



# HORROR AND THE MONSTROUS-FEMININE

## *An Imaginary Abjection*

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*Mother's not herself today.*

—Norman Bates, *Psycho*

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All human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject. “Probably no male human being is spared the terrifying shock of threatened castration at the sight of the female genitals,” Freud wrote in his paper “Fetishism” in 1927.<sup>1</sup> Joseph Campbell, in his book *Primitive Mythology*, noted that

there is a motif occurring in certain primitive mythologies, as well as in modern surrealist painting and neurotic dream, which is known to folklore as “the toothed vagina”—the vagina that castrates. And a counterpart, the other way, is the so-called “phallic mother,” a motif perfectly illustrated in the long fingers and nose of the witch.<sup>2</sup>

Classical mythology also was populated with gendered monsters, many of which were female. The Medusa, with her “evil eye,” head of writhing serpents, and lolling tongue, was queen of the pantheon of female monsters; men unfortunate enough to look at her were turned immediately to stone.

It is not by accident that Freud linked the sight of the Medusa to the equally horrifying sight of the mother's genitals, for the concept of the monstrous-feminine, as constructed within/by a patriarchal and phallogocentric ideology, is related intimately to the problem of sexual difference and castration. In 1922 he argued that the "Medusa's head takes the place of a representation of the female genitals";<sup>3</sup> if we accept Freud's interpretation, we can see that the Perseus myth is mediated by a narrative about the *difference* of female sexuality as a difference that is grounded in monstrousness and that invokes castration anxiety in the male spectator. "The sight of the Medusa's head makes the spectator stiff with terror, turns him to stone."<sup>4</sup> The irony of this was not lost on Freud, who pointed out that becoming stiff also means having an erection. "Thus in the original situation it offers consolation to the spectator: he is still in possession of a penis, and the stiffening reassures him of the fact."<sup>5</sup> One wonders if the experience of horror—of viewing the horror film—causes similar alterations in the body of the male spectator. And what of other phrases that apply to both male and female viewers—phrases such as "It scared the shit out of me"; "It made me feel sick"; "It gave me the creeps"? What is the relationship between physical states, bodily wastes (even if metaphoric ones), and the horrific—in particular, the monstrous-feminine?

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Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*<sup>6</sup> provides us with a preliminary hypothesis for an analysis of these questions. Although this study is concerned with literature, it nevertheless suggests a way of situating the monstrous-feminine in the horror film in relation to the maternal figure and what Kristeva terms "abjection," that which does not "respect borders, positions, rules"—that which "disturbs identity, system, order" (4). In general terms, Kristeva is attempting to explore the different ways in which abjection, as a source of horror, works within patriarchal societies, as a means of separating the human from the nonhuman and the fully constituted subject from the partially formed subject. Ritual becomes a means by which societies both renew their initial contact with the abject element and then exclude that element.

Through ritual, the demarcation lines between human and nonhuman are drawn up anew and presumably made all the stronger for that process. One of the key figures of abjection is the mother who becomes an abject at that moment when the child rejects her for the father who represents the symbolic order. The problem with Kristeva's theory, particularly for feminists, is that she never makes clear her position on the oppression of women. Her theory moves uneasily between explanation of, and justification for, the formation of human societies based on the subordination of women.

Kristeva grounds her theory of the maternal in the abject, tracing its changing definitions from the period of the pagan or mother-goddess religions through to the time of Judaic monotheism and to its culmination in Christianity. She deals with abjection in the following forms: as a rite of defilement in paganism; as a biblical abomination, a taboo, in Judaism; and as self-defilement, an interiorization, in Christianity. Kristeva, however, does not situate abjection solely within a ritual or religious context. She argues that it is “rooted historically (in the history of religions) and subjectively (in the structuration of the subject’s identity), in the cathexis of maternal function—mother, woman, reproduction” (91). Kristeva’s central interest, however, lies with the structuring of subjectivity within and by the processes of abjectivity in which the subject is spoken by the abject through both religious and cultural discourses, that is, through the subject’s position within the practices of the rite as well as within language:

But the question for the analyst-semiologist is to know how far one can analyze ritual impurity. The historian of religion stops soon: the critically impure is that which is based on a natural “loathing.” The anthropologist goes further: there is nothing “loathsome” in itself; the loathsome is that which disobeys classification rules peculiar to the given symbolic system. But as far as I am concerned, I keep asking questions. . . . Are there no subjective structurations that, within the organization of each speaking being, correspond to this or that symbolic-social system and represent, if not stages, at least types of subjectivity and society? Types that would be defined, in the last analysis, according to the subject’s position in language? (92)

A full examination of this theory is outside the scope of this chapter; I propose to draw mainly on Kristeva’s discussion of abjection in its construction in the human subject in relation to her notions of (1) the “border” and (2) the mother–child relationship. At crucial points, I shall also refer to her writing on the abject in relation to religious discourses. This area cannot be ignored, for what becomes apparent in reading her work is that definitions of the monstrous as constructed in the modern horror text are grounded in ancient religious and historical notions of abjection—particularly in relation to the following religious “abominations”: sexual immorality and perversion; corporeal alteration, decay and death; human sacrifice; murder; the corpse; bodily wastes; the feminine body; and incest.

The place of the abject is “the place where meaning collapses” (2), the place where “I” am not. The abject threatens life; it must be “radically excluded” (2) from the place of the living subject, propelled away from the body and deposited on the other side of an imaginary border which separates the self from that which threatens the self. Kristeva quotes Bataille:

Abjection . . . is merely the inability to assume with sufficient strength the imperative act of excluding abject things (and that act establishes the foundations of collective existence). (56)

Although the subject must exclude the abject, it must, nevertheless, be tolerated, for that which threatens to destroy life also helps to define life. Further, the activity of exclusion is necessary to guarantee that the subject take up his/her proper place in relation to the symbolic:

To each ego its object, to each superego its abject. It is not the white expanse or slack boredom of repression, not the translations and transformations of desire that wrench bodies, nights and discourse; rather it is a brutish suffering that "I" puts up with, sublime and devastated, for "I" deposits it to the father's account (verse au pere—pere-version): I endure it, for I imagine such is the desire of the other. . . . On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture. (2)

The abject can be experienced in various ways—one of which relates to biological bodily functions, the other of which has been inscribed in a symbolic (religious) economy. For instance, Kristeva claims that food loathing is "perhaps the most elementary and archaic form of abjection" (2). Food, however, only becomes abject if it signifies a border "between two distinct entities or territories" (75). Kristeva describes how, for her, the skin on the top of milk, which is offered to her by her father and mother, is a "sign of their desire," a sign separating her world from their world, a sign which she does not want. "But since the food is not an 'other' for 'me,' who am only in their desire, I expel *myself*; I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish *myself*" (3). Dietary prohibitions are, of course, central to Judaism. Kristeva argues that these are directly related to the prohibition of incest; she argues this not just because this position is supported by psychoanalytic discourse and structural anthropology but also because "the biblical text, as it proceeds, comes back, at the intensive moments of its demonstration and expansion, to that mytheme of the archaic relation to the mother" (106).

The ultimate in abjection is the corpse. The body protects itself from bodily wastes such as shit, blood, urine, and pus by ejecting these substances just as it expels food that, for whatever reason, the subject finds loathsome. The body extricates itself from them and from the place where they fall, so that it might continue to live:

Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit—cadere, cadaver. If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel. "I" is expelled. (3–4)

Within the biblical context, the corpse is also utterly abject. It signifies one of the most basic forms of pollution—the body without a soul. As a form of waste it represents the opposite of the spiritual, the religious symbolic:

Corpse fanciers, unconscious worshippers of a soulless body, are thus preeminent representatives of inimical religions, identified by their murderous cults. The priceless debt to great mother nature, from which the prohibitions of Yahwistic speech separates us, is concealed in such pagan cults. (109)

In relation to the horror film, it is relevant to note that several of the most popular horrific figures are “bodies without souls” (the vampire), the “living corpse” (the zombie), and corpse-eater (the ghoul). Here, the horror film constructs and confronts us with the fascinating, seductive aspect of abjection. What is also interesting is that such ancient figures of abjection as the vampire, the ghoul, the zombie, and the witch (one of whose many crimes was that she used corpses for her rites of magic) continue to provide some of the most compelling images of horror in the modern cinema. The werewolf, whose body signifies a collapse of the boundaries between human and animal, also belongs to this category.

Abjection also occurs where the individual fails to respect the law and where the individual is a hypocrite, a liar, a traitor:

Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility. He who denies morality is not abject; there can be grandeur in amorality. . . . Abjection, on the other hand, is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady. (4)

Thus, abject things are those that highlight the “fragility of the law” and that exist on the other side of the border which separates out the living subject from that which threatens its extinction. But abjection is not something of which the subject can ever feel free—it is always there, beckoning the self to take up its place, the place where meaning collapses. The subject, constructed in/through language, through a desire for meaning, is also spoken by the abject, the place of meaninglessness—thus, the subject is constantly beset by abjection which fascinates desire but which must be repelled for fear of self-annihilation. The crucial point is that abjection is always ambiguous. Like Bataille, Kristeva emphasizes the attraction, as well as the horror, of the undifferentiated:

We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it—on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger. But also because abjection itself is a composite of judgement and affect, of

condemnation and yearning, of signs and drives. Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship. (9–10)

To the extent that abjection works on the sociocultural arena, the horror film would appear to be, in at least three ways, an illustration of the work of abjection. Firstly, the horror film abounds in images of abjection, foremost of which is the corpse, whole and mutilated, followed by an array of bodily wastes such as blood, vomit, saliva, sweat, tears, and putrifying flesh. In terms of Kristeva's notion of the border, when we say such-and-such a horror film "made me sick" or "scared the shit out of me," we are actually foregrounding that specific horror film as a "work of abjection" or "abjection at work"—in both a literal and metaphorical sense. Viewing the horror film signifies a desire not only for perverse pleasure (confronting sickening, horrific images, being filled with terror/desire for the undifferentiated) but also a desire, having taken pleasure in perversity, to throw up, throw out, eject the object (from the safety of the spectator's seat).

Secondly, there is, of course, a sense in which the concept of a border is central to the construction of the monstrous in the horror film; that which crosses or threatens to cross the "border" is object. Although the specific nature of the border changes from film to film, the function of the monstrous remains the same—to bring about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability. In some horror films the monstrous is produced at the border between human and inhuman, man and beast (*Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, *King Kong*); in others the border is between the normal and the supernatural, good and evil (*Carrie*, *The Exorcist*, *The Omen*, *Rosemary's Baby*); or the monstrous is produced at the border that separates those who take up their proper gender roles from those who do not (*Psycho*, *Dressed to Kill*, *Reflection of Fear*); or the border is between normal and abnormal sexual desire (*Cruising*, *The Hunger*, *Cat People*).

In relation to the construction of the object within religious discourses, it is interesting to note that various subgenres of the horror film seem to correspond to religious categories of abjection. For instance, blood as a religious abomination becomes a form of abjection in the "splatter" movie (*Texas Chainsaw Massacre*); cannibalism, another religious abomination, is central to the "meat" movie (*Night of the Living Dead*, *The Hills Have Eyes*); the corpse as abomination becomes the object of ghoul and zombie movies (*The Evil Dead*, *Zombie Flesh eaters*); blood as a taboo object within religion is central to the vampire film (*The Hunger*) as well as the horror film in general (*Bloodsucking Freaks*); human sacrifice as a religious abomination is constructed as the object of virtually all horror films; and bodily disfigurement as a religious abomination is also central to the slash movie, particularly those in which woman is slashed, the mark a sign of her "difference," her impurity (*Dressed to Kill*, *Psycho*).

