



THE  
*Monstrous-Feminine*



FILM, FEMINISM,  
PSYCHOANALYSIS



**Barbara Creed**

# THE MONSTROUS-FEMININE

In almost all critical writings on the horror film, woman is conceptualized only as victim. In *The Monstrous-Feminine* Barbara Creed challenges this patriarchal view by arguing that the prototype of all definitions of the monstrous is the female reproductive body.

Woman as castrator constitutes the most significant face of the monstrous-feminine in film, and Creed challenges the mythical patriarchal view that woman terrifies because she is castrated by arguing that woman primarily terrifies because of a fear that she might *castrate*. With close reference to a number of classic horror films including *Alien*, *The Brood*, *The Hunger*, *The Exorcist*, *Sisters*, *I Spit on Your Grave* and *Psycho*, she presents the first sustained analysis of the seven 'faces' of the monstrous-feminine from a feminist and psychoanalytic perspective, discussing woman as monster in relation to woman as archaic mother, monstrous womb, vampire, witch, possessed body, monstrous mother and castrator.

Her argument disrupts Freudian and Lacanian theories of sexual difference as well as existing theories of spectatorship and fetishism in relation to the male and female gaze in the cinema to provide a challenging and provocative rereading of classical and contemporary film and theoretical texts of interest to all teachers and students of film, feminist theory and cultural studies.

Barbara Creed lectures in Cinema Studies at La Trobe University, Melbourne.

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# THE MONSTROUS-FEMININE

Film, feminism, psychoanalysis

*Barbara Creed*

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Part I

FACES OF THE  
MONSTROUS-FEMININE:  
ABJECTION AND THE  
MATERNAL



# INTRODUCTION

The horror film is populated by female monsters, many of which seem to have evolved from images that haunted the dreams, myths and artistic practices of our forebears many centuries ago. The female monster, or monstrous-feminine, wears many faces: the amoral primeval mother (*Aliens*, 1986); vampire (*The Hunger*, 1983); witch (*Carrie*, 1976); woman as monstrous womb (*The Brood*, 1979); woman as bleeding wound (*Dressed to Kill*, 1980); woman as possessed body (*The Exorcist*, 1973); the castrating mother (*Psycho*, 1960); woman as beautiful but deadly killer (*Basic Instinct*, 1992); aged psychopath (*Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*, 1962); the monstrous girl-boy (*A Reflection of Fear*, 1973); woman as non-human animal (*Cat People*, 1942); woman as life-in-death (*Life-force*, 1985); woman as the deadly *femme castratrice* (*I Spit On Your Grave*, 1978). Although a great deal has been written about the horror film, very little of that work has discussed the representation of woman-as-monster. Instead, emphasis has been on woman as victim of the (mainly male) monster. Why has woman-as-monster been neglected in feminist theory and in virtually all significant theoretical analyses of the popular horror film? After all, this image is hardly new.

All human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject. Freud linked man's fear of woman to his infantile belief that the mother is castrated. 'Probably no male human being is spared the fright of castration at the sight of a female genital', Freud wrote in his paper, 'Fetishism' in 1927 (p. 154). Joseph Campbell, in *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology*, drew attention to woman as castrator and witch.

there is a motif occurring in certain primitive mythologies, as well as in modern surrealist painting and neurotic dream, which is known to folklore as 'the toothed vagina' – the vagina that castrates. And a counterpart, the other way, is the so-called 'phallic mother,' a motif perfectly illustrated in the long fingers and nose of the witch.

(Campbell, 1976, 73)

As well as its expression in surrealist art (see illustrations), the myth of the *vagina dentata* is extremely prevalent. Despite local variations, the myth generally states that women are terrifying because they have teeth in their vaginas and that the women must be tamed or the teeth somehow removed or softened – usually by a hero figure – before intercourse can safely take place. The witch, of course, is a familiar female monster; she is invariably represented as an old, ugly crone who is capable of monstrous acts. During the European witch trials of recent history she was accused of the most hideous crimes: cannibalism, murder, castration of male victims, and the advent of natural disasters such as storms, fires and the plague. Most societies also have myths about the female vampire, a creature who sucks the blood of helpless, often willing, victims and transforms them into her own kind.

Classical mythology, too, was populated with gendered monsters, many of which were female. The Sirens of classical mythology were described as enormous birds with the heads of women. They used their magical songs to lure sailors close to shore in order to drive the sailors' ships into hidden reefs. The Sirens then ate their helpless victims. The Medusa and her two sisters also presented a terrifying sight. They had huge heads, their hair consisted of writhing serpents, their teeth were as long as boars' tusks and they flew through the air on golden wings. Men unfortunate enough to look upon the Medusa with her evil eye were immediately turned to stone. In classical times, pendants and other jewellery depicting the Medusa's frightening appearance were frequently worn to ward off evil spirits, and warriors painted the female genitals on their shields in order to terrify the enemy. Freud takes up this point in his short essay, 'Medusa's head':

If Medusa's head takes the place of a representation of the female genitals, or rather if it isolates their horrifying effects from their pleasure-giving ones, it may be recalled that displaying the genitals is familiar in other connections as an apotropaic act. What arouses horror in oneself will produce the same effect upon the enemy against whom one is seeking to defend oneself. We read in Rabelais of how the Devil took flight when the woman showed him her vulva.

(p. 274)

It is not by accident that Freud linked the sight of the Medusa to the equally horrifying sight of the mother's genitals, for the concept of the monstrous-feminine, as constructed within/by a patriarchal and phallogocentric ideology, is related intimately to the problem of sexual difference and castration. If we accept Freud's interpretation that the 'Medusa's head takes the place of a representation of the female genitals', we can see that the Medusan myth is mediated by a narrative about the *difference* of female sexuality as a difference which is grounded in monstrousness and which invokes castration anxiety in the male spectator. 'The sight of the Medusa's

head makes the spectator stiff with terror, turns him to stone.’ The irony of this was not lost on Freud, who pointed out that becoming stiff also means having an erection. ‘Thus in the original situation it offers consolation to the spectator: he is still in possession of a penis, and the stiffening reassures him of the fact’ (ibid., 273). One wonders if the experience of horror – of viewing the horror film – causes similar alterations in the body of the modern male spectator. And what of other phrases that are used by both male and female viewers – phrases such as: ‘It scared the shit out of me’; ‘It made me feel sick’; ‘It gave me the creeps’? What is the relationship between physical states, bodily wastes (even if metaphoric ones) and the horrific – in particular, the monstrous-feminine?

I have used the term ‘monstrous-feminine’ as the term ‘female monster’ implies a simple reversal of ‘male monster’. The reasons why the monstrous-feminine horrifies her audience are quite different from the reasons why the male monster horrifies his audience. A new term is needed to specify these differences. As with all other stereotypes of the feminine, from virgin to whore, she is defined in terms of her sexuality. The phrase ‘monstrous-feminine’ emphasizes the importance of gender in the construction of her monstrosity.

Before discussing the questions raised above, it is relevant to consider the various ways in which theorists and critics have approached the question of woman as monster in popular film. In general, they have adopted one of the following approaches: simply discussed female monstrosity as part of male monstrosity; argued that woman only terrifies when represented as man’s castrated other; referred to her only in passing; or argued that there are no ‘great’ female monsters in the tradition of Frankenstein’s monster or Dracula. One theorist who has contributed a great deal to a critical appreciation of the horror film is Robin Wood; but, although he is interested in gender relations in the horror film, he has not discussed the nature of female monstrosity in any detail. To my knowledge no one has presented a sustained analysis of the different faces of the female monster or ‘the monstrous-feminine’.

Gérard Lenne in his article, ‘Monster and victim: women in the horror film’, is fairly typical of those who find the very idea of a female monster offensive to their rather quaint, but deeply sexist, notions of chivalry. Gérard Lenne argues that there ‘are very few monstrous and disfigured women in the fantastic, and so much the better’. He appears to believe that women should be represented only in terms of their ‘natural’ role in life. ‘Is it not reasonable that woman, who, in life, is both mother and lover, should be represented by characters that convey the feeling of a sheltering peace?’ (Lenne, 1979, 35). He allows that there are female monsters but then finds reasons why they are not real monsters; for instance he states that the female vampire exists but her role is usually ‘secondary’; the schizophrenic female monsters of *Repulsion* and *Sisters* are understandable

because 'schizophrenia is readily assimilated to female behaviour' (ibid., 37). Lenne evades the identification of female monsters such as the half-human, half-animal female hybrids of *Island of Lost Souls* and the 'revolting' figure in *The Reptile* by dismissing them as 'problematic'. 'Woman is seldom to be found among the great psychopaths' and there is 'not one single female mad scientist' (ibid., 38). *The Exorcist* is simply the result of a 'prevailing trend for making female versions of the great myths of the fantastic' (ibid.). The only 'indisputably active role in the fantastic that is exclusively female' is that of the witch (ibid., 39). However, Lenne is more interested in the 'attractiveness of the witch' than in her monstrousness. After producing a litany of sexist comments, he concludes that the 'great monsters are all male'. In his view, woman exists in the horror film primarily as victim. 'Perfect as a tearful victim, what she does best is to faint in the arms of a gorilla, or a mummy, or a werewolf, or a Frankensteinian creature' (ibid., 35).

While it is true that there are fewer classic female monsters than male, it does not follow that these creatures are not terrifying or truly monstrous. Lenne does not even mention Paula the Ape-Woman of the 1940s played by Acquanetta in both *Captive Wild Woman* and *Jungle Woman* and by Vicky Lane in *Jungle Captive* – the classic female monster with more than one film to her credit. Lenne's definition of what constitutes the monstrous is questionable on a number of counts, particularly his statement that the horror of schizophrenia is somehow ameliorated not only because it is understandable but because it is supposedly a 'female' illness.

In his book, *Dark Romance*, David J. Hogan examines the sexual aspect of the horror cinema. While he draws attention to those films, within each sub-genre, in which the monster is female, he does not examine the nature of female monstrosity in any depth. Where he does discuss this issue, his response is ambivalent. On the one hand, he states that horror films with female monsters as central characters are 'a relatively new phenomenon, and seem to have developed parallel with the growth of the women's movement in the United States and Europe'. However, he dismisses most of these films as 'obvious and childish' (Hogan, 1986, 19). On the other hand, Hogan does draw attention to a 'fascinating subgenre' that appeared in the early 1950s, which he calls the 'cinema of lost women'. This subgenre, in which women choose to live apart from men, includes titles such as: *Queen of Outer Space*, *The She-Creature* and *Voodoo Women*. A central feature of these films is 'their insistence upon the adversary aspect of man-woman relationships', which Hogan finds 'disquieting' (ibid., 61–3). Hogan is generally dismissive of films with female monsters. He does, however, acknowledge the contribution of Barbara Steele, known as the 'High Priestess of Horror', to the genre. He argues that her appeal resides in her ability 'to express a tantalizing sort of evil, and a sexual ambivalence that is at once enticing and ghastly'. In his view, Steele represents, more

than any other genre star, the connection between sex and death as well as the culture's ambiguous attitude to female sexuality (*ibid.*, 164).

In *Dreadful Pleasures* James B. Twitchell argues that horror films are similar to 'formulaic rituals' which provide the adolescent with social information. 'Modern horror myths prepare the teenager for the anxieties of reproduction . . . they are fables of sexual identity' (Twitchell, 1985, 7). He is primarily interested in the monster as a figure of transformation – the vampire, werewolf, zombie, psychopath. On the one hand, Twitchell draws attention to female monsters who belong to these categories, but on the other hand he does not seriously examine films, such as *Carrie* and *The Exorcist*, that are made from the perspective of a female rite of passage. He dismisses the female psychopath as 'mannish' (*ibid.*, 257) which suggests he believes that 'femininity', by definition, excludes all forms of aggressive, monstrous behaviour.

Only those writers whose analysis of horror draws on recent debates about the nature of sexual difference attempt to come to terms with the nature of monstrosity in relation to gender. In general, these theorists work from the Freudian position that woman horrifies because she is castrated. One of the most substantial analyses of the monster is presented by Stephen Neale in his book, *Genre*. Drawing on Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze and male castration anxiety, Neale argues that the classic male horror monster represents castration but only in order to fill the lack, to disavow castration and thereby entertain the male spectator by soothing his castration anxieties. According to Neale, 'most monsters tend, in fact, to be defined as "male," especially in so far as the objects of their desire are almost exclusively women' (Neale, 1980, 61).

In this respect, it could well be maintained that it is woman's sexuality, that which renders them desirable – but also threatening – to men, which constitutes the real problem that the horror cinema exists to explore, and which constitutes also and ultimately that which is really monstrous.

(*ibid.*, 61)

In Neale's view, there are two ways of interpreting the monster. The first is that the monster signifies the boundary between the human and the non-human. The second is that it is the male fear of castration which ultimately produces and delineates the monstrous. Neale argues that man's fascination with and fear of female sexuality is endlessly reworked within the signifying practices of the horror film. Thus, the horror film offers an abundant display of fetishistic effects whose function is to attest to the perversity of the patriarchal order founded, as it is, on a misconception – the erroneous belief that woman is castrated.

A sustained and important discussion of the monstrous female is presented by Susan Lurie in her article, 'The construction of the "castrated

woman" in psychoanalysis and cinema'. Adopting an approach in opposition to Neale's, Lurie challenges the traditional Freudian position by arguing that men fear women, not because women are castrated but because they are *not* castrated. Lurie asserts that the male fears woman because woman is *not* mutilated like a man might be *if he were* castrated; woman is physically whole, intact and in possession of all her sexual powers. The notion of the castrated woman is a phantasy intended to ameliorate man's real fear of what woman might do to him. (I have used the term 'phantasy' rather than 'fantasy' throughout because I wish to emphasize phantasy in the Freudian sense in which the subject is represented as a protagonist engaged in the activity of wish fulfilment. 'Fantasy' sometimes has the connotations of whimsy – a notion I wish to avoid.) Specifically, he fears that woman could castrate him both psychically and in a sense physically. He imagines the latter might take place during intercourse when the penis 'disappears' inside woman's 'devouring mouth' (Lurie, 1981–2, 55). Lurie's analysis is important, particularly her discussion of man's fear of woman as castrating other. It is this aspect of Lurie's argument that I will develop in detail in Part II of my analysis. But, like Neale, Lurie is ultimately concerned only with the representation of woman as *victim*. She argues that man deals with his anxiety that woman is not castrated by constructing her as castrated within the signifying practices of the film text. She analyses this process in relation to Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*. She claims that the 'proliferation of efforts' to represent woman as symbolically castrated, particularly in the romance genre of the fiction film, 'argues vigorously against the hypothesis that men regard women as a priori castrated' (*ibid.*, 56).

Drawing on Lurie's work, Linda Williams argues, in her article 'When the woman looks', that it is woman's 'power-in-difference' (1984, 89) that is central to the representation of the monster in horror. She states that classic horror films such as *Nosferatu* and *The Phantom of the Opera* frequently represent 'a surprising (and at times subversive) affinity between monster and woman' in that woman's look acknowledges their 'similar status within patriarchal structures of seeing'. Both are constructed as 'biological freaks' whose bodies represent a fearful and threatening form of sexuality. This has important implications for the female spectator. 'So there is a sense in which the woman's look at the monster . . . is also a recognition of their similar status as potent threats to vulnerable male power' (*ibid.*, 90). Williams's argument challenges the assumption that the monster is identified with masculinity and opens the way for a discussion of woman's 'power-in-difference'. Although Williams's thesis is important, because it challenges conventional approaches to the horror film, it still leaves unanswered questions about the nature of female monstrosity. What exactly is it about woman herself, as a being quite separate from the male monster, that produces definitions of female monstrosity?

Apart from Williams, nearly all of the articles discussed above deal with woman as victim in the horror film. The main reason for this is that most writers adopt Freud's argument that woman terrifies because she is castrated, that is, already constituted as victim. Such a position only serves to reinforce patriarchal definitions of woman which represent and reinforce the essentialist view that woman, *by nature*, is a victim. My intention is to explore the representation of woman in the horror film and to argue that woman *is* represented as monstrous in a significant number of horror films. However, I am not arguing that simply because the monstrous-feminine is constructed as an active rather than passive figure that this image is 'feminist' or 'liberated'. The presence of the monstrous-feminine in the popular horror film speaks to us more about male fears than about female desire or feminine subjectivity. However, this presence does challenge the view that the male spectator is almost always situated in an active, sadistic position and the female spectator in a passive, masochistic one. An analysis of this figure also necessitates a rereading of key aspects of Freudian theory, particularly his theory of the Oedipus complex and castration crisis.

Part I presents a detailed discussion of at least five faces of the monstrous-feminine in relation to Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject and the maternal. (Chapters 1 and 2, with some modifications, were originally published as a journal article: 'Horror and the monstrous-feminine: an imaginary abjection', *Screen* 27.1 (1986): 45–70.) I will argue that when woman is represented as monstrous it is almost always in relation to her mothering and reproductive functions. These faces are: the archaic mother; the monstrous womb; the witch; the vampire; and the possessed woman. In Part II I will discuss the representation of woman as monstrous in relation to Freud's theory of castration. Whereas Freud argued that woman terrifies because she appears to be castrated, man's fear of castration has, in my view, led him to construct another monstrous phantasy – that of woman as castrator. Here woman's monstrousness is linked more directly to questions of sexual desire than to the area of reproduction. The image of woman as castrator takes at least three forms: woman as the deadly *femme castratrice*, the castrating mother and the *vagina dentata*. Freud did not analyse man's fears of woman as castrator; in fact he seems to have repressed this image of woman in his writings about sexual difference and in his case histories. Of necessity, then, this investigation will, through its analysis of popular fictions, entail a critique of some of the main tenets of Freudian theory and contemporary film theory.

# KRISTEVA, FEMININITY, ABJECTION

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.

Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*

Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* provides us with a preliminary hypothesis for an analysis of the representation of woman as monstrous in the horror film. Although her study is concerned with psychoanalysis and literature, it nevertheless suggests a way of situating the monstrous-feminine in the horror film in relation to the maternal figure and what Kristeva terms 'abjection', that which does not 'respect borders, positions, rules', that which 'disturbs identity, system, order' (Kristeva, 1982, 4). In general terms, Kristeva is attempting to explore the different ways in which abjection works within human societies, as a means of separating out the human from the non-human and the fully constituted subject from the partially formed subject. Ritual becomes a means by which societies both renew their initial contact with the abject element and then exclude that element. Through ritual, the demarcation lines between the human and non-human are drawn up anew and presumably made all the stronger for that process. (One of Kristeva's aims in *Powers of Horror* is to present a rewriting of many of the ideas and beliefs put forward by the College of Sociology, specifically those associated with the nature of femininity, abjection and the sacred. For an introduction to the philosophy and writings of the college see *The College of Sociology (1937–39)* edited by Denis Hollier.)

A full examination of this theory is outside the scope of this project; I propose to draw mainly on Kristeva's discussion of the construction of abjection in the human subject in relation to her notion of (a) the 'border' (b) the mother-child relationship and (c) the feminine body. At crucial points, I shall also refer to her writings on the abject in relation to religious discourses. This area cannot be ignored, for what becomes apparent in reading her work is that definitions of the monstrous as constructed in the

modern horror text are grounded in ancient religious and historical notions of abjection – particularly in relation to the following religious ‘abominations’: sexual immorality and perversion; corporeal alteration, decay and death; human sacrifice; murder; the corpse; bodily wastes; the feminine body and incest. These forms of abjection are also central to the construction of the monstrous in the modern horror film.

The place of the abject is ‘the place where meaning collapses’, the place where ‘I’ am not. The abject threatens life; it must be ‘radically excluded’ (Kristeva, 1982, 2) from the place of the living subject, propelled away from the body and deposited on the other side of an imaginary border which separates the self from that which threatens the self. Although the subject must exclude the abject, the abject must, nevertheless, be tolerated for that which threatens to destroy life also helps to define life. Further, the activity of exclusion is necessary to guarantee that the subject take up his/her proper place in relation to the symbolic.

The abject can be experienced in various ways – one of which relates to biological bodily functions, the other of which has been inscribed in a symbolic (religious) economy. For instance, Kristeva claims that food loathing is ‘perhaps the most elementary and archaic form of abjection’ (ibid.). Food, however, only becomes abject if it signifies a border ‘between two distinct entities or territories’ (ibid., 75). Kristeva describes how, for her, the skin on the top of milk, which is offered to her by her father and mother, is a ‘sign of their desire’, a sign separating her world from their world, a sign which she does not want. ‘But since the food is not an “other” for “me,” who am only in their desire, I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which “I” claim to establish myself’ (ibid., 3). In relation to the horror film, it is relevant to note that food loathing is frequently represented as a major source of abjection, particularly the eating of human flesh (*Blood Feast, Motel Hell, Blood Diner, The Hills Have Eyes, The Corpse Grinders*).

The ultimate in abjection is the corpse. The body protects itself from bodily wastes such as shit, blood, urine and pus by ejecting these things from the body just as it expels food that, for whatever reason, the subject finds loathsome. The body ejects these substances, at the same time extricating itself from them and from the place where they fall, so that it might continue to live:

Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit – *cadere*, cadaver. If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel. ‘I’ is expelled.

(ibid., 3–4)

Within a biblical context, the corpse is also utterly abject. It signifies one of the most basic forms of pollution – the body without a soul. As a form of waste it represents the opposite of the spiritual, the religious symbolic. In relation to the horror film, it is relevant to note that several of the most popular horrific figures are ‘bodies without souls’ (the vampire), the ‘living corpse’ (the zombie), corpse-eater (the ghoul) and the robot or android. What is also interesting is that such ancient figures of abjection as the vampire, the ghoul, the zombie and the witch (one of her many crimes was that she used corpses for her rites of magic) continue to provide some of the most compelling images of horror in the modern cinema. Were-creatures, whose bodies signify a collapse of the boundaries between human and animal, also belong to this category.

Abjection also occurs where the individual is a hypocrite, a liar. Abject things are those that highlight the ‘fragility of the law’ and that exist on the other side of the border which separates out the living subject from that which threatens its extinction. But abjection is not something of which the subject can ever feel free – it is always there, beckoning the self to take up the place of abjection, the place where meaning collapses. The subject, constructed in/through language, through a desire for meaning, is also spoken by the abject, the place of meaninglessness – thus, the subject is constantly beset by abjection which fascinates desire but which must be repelled for fear of self-annihilation. A crucial point is that abjection is always ambiguous. Like Bataille, Kristeva emphasizes the attraction, as well as the horror, of the undifferentiated.

### **ABJECTION AND THE HORROR FILM**

The horror film would appear to be, in at least three ways, an illustration of the work of abjection. First, the horror film abounds in images of abjection, foremost of which is the corpse, whole and mutilated, followed by an array of bodily wastes such as blood, vomit, saliva, sweat, tears and putrefying flesh. In terms of Kristeva’s notion of the border, when we say such-and-such a horror film ‘made me sick’ or ‘scared the shit out of me’, we are actually foregrounding that specific horror film as a ‘work of abjection’ or ‘abjection at work’ – almost in a literal sense. Viewing the horror film signifies a desire not only for perverse pleasure (confronting sickening, horrific images/ being filled with terror/desire for the undifferentiated) but also a desire, once having been filled with perversity, taken pleasure in perversity, to throw up, throw out, eject the abject (from the safety of the spectator’s seat). In Kristeva’s view, woman is specifically related to polluting objects which fall into two categories: excremental and menstrual. This in turn gives woman a special relationship to the abject – a crucial point which I will discuss shortly.

Second, the concept of a border is central to the construction of the

monstrous in the horror film; that which crosses or threatens to cross the 'border' is abject. Although the specific nature of the border changes from film to film, the function of the monstrous remains the same – to bring about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability. In some horror films the monstrous is produced at the border between human and inhuman, man and beast (*Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, *King Kong*); in others the border is between the normal and the supernatural, good and evil (*Carrie*, *The Exorcist*, *The Omen*, *Rosemary's Baby*); or the monstrous is produced at the border which separates those who take up their proper gender roles from those who do not (*Psycho*, *Dressed to Kill*, *A Reflection of Fear*); or the border is between normal and abnormal sexual desire (*The Hunger*, *Cat People*). Most horror films also construct a border between what Kristeva refers to as 'the clean and proper body' and the abject body, or the body which has lost its form and integrity. The fully symbolic body must bear no indication of its debt to nature. In Kristeva's view the image of woman's body, because of its maternal functions, acknowledges its 'debt to nature' and consequently is more likely to signify the abject (ibid., 102). The notion of the material female body is central to the construction of the border in the horror film. I will explore this crucial area fully in the following chapters.

Interestingly, various sub-genres of the horror film seem to correspond to religious categories of abjection. For instance, cannibalism, a religious abomination, is central to the 'meat' movie (*Night of the Living Dead*, *The Hills Have Eyes*); the corpse as abomination becomes the abject of ghoul and zombie movies (*The Evil Dead*; *Zombie Flesh eaters*); blood is central to the vampire film (*The Hunger*) as well as the horror film in general (*Bloodsucking Freaks*); the corpse is constructed as the abject of virtually all horror films; and bodily disfigurement as a religious abomination is also central to the slasher movie, particularly those in which woman is slashed, the mark a sign of her 'difference', her impurity (*Dressed to Kill*, *Psycho*).

The third way in which the horror film illustrates the work of abjection is in the construction of the maternal figure as abject. Kristeva argues that all individuals experience abjection at the time of their earliest attempts to break away from the mother. She sees the mother-child relation as one marked by conflict: the child struggles to break free but the mother is reluctant to release it. Because of the 'instability of the symbolic function' in relation to this most crucial area – 'the prohibition placed on the maternal body (as a defense against autoeroticism and incest taboo)', Kristeva argues that the maternal body becomes a site of conflicting desires. 'Here, drives hold sway and constitute a strange space that I shall name, after Plato (*Timaeus*, 48–53), a *chora*, a receptacle' (ibid., 14). The position of the child is rendered even more unstable because, while the mother retains a close hold over the child, it can serve to authenticate her