression of this fear could lead to the development of fetishes in later life - "the horror of castration has set up a memorial to itself in the creation of this substitute"²⁸. Some fixations, such as the disgust at or fetishisation of pubic hair, are meant to have resulted from disappointment at the lack of a longed-for penis underneath the hair - fetishes are a substitute for the penis. Body hair, like shitting, is considered a taboo for women to talk about or show in public. "...Women's body hair is seen as, apparently, either too ridiculous and trivial - or too monstrous - to be discussed at all. In this sense, women's body hair is truly configured as a taboo: something not to be seen or mentioned; prohibited and circumscribed by rules of avoidance; surrounded by shame, disgust and censure."²⁹ So, unless fetishised for male consumption, body hair, shit, menstrual blood and other female bodily functions are unacceptable and taboo topics of conversation.

²⁷ Brian Massumi, "The Bleed: Where Body Meets Image", in *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. (London: Duke University Press, 2002.) 50.

²⁸ Sigmund Freud and James Strachey, "Fetishism", in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XXI. (London: Hogarth and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1927) 154.

²⁹ Karin Lesnik-Oberstein, "The Last Taboo: Women, Body Hair and Feminism", in *The Last Taboo: Women, Body Hair and Feminism*, ed. Karin Lesnik-Oberstein. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 1.

A simple Google search reveals the extent of the fetishisation of faecal matter and the act of shitting. The fact that the performer in *Shit Film* is Asian is interesting to note because of the way that the media, specifically pornography, generalises and fetishises women of colour – particularly Asian women. Googling ‘scat porn’ throws up a multitude of results, many of which specifically feature Asian women, and involve the degradation of their bodies by smearing faecal matter over them. There are also numerous articles on the web which discuss ‘yellow fever’ – the dehumanisation of Asian women by white men who only go after them to indulge in racist fantasies of dominance and power, in order to reinforce their masculinity. Asian women are frequently presented in the media as exotic and mysterious, yet passive, or as the butt of jokes about dormant female sexuality and mail-order brides. Women from Asian cultures have always been stereotyped, and are consistently presented as remaining in the background, quietly serving men, which reinforces dehumanising Western ideas of Asian women. Perhaps Creed is playing on these racial stereotypes by selecting an Asian female performer to take part *Shit Film* – again, the way Creed presents a woman in the act of shitting leads the audience to expect something funny, but then have their expectations confounded by feelings of abjection.

The wealth and excess of different kinds of pornography on the internet shows that nothing is sacred, and almost every topic one can think of has been turned into porn – just like how no natural disaster, celebrity death or social movement is safe from being joked about, as Dundes points out. Porn “is an incredibly variant and diverse zone where every possible body and gesture is accommodated by a category and/or website dedicated to it.”³⁰ This phenomenon of excess is not just limited to porn, however. Fascination with gore and disaster is evident in the prevalence of these images online – the fact that some videos of ISIS beheadings on Youtube have been watched over a million times is testament to this. The availability of gore, pornography and other graphic images online, as well as the

³⁰ Eugene Thacker, *Can The Digital Become Excremental? – Bataille, Expenditure, and Web Pornography*. Written for the da-da-Net “Trash Art” Festival ’99.

democratisation and accessibility of the internet has led to new kinds of scopophilia and fetishism for the digital age.

Eugene Thacker's essay, "Can the Digital Become Excremental" compares this excess with Bataille's theory of 'unproductive expenditure' - giving away without getting anything back. Bataille suggested that instead of viewing things in terms of their use-value, and what society needs to have to function properly, we should view things in terms of excess. Bataille also discusses the 'accursed share' in his writings - what we have as excess in society that is destined to go to waste. "Bataille performs a reversal of traditional political economy's emphasis on production, accumulation, and scarcity, and suggests that the field of political economy - as a general movement - may also be approached from the perspective of surplus, excess, and expenditure."³¹

The act of exclusion of that which is unnecessary for human survival can be compared to the act of defecation. Instead of looking at what is useful to us, we should look at what is not useful - what is excess. This can be compared to the idea of abjection, and the frightening nature of the materials our body rejects in order to continue to work properly. "Bataille attempts to show how the social is in fact founded upon this exclusionary or excremental process. Put crudely, Bataille's political economy attempts to analyze how society 'deals with its shit.'"³² Arguably, the act of shitting as presented in *Shit Film* is comparable to Bataille's idea of a violent expulsion of unnecessary waste objects from a political economy. The shit in the video stands for the symbolic shit of all of the things that we could live without, that we might expunge from society. This shows that abjection is possible on an individual level as well as on a wider social level.

