

Kristeva's Theory of Abjection

What do our fears tell
us about our
conception of
ourselves?

POWERS OF HORROR

An Essay on Abjection



JULIA KRISTEVA

Julia Kristeva



- Born in 1941 in Bulgaria, where she attended a Francophone school run by Dominican Nuns.
- While in Bulgaria, she acquainted herself with the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, a famous Russian literary critic who redefined our conception of the novel through his theory of *heteroglossia* (multiplicity of voices in a text).
- Moved to Paris in the 1960s, where she continued studying under several influential French theorists, such as Roland Barthes, who coined the concept of *la mort de l'auteur* (the death of the author).
- Her psychoanalytical concept of abjection has influenced feminist movements (whether or not she supported those movements is another story), sociology, linguistics, literary criticism, and more.

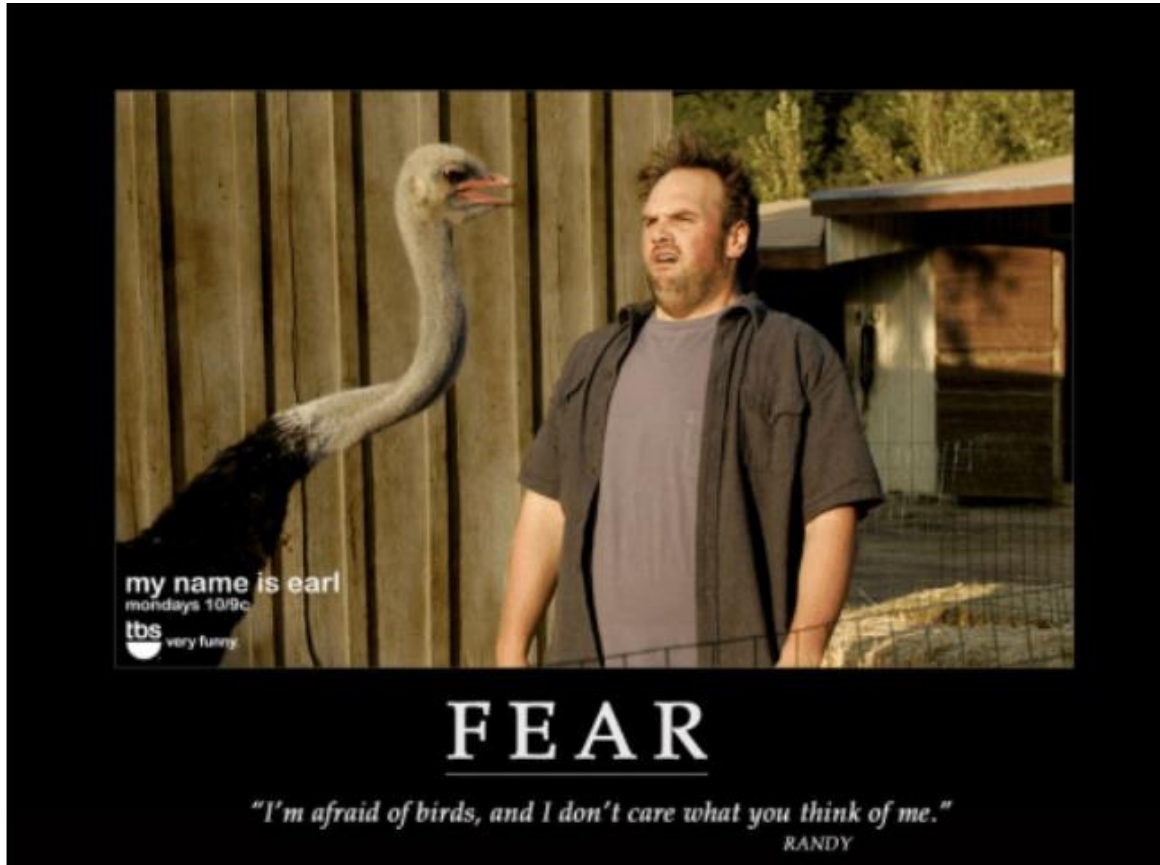
An Overview of *Powers of Horror*

Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* (1983) was a book that built on the theories of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, psychoanalysts who are famous (or infamous) for their work on child development and the "unconscious" part of the human mind.

Kristeva argued that one's experience of horror is caused not by one's disgust and revulsion towards the object of horror per se, but by the threat the object poses towards one's identity.

Kristeva's term for the psychological process we experience when we encounter these objects of horror (which are not really objects, actually, but we'll get to that later) is ***abjection***.

What is Abjection and the Abject?



Abjection: A casting out or spewing out, (from the latin *abjectus*: thrown, or cast away)

“ACCORDING TO JULIA KRISTEVA in the [Powers of Horror](#), the abject refers to the human reaction (horror, vomit) to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction between subject and object or between self and other. The primary example for what causes such a reaction is the corpse (which traumatically reminds us of our own materiality); however, other items can elicit the same reaction: the open wound, shit, sewage, even the skin that forms on the surface of warm milk.”

