**BA FINE ART**

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***FA204 Critical Studies and Reflective Practice 4: Research Methods***

LITERATURE REVIEW COVER PAGE

YOUR NAME: MADELEINE STURGEON-KELL

* LITERATURE REVIEW TITLE:
* EXPANDING UPON THE THEME OF ABJECTION: A RESTRICTED REVIEW OF *POWERS OF HORROR: AN ESSAY ON ABJECTION* BY JULIA KRISTEVA

WORD COUNT: 1040

As art and literature have approached the contemporary climate we thrive in today, the borders between written psychological themes and visual stimuli merge. Despite the book *Powers of horror: An essay on Abjection* critically and extensively analysing the use of abjection through time, more specifically the works of French literature and the theories that they surround. Kristeva breaks down the previous notion of the abject and modernises it. With the book written as a literary critique on the use of the abject and uncanny throughout contemporary classic writing up until 1980, it ties in directly with visual arts and the theories that bring them into fruition. The work is extensive and in-depth, expanding heavily on arcane themes. However, the key aspects of abjection as a tool, although dotted throughout the text, can be found in the first chapter *Approaching Abjection*. Separated into a number of sections, this review will elaborate and clarify upon the sections on *Neither Subject nor Object* and *The Improper/Unclean.* In these sections, Kristeva is clarifying and contextualising the abject in creative forms, something that is later extended upon in the book.

Within the introductory chapter there are 22 sections eventually leading to the critical analysis of abjection as a tool in contemporary French literature. Beginning with the sub-chapter *Neither Subject nor Object,* Kristeva introduces the term abjection and initiates the gradual definition of the term. Considering abjection as an aspect of one’s psyche, as a cloud that hangs over a being, it lies dormant as a symbol of violence and revolt directed but simultaneously radiating from the inner and outer sense of being. It lies beyond our understanding but entertains one’s desire without being entirely seduced. When seduction takes place within the self, an impulsive spasm takes over, tempted out by the newly condemned and disgusted eventually leading to an expelling of the body through a sickening and physical repugnance of the condemned. This process of temptation and repulsion acts as a repetitive cycle that defines the abject, this continual seduction and curiosity leading to the opposite of what was enticed. An ab-ject doesn’t lie physically as a named object or imagined being, “Nor is it an ob-jest, an otherness ceaselessly fleeing in a systematic quest of desire.” (Kristeva, 1980). The abject allows, in the interpretation of Kristeva, a being to be “detached and autonomous” whilst maintaining some features of the object as an opposition to the being, interpreted as a discarded object. It is after all objects that draw out the feeling of abjection, accompanied with the superego as its governing body. The abject leaves a convulsion and discharge as a result of the “… emergence of uncanniness, familiar in a forgotten life, now separate and loathsome.”. Resting on the edge of meaning and hallucination, the abject crumbles and the moment of understanding as its purpose is to remain out of our realm of consciousness.

Kristeva continues to define abjection, specifically noting what causes this flooding sensation and how these triggers stem mostly from the connection to the body throughout *The Improper/Unclean*. The aforementioned impetus and filth relating retching and expelling of elements of the body is led by the human seduction and curiosity of the uncanny. Kristeva explains that abjection is most common in its association with food. Elements of edible substances that bear a resemblance to human-like qualities immediately and sometimes violently trigger an overwhelming sickness. She uses the example of skin on milk as a prime example of food loathing, yet it is clear that this is a highly personal experience. As this text continues to explain the abject as an experience that a majority if not all humans have a history with, it is highly personal and difficult to predict. This whole text attempts to define and curate a sensation that cannot be accurately recorded or interpreted universally. Kristeva describes the filth (in this case milk skin) as not entirely other, a part of her existence so the convulsions that ensue are an expelling and abjecting of oneself in an attempt to isolate and extricate the being from the visual. In the reaction to the associations of flesh and decay, one’s own demise can be found through the vomit pus and blood that has been expelled. These fluids signify to us what death contains, they provide the being with an understanding of the borders of our lives, something that the abject blurs. The corpse becomes and object surrounded by the live-giving fluids that now form the abject, as they were once at the core of one’s existence. The transformation from subject to object is what creates the abject and the looming convulsions that accompanies it. The expelling of one’s life force through abjection erases psychological borders, leaving death to absorb life.

“The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons us and ends up engulfing us.” (Kristeva, 1980).

In relation to the unclean, Kristeva considers abjection as the merging of the sinister and the innocent in connection to the body and the flesh.

Throughout this short body of selected text, Kristeva attempts to describe and visualise the subconscious. In short, this is a previously unresearched and analysed topic, at least at this level of description. Due to this as a hinderance to the introduction of the text *Powers of horror: An essay on Abjection,* it is challenging to review a pivotal piece of text. It is clear that Kristeva is following the Post-Structuralist views on literature and is entirely redefining the words abject and abjection, providing a fluid and undefinable characteristic to the phenomenon of visceral physical and psychological reaction. In this case one would continue to follow Kristeva’s dialogue in opening up the use of abject post-structuralist themes in contemporary French literature based on these definitions. Kristeva is a pivotal theorist on these themes, as they had not previously been discussed to these depths. Due to these factors, the text is at the foremost of its kind and cannot be critiqued against the previous texts as they simply did not exist.

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