



[Derek Hook](#)

Language and the flesh : psychoanalysis and the limits of discourse

Originally published in [Pretexts : literary & cultural studies](#), 12 (1). Pp. 43-64 © 2003 Carfax Publications.

You may cite this version as:

Hook, Derek (2003). Language and the flesh : psychoanalysis and the limits of discourse [online]. London: LSE Research Online.

Available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/archive/958>

Available in LSE Research Online: September 2007

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

This document is the author's final manuscript version of the journal article, incorporating any revisions agreed during the peer review process. Some differences between this version and the publisher's version remain. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>

Contact LSE Research Online at: Library.Researchonline@lse.ac.uk

Language and the flesh: Psychoanalysis & the limits of discourse

Derek Hook

Abstract

The recent preponderance of discursive or social constructionist approaches - so currently popular within the critical social sciences, humanities and arts - seems to call for a rival ontology, so as to delimit the analytical field of the discursive. The primary theoretical challenge of this paper is to do just this, to think, psychoanalytically, an ontological domain that both precedes, and exists in opposition to the discursive, that is, to the realm of language and the symbolic. The body and corporeality prove to be key players in this argument given that it is here, as Bryson (1996) puts it that we confront an “underground resistance from the boundary of the discursive empire” (p. 219). This body, as problem to representation, is able to induce a variety of disturbing experiences, reactions of dread, horror and nausea – reactions which typically mark the confrontation of discursive limits, arising at particularly those moments where signification fails and meaning collapses. These affects, along with the role of the body as limit-case of social or discursive meaning can variously be understood as the effects of the uncanny (in Freud), of the abject (in Kristeva), or the Real (in Lacan). A careful reading of these theories – across which a single explanatory trajectory may be traced – enables one to speculate about both the conditions of possibility for the speaking subject (and their signifying practices), and, by the same token, about the conditions of impossibility for this subject (and their ability to signify).

Once the world is declared to have become representation, and the real drops out of the system, the cultural sphere should be at peace, orbiting in the serene spaces of virtual reality. But the surprising consequence of the conversion of reality into spectacle is its obverse: a tremulous sensitivity to the real, an acute awareness of the moments when the

virtual reality is disturbed, when it comes up against and hits that which it has notionally expelled from its system. Precisely because the system of discursive representation is supposed to have embraced everything there is...the subject's brushes with the real have a force they never possessed prior to the totalization of representation into "reality" (Bryson, 1996, pp. 220-221).

Introduction.

The recent "turn to the text", like the adherence to the notion of discourse, and the discursive or *constructed* nature of social reality, has come to represent something of a priority in much critical contemporary work in the social sciences, humanities and arts. It seems apparent however that it is necessary to delimit the field of the discursive, both so that the term does not simply become redundant - simply all-encompassing - and, by the same token, so that its critical and effective use is ensured by virtue of *an awareness of its limits*. This is the primary theoretical challenge this paper has set itself. More directly put, the preoccupation here is the attempt to think, psychoanalytically, an ontological domain that both *precedes* and *exists in opposition* to the discursive, that is, to the realm of language and the symbolic. Such a line of discussion will enable us to interestingly redraw the traditional divide between nature and culture, between natural and social worlds. A key player in this attempt to trace the limits of the discursive world will be the body, for it is the body, claims Bryson (1996) which most often proves symbolically recalcitrant, an "underground resistance from the boundary of the discursive empire" (Bryson, 1996, p. 219). The body often represents a challenge to 'signifiability'; or, in Bryson's (1996) terms, "the discourse that would officially carry the body off stumbles, falters, as it is experienced as running up against something that eludes the contractual exchange of signifiers: a density, a gravity, a standing-outside of discourse; an ecstasy of the body which cannot, will not, be sublimated into signifying space" (p. 219). This body which represents a problem to representation, this frequently unfathomable figure, is able to induce a variety of disturbing (and visceral) experiences, reactions of dread, horror and nausea – reactions which typically characterize the confrontation of discursive limits, arising at particularly those moments where signification fails and meaning collapses. These affects, along with the role of

the body as limit-case of social or discursive meaning can variously be understood as the effects of the uncanny (in Freud), of the abject (in Kristeva), or the Real (in Lacan). Indeed, in this connection, there is a theoretical trajectory discernable across the psychoanalytic explanations offered by Freud, Kristeva and Lacan, all of which emphasize, at some level, *the role of the body and corporeality both in the constitution of the speaking subject, and in the production, through signification, of meaning*. As Gross (1990a) suggests

The interlocking of bodies and signifying systems is...[for psychoanalysis] the precondition both of an ordered, relatively stable identity for the subject and of the smooth, regulated production of discourses and stable meanings (pp. 81-82).

The ways in which the body is coded Gross (1990a) notes, is made meaningful and rendered representable, “provide[s] some of the necessary conditions for discursive and cultural representation”(p. 81). My concerns here then are with both the conditions of possibility for the speaking subject and their signifying practices, and, by the same token, with the *conditions of impossibility* for this subject and their ability to signify. I turn first to Freud’s account of the ‘uncanny’.

The ‘uncanny’.

Freud locates his (2001 [1919]) discussion of the uncanny squarely within the domain of aesthetics, as an elusive or troubling quality of feeling. Herbst (1999) provides a useful shorthand introduction to the term; Freud’s ‘uncanny’ is that eerie feeling, he claims, “like déjà vu with a twist of fear...[that] can catch us unawares and give our entire understanding of the world new terms of reference” (2001, p. 102). Freud considers the uncanny to be a distinct sub-variety of fear, “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (2001, p. 220). In this connection he points to a paradox in the etymology of the word. Historically the German term *heimlich* (i.e. the rough German equivalent of ‘uncanny’) has meant both that which is familiar, agreeable or homely and that which is concealed and kept out of sight. What we are able to detect here is not only the fundamental

ambivalence that underlies any powerful emotion, but an additional and quality that will prove essential in Freud's final exposition.

In an anecdotal section of his 1919 paper on the uncanny, Freud provides a loose overview of a variety of impressions, events and situations able to arouse "particularly forcible feelings of the uncanny" (2001, p. 226). Deserving of special attention here are doubts as to whether "an apparently animate object is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might in fact be animate" (2001, p. 226). Similarly uncanny are the effect of epileptic fits, and of manifestations of insanity, because "they excite in the spectator the impression of automatic, mechanical processes at work behind the ordinary appearance of mental activity" (2001, p. 226). One starts to detect in Freud's explanation two basic 'poles' of the uncanny: anxieties concerning (variants of) *embodied absence* on the one hand, and *disembodied presence*, on the other. At basis these appear to be ontological anxieties about the status of the object, and more particularly, anxieties about its *authenticity as human*. Put differently, these are anxieties about the soul, which is problematic in view of its absence (where in fact it should be) or its presence (where in fact it should not be).

Such anxieties subtend the genres of science-fiction and horror, so much so that they appear to constitute two of its most foundational themes. On the one hand, the dead body made animate, the soulless thing that walks and talks, that mimics the human despite a dreadful emptiness within.¹ On the other hand, and of a roughly more *romantic* nature, the idea of a free-floating consciousness, a disembodied and typically malevolent form of intelligence; an undefined actor or agency *outside* of the bodily confines of the human.² An essential aspect of the uncanniness of disembodied presence is the sense of a kind of 'remote control', a superstitious 'theory' of action where effect is seemingly separated from its agent. Or, put more precisely, a 'remote control'

¹ Vampires, ghouls, zombies, the whole category of the undead springs to mind here; in addition, re-animated creatures, the Frankenstein monster and all his progeny; again, an emphasis on that which *had* been living, now inappropriately returned. Also of course robots, cyborgs, androids, and of a more precisely psychopathological order, the stereotypical sociopath living within a human shell, yet emptied out of all human empathy and remorse, the monster with no spark of humanity within.

² Here a fear of the dark, of 'what lies beneath', of those things we cannot see or physically apprehend, but know to be there, phantoms, ghosts, spirits, poltergeists; a class of which - with the exception of the quality of malevolent character - God would seem to be the prime representative.

where a disturbing uncertainty (and typically, a *suspicion of the supernatural*) occupies the place where one would expect to find the embodied actor).

A related form of this 'ontological skittishness' arises within the phenomenon of the 'double'.³ Here again we find problems of human authenticity and essence, the hoped-for uniqueness of soul, this time typified in 'identical characters', in the figure whom "possesses knowledge, feelings and experiences in common with the other", in the "doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self" (2001, p. 234).

What we are confronted with in such variations of the uncanny is an animistic conception of the universe, the idea that the world is peopled with the spirits of human beings, by a belief in the omnipotence of thoughts, the attribution to various peoples and things of magical powers (Freud, 2001). In fact for Freud everything which strikes us as uncanny fulfills the condition of "touching those residues of animistic mental activity within us and bringing them to expression" (2001, p. 240). Importantly, Freud emphasizes here the element of doubling, or more accurately, *the role of recurrence*, within experiences of the uncanny, so much so that "the quality of uncanniness can only come from the fact of the 'double' being a creation dating back to a very early mental stage, long since surmounted" (2001, p. 236). The uncanny is hence that class of the frightening in which something repressed makes its return. Herbst (1999) is hence right to speak of the uncanny as an "emotional adjunct to the emergence into consciousness of repressed unconscious material" (p. 105). Moreover, the uncanny is not a *category* of repressed material but "an unsettling sense of familiarity that appears when repressed material manages to slip into consciousness"(Herbst, 1999, p. 105).

The paradox that Freud poses at the beginning of his 1919 paper is hence retrieved: the uncanny is thus both that which is at some level familiar *and* unfamiliar, that which had been known, secreted away, and then returned – the old-established 'thing' which became alienated to the mind precisely through repression. In figurative terms, one is reminded, as Freud points out, of the return of the dead, the previously familiar, now forgotten persona who returns to stake a claim on the living. The uncanny experience may hence be

³ Replicants, doppelgangers, clones, mirror-image replacements of 'the genuine object'; the transportation and/or duplication of minds, bodies, telepathy, etc.

characterized by a kind of cognitive gap, of varying length and intensity, a flickering moment, as Herbst (1999) describes is, when familiarity and unfamiliarity coexist “producing an inexplicable sensation in which one is both attracted to some thing (now undefined) and indifferent to it, or even repulsed by it” (p. 106). Herbst (1999) continues: long before one might trace the object of the original familiar response, the gap has closed, overcome either by avoidance, classification, or an act of the imagination.

Here it is important to point out that Freud distinguishes between two primary sources of the uncanny. The first is of a more phylogenetic variety, and concerns the surmounting of the tendencies of primitive thought (such as those of animism, magical thinking and a belief in the omnipotence of thoughts, as mentioned above). As a result, this form of the uncanny revolves around “reality testing”, that is, it makes its appearance when an event questions our concept of reality, creating the impression that what we had thought we had surmounted in the obscure realms of our forebears *reappears*. The second source of the uncanny – bearing in mind that in experience the two are typically intermingled at the level of experience – is of a more ontogenetic variety. This form of the uncanny concerns the reappearance of largely forgotten and inaccessible infantile material derived from *repressed realms of the unconscious*.

Both forms of the uncanny disturb the ego; one directly, by the threatening emergence of exactly repressed material which duly induces massive anxiety; the other indirectly, by calling into question the basic structures of meaning, explanation and value sanctified by a given social/political/symbolic order. In each case, such forms of ego-disturbance represent a harking-back to particular phases in the evolution of the self-regarding feeling, a regression to a time when the ego had not yet marked itself off sharply from the external world and from other people (Freud, 2001, p. 236). So although Freud does not link affects of the uncanny exclusively to problems of embodiment (or the lack thereof), the uncanny does appear to implicate problems of ego-formation, which must by definition involve questions of the body, and especially so given Freud’s famous declaration that “The ego is first and foremost a bodily ego...the projection of [its]...surface” (1966, SE XIX, p. 26).

The uncanny hence presents a threat to the ego on the level of those identificatory practices which both *separate* the subject from external objects of the world, and which, by the same token, implicate those objects *within it*. Put differently, the uncanny is, an upsetting of the subject's dividing lines, of its *constitutive* inside/outside distinctions. In slightly more detail, and here drawing on Gross (1990a), if the ego and its objects are counterparts, each finding its support and lending substance in/to the other, then the uncanny experience is an indication that this dialectics of identification has gone somewhat awry. It is that momentary destabilization where some apparent object, or more accurately perhaps, *the stimulus attached to that object*, fails to lend the subject its expected stability. To the contrary in fact, it thoroughly denies this hoped-for stability. These moments where subject-status and object-status are so vexingly overlapped, these paradoxes of disembodied presence and embodied absence, these moments threaten to collapse exactly the ego-object boundaries so necessary to constitutive identificatory practices. The threatening of these boundaries seems to herald a potentially greater collapse, a far wider ontological crisis that implicates broader structures of meaning and identity. It is unsurprising that ontological anxieties concerning souls and objects (and their troubled intersections) seem most intense here though, at the level of the individual's own 'moorings' to the world, because here they are being realized as problems of *ego-distinction*.

It is on this basis of such crises of separation and delimitation that Freud explains the irrational component of the uncanny, the fact that the affects thereby induced necessarily *exceed* the objective contents of the stimulus. Indeed, there is nothing in the superficial material of the uncanny stimulus *itself* that is properly able to "account for the urge towards defence which has caused the ego to project material outward as something foreign to itself" (2001, p. 236). One should be aware here though that the fear induced by the uncanny is about *more* than the limits of internal and external. A useful clue in this connection is provided by the priority that Freud places on the factor of repetition, a priority which should hardly be considered surprising given that his formulations concerning repetition-compulsion are to be published less than a year later in *Beyond the pleasure principle* (1920). In

retrospect it is easy to see in this emphasis of repeated experience and/or involuntary repetition the nuances of a death-instinct still to be posited.⁴

The threat to the ego so strongly (and affectually) experienced in the uncanny is not only that of the ontological skittishness concerning the confused relations of souls and objects. It is also, whether in its underlying mechanism (of the disturbing experience repeated, that would ideally be 'set aside') or in variations of its ideational content (that is, the fear of the ego's incoherence, or dissolution), the threat of another limit, that of life itself. Although Freud does not articulate this in explicit terms, one should nonetheless be aware, as seems implicit within his argument, that in the uncanny experience we are dealing not only with the dividing lines between soul and object, but also, on a more immediate and directly experiential level, *the dividing lines of life and death, with the fear – posed by death - of the ultimate dissolution of the ego*. The uncanny, in short - and it would seem at exactly this point that Kristeva's account begins - troubles both the ego's identifications, and, in a very significant way, the absolute horizon of its existence, life itself.

The abject.

Kristeva (1982) speaks of abjection as *an affectual response*, as a dark 'revolt of being' directed against an exorbitant threat which "seems to emanate from beyond the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable"(p. 1). This threat – i.e. that of the abject - is seemingly impervious to any kind of containment or assimilation, and remains there (beyond the parameters of the thinkable, the possible, the signifiable), close, invariably *too* close, inescapable. It is, as Kristeva (1982) puts it, a boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsions. It is a "massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness" (p. 2) whose affected response in the subject defies rational explication. A "twisted braid of affects and thoughts" (p. 1), an enemy of language and the Symbolic⁵, the abject, it seems, cannot easily be defined.

⁴ As Freud puts it somewhat later in the Uncanny paper: "For it is possible to recognize the dominance in the unconscious mind of a 'compulsion to repeat' proceeding from the instinctual impulses and probably inherent in the very nature of the instincts – a compulsion powerful enough to overrule the pleasure principle, lending to certain aspects of the mind their daemonic character" (p. 238).

⁵ The Symbolic, along with the Imaginary and the Real, is one of Lacan's three orders, one of his basic

Chisholm's (1992) shorthand definition takes the abject to be a variety of horror, "that primary uncanny of not knowing the boundaries distinguishing 'me' from 'not-me'" (p. 342). Importantly, whereas *abjection* is understood as a powerful, irrational and disturbing *reaction*, *the abject* is taken to be the *source* of such affects. It is that anomalous, uncontained and undefinable 'thing' which elicits fear, dread, horror. More than just this, the abject is to be known by the *visceral* or bodily responses (the abjections) it induces, typically those of retching, vomiting, spasms, choking. More fundamental than this however is the nature of the abject's threat, the fact that it constantly plagues and disturbs identity, system, structure.

Vital to an appreciation of the threat of the abject is an awareness of the fact that the abject *possesses no intrinsic objecthood*. It is exactly this quality that ensures that the abject is so elusive, so persistent, so undeniable, and so prone to return. The abject is something like the vacancy behind the object, the object's shadow, it is the 'jettisoned object', the non-object which never assumes a regular or generalizable form. Dirt and putrefaction might hence *image* the abject, but they, like any other quantifiable objects, are not the abject. Nothing that appears as abjection in the Symbolic is abject in *essence* (Kristeva, 1982). This ontological slipperiness of the abject provides understandable complications for the ego. Indeed, as has already been suggested, the abject 'thing' is that which is not to be subsumed into the dialectics of self-other, ego-object identifications, because it is exactly that which continually threatens to disallow the prospects of any correlative objects, of any stable supports, symbolic or otherwise, through which 'I', in various and conditional ways, would be able to assume a kind of detachment and autonomy. Indeed, the abject is not some 'otherness' ceaselessly fleeing my desire, some correlative of my ego through whom, by a process of

registers of subjectivity. The Symbolic is the realm of language, law and prohibition - hence it is also the realm of the Oedipal father. In this sense it is the system of pre-existing social structures into which the child is born, and which hence imposes order on experience. An essentially linguistic dimension, the Symbolic encompasses all aspects of representation, signs, symbols and meaning. Herbst (1999) describes it as "the structuring system of the subject, woven from language and all the laws, functions and features that language embeds" (p. 457). In Bowie's (1991) terms, the Symbolic is "inveterately intersubjective and social... a *res publica* that does not allow any of its members to be himself, keep himself to himself or recreate in his own image the things that lie behind him" (p. 93). More than just this, the Symbolic is also "the realm of radical alterity which Lacan refers to as the other. The unconscious is the discourse of this Other, and thus belongs wholly to the Symbolic order" (Evans, 1996, p. 202).

negative reflection, I am able to become (no matter how delusionally), separate and individuated. Whereas the object, through its opposition, settles me within “the fragile texture of a desire for meaning”, thereby making me “ceaselessly and infinitely homologous to it”, the abject, on the contrary, is the radically jettisoned and excluded thing which, in a classic phrase, “draws me toward the place where meaning collapses” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 2).⁶

At its most basic then, abjection is about the borders of the ego, about how these borders are disrupted, unsettled and made disturbingly permeable. The original and primary ‘surface’ of the abject’s realization however, remains that of the body. (The body is, as has already been emphasized, the multi-zonal site for the earliest instances of cultural exchange and socialization, that ‘surface of experience’ and hence the template, for the developing ego). Indeed, amongst the most primal (and powerful) abject “objects” (or stimuli) are those items that challenge the integrity of one’s own bodily parameters. These are those bodily things and products, mucous, puss, blood, vomit, cut-off fingernails, hair, and so on, that once so undeniably a part of me, have now become separate, loathsome. These instances of the abject are those ‘things’ which straddle the dividing line between where the ‘I’ of my body (and hence also ego) ends, and where the ‘not I’ of external objects begins. In this sense, the ego’s attempt to achieve autonomy through separation-individuation is always a struggle against exactly these borderline ‘objects’ that defy me/not-me categorization and threaten to dissolve the newly founded integrity and separateness of the ego’s identity – along with the broader social system of identity of which it is part.

Of all the bodily wastes that incur affects of abjection, the corpse is the most disturbing. Here it is worth quoting Kristeva (1982) at length:

Corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These bodily fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There I

⁶ In Lacanian terms, one would attest that the abject is not a player in the mirror stage, or a form existent on the Imaginary level of the ego. If it were, then the realm of the Symbolic would seemingly offer some containment, some refuge to its dreadful range of affects. In fact, if the object is well-placed within the Imaginary, as a counterpart to the self, through which the ego is able to draw its orientation and settle a sense of meaning and identity through a growing proximity to the Symbolic, then *the abject* serves exactly the opposite function. It is a kind of ‘magnet of the Real’.

am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit....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...In that compelling, raw, insolent thing in the morgue's full sunlight, in that thing that no longer signifies anything, I behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders (pp. 3-4).

This passage is important for a number of reasons. Firstly, it makes the suggestion that the abject is somehow necessary, *fundamental* even, to the constitution of human subjectivity - 'that which I permanently thrust aside in order to live'. Secondly, it evokes the deathliness that, as we have seen, powerfully underlies experiences of the uncanny, and does so *exactly because* it evokes the primal fear of the ultimate dissolution of ego, of that place "where I am not". Gross (1990a) makes a valuable contribution in this connection; abjection, she (1990a) claims, is the body's acknowledgement that the boundaries and limits imposed on it are really social projection. The abject moment testifies to the precarious grasp of the subject in its own identity, and constitutes an assertion that the subject may slide back into the impure chaos out of which it was formed. For this reason, she argues that abjection is *an avowal of the death drive*, a moment of *undoing identity*.

A further important qualification of the abject lies in the fact, also hinted at in the above passage, that *it is a constituent part of human identity*, at least in so much as identity is a function of the individual's registration in the Symbolic. The fact that the abject is an originary component of human identity accounts both for the fact that abjection is universally experienced, and for the fact that the abject can never be destroyed.

It is helpful at this point, as means of expanding this exposition of the abject, to make brief recourse to Kristeva's narrative of the development of the speaking subject. The abject for Kristeva arises in the passage from the Semiotic to the Symbolic. These are two distinct *registers of subjectivity*, which Herbst (1999) explains as follows: "where...[the Symbolic] is the active, conscious, law-based, language-founded domain into which the subject is

interpolated...the [Semiotic] is an element of the repressed, preverbal unconscious” (p.109).

The Semiotic is a murky, undifferentiated and narcissistic realm characterized by the lack of distinct borders and clear separations. This lack of any demarcation means that there are no objects, no separation between ego and world. The place of the Semiotic, that undifferentiated space that plays home to the not-as-yet ego, that amorphous collection of unformulated bodily sensations and drives, Kristeva refers to as the *chora*. (Herbst, like Robinson (1999) usefully here distinguishes between the *chora* as that preverbal *place* in the time of the subject, as opposed to the larger holding category of the Semiotic as that *mode of subjectivity* “which has the capacity to irrupt into consciousness at any point in the subject’s life” (1999, p.110 (f)). The *chora* is that place where “consciousness has not assumed its rights and transformed into signifiers those fluid demarcations of yet unstable territories...[it is] where an ‘I’ that is taking shape is ceaselessly straying”(1982, p. 11).⁷ The vital point to grasp here is that

When the subject falls under the controls of civilization, takes on language and a super-ego steered by a law-abiding conscience, then the *before* – everything associated with the pre-objectal relationship the subject used to enjoy freely and exclusively with his or her mother – is negated and repressed (Herbst, 1999, p. 109).

Gross (1990a) bases her exposition of the abject on precisely this basis; the notion of abjection for her provides “a sketch of that period which marks the threshold of the child’s acquisition of language and a relatively stable enunciative position” (p. 86).

⁷ Macey (2000) gives a useful shorthand description of the *chora*. The Greek term for receptacle or enclosed space, the notion of the ‘*chora*’ has effectively become synonymous with ‘womb’. Kristeva takes the term from Plato, who understands it as “a space which is both eternal and indestructible, and that...provides a position for everything that comes into being” (Macey, 2000, p. 61). More specifically, in view of Kristeva’s theory of the Semiotic,

the *chora* is a provisional and mobile articulation of movements and their ephemeral stases. It exists prior to...temporality and representation, and can be likened only to primitive vocal or kinetic rhythms. [It]...exists at the level where the child’s archaic and primitive drives are directed towards the mother. To the extent that it is a space that allows the child to separate itself from the mother, the *chora* is the subject’s point of origin; to the extent that it is a receptacle that threatens the child with a suffocating enclosure, it is also the site of the subject’s negation (Macey, 2000, p. 61).