Source:

<https://www.cla.purdue.edu/academic/english/theory/psychoanalysis/kristevaabject.html>

What is Abjection and the Abject?



The Abject: Any object we reject that, through our rejection of the object, defines the limits of our selves (the subject).

Julie Kristeva's concept of the *abject* is often viewed in contrast to Jacques Lacan's *objet petit a*: an object of desire that remains out of reach, separate from our selves, a thing we continually seek in "the other." The *objet petit a* allows us to see what we want and establish our identity accordingly. Kristeva's *abject*, on the other hand, is that which we radically exclude from our conception of self (as determined by our drives and desires) and that which draws us towards "the place where meaning collapses" (*Powers of Horror*, 2).

So what's up with all these psychoanalytic terms?

Subject = Us. Or, to use more psychoanalytic, individual-based language, I. Is the subject our conscious selves? Or the sum of our unconscious impulses and desires?

Object = The things we direct our impulses (death drive and sex drive, which constitute our subjecthoods) towards.

Abject = The objects we reject that, through our rejection of them, define the limits of our selves (the subject).

The Other = That which is not the subject. That which is unknown, and, if it overlaps with the abject, that which is also detestable.



But things that are *abject* are not quite *objects... or subjects...*

Object

The closest the abject gets to being an object is in the way the abject **perverts the objects we would otherwise desire.**

Abject

Something unsettling that comes out of us and something that we strive to separate ourselves from.
Neither object nor subject.

Subject

The closest one's abject gets to being a part of one's self is in the way the abject **helps define subjecthood through negation.**

Think-Pair-Share: What are some things that horrify you? How are they perversions of things that you would otherwise enjoy?



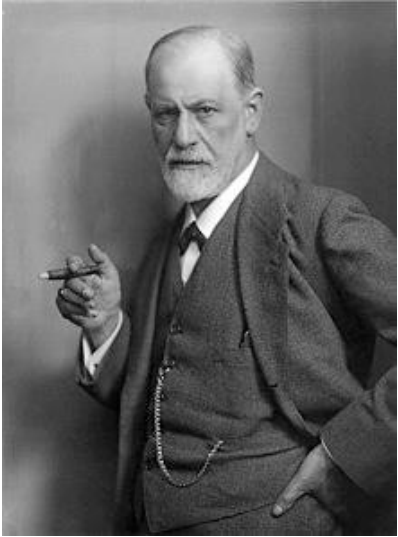
from chapter 1 of *Powers of Horror*:

NEITHER SUBJECT NOR OBJECT

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects. A certainty protects it from the shameful—a certainty of which it is proud holds on to it. But simultaneously, just the same, that impetus, that spasm, that leap is drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned. Unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself.

Take a look at Kristeva's diction. Where does she use contradictory phrasing, and to what effect?

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



A certain "ego" that merged with its master, a superego, has flatly driven it [the abject] away. It lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the latter's rules of the game. And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master. Without a sign (for him), it beseeches a discharge, a convulsion, a crying out. To each ego its object, to each superego its abject (*Powers of Horror*, 2).



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1. Recall our lesson on Freud's tripartite theory of the mind. What's an example of how our superegos (socially-imposed rules) are the "master" of our egos (our conscious minds)?
 2. What might Kristeva mean when she says the abject does not agree to the superego's "rules of the game?"
 3. Why might ego correspond to object and superego to abject?

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

PERVERSE OR ARTISTIC

The abject is related to perversion^ The sense of abjection that I experience is anchored in the superego. The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them. It kills in the name of life—a progressive despot; it lives at the behest of death—an operator in genetic experimentations; it curbs the other's suffering for its own profit—a cynic (and a psychoanalyst); it establishes narcissistic power while pretending to reveal the abyss—an artist who practices his art as a "business." Corruption is its most common, most obvious appearance. That is the socialized appearance of the abject (15).

1. How does the abject “take advantage” of the rules and laws imposed by the superego? If you could personify the abject, what would its goals and motivations be?
2. A despot is a ruler or dictator with absolute, unlimited power. Why might a “progressive despot” be an effective analogy for describing the abject? How exactly does the abject kill “in the name of life”?
3. Why might “an artist who practices his art as a ‘business’” be an example of the abject?

Kristeva's Famous Example of Abjection (from *Powers of Horror*, 2-3)

Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection. When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk—harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail paring—I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire. Along with sight-clouding dizziness, nausea makes me balk at that milk cream, separates me from the mother and father who proffer it. "I" want none of that element, sign of their desire; "I" do not want to listen, "I" do not assimilate it, "I" expel it. But since the food is not an "other" for "me," who am only in their desire, I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish myself. That detail, perhaps an insignificant one, but one that they ferret out, emphasize, evaluate, that trifle turns me inside out, guts sprawling; it is thus that they see that "I" am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death. During that course in which "I" become, I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit. Mute protest of the symptom, shattering violence of a convulsion that, to be sure, is inscribed in a symbolic system, but in which, without either wanting or being able to become integrated in order to answer to it, it reacts, it abreacts. It abjects.



