

# Introduction: approaching abjection

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‘Abjection’ is a word with a long history in the English language. In *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* its use is traced back to the fifteenth century. At that time, someone who had been brought low, rendered despondent or dejected for whatever reason, was referred to as abject. The term assumed its more familiar meaning of being degraded or despicable in the sixteenth century. Its etymological roots are to be found in the Latin word *abdicere* meaning to cast away or rebuff. In contemporary cultural theory, however, the term ‘abjection’ is commonly associated with the psychoanalytic theories of Julia Kristeva.<sup>1</sup> In 1980, Kristeva published *Pouvoirs de l’horreur: Essai sur l’abjection* (Kristeva, 1980). The book was swiftly translated into English, appearing in 1982 as *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (Kristeva, 1982). It notably preceded the English-language translation of Kristeva’s ground-breaking *Revolution in Poetic Language* which was published in French in 1974 (Kristeva, 1974) but only translated into English in 1984. *Powers of Horror* provided the English-language reader with the first monograph (rather than collection of essays) by Kristeva and subsequently profoundly shaped the Anglophone reception of her work.

Sylvère Lotringer has suggested that Kristeva’s work, coupled with the Whitney Museum exhibition *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art* of late June to late August 1993, contributed to abjection gaining wide currency (Lotringer, 1994: 2). These two impetuses will now be analysed for the insights they provide into what comprises abjection and also the possible restrictions they place on our understanding. In the context of the constraints that accompany operating with a purely Kristevan notion of the abject, Lotringer suggests that the significant attention given to *Powers of Horror* has obscured Georges Bataille’s earlier theorisation of abjection. Bataille’s treatment of abjection is different from Kristeva’s. He does not use the term

very much nor does he develop it into an elaborate theory in the way that Kristeva does. He explicitly addressed abjection in a short essay he drafted in 1934, 'Abjection and Miserable Forms'. This was published posthumously as part of *Essais de sociologie* in 1970,<sup>2</sup> where it is clear that his focus is rooted in the socio-political (rather than the psychoanalytic, which is where Kristeva's predominant focus lies) and accounts for the dynamic of rejection and exclusion in relation to the socially disenfranchised. But if we consider abjection as a concept within a larger theory of the sacred, particularly in relation to Bataille's work on desire and eroticism (see Wirth, 1999) then we can make the case that it was integral because it contributed to his aesthetic and philosophical view of desublimation (Arya, 2014: chapter 3).

Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* is a book of three distinct parts. It begins with a psychoanalytic exegesis of the concept of abjection. This is followed by a Western cultural anthropology of the abject. The book concludes with a literary analysis of the role of the abject in the writing of Louis-Ferdinand Céline. Working within a predominantly Lacanian paradigm, abjection is identified by Kristeva as a process that initially pre-figures the mirror-stage in the psychic development of an infant. It comprises the period when the child begins to separate from the figure of the Mother. Prior to the child's misrecognition of itself in the mirror, it must first become estranged from this Mother. Kristeva writes: 'Even before being *like*, "I" am not but do *separate, reject, ab-ject*' (Kristeva, 1982: 13).<sup>3</sup> Abjection therefore occurs before the subject's positioning in language, anterior to the emergence of the 'I'. It is a provisional, transitory sense of differentiation from the maternal: a fragile, unbecoming and unknowing sense of self.

Abject materials, such as bodily excretions like menses, urine, faeces, mucus or spit, are capable of triggering memories of this archaic stage of psychic life, of abjection, in later psychic life. Excretions, for example, travel from inside to outside the body, thereby troubling any sense of it having secure borders. The acquaintance such materials provide us with regarding the lack of assurance of our physical borders is supplemented by recognition of the precariousness of our psychic borders, our sense of self. This renders abject materials psychically threatening. Cultures therefore frequently develop rituals for policing encounters with such substances. Kristeva explores how in a Judeo-Christian context religion has assumed the role of guarding against the abject. For her, the rise of secularism in modernity has led art to take over this function. Avant-garde literature of the kind practised by Céline provides the means by which Western culture manages the abject.

In the Anglophone world, however, abjection is predominantly associated with art rather than literature. This situation can be attributed to the cultural impact of the Whitney exhibition, which was formed from a selection of works from the gallery's permanent collection of American Art.<sup>4</sup> The exhibi-

tion was curated by Craig Houser, Leslie Jones and Simon Taylor. As is evident from their individual contributions to the catalogue that accompanied the exhibition, each conceived of abject art in markedly distinct ways. The exhibition featured a selection of works, mainly produced post-1945, which the curators felt spoke to their varied ideas of the abject. Several video works by Jennifer Montgomery, Azian Nurudin and Suzie Silver were from the early 1990s. Many of the other artworks were from the 1960s.

The Introduction to the catalogue for the exhibition endeavours to synthesise the diverse approaches to abjection adopted by the curators. In the essay, the curators state that they are operating with a theory of abjection drawn from two key constituents: a psychoanalytic component related to the blurring of boundaries between self and other and a philosophical dimension originating in Georges Bataille's notion of 'base materialism' which challenges mind-body dualism and established taboos (Ben-Levi et al., 1993: 7).<sup>5</sup> Abject art displays boundary breakdown and/or base materialism. The curators conceive of such art not as a specific movement within art's history but as a particular physical quality which potentially manifests across diverse periods.

The term 'abject art' is used by the Whitney curators to group together a varied body of works that engage with materials culturally coded as abject in order 'to confront taboo issues of gender and sexuality' (Ben-Levi et al., 1993: 7). Abject art comprises a group of works, a corpus, which 'incorporates or suggests abject materials such as dirt, hair, excrement, dead animals, menstrual blood and rotting food' (7). The abject quality ascribed to some artworks therefore inheres in particular kinds of substances. Some of these are referenced in subsequent essays in the catalogue. Leslie Jones, for example, refers to the incorporation of 'untraditional substances' in artworks of the 1970s and provides the example of Judy Chicago's *Menstruation Bathroom* of 1972, which comprised 'a trash can overflowing with bloodied tampons and pads' (Jones, 1993: 36–37). Hannah Wilke's use of chewing gum is also foregrounded (50–51). Taylor draws attention to the use of wax in Kiki Smith's *Untitled* (1990) (Taylor, 1993: 65).

For the curators, the abject is therefore signalled first and foremost at the level of form. Works composed from, or connoting, abject materials also frequently feature abject subject matter (Ben-Levi et al., 1993: 7). Such subject matter is of a kind that has been 'deemed inappropriate by a conservative dominant culture' (7). For the curators, the subject matter invariably relates to issues of gender and sexuality. In his catalogue essay 'I, Abject', Houser (who had advance access to the manuscript of *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*) draws on Judith Butler's identification of abjection as a 'strategy used to remove the different threats gays and lesbians present to the heterosexual' (Houser, 1993: 86). The heterosexual subject, Butler explains, comes into being through 'the simultaneous production of a domain

of abject beings, those who are not yet “subjects,” but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject’ (Butler, 1993: 3). This outside exists inside the heterosexual subject as ‘its own founding repudiation’ (3).

The gay and lesbian as figures of this outside are meant to live as abject beings, to perform the role of bodies that do not matter. This ‘exclusionary matrix’, as Butler calls it, has a long history in Western culture. Marcel Jouhandeau’s 1939 work *De l’abjection*, for example, describes the hate speech gay subjects are subjected to, speech that demarcates them as abject. In a passage that prefigures Butler’s affirmation that performing sexuality is not equivalent to ‘taking on a mask’, Jouhandeau describes the impact of verbal abuse directed at him because of his sexuality (Butler, 1993: 7). He writes of the insults: ‘At first you try to pretend that it’s not real, that it’s only a mask, a theatre costume mockingly thrown on you that you want to tear, but no; they cling so much that they are already your face and your flesh and it is yourself that you rend by wanting to strip off’ (Jouhandeau, 2006 [1939]: 191).<sup>6</sup> Here Jouhandeau harrowingly captures the materialisation of an abject subjectivity and the role of others, those who embody regulatory norms, in producing it.

For Butler, the process of abjection that produces bodies which do and do not matter, which generates the wholesome and the abject sexual being, provides a critical resource. When they work collectively, those who dis-identify with dominant identity categories such as the heterosexual ‘can facilitate a reconceptualization of which bodies matter, and which bodies are yet to emerge as critical matters of concern’ (Butler, 1993: 4). In this sense, embracing an abject subject position can become a means by which to renegotiate that position. The curators of the Whitney exhibition also recognised the political potential of the abject. For them aesthetic practices which unfold across the terrain of the abject can exploit base materials to promote a radical sexual politics. Abject art then becomes a means by which to challenge the status quo. In his catalogue essay, Taylor describes abject art as manifesting an ‘insurgent materialism’ that acts ‘against societal repression’ (1993: 59). This insurrectionary capacity, Taylor goes on to explain, is triggered through the production of artworks that transgress social taboos (66). Abject art can potentially reshape the social conditions from out of which it emerges.

The essays in this volume communicate the enduring power and relevance of the abject by explaining how it conveys ideas about aesthetic, social and moral conventions with regards to representation and viewing. In their chosen themes and artists, the contributors draw on the ideas of Bataille and Kristeva, and others such as Judith Butler, Hal Foster and Rosalind Krauss, as part of their approach to extending current ways of conceiving abjection. The majority of the essays focus on the visual arts although there are also considerations of how attending to the abject can inform readings of film, theatre and literature, a fact which attests to its enduring relevance in culture, and

how abjection is starting to be discussed by disciplines which hitherto have not broached the topic.<sup>7</sup>

John Lechte's essay for this volume, 'Abjection, art and bare life', develops the idea of the abject as being beyond objectification. Grounding his argument in Kant's conception of the beautiful as that which has no concept, Lechte asks if there can really be an art of the abject given the concept's elusive status. He answers this question through an analysis of the film *Sombre* (Dir. Philippe Grandrieux, France, 1998). For Lechte, the abject 'represents' a radical immanence. Abject art is therefore art that takes the non-object as its object. Grandrieux's films, through their chiaroscuro cinematography, comprise works in which the medium of film appears to be foregrounded. The sombre lighting makes objects difficult to discern. This has led some commentators to contend that Grandrieux brings the materiality of film to the screen. Lechte, however, argues that materiality is always already screened, barred from us, by the very process of signification that seeks to capture it. In this light, if there is an abject element to *Sombre* it can only ever be evoked rather than clearly represented for to represent it would be to abolish it.

The radical power of abjection is examined in a number of essays in this volume. Jayne Wark, for example, draws on the ideas of Judith Butler and Kristeva as a means to examine the political potency of a number of works by the Canadian artists Allyson Mitchell, Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan, and Rosalie Favell whose practices are informed by feminist and lesbian politics. The artists strive to problematise fixed identity categories. Wark seeks to move beyond what she perceives to be the limiting outlook of the Whitney conceptualisation of abject art because it lacked nuance and was too wedded to the political climate of the United States of the early 1990s. The Whitney curators had a national agenda and were responding to efforts to censor art and censure certain artists, such as Robert Mapplethorpe, Andres Serrano, Annie Sprinkle and Karen Finlay, in the United States in the 1980s and early 1990s (Ben-Levi et al., 1993: 8). Their political motivations do not seamlessly transfer to a consideration of contemporary Canadian art.

For Wark, each of the artists she considers strives, in different ways, to resignify the abject. They therefore employ it as a critical resource in the way Butler envisages. As the Whitney exhibition and the essay by Wark demonstrate, thinking about modernist and contemporary works through the prism of abjection allows us to recognise their political radicalism and to understand how they confront the repressive tendencies of dominant culture at specific historical moments. The Whitney curators identified many now 'canonical' artists as having produced abject art, naming Carl Andre, Marcel Duchamp, Jasper Johns, Claes Oldenburg, Robert Rauschenberg, Cy Twombly and Andy Warhol among others as exemplary. In their different

ways, each of these artists drew attention to the human body, a body capable of oozing, festering, mouldering and dirtying. Warhol's *Oxidation Painting* (1978), for example, was produced by the Pop artist urinating on a ground of copper-based paint. For the curators, this action 'suggested an ironic relation between [Jackson] Pollock's painting procedure and his exhibitionist habit of pissing in public, pointing to how the issue of the body had been elided in discussions of the artist's work' (Ben-Levi et al., 1993: 9).<sup>8</sup>

The example of Warhol highlights the limits of the Whitney's historical overview. The interpretation, Warhol's perceived piss-take, is premised on Pollock not himself recognising the parallels between dripping paint from a stick and the act of a man urinating. If Pollock did perceive continuity between the two forms of expression then, for him, the canvas already formed a figurative urinal. The connection between penis and paintbrush (a glorified stick) is longstanding. Pollock's technique has also sometimes been viewed as ejaculatory and as being closely bound up with his masculinity.<sup>9</sup> Equating paint with sperm, another abject material not discussed by the curators, is commonplace.<sup>10</sup> If paint possesses a spermatic symbolic potential then many artworks in traditional media such as egg tempera, gouache, oil and watercolour, and also those made from baser material such as house-paint, possess an abject capacity. Nicholas Chare's essay 'Manet's abject Surrealism' examines this possibility.

Chare suggests that the Surrealist project possessed an underlying sadistic impulse that was prefigured in the art of Édouard Manet. Manet exploited paint's potentially aberrant qualities through an aggressive approach to composition and handling. Artworks that exhibit a deviant painterliness often function within Surrealism to question dominant ideas about identity, particularly sexual identity. Manet's works prompt such a questioning. Chare contrasts Manet's technique with Jackson Pollock's to tease out the nature of the former's brutal formalism, his Surrealism, and elaborate on its capacity to recast identity without losing sight of the self entirely.

The curators at the Whitney included works by women artists in their exhibition but the history of art they promoted was still overwhelmingly a white history. In this context, Wark's analysis of artworks by a Métis, a group of Canadian people of First Nations and European heritage, forms a valuable counterpoint to what can still be seen as the prevailing narrative of abject art. The essay by Rex Butler and A. S. Donaldson in this collection also challenges the conventional focus on artists operating within a European or American context. Building on the theories of Kristeva and Slavoj Žižek, Butler and Donaldson explore how debates about modernism and postmodernism are played out in the work of Chilean-Australian artist Juan Davila. Davila's Antipodean and South American background render him an outsider in the Whitney's terms. The abject assumes a central role in these debates as it cannot

be equated either with the medium or the message of art. It falls outside polarising arguments over the privileging of surface or subject matter. The abject is not present in Davila's paintings as it cannot become their subject given its quality as a non-object. The abject is rather that which resists becoming subject. It refuses to be made to matter as a subject because it refuses objectification. It is, however, not a simple matter. It is a kind of arrested or abeyant signification: it occupies the gap between matter and meaning. Butler and Donaldson show how Davila works within this gap exploiting the abject's slipperiness in his recent pictures as a means to intervene in contemporary aesthetic disputes about the role of the medium in art.

Taylor's Whitney catalogue essay identifies abject art as comprising works that raise various challenges to Clement Greenberg's aesthetics of purity and to the White Cube format of exhibiting art. He draws on Barbara Creed's Kristevan-inspired idea of the 'monstrous feminine', which describes men's perception of women due to their dread of the female genitals, to explain the impact of works such as Cindy Sherman's *Untitled* (1987) and Kiki Smith's *Untitled* (1990) on gallery goers. Creed initially formulated the 'monstrous feminine' as a means to explain the attraction and repugnance generated by horror films such as *Aliens* (Dir. James Cameron, USA, 1986).<sup>11</sup> In this volume, however, in collaboration with the art historian Jeanette Hoorn, Creed explores art in relation to abjection. Creed and Hoorn's essay, 'Animals, art, abjection', teases out the implications of Kristeva's contention in *Powers of Horror* that the abject engenders a fragile state within which the human strays on the territory of the animal (Kristeva, 1982: 12). For Kristeva, some cultures have branded animals as abject and as 'representatives of sex and murder' (13). In such cultures, the animal is figured in negative terms, and notions of animalism, of the human as an animal species, are suppressed.

Animals therefore figure as impure and are made to form the constitutive outside to the human. Creed and Hoorn, however, argue that contemporary art practices that explore animals and animality do so as a means to challenge the notion that animals form humankind's abject other. In this context, the artworks do not function to purify the abject but rather embrace what has hitherto been labelled as abject as a means to renegotiate its status from within an anthropocentric society. The emancipatory logic outlined by Judith Butler in relation to gender is here transferred to the matter of the animal. Jouhandeau's *De l'abjection* displays anthropocentrism of the kind Creed and Hoorn seek to combat. He describes the descent into abjection as becoming animal and then plant: 'become foul animal and then muddy plant, acclimatised to withdrawal into a shameful crevice of hell, suddenly you become less than that, protoplasm, and next, something so eminently close to "nothing" that in the blink of an eye you have witnessed that vertigo that is the other aspect of us all: negation, absolute nothingness' (2006: 182).

Rina Arya's essay continues in the vein of investigating the amorphous body that is in between different states, such as the human-animal, by examining abjection in relation to the fragmented body. She starts by exploring the significance of the boundary in relation to the body proper before moving on to look at what happens when we look at distorted or fragmented bodies that do not adhere to the normal conventions of how we read a body. In the ordered body, abjection occurs at its margins, which corresponds to the points of the greatest vulnerability and the body is regulated accordingly. Abjection is harder to establish in the case where the body is fragmented and does not conform to being an organically ordered and functioning body. How are we to think about the boundary when it is not clear where the body starts or ends? Arya considers the cases of two twentieth-century artists, Hans Bellmer and Francis Bacon, who both employ fragmentation in order to release the somatic and expressive potential of the body but also to critique longstanding traditions of the art historical representative tradition.

Ernst van Alphen's essay is a consolidated study of abjection in the context of Francis Bacon's art, and investigates the various ways and senses in which Bacon's art can be described as abject. On an unstudied level Bacon's paintings are understood as abject but this needs to be probed further to examine the significance of the boundary between matter and representation, for instance, and of his figures themselves which are fragmented and which demonstrate various positions of subjecthood at risk. Calling on the work of other theorists, including Mikhail Bakhtin and Roland Barthes, van Alphen explores the identity of the Baconian figure and argues for a revived way of thinking about the abject condition of Bacon's figures. A further area of study in van Alphen's essay draws on Hal Foster's work and concerns how the viewer is provoked to complete the operation of the abject, which results in a reshattering of the viewer's sense of self. Van Alphen's study shows how abjection can be used to elicit a host of other Baconian themes about representation, viewing and identity.

The next two contributions by Estelle Barrett and Kerstin Mey continue with the theme of the applicability of abjection in twentieth-century art and examine more contemporary artworks. Barrett is concerned with the multidisciplinary practice of the Australian artist Catherine Bell and aims to show how artistic practice can extend, develop and reconfigure established conceptions of abjection, in particular Kristeva's and Bataille's. She argues that extant commentaries about abjection remain within the parameters of exposition and referentiality but do not adequately articulate the implications of abjection for understanding the aesthetic experience in both the making and viewing of art. This is often characterised by ambivalence (namely attraction and repulsion) and Barrett explores the transgressive (in the Bataillean sense) in the photographic and video work of Bell. By shifting the focus from the read-



ing of an artwork to an experiential encounter, Barrett conveys the power of Bell's practice to evoke a complex of sensory and cognitive feelings that often involves ambivalence. Abjection then is reconceived as an operational function and as a process that is engendered by aesthetic experience in the making and viewing of art, thus reinvigorating its potential.

Kerstin Mey's essay takes us to the heart of abjection by examining the vilest 'object' of abjection, that is, the corpse. Mey considers how although death and its concomitant connotations – disease and demise – has been removed from the public gaze in the West, this has not reduced our fascination with these subjects. Nor has it removed its exploration through various forms of mediated culture, including graphic video games, films and the visual arts. She examines the mass appeal of the anatomist Gunther von Hagens' *Body Worlds*, which was a worldwide touring exhibition shown in North America, Asia and Europe between 1995 and 2011, and focused on the display of preserved corpses and body fragments. The scientific process of Plastination was employed to preserve the body tissue and reveal inner anatomical structures which gave the specimens a hyperreal coloration, somewhat departing from the visceral ghoulishness expected of bodily parts but in other ways imparting the starkness of our grim destinies, especially given the lifelike poses of the corpses. Von Hagens pushed the boundaries of acceptability in other ways by performing the first public autopsy in 2002, and in 2009 unveiling a plastinate of a couple having sex. Mey's essay details the different aspects of von Hagens' controversial but influential work and also examines the work of other artists who are engaged in similar subject matter, such as Joel-Peter Witkin, the art group AES + F and Andres Serrano's morgue series.

In the first essay of this volume Lechte attends to Kristeva's belief that the abject can form the subject of art and literature. Kristeva has claimed that the abject features as a theme in much avant-garde art. She also asserts that the experience of abjection accompanies this art's production and reception. Her theory of abjection is therefore one that encompasses the abject and abjection, substance and process. For her it is necessary to generate artworks that trigger abjection as a means to purge individual and social anxieties surrounding the abject. The Whitney exhibition did not conceive of art in this way. It was in the exhibition catalogue for a later exhibition, *Rites of Passage: Art for the End of the Century* which was held at the Tate Gallery in 1995, as part of an interview with Charles Penwarden, that Kristeva conceded there is a relationship between abjection and rites of passage in that the latter, as rituals, are bound up with purification (Penwarden and Kristeva, 1995: 23). In this context abject art can be read as a ritual practice that performs a purifying function. Artworks that attend to the abject, coming close to it while refusing to collapse into it, provide a cathartic value. (23).

For Kristeva the danger of not discharging social anxieties related to

abjection is that they will be exploited to advance extreme politics. Abjection threatens identity and there is a danger that to counteract it individuals or groups will project their fears on to an Other. In Céline's case this Other was the Jew and the homosexual. In Jouhandeau's case it was the Jew. His anti-Semitism might be read as an effort to counteract the abject status he felt his homosexuality brought him.<sup>12</sup> Jacqueline Rose reads Céline's writings as symptoms that reveal how horror can become a matter for power (Rose, 1993). Céline wrote out his hatred rather than physically enacting it. The Nazis, however, contemporaneously exploited this hatred which was foundational to their politics and acted upon it through their anti-Semitic policies and the genocide they perpetrated. For Kristeva and Rose culture can therefore potentially play a vital role in combatting extremism. Art and literature have a critical purgative role to play in contemporary society.

Kristeva's literary examples are exclusively modernist. In this volume, however, Calvin Thomas explores the differing roles of the abject as a theme in the writings of the contemporary authors Don DeLillo and David Foster Wallace. For Thomas, Wallace's novella 'The Suffering Channel', which features an artist who claims to excrete fully modelled figurative sculptures, demonstrates how literature provides a crucial means to convey abject suffering. The scatological art produced by the fictional artist in the novella, Brint Molke, would not have been out of place in the history of modern art. Molke's excremental oeuvre would have added to a long history of artists talking shit to each other through their work. This ongoing conversation includes Piero Manzoni's 1961 work *Artist's Shit*, Carl Andre's 1962 *Dog Turd Sculptures*, Sam Goodman's and Boris Lurie's 1964 *Shit Sculptures*, Lynda Benglis's seeming riposte to Andre, *Quartered Meteor*, of 1969, and Mary Kelly's faecal stains in the 1974 *Post-Partum Document*, a prototype for which formed part of *Abject Art*. More recently, Chris Ofili has incorporated elephant dung in works such as *No Woman, No Cry* of 1998 which forms a tribute to the murdered black teenager Stephen Lawrence. For Thomas, Wallace's faecal theme provides the means by which the author explores abjected masculinity in contemporary America and also art's claim to use stories to reveal truths.

The final essay in this volume, Daniel Watt's 'Base materials: performing the abject object', configures abjection within the performing arts, and in particular within theatre, thereby underscoring the significance of catharsis in abjection as grounded by Antonin Artaud's work. Watt examines the radical theatre practices of Tadeusz Kantor, who co-founded the Cricot2 theatre in 1955, and Jerzy Grotowski's theatre company, which began in 1959. What these share is the view of the practice of immersion in abjection. The actor in Kantor's theatre, the bio-object (which is neither human nor object) is transformed throughout the performances from persons to things. In Grotowskian performance the body is sacrificed in total theatre. Both cases articulate how

the sacrificial abjection of the performing object reveals a vision of reality, in a Bataillean sense, that conveys the potentiality of theatre as one that unveils the human, through a different type of communal event that entails the dissolution of selfhood (*jouissance*) and the power of horror. The task of performance becomes one of immersion in abjection.

The rich variety of essays in *Abject visions* demonstrates that abjection as a concept continues to hold great value as an aid to cultural understanding and a prompt to critical reflection. The profound interest abjection as an idea continues to inspire in the present signals its enduring newness. Theories of the abject are key to understanding the contemporary. This is because abject art and literature are not bound to a particular period or geographical location. They adapt to reflect changing times and contexts. The essays in this volume cumulatively demonstrate that abjection is not singular but plural and multi-form. Something of the concept's lasting value and significance may inhere in its elusiveness. Kristeva's magisterial *Powers of Horror*, for instance, is marked by shifting notions of what comprises abjection. It refuses to be bounded. The power of abjection is its refusal to be too easily and rapidly explained.

Abjection's resistance to thought, a resistance that is also simultaneously a challenge and an invitation, has not prevented Kristeva's psychoanalytic exegesis in particular from being subject to cursory and uninformed readings that focus solely on the visceral aspect of her argument. Adrian Rifkin has rightly drawn attention to the tendency to 'pillage' *Powers of Horror* for 'conveniently sized "bleeding chunks"' (1998: 136). The phrase 'bleeding chunks' derives from Donald Tovey's essay on Anton Bruckner's Symphony No. 4, first published in 1935, in which he chastises concert audiences who delight in 'the bleeding chunks of butcher's meat chopped from Wagner's operas and served up on Wagner nights' (2015: 254–255). Tovey is criticising the practice of plundering operas for what are perceived to be the best bits. He regards it as akin to butchery. Operas understood only through excerpts, the perceived highlights, lose their integrity. This volume is also important because through the fine, nuanced readings it provides of Kristeva it additionally serves as a valuable corrective to the kind of practice Rifkin identifies.

Tovey's image of butcher's meat dripping with blood is purposely gruesome. He has chosen a horrible analogy to drive home his point. In a sense, Tovey recognises the power of horror. The image repels yet fascinates. It is striking. Classical music is not often discussed in relation to earthy matters such as butcher's meat. Music, however, like all culture is founded on horror. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva seeks to lay bare what lies beneath 'the cunning, orderly surface of civilizations' (1982: 210). She strives to reveal the 'nurturing horror' that civilisations seek to push aside through 'purifying, systematizing and thinking' (210). The essays in this volume can all be said, in their different ways, to join her in this effort.

## Notes

- 1 For a brief summary of the various criticisms that have been levelled at Kristeva's conception of abjection see Rina Arya and Nicholas Chare's introduction to the special issue of *Performance Research*, 'On Abjection', devoted to the theme of abjection in relation to a number of performance practices (Arya and Chare, 2014). See also Arya, 2014 for a comprehensive elucidation of the concept of abjection in culture.
- 2 This essay is included in volume H of the author's *Œuvres complètes* (Bataille, 1970).
- 3 These are Kristeva's emphases. Unless otherwise stated all emphases are our own.
- 4 For an interesting analysis of the American artist as abject figure in relation to nationalism see Julie Codell's reading of cinematic depictions of artists in 'Nationalizing Abject American Artists' (Codell, 2011). For Codell, minoritarian abject artists reveal the underside of national identity but their filmic representations re-inscribe hegemonic values in relation to their personalities and works.
- 5 Kristeva's indebtedness to Bataille in *Powers of Horror* is evident in her book's third chapter which begins with an epigraph related to abjection taken from his *Essais de sociologie*.
- 6 Our translation. All translations are our own unless otherwise stated.
- 7 See Rina Arya and Nicholas Chare's guest edited volume 'On Abjection' for *Performance Research*, which is a comprehensive exploration of abjection in performance studies and related areas.
- 8 The idea that the bodily component to Pollock's practice was not hitherto recognised is, of course, belied by Harold Rosenberg's 'The American Action Painters' (Rosenberg, 1962).
- 9 See Chare, *After Francis Bacon* (2012: 77–100).
- 10 For a discussion of the history of this equivalence see Chare, 'Sexing the Canvas' (Chare, 2009).
- 11 See Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine* (1993).
- 12 For a discussion of Jouhandeau in this context see Rifkin's 'Does Gay Sex Need Queer Theory?' (2012).

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