



A Moebial Ride through Polanski's Repulsion

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Abstract

This article examines Roman Polanski's film *Repulsion* from a psychoanalytic perspective by attending Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection. This paper deals primarily with two main focal points. First, it focuses on the film's portrayal of the protagonist, Carole's abjection, her problem of non-differentiation, as evidenced by her relation to the maternal body and to corporeality. Secondly, the article investigates how the film positions its viewers with regard to Carole. It questions how *Repulsion* impels its spectators to engage Carole with a similar non-differentiation by generating a complex web of ambiguities with regard to the differentiation between external/internal, objective/subjective and reality/fantasy.

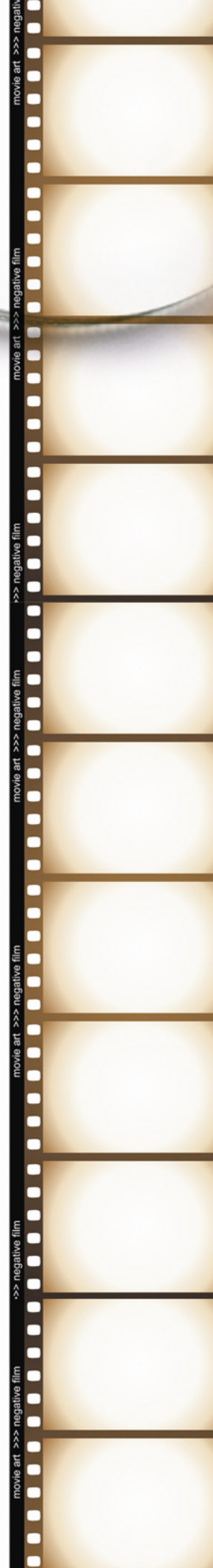
Keywords: Kristeva; Freud; abjection; corporeality; primal scene; fetishism



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A Moebial Ride through Polanski's *Repulsion*

Defne Tüzün

Introduction

Emerging in an extreme close-up, an eye is centered, filling up the frame. Inside the eye, the film's title, *Repulsion*, cuts across the pupil horizontally. While the credits are running and the array of words move over the image of the pupil, the camera gradually zooms out to show the face of the protagonist. This opening image of *Repulsion* (1965) seduces the audience to assume that we are entering the protagonist's subjectivity, an expectation that the director, Roman Polanski, sets out to render unstable. The image of the eye, belonging to the diegetic realm, reveals interiority, intimacy, and subjectivity, on the other hand, the titles, the words superimposed on the image, are part of the non-diegetic domain, indicating an exterior objectivity. The clash between the image and the words creates an ambivalent, unstable effect for the spectators, pulling them into the subjectivity of the protagonist or the film, while at the same time, as the titles become a centrifugal force, taking the viewers away from the image and the film's confined space. *Repulsion* achieves such ambivalence for the spectators, the effect of being simultaneously inside and outside of the film's world. This feeling of ambivalence, instilled upon the spectators, is best described with regard to the term, abject. Spatial considerations are crucial to the conceptualization of abject as a topology marked foremost by spatial uncertainty, the non-differentiation between

inside/outside. The effect of abject emerges when the rigidity of the boundaries separating inside/outside, objective/subjective, and external/internal are rendered unstable.

Repulsion evokes Julia Kristeva's insistence on abjection as, first and foremost, a struggle with "spatial ambivalence (inside/outside uncertainty)" and an endeavor to mark out a space in the undifferentiated field of the mother-child symbiosis (Beardsworth, 2004, p. 62). In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Kristeva postulates her notion of abjection to designate the earliest trial of separation. Abjection is experienced by the "subject-to-be" as a precondition for separating itself from the "object-to-be," recognizing its boundaries in an undifferentiated flow, and eventually becoming an independent entity. When elaborating the concept of abjection, Kristeva's focus on the mother is constructed from the infant's perspective. In a similar vein, my discussion of the mother-child relationship in *Repulsion* concentrates on the protagonist's perspective, her relation to the mother and her trials of subjectivity. In the film, the protagonist, Carole's relationship (or lack thereof) to her mother, or to mother figures, and to the maternal are given a special thematic emphasis. The film represents Carole's relationship to the maternal as an inevitable and threatening distance from the mother. This unbridgeable distance with regard to the mother and to the maternal results in the protagonist's abjection. As Carole is gradually beset by

abjection, she falls back into the realm of the pre-symbolic and into the place of non-differentiation: the topology of the mother-child dyad.