Kristeva's Famous Example of Abjection

Application Exercise: Pick a food item that disgusts you. Describe it's physical qualities in as detailed a manner as Kristeva describes the skin that forms on milk. Then describe a way to cook or prepare the food item to make it more appetizing to you. Were you able to figure out what was "perverted" in the initial food that made you feel disgusted?



Abjection and the Mother

- To feminist scholars, the most intriguing part of Kristeva's theory of abjection is in how the male subject can trace his disgust and fear towards women and women's bodies to the point in his life (as a baby) when he realized he was a separate being from his mother, when he realized his mother was an "other," separate from his own subjecthood.



“Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be—maintaining that night in which the outline of the signified thing vanishes and where only the imponderable affect is carried out.”

(Powers of Horror, 10)

Think back to class 1 when we talked about the archetype of women's bodies in horror movies. How much of that archetype comes from male disgust and fear (abjection) of women's bodies, sexuality, and power?

Jouissance

Delight, enjoyment, ecstasy

late 15c., from Old French *jouissance*, from *jouissant*, present participle of *joir* "to enjoy" (from dictionary.com)

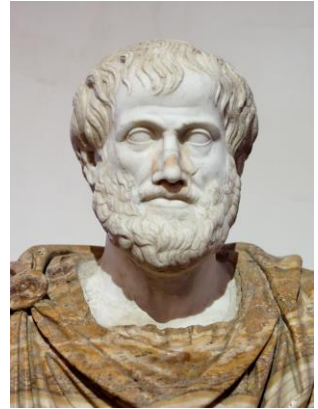


The abject must also be disguised from desire (which is tied up with the meaning-structures of [the symbolic order](#)). It is associated, rather, with both fear and *jouissance*. In phobia, Kristeva reads the trace of a pre-linguistic confrontation with the abject, a moment that precedes the recognition of any actual object of fear: "The phobic object shows up at the place of non-objectal states of [drive](#) and assumes all the mishaps of [drive](#) as disappointed desires or as desires diverted from their objects" ([Powers 35](#)). The object of fear is, in other words, a [substitute formation](#) for the subject's abject relation to [drive](#). The fear of, say, heights really stands in the place of a much more primal fear: the fear caused by the breakdown of any distinction between subject and object, of any distinction between ourselves and the world of dead material objects. Kristeva also associates the abject with *jouissance*: "One does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it [*on en jouit*]. Violently and painfully. A passion" ([Powers 9](#)). This statement appears paradoxical, but what Kristeva means by such statements is that we are, despite everything, continually and repetitively drawn to the abject.

Source: <https://www.cla.purdue.edu/academic/english/theory/psychoanalysis/kristevaabject.html>

Jouissance and Catharsis

Catharsis: the purging of emotions we experience as audience members when watching a play (or watching a movie, tv show, reading literature, etc.), which leads to the feeling of relief. Catharsis was first theorized by the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, who wrote about it in his *Poetics*, one of the most famous books on storytelling and drama .
- from Greek katharsis, from kathairein: to purge, purify



To experience the abject in literature carries with it a certain pleasure but one that is quite different from the dynamics of desire. Kristeva associates this aesthetic experience of the abject, rather, with poetic catharsis: "an impure process that protects from the abject only by dint of being immersed in it" ([Powers 29](#)).

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Jouissance



And, as in jouissance where the object of desire, known as object a [in Lacan's terminology], bursts with the shattered mirror where the ego gives up its image in order to contemplate itself in the Other, there is nothing either objective or objectal to the abject. It is simply a frontier, a repulsive gift that the Other, having become alter ego, drops so that "I" does not disappear in it but finds, in that sublime alienation, a forfeited existence. Hence a jouissance in which the subject is swallowed up but in which the Other, in return, keeps the subject from foundering by making it repugnant. One thus understands why so many victims of the abject are its fascinated victims—if not its submissive and willing ones.

(Powers of Horror, 7)

1. Why do horror movies exist? Why do we as a society enjoy going to the movie theatres just to get scared? Or Halloween Haunt in Wonderland?
2. Think of a time you “enjoyed” experiencing something horrific (in a fictional form). Why might you have enjoyed identifying with “the Other” (an unknown and typically undesirable object)?

Let's put ourselves in other people's shoes...

1. What might the process of abjection look like for a Trump supporter who feels disgusted at the thought of more immigrants entering his country? How might immigrants threaten the Trump supporter's identity? What does his disgust reveal about the way he defines himself?
2. Why do so many people fear spiders and squids? Jot down a list of the physical characteristics of either a spider or a squid. Based on Kristeva's theory of how we partially identify with the abject, what is it about the physical characteristics of spiders and/or squids that threatens our own belief of who we are?
3. Based on the idea that men dominate the film and television industry, how might the sexualized depiction of women's bodies on screen actually be the result of men's fears? Why might male screenwriters and directors experience abjection when confronted by an atypical (or simply realistic) female body?