Perhaps the most effective way of understanding the true capacity, the bottomless threat, of the abject is through such an appreciation of its nature as “that repressed pre-objectal material...[as] the pleasure-giving drives of pure libido” (Herbst, 1999, p. 126). It is exactly through the reversing action of repression⁸ that this material and unbridled *pleasure* from that foundational pre-Symbolic era of development is made *loathsome* and in need of radical relocation to the category of the abject. Recapitulating Freud’s notion of the uncanny as ‘the return of the oppressed’, as the once-known, now forgotten, Kristeva (1982) comments that the abject, familiar as it may have been “in an opaque and forgotten life” now

harries me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either... A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me (p. 2).

What Kristeva is alluding to in this explanation of the abject and its ‘pre-history’ is the powerful ambivalence which underlies abjection. Like moments of uncanniness, one is able to fathom within abjection braids of repulsion *and* compulsion, revulsion *and* attraction; what one sees here is desire contorted: the abject “beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire”(Kristeva, 1982, p. 1) as she puts it. This ambivalence stems from the fact that the abject, like any other category of the uncanny, stems from that which is both strange and yet nonetheless *originary*. Herbst (1999) is again here instructive:

[I]f the unconscious can extrude such archaic material and formless pleasure into consciousness, we as subjects can occasionally be confronted with long-forgotten aspects of our past, whether these be actual memories or currents of feeling and experience linked to

⁸ The repressed is typically understood as that class of threatening unconscious material *that was once conscious*, or dangerously close to it, hence the need for repression. The early experiences of the Semiotic are those in which “consciousness has not assumed its rights” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 11), and as such it is necessary to qualify this talk of repression. Kristeva (1982) does this by referring to Freud’s distinction between primary and secondary repression. The form of repression that Kristeva has in mind is clearly primal in nature in that it “has been effected prior to the springing forth of the ego, of its objects and representations” (p. 11). Such representations, as they depend on “another repression, the “secondary” one, arrive only *a posteriori* on an enigmatic foundation that has already been marked off; in return...the shape of abjection notifies us of the limits of the human universe” (1982, p. 11). We are here at the limit of primal repression that “nevertheless, has discovered an intrinsically corporeal and already signifying brand, symptom, and sign: repugnance, disgust, abjection” (p. 11).

drives and instincts long since prohibited by the super-ego (itself honoring the requirements of the Symbolic). What we once desired and loved, we can desire and love again...and so, for that instant before prohibition kicks in, we do desire again, and we feel the familiarity and the promise of that desire, and this accounts for the attraction we can feel for unconscious or excluded things. The loathing takes over as soon as the super-ego realizes what this flaring into consciousness is, and denies it (p. 127).

Language, the greater order of the Symbolic, and perhaps most pertinently, the subject's position within this linguistic and social structure, is continually problematized – in the form of the abject – by its prior Semiotic existence, which, as Macey (2000) reiterates, is that “pre-linguistic level that exists prior to, or ‘beneath’ the logical and grammatical structures of the Symbolic”(p. 348). Or as Gross (1990a) puts it: “Abjection attests to the perilous and provisional nature of the symbolic control over the dispersing impulses of the semiotic drives, which strive to break down and through identity, order, and stability” (p. 86).

The inaugural experience of abjection is that “founding and traumatic moment of separation from the child's archaic and undifferentiated relationship with its mother” (Macey, 2000, p. 1). The experience of abjection as such “establishes bodily boundaries by facilitating the introduction between the inner and outer, and then between the ego and the non-ego” (Macey, 2000, p. 1). Or, in Kristeva's own terms: “Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of the pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be” (1982, p. 10). It helps to emphasize here that in the earliest months of life the infant forms a syncretic unity with the mother, is unable to distinguish between itself and its environment, and has no awareness of its own corporeal boundaries. The child as such is *ubiquitous* “with no separation between itself and ‘objects’...it forms a ‘primal unity’ with its objects” (Gross, 1990b, p. 34). If the child is to enter the Symbolic, to acquire language and thereby identity, a form of primal differentiation and separation proves absolutely imperative. For Kristeva (1982) this state speaks of the necessity of the mechanism of abjection, as a primal process of division, demarcation, exclusion, to the

formation of self-other relations, to the basic acquisition of language, and ultimately, to the (relative) stabilization of identity.⁹ As Gross (1990a) is at pains to emphasize, the expulsion of the abject – be it in the form of the mother’s body, the wastes of one’s own, in whatever threatens the nascent distinctness of the infant’s body and ego (or broader systems of difference and distinction, generally) – *is a precondition of the Symbolic*. Not only is it a precondition of the Symbolic, it is also

the by-product or excessive residue left untapped by symbolic functioning. It is, as it were, the unspoken of a stable speaking position, an abyss at the very borders of the subject’s identity, a hole into which the subject may fall... The subject must have a certain, if incomplete, mastery of the abject; it must keep it in check and at a distance in order to define itself as a subject (Gross, 1990a, p. 87).

The abject is hence a part of the subject that the subject continually attempts to expel, which, never fully obliterated, “hovers at the border of the subject’s identity, threatening apparent unities and stabilities with disruption and possible dissolution” (Gross, 1990a, p. 87). *A necessary condition of the subject*, the abject is that which must be expelled or repressed if the subject is to attain identity and a place in the Symbolic. As Herbst (1999) emphasizes, the abject is only ‘peeled away’ from the subjectivity of the developing subject - and even then only partially - as a result of exclusions and prohibitions set in

⁹ The explanation as to why separation from the mother’s body and the delimitation and demarcation of external objects and self-other relations is such a prerequisite of entry into the Symbolic is significantly advanced via consideration of Lacan’s notion of the Name-of-the-Father. Elliot (1992) makes succinct reference to exactly this point:

For the child to move past...[the] imaginary state and into the network of social and cultural relations it is essential that it begins to recognize that “objects” are not simply manipulable according to its own wishes. This passage into received social meanings, as previously noted, occurs with the shift into a “triadic” phase which functions to break the *dyadic* unit of child and mother. The symbolic father intervenes in the child/mother dyad, registered in the painful negotiations of the Oedipus and castration complexes, and thereby severs the child from the imaginary plenitude of the maternal body. And it is this paternal prohibition – symbolic castration – which...instantiates...the social code. [This prohibition]...represents the structuring event which breaks up the monad of the psyche, thereby bringing the individual subject into the network of pre-existing social and cultural relations... [T]he function of the father here is principally symbolic, to bar the child’s imaginary relation with the desired object. Severed from an imaginary unity with the mother’s body, the child becomes aware of the impossibility of an interpersonal relationship which is not already structured by the sexual and cultural forms of power relations in society. It is from the unconscious reorganization of the psychological economy that the subject becomes “socialized” (pp. 37-38).

place by others. Or put differently again, the abject is essential to the subject “as the category that shows him or her what s/he must not *do* and must not *be*” (Herbst, 1999, p. 125). In Kristeva’s own definitive terms – no subject can exist ‘sanely’ in the Symbolic without this category of unwanted, reject matter, this “Not me. Not that” (1982, p. 2).

This point holds for the structural integrity both of the individual ego, and of *the culture, the Symbolic order* in which that individual is located. Here one starts to understand that the threat of the abject is simultaneously: 1) a threat to the structural integrity of the ego – i.e. where my body ends and another’s begins, 2) a threat to the structural integrity of the ego – in the sense of my possessing a singular and cohesive identity, and 3) a threat to the Symbolic in the sense of large social and linguistic structuring systems of the subject, laws, symbols, prohibitions, meanings.

Even in the most sacrosanct, purified, and socially sanctioned of activities, the unclean and improper must be harnessed (Gross, 1990a). In this way one can understand why the prime operation of abjection is that of *exclusion*, and why the most basic responses to abjection are those of *ejection*, separation, division, the drawing of boundaries: “A deviser of territories, languages, works, the *deject* [the subject in the state of abjection] never stops demarcating his universe” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 8). Referring once again to Herbst (1999):

The abject is always determined in relation to a border or periphery which one can label the limit of the Symbolic system. All that exceeds this limit is excluded in the margin beyond it... It is everything considered abject, taboo, prohibited, undesirable, unclean, impure, improper *within* the Symbolic. It is a ready-made category for everything...without category (p. 122).

Gross (1990a) makes the same point when she asserts that abjection is *the underside of the Symbolic*; that which “the Symbolic must reject, cover over and contain” (p. 89). It is crucial here that we not reduce, or under-estimate the role of crass physicality, of the body, for abjection, after all, “is an insistence on the subject’s necessary relation to death, to animality and to materiality, being the subject’s recognition and refusal of its corporeality” (Gross, 1990a, p. 89).