Uncontrollable Corporeality

In *Repulsion*, Carole (Catherine Deneuve) is a Belgian immigrant, who lives with her elder sister, Helen (Yvonne Furneaux), in London. Carole is away from her motherland and her mother is physically absent from the entire film. Her mother is present in the film only as an image, shown twice in a family photograph. The plot reveals nothing which might allow the viewer to infer whether her mother has died or is still alive. By creating this ambiguity, *Repulsion* points to the melancholic state of the protagonist. Carole is presented as being oblivious to what she is mourning for, what she is grieving over or what she is being deprived of. *Repulsion*'s initial portrayal of Carole as melancholic, which is reinforced by the given ambiguity—if her mother is still alive or not—perfectly fits into the psychoanalytical meaning of this psychic formation. For Freud, melancholy attests to the “ambivalent” quality of the subject’s relationship with its love object that has for some reason departed. As he clarifies, “the occasions which give rise to [melancholia] include all those situations being slighted, neglected or disappointed, which can import opposed feelings of love and hate into the relationship or reinforce an already existing *ambivalence*” (1917, p. 251). Mourning follows a loss that has really occurred, whereas in melancholia one can neither know certainly what it is that has been lost, nor what she has lost in losing the other. In melancholia,

therefore, it is not really possible to identify a lost object; for this reason, Freud describes it as a “loss of a more ideal kind,” “an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness” or an “unknown loss” (p.245).

Carole’s melancholic disposition is also evident in that she is represented from the start as detached and disinterested. The relationship between Carole and her sister resembles one of a mother and child, and there are several other mother figures in the film, however, she is not close to any of them. Carole works as a manicurist at a beauty spa where her customers are mostly older ladies who often give her some motherly advice. There is a suitor in her life named Colin (John Fraser), a distant relative, in whom Carole does not show any interest. Although frequently framed in close-ups, Carole’s expressionless face does not permit us to know her intimately, nor does it provide us with any knowledge about her thoughts/feelings, but merely gives the impression that she is imbedded in her internal reality and indifferent to the external world. As Carole indulges in daydreams or lapses into catatonic states more frequently, her performance at work gradually gets worse. After Helen leaves for a vacation with her married lover, Michael (Ian Hendry), Carole stops going to work and eventually shuts herself up in the flat. Her mental disturbances become increasingly frequent until they induce Carole to commit murders and she gradually descends into an utterly catatonic state.

Carole's profession as a manicurist is quite peculiar since her practice entails engaging directly with the corporeal borders. Carole's disturbed relationship to corporeality manifests itself through the form of catatonic paralysis. It is not unexpected that she often passes into such states in her workplace, for the beauty salon offers plentiful reminders of the maternal and the corporeal: nails, hair, blood, and milky products, especially creams and masks. Paula Black (2006) writes, "The beauty salon is made use of to police the boundaries of an 'acceptable' bodily state" (p.74). Beauty salon may be regarded as a site for "exclusionary" rituals in Kristevan sense. Through ritualistic activities certain elements or borderline qualities that threaten identity, which are associated with the corporeality and therefore codified as abject, are jettisoned so that the "clean and proper body" can be maintained. (Kristeva, 1982, pp.72-73). The whole beauty industry is in the service of excluding the decaying parts of the body—the abjected elements, and of modifying the corporeal borders to sustain the "clean and proper body." In this respect, the beauty industry operates to ward off the unstable boundaries and, takes up the function of rituals in the modern world.

Carole is shown having catatonic moments several times when she is cutting the cuticles. Although trimming should be a regular activity for Carole, on every occasion it still seems as though she is being exposed to something very unfamiliar and being intensely repulsed by the image of skin bordering the nails. The skin is the border zone upon which the distinctions between

self and not-self, outer and inner, ego and other are played out. This border is disintegrated when the abjected elements such as blood or pus surface and expose the subject to the limits of the self. The skin is, therefore, an unstable, unreliable boundary, which is always involved in abjection. Moreover, Kristeva specifically mentions how nail paring arouses a “gagging sensation,” and “nausea” in us (1982, p.3). Nails both belong to and attest to the fragile borders of our corporeality. Nails or hair, both borderline elements of this type, along with the other corporeal wastes such as faeces, blood, urine, and pus, should be ejected in order for the body to separate itself from them and thereby be saved from the risk of falling to where these wastes descend (Kristeva, 1982, p.71). Such wastes or disorderly elements arouse the feeling of abjection because it reminds us of the border between what Kristeva refers to as “the clean and proper body” and “the abject body.” The fully symbolic body must bear no trace of its relation to the unclean, “the non-separate,” and the non-symbolized body (Kristeva, 1982, p.102).

The procedures performed to erase the signs of the unclean, unsymbolized body give the modern subject the confirmation—in the same way that rituals function for people in so-called primitive societies—that anything which threatens the identity from outside, that is associated with pure corporeality and materiality, is being kept under control and warded off. However, for Carole, such activities do not fulfill the function that they perform for the customers. Indeed,

when practicing her job, threatened by the encroachments of the material existence, she is repeatedly confronted with the fragility of her own corporeality. Carole obviously has an ambiguous relation to the corporeal borders. She often bites her nails and also chews and sucks her hair. As well as being repulsed by the corporeal borders, she is strongly attracted by them.

Carole's troubled relationship to corporeality is also evident in her relation to eating. For Kristeva, the most elementary form of abjection is food loathing. Refusing the food offered by one's mother is to reject what that food signifies, which is maternal love. Food is an ambiguous object, it is abject since it signifies a primary boundary between the self and the (m)other (Kristeva, 1982, pp.2-3). Food loathing is, again, related to one's own limits; it is the refusal of the limits of the self. Carole rarely eats and is obviously disgusted even at the sight of food. In *Repulsion*, there is only one scene in which Carole sits at a table to eat but she just looks at the meal. This scene is preceded by a sequence in which Carole walks on the streets on the way home and passes by workers who are digging up pavement. The camera shows a close-up of a construction worker's face and then it stops. There is a cut from the man's face to a plate of food in front of Carole at the restaurant. Then the camera slowly rises up and shows Carole looking apathetically, and with disgust at the meal in front of her. In this transition, the analogy established between dietary items

and the men in terms of Carole's abjection is explicit in the very noticeable cut from the face of the worker to the meal in front of her.



Among the multiple scenes reinforcing this analogy between man and food in regard to Carole's abjection, are two of particular importance. In the first, Colin gives her a ride home and then attempts to kiss her in the car. Initially, Carole does not seem to reject him, but she is quite indifferent and looking off screen when he is kissing her. Then, she panics, immediately runs off to brush her teeth and wash her mouth. She notices the belongings of her sister's lover (Michael), such as a shaving brush, a toothbrush, and a straight razor and repositions all of them. Here, once again, there is a very discernable cut from the image of the razor to the shot of her sister's hand holding a knife and peeling potatoes. Therefore, the film constantly connects male items to dietary items through editing. Later in the film, there is a very exceptional scene in which Carole eats; she gets some snacks when her sister is cooking. As Helen takes an uncooked rabbit from the refrigerator, Carole looks at the rabbit with an expression of shock and disgust, then stops eating. It is apparent that she feels abjected in front the rabbit's image. The image of rabbit is one of the

most important leitmotifs in the film. As the film unfolds, the close-ups of the decaying rabbit are shown in parallel to Carole's losing her stake in external reality. We first learn about the rabbit from a conversation between Carole and Colin. Colin asks Carole out to dinner and the conversation follows:

Carole: I'm busy tonight. I'm having a dinner with my sister. We are having a rabbit.

Colin: Rabbit! I thought they are all killed off.

Carole: No, she has a friend.

Colin: A rabbit?

Carole: No, I think the friend has rabbit.

Colin: Poor bunny.

Even from the first utterance of the rabbit, this item is somehow strangely, in its absurdity, associated with Helen's boyfriend, Michael. Through this conversation, the film introduces us to Carole as a foreigner with a heavy accent, shy and inarticulate, it also underlines the lack of communication between her and Colin. With the intention of punning, Colin anthropomorphizes the rabbit and refers to Michael as a rabbit. The film, through this verbal pun and its editing strategy, establishes contiguity between food and men. As she feels abjected by Michael's belongings, Carole is not only repulsed—as the film's title suggests—but also attracted to and fascinated by the rabbit, as abjection is above all ambiguity.

In *Repulsion*, the analogy established between dietary items and the men reveals Carole's problem with incorporation as well as with introjection. Laplanche and Pontalis (1988) remark, "In the case of the 'oral object-relationship,' [at] the centre of interest are the various guises of incorporation and the way this is to be found as the meaning and the dominant fantasy at the kernel of all the subject's relations with the world" (p.280). Although incorporation is confined neither to the oral activity nor to the oral stage, orality furnishes the prototype of incorporation. Incorporation of the object (breast, milk or food) provides the corporeal model for the process of language learning (incorporation of words), for introjection (into the ego or ego-ideal), and therefore, for identification. Kristeva (1987) explains that the infant's incorporation of the breast (food) founds the logic of the subsequent incorporation of "the speech of the other" (p.26). Kelly Oliver (1992) clarifies further, "there is a logic or pattern which is duplicated in the move from breast to speech... While nursing, the infant takes in the milk from the mother, incorporates the food from the other, and makes this food part of itself" (p.69). For Kristeva, this is a model that is repeated in language acquisition; the child takes the language of the other and makes it part of itself. The child, by incorporating "the speech of the other," incorporates the pattern of language that enables him to identify with the other. Kristeva (1982) writes, "Nourishing oneself [...] with words. In being able to receive the other's words, to assimilate, repeat, and reproduce them, I

become like him: [...] A subject of enunciation” (p.26). However, in the case of abjection, “‘I’ want [...] sign of their desire; ‘I’ do not want to listen, ‘I’ do not assimilate it [...]” (p.3). In the case of food loathing, when beset by abjection, one does not incorporate the food offered to her, as she does not want the sign (words) of the other and while the process of incorporation is short-circuited, there would be no pattern to be reduplicated to succeed in the processes of introjection and identification.

Kristeva states, “*any* verbalizing activity [...] is an attempt to introject the incorporated items. In that sense, verbalization has always been confronted with the ‘ab-ject’ [...]” (1982, p.41). This is exactly the case which defines Carole’s abjection: her mouth, which has been deprived of the mother (her breast), cannot be filled with words either. Just as she experienced a failure of incorporating the maternal object, it seems that a malfunction occurred in the introjection of the mother (her ego as an ideal-ego or her imago) as well. The failure in incorporation indeed is most evident in Carole’s speech; her linguistic activity is quite weak. Carole rarely speaks, hardly completes her sentences and does not initiate any conversation. She briefly answers the questions directed at her, but she speaks so softly, almost murmuring, that she is hardly heard. Carole does not talk to her sister in their native language (French) either. Carole, being unaware of the distinction between what is external and what is internal to her, cannot incorporate the extraneous object or the speech of the other, and thereby is unable to reproduce the other’s words.

In contrast to her verbal malfunctioning, almost all of Carole's actions are motivated by sounds. This is a pattern which emerges throughout the film: everyday sounds such as dripping taps, ticking clocks, ringing phones, bells and instrumental sounds played by street musicians function as the motivations that call her back to outside reality. Her catatonic moments are only interrupted by such sounds. Carole only responds to such non-verbal articulations, to rhythms and to repetitions of tones. Similar to what Kristeva describes as the difficulty that is experienced by borderline cases in accessing language, for Carole, it seems that the connection between verbal signs and their somatic support has been cut off and that is why she fails to make active use of symbolic communication. In Carole's case, the relationship between signified and signifier collapses, and her discourse emerges as "a challenge to symbolization" or what Kristeva (1982) designates exactly as "infantile semiotization," which returns in the discourse of this borderline case (p.51). Toward the end of the film, her response to those auditory inputs becomes weaker and weaker. Before passing into an ultimately catatonic state, Carole, lacking the support of a symbolic constituent, makes only incomprehensible sounds as if she is singing a song in unintelligible words.

The cracks between reality and fantasy

While constructing the protagonist as someone who fails to accept her own corporeal borders, *Repulsion* also produces a particular placing of the spectator in relation to Carole's actions and experiences. The film draws the spectator into identification with Carole by restricting their epistemic range to the protagonist's knowledge and subjectivity, i.e., the spectator knows only as much as Carole knows and experiences, since the film is viewed for the most part with Carole's presence. The spectators of *Repulsion* have almost no access to a knowledge and subjectivity other than that of the protagonist. Thus, the film's focus is almost exclusively on the subjectivity of Carole. This subjectivity of experience is the theme starting from the opening credit sequence, with the slow zoom-out from an extreme close-up of Carole's eye. At the very end of the film, the camera zooms in on the family photo that is shown twice before during the film; it closes in on the child, Carole, ending up on an extreme close-up of her eyes.



It would be trivial to suggest that *Repulsion*'s plot is circular, as the opening and closing images are quite similar. Yet even though they are similar, there are some radical changes between the opening and closing images. At the beginning, the camera *zooms out* from the extreme close-up of Carole's eye, however, at the end, the camera tracks along the shadowy line of dolls and toys on

the mantelpiece, to *zoom in* on the family photo. The camera zooms further into this familiar picture until it focuses on Carole's pupil. As a cinematic convention, this pattern, in which the camera zooms in on an image (or gives a close-up of an image) and then zooms out from the same image after a passage of time (or even after containing the film's whole narrative), suggests that the film gives us a depth of knowledge about the subject in the frame. This pattern indicates that either we are taken into the character's mind (her subjective experience) or to an imaginary sequence; it may also imply the beginning of a flashback sequence as we are taken into a character's past.

In *Repulsion*, at the beginning, with the zoom out from the extreme close-up of Carole's eye, the film seemingly implies that we are taken into Carole's subjective world. Moreover, during the course of the film, since we are continuously provided with Carole's point of view shots, this assumption is perpetuated. Yet, throughout the whole film, the subjectivity and objectivity of experience (of the shots) are constantly conflated. Therefore, we cannot suggest that the beginning of the film marks that we are taken into Carole's mind and the ending of it indicates that we exit from that subjective world. Hence, we cannot suggest that the beginning and the ending sequences of the film imply a classical framed (bracketed) narration, which contains a subjective view of its protagonist. As the film eludes the simple oppositions of subjective/objective, inside/outside,

surface/depth and so on, *Repulsion*'s structure cannot be categorized simply as linear or non-linear. Although there are no flashbacks or flashforwards (in that respect, the film unfolds in what is ostensibly a linear way), nevertheless, the distinction between linear and non-linear temporalities does not help us to examine the intricacy of the film's structure. In order to understand this narration-wise strategy, we need to utilize a different topology that traverses the fundamental assumptions of Euclidean time and space.

Repulsion's formal structure offers a new topology that can be demonstrated through the figure of the Moebius strip. Dylan Evans (1997) explains: "The figure illustrates the way that psychoanalysis problematizes various binary oppositions, such as inside/outside, before/after [...]" [I]n terms of the topology of the moebius strip [...] the opposed terms are thus seen as to be not discrete but continuous with one each other" (p.116). The structure of the Moebius strip allows us to conceptualize binary pairs not as strictly disparate but as merging into one another. *Repulsion*'s structure is moebial since it annihilates the demarcation line between interior and exterior space, fantasy and reality, subjectivity and objectivity through its course. The film's moebial strategy is most evident in its particular elaboration of mise-en-scene. When Carole's sister Helen leaves for a vacation with her lover, Carole gradually disconnects herself from the outside world. After her confinement in the apartment, as Carole loses her sense of the defining borders of her corporeal existence and the demarcating line between the internal and external, in parallel the spectators can

no longer determine the objectivity/subjectivity distinction with regard to the shots. As Carole gives in to the attacks of the abjected elements, as her borders become less stable, the confined space surrounding her begins to be permeable as well. Her body and the space she occupies begin to have a mutual openness; the space loses its definitive borders. Cracks appear in the walls, which begin to acquire a clay-like quality; Carole's hands leave prints on them. Later in the film, a penetration from outside to inside utterly annihilates borders; arms emerge from the wall, reaching out to grab and touch her.

One of the ways in which *Repulsion* blurs the line between fantasy and reality is with the strong association it evokes between the enactment of the scenes where Carole is exposed to Helen's moaning while she has sexual intercourse with Michael in the next room and the mise-en-scène of the succeeding rape scenes that Carole imagines. The prior scenes where Carole hears the sounds of the copulating couple in the adjacent room evoke the primal scene fantasy, the fantasy of overhearing or observing parental intercourse. Both of the primal scenes in the film are initiated by sound. In the first one, the noticeable ticking sound of a clock is heard. It then is accompanied by Helen's giggles, while Carole seems half-asleep. Disturbed by the subsequent moaning, Carole stares upward and consecutive shots of the ceiling, the wardrobe and the fireplace are given from her point of view. A constant interplay of lights and shadows dominates these shots. *Repulsion*,

which is a black and white film, establishes chiaroscuro lighting, a dramatic clashing and blending of darkness and whiteness through which the film once again brings forth the binary forms and conflates them. As the ticking gets softer and the moaning gets louder, Carole becomes more distressed: she sucks her hair, then tosses and turns until the moaning ends. The next night, the sound of the church's bell is heard; the camera tilts down and shows Carole wide awake this time. As the bell continues ringing, Helen's chuckles are heard; at the same time, the camera pans to show the side table clock and the window. Carole catatonically stares at the ceiling for a while, then the bell stops and the moaning begins. Next, as the moaning fades away, only the ticking of the clock is heard. Later, hearing some noises made by water (presumably from the bathroom sink) and footsteps, Carole looks anxious. Finally, from her point of view, what is seen is the doorknob being slowly turned. Helen is the one who opens the door and she scolds Carole for throwing away Michael's things in the bathroom. These two scenes are presented from the camera's 'objective' point of view (and from Carole's perceptual perspective); there is no clue for the spectators to render them as 'subjective' shots.

During her first night alone in the flat, Carole, lying on her bed, scratches the wall. The only sound is that of the clock's ticking. Then, as she sees a light above the wardrobe and hears footsteps, Carole becomes scared and closes her eyes. As soon as she opens her eyes again, she no longer sees the light. For the spectator, there is no indication if this experience is an imaginary one

or a real one because this occurrence is quite like the previous night, which ended with Helen opening the door. What Carole hears might be just some noises coming from the building or indeed be someone in the apartment. These possibilities would make one frightened to be alone in her flat, out of a reasonable fear of an intruder forcing his way in. The play of lighting cannot be indicative of any 'subjectivity' either, since the previous scenes were presented in a similar dramatic lighting. Thus, the scene is constructed to create this ambiguity in terms of whether Carole's experience is real or fantasy/hallucination.

The first rape scene occurs the following night. Again, Carole hears some noises and sees a light above the wardrobe; she is horrified this time, as the noises of footsteps get closer. Then, suddenly an unknown man breaks his way into the bedroom through a door from behind the wardrobe. This unidentified attacker throws Carole on the bed, ripping her nightgown off, while the soundtrack stays absolutely silent except for the very loud ticking of the clock. In the second rape scene, this unknown figure suddenly rolls out of her bedclothes and rapes her again. The attack again happens in almost complete silence, with just the ticking of the clock being audible. In both rape scenes, the soundtrack intensifies the power of the attacks and mutes Carole's screams. It is quite like a dream image in that she screams but her voice cannot be heard. The ambiguousness of the transitional scene—which comes after the two consecutive primal scenes that are marked

as ‘real’ occurrences, and before the ‘imaginary’ rape scenes—not only points at the structural kinship between primal scenes and the rape scenes but also exposes the porous border between fantasy and reality.

The rape fantasies that Carole forms reveal how she has perceived the earlier scenes of the sexual intercourse between Helen and Michael. Whether an actual memory, a real event or a fantasy, the primal scene experience is quite important in terms of the subject’s psychosexual functioning. Primal scenes fall into the category of what Freud calls “primal fantasies” which play an important part in producing sexuality within the child. If the scene of parental sex explains the subject’s origins, Carole’s uneasiness, her feelings of horror and even disgust when exposed to the sounds of copulation, point at her resistance to acknowledge the presence and potency of the father as a part of a copulating couple. In other words, for Carole what is to be denied is Michael’s function in relation to both (her)self and mother, since copulation equals the violence of separation for her. Freud argues that the child who witnesses or fantasizes the sight or the sound of sexual intercourse between adults interprets the scene as an act of violence by the father. Freud (1908) discusses situations in which a child directly observes the primal scene and he argues that all children arrive at the same conclusion: “They adopt what may be called a *sadistic view of coition*. They see it as something that the stronger participant is forcibly inflicting on the weaker [...]” (p.220). In congruence with Freud’s assertion, Carole’s subsequent fantasy formation with regard

to the scene she overhears is one of aggression and violence. Her imaginary rape scenarios illustrate that Carole fantasizes about these earlier scenes in such a way that Helen becomes the mother figure that is imagined to be with the father (substitute) by force rather than preference. In other words, she forms a fantasy of sadistic coupling, rape of the mother by the father, in which Carole fills in for the mother figure. The rape fantasies thus show that Carole identifies with the imaginary position of the mother.

If Looks Could Kill

In *Repulsion*, the camera follows Carole extremely closely and it provides us with shots from Carole's point of view. These point of view shots have a double function; they both endow the spectators with Carole's view and yet, at the same time, the stalking camera, which is often positioned very close to her face and body, forces the viewer to experience Carole's discomfort and her feeling of confinement when she walks alone through the streets of London. The following scene is worth analyzing to exemplify the specific choices the camera makes, its repetitive movements, and the possible meanings that can be derived from these patterns. The scene starts with a shot of the protagonist, who is waiting for the traffic lights. She comes towards the camera, which is positioned just across the street, and then the camera starts to accompany her on her side. They move together at first; at one point, the camera stops and stays behind her, then it shows a

man calling her from behind the window of a bar. Then, the camera resumes following her; she keeps on walking and passes by workers who are digging up pavement. This time the camera stays with one of the workers, who is wearing an undershirt, grinning and looking at her. The camera shows the close-up of this worker's face and then it stops. There is a cut from the man's face to a plate of food. Thus, this succession is blocked by a jump at a very specific point. Both this jump, connecting the scene of the protagonist's walking to the scene at the restaurant, and the previous cut (camera break) within the former scene, are intrusions into the protagonist's activity. The camera prefers to stay with the men and causes interruptions in the course of the protagonist's activities. During most of the film, the camera keeps stalking her but when there is an intrusion, it chooses to stay with the intruder. The relation of the camera to the protagonist resembles men's relation to her: both the camera and the men attempt to intrude into the protagonist's mind/catatonic state. Both of them incessantly tease, harass and stalk her. The viewer is at first motivated to identify with the camera's point of view, but as the film unfolds, it shows us how disturbing and distressing this look is.

Besides following Carole extremely closely, the camera is also at a very low height during several important scenes. This opens up another discussion regarding the fetishistic relation of the spectators to the camera positioning. One scene particularly clarifies the camera's fetishism. The sequence starts with Carole's returning home. After she steps off the escalator and enters the flat,

the camera, which is placed at the level of floor, shows her legs, her taking off her shoes, and her skirt falling onto the floor. It then slowly rises up and shoots her half-naked body. Then, Carole goes to the bathroom and washes her legs in the sink. Here, the camera presents merely her leg in the sink from a medium shot. Although it shows a very routine activity, this shot is held for an unexpectedly long time. If we think of the beginning of this sequence together with this bathroom scene, we may suggest that these fetishistic positionings and movements of the camera are of great importance for spectatorial identification.



In his essay “Fetishism,” Freud (1927) elaborates that the male child, upon observing the female (mother’s) genitals for the first time, is horrified by the thought that human beings can be without a penis. This thought evokes a great fear of castration. As a defense against castration anxiety the child “disavows” the primal perception—the female genitals without a penis—and refuses this knowledge that castration can occur. To be able to ward off the danger to himself, he constructs a fetish substitute for the (mother’s) lacking penis. Here, disavowal has a double functioning: through the fetish, the child holds on to the belief in the mother’s penis, yet at the

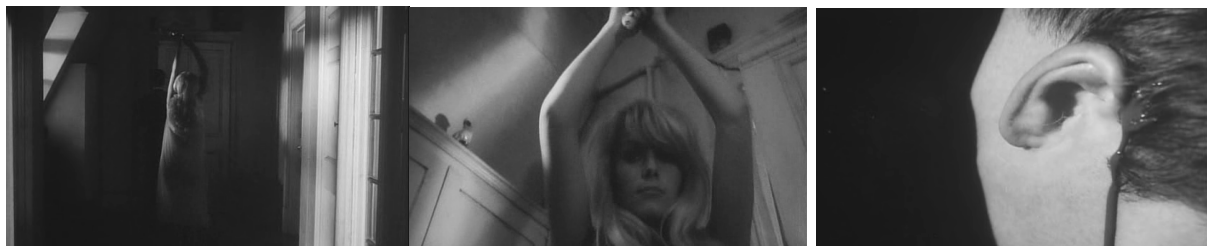
same time, the requirement for a fetish confirms the knowledge of the woman's castration. In the scenario of fetishism, Freud explains that the object most likely to be instituted as a fetish is that which the subject last glanced upon before seeing the terrifying absence. The subject's interest is fixated on the last impression just prior to "the uncanny and traumatic" sight of absence (Freud, 1927, p.155). Elizabeth Cowie (1997) clarifies that the object is substituted as a fetish not merely because of its visual similarities to the (male) penis or its resemblance to what covers over/around the absence of penis in the female body, i.e. the site of the lack (p.263). Rather, the object is figured as a fetish by acquiring a similar functioning in the mechanism of disavowal, in that fantasy scenario formed by the subject.

In this context, the use of the concept of fetishism in cinema cannot simply entail the representations of fetish images since particular objects or images cannot inherently have a fetishistic form of representation. In cinema, as Cowie points out, the question is not the representation of fetish-objects or fetish-images, rather the process of "fetishising, of the becoming substituted" (p.267). Here, Cowie's emphasis on the term "fetishising" as a process points to the importance of the objects being placed, displaced, or substituted within the spatiotemporal continuity of moving images. *Repulsion* achieves a "fetishising" not through the images of the protagonist, but via the elaboration of the camera movements, camera distance, camera height and mise-en-scène. I have detailed a particular scene above in which the camera, placed at the level of

floor, shows Carole's lower body for a considerable time; this scene is followed by Carole washing her leg in the sink. The images of her lower body are not fetishistic in themselves; however, the spectator's look is fetishized by being constantly positioned to look upward, by being conditioned to wonder what more there is to see. In this particular scene, the objects are metonymically displaced one after another: her legs, the shoes taken off, and then, the skirt, which falls onto the floor. By the metonymical substitution of the objects, the spectator's look is constantly interrupted and thus, the spectator is deprived of seeing Carole's full body. When the camera finally tilts up, it cuts to her in a medium shot without showing that "uncanny and traumatic" sight of absence; therefore, the camera allows the spectators to disavow the moment of castration. What fetishizes the spectator's look is the camera's suggesting a constant disavowal, and such disavowal of lack is realized through a process of substitution of the objects.

In *Repulsion*, there are only two scenes that are not viewed from the protagonist's perspective despite her presence. These are the scenes in which Carole commits murders. The metonymic connection between Carole's body and the apartment is already established before the first murder scene. The murder takes place soon after she has confined herself in the apartment. The victim of the first murder is Colin, who, although he barely knows Carole, still desperately wants to be with her. Despite the fact that his advances are consistently turned down by Carole,

and despite her apparent indifference to him, Colin insists upon seeing her. Finally, he comes to her apartment and threatens to smash the door in if Carole does not open it. When Colin is behind the door, the spectator witnesses what is happening from Carole's point of view, as she fearfully looks into the peephole. After he forcibly breaks into the apartment, Colin tries to apologize and conduct a conversation, yet Carole remains entirely silent. As soon as Colin steps to close the door, Carole's first attack is heard. From this moment on, the spectators are given his point of view. When Carole hits him several times with a candlestick, the camera is on the floor, where Colin lies. What is shown is the medium shot of Carole and her violent strikes. Carole's face is darkly lit; only her hair noticeably shines. The shift from Carole's point of view to Colin's is evident.



After a particular lapse of time, the landlord shows up to collect the overdue rent. As an authority figure, he threatens to call the police if she does not open the door. As soon as he pushes the door and enters the apartment, he steps towards the camera, which is positioned inside the apartment at the end of the corridor. He looks around curiously, and then he suddenly stares downward with a disturbed look. Then, there is an obvious cut to Carole's bare feet; the camera makes a slow tilt from her foot to her upper body. First, we suppose that this is the landlord's point

of view, yet, while the tilt still continues, the landlord enters the frame from the left side. The camera immediately falsifies the spectators' assumption regarding the owner of this look. There is no diegetic substitute, a stand-in character who would be looking at Carole's bare feet, which would hide the camera's look. By revealing its presence, with its reflexive visibility, *Repulsion's* camera again forces the spectators to confront with their own fetishistic positioning. Although she looks exhausted and torn down, the camera's first shot of Carole is her feet, legs and lower body. After being questioned about the rent and the barricading of the door, Carole gives the landlord the rent money. When he is about to put the money in his bag, he notices her legs and immediately takes off his glasses and continues to stare. This time the landlord's sexually fueled look at her is obvious. Being seemingly worried about Carole, the mess, and the chaotic state of things, the landlord offers her water and takes care of the rotten rabbit. Along with all the deeds of the other male characters in the film, the landlord's acts are directed to recuperate the disturbed and unstable symbolic order.

The landlord comes closer to Carole and tries to converse with her, yet she remains silent. Then, after mentioning that she does not need to be lonely and that they can be friends, he offers a clear transaction: sexual intercourse in exchange for the rent money. Despite Carole's resistance, he kisses her and attempts to rape her. The camera shows all these acts from relatively neutral

medium shots until Carole attacks him with a straight razor. Then, the camera shows Carole's strikes from the landlord's point of view and she is again darkly lit.



Therefore, the film presents the two murder scenes in a quite similar way; we are shown Carole's brutal attacks from the victims' point of view. If we think of these murder scenes together with the camera's fetishism discussed earlier, we can conclude that *Repulsion* provides its spectators with an unexpected and undesirable insight. Through the film, the spectators are constantly motivated to identify with the fetishistic camera positioning and with the stalking camera, but in return they have to watch the murder scenes from the victims' point of view. The viewers witness how Carole's gaze is transformed into killing. They are forced to face the violent, attacking woman who has been exposed to the intrusive camera, stalked and fetishized by it until the murders take place.

The moebial ride the film takes us on does not explicitly reveal the source or the origins of Carole's mental disturbances, yet it points at her troubled relation to the mother, more precisely, the maternal. *Repulsion* presents Carole as abjected, as someone who cannot maintain the rigid boundaries imposed by the symbolic, failing to sustain a "clean and proper body." Carole,

mourning for an impossible, maternal object, still struggles with the ambiguity of her own borders. It is in this sense that Carole's abjection predates any specular identification, i.e. the identification with an imaginary other. Despite the clinical exposition of Carole as abjected—evident in her problem of non-differentiation and struggle with spatial ambivalence, *Repulsion* does not show Carole's body as abjected or repulsive, on the contrary, it portrays her as a beautiful young woman who is 'objectivized' and assaulted by the predatory looks of the men. In the film, male characters coerce this young woman into sexual act/sexuality. For Carole, the sexual act is above all an act of violence made to her fragile borders. In this respect, her murderous acts do not assign her an active agency, but rather can be read as her final attempts to maintain her porous borders intact. By showing the murders from the men's point of view, the film does not victimize the male figures; rather it explicitly indicates that Carole's murderous act is an inevitable consequence of the men's violent intrusion on her boundaries. In this respect, *Repulsion* points to how the symbolic system, the modern society, fails in finding ways to connect with the borderline subject who resides on the society's own borders. *Repulsion* attests to the fragility of the symbolic system, to a society that cannot provide forms or means to cope with the material or the semiotic, doomed to be suppressed because of the very existence of such order but at the cost of baring the very fragility of this very order. *Repulsion* offers a critical account of the unyielding attempts—conducted by male figures—

to restore the symbolic order without maintaining a functioning, effective relation with the semiotic.

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