University of Vermont

UVM ScholarWorks

UVM College of Arts and Sciences College Honors Theses

Undergraduate Theses

2024

Feminine Tragedy and the Ethics of Abjection

Melissa Faye Chadwick

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/castheses

Recommended Citation

Chadwick, Melissa Faye, "Feminine Tragedy and the Ethics of Abjection" (2024). *UVM College of Arts and Sciences College Honors Theses*. 149.
https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/castheses/149

This Undergraduate Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Theses at UVM ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in UVM College of Arts and Sciences College Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of UVM ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact schwrks@uvm.edu.

University of Vermont

Feminine Tragedy and the Ethics of Abjection

Undergraduate Thesis

College of Arts and Sciences

Film and Television Studies

25 April 2024

Table of Contents

Introduction **3**
Close-up/Face-down: Framing Feminine Tragedy **9**
Agnes Varda: The Path to Freedom is a Dirt Road **21**
Female Masochism and the mOther in Haneke's *La Pianiste* **32**
***Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me*: To Die a Beautiful Death** **42**
Final Analysis and Conclusion: **53**
Works Cited **55**

Introduction

This thesis investigates how several filmmakers have depicted the downfall of female protagonists whose existence poses a threat to what we consider feminine, proper, and moral. Central to my analysis is Julia Kristeva's conceptualization of the abject, as she outlines in her 1980 essay *Powers of Horror*. The abject is that which is neither subject nor object, neither self nor other, but that which, as Kristeva describes, "is radically excluded and draws me to the place where meaning collapses" (2). Abjection occurs at the disturbance of identity, system, and order. The abject is improper, unclean. It repulses desire and provokes a bodily reaction to expulse it. The abject can be found in all sorts of things, like a wound or bodily waste. On the most archaic level, abjection takes the form of food repulsion, like bodily convulsion at the taste of spoiled milk. One violently spits it out, spits themselves out, in a simultaneous act of constituting the self. In the same manner, the abject is connected to the split from the mother in ego formation, when one has to separate the mother from themself in order to constitute the self as such. She describes abjection as an "object of primal repression" (12) and a "precondition of narcissism" (13) because the split from the mother precedes the subject's emergence into the symbolic. It speaks specifically to the struggle involved in breaking away from the mother.

The apotheosis of the abject is the corpse, death and waste, all that which I've rejected, yet I cannot look away. As Kristeva explains, "It is death infecting life" (4). Confronted with the corpse, one faces a meaninglessness so significant that it encroaches upon meaning. The corpse reminds us of our own corporality and threatens its sanctity. Abjection also occurs when the Other takes the place of the self. It is a profound alienation in which the abject person is something of a stray. In its exclusion, the stray finds tremendous jouissance, manifesting in a violent and painful passion. Kristeva's theory draws on the psychoanalytic framework of

Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan and expands upon it. In the sense of psychoanalytic diagnostics, abjection is not neurotic or psychotic but perverse; seeking to corrupt any prohibition by the name-of-the-father rather than rejecting or assuming it. For example, socialized abjection could look like corrupt power disguised as a strict adherence to the law. It acknowledges religion, morality and the law as necessary but takes advantage of or gets around them. Similarly, contemporary literature imposes the abject onto religion, morality and the law in the crossing over of dichotomous categories such as impure/pure or moral/immoral. The abject cannot be gotten rid of, but it can be purified so as to reestablish our separation and distinguish ourselves from it. Such has been done historically through religious practices, the law, and art, which Kristeva describes as "catharsis par excellence".

Abjection's connection to the disturbed human reaction upon confrontation with a primordial trauma has made it a significant theory for studying horror films. Following Kristeva, Barbara Creed argues that the horror film is a "modern defilement rite" connected to the reconciliation with the maternal body. In her book *The Monstrous Feminine,* Creed considers abjection in terms of women who have broken out of their proper feminine role, thus appearing monstrous. She argues that the woman is almost always constructed as monstrous in relation to her mothering and reproductive functions. For example, she notes in the films *Carrie*, *Psycho* and the *Birds*, the mother who refuses to let her child break away from her is constructed as monstrous and prevents her child from properly entering the symbolic. Creed highlights the distinction Kristeva makes between maternal authority which helps the subject construct the clean and proper body and paternal authority which establishes language and the law. Abject substances, like shit, blood, vomit, signify this split. They at once evoke disgust in the spectator and signify the time in which they weren't a source of shame, before the split from the mother.

While this paper will not be focused on horror films, Creed’s analysis provides crucial insight into how abjection is incorporated into film to subvert the image of women as passive figures in genres that typically situate her as such.

My thesis strays away from horror and turns to tragedy to focus on how various experimental cinematic approaches situate the feminine subject on the moral stage. A feminine tragedy can take many forms and span across several genres. I define the feminine tragedy in this context as a film about the suffering and downfall of its female protagonist. While I focus specifically on films, several aspects of tragedy understood through theater inform my argument.

Abjection and tragedy share an ethical dimension, suffering-horror, and catharsis as their common aim. Hegel described the tragedy as “a collision of equally justifiable ethical claims”. For example, in Sophocles' *Antigone*, Antigone’s insistence upon her conscience and Creon’s upholding of the law bring about suffering. He sees catharsis as embracing the change that emanates from this eternal contradiction. In the modern tragedy, Hegel sees a shift where characters act according to their subjectivity rather than any substantial end. Hegel’s understanding of tragedy helps us to mark tragedy as not divided between right and wrong claims, but a conflict of one-sided passions. Oftentimes, this collision concerns the subjectivity of an individual against the institutional actors. Lacan helps us further situate the desire via the law and the role of tragedy. In his *Seminar VI: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, he asserts that the moral law is that through which the Real is actualized, this notion allows us to question what we believe is ideal. Suffering-horror in tragedy is precisely the weight of the abject, the Real too. Human pleasure is at odds with the moral law and this conflict underlines the tragic experience.

