

Abject(ion): The Feminine and The Masculine

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Abstract

Women have been associated with many negative terms in society, one of which is abject(ion), a term popularised by Julia Kristeva in her 'Powers of Horror' (1982). Abject(ion) has become Women's historical condition - a name that is attributable to her and therefore changeable. This paper proposes to take a different approach to this Feminine classified term, and to the notion that Woman is associated with all that is on the other side of the border, through revealing that abject(ion) is both Feminine and Masculine. It is precisely because abject(ion) is not only psychological but also physiological that it straddles both genders and is not solely reducible to the Feminine.

The rethinking of such a term, which has been gendered, proves critical to understanding the full power of its workings, and to be able to approach it productively rather than negatively, where it is forever in relation to a positive counterpart. Hence what is at the core of the paper, is a concern with the certain curtailing that occurs through the direct association between abject(ion) and the Feminine/Woman.

These negative connotations have proliferated all manner of disciplines, instituting abject(ion) as Feminine. One such discipline is architecture, and we may employ architecture to not only provide a series of illustrative examples of the short comings of gendering abject(ion), but more importantly demonstrate, how abject(ion) may be rethought productively, and thus unlock critical attributes that are presently curtailed. It is only under such circumstances that we come to understand 'the obscene' as 'something much more profound than the backwash of a sick society's aversion to the body,'¹ to employ the words of Susan Sontag.

Key words: Abject(ion), Feminine, Masculine, Productive, Architecture

1. Women's Historical Condition

If we begin by adopting Kristeva's direct association of the Woman (and particularly the maternal) with abject(ion), a string of questions that Barbara Creed points to as having escaped discussion by Kristeva follow:

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

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subjectivity and language, completely unchangeable? Is the abjection of women a precondition for the continuation of sociality?²

Creed makes explicit that the classification of Woman as abject, is by the subjective system. Hence she asks whether this name is merely attributed to her and therefore changeable, or is a precondition for the continuation of sociality. This results in a broader question: whether abject(ion) as attributed to the Feminine in fact prevents the female from redefining a new form of Feminine subjectivity? An identical question to that posed by Luce Irigaray regarding Deleuze and Guattari's *Body without Organs* as Rosi Braidotti notes.

She [Irigaray] points out that the emphasis on the machinelike, the inorganic, as well as the notions of loss of self, dispersion, and fluidity are all too familiar to women; is not the "body without organs" women's own historical condition?³

I would argue that abject(ion) is (as is the BwO) Women's own historical condition, and that both are therefore changeable. Abject(ion) as associated with the Feminine, is changeable precisely as it can also be characterised as non-gender specific, if we take it as purely physiological, as much of that physiology is shared by both genders. For both genders equally urinate, defecate, vomit and perspire. Abjection is our bodily process for managing waste, it exists in order for the body to be, it is purely about the body expelling that which it has exhausted all possible nutrients from, in order that it may rejoin the field of material structure. It is only after its primal function, that it acquires meaning, and it is from this perspective, that Kristeva insists on its relation to the maternal,⁴ as the maternal is a 'pre-discursive biological necessity'⁵. It is at this point, that abject(ion) as maternal, becomes transferred to the architectural discipline, through spatial figures such as the cave.

It is clear that the cave is a metaphor for the maternal womb. Through the processes of metaphorisation the attributes of the maternal womb are transferred over to this *space*, over to the figure of the cave.⁶

To label this rejecta as Feminine and reduce it to the negative case, or as Masculine where it assumes a positive case, and to then translate this term into architecture as gendered, is to underestimate its complexity. Such approaches reaffirm the dualistic system, which leaves no room for the in-between. In this context it is impossible to approach abject(ion) productively, to fully understand its workings and functionings. Thus although one must acknowledge the long standing associations between abject(ion) and the Feminine, abject(ion) is not intrinsic to the Woman (or to any one body). Abject(ion) flows between bodies. It is sometimes Feminine (menstruation), sometimes Masculine (ejaculation), sometimes both, but it never solely concerns one body. Consider,

- A woman menstruating, the haemorrhage leaks on her male partner, onto

the bed -

Abject(ion) stops being gendered the moment it leaves one body and becomes ingrained in others. To reduce abject(ion) to a single body, or a spatial figure, leaves no room for it as the in-between, as slippage. In fact, these conceptions defy its workings, situating it, rendering it static. Here, abject(ion) is not excess. It does not overflow.

2. Masculine Abject(ion)

The problem with gendering abject(ion), is that it could be equally gendered as Masculine for a number of reason. One: Man enters/penetrates into other bodies. Woman accepts things into her body. 'women's bodies are penetrable by design'⁷ as William Ian Miller writes. Diane Ackerman distinguishes between the two genders further,

During intercourse, a man hides parts of himself in a woman, a bit of his body disappears from view, while a woman opens up the internal workings of her body and adds another organ to it, as if it were meant to be there all along. These, in a starched, stiff, dangerous world, are ultimate risks.⁸

Given this, Man loses a part of himself, he temporarily expels a part of his body into another, whereas Woman accepts a new organ into her body. Women are not only leaky but possess the ability for containment. There is a subtraction that associates itself with the Man, and an addition with the Woman. Abjection is a form of subtraction, our body expels, leaks, overflows. Hence in this instance of metaphorical abjection, it is the Man who expels. This exchange between the bodies, this act of addition and subtraction that occurs, not only serves to illustrate that Man is associable with abject(ion) but is interesting on a further level. It is interesting to consider this act of addition and subtraction between not merely human bodies but in the case of architecture, human and spatial bodies.

We may pose the following questions: Cannot space open its internal workings to the body and add a bodily organ to its composition? Or can the body not allow a part of space inside it, or further still, probe space with a part of itself and disappear? And all of this interchangeably? Would not such a violent union produce an intimacy between our body and space akin to orgasm? Is this not the violence architect Bernard Tschumi spoke so passionately of in the 1990s?⁹ Wouldn't all this result in a single body for which we require a single language? A body manifested by a crash, akin to the J.G. Ballard crash between mechanical and human bodies. Here it is important to understand that our body is a Klein bottle, that it freely turns in on itself.

The mouth and the anus bear an undeniable connection. They are literally connected, each being one end of a tube that runs through the body. No great feat of metaphorization or cultural imagination was needed to show that what went in at

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one end came out at the other.

The anus is the end of a tube; the mouth is the beginning

One is properly ingress; the other egress.¹⁰

Two: Abject(ion) is Masculine because it inevitably leads to death - to the point where we no longer expel but we are expelled:

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 - *cadare*, cadaver.... It is no longer "I" who expel. "I" is expelled.¹¹

From the perspective of death it is particularly Man who comes to approach abject(ion), and who has been associated with death throughout history. One can see such a comment from French film director Catherine Breillat, 'A man cannot give life. He takes it. He gives death. And thus, eternal life.'¹²

Three: Abject(ion) forms the work of Men, as much as Women. Whether abject(ion) merely appears in select passages: William S. Burroughs's 'Naked Lunch' (1959), the Comte de Lautreamont's 'Maldoror' (1868-9), or plays a more persistent role: Francis Bacon's paintings, Matthew Barney's films. This work is marked by not only male writers, painters, film makers, but importantly by the male figures in their work which are in the process of abjection, and which in the case of Barney's films, is often himself. It is clear that abject(ion) exists within the Masculine realm on a number of levels, and one could even say that if need be, it could be woven into Men's historical condition.

3. Abject(ion) in Architecture

The association between abject(ion) and the Feminine, and their classification as that located on the 'other side of the border' is interesting architecturally, as it lends itself directly to the dualistic relationships still prevalent to a large degree in the discipline. On a fundamental level, architecture engages in various dualistic relationships whether in form, materiality, layout or other aspects (we need only to look to the architectural rhetoric) i.e. rough/raw versus smooth/rich; dark versus light; compression versus release; open versus enclosed; intimate versus public etc. This is ideal for discussing abject(ion) negatively, however if we understand abject(ion) as the in-between, then there is no way of addressing it architecturally. It does not fit, as it is neither A nor B but rather that which binds them.

Because of this framework, it is abject(ion) as negative (as associated with the Feminine) that is predominant in architectural writing and practice. There are two distinct approaches in architecture in dealing with abject(ion): a direct approach and an indirect approach. The direct approach often entails a construction of spaces with abject materials,¹³ an approach that serves to establish a threatening proximity,

however one which falls into the trap of prioritizing the abject over the process of abjection, and as a result objectifying the abject. Within the second approach, the terms associated meanings and symbolic connotations take precedence over the actual abject or its process. Thus we often come across Georges Bataille's *dust* and *informe*, Anthony Vidler's the *uncanny*, Adolf Loos's parallel between ornament and filth is also worthy of mention, the womb and/or the cave, the sublime and dichotomies such as inside-outside/ Feminine-Masculine that implicate the abject through a direct translation to the Feminine, and where the Feminine in turn becomes translated to the inside. A certain complexity however arises from not dealing with the term directly, which must be unravelled with care, as simplistic readings of these associations lead to unproductive and unformed categorisations,¹⁴ and where abject(ion) may only be approached metaphorically. It is useful here to provide an example.