## III

The third way in which the horror film illustrates the work of abjection refers to the construction of the maternal figure as abject. Kristeva argues that all individuals experience abjection at the time of their earliest attempts to break away from the mother. She sees the mother-child relation as one marked by conflict: the child struggles to break free, but the mother is reluctant to release it. Because of the “instability of the symbolic function” in relation to this most crucial area—“the prohibition placed on the maternal body (as a defense against autoeroticism and incest taboo)” (14)—Kristeva argues that the maternal body becomes a site of conflicting desires. “Here, drives hold sway and constitute a strange space that I shall name, after Plato (*Timeus*, 48–53), a *chora*, a receptacle” (14). The position of the child is rendered even more unstable because, while the mother retains a close hold over the child, it can serve to authenticate her existence—an existence which needs validation because of her problematic relation to the symbolic realm:

It is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling. The difficulty the mother has in acknowledging (or being acknowledged by) the symbolic realm—in other words, the problem she has with the phallus that her father or husband stands for—is not such as to help the future subject leave the natural mansion. (13)

In the child’s attempts to break away, the mother becomes an abject; thus, in this context, where the child struggles to become a separate subject, abjection becomes “a *precondition of narcissism*” (13). Once again we can see abjection at work in the horror text where the child struggles to break away from the mother, representative of the archaic maternal figure, in a context in which the father is invariably absent (*Psycho*, *Carrie*, *The Birds*). In these films, the maternal figure is constructed as the monstrous-feminine. By refusing to relinquish her hold on her child, she prevents it from taking up its proper place in relation to the Symbolic. Partly consumed by the desire to remain locked in a blissful relationship with the mother and partly terrified of separation, the child finds it easy to succumb to the comforting pleasure of the dyadic relationship. Kristeva argues that a whole area of religion has assumed the function of tackling this danger:

This is precisely where we encounter the rituals of defilement and their derivatives, which, based on the feeling of abjection and all converging on the maternal, attempt to symbolize the other threat to the subject: that of being swamped by the dual relationship, thereby risking the loss not of apart (castration) but of the totality of his living being. The function of these religious rituals is to ward off the subject’s fear of his very own identity sinking irretrievably into the mother. (64)

How, then, are prohibitions against contact with the mother enacted and enforced? In answering this question, Kristeva links the universal practices of rituals of defilement to the mother. She argues that within the practices of all rituals of defilement, polluting objects fall into two categories: excremental, which threatens identity from the outside, and menstrual, which threatens from within:

Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death. Menstrual blood, on the contrary, stands for the danger issuing from within identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference. (71)

Both categories of polluting objects relate to the mother; the relation of menstrual blood is self-evident, the association of excremental objects with the maternal figure is brought about because of the mother's role in sphincter training. Here, Kristeva argues that the subject's first contact with "authority" is with the maternal authority when the child learns, through interaction with the mother, about its body: the shape of the body, the clean and unclean, the proper and improper areas of the body. Kristeva refers to this process as a "primal mapping of the body," which she calls "semiotic." She distinguishes between maternal "authority" and "paternal laws":

Maternal authority is the trustee of that mapping of the self's clean and proper body; it is distinguished from paternal laws within which, with the phallic phase and acquisition of language, the destiny of man will take shape. (72)

In her discussion of rituals of defilement in relation to the Indian caste system, Kristeva draws a distinction between the maternal authority and paternal law. She argues that the period of the "mapping of the self's clean and proper body" is characterized by the exercise of "authority without guilt," a time when there is a "fusion between mother and nature." However, the symbolic ushers in a "totally different universe of socially signifying performances where embarrassment, shame, guilt, desire etc. come into play—the order of the phallus." In the Indian context, these two worlds exist harmoniously side by side because of the working of defilement rites. Here, Kristeva is referring to the practice of public defecation in India. She quotes V. S. Naipaul, who says that no one ever mentions "in speech or in books, those squatting figures, because, quite simply, no one sees them." Kristeva argues that this split between the world of the mother (a universe without shame) and the world of the father (a universe of shame) would in other social contexts produce psychosis; in India it finds a "perfect socialization":