Themes of death, pain, suffering, gender and abjection are also prevalent in the work of Marina Abramović. For one of her most famous works, *Rhythm 0* (1974), Abramović lined up seventy-two objects - some harmful, some pleasant - on a table in front of her naked body, and for six hours invited the audience to do whatever they wanted to her. In this work, she breaks the boundaries of subject and object, by

³¹ Thacker, "Can the Digital Become Excremental".

³² Thacker, "Can the Digital Become Excremental".

making herself into an object. It culminated in the artist having a gun pointed to her head by a member of the audience, at which point other members of the audience took the gun from him and threw the single bullet which was inside it out of the window. Abramović allows her body to be degraded, fetishised and objectified: "The fetish can function as a substitute for the body of the mother. In *Rhythm 0*, Abramović's passive body itself became a kind of fetish object, onto which desire, hatred and fear were projected represented in the classic triad of mother, madonna and whore."³³ By taking on the role of passive female body/object and allowing herself to undergo often frightening experiences, Abramović's body, in a way, becomes a vessel for the fears and desires of her audience.

Abramović's work often explores the history of her home country, the former Yugoslavia, the boundaries between the human body and the social body, the relationship between audience and artist, and the limitations of the body and mind with relation to Eastern religious philosophies. Her work often occupies a space between life and death, and between subject and object. The use of abject objects associated with death in works such as *Cleaning the Mirror I* (1995), where the artist cleaned an entire human skeleton, and *Cleaning the House* (1996), where she sat on top of a pile of bloody cattle bones and picked and scrubbed them clean, relate to Abramović's use of 'power objects' in more recent work, which are similar to the sacred 'totems' Freud discusses in "Totem and Taboo." This text serves to illustrate the nature of repression of taboos in its discussion of the incest taboo in primitive societies. Freud argues that certain taboos in society provide a window into the individual and collective unconscious and that these prohibitions shape the way a civilisation progresses. "Taboo, in the literal sense, includes everything that is sacred, above the ordinary, and at the same time dangerous, unclean and mysterious."³⁴ Taboos embody a fear and dread at polluting objects (as Kristeva describes them) which are also somehow sacred, in a similar way to how the abject is simultaneously rejected and affirmed. Freud draws parallels between primitive

³³ Chrissie Iles, "Cleaning the Mirror", in *Marina Abramovic: objects performance video sound*, exhibition catalogue for an exhibition of the same name at Modern Art Oxford, 9 April – 2 July 1995. Ed. Chrissie Iles (Oxford: Museum of Modern Art Oxford, 1995), 40.

³⁴ Sigmund Freud and A.A Brill, "Taboo and the Ambivalence of Emotions", in *Totem and Taboo, Resemblances Between the Psychic Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, (New York: Moffat, Yard and Company, 1919). 32.

societies' fear of these objects and his some of his patients' fear of objects they will not touch, for fear that they will be polluted by them. He argues that this fear is also an obsession, and potentially representative of unconscious desires.

The ritualistic nature of some of Abramovic's performances support the Freudian idea of a close relationship between fear and obsession. Much of her work with her partner Ulay featured a juxtaposition of life and death, particularly in works where trust was a large part of their success – works such as *Breathing In Breathing Out* (1977), where the pair knelt on the floor with their legs interlocked, their mouths pressed together, breathing in each other's carbon dioxide exhalations until they passed out and the performance ended after nineteen minutes. The mouth-to-mouth contact could be seen as a symbol of love or passion, but the fact that they were giving up something essential to life – breathing – meant they were closer to death than life. Abramovic's work could be said to create anxiety in the audience by presenting them with abject objects, such as cattle bones, as well as her own body, which becomes abjected through the viewers' treatment of it as an object.