In 'Cinematic Space: Desiring and Deciphering' (1996) Laura Mulvey on numerous occasions refers to 'A home or homestead as signifier of stable space, the sphere of the family and the feminine',¹⁵ rendering the Feminine stable - passive (a generally accepted categorisation hailing back to the Greek syntax and semantics as Alice Jardine notes, where "presence" or "being" is there *ousia* or *parousia*, signifying "homestead," "being-at-home," and "integral, unmediated presentness.")).¹⁶ Mulvey further outlines the Masculine as outside (a point confirmed by architectural historian Beatriz Colomina), adventure, movement and cathartic action.¹⁷ If we follow this translation of the Feminine to the home/interior through, we come to the abject being associated with the interior via its translation to the Feminine, as per Kristeva's classification:

At the limit, if someone personifies abjection without assurance of purification, it is a woman, "any woman," the "woman as a whole"; as far as he is concerned, man exposes abjection by knowing it, and through that very act purifies it.¹⁸

Thus via this string of translations we come to indirectly address the abject in architecture. Not only does this bring us back to a far too simplistic translation, but further, the Feminine which personifies abject(ion) and thus is volatile and ill-defined on the one hand, is simultaneously passive and stable. Hence doesn't this flow and unboundedness contradict passivity? And aren't Women in fact active and Men passive? It would seem that there is an inherent conflict which implicates the labelling of abject(ion). Paradoxes emerge, and certain qualities become consciously omitted.

Alice Jardine writes that, 'woman and her obligatory connotations are essential to the functioning of psychoanalytic theory'.¹⁹ In other words, Woman and all that is associated with her; the interior, home, cave, abject(ion), fluidity, slippage, the viscous etc are essential to psychoanalysis. If this is the case, architecture as an active participant in such connotations, is psychoanalytic. And here lies the problematic of accepting and working within the current notions of abject(ion) in

architecture. For if we directly adopt the current architectural approach to abject(ion), without the consideration of the definition as a whole, we will ultimately be rehashing the established relationships between Woman-space-abject(ion), we will be dealing with dated polemics. Architecture currently depends on this association between 'Woman' and 'space' and it is for this reason that one is unable to locate any reference to abject(ion) void of the Feminine. And it is because we deal with abject(ion) as the negative of the clean and proper, because we tend to discuss it indirectly, that we may maintain our distance from it and hence maintain a certain Puritanism in architecture as architect/theorist Bernard Tschumi wrote in 1996,

Although society secretly delights in crime, excesses, and violated prohibitions of all sorts, there seems to be a certain Puritanism among architectural theorists...²⁰

What the survey of abject(ion) in architecture makes explicit, is a gap in investigations into the process of abjection, into the act, the verb, into the obscured boundary between human bodies and spatial bodies, in effect, into the in-between. Such an investigation is into the breaking boundaries of the human body not in isolation but in relation to the breaking boundaries of spatial bodies, which when ruptured, simultaneously rupture those of space and vice versa, interdependently. The question that therefore arises, is how does one discuss the true nature of abject(ion) directly, within the current dualistic framework of architecture? How does one rethink abject(ion) productively?

4. Bodies

To begin with, we need to understand that abject(ion) is not reducible to *a* body, be it a human or spatial body. It is volatile. It excretes out of one body only to be ingrained in another, and in so doing, crosses and dilutes boundaries. Abject(ion) entails bodies. Because of this, it cannot be solely Feminine. It is a discussion of proximity, where objects (space) that are typically kept at a distance from our bodies and understood as outside of us, are brought within an overwhelming proximity to our body, to the extent that the object disappears both physically and psychologically. This for Jean-Paul Sartre brings on a feeling of nausea.

Objects should not *touch* because they are not alive. You use them, put them back in place, you live among them: they are useful, nothing more. But they touch me, it is unbearable. I am afraid of being in contact with them as though they were living beasts.²¹

His blue cotton shirt stands out joyfully against a chocolate-coloured wall. That too brings on the Nausea. The Nausea is not inside me: I feel it *out there* in the wall, in the suspenders, everywhere around me. It makes itself one with the café, I am the one who is within it.²²