This may be because the setting up of the rite of defilement takes on the function of the hyphen, the virgule, allowing the two universes of filth and prohibition to brush lightly against each other without necessarily being identified as such, as object and as law. (74)

Images of blood, vomit, pus, shit, etc., are central to our culturally/socially constructed notions of the horrific. They signify a split between two orders: the maternal authority and the law of the father. On the one hand, these images of bodily wastes threaten a subject that is already constituted, in relation to the symbolic, as “whole and proper.” Consequently, they fill the subject—both the protagonist in the text and the spectator in the cinema—with disgust and loathing. On the other hand, they also point back to a time when a “fusion between mother and nature” existed—when bodily wastes, while set apart from the body, were not seen as objects of embarrassment and shame. Their presence in the horror film may invoke a response of disgust from the audience situated as it is within the symbolic but at a more archaic level the representation of bodily wastes may invoke pleasure in breaking the taboo on filth—sometimes described as a pleasure in perversity—and a pleasure in returning to that time when the mother-child relationship was marked by an untrammelled pleasure in “playing” with the body and its wastes.

The modern horror film often “plays” with its audience, saturating it with scenes of blood and gore, deliberately pointing to the fragility of the symbolic order in the domain of the body which never ceases to signal the repressed world of the mother. This is particularly evident in *The Exorcist*, where the world of the symbolic, represented by the priest-as-father, and the world of the presymbolic, represented by woman aligned with the devil, clashes head-on in scenes where the foulness of woman is signified by her putrid, filthy body covered in blood, urine, excrement, and bile. Significantly, a pubescent girl about to menstruate played the woman who is possessed—in one scene blood from her wounded genitals mingles with menstrual blood to provide one of the film’s key images of horror. In *Carrie*, the film’s most monstrous act occurs when the couple are drenched in pig’s blood that symbolizes menstrual blood—women are referred to in the film as “pigs,” women “bleed like pigs,” and the pig’s blood runs down Carrie’s body at a moment of intense pleasure, just as her own menstrual blood runs down her legs during a similar pleasurable moment when she enjoys her body in the shower. Here, women’s blood and pig’s blood flow together, signifying horror, shame, and humiliation. In this film, however, the mother speaks for the symbolic, identifying with an order which has defined women’s sexuality as the source of all evil and menstruation as the sign of sin. The horror film’s obsession with blood, particularly the bleeding body of woman, where her body is transformed into the “gaping wound,” suggests that castration anxiety is a central concern of the horror

film—particularly the slasher subgenre. Woman’s body is slashed and mutilated, to signify not only her own castrated state but also the possibility of castration for the male. In the guise of a “madman” he enacts on her body the one act he most fears for himself, transforming her entire body into a bleeding wound.

Kristeva’s semiotic posits a preverbal dimension of language that relates to sounds and tone and to direct expression of the drives and physical contact with the maternal figure; “it is dependent upon meaning, but in a way that is not that of *linguistic* signs nor of the *symbolic* order they found” (72). With the subject’s entry into the symbolic, which separates the child from the mother, the maternal figure and the authority she signifies are repressed. Kristeva argues that it is the function of defilement rites, particularly those relating to menstrual and excremental objects, to point to the “boundary” between the maternal semiotic authority and the paternal symbolic law:

Through language and within highly hierarchical religious institutions, man hallucinates partial “objects”—witnesses to an archaic differentiation of the body on its way toward ego identity, which is also sexual identity. The defilement from which ritual protects us is neither sign nor matter. Within the rite that extracts it from repression and depraved desire, defilement is the trans-linguistic spoor of the most archaic boundaries of the self’s clean and proper body. In that sense, if it is a jettisoned object, it is so from the mother. . . . By means of the symbolic institution of ritual, that is to say, by means of a system of ritual exclusions, the partial-object consequently becomes scripture—an inscription of limits, an emphasis placed not on the (paternal) Law but on (maternal) Authority through the very signifying order. (73)

Kristeva argues that, historically, it has been the function of religion to purify the abject, but with the disintegration of these “historical forms” of religion, the work of purification now rests solely with “that catharsis par excellence called art” (17):

In a world in which the Other has collapsed, the aesthetic task—a descent into the foundations of the symbolic construct—amounts to retracing the fragile limits of the speaking being, closest to its dawn, to the bottomless “primacy” constituted by primal repression. Through that experience, which is nevertheless managed by the Other, “subject” and “object” push each other away, confront each other, collapse, and start again—inseparable, contaminated, condemned, at the boundary of what is assimilable, thinkable: abject. (18)

This, I would argue, is also the central ideological project of the popular horror film—purification of the abject through a “descent into the foundations of the symbolic construct.” In this way, the horror film brings about a confrontation with the abject (the corpse, bodily wastes, the monstrous-feminine) in order,

finally, to eject the abject and redraw the boundaries between the human and nonhuman. As a form of modern defilement rite, the horror film works to separate out the symbolic order from all that threatens its stability, particularly the mother and all that her universe signifies. In Kristeva's terms, this means separating out the maternal authority from paternal law.

As mentioned earlier, the central problem with Kristeva's theory is that it can be read in a prescriptive rather than a descriptive sense. This problem is rendered more acute by the fact that, although Kristeva distinguishes between the maternal and paternal figures, when she speaks of the subject who is being constituted, she never distinguishes between the child as male or female. Obviously, the female child's experience of the semiotic chora must be different from that of the male's experience in relation to the way it is spoken to, handled, etc. For the mother is already constituted as a gendered subject living within a patriarchal order and thus aware of the differences between the "masculine" and the "feminine" in relation to questions of desire. Thus, the mother might relate to a male child with a more acute sense of pride and pleasure. It is also possible that the child, depending on its gender, might find it more or less difficult to reject the mother for the father. Kristeva does not consider any of these issues. Nor does she distinguish between the relation of the adult male and female subject to rituals of defilement—for instance, menstruation taboos, where one imagines notions of the gendered subject, would be of crucial importance. How, for instance, do women relate to rites of defilement, such as menstruation rites, that reflect so negatively on them? How do women within a specific cultural group see themselves in relation to taboos that construct their procreative functions as abject? Is it possible to intervene in the social construction of woman as abject? Or is the subject's relationship to the processes of abjectivity, as they are constructed within subjectivity and language, completely unchangeable? Is the abjection of women a precondition for the continuation of sociality? Kristeva never asks questions of this order. Consequently, her theory of abjection could be interpreted as an apology for the establishment of sociality at the cost of women's equality. If, however, we read it as descriptive, as one that is attempting to explain the origins of patriarchal culture, then it provides us with an extremely useful hypothesis for an investigation of the representation of women in the horror film.<sup>8</sup>

#### IV

The science fiction horror film *Alien* is a complex representation of the monstrous-feminine in terms of the maternal figure as perceived within a patriarchal ideology. She is there in the text's scenarios of the primal scene, of birth and death; she is there in her many guises as the treacherous mother, the oral sadistic mother,

the mother as primordial abyss; and she is there in the film's images of blood, of the all-devouring vagina, the toothed vagina, the vagina as Pandora's box; and finally she is there in the chameleon figure of the alien, the monster as fetish-object of and for the mother. But it is the archaic mother, the reproductive/generative mother, who haunts the *mise-en-scène* of the film's first section, with its emphasis on different representations of the primal scene.