Kristeva states, “Abjection is a resurrection that has gone through death (of the ego)” (15). The death of the ego means the loss of one’s symbolic identity, in which one occupies a space between two deaths. Lacan invokes the notion of the symbolic and real death to discuss Antigone. Lacan identifies Antigone as a model of ethical conduct for her insistence on singularity in her effort to bury her brother, Polyneices, despite it being grounds for her own death. For Lacan, Antigone is an ethical character because she is living as if she is already dead. At the same time, Antigone’s living-in-death makes her abject. Additionally, Lacan sees Antigone as a perfect model for desiring subjectivity, where abjection is understood by Kristeva as lacking desire. Lacan’s reading of Antigone helps guide us towards the radical potential of abjection because it posits symbolic death as an ideal position.

Catharsis is integral to abjection and tragedy because it is a means of purification. A tragedy may provoke some trauma or negative feelings at the same time it excites the body. One has to reach a frontier or cross a limit in order to not only expel negative emotions but receive the pleasure of doing so. At the same time that one watches someone else suffer, their own suffering lingers in the background. In the same way, when faced with abjection, one confronts something both horrible and primordial with catharsis as its reward. Understood as purification, catharsis is achieved through the resurfacing of the abject, of bringing it about again. Not like horror, where the threat of abjection is manifested in a disgusting monster or substance, in whose dissolution one finds their catharsis. Abjection is experienced in the tragedy’s protagonist as a narcissistic crisis, threatening one's subjectivity and selfhood. Abjection invokes a crisis of ethics, provoking a conflict between desire and the law while it remains somewhere outside those two landmarks. Catharsis is not found in the reestablishment of identity or order but in the acceptance of their fundamental instability as categories.

This thesis specifically engages with how tragedy and abjection interact with the feminine and the visual. In theater, the “she-tragedy” refers to a type of play that emerged in the late 17th century and continued into the early 18th century in which, as Jean Mardsen explains, “women are presented to the audience's gaze, established as desirable, and then driven into prolonged and often fatal suffering” (60). Mardsen examines the she-tragedy as a sexual spectacle for a male audience, in which the suffering of its female heroine is pivotal to its construction and effectiveness. The male gaze and visual pathos defined the she-tragedy’s reception. The heroine of such plays was often characterized by either her innocence or sexual impurity, or a blurring between the two. She may be subject to sexual crimes such as rape or adultery. She passively submits to her suffering and meets her tragic end through murder or suicide. Unlike horror plays popular at the time, blood and gore were not part of the spectacle, instead it was the sexualization of the heroine and her emotional and physical suffering.

Centuries later, the she-tragedy has not disappeared, but taken new forms. Focusing on cinema places emphasis on the visual allure that defined the she-tragedy. Women suffer in every film genre like it is a requirement. As Alfred Hitchcock commands us, “Torture the women!”. The suffering woman in she-tragedies or film often faces abjection in relation to how she is characterized as pure/impure. While depicting the struggles specific to womanhood is important, the suffering woman can easily become a spectacle or parodied trope. Several filmmakers have grappled with how to depict the feminine tragedy while not playing into the tropes they aim to critique.

Part of the interpretation deals with how several filmmakers have narratively and visually framed their feminine subjects while interacting with the abject. The first chapter: “Close-up/Face-down: Framing Feminine Tragedy” looks at Carl Theodor Dreyer's *La Passion* *of Jeanne D'Arc* (1928) and Jean-Luc Godard's *Vivre Sa Vie* (1962). The second chapter "Agnes Varda: The Path to Freedom is a Dirt Road" focuses on new wave feminist filmmaker Agnes Varda and her films *Cléo de Cinq à Sept* (1962) and *Sans Toit ni Loi* (1985). The last two chapters discuss on Michael Haneke's *La Pianiste* and David Lynch's Twin Peaks: *Fire Walk with Me.*

Like the monstrous feminine, today's tragic feminine has broken out of her proper feminine role. Her struggle is almost always in relation to not assuming a proper place within the patriarchy, leaving her in a position of exclusion. Throughout this thesis, I will argue that the abject woman demands an experimental form because she disturbs visual, narrative and ideological framing. I will interpret how the film's formal style connects to the perception of these characters, such as in how the film contains or releases the character from her social position. I consider how both disruption of identity and social exclusion situate the tragic feminine as abject. In the films I've chosen, both narrative and framing demonstrate the loss of distinction between self and other or subject and object. I will further analyze the films through the frameworks of psychoanalysis, existentialism and feminist film theory to demonstrate how the films comment on the female structural position and how they might allow us to expand theories of abjection into the realm of ethics.

Close-up/Face-down: Framing Feminine Tragedy

When tragedy is invoked in cinema, it takes up its own styles unique to the medium, such as usage of the frame and editing. Thus when we read tragedy in film, it is important to understand how form is used to invoke a certain emotion or express a certain idea. We can think back to when cinema was first developed and there were conflicting ideas about what cinema should be. People questioned whether cinema was an art or a science, a language, or something else entirely. Along with others, Antonin Artaud saw cinema as first of the body rather than as a language in its unique affective capability, containing the ability to express what cannot be expressed in words. Now, we come to understand that cinema is both of the body and a language, to be read and felt. What remains is the artistic inclination to depict the human condition, to bring humanity to a limit, to achieve catharsis.

Where the abject was once purified through religious traditions, and rituals, abjection is now written. Art, according to Kristeva, is "catharsis par excellence". In literature specifically, the abject is written in the crossing over of subject and object delineations, creating the ambiguity that defