Lustmord in Weimar Germany: The Abject Boundaries of Feminine Bodies and Representations of Sexualized Murder

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Introduction

In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Julia Kristeva analyzes the conditions that make subjectivity, the symbolic order and thus personal and societal identity possible. She argues that individual subjectivity or identity can only be formed by abjecting the maternal body. It is only through this process of abjection that borders, binaries, and the subject/object distinction can occur. On a societal level, abjection of the maternal operates via rituals of defilement and taboos. Such rituals and taboos are symbolic mechanisms that either distance the individuals from the threat of the abject, or they allow expression of the abject through socially/symbolically tolerable means. In this paper I shall explore the abject nature of representations of sexual murder or *Lustmord* that occurred in Weimar Germany. Such representations were not isolated or obscure, but rather were a cultural phenomenon, produced by two of the period’s most celebrated artists, George Grosz and Otto Dix. As such, they warrant examination as a historical manifestation or variant of the incest taboo, on which much of Kristeva’s analysis is focused. I shall show that lustmord operated both as ritualized defilement, and as an explicit inscription of the abject. In the first section of this paper I will discuss Kristeva’s analysis of abjection and rituals of defilement. In the second section I will examine the phenomenon of lustmord as abjection. I will conclude with some remarks as to the relevance of my analysis to contemporary depictions of women.

I. Abjection

In her study of the abject, Kristeva is interested in the discourses and conditions that both make identity or the speaking subject possible, and those which challenge the borders and integrity of identity and subjectivity. According to Kristeva, signification, which includes language and subjectivity, is a heterogeneous dialectical process that includes both semiotic and symbolic elements. The raw material for signification is what Kristeva terms the semiotic. It is constituted or characterized by the polymorphous sexual/psychic drives that are discharged in language and signification, and hence the semiotic is the material inscription of the drives in signification. The semiotic is an anarchic and formless flux that both precedes and exceeds symbolization. The semiotic corresponds to the rhythm and tone of language, to bodily affect, and to the maternal. It is the unrepresentable and as such heterogeneous and unstable ground of language and identity. The semiotic also corresponds to the unrepresentable aspects of the unconscious and the irrational that are again, for Kristeva, the foundations of language and subjectivity. Within the process of signification the semiotic drive force is constrained and given form via repressive mechanisms by the symbolic, but it is never completely successfully repressed or subsumed by the Symbolic order, and remains in dialectical tension with the symbolic element. Both signification and
identity/subjectivity are continuous oscillating processes of interplay between he semiotic and symbolic. Although the two are separate elements, they are in constant dialectical tension.

The semiotic is the non-signifying affective corporeal material of signification and it is therefore prior to any representation, unity, and binary or hierarchical differentiation which characterizes the symbolic, and hence also characterizes identity. Thus, the semiotic precedes any unified ego, or any ego/object distinction. Kristeva links the semiotic and the undifferentiated drives to the maternal relationship. The child’s original relationship to the mother (whether by original we mean in utero or after birth) is characterized by undifferentiation both of self and of drives and internal perceptions and emotions. There are no clear and distinct borders perceptually or psychically between the child and its mother. How, then, does differentiation, subjectivity, language and signification occur?

For Lacan, the emergence of subjectivity begins with the identification and alienation that occurs during the mirror stage, and is secured during the Oedipal stage and its attendant threat of castration and submission to the paternal/phallic law. Lacan establishes the narcissistic identification that occurs in the mirror stage as intrinsically symbolic and that which is always mediated by language. Kristeva argues that the narcissistic structure and identification required for subjectivity is a pre-symbolic, and thus objectless identification. Such an identification is connected to the unstable drives and the semiotic. This objectless identification present in primary narcissism is effected by an attempted rejection of the undifferentiated fluid ground from which it is engendered, and from which the “I” must try to individuate. In short the maternal and the child’s relationship to the maternal is transformed through a process of Abjection, whereby the mother, although still compelling, is made repulsive. The child makes the mother abject in order to facilitate its individuation, but at this point the ego of the child is not yet a subject and the mother is not yet an object. The mother is the non objectal Other, and the abject is thus the space between what will become the Other as object and the subject. Abjection, Kristeva writes, is a narcissistic crisis. The identification that occurs is only a seeming. The child is not joined to part of the mother, but it is not distinct from the mother. The abject, then is the Other that both engenders identity, and challenges the integrity of identity by confronting it with its own unstable borders.

The receptacle or space that is linked to the maternal, and in which drives hold sway Kristeva calls the Chora. The drives correspond to the “not yet ego” and the “not yet object of that ego” that characterize primary narcissism. Primary Narcissism is an internal cathection of drives which makes future symbolic distinctions such as subject/object or inside/outside possible. But there has to be an abjection of the maternal or undifferentiated state for Primary narcissism to occur, and this abjection is concomitant with primary narcissism, which prefigures entry into the symbolic. So from the beginning, Kristeva argues that the body and the flux of the semiotic/maternal constitutes subjectivity even though signification and subjectivity require that the Chora and the maternal be repressed.

It bears repeating that primary narcissism is an objectless identification because it is anterior to any subject/object or outside/inside dichotomy, but it is an attempt at covering the unstable ground of identity by abjecting or repudiating that unstable ground and all that represents it. The ego and its objects are counterparts. If each finds its support in the other, if the stability of the object promises the stability of the subject, then the abject is neither subject nor object.
It is a consequence of recognizing the impossibility of the identity of either subject or object, and yet the necessary dependence of each on the other. If the object is an externalized correlate of the subject, then the abject is with the fading, emersion, or disappearance of the subject and its imaginary hold over the object. The abject is that part of the subject (which cannot be categorized as an object) which attempts to expel. The abject is the symptom of the object’s failure to fill the subject or to define and anchor the subject.1

The abject is the objectless, or unobjectified material on which both the unconscious and identity are erected. It is the material on which all social order is founded. Abjection safeguards identity, but, although rejected, the abject, or maternal/semiotic material is never fully repressed or sublimated, and constantly threatens the borders of identity with rupture or dissolution. The abject haunts identity with the impossibility of clear borders between the filthy and the clean, or order and disorder required by the symbolic.

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, abjection itself is a compromise of judgment and affect, of condemnation and yearning, of signs and drives. Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which the body becomes separated from another body in order to be - maintaining that night in which the outline of signified thing vanishes and where only the imponderable affect is carried out.2

Kristeva writes “the more or less beautiful image in which I behold or recognize myself rests upon an abjection that sunders it as soon as repression, the constant watchman is relaxed.”3 Abjection, however, is not merely repression of elements within the unconscious by the conscious. Repression is a symbolic mechanism that requires a distinction between subject/object and consciousness/unconsciousness in order to function. Prior to the act of abjection and the primary narcissistic structure, symbolic functions such as repression do not yet exist. Symbolic functions do, however, subsequently keep the abject from exceeding the boundaries of identity and social order once the subject has entered the symbolic order of language, and become a ‘speaking subject’. Kristeva finds these symbolic functions in rituals of defilement and taboos, which always focus on the repression or repudiation of the maternal body or the maternal relationship, and the pleasure found therein. Rituals of defilement are attempts to make the abject -- that which doesn’t agree to the super-ego’s rules of prohibition, paternal function, and symbolic differentiation -- tolerable through repressive or sublimating mechanisms. Rites of defilement or purification are attempts at purifying the abject. They are symbolic mechanisms for keeping the abject excluded from identity and the social order, or for attempting to purify identity and social order of the abject. Thus, they are attempts to protect identity from the threat of dissolution.

Rituals of defilement, or ritualized abjection of the maternal/female body

Kristeva extends her analysis of personal identity built on abjection of the maternal body to social identity built on ritualized abjection of the maternal, feminine, or female body. Such rituals take the form of incest taboos or defilement of unclean objects that represent the ambiguous borders of the
“clean and proper body” which are threatened by abjected material. Discourses and rituals of defilement are attempts at coding the taboo of incest, which represents on a social level the threat of engulfment by the maternal body that operates on a personal level. Kristeva is concerned not with the socially productive function of the son-mother incest prohibition, but rather with the “alterations within subjectivity and within the very symbolic competence, implied by the confrontation with the feminine and the way in which societies code themselves in order to accompany as far as possible the speaking subject on that journey. Abjection, or the journey to the end of the night.”

On a societal or cultural level, confrontation with the feminine equals confrontation with the abject. The feminine represents the Other without a name, the Other that underlies the appearance of a stable identity. Since the confrontation with the feminine is a confrontation with the unnamable abject, the feminine must be dealt with via symbolic mechanisms of exclusion, repression, or sublimation if the social code and order is to remain intact and stable. Incest prohibitions and rituals of defilement act as rejections of the abject as that which is filthy or repulsive but yet compelling. Such rejections are attempts to veil the motility, ambiguity, and uncertainty that both underlie and threaten identity and the social order. “Incest prohibition throws a veil over primary narcissism and the always ambivalent threats with which it menaces subjective identity. It cuts short the temptation to return with abjection and jouissance, to that passivity status within the symbolic function, where the subject, fluctuating between inside and outside, pleasure and pain, would find death, along with nirvana”.

Abjection, in one form or another, like the incest taboo, is a universal phenomenon and hence it is coextensive with the symbolic and social order, and exists both on a collective and individual level. Even though abjection is a universal phenomenon, the form and shape of abjection and its societal codings can vary according to sociohistorical conditions and symbolic systems. That is to say, different cultures or different historical times engender variant rituals of defilement, or ways of keeping the abject at bay. Thus, socio-historical considerations can “allow us to understand why the demarcating imperative, which is experienced subjectively as abjection, varies according to time and space, even though it is universal.”

Although the historical manifestations may vary according to time and space, Kristeva argues that the logic underlying the different methods of abjection is the same. There is one psycho-symbolic economy that determines the underlying logic of all cultural or anthropological variants of abjection (i.e., marriage rites, menstrual rituals, food rituals, religious rites) and “evinces a specific economy of the speaking subject, no matter what its historical manifestations may be.” All such variants are attempts to cover the hole of primary narcissism, and the unstable borders of identity which depend upon the abjection of the maternal/feminine body.

In her attempt to support her claim, Kristeva analyzes a variety of rituals of defilement centering on such things as menstrual blood, incest taboos, marriage rights, and food. Kristeva, relying on research from Mary Douglas, argues that the ability of the defiled object (be it filth, food, etc.) to pollute or contaminate is proportional to the potency of the prohibition that founds it. Presumably incestuous relations would be extremely “polluting” or contaminating given the potency of the threat to identity they pose, and hence the incest prohibition must be extremely potent. Correspondingly, the ritual of defilement would need to be as potent as the threat posed by incest and the feminine.
Rituals of defilement are supposed to protect one from the evil threat of the abject. Kristeva notes that women and particularly mothers are implicated both socially and symbolically in rituals of defilement.

There is a need to separate the sexes, and to privilege the rights of men over those of women. Although they are put in the position of passive objects, women are also seen as

“baleful schemers” from whom rightful beneficiaries must protect themselves. It is as if, lacking a central authoritarian power that would settle the definitive supremacy of one sex-- or lacking a legal establishment that would balance the prerogatives of both sexes--two powers attempted to share out society. One of them, the masculine, apparently victorious, confesses through its very relentlessness against the other, the feminine, that it is threatened by a asymmetrical, irrational, wily, uncontrollable power...it is always to be noticed that the attempt to establish a male, phallic power is vigorously threatened by the no less virulent power of the other sex, which is oppressed (recently? or not sufficiently for the survival needs of society?). That other sex, the feminine becomes synonymous with a radical evil that is to be suppressed. 9

The societal need to suppress the evil that is the feminine corresponds to the psychic need to suppress or abject the maternal body and the maternal authority in order to enter the symbolic order, to bring oneself under paternal/phallic law, and to become a subject. Thus we should infer that the feminine poses the most extreme threat to identity, has the most potency for pollution or contamination, and requires the most forceful suppression and the most potent rituals of defilement. (Rituals of consecration or idealization could also be means of excluding the abject. Women may then be either defiled or elevated to the status of someone like the Virgin Mary. Such elevation usually involves the desexualization of women, and hence renders women impotent as both sexual beings and as threats of contamination or dissolution. In both cases, defilement and consecration can be read as attempts at excluding the abject or subduing its threat through symbolic mechanisms of social ritual.)

Now that Kristeva’s general outline of abjection and the function of rituals of defilement have been laid out, I would like to explore the subject of Lustmord, or sexual murder as it appeared in the work of Otto Dix and George Grosz in Weimar Germany. I shall extend Kristeva’s analysis of the abject and rituals of defilement to lustmord. If we extend Kristeva’s analyses of the abject and rituals of defilement to lustmord, lustmord may be viewed as the ultimate ritual of abjection and defilement against that most potent threat of pollution -- female sexuality. In situating lustmord as a cultural phenomenon of the abject, one ritualized through art rather than religion, I shall try to explore whether or not lustmord was an act of defilement of the feminine. I shall try to show that lustmord does not clearly emerge as either a disruptive confrontation with the abject that exceeds the borders of the symbolic, or as a ritual of defilement operating to exclude the abject and preserve the borders of the symbolic. Lustmord is both an artistic discourse of excess, and a repressive means of defilement. At this point however, the ambiguity of the abject should not be at all surprising.

II. Lustmord: artistic representations of sexual murder in Weimar Germany

In her book Lustmord: Sexual Murder in Weimar Germany10, Maria Tater investigates the gender
politics of cultural production in Germany during the pre-World War I era through the war years in
the 1920s, specifically as it operated through the artistic representations of sexual murder or
lustmord made popular by George Grosz and Otto Dix. This period has been referred to as one of a
modernist movement in art that aestheticized violence and was funded by a transgressive energy that
marks the avant-garde. Tater, however, reads the situation of sexual murder in the art work of
Weimar Germany as more than an avant-garde aesthetic convention or genre. She argues that it is
symptomatic of a culture that views women as icons of licentious sexuality, threats to masculinity,
and as mothers as agents against sexual prohibitions.11 Tater makes clear that the representations of
sexual murder are not just eviscerated female bodies in lewd positions, but that the subject matter is
lustful. The German term Lustmord implies desire or pleasure along with sexual gain from the
murderous act or representation. Women are represented as mutilated female bodies which are
objects of both fascination and dread. Such representations are both riveting in their displays of
disfiguring violence, and also repugnant in the detail of morbid carnality.12

It will be fruitful to extend Kristeva’s analysis of the abject to the female body as represented in
lustmord, as this representation fits the definition of Kristeva’s abject. The female body as
represented in lustmord is both repulsive and compelling. It must, however, be made repulsive
through abjection and through defilement. Such representations can be viewed as defilements
ritualized not through religion, but through art. “Our fascination with sexual murder stems in part
form its mystification as a deed that, in its perversion of love into hate, could be committed only by
a savage beast or deranged monster rather than a human being. Yet time and again, these murderers
are constructed as sons seeking revenge against women...”13 Perhaps viewing the sexual murder as a
perversion that could only be committed by a beast is an attempt to cover the fact that identity is
born out of a rejection of such ambiguous and undifferentiated drives of love and hate that the
feminine/maternal body represents. These undifferentiated drives and the feminine/maternal body
force us to confront lustmord in ways which alleviate the threat to identity.

Tater notes that for decades the images of the female victims of lustmord were suppressed in
investigations of Weimar Culture. She attributes the motivating factors of this suppression to the
disturbing content of the art, and the unsettling effect on attempts to produce stabilizing definitions
of modernist aesthetics. Even though the images in the work of Grosz and Dix were extremely
graphic, art critics focused on the form of the paintings or the positioning of objects such as lamps,
and all but ignored the violent content and the graphic representation of mutilated, lewdly
positioned female bodies that appeared in the artwork. Referring to Dix’s Sexual Murder (1922)
Tater notes that “One critic singles out Dix’s canvasses of murdered women (there are many,
though this one ranks among the most lurid) for their ‘intensely glowing colors’ and ‘grotesque
humor’ which give them ‘special appeal’. Another treats the scene as wholly unremarkable—a mere
‘genre convention,...noting only that the room in which the corpse of Lustmord reposes resembles
Dix’s room as a student.”14 Such cultural blindness often acts to naturalize rape and murder of
women. Such images no longer evoke shock at violence directed toward women, and indeed, the
scenes of lustmord don’t even warrant mention. Tater notes that other representations of death
haven’t been met with such blindness and disinterest. “Deaths represented as having a spiritually or
socially redeeming purpose have not met with the powerful resistance to analysis at work in images
of Lustmord.” For example, the nineteenth-century Liebestod (love-death) marked by the assertion
of transcendent desire and the spiritualization of Eros was celebrated in Wagner’s Tristan and
Isolde. “It has not ceased to attract popular and scholarly attention over the years, and remains a
fixture in our understanding of nineteenth-century poetics of passion and death.”

Why should certain representations of death be celebrated while others are ignored? I believe employing the concept of the abject can help answer this question. If we view the representation of women in works of lustmord as defilements of the abject, and as a means of distancing the abjected feminine by defiling the female body, then this blindness would, following Kristeva, function as a way of voiding the object from consciousness. In her observations on Hindu culture, Kristeva notes that the ritualization of defilement is accompanied by one’s being totally blind to filth itself, even though filth is the object of those rites.