In review then, the abject is that which corrupts processes of meaning and identity. It introduces moments of blockage into the flow of signification and identificatory practices, both of which - via the subject's constitution in the Symbolic - are implicated in one another. It is important here to again emphasize that the abject's disruption of identificatory boundaries occurs at different levels, and understandably so, given that ego-integrity is as much about bodily wholeness as it is about the cohesion and structure of cultural and symbolic meaning. This point becomes clear toward the end of *Powers of Horror* where Kristeva makes reference to how the 'orb of abjection' spreads across the broad social spheres of morality, religion, politics, culture.

One should not under-estimate the disruption of super-ego-level functioning, of abjection's role in undermining the Symbolic. This, in many ways, is its most crucial level of impact. Indeed, while there is little doubt that the abject torments the ego, the prime zone of its affect would seem to lie at *the site of a superego*. It is here, where 'an ego has merged with its master', that the affects, the tremors of the abject are felt at their most powerful. Although lying beyond the set of the ego's objects, the superego, the abject "does not cease challenging its master...it beseeches a discharge, a convulsion, a crying out" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 2). At her most succinct Kristeva puts it thusly: "[T]o each ego its object, to each superego its abject" (p. 4). The real threat of horror then is not so much that quantifiable object that vexes and frightens the ego, it is rather that anomalous thing that exerts itself upon the moral-political nerve-center of the ego, the individualized guardian of the Symbolic.

In this sense the abject is that which eats away at the familiar explanatory or 'holding narratives' of a culture, threatening to swallow them, and with them, the speaking subject. And because it is not based in the object, or in the field of signification - indeed, it is precisely 'insignifiable' - we are left unable to prepare sufficient defences against it, either on the level of the ego, or on the level of language. The abject, in summation then, is that which dwells in opacity, beyond the parameters of signification, to destabilize, capsize and refute the laws and divisions of the Symbolic. It is that, in short, which collapses the powers of language, in both its capacity to confer, to stabilize meaning (and hence identity), and in its ability to sublimate

unconscious threats to the order of the Symbolic. The abject, in Bryson's (1996) terms, proves resistant, it is "a density, a standing-outside of discourse...[that] which cannot...be sublimated no signifying space" (p. 219).

The Real.

Lacan's concept of the Real stands importantly apart from both Freud's notion of the uncanny and Kristeva's idea of abjection in that both of these concepts rely on an account of unconscious material that, in differing ways, returns.¹⁰ The notion of the Real is not grounded in the unconscious, nor does it involve the mechanism of repression. By the same token, the Real cannot be recovered during analysis. Despite this, the structural similarities across these accounts is pronounced - as will become evident as we continue - and Lacan's Real certainly compliments and furthers these theoretical explanations already offered.¹¹

For the time being it profits us to focus on what the concept of the Real has *in common* with the notions of the abject and the uncanny. As is the case with both the abject and the uncanny, the near-experience, the *approach* of the Real induces powerful responses of extraordinarily disturbing affect. In this respect, Bowie (1991) describes the Real as knowable only as an experiential residue. Similarly Evans (1996) suggests that the Real is

¹⁰ In presenting the different theoretical strands of Freud, Kristeva and Lacan one should not bow too readily to the temptation to attempt resolve, or synthesize their differences. In fact it is necessary to emphasize that these perspectives *cannot* be reconciled in any simple way. In a forum such as this, the attempt is to appreciate both the broad parallels, and the tensions, between these theoretical positions. Indeed, they are brought together here as means of making a broader argument about the *speaking subject's constitution relative to the limits of the discursive*. The key point of contention here lies exactly with the Real, which, for Lacan, is not in any way reducible to the unconscious. Of course, much of the force of Freud's uncanny and Kristeva's abject stems from exactly this source, from the fact that these affects are exactly responses to repressed (i.e. unconscious) material that momentarily threatens to 'come undone'. Lacan's Real lies importantly outside of the unconscious, at least in as much as the unconscious is thought to be 'structured like a language'. In opposition to this, the Real is precisely that which is 'insignifiable', that which can never be made known through language.

This is not to say that the Real, like the abject, like unconscious content pressing towards expression (in the mechanism of the symptom, for instance), is *not* that which continually needs be ejected, kept at bay, sublimated in hopeful (if not futile) attempts at domestication. The Real, like the force of unconscious desire, requires exactly this kind of attention, given that it - like repressed unconscious material - is exactly a threatening and troubling force that poses a traumatizing risk to the subject. In this regard it performs much the same function as the abject, and as the unconscious material that threatens, in the experience of the uncanny, to become manifest - hence its place in this argument about what the speaking subject needs to 'set aside in order to live' within the Symbolic.

¹¹ Obviously presenting Lacan's idea of the Real here also breaks with chronology, because Lacan, like Freud, had supplied a good deal of the theoretical vocabulary that Kristeva drew on in elaborating the notion of abjection.

virtually inseparable, in its near-apprehension, from affects of anxiety and dread.

Lacan's Real has its origin, so Ragland-Sullivan (1992) tells us, in *the recalcitrance of nature*. In his earliest writings, Lacan describes the real as a brute, pre-Symbolic reality, which returns in the form of pronounced need, such as that of hunger. One is not here referring to an 'object' of need however; objects or symbols such as the breast, the bottle, or the mother (in this instance) would be considered by Lacan to exist within the domain of the Imaginary¹², exactly as *imaginary objects*. Indeed, like Kristeva's abject and Freud's uncanny, Lacan's Real possesses no single object; it is that essential "object" which isn't an object any longer, the something that faced with which, all words cease and categories fail, the Real is hence the object of anxiety *par excellence* (Evans, 1996). Imaginary objects here are always both more and less than the Real "object":

The Real object...in and out of itself, is nothing, unconceptualized, but nonetheless an absolute...if the first Real object is the attempt to satisfy hunger, from its inception the Real bespeaks its own impossibility: of necessity each experience of hunger, because it can never finally be quelled, alternates pleasure with displeasure in acts of repetition (Ragland-Sullivan 1992, p. 375).

It is not only the recalcitrance of nature one beholds in the real: it is also the quality of a primal and seemingly insatiable need, and with it a drive to repetition. One may take the latter, in its resonance with the death-drive's mechanism of repetition-compulsion, to signal the presence – once again – of a form of deathliness. This repetitive quality is apparent in Lacan's famous formula: 'the real is that which always comes back to the same place', which provides a point of resonance with Freud's exposition of the uncanny, at least in as much as that it involves a form of *return* as an integral component.

¹² The Imaginary, like the Symbolic, is one of Lacan's three orders. It is the order of mirror-images, identifications and reciprocities, to paraphrase Bowie (1991). It is in this domain that the original identificatory procedures which brought the ego into being are repeated and reinforced by the individual in his relationship with the external world of people and things...the scene of a desperate delusional attempt to be and to remain 'what one is' by gathering to oneself ever more instances of sameness, resemblance and self-replication...[the] Imaginary...creates a bridge between inner-directed and outer-directed mental acts, and belongs as much to the objects of perception as to those internal objects for which the word is usually reserved in ordinary speech (Bowie, 1991, p. 92).

Lacan's formula, moreover, is an indication of the Real's unchanging sameness, the fact, that as a kind of absolute recalcitrance, radical indeterminacy, or ontological primacy, it remains forever oblivious to history, culture, civilization, or the discursive maneuverings of human subjects. This recalcitrance, the power of this resistance to any form of symbolic mediation or representation is made abundantly clear by Lacan:

For the real does not wait, and specifically not for the subject, since it expects nothing from the world. But it is there, identical to its existence, a noise in which everything can be heard, and ready to submerge in its outbursts what the 'reality principle' constructs it under the name of the external world (Lacan, cited in Bowie, 1991, p. 131).

The real is not to be remade, to be domesticated, or to be accessed in parts; it is one single pre- and post-existing 'all' that is absolutely unmoved by the subject; it is that surface, as Bowie (1991) reminds us, "upon which human beings can never achieve purchase" (p. 95). Minsky (1996) makes a helpful contribution here, referring to the Real as "the pre-Imaginary moment of excess and impossible plenitude...lying inviolate and out of reach of all imaginary identity and the subjectivity offered by...language [and] the Symbolic order"(p. 147). More just than the idea of "impossible, super-abundant plenitude", however, and this reiterating the point made above, the Real refers to "the superseding power of totality, the 'all'" (Minsky, 1996, p. 147). The 'lack of a lack', it has no boundaries, borders, divisions, or oppositions "it is a continuum of 'raw materials'"(Gross, 1990b, p. 34).

One can hence understand how for Lacan, the Real comes close to meaning something like 'the ineffable', or 'the impossible'. Bowie an astute comment in this respect, and that is to say that the Real, as it is handled by Lacan, gives the reader an acute sense of paradox, the sense indeed of the unthinkable being thought. In the same vein – i.e. that of a stylistic comment – Bowie furthermore (1991) speaks of Lacan's ability to consistently reinvent the concept from moment to moment, to "embody the weight and recurrence that he ascribes to the Real in the ponderous repetitions of his text"(p. 102).

Concurring with Ragland-Sullivan and Bowie, Evans (1992) points out that the Real emerges in Lacan's work "as that which is outside language and

inassimilable to symbolization....'that which resists symbolization absolutely'...or, again, the real is 'the domain of whatever exists outside of symbolization' (p. 160). The real is impossible to imagine, impossible to integrate into the Symbolic order, impossible to attain in any way; importantly, it is this impossibility, this pronounced resistance to symbolization, that lends the real its essentially traumatic quality (Evans, 1996). In this connection, as Bryson (1996) asserts, one can never grasp the full materiality of the body, its fleshiness, its dampness, its excess beyond signification. Here Bryson (1996) makes reference to Lacan's description of Freud's patient Irma, an example which draws strong parallels with Freud's uncanny and Kristeva's abject, at least in as much as it points to a jarringly incommensurability between corporeal and psychical dimensions of the speaking subject:

Having got the patient to open her mouth...what he sees there, these turbinate bones covered with a whitish membrane, is a horrendous sight... Everything blends in and becomes associated in this image, from the mouth to the female sex organ by way of the nose – just before or after this, Freud has his turbinate bones operated on...There's a horrendous discovery there, that of the flesh one never sees, the foundation of things, the other side of the head, of the face, the secretory glands par excellence, the flesh from which everything exudes, at the very heart of the mystery, the flesh in as much as it is suffering, is formless, in as much as its form itself is something which provokes anxiety. Spectre of anxiety, identification of anxiety, the final revelation of *you are this – You are this, which is so far from you, this which is the ultimate formlessness* (Lacan, 1988, pp 154-155).

In this brief passage Lacan touches on some of the most central themes thus far discussed. Here, in the retelling of a seemingly unmediated experience of the body, Freud confronts a radical and threatening formlessness, which both prevents distinct object separation/definition, and, by the same token, prevents language from taking a hold. The result is extreme identificatory anxiety, a near engulfment by this 'unformulable formlessness'; the paradox which cannot be permitted is that one in fact *is* this irretrievable fleshiness,

this bottomless and insignifiable and crass nature, which in fact is the undeniable foundation of all things human.

Now despite the qualities of brute physicality which have already been ascribed to it – and here one encounters some of the challenges of Lacan's ongoing reinvention of the term - the Real finds existence in the *mental* as well as the material world. (Here one is tempted to suggest that the Real's intractable materiality is only one aspect of what appears to be the more fully rounded characteristic of 'insignifiability'). Hence we are not only speaking of the materiality of actual objects, but also

The experience of trauma when we are thrown back into the baby's earliest experiences of helpless speechlessness, the state of psychosis where the controlled perceptions available in the Symbolic are rejected so that subjectivity collapses into phantasy completely, and finally death, the triumph of the Real, which puts a physical end to subjectivity and meaning (Minsky, 1996, p. 148).

Perhaps the most instructive case for our purposes here is that of trauma – a mental state as unsymbolizable, as resistant to the sublimating capacities of representation and transcription as is the base corporeality of physical objects. The traumatic event proper is always extrinsic to signification, inassimilable to the pursuit of pleasure. More than this, the traumatic event is in a sense already in-built within the primary process, or such would seem to be Lacan's implication:

At the very heart of the primary process, we see preserved the insistence of the trauma making us aware of its existence. The trauma reappears there, indeed, frequently unveiled. How can the dream, the bearer of the subject's desire, produce that which makes the trauma emerge repeatedly – if not its very face, at least the screen that shows us that it is still there behind?

Let us conclude that the reality system, however far it is developed, leaves an essential part of what belongs to the real a prisoner in the meshes of the pleasure principle (Lacan, XI, 55).

Here we detect strong similarities with Kristeva's formulation of the abject, particularly in view of the suggestion that like the domain of Semiotic

experience¹³, the Real is already inside, already a component part of the pleasure principle, threatening at each moment to repeat, in clarity and incisiveness, a limit of existence, a threat of dissolution, a kind of deathliness. It is “an accident that repeats an accident, an irreducible fragment...that speaks of unrecoverable loss, an encounter that is peremptory and brutal and yet one that can now never, outside of dreams, take place” (Bowie, 1991, p. 106). Bowie presents this case in an extraordinarily lucid passage:

The hard, durable traumatic residues that are caught up in the ‘meshes’ of the pleasure principle, or in the ‘network’ of signifiers, are an accidental catch – no one was fishing for them; and they cannot be put to use – no one can knit them into a net. Yet these encounters with the Real, in their obtuseness and their acuity, are essential to an understanding of the mind. They are stray events, stragglers, in which the march of an overwhelming necessity may be glimpsed. In them the mind makes contact with the limits of its power, with that which its structure cannot structure (pp. 104-105).

Here we see brought together several strands of Lacan’s account: the impossibility of the Real, its antagonistic relation to signifiability and meaning, its tendency to repeat, to plague and traumatize the subject, all seem to work together here. It is the missed encounter with the Real “object”, claims Evans (1996) - whose explanation is invaluable here - that presents itself in the form of trauma, *which is exactly the repeated attempt to impose meaning on that which shatters meaning and destroys representability*. Here then the failure of meaning, structure, form, cohesion, is one which seems to break the subject apart, pushing them into an unrecoverable loss and depreciation, which, in its repeated form, is trauma.

¹³ Kristeva’s notion of the Semiotic is similar to the Real, at least in so far as resistance to symbolism and ontological primacy are concerned. The Real however seems a far more open-ended term “taking in the entire field of possibilities implied by the proposition of something unavailable to analysis; whereas the Semiotic refers expressly to a period of subject formation that precedes the Symbolic” (Herbst, 1999 p. 453). Further yet, and Herbst (1999) is again useful here:

Since aspects of the Semiotic, e.g., its non-differentiated disposition, can be re-experienced in the form of such feelings as those psychoanalysis describes as “oceanic”, and since this disposition itself can only be articulated through signification, it does not “resist symbolization absolutely” and is therefore not as unbounded as Lacan’s Real. At best, it is an element in the Real (p. 453).

One further aspect of Lacan's notion of the Real is highlighted by Benvenuto & Kennedy (1986) via the notion of *foreclosure*. The domain of the Real, in this respect, is the place of that which is outside of the subject, that which has been expelled, or more appropriately, *foreclosed* by them. Referring back to Freud's use of the term *Verwerfung*, Lacan develops his notion of foreclosure as a particularly intense form of rejection, one which rejects something *as if it did not exist*. This moreover is a form of rejection importantly distinct in its meaning and functioning from repression¹⁴. Indeed the sense of the term that Lacan has in mind is of a 'symbolic abolition' – almost a deliberate removal of signifiability, were such a signifying capacity ever the prerogative of the subject – an abolition and expulsion outside the subject of a thing, so to speak, a consigning to the object a status of non-existence.

Such a foreclosure is considered to be an older, deeper and more fundamental process than repression. Moreover, such a foreclosure, much like the operation of abjection, plays an important role in the constitution of the subject. Foreclosure for Lacan is the rejection, via a powerful disaffirmation, of something as existing for the subject. Here one should point out that a primary form of affirmation is implicated by Lacan in the identificatory processes whereby a subject takes things into itself. This affirmation (*Bejahung*) involves a positive judgment of attributes, and requires a 'taking in' and symbolizing – an introduction into the Symbolic Order of that thing. Foreclosure, by contrast, "cuts short any symbolization, is opposed to the primary *Bejahung*, and constitutes what is expelled" (Benvenuto & Kennedy, 1986, p. 152). Put in more straightforward terms: "what does not come to light in the Symbolic Order appears in the Real, the realm outside of the subject, for instance as a hallucination" (Lacan, 1977, p. 388).

¹⁴ Benvenuto & Kennedy (1986) quote Leclaire to great effect here in distinguishing between neurotic repression and psychotic foreclosure:

If we imagine common experience to be like a tissue...a piece of material made up of...threads, we could say that repression would figure in it as a rent or a tear, which nonetheless could still be repaired; while foreclosure would figure in it as a gap...due to weaving itself, a *primal hole* which would *never again be able to find its substance since it would never have been anything other than the substance of a hole*, and could only be filled, and even then imperfectly, by a patch...(Leclaire, cited in Benvenuto & Kennedy, 1986, p. 153).

Lacan makes ample reference, in this connection, to a series of hallucinatory/dream moments in Freud, one of which is the famous 'Father can't you see I'm burning' dream scene in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Another is the Wolf Man's experience of 'unspeakable terror' when he imagines cutting through his little finger to the point where it is 'hanging on only by its skin'. This particular example, which as it turns out is entirely imagined, re-evokes a moment of unsymbolizable castration anxiety for the Wolf Man. (Freud of course gives pride of place to such moments of castration anxiety in his account of the uncanny). This is a hallucination of the Real by virtue of the fact that it remains, or points to, a 'hole' in the Symbolic Order, it is that which exists outside the subject; it is that, to reiterate, in Benvenuto & Kennedy's (1986) terms, which has been expelled, *foreclosed* by the subject.

Here again we encounter the notion that the speaking subject's registration into the Symbolic Order - their entry into culture, language and social structure - requires, as a matter of irreconcilable necessity, an unflinching, consistent, and perhaps somewhat *desperate* rejection of that 'entire world which falls irretrievably outside the signifying dimension'. What Lacan is effectively doing here, is retrieving an aspect of the Freudian unconscious, i.e. namely that aspect of it which remains unassimilable to language¹⁵. It is important that this aspect of the Freudian unconscious be acknowledged, not only because it is routinely insisted upon by Freud, but because it is a quality which clearly does not hold in the terms of a Lacanian unconscious taken to be structured like a language. One might speculate that the Real is the concept that Lacan enlists to do the work that aspects of the Freudian formulation of the unconscious had managed previously. Put differently, it is the designation for that threatening, ontologically unformulable and potentially subversive space which challenges or refutes the subject in its categorization as body, ego, and superego.

¹⁵ Bowie's (1991) representation of this issue – of the posited insignifiability of the unconscious in Freud - is instructive:

Whether the unconscious is thought of as the domain of the fundamental drives, or as a dynamically maintained repository of memories...inadmissible to consciousness, Freud does not want...speech, or even a ghostly premonition of speech, to penetrate 'down' into it....The bodily processes whereby instinctual force is accumulated and discharged [remain]...protected from the encroachments of culture...the drives [are]...silent,

Clearly this is a domain of experience that psychoanalysis needs to account for, be it in the theoretical terms of the uncanny, the abject, or the Real. Likewise, the rejecting mechanism integral to it, whether one frames it in the terms of primal or secondary repression, the dynamics of abjection, or within the technical notion of foreclosure, is vital – a setting aside in order to live – to explaining what the speaking subject and the order of the Symbolic must continually eject in order to attain coherence, system, structure.

The ‘other side of language’: the limits of signification.

The preceding discussion yields a number of lines of implication regarding the role and limits of signification in and for the speaking subject. The first such point concerns the limited horizon of signifiability, and features, as perhaps its central protagonist, the body. It is on the basis of this hard kernel of experience, this point of nature’s unyielding and seemingly violent recalcitrance (violent at least in the sense of the traumatic repetitions of the Real), that we are able to deduce an entire ontological order that resists representation. Bryson (1996) makes this point perfectly:

the body is exactly the place where something falls out of the signifying order – or cannot get inside it. At once residue and resistance, it becomes that which cannot be symbolized: the site, in fact, of the [R]eal...The body is everything that cannot be turned into representation (p. 219).

It is for this reason, continues Bryson (1996), that the body is in fact never directly recognizable. If, in fact, we were to picture this body-outside-discourse, it would never resemble a body at all “since the body as-as-resemblance is precisely that into which it may not be converted” (1996, p. 220). Even depictions of the body in abjection only approximate what is at stake here, “substituting the mere forms of the horrible for what is essentially incommensurate with form, is *informe*” (p. 220). Like language, visual representation can only find analogues and comparants for this body: it is *like* this or that. Further yet

At the edges of representation or behind it hovers a body you will

inscrutable, unavailable to mere talk (pp. 52-53).

know about only because these inadequate stand-ins, which are there simply to mark a limit or boundary to representation, are able to conjure up a penumbra of something lying beyond representability (Bryson, 1996, p. 220).

Of course, as suggested above, it is not just the body we are speaking of here, although the body does seem to provide *the* paradigmatic example. Beyond it though, as Bowie (1991) tells us of Lacan's Real: "There exists a world which falls entirely and irretrievably outside the signifying dimension" (p. 94). It is this domain, of nausea, incommensurability and seeming ontological formlessness (or absolute and ungraspable ontological primacy) – that is felt, symptomatically induced, one might say, in that particular order of affects that we have been here investigating.

We find here something like an absolute rival to representation. As opposed to an extreme constructionist position – i.e. if something exists at all, it exists in and for representation - this domain is one which simply cannot be grasped by the signifying apparatus. It is a domain 'knowable' to us only in as much as it introduces something akin to signifying blindspots into discourse, or, in Bryson's (1996) terms, a 'penumbra' which indicates that discourse-as-sight cannot quite detect this region or bring it into focus. Yet, continuing his metaphor, "insofar as the spectator has the sense that sight is not able to comfortably scan the penumbra (the gaze bouncing off of the image like an arrow hitting a shield), a certain nausea arises that unmistakably announces the advent of the Real" (p. 220). Importantly, these visual affects are not due to the fact that the image shows this or that horrible thing. The image's content, Bryson (1996) suggests, is only a momentary obstacle to discourse, since as soon as the discourses of horror move in on their target, they at once neutralize it and absorb it back inside the repertoire of the conventions. On the contrary, "the object of horror...shown in the picture will always be inadequate to the affective charge it carries with it: the horror is never in the representation, but around it, like a glow or a scent" (p. 220).

This is to speak of the already virtual – the already *mediated* - quality of what we take to be (in the non-Lacanian sense) the real. As has been established, we are always at an arm's length distance from our own

corporeality. Rather than being the beneficiaries of a pre-made match between psyche and body, we are confronted with a kind of 'corporeal suit' that we need *psychically* take on. As such, one exists - in as much as one exists in the Symbolic at all – as an outsider within one's own body, in a constant state of alienation from the indeterminate fleshiness of our own bodily matter. Failures of language and signification around the 'hard nucleus of the Real' that is the body are exactly symptomatic of this 'not at homeness'. Furthermore, it is the anxious tremor of this near-realization (of one's alienation from one's own body) that we appear to confront in moments of the uncanny, the abject and the Real. Freud's developmental narrative of the zoning of the body is one way of emphasizing this detached and virtual experiential state, as is Lacan's reference to autoscopy, imagined anatomies, phantom limbs, dismemberment phantasies, and so on. Žižek makes exactly this point with reference to the supposed bodily detachment of cyberspace. It is through such experiences of cyberspace that we may come to realize that there is no such thing as an immediate material body, *nor was there ever*:

[O]ur bodily self-experience [is]...always-already that of an imaginary constituted entity...One is tempted to risk the hypothesis that it is precisely psychoanalytic theory which was the first to touch on this key question: is not the Freudian eroticized body, sustained by libido, organized around erogenous zones, precisely the non-animalistic, non-biological body? (Žižek, 2001, p. 55).

Where does this lead us? The suggestion here, plainly put, is that the domain of bodily experience, much like *the domain of conscious experience as a whole* – as psychoanalysis has been telling us from its inception – has been that of prior mediations all along. More radically though, the upshot of *this* is that the domain of signification *itself* has been that of prior mediations all along. To make this point it is helpful to emphasize the link attaching bodily to ego integrity, and ego integrity to superego and hence Symbolic integrity, as has been articulated above. In each case the cohesion, the *systemic functioning*, of the entity in question is predicated exactly upon a kind of prior mediation, a kind of distortion, a mythical closure, completeness, directness, that makes it – be it body, ego or superego - *seem* whole and structurally

sound, despite the fact that it conceals, at its basis, a *constitutive* weakness.¹⁶

This weakness is a kind of 'foundational hollow', a flaw so integral that it threatens to collapse its entire system, should it be revealed. Each of these systems needs to continually keep something at bay so as to protect itself. They need mitigate and defend against a subversive force which threatens to undo them, and they need to do so as a matter of absolute urgency, because a failure to do so would precipitate a near-total functional collapse. It is here that we find the violent actions of ejection and demarcation, the desperate bid to affirm or maintain self (body, ego, Symbolic system) at the expense of what is *abjected*. Here too we are able to trace a whole series of representational substitutes, stand-ins, replacements, distortions - in the terms of classical psychoanalysis, displacements, condensations - whose job is to contain and where possible domesticate this corrupting force. And in each case that threatening force, which is always already a part of the system - hence the *constitutive* role of the abject, the *return* of the repressed, the inbuilt role of the traumatic Real *within* the primary process - is nature in an unadulterated and pure state, be it in the guise of the recalcitrant fleshiness of the body, the primal desires and instincts of the unconscious, or the ontological primacy of the Real that cannot be sublimated into signifiable form. Furthermore, the over-arching fear which unites each of these particular ontological anxieties is that of *the ultimate suspension of form* – that of death itself.

It is important that we re-emphasize here the logic of distorted reflection, of disguised or 'stand-in' forms of representation. The formal similarity we evidence here, in the problem that unconscious ideation poses for consciousness, that the abject poses for the ego/super-ego, and that the domain of the Real poses for signification, *does* call for an interpretative analytics. This, of course, is exactly the objective upon which psychoanalysis, as clinical and critical system, has been predicated. Psychoanalysis has as its goal exactly this project, of interpreting the irrational rationality of such mediating and self-protecting forms of representation. What one has to bear in mind here is that it is not only the substance of *conscious experience* – like

¹⁶ A working knowledge of Lacan's mirror-stage is useful here, especially in as much as it illuminates the body image as an illusory and deceptive yet nonetheless enabling gestalt of physiological and psychological completeness and unity.

that of the apprehension of one's own body – that is fundamentally based on distortion, replacements, analogues. *It is also the entire field of signification itself.* This is not simply to make the obvious point that signifiers are formally different from signifieds, that some degree of artifice or arbitrariness is necessary in signification, by virtue of the fact that to speak of a dog, for instance, is to use an acoustic image of it and not it itself. This, it would seem, is to make a point about *what signification keeps at bay in order to make itself possible as a coherent and functional.* To reiterate, it is not simply a problem of conversion that we are speaking of here – the fact that word-presentations and thing-presentations are different in form to one another. It is rather of a desperate kind of separation, ejection, *disavowal* even, or *foreclosure*, on the part of signification *of the territory of the Real*, which, as kind of ontological primacy, as 'unwordable' experience of pure formlessness, would threaten to dissolve the Symbolic altogether.

The threat posed to consciousness by unconsciousness, to the ego/superego by the abject, *is* - at the risk of repetition - that posed to signification by the order of Real. The Real, like the memorable image evoked by Bryson (1996), of a magnet held up to the surface of a television screen, is able to cause the entire system of meaning and law that is the Symbolic, like the electronic image, to buckle, to collapse completely.

Conclusion.

The argument above has suggested that concerns with the body and signification are indicative of broader ontological issues regarding the limits of possibility of/for the speaking subject and signification as a whole. Indeed, the mediated and distanced experience of the body seems precisely symptomatic of a far larger category of conflict. The case of the body and signification is particularly instructive in that it indicates the extent to which each of these (that is, the body and signification) function as predetermined 'rivals', as kind of 'first guards' of opposed ontological orders. The confrontation of these two rivals occurs at exactly the frontier that divides nature from culture, i.e. at that boundary-area, that abrasive and conflictual articulation-point, so fundamental to psychoanalysis, which produces what is most definitive of human experience. It is this condition, it hardly needs emphasizing - *the limiting of*

nature by culture - which makes the speaking subject, and signification, or more generally yet, the Symbolic order itself, possible.

However, as has become evident, this limiting comes at a price, that of the continued threat of nature's return. This dividing line is, as it were, the price we pay to exist as rational, cultural beings. So by the same token that culture may limit nature, so nature may limit culture, that which anchors the intelligibility of our discourse, that which, bluntly put, makes signification possible in the first place. Put somewhat differently, it is the nature of this particular articulation, this division, this ontological separation between nature and culture, which underlies both the conditions of possibility for the speaking subject, *and their conditions of impossibility*. In more categorical terms: just as it is the limitation of nature by culture which determines the conditions of possibility for the speaking subject and signification, so it is the limitation of culture by nature which determines the conditions of impossibility for the speaking subject and signification.

Indeed, given the primacy of this division, it is not surprising that language, or more accurately, that signification and hence discourse - as forerunners and bases of culture and the Symbolic - should collapse precisely when nature is at its most ascendant. Those moments when we experience something akin to the incursion of the Real, the horror of abjection, or the uncanny return of the repressed, those moments concur exactly with a breakdown in signifying exchange precisely because they are coterminous with the threatened subversion of my coherence as body, ego and cultural being.¹⁷

References.

Benvenuto, B. & Kennedy, R. (1986). *The works of Jacques Lacan an introduction*. Free Association Press: London.

Bowie, M. (1991). *Lacan*. Fontana: London.

Bryson, N. (1996). House of wax. In R. Krauss (Ed.) *Cindy Sherman 1975-1993*. New York: Rizzoli, pp. 216-223.

¹⁷ One should not forget, in this respect, how fundamental Lacan, for example, takes language to be in the constitution of the human subject: "If one has to define the moment at which man becomes human, we can say that it is the moment when, however little it be, he enters the Symbolic relation"

- Chisholm, C. (1992). The uncanny. In E. Wright (Ed.) *Feminism and psychoanalysis: A critical dictionary*. London: Routledge, pp. 436-440.
- Elliot, A. (1992). *Social theory and psychoanalysis in transition: Self and society from Freud to Kristeva*. Oxford & Cambridge: Blackwell.
- Evans, D. (1996). *An introductory dictionary of Lacanian psychoanalysis*. London & New York. Routledge.
- Freud, S. (1966). Standard edition of the complete psychological works of *Sigmund Freud*. (Ed.) J. Strachey. London: Hogarth.
- Gross, E. (1990a). The body of signification. In J. Fletcher & A. Benjamin (Eds). *Abjection, melancholia and love: The work of Julia Kristeva*. London: Routledge, pp. 80-103.
- Gross, E. (1990b). *Jacques Lacan: A feminist introduction*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Herbst, M. (1999). *Goya's grotesque: Abjection in Los Caprichos, De Sastres de la Guerra, and Los Disparates*. Unpublished PhD thesis. Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand.
- Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of horror: An essay on abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Lacan, J. (1977). *Ecrits*. New York & London: Norton and Company.
- Lacan, J. (1979). *The four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis*. London: Penguin.
- Lacan, J. (1988). *The seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book II the ego in Freud's theory and in the technique of psychoanalysis 1954-1955*. (Ed.) Miller, J. Trans. S. Tomaselli. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Macey, D. (2000). *The Penguin dictionary of critical theory*. London: Penguin Books.
- Minsky, R. (1996). *Psychoanalysis and gender*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Ragland-Sullivan, E. (1992). The real. In E. Wright (Ed.) *Feminism and psychoanalysis: A critical dictionary*. London: Routledge, pp. 374-377.

(Lacan, I, 178).

Robinson, J. (1999). *Feminism and the spaces of transformation*. Unpublished paper. Faculty of Social Sciences, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes.

Zizek, S. (2001). *On belief*. New York & London: Routledge.