‘The w/hole and the abject’

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The subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, 'inside' the subject as its own founding repudiation. (Butler 1994: 3)

My wish is that every subject’s encounter with the death drive might become in time more of an everyday occurrence --that the typical male subject, like his female counterpart, might learn to live with lack. (Silverman 1992: 65)

Since the middle of the 1990s French cinema has seen the resurgence of a version of the realism once associated with the 1970s. These films frequently focus on life in the provinces, especially the North, rather than in Paris, and on dysfunctional male characters. Although generally praised by critics, the films have also been criticised for their mix of complacent pessimism and fashionable cinematic effects. A critic writing in Le Monde Diplomatique, for example, complains about ‘the darkest and most despairing naturalism and the most affected mannerism and formalism’; he claims that their ‘fascination for the abject and the sordid show an undeniable hatred for the people’ (Pardo 2000: 28). ¹ The film heading his list is Gaspar Noé’s Seul contre tous (1998), the continuation of the biography of the protagonist of the 40-minute Carne (1990. Such films, which explore the male’s essential confrontation with abjection, are inescapable, however, because they are a necessary part of subject-positioning (as Butler implies in the first epigraph), and they can be seen in a moral light, as implied by the second epigraph.

A brief synopsis of the films may be useful for what follows. Both films are remarkable amongst other things for the soundtrack, the interior monologue of a Parisian horse butcher, a fascist ranting against everyone, especially women, gays and Arabs, in which there is much talk of arseholes, cunts, shit, cocks, fucking, and so on.

Carne, a 40-minute short, begins with an abattoir scene where a horse is killed and eviscerated, intercut with the birth of the butcher (Philippe Nahon)’s daughter, Cynthia (Blandine Lenoir), as she emerges from her mother (apart from Cynthia, none of the other characters is named). Short scenes with intertitles recount Cynthia’s childhood as she grows up without her mother who left the butcher shortly after the birth. The butcher idolises his daughter who is mute and retarded; we see him washing her, dressing her, feeding her, and, eventually, feeling ambivalent towards her sexually as she reaches adolescence. He mistakes the menstrual blood on her knickers

¹ All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.
for the blood of defloweration by an Arab who works on the nearby building site, called ‘le trou’, or the hole; he plunges his knife into an unsuspecting worker’s mouth (the wrong man, as it happens) and twists it around. He is jailed, and on release finds it difficult to get work. He leaves for a new life in Lille with the female owner of the café where he has been working (Frankye Pain), and whom he has made pregnant.

*Seul contre tous* reprises *Carne*’s narrative with a rapid-delivery monologue by the butcher overlaying stills of buildings. We learn more about the butcher’s early childhood; he never knew his mother, was raised as an orphan, was sodomised by his teacher. The butcher, dependant on his partner’s money, resents her, and drifts from job to job. He brutally attacks his pregnant wife when she accuses him of infidelity, and leaves for Paris once more, taking his mother-in-law’s revolver. Jobless, and unsuccessful in his attempts to borrow money from acquaintances, he spends his last few francs on a coffee. At the end of his tether, he picks Cynthia up from the institution with the aim of killing her and himself. We see him doing this, but it turns out to be a fantasy, and the film ends as he extols the virtues of incest.

It may also be useful to define the abject briefly. Julia Kristeva characterises it as a combination of fear and loathing, but also of attraction to the pre-Oedipal state, prior to the acquisition of language and prior to what Lacan calls the Law of the Father. The abject is therefore linked to the maternal, to lack of control and helplessness, to all the fluids we might associate with early childhood (vomit, blood, urine, excrement). The abject is a liminal state, an in-between, poised on the cusp of subject-hood, but not quite yet subjection. There is an unsettling combination of fluidity and rigidity in our films, but it is no stereotyped female-male binary. The butcher is not so much contrasted with a female other, as presented to us as both rigid and fluid; and he hates both, as much as he is attracted to both. There is overlap between the whole (the wholeness and the singular) to which he aspires, and the hole (the oblivion contained within the whole) to which he aspires no less (hence the title of this paper). We can explore this issue by focusing on the three clear references to *Taxi Driver* (Scorsese, 1976), on which the last part of the film is obsessively structured.

**Taxi Driver variation 1: the porn film and the butcher as penis**

In the first reference to *Taxi Driver* the butcher goes disconsolately to see a porn movie and watches stony-faced as a heterosexual couple perform on screen. The scene is a key one for the film, insisting on existential isolation and alienation, as well as on the radical separation of the sexes. As the butcher watches, he muses thus:

Either you’re born with a cock and you’re useful if you behave like a good hard cock which stuffs holes, or you’re born with a hole and you will only be useful if you are stuffed yourself. But in both cases you are alone. Yes, I’m a cock, a miserable cock, and to be respected I must always stay hard.

The ‘hard body’ desired here is Theweleit’s ‘fascist male warrior’, who fears being overwhelmed by a feminising red flood (see Thomas 1996: 129). It is hardly surprising that the butcher, who must draw blood as part of his job, feels repulsion for fluids spilling out of control from ruptured and distended bodies, whether those of slaughtered horses or women giving birth, or indeed a woman dying.

Nahon’s body emphasises the rigidity and aggression of the hard body. He is squat; he has bulbous glaring eyes, and a belligerently protuberant nose. His body is thus constructed as a threatening forward lunge, matched linguistically by the monosyllables he occasionally spits out vituperatively, his teeth and fists clenched. As Kristeva says of the abject subject, ‘I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself*
within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish myself (Kristeva 1982: 3; her emphases). These seep across and through the entire film in a stream of consciousness, a linguistic fluidity, which contaminates the otherwise often neutral sights we see (a humdrum hotel room, empty streets). That linguistic fluidity suggests that the rigidity of the butcher is not quite what it seems.

Indeed, the butcher’s observations as he watches the porn film are ambiguous. The subject of the utterance, shifting from male to female within the single ‘you’, suggests that the butcher himself is the one who needs to be ‘stuffed’, the hole made whole; in this fantasy he is both cock and hole at one and the same time. That whole combines both masculinity, and a femininity constantly repressed and represented as abject. It is a masculinity subjected hysterically to the Law, and a femininity abjected in the liminal spaces which border and burrow through the Law, like a network of arteries pulsating obscenely under skin stretched to breaking point, until a hole perforates the skin for the blood to gush out, as happens when the butcher fantasises the murder of his daughter.

Words gush out in the butcher’s stream of consciousness monologue, like the blood gushing out of Cynthia, like the blood which accompanies Cynthia’s birth in Carne, gushing out of the vagina, and like the blood gushing out of the slaughtered horse’s stomach in the scene intercut with Cynthia’s birth. The films show an obsession with holes of all kinds. It is not just the vagina through which blood and baby Cynthia emerge, or the hole in Cynthia’s neck spurting blood when she dies, or the horse’s stomach from which blood and guts gush out, or the vagina in the porn film, but the repeated scenes where the butcher gropes for Cynthia’s vagina as they sit on the bed, and the exterior shots of tunnels into which the butcher drives or emerges on foot. It is also the many shots of mouths, whether the mouth of the Arab worker into which the butcher twists his knife, or the shots of the butcher’s own mouth with the eyes out of shot, cartoon-style.

Importantly, however, the mouth is not just vaginal, as the opening scenes of Carne might have suggested; it is also cloacal. A number of spaces function as holes, not least because of their linguistic associations. The word trou in French is used colloquially for both the vagina, and, in the expression which occurs several times in the films, trou de cul, for the anus as well. It is also a colloquialism for prison, and it is the word used in Carne to refer to the building site. In each case, these spaces referred to as holes (the building site and the prison) contain other sexualised holes; for the building site it is the worker’s mouth penetrated by the butcher’s twisting knife held at his crotch height; and in the prison, there is an implication that the butcher and his cellmate engage in gay sex.