It is as if one had maintained, so to speak, only the sacred, prohibited facet of defilement, allowing the anal object that such a sacralization had in view to become lost within the dazzling light of unconsciousness if not of the unconscious...Hindus defecate everywhere without anyone ever mentioning, either in speech or in books, those squatting figures, because, quite simply, no one sees them. It is not a form of censorship due to modesty that would demand the omission in discourse of a function that has, in other respects, been ritualized. It is blunt foreclosure that voids those acts and objects form conscious representation.

Lustmord can be viewed to operate as defilement ritualized in at least two ways. The first is the representation of the feminine body as a maimed sexual object that has been desexualized through death and disfigurement. Often, the scenes are of women lewdly positioned but with their genitals or breasts cut off or maimed. Both in real life sexual murders and artistic representations of them, the targets of assault have been both the female genital organs and the interior reproductive organs. This, Tater claims, reveals that such murders and their representations are driven by more than merely the perversions of sexual desire. I am arguing that Tater’s insight can be expanded by Kristeva’s notion of the abject. The all too frequent depiction of women with maimed sexual parts points to the threat of the abject that hovers between the borders of identity. The confrontation with the feminine is represented and thus distanced by her desexualization and maiming. Brutalizing the female body may be one historical manifestation of the incest prohibition.

Brutalizing and maiming the sexual woman through artistic representations may be one way for women to be rejected on a societal or cultural level. If on a cultural level women are not separated from their maternal functions, then the rejection of women, as in lustmord, may be the result of misplaced abjection. If the process of individuation and identity formation requires only the abjection of the “maternal container”, but that container can’t be separated from the “mother as a person”, and women are not culturally represented as being separate from their maternal functions, then rejection of all women would be symptomatic of misplaced abjection. “[B]ecause the maternal function is not separated from our representations of women or the feminine, women themselves have been abjected within our society.”

Lustmord is ritualized defilement in a second way. The female body exhibits the ambiguity of the abjected maternal relationship, the objectless Other. Her body is cut in ways that blur the borders between inside/outside. The lustful yet horrific crime of which she is a victim blurs the borders between pleasure/pain for both the artist and the observer, both of whom become complicit in the crime. The female body is turned into the corpse, the most horrific encounter with the abject.
Kristeva claims that the most extreme experience of the abject comes with the confrontation with the corpse. “The most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer “I” who expels, but “I” is expelled. The border has becomes object. The corpse seen without God, and outside of science is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected for which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object.” The corpse represents the permeable border between life and death, and threatens self-certainty which is the ultimate threat of the abject. The ambiguity of the feminine and of “woman” as abject is explicitly made visual in representations of lustmord.

**From Weimar to home**

Certainly, our examination of females as the victims of sexualized murder need not be confined to Weimar, Germany. Sexualized female victims are ubiquitous within the genre of slasher films. The formulaic pairing of sexual violence and female victims extends to non-horror movies and to the media of television, albeit in less graphic displays. What then is the social or personal purpose of lustmord? Does it operate as a socially acceptable expression of the abject that cannot be restrained? Or is it a method for distancing oneself from the abjected maternal/feminine material that underlies and threatens identity? I think that perhaps it operates as both. Rejecting women and the feminine is a culturally acceptable means of dealing with the abject, even if it does indicate misplaced abjection. Representations of the feminine as the objects of eroticized murder seems to be a way of distancing identity from the threat that the feminine as abject poses to the borders of identity and the symbolic. Such representations also may be fueled by a need to give expression to the fear that the abject engenders on a psychic/unconscious level. This is not to say, however, that such representations of women should be ignored, accepted uncritically, or legitimized. Certainly, such representations would only evince the individual and cultural inability to separate women from the maternal function and the threat that it/they pose to identity. Indeed, such representations would only fortify the dominant discourses on women that have become reified.

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**Notes**


3. Ibid., p. 12.

4. Ibid., p. 58.

5. Ibid., p. 63-64. There are discourses that exceed the symbolic. Excessive discourses such as *jouissance* and *poetic language* can rupture the symbolic order, and displace dominant discourses. Complete displacement, however, would be acultural nonsense, or madness. Even the excessive discourses must be channeled or recuperated into symbolic form.
6. Ibid. p.68.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid., p. 70


11. Ibid., p. 7.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.


15. Ibid., p. 9-10.


17. Oliver, Kelly. This is her interpretation of Kristeva that appears in “Julia Kristeva’s Feminist Revolutions” *Hypatia*, 8 (3), 1993. p.104-105.

18. Kristeva, p. 3-4.

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