Cindy Sherman and Jo Spence: Monstrousness, Abjection & Female Identity.

Helen McGhie

PVD 332 ‘Research Project'
University of Sunderland
School of Arts, Design, Media & Culture
April 2009
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Introduction

Abjection and Identity

“It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.” – Julia Kristeva

The French post-structuralist Julia Kristeva has been a key theorist in defining the notion of ‘abjection’ and its relationship with identity and the formation of individual subjectivity. By drawing on Jacques Lacan’s ‘mirror stage’ and the psychoanalytic work of George Bataille, she suggests that the term describes something ‘other’ to oneself; a (particularly unpleasant) borderline space between subject and non-subject, self and other; that can threaten an individual’s stable identity. In the book *Powers of Horror* (1982), Kristeva explains the concept by referring to explicit ‘abject’ substances such as excrement, corpses etc. She explains and emphasizes how their presence can function to challenge the stability of the human subject:

“When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk – harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail paring – I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire.”

Abjection is connected with the development of a subject’s identity and is central to the relationship between mother and child. Kristeva suggests that for a child to become an individual, a progression from the maternal ‘semiotic’ stage to the paternal ‘symbolic’ realm of language must take place. She believes that the child (‘speaking subject’) will

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2 Ibid., p. 4.
begin life in the Semiotic maternal ‘chora’; a metaphorical womb-like space that identifies a child as secure and 'at one' with the mother. This stage ‘precedes language’, existing before borders between self and other are constructed, prior to the child subject becoming an individual. In order to progress into the Symbolic, the subject must first break the union between itself and the comforting maternal chora. This semiotic ‘maternal authority’ must be excluded (abjected), and the subject must construct a border between itself and her (this process is particularly difficult as the child was once inside the maternal body and is now outside of it). Although ‘maternal authority’ is repressed, abject substances such as blood and excrement can become unwanted reminders of the subject’s pre-symbolic stage, and will continue to threaten borders that constitute identity throughout a lifetime.

‘Abject Art’ “[..] does not connote an art movement so much as it describes a body of work which incorporates or suggests abject materials such as hair, excrement, dead animals, menstrual blood, and rotting food”.4

If ‘abject’ substances must be repressed in order for a subject to commence in patriarchal rational society, then it may be explored/confronted in non-rational discourses such as art and poetry. Two major exhibitions have been curated to address the notion of ‘abject art’ by re-contextualising existing artworks. In 1993, the Whitney Museum of American Art held ‘Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art’. Its emphasis was to “confront taboo issues of gender and sexuality [...] often deemed

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3 For further reading see Barbara Creed, ‘Kristeva, Feminity, Abjection’ in The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis. (London: Routledge, 1993)
inappropriate by a conservative dominate culture". The exhibition included a range of art from the latter half of the 20th century, including 1960 & 1970s ‘transgressive’ body art by female practitioners including Eva Hess (fig 1) and Hannah Wilke (fig 2), as well as more contemporary work by artists such as Cindy Sherman. In 1995, the TATE Gallery exhibited ‘Rites of Passage: Art for the End of the Century’. The show presented a small selection of artists who expressed a sense of vulnerability through their work. This included Louise Bourgeois’s Red Room’s installation (fig 3) and John Coplans naked Self-portraits (fig 4). Although much of the work expressed individual experiences, Rites of Passage sought to convey a united sense of insecurity that mirrored societies uncertain approach towards the new millennium (fear of ‘crisis’ such as the ‘Millennium Bug’ and the breakdown of databases).

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5 Ibid.
This essay will compare particular photographic work by the two artists Cindy Sherman and Jo Spence. Whilst both practitioners address how the female body is represented (in the later half of the 20th century), their powerful depictions present contaminated ‘abject’ bodies that graphically shock the viewer. I will argue that both artists consciously illustrate abjection to present the ‘othered’ female body, and will suggest that their chosen symbolism highly links with the construction and maintaining of gendered identity. Cindy Sherman is notorious for her uncanny explorations into the representation of feminine identity within the media. Her work appropriates the stereotypical female identities in creating new subversive meanings. I intend to thoroughly examine her Fairytales & Disasters series of the late 1980s as their dark signifiers highly reference the abject. Jo Spence’s photography reworks codes drawn from commercial portrait photography; she experimented with the staging of self in creating powerful self-portraits that explore the construction of identity. I intend to particularly analyse her later Narratives of Dis-ease series, as the thought provoking images address societies gaze upon the diseased ‘abject’ female body.
Chapter one will provide a contextual analysis of the two artists that will particularly relate their differing visual languages to the breakdown of Patriarchal order, especially drawing upon societies stereotypical images of woman. Although both Sherman and Spence use contrasting languages in creating very different bodies of work, they both appropriate existing (Symbolic structured) visual culture in an attempt to adopt a male position and be taken seriously. This interference of patriarchy successfully aligns with the abject’s mechanism of disturbing “[..] identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules.” Whilst Sherman appropriates and subverts the media and film industry, Spence uses a political agenda to challenge the traditional representation of the female body within photographic history. As the artist practises differ greatly, this chapter will provide a contextual comparison between each artist’s use of culture’s existing signification and it’s appropriate disruption

In chapter two I will critique the two artists in terms of the film theorist Barbara Creed’s notion of the ‘Monstrous-Feminine’ (Creed being highly influenced by Kristeva’s abjection). The text will involve an extensive analysis of the artist’s differing representations of woman as monstrous ‘other’, explicitly referring to the maternal body. I intend to deconstruct particular images in relating the ‘offensive’ signifiers to symbolism prevalent in the contemporary horror film genre. As an encounter with abject substances functions to deconstruct a subject’s stable self, I will attempt to suggest how both artists have used signifiers that reference the abject in producing photography that deliberately invades the space of the gallery viewer. When viewing a filmic production, an encounter with abject repulsion is of temporary affect (the story has a certain

duration). I intend to argue that both Sherman and Spence's abject photographs represent a continuing trauma that has lasting affect on the spectator.
Chapter 1

Disrupting the Patriarchal Order

“For Kristeva the abject is on the side of the feminine; it stands in opposition to the patriarchal, rule bound order of the symbolic.”

If the condition for a subject to progress towards Symbolic culture (to construct identity) depends on the abjection and repression of the maternal Semiotic stage, then the representation of (non-rational) abject bodily wastes may threaten to breakdown Symbolic order. Feminists within the 1960s & 1970s created graphically disruptive work in order to transgress patriarchal ideas of feminine appearance, which especially included an exploration into the female body’s ‘interior’ space (e.g. Carolee Schneemann’s *Meat Joy*, fig 5). This search for woman’s ‘natural’ representation erupted as a search for gender difference that confronted the ‘cultured’ gallery space. It has been described as “[..] a vast exploration, a questioning and turning back upon [women’s] own discourse, in an attempt to create a new space or spacing within themselves for survivals…and this space has been coded as feminine, as woman.”

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The early work by Cindy Sherman and Jo Spence uses predefined languages to disrupt patriarchal institutions in order to define woman as dominant. As culture is governed by a male dominated law (where women’s rights have been historically repressed), the subversive work produced by both artists can be understood as sophisticated protests that attempt to deconstruct male defined representation of women. Sherman is known for her post-modernistic appropriation of the cinematic entertainment genre, whilst Spence has politically explored the representation of women within societies class structures.

Cindy Sherman is notorious for her exploration of the representation of women within contemporary culture. Although the main body of this essay will concern the artist’s illustration of monstrousness and woman’s abject bodily ‘interior’, we must consider her early subversion of the media’s fetishistic presentation of woman’s constructed ‘exterior’ image. The 1970’s Untitled Film Stills series present a wide selection of stereotypical female characters photographed in the style of 1950’s black and white B movie productions. By taking control of the image’s construction to parody the male defined appearance of 50’s cinema, Sherman disrupts patriarchy. Her work particularly addresses the gender specific concepts Voyeurism and Fetishism, (both highly connotative in the cinematic arena) to further demean the male authority that conditions structures. The artist ‘performs’ “idealised media identities” which the viewer

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recognises from Symbolic access to contemporary culture, the large series (69 images) mirroring the bulk of 50’s female stereotypes – see fig 6 and fig 7.

In the well known essay “Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema”, Laura Mulvey suggests that much mainstream cinema involves the Freudian notion of ‘Scopophilia’, an erotic pleasure in looking. Freud “[..] associated scopophilia with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze.”11 This is relevant to the spectator’s ‘active’ look (from the dark theatre space) at the ‘passive’ female figure who is “styled accordingly”12. The denoted signs in *Untitled Film Still # 10* (fig 8) present the male defined feminine ‘ideal’, an attractive character looks up (at an invisible presence) from her domesticated space, proceeding to tidy groceries from the kitchen floor. She should be exhausted from the ordeal, yet her attractive appearance (short skirt, heavy makeup) continues to signify male sexual desire (the downward facing camera angle

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12 Ibid., p. 19.
contributing to active male ‘looking’). The disruption occurs when the viewer gains knowledge that the scene is falsely constructed, as this destroys the illusion of the alluring female represented (as well as the credibility of the filmic construction). “The lure of voyeurism turns around like a trap, and the viewer ends up aware that Sherman-the-artist has set up a machine for making the gaze materialise uncomfortably, in alliance with Sherman-the-model.”

![Fig 8. Cindy Sherman, Untitled #10. 1978](image)

“It is precisely at the legislative frontier between what can be represented and what cannot that the postmodernist operation is being staged – not in order to transcend representation, but in order to expose that system of power that authorizes certain representations while blocking, prohibiting or invalidating others.”

Postmodernist art sought to expose the structured masculine representation in the modern period. Sherman’s film stills are certainly postmodern due to their re-representation of an existing visual language. By presenting a still image (instead of

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moving footage), the artist denies the film’s narrative\textsuperscript{15} of any significance, undermining man’s subjective ‘creativity’. As man has traditionally controlled the representation of women within the media (to appear sexually attractive for male desire), Sherman’s active mimicking of this ‘representation’ exposes the props that constitute ‘femininity’ whilst aggressively challenges male control of the ‘image of woman’\textsuperscript{16}.

* * *

Jo Spence thoroughly experimented with photography’s ability to represent the self throughout her career. Although her later work can be seen as an autobiographical coping mechanism (this will be discussed in chapter 2), her early self-portraiture “[..] sought to intervene [symbolic] ideologically into areas of daily social practice with which a non-specialist public could openly identify.”\textsuperscript{17} Similarly to Sherman, Spence recognised the patriarchal structures that determine cultures visual understanding of the feminine ‘ideal’, and much of her work relates to the representation of class identity. Her short career produced a bulk of photographic projects and critically texts that politically disrupted institutionalized photographic stereotyping of female identity within western society.

“Through this work-in-progress we are interested to better understand how, through visual and other forms of representation, our psychological or subjective view of selves, and others, are constructed and held across the institutions of media, and within the hierarchal relationships in which we are constantly encountering the various facets of capital and the state”\textsuperscript{18}.

\textsuperscript{15} This can be related to Marxist notion of the ‘master narrative’, for further reading see Ibid., p. 64-70
An early reworking of ‘everyday’ photography (the family album) communicated with
different social groups (other than the cultured gallery audience) made Spence’s ideas
especially accessible to the general public, further devaluing the credibility of the
patriarchal gallery.

_Beyond the Family Album_ (see fig 9, 10) was an early project that involved an
anthropological exploration into the unnatural construction of the snapshot portrait.
Spence decodes her ‘image’ through a personal collection of photographs, emphasizing
the hidden truths that the idealised portraits deny. In the process of ‘Symbolic
reclamation’ ¹⁹ she transgressed the image surface by providing an explicit commentary
of the actual occasion when the photograph was taken.

“More pictures of my face, more ritual displaying for posterity.”

“Twenty years: a dirty weekend at Brighton. No toy panda to sit on, no
pretty mother to frame me on the beach. She’s there in my head though.”

Fig 9. Jo Spence,
_Beyond the Family Album_. 1979. ²⁰

“Thirty years: the marriage. My bouquet came off the Hampstead
registrar’s window sill. The honeymoon was the most boring holiday either
of us ever had. There is no record of it.”

Fig 10. Jo Spence, _Beyond the Family Album_. 1979. ²¹

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¹⁹ Ibid., p. 353.
The artist takes control of her depicted identity “to understand the complexities of how representations mediate from the [male headed] institutions of our social formation [...] to a psychological subjectivity”\textsuperscript{22}. The search into a re-evaluation of the family photograph developed ideas within Spence’s collaborative ‘phototherapy’ projects (both cathartic and autobiographical), which involved a juxtaposition of photography and psychotherapy to make repressed memories (both pleasant and unpleasant) visible.

*Remodelling Photo History* is a collection of images which explores the representation of women within class society through a satirical critique of early photographic styles and movements (i.e., pictorialism, modernism). In *Colonization* (fig 11), Spence poses as a ‘social actor’, combining woman’s domestic labour (signified by the collection of doorstep milk and cleaning apparatus) with the necessity to appear sexually attractive (her breasts are exposed). The house’s appearance also suggests a working class status. These blatant signifiers ridicule cultures stereotyped ‘image’ of the objectified housewife, especially as Spence’s overweight naked body could be considered indecent\textsuperscript{23}.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., p. 89.
\textsuperscript{23} This can be related to the ‘sublime’ body, see Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art Obscenity and Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1992) p. 25-33
“We are not trying to show familiar objects in unfamiliar ways, but rather to denaturalize the genres of photography which already consist of fully coded signs.”

The coded signs in the image *Victimization* (fig 12) put emphasis on the female as culture’s passive ‘other’. Spence lays as if ‘dumped’ as societies ‘outsider’; this is signified by the border of the central fence. The juxtaposition between landscape photography and the naked female body creates a visual language that suggests woman’s close relationship with nature (opposing male headed culture). “We must learn to see beyond ourselves and the stereotypes offered, to understand the invisible class and power relationships into which we are structured from birth.” Spence encouraged a communal examination of the series within educational environments, in order to setup a discussion concerning the coded representation of the female body, her feminist teaching further disrupting the male headed environment.

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25 Ibid., p. 92.
Both artists use very different visual mechanisms to discuss female identity, Sherman disrupts patriarchal structures by investing new meaning into existing cinematic codes, whilst Spence teaches feminist ideals within institutionalized Symbolic environments. The work by both artists differs greatly; their ideas unite against patriarchal defined notions of female appearance. Although the above work is highly technical in terms of image construction and theoretical placement, it’s appropriative nature can only ever exist in straight opposition to particular male structured institutions. In the late 1980's, both artists produced notably darker series’ to examine female identity. Whilst their conceptual issues continued to intentionally disrupt patriarchal definitions of femininity, emphasis was put on the aggressive representation of ‘abject’ female space (separate from man). Barbara Creed’s concept of the ‘Monstrous-Feminine’ (archaic mother, evil witch, vampire, possessed monster etc.) provides a suitable combination of these elements, as the construction is based around an analysis of the female gendered monster prevalent in contemporary horror films. She suggests that where much cinema involves a voyeuristic pleasure in looking, the fearful monster in a horror film dispels this as it challenges “[..] the view that the male spectator is almost always situated in an active, sadistic position”26.

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Chapter 2

The Abject body and the ‘Monstrous-Feminine’

“At the very moment, then, when the veil is lifted, when the fetish is stripped away, the mythic content of a package signified -‘the monstrous feminine’- nonetheless rises into place to occupy the vertical field of the image/form. The truth of the wound is thus revealed.”

Both Sherman and Spence construct themselves as the monstrous female ‘other’, this “other” not only referring to the theory that woman is the castrated version of man, but as other to the culturally idealised representation of woman.

Kristeva suggests that the abjection of the mother is particularly relevant in the construction of subject development. Without the completion of this stage, the subject cannot progress into the paternal symbolic realm. While this abjected ‘maternal authority’ is repressed, it will forever haunt the subject through unsettling reminders of ‘falling back’ into the maternal *chora* (the ‘semiotic’ stage before identity formation). This is when the mother teaches her child a ‘primal mapping of the body’ (the subject will learn about its body, ‘the clean and unclean, the proper and improper’). This stage is shame free, bodily wastes of excrement, blood and vomit being central to the learning experience.

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“Maternal authority is the trustee of that mapping of the self’s clean and proper body; it is distinguished from paternal laws within which, with the phallic phase and acquisition of language, the destiny of man will take shape.”

Although paternal law abolishes this shame-free existence in providing (symbolic) order that the subject must abide to, abject reminders (i.e., bodily wastes) of this former mother-child relationship may threaten to breakdown its stable identity. In the construction of the ‘monstrous-feminine’, film theorist Barbara Creed likens this ‘maternal figure’ to the attributes of the monstrous character prevalent in many contemporary horror films: this is documented in the essay, “Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection”. By deeply critiquing the appearance of particular monstrous characters and the clichéd fleshy scenes of decapitation, she provides a powerful analysis that aligns the horror film with the intimidating mechanism of abjection. Due to its negative affect on the victim/cinematic audience, the film becomes a ‘work of abjection’.

“The horror film puts the viewing subject’s sense of a unified self into crisis, specifically in those moments when the image on the screen becomes too threatening or horrific to watch, when the abject threatens to draw the viewing subject to the place ‘where meaning collapses’, the place of death. By not-looking, the spectator is able momentarily to withdraw identification from the image on the screen in order to reconstruct the boundary between self and screen and reconstitute the ‘self’ which is threatened with disintegration.”

The monstrous character projected onto the cinematic screen in many horror films is (safely) placed/positioned at a reasonable distance from the viewing audience. Although it is undoubtedly threatening, this detached presence allows the spectator a safe

31 Barbara Creed, ‘Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection’ in *Screen* No. 27, p. 65.
confrontation with ‘abjection at work’. Of course, the distressed viewer is granted full security only when the threatening character’s existence is permanently expelled (typically killed by a heroic character). Creed’s hypothesis is relevant to my photographic comparison, as particular self-portraiture staged by both Spence and Sherman signifies a monstrous identity, whilst gallery audiences are forced to experience the abject at work.

Creed suggests that the horror film is populated by female monsters, she believes that many can be categorised as having different faces. The shocking ‘Monstrous-Feminine’ character can be recognised as woman becoming representative of the archaic mother, evil witch, vampire, possessed monster, monstrous womb etc. In terms of these different identities, I will suggest that Sherman (due to the appropriation of Kristeva’s maternal figure) constructs herself as the ‘archaic mother’, “[..] the mother of infancy, weaning and toilet training”; whilst Spence (by wallowing for her mother) becomes the ‘possessed monster’, “[..] the possessed female subject [..] who refuses to take up her proper place in the symbolic order”.

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32 Ibid., p. 48.
33 Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, p. 65
34 Ibid., p. 38.
An unpleasant encounter with Cindy.

Untitled #156 (fig 13) presents the viewer with Cindy Sherman dressed as a threatening monster in part of her late 1980s Disasters series. She looks up from her disgusting pit at the viewer, threatening, but helpless as if she is a creature past saving. “The monster represents both the subject’s fears of being alone, of being separate from the mother, and the threat of annihilation – often through re-incorporation.” As with Sherman’s previous projects, Untitled #156 uses constructed self portraiture to give the viewer a guided interpretation. Whilst the creature’s menacing face confronts the spectator with its active gaze and intimidating teeth (the dramatic lighting emphasizing its features), the downward camera angle (purposely decided by Sherman) forces the spectator to look down at the female creature and demean its presence. A tightly

Fig 13. Cindy Sherman, Untitled # 156. 1985.

cropped frame further victimises the creature by separating it from the surroundings. This confusion in visual codes constructs Sherman’s female monster as both alarming and powerless, perhaps in a deliberate attempt to creatively mimic the woman’s determination to break free of her traditionally ‘passive’ role in male dominated society.

In terms of Kristeva’s abjection, Sherman’s creature could represent the rejected ‘maternal figure’ that has been repressed in order for the speaking subject to enter the symbolic (patriarchal) realm of language. Essentially, the self-portrait presents a passive woman ‘at one’ with nature, existing in a pool of shells and moist egg-like substance, this cliché of woman satirically emphasising society’s identification of her role in patriarchal culture. However, the appropriation of contemporary horror film and the representation of Creed’s ‘monstrous-feminine’ makes the viewer aware that the menacing creature is potentially threatening and must be successfully abjected before it attacks (as this would ultimately result in a dangerous loss of one’s body). Sherman’s monster becomes the aggressive ‘abject at work’ and is a reminder that a relapse back into maternal authority could disintegrate the spectator’s stable identity.

“[..] when we say such-and-such a horror film ‘made me sick’ or ‘scared the shit out me’ we are actually foregrounding that specific horror film as a ‘work of abjection’ or ‘abjection at work’ – in both a literal and metaphoric sense.”

Untitled #190 (fig 14) presents the viewer with facial features submerged in a grotesque blood-like substance. The image is far more ambiguous in its representation of the ‘monstrous-feminine’ than the portrait in Untitled #156, although the graphic nature of disgusting liquids make it just as shocking. The open mouth works to signify the

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36 Ibid., p. 48.
bleeding wound that is associated with the female castrated body, but at the same time this direct image could invoke castration anxiety in the male spectator.

“Woman’s body is slashed and mutilated, not only to signify her own castrated state, but also the possibility of castration for the male.”

Unlike the last image where the monster is constructed as a isolated threat, *Untitled* #190 presents a far more direct portrait. The image could be read in two ways: either it is another representation of a horrific monster trying to threaten the spectator, or it is a documentation of a dying victim who has been captured and disfigured. As the ‘wounded’ mouth suggests femininity, the maternal body is heavily referenced (this is backed up further by the menstrual blood-like matter). It could be suggested that the face belongs to a victim who has gained sadistic pleasure from confronting the abject

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37 Ibid., p. 52.
and sacrificed his/her identity. The face cannot be seen, there are literally no features in sight to show individual characteristics.

The gaping hole of the mouth could be recognised as the ‘black hole’ in a typical horror film. Creed suggests this is not only likened to female genitalia (signifying sexual difference) but to the myth of the *Vagina Dentata* (toothed vagina). Sherman’s image forcefully invokes a fear of castration for both the male and female spectator as ‘symbolic castration’ involves the loss of mother during identity formation. “Close-up shots of gaping jaws, sharp teeth and bloodied lips play on the spectator’s fears of bloody incorporation.”