According to Freud, every child either watches its parents in the act of sexual intercourse or has fantasies about that act—fantasies that relate to the problem of origins. Freud left open the question of the cause of the fantasy but suggested that it may initially be aroused by “an observation of the sexual intercourse of animals.”<sup>9</sup> In his study of “the Wolf Man,” Freud argued that the child did not initially observe his parents in the act of sexual intercourse but that he witnessed the population of animals whose behavior he then displaced onto his parents. In situations where the child actually witnesses sexual intercourse between its parents, Freud argued that all children arrive at the same conclusion: “They adopt what may be called a *sadistic view of coition*.”<sup>10</sup> If the child perceives the primal scene as a monstrous act—whether in reality or fantasy—it may fantasize animals or mythical creatures as taking part in the scenario. Possibly the many mythological stories in which humans copulate with animals and other creatures (Europa and Zeus, Leda and the Swan) are reworkings of the primal scene narrative. The Sphinx, with her lion's body and woman's face, is an interesting figure in this context. Freud suggested that the Riddle of the Sphinx was probably a distorted version of the great riddle that faces all children—where do babies come from? An extreme form of the primal fantasy is that of “observing parental intercourse while one is still an unborn baby in the womb.”<sup>11</sup>

One of the major concerns of the sci-fi horror film (*Alien*, *The Thing*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *Altered States*) is the reworking of the primal scene in relation to the representation of other forms of copulation and procreation. *Alien* presents various representations of the primal scene. Behind each of these lurks the figure of the archaic mother, that is, the image of the mother in her generative function—the mother as the origin of all life. This archaic figure is somewhat different from the mother of the semiotic chora, posed by Kristeva, in that the latter is the pre-Oedipal mother who exists in relation to the family and the symbolic order. The concept of the parthenogenic, archaic mother adds another dimension to the maternal figure and presents us with a new way of understanding how patriarchal ideology works to deny the “difference” of woman in her cinematic representation.

The first birth scene occurs in *Alien* at the beginning, where the camera/spectator explores the inner space of the mother ship whose life-support system is a computer aptly named—“Mother.” This exploratory sequence of the inner body of the “Mother” culminates with a long tracking shot down one of the corridors,

which leads to a womblike chamber where the crew of seven are woken up from their protracted sleep by Mother's voice monitoring a call for help from a nearby planet. The seven astronauts emerge slowly from their sleep pods in what amounts to a rebirthing scene marked by a fresh, antiseptic atmosphere. In outer space, birth is a well-controlled, clean, painless affair. There is no blood, trauma, or terror. This scene could be interpreted as a primal fantasy in which the human subject is born fully developed—even copulation is redundant.

The second representation of the primal scene takes place when three of the crew enter the body of the unknown spaceship through a “vaginal” opening: the ship is shaped like a horseshoe, its curved sides like two long legs spread apart at the entrance. They travel along a corridor which seems to be made of a combination of inorganic and organic material—as if the inner space of this ship were alive. Compared to the atmosphere of the *Nostramo*, however, this ship is dark, dank, and mysterious. A ghostly light glimmers and the sounds of their movements echo throughout the caverns. In the first chamber, the three explorers find a huge alien life-form that appears to have been dead for a long time. Its bones are bent outward as if it exploded from the inside. One of the trio, Kane, is lowered down a shaft into the gigantic womblike chamber, in which rows of eggs are hatching. Kane approaches one of the eggs; as he touches it with his gloved hand, it opens out, revealing a mass of pulsating flesh. Suddenly, the monstrous thing inside leaps up and attaches itself to Kane's helmet, its tail penetrating Kane's mouth in order to fertilize itself inside his stomach. Despite the warnings of Ripley, Kane is taken back on board the *Nostramo*, where the alien rapidly completes its gestation processes inside Kane.