But spaces are often also closed to the butcher; doors of buildings — the hotel, the butcher’s shop, the café— are as frequently closed as open. Spaces are therefore as much cloacal as they are vaginal in the film. They are potential holes waiting to swallow him like the vagina dentata, or rejecting him because they are tightly closed like anxious anal sphincters.

This section has shown how the demarcation between rigidity and fluidity, which the butcher postulates as the marker of sexual difference, collapses under the weight of linguistic fluidity. The obsession with holes equally collapses the distinction between vagina and anus. The next section will explore the shift from the butcher as penis to the butcher as turd.
**Taxi Driver** variation 2: the gun in the mirror and the butcher as turd

The self-disgust generated by the abject is made clear in the second *Taxi Driver* reference, when the butcher returns to his hotel room and looks at himself in the mirror with his gun, fantasising that he will kill those who have crossed him, as well as killing himself. The violence he turns against himself bears out Kristeva’s point that in the abject the subject struggles to disentangle himself from what lies within, the unnameable and horrifying maternal origin. As the butcher says in that scene, playing on the part-homonym *mère/merde*, ‘my whole life has been a colossal turd, willed by a whore of a mother’; elsewhere in the film he refers to himself derisively as a ‘trou de cul’, or arsehole. He is both turd and hole, or, more precisely, turd in the hole, what Kristeva calls the anal penis, ‘the phallus with which infantile imagination provides the feminine sex’ (Kristeva 1982: 71). The butcher, desperate to remain hard and penile, realises that he is also fecal, *homo erectus*, but also *homo rectus*, whole and hole. There could be no clearer expression of what Calvin Thomas calls ‘scatontological anxiety’.

Thomas brings together Freud’s account of the *fort/da* game, and his theory of cloacal birth to suggest that the former ‘is implicated not only with the boy’s phantasy of having been produced through his mother’s bowels, and his foreclosure of that phantasy, but also with his own struggles to secure identity through the control of his bowels’ (Thomas 1999: 29). As Thomas points out, those struggles are never really successful, and all modes of representation are, to use his word, haunted by scatontological anxiety: ‘The image of “unimpaired masculinity”, the self-produced, self-representational image of the actively “self-made man”, is haunted by the earlier phantasmatic image of having been a passively and cloacally (m)other-made child’ (Thomas 1999: 29). Hence the aggression against women in the butcher’s rambling monologue, and the fear of homosexuality, ‘a fear of the anus as phantasmatic origin in the former instance and as destination of desire or locus of pleasure (…) in the latter’ (Thomas 1996: 88). The beginning of *Seul contre tous* makes it clear that the butcher was abused as a child, an event which posits the possibility of the pleasure to be gained from the anus, even if it is a pleasure only available to the abuser (we assume); the butcher’s frequent references to sodomy suggest both repulsion and attraction, a fear of becoming feminised, but also the masochistic desire to return to be ‘a passive object and slave to this jouissance, aggressed, sadisticized’ (Kristeva 1982: 183), as Kristeva writes of some of Céline’s more racist and homophobic pronouncements.

Like Céline’s work, the butcher’s voice smears what we see in a fecal stream of consciousness, an effect all the more pronounced by the editing out of the pauses and breaths between statements. We are attracted to this abject anality, submerged in it, for very simple material reasons. The butcher’s voice-over draws us close to him, for two reasons. First, because its almost continuous nature means that we are always with the butcher, ‘forced to share permanently his states of mind and to follow him in his most frightening excesses’, as Noé puts it (Rouyer 1999: 31. Second, because the punctuating gunshots on the soundtrack interact with that voice-over, encouraging us to see that voice-over not for what it is, an extremely aggressive flow, but for what it is in relation to the gunshots, a more mellifluous flow, a refuge from what Noé calls the stress of those gunshots (Bourbon 1999).