Whilst various characters make up the different roles in a horror film (victim, murderer etc.), Sherman only presents a single character as different versions of the ‘monstrous-feminine’. Bloody knives and decaying broken limbs signify the aftermath of violent mutilation, but do not state who/what caused the horrific event. As with many Sherman photographs, it is possible to conjure up different meanings from the signifiers on display. However, could Sherman be suggesting that the damage is caused through the viewer’s active gaze upon the creature(s), that we (the spectator) have caused the violent repression through our personal identity formation? It is more likely that Sherman’s intentions have been to symbolise the subject’s continuous/lifelong repression towards the maternal figure. When looking at the images, the subject/spectator becomes involved with the monster and must look away from its confrontational enticement in order to expel it (to sustain an adequate control over one’s

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identity). Sherman’s ‘set up’ becomes a conscious example of the psychological mechanism a subject must deal with throughout life.

**Jo Spence: Constructing the Monstrous Self**

“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.”39

Much of Jo Spence’s self portraiture can be recognised as a construction of the Monstrous-Feminine, although not necessarily described as such in contemporary texts. The image *Exiled* (fig 15) is taken from the series *Narratives of Dis-ease*; it is Spence’s most obvious representation of her social identity as monstrous. The viewer witnesses Spence’s naked torso, her post-operated breast emphasized as ‘abject other’ by the hand written ‘Monster’ applied to her chest. The artist’s phototherapy session forces her to identify herself as a deformed and aged female, helping her to accept her faded identity. The word ‘Monster’ also suggests the upsetting experience Spence had as a cancer patient. “[..] that’s how I experienced myself”.40

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39 Ibid., p. 1.
Unlike Sherman’s staged portraiture, Jo Spence represents a real identity through her phototherapy self-portraits. There are no quirky monsters ‘threatening’ the audiences’ personal identity, instead the spectator is witness to an autobiographical experiment that identifies the artist as an aged woman with ill health (*Narratives of Dis-ease*).

Spence’s ‘lived’ body could easily be understood as the Maternal figure, although her monstrous identity is particularly constructed around “[..] how she sees herself and how she thinks others perceive her.”

The female artist also consciously refers to her ‘lack’ by using her post-operated breast as a visual metaphor. This is further emphasized by the image *Expunged* (fig 16), which shows Spence hold a ‘boobie’ prize next to her damaged breast. The dreadful pun suggests that her broken body has contributed a terrible performance. *Expected* (fig 17) refers to the Freudian concept of sexual ‘fetishism’ as it shows the artist reaching down to remove a pair of red stiletto shoes.

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Heeled shoes (‘in a process termed ‘disavowal’’\(^{42}\)) create the illusion that woman is not ‘lacking’ (a penis) and is therefore not a threat of castration. As Spence progresses to remove her fetish shoes, she consciously accepts how others view her monstrous sexuality.

“The difference between the self-projections of a normal or idealised body and the reflection of a corporal identity ‘contaminated’ by illness, produces images of an Other.”\(^{43}\)

The spectator (who views Spence’s imagery within the art gallery space) is made uneasy by viewing this ‘abject body’ that does not conform to the culturally ideal woman. Carol Duncan suggests that the modern art gallery is not only set out for the clichéd understanding of different art movements, but specifically for a \textit{cultured male} audience. She suggests that imagery depicting monstrousness enables “one to both experience


\(^{43}\) Kerstin Mey, \textit{Art & Obscenity}. p. 46.
the dangerous realm of woman-matter-nature and symbolically escape it into male-culture-enlightenment."\textsuperscript{44} If the gallery is created for men, and occupied by mainly male artists, I would argue that Spence’s photographs disrupt order in the ‘patriarchal’ environment. If the abject “disturbs: identity, system, order”\textsuperscript{45} for its subject, Spence’s ‘othered’ body functions to ‘de-masculinize’\textsuperscript{46} the gallery space.

Spence’s portraits are closely cropped emphasizing her culturally ‘ugly’ identity. This deliberate fragmentation of the female body suggests where the gaze of others may concentrate. Artists from the Abstract Expressionism movement presented “simply female bodies, or parts of bodies, with no identity beyond their female anatomy”\textsuperscript{47}, and this is referred to in Spence’s cancer portraits. The varying framing of the portraits also presents her female body as ‘always becoming’\textsuperscript{48} which could relate to the female’s close relationship with change, for example the menstrual cycle and menopause. It must also be noted that Spence’s bodily disfigurement (loss of a breast) is a female condition that further signifies change. The above body ‘transformations’ also present monstrous attributes, depending on its particular face, the monstrous character in a film will have ‘become’ evil (the female child in \textit{The Exorcist} becomes possessed).

\textsuperscript{46} Carol Duncan, \textit{Civilizing Rituals}. p. 128.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., p. 111.

Whilst *Libido Uprising* (fig 18) uses religious iconography in exploring female repressions associated with the domestic, a relationship with the maternal body is referenced. Both mother and daughter are represented through a series of both comical and eroticized self-portraiture. Although the series is primarily concerned with the ‘resurrection’ of Spence’s mother after her household captivity, I believe that the artist demonstrates a longing for a destruction of paternal law and union with the comfort of maternal authority. Barbara Creed suggests in her critique of the possessed character in *The Exorcist* that Regan “demonstrates that those abject substances can never be successfully obliterated but lie in wait at the threshold of the subject’s identity, threatening it with possible breakdown.”49 Spence’s blood covered self-portraits (fig 19 & 20) represent this ‘breakdown’, her adult body submerged with an abject body waste that should be contained within the stage of the maternal *chora* and not through Symbolic law. Spence becomes inevitably monstrous as she breaks requirements that

maintain the self’s ‘clean and proper body’, although cleverly “demonstrating the fragility of those laws and taboos”.50


As with earlier photo-therapy work, the spectator is invited to become involved within the process of identity formation. We experience Spence’s happy union with abject substances of her mother’s body, (as well as her own sexuality signified by the lace underwear) and wallow with her monstrous, yet ‘uprising’ freedom. If the mother is sacrificed in order for a subject to enter paternal law, the undoing of this is presented by Spence.

The viewer of a Spence photograph does not experience the ‘abject-at-work’ (the threat of losing one’s identity), as the fragile line of paternal law has already broken; instead we bear witness to an autobiographical interaction with a body that has already succumbed to the abject. In Narratives of Dis-ease, Spence makes her culturally

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50 Ibid., p. 40.
unacceptable body visible, whilst *Libido Uprising* presents a grown woman wallowing in pre-symbolic authority. What makes her work interesting is the aspect of truth that the photo-therapy sessions unfold. As photo-therapy is a collaborative process where the subject can safely express feelings of trauma, the viewer is given an honest understanding of Spence's insecure view of her own identity.
Conclusion

Monstrous Identity & Trauma

When the term ‘monster’ is associated with female identity, we think of a body opposed to culture’s normalised woman particularly recognisable in beauty campaigns. Although both Sherman and Spence use this notion in subverting codes of beauty, their work contrasts in terms of style and conceptual argument. Sherman appropriates and re-works female representation in the horror film (entertainment) genre, whilst Spence uses a political agenda to question patient experience within the health establishment and the representation of the post-operated female body.

Sherman’s *Disaster* images contain a horrific face-to-face encounter with non-rational abject ‘matter’; the spectator is shocked by their initial confrontation. Her self-portraits can be understood as metaphoric visual ideas, in this case the threat of losing ones identity, by leaving the ‘symbolic’ realm and falling back to the stage of ‘semiotic’ maternal authority. Similarly to the viewing of a horror film, the spectator of a Sherman’s image may gain a ‘perverse pleasure’ in looking at the sick imagery (experiencing the abject at work). This process of looking differs from Spence’s audience who may ‘feel sorry’ for her unfortunate position. Although the monster is staged by both artists, Spence’s photo-therapy portraits signify a literal ‘othered’ identity. She puts attention on herself by being photographed naked and vulnerable in an empty studio environment, labelling herself as ‘monstrous’ in accepting cancerous defeat.

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51 Barbara Creed, ‘Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection’ in *Screen* No. 27 p. 48.
If paternal law constitutes the subject as stable and ‘proper’, then the viewing of ‘polluting objects’ such as blood and vomit work to disturb the audiences’ constructed identity. As the patriarchal ‘cultured’ art gallery space has historically exhibited art by male practitioners (much of which objectifies the female form), representations of socially unacceptable ‘ugly’ women provoke the sterile space. The role of the spectator is vital when viewing work by both artists. It is suggested that “[..] the horror film breaks through the boundaries of representation and ‘invades’ the space of the viewer, inviting a range of physical reactions from hiding the eyes to stomach churning or even nausea.”52 These ‘physical reactions’ are similarly caused in the spectator’s reception of Sherman and Spence’s photography, therefore the subject of identity is taken further than just the visual coding within the image.

A Traumatic Representation

“[..] the representation of horror –however ghastly–was never any more than a phantom or a temporary nightmare, since no matter how bad the dream one could always wake up and shift away from the unsettling zone of representation back to the safe haven of a real world and a waking state.”53

Due to my reading of the film theorist Barbara Creed’s work on the ‘Monstrous-Feminine’, I have thoroughly analysed the photographic work of Cindy Sherman and Jo Spence in terms of a horror film’s staged representation. It must be noted that both artists’ photographs are presented as graphic stills that evoke constant fear in the spectator, this differing from a film’s moving depiction where the narrative process

incorporates a number of ‘safe’ scenes that exclude the presence of the abject. Although Sherman’s staged photographs operate within the similar codes of cinema, it must be recognised that she operates in the “postmodern visual regime, built around the idea of the classical opposition between real and copy and on the absorption of reality within representation.”54 Jo Spence’s images differ greatly as they signify a realistic trauma, her ‘cancer portraits’ allowing the viewer to witness a real woman dying. What is similar about both artists is their self-recognition as being outcasts in a real society by demonstrating the condition to ‘be abject’.

The viewer’s active ‘gaze’ is relevant to the reception of a distressing image, for each individual will read a photograph differently as particular signifiers may relate to former experience. Hal Foster refers to the Lacanian diagram of the gaze (fig 21) in his book The Return of the Real. He recognises that “it is much cited but little understood” before explaining its active function in the visual art spectator. He suggests that the ‘screen’ (image surface) placed between the viewer’s gaze (point of light) and the subject of representation (picture) is not only used to mediate “[..] object-gaze for the subject, but it also protects the subject from this object-gaze”.55 Man can consciously mediate the ‘screen’ due to his access to the Symbolic realm (of knowledge), therefore can (if so wished) safely ‘behold’ the subject of representation through this shield-‘screen’. As the ‘screen’ may also function to ‘protect’ the subject of representation from the gaze, many contemporary artists have ‘probed’ behind it to produce work that actively provokes the

54 Ibid.
spectator. "To this end it [the gaze] moves not only to attack the image but to tear at the screen, or to suggest that the screen is already torn."\textsuperscript{56}

Sherman’s body fluid ‘portraits’ suggest this ‘screen’ disintegration due to her removal of a cosmetic fetish. The interior abject substances literally present the inside-out body, there is nothing safe for the gaze to ‘behold’ – the 1950’s beauty of the Untitled Film Stills has vanished. Spence’s ‘cancer portraits’ similarly reference the disappearance of the ‘screen’; her removed breast (feminine attribute) can be likened to an unveiled fetish. As the ‘screen’ cannot function to tame the gaze, all Symbolic “meaning collapses”\textsuperscript{57}, resulting in the subject of representation (the abject body) exposing too much to the viewing spectator who becomes overwhelmed by the disturbance of the cultured gallery space. Both Sherman and Spence have produced images that pass beyond the notion of the ‘Monstrous-Feminine’ by presenting a ‘too realistic’

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\textsuperscript{57} Julia Kristeva, Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection, p. 2.
representation of the violated female form. Sherman appears as an obscene corpse in *Untitled #153* (fig 22), whilst Spence lies on her death bed in *Untitled* (fig 23). In Kristeva’s terms, these disturbing images allow the viewer to face ultimate abjection, for the corpse is “the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything.”

The work by both Cindy Sherman and Jo Spence differs greatly and as independent figures, working extensively in the latter part of the 20th century, they successfully challenge stereotypical notions of feminine appearance and identity by subverting the cultures dominant imagery of the time. By using the photograph as a medium for representing female identity, both artists emphasize the importance of the spectator’s ‘looking’ (this process becoming representative of society’s gaze upon women).

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Both artists use a visual language that provokes Symbolic culture in formulating their specific depictions of female identity, although both artists use similar methods (constructed self-portraiture) the viewer’s reception differs greatly. As Sherman’s Disasters/Fairytale projects explicitly pastiche contemporary horror film production, the modern-day spectator (who understands cinematic visual conventions) may gain a ‘perverse pleasure’ in encountering the artist’s monstrous ‘constructed’ identity (the artist’s use of garish colouring and over-the-top props injecting humour). Spence’s honest phototherapy self-portraits differ greatly in style and meaning; although the artist ‘pokes fun’ at herself in particular images (Expunged), the witnessing of an imperfect cancerous body excludes the spectator from any joke.

Although both artists provoke patriarchal order by constructing the female body as monstrous ‘other’, I believe that the image content within Spence’s self-portraits better suggests the condition to be abject. Through phototherapy, her realistic representation of trauma allows the spectator an encounter with a literal ‘othered’ female body, undoubtedly more powerful than Sherman’s fictional media appropriations. As both artists politically pose questions about the society’s gaze upon the female body, 20 years later the woman’s role as ‘other’ within patriarchal culture has changed. This is recognised by the fact that last year the first female figure fought to lead the Democratic party in the American presidential election.
List of Illustrations

Fig 1: Eva Hess, *Untitled (Rope Piece)*, 1969-70

Fig 2: Hannah Wilke, *Phallic/Excremental Sculptures*, 1960-63


Fig 4: John Coplans, Self-Portrait (Torso Front). 1987.


Fig. 6. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled # 34*. 1979.


Fig 8. Cindy Sherman, Untitled # 10. 1978.


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Spence, J. (1990) ‘No I can’t do that, my consultant wouldn’t like it’ in *Silent Health*, London, Camerawork