This representation of the primal scene recalls Freud's reference to an extreme primal scene fantasy where the subject imagines traveling back inside the womb to watch her/his parents having sexual intercourse, perhaps to watch her/himself being conceived. Here, three astronauts explore the gigantic, cavernous, malevolent womb of the mother. Two members of the group watch the enactment of the primal scene in which Kane is violated in an act of phallic penetration—by the father or phallic mother? Kane himself is guilty of the strongest transgression; he actually peers into the egg/womb in order to investigate its mysteries. In so doing, he becomes a “part” of the primal scene, taking up the place of the mother, the one who is penetrated, the one who bears the offspring of the union. The primal scene is represented as violent, monstrous (the union is between human and alien), and is mediated by the question of incestuous desire. All restagings of the primal scene raise the question of incest, as the beloved parent (usually the mother) is with a rival. The first birth scene, where the astronauts emerge from their sleep pods, could be viewed as a representation of incestuous desire par excellence: the father is completely absent; here, the mother is sole parent and sole life-support.

From this forbidden union, the monstrous creature is born. But man, not woman, is the “mother” and Kane dies in agony as the alien gnaws its way through his stomach. The birth of the alien from Kane’s stomach plays on what Freud described as a common misunderstanding that many children have about birth, that is, that the mother is somehow impregnated through the mouth—she may eat a special food—and the baby grows in her stomach from which it is also born. Here, we have a third version of the primal scene.

A further version of the primal scene—almost a convention<sup>12</sup> of the science fiction film—occurs when smaller crafts or bodies are ejected from the mother ship into outer space; although sometimes the ejected body remains attached to the mother ship by a long life-line or umbilical chord. This scene is presented in two separate ways: one when Kane’s body, wrapped in a white shroud, is ejected from the mother ship, and the second when the small space capsule, in which Ripley is trying to escape from the alien, is expelled from the underbelly of the mother ship. In the former, the “mother’s” body has become hostile; it contains the alien whose one purpose is to kill and devour all of Mother’s children. In the latter birth scene the living infant is ejected from the malevolent body of the “mother” to avoid destruction; in this scenario, the “mother’s” body explodes at the moment of giving birth.

Although the “mother” as a figure does not appear in these sequences—nor indeed in the entire film—her presence forms a vast backdrop for the enactment of all the events. She is there in the images of birth, the representations of the primal scene, the womblike imagery, the long winding tunnels leading to inner chambers, the rows of hatching eggs, the body of the mother ship, the voice of the life-support system, and the birth of the alien. She is the generative mother, the prephallic mother, the being who exists prior to knowledge of the phallus.

## Notes

1. Sigmund Freud, “Fetishism,” in *On Sexuality* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1981), 354.
2. Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology* (New York, Penguin, 1969), 73.
3. Sigmund Freud, “Medusa’s Head,” *Standard Edition* 18 (1964): 273–74.
4. Freud, 273.
5. Freud.
6. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982). All page citations will be included in the text.
7. For a discussion of the way in which the modern horror film works upon its audience, see Philip Brophy, “Horrority—The Textuality of Contemporary Horror,” *Screen* 27, no. 1 (1986): 2–13.

8. For a critique of *Powers of Horror*, see Jennifer Stone, "The Horrors of Power: A Critique of 'Kristeva,'" in *The Politics of Theory*, ed. F Barker, P Hulme, M Iversen, D Loxley (Colchester, U.K.: University of Essex, 1983), 38–48.

9. Sigmund Freud, "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis," in *Case Histories II* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1981), 294.

10. Sigmund Freud, "On the Sexual Theories of Children," in *On Sexuality* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1981), 198.

11. Sigmund Freud, "The Paths to the Formation of Symptoms," in *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1981), 417.

12. Daniel Dervin argues that this structure does deserve the status of a convention. For a detailed discussion of the primal scene phantasy in various film genres, see his "Primal Conditions and Conventions: The Genres of Comedy and Science Fiction," *Film/Psychology Review*, Winter–Spring 1980, 115–47.