These bodies engaged in the process of abjection are not discrete entities, they are

not static. Rather they may be understood as a mass of perpetually shifting heterogeneous organs. Abject(ion) blurs boundaries and hence reorganises bodies, no body remaining cohesive – singular. Instead temporary heterogeneous bodies, or what Gilles Deleuze would term assemblages are formed, which eventually decompose, the organs having constituted these bodies descending to their respective structures. It is possible to contemplate such relationships as both human and spatial bodies are material objects, and may therefore be broken into parts, lose parts and acquire new parts thus altering the whole. In this way, human bodies and spatial bodies may displace each other, exchange parts and importantly affect one another. This is something as architect Greg Lynn notes, that architecture, privileging ‘a holistic model of the body – one that is essentially static’ has consistently ignored, ‘This *whole* architectural concept ignores the intricate local behaviors of matter and their contribution to the composition of bodies.’²³

Despite the persistent distinction/ duality between body and space in architecture, we may come to understand abject(ion) as a process that entails bodies and sets in motion the construction and deconstruction of assemblages through open philosophical models such as those of Gilles Deleuze. Deleuze allows for ‘a way of looking at all bodies as parts of the same construct, to be linked or decoupled in strategic or momentary ways.’²⁴ In order for such a model to be implemented, one must accept that architecture is not a static entity, that it is merely space, but rather that it is constituted by the interaction between human and spatial bodies. In short, that experience or what Tschumi terms event, constitutes architecture. It is only such an approach that allows one to move beyond classifying abject(ion) as the other side of the border and associating it with the Feminine - an approach that admits that abject(ion) is about volatile bodies and the assemblages they form. Here abject(ion) has agency. Here, it is truly productive.

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Notes

- ¹ Susan Sontag, "The Pornographic Imagination," in *Styles of Radical Will*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), 57.
- ² Barbara Creed, "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection," *Screen* 27, no. 1 (1986): 54.
- ³ Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 116. Referring to Luce Irigaray's comments in, *This Sex Which Is Not One*.
- ⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 45.
- ⁵ Judith Butler writes on Kristeva, 'She defends a maternal instinct as a pre-discursive biological necessity, thereby naturalizing a specific cultural configuration of maternity.' Judith Butler, "The Body Politics of Julia Kristeva," *Hypatia* 3, no. 3 (Winter 1989): 104.
- ⁶ Mirjana Lozanovska, "Excess: The Possibility of Disruption on the Side of Woman/Women," *Interstices* 4 (1995): 2.
- ⁷ William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 101.
- ⁸ Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 307.
- ⁹ See Bernard Tschumi, who refers to metaphoric violence in architecture to describe the intensity of the interaction between bodies and spaces. Bernard Tschumi, *Questions of Space: Lectures on Architecture*, (London: Architectural Association, 1995). And Bernard Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction*, (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1996).
- ¹⁰ Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*, 96, 98, 99.
- ¹¹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 3-4.
- ¹² Catherine Breillat, *Pornocracy*, translated by Paul Buck and Catherine Petit, (Los Angeles: Semiotext, 2005), 98.
- ¹³ See David Adjaye 'Dirty House' (2002), R&Sie 'Dusty Relief' (2002) and Christine McCarthy, "Constructions of a Culinary Object," *Space and Culture* 1, no. 9 (1997): 9-23.
- ¹⁴ In a philosophical context for example, Denis Hollier writing 'on' the Bataille labyrinth points to its far too direct and simplistic relation to caves, tunnels, wombs etc. 'But it is not simply a product of nature either, despite the diverse organotelluric connotations that would connect it with Old Mole's tunnels, with the underground networks of chambers and corridors of caves (like Lascaux), with the "world of the womb," with the "infernal and maternal world of the depths of the earth." That would be too easy.' Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille*, (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1989), 57-8.
- ¹⁵ Laura Mulvey, "Cinematic Space: Desiring and Deciphering," in *Desiring Practices*, edited by Katerina Rüedi, Sarah Wigglesworth and Duncan McCorquodale, (London: Black Dog Publishing Limited, 1996), 210. See also Mulvey's article 'Pandora: Topographies of the Mask and Curiosity' in Beatriz Colomina, ed. *Sexuality and Space*, Vol. 1, Princeton Papers on Architecture, (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), 55-56.
- ¹⁶ Alice A. Jardine, *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 128.
- ¹⁷ Mulvey, "Pandora: Topographies of the Mask and Curiosity," 55.
- ¹⁸ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 85.
- ¹⁹ Jardine, *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity*, 159.
- ²⁰ Bernard Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction*, (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1996), 66.
- ²¹ Jean- Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, translated by Lloyd Alexander, (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1959), 19.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 31.
- ²³ Greg Lynn, "Body Matters," In *Folds, Bodies & Blobs: Collected Essays*, (Bruxelles: La Lettre Volée, 1998), 135.
- ²⁴ Kelly Pendergrast, "Flows of Power: Rethinking the Abject in Ousmane Sembène's *Xala*," *Octopus Journal* 3 (Fall 2007): 81-82.

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