Anxiety could be defined here in the same way Søren Kierkegaard defines it in "The Concept of Anxiety". He linked it to original sin; Adam felt anxiety before eating the forbidden fruit. By being forbidden to eat it, he knew this meant he had the potential to choose to disobey God. According to Kierkegaard, anxiety precedes sin, because before Adam experienced anxiety and ate the forbidden fruit, there was no sin or even any distinction between good and evil – evil was brought into the world by Adam and Eve's choice to exercise their free will and disobey God. In this sense, anxiety and guilt are also closely linked. For Kierkegaard, anxiety is an overwhelming emotion experienced when one has the freedom to make many different choices.

In this sense, Abramovic's work is anxiety-inducing because it presents the viewer with many possibilities; some considered immoral or perhaps taboo by the society we live in, such as harming or even killing the artist. The anxiety about whether or not to commit these acts perhaps comes from fear of punishment. Kierkegaard also suggested, however, that anxiety and dread present people with a choice to recognise their inherent sinfulness and potential for wrongdoing, but also

to become self-aware and recognise their true identity and purpose or responsibility in life. People only become truly aware of their potential once they have experienced fear and dread, so seeing Abramović's work, or participating in it, could be seen as an affirmative experience which cements the viewers' sense of right and wrong.

The works of Martin Creed and Marina Abramović inspire feelings of anxiety, abjection and fear in their audiences by not only rejecting dominant patriarchal beauty standards for women, which have been internalised by the audience, but also by resisting cultural norms and social etiquette. Certain ideas of women are cemented during an individual's early years, for example through the mirror stage, when a child begins to relate themselves to the objects and people around them. Women are often seen as objects by men because of what Sigmund Freud described as 'scopophilia', and are only seen as 'bearers of meaning'³⁵ through which men can fulfil their egos. Such harmful attitudes to women are naturalised and legitimised by the presentation of women in the mainstream media, but seem to be deconstructed in *Shit Film* and in many of Abramović's performances.

Shit Film rejects conventional portrayals of women by presenting a woman in the act of doing something taboo, that we would not normally expect to view a woman doing- shitting. From a psychoanalytical perspective, female bodies are often coded as abject because of a fear of female sexuality, a fear of castration which is dealt with by fetishising female bodies, and because of a need to separate oneself from the abject body of the mother in order to establish one's identity. The image of a woman shitting is an abject one, because the faecal matter is not being fetishised; according to Freud, fetishisation of things such as shit is a substitute in a man's mind for the penis his mother does not possess. However, when shit is seen outside of this context, it is perhaps frightening and anxiety-inducing, as well as humorous, because there is no element of fetish, which is what the viewer has come to expect when seeing female bodies. This is evident in the audience's response to the film, which was either to leave the room in disgust, to laugh hysterically, or to feel

³⁵ Mulvey, 15.

anxious when presented with something which could be construed as a threat to one's ego, or one's idea of oneself as clean and pure.

The viewers also become the subject of the video, because the act of shitting is universal to everyone watching it. Watching a woman shit is abject in itself because of the configuration of women's bodies as abject and monstrous, 'othered' by the rejection of patriarchal standards inherent in the act of shitting publicly as a woman.

Abramović's work differs in the sense that she deliberately objectifies herself in her performances; she turns herself into an abject object by allowing the audience to treat her body like a fetish object, in *Rhythm 0* (1974) for instance. By often presenting herself without clothes, she frightens the audience by decontextualising her own body; female bodies are often encountered in a sexual setting, and when one encounters a body which has not been sexualised, it is hard to know how to react.

However, she still resists ordinary ways in which female bodies are objectified, because the artist is seemingly possesses subjectivity and is in control of her own body. This ties into how women are often seen as victims, rather than as victimisers. When women are presented as powerful, or in control of their own bodies, they are seen as abject and monstrous, and anxiety is a result of this, especially in artworks which encourage or require audience participation. Both Abramović and Creed present female bodies in ways they would not normally be seen, which could be said to induce feelings of abjection and anxiety.

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