Blood as a visual sign of rupture, rejected birth, menstruation, and death, mingles with the shit of the soundtrack. As Thomas suggests, the anxious subject ‘collapses all those heterogeneous processes for which bodies are sites—fecal, urinal, seminal, fetal,
menstrual, glottal, lingual—into an undifferentiated and abject flux’ (Thomas 1966: 32); all of these are present either visually or linguistically in the two films. The borders between the visual and the aural are constantly shattered by explosions, whether aural, in the gunshots which punctuate the soundtrack, or the sudden zooms which jerk us forward dizzyingly from one plane into another. Sounds become signs, and signs become sounds, both signifying the horror of the abject with its fluid boundaries leaking into each other. Seeing and hearing melt into the searing light of a brilliant white fade-out at the end of the murder/suicide sequence, signifying apocalyptic failure, the blankness of an anger so excessive that the words strangle and extrude their obscene obverse, the silence of death, never so aptly named a pregnant silence, a silence full of what it cannot silence, a silence made of countless explosions paused as they are about to explode. Kristeva’s comment on Céline’s prose, which she describes as ‘a thin film constantly threatened with bursting’ (Kristeva 1982: 141) is an apt analysis of the promiscuity between the visual and the aural in *Seul contre tous*.

This section has shown how the butcher’s frame of reference is fecal and abject. The clean, hard body, or *corps propre*, as Kristeva calls it, collapses its boundaries and is invaded from within by abject fluids associated with the mother. Another boundary, that between seeing and hearing, is collapsed as the butcher’s stream of consciousness permeates the image track, working both with and against it. The next section will explore the butcher’s antithetical attempts to resolve the dissolution of the boundaries; first, through hysterical cutting, second through incest.

**Taxi Driver** variation 3: murder, incest, cannibalism

The final reference to *Taxi Driver* is the butcher shooting his daughter, which, as in *Taxi Driver*, is a bloodbath in a claustrophobic hotel space. This scene, no less than the first two replays, all differ from *Taxi Driver* in one significant way, however. They underline the butcher’s failure, something he comments on in the fantasied murder scene: ‘I’ve failed at everything. My birth, my youth, my love life, my shop. I should never have been born. My entire life is a mistake’. In the first film theatre scene, he is alone, and comments disconsolately on solitude, whereas Travis Bickle unsuspectingly takes his suitably offended girlfriend. In the mirror scene, like Bickle, the butcher fantasises the death of others, but, unlike Bickle, also fantasises his own death. And, finally, in the murder scene, Bickle murders a whole group of pimps and prostitutes, and is heroised for those murders, whereas the butcher merely fantasises his daughter’s murder, but does not go through with it, remaining the unheroic failure he commented on in the previous mirror sequence.

Arguably, his murderous fantasy is the logical conclusion to a series of insistent but ineffectual cuts practised in the two films. Cutting can be seen as an hysterical attempt to control time and the change which it brings, and to control space, most particularly to control the invasion of the fragmenting and hetero-dimensional abject into the monolithic and uni-dimensional *corps propre*. There is first the cut between the two films, which overlap with each other in terms of narrative. Then there are the very literal cuts we see as the butcher chops the meat at the beginning of *Carne*, these narrative cuts being mirrored by editing cuts as intertitles signal the passage of the years, as though the butcher were trying to control time. This sequence is echoed at the beginning of *Seul contre tous*, as the butcher recounts his life. His breathless, rapid-delivery monologue overlays a visual track consisting of photo-album stills of people and places, as if he were trying to staunch the flux of time by punctuating it with frozen images, familiar clichés providing havens of recognisability within the
anarchic flux of life itself. The cuts we see at the beginning of the films are themselves echoed throughout by rapid edits accompanied by fast zooms and gunshot sounds, as previously mentioned. These procedures can be seen as attempts to separate body and sign, materiality and spirit.

These various types of cutting have the opposite effect to that desired, however; they undermine the coherence of the narrative, compounding the butcher’s failure. As Kristeva points out in relation to Céline’s writing, the narrative is carved up into choice morsels with which the butcher is fascinated, and that fascination dislocates the narrative, allowing the abject to emerge, disrupt, and occasionally to overwhelm. The films set up cutting as a kind of ritual, but the films are submerged in fluids, whether corporeal or linguistic. It is therefore logical that we should see images which suggest that the mother’s body and the daughter’s body can be eaten: the mother’s body giving birth is intercut with a horse being slaughtered for the butcher; the butcher dreams of pink fleshy fillets which are shot and handled by the butcher in such a way as to suggest a vagina. It is therefore also logical that the butcher fails to kill his daughter, choosing instead the fantasy of incest, since incest represents the suspension of the Law of the Father, as Zizek points out (see Zizek 2000: 31), in the return to the non-differentiation of the pre-Oedipal and the engulfment in the archaic mother. It is for that reason that we might disagree with reviewers who felt that the apparent redemption of the butcher through incest was a disappointing closure (see for example Genin 1999: 1). It is logical in terms of the butcher’s project; and, more importantly, it is emphatically not a redemption, but, in appearance at least, a regressive return to the abject.

This section has shown how the third Taxi Driver reference emphasises the butcher’s failure, despite the cutting procedures which attempt to reinstate the control of the corps propre. Incest is no redemption, but forms an integral part of this failure, since it signals the return to the abject. Seul contre tous is neither joyous affirmation nor humdrum recognition of the abject, but a precarious balance between the two. The final section will suggest that this is figured narratively by incest, and metaphorically by something connected to it but which we do not see, at least not directly.

Coda: semen
The radical potential of incest as break with the Law and return to the abject, as argued above, is destabilised by what is never shown in the film, although constantly gestured at: semen. In fact, semen does appear, but sublimated, figured both as closure, and as counter-weight to the abject (unlike other markers of the abject, such as excrement and menstrual blood, which are connected with the mother, semen, for obvious reasons, is paternal; see Kristeva 1982: 71-72).

Arguably, there might have been plenty of opportunities for semen to be shown, whether prior to the birth scene in Carne, or as part of the porn film the butcher watches in Seul contre tous, or even as part of his incest fantasy. It is there nevertheless. It appears indirectly in the unexpected fade to white at the end of the film, where it is linked to the butcher’s insistence that he will commit incest. It also appears indirectly throughout the film as the film itself. The constant cutting procedures described above are an attempt to keep the abject at bay, to impose meaning on the body. Whether cuts of meat or cuts of film, cutting tries to impose the phallic economy; and if the cuts are the process, then the product is, metaphorically speaking, semen, which is why semen is present liminally as the film itself, even if the
butcher (and the film) to a large extent fail, because cutting releases the abject, figured by flux (of blood, of language).

Cutting is a constant struggle between the release of abjected blood and paternal semen; between red and white; between absence of meaning and meaning; between the hole and the whole. The final scenes of the film are crucial in this respect, since they contrast the murder of Cynthia and the rape of Cynthia as two alternative narrative economies answering the question ‘how can this end?’ The first produces, literally, a gaping hole which gushes blood, as had the feminised holes of Carne: Cynthia’s mother giving birth to Cynthia, intercut with the slaughter of the horse, could not make clearer the fear and fascination of the abject. But the final scenes take up another fascination, the fascination with Cynthia’s invisible vagina. The butcher is often seen groping for Cynthia's vagina in Seul contre tous, fascinated by what is deceptive and doubly hidden from his gaze, first by her skirt, second by her flesh, the bleeding wound which deceives the gaze; neither we nor the butcher know in Carne whether the blood on her knickers signifies rape or menstruation.

Like semen, then, Cynthia’s vagina is never seen, but we know that it is there, an object of endless fascination for the butcher, who wishes to implant his semen in it, to loop the loop. Why? As the final sentences of the final dialogue suggest -- 'Between us, that’s all I can see. I love you.' -- the butcher seeks disappearance through identification with the same in a safe pre-Oedipal space where absent mother, mute daughter, and father collapse into a transcendent, phallicised space, no longer the messy corporeal space of the maternalised abject, but ‘pure’ emptiness. No blood, no words (the two are the same in these films, abject flux); just the blinding whiteness of the final money shot in fantasied copulation, figured by the slashing copula of my title, w/h, seen but not heard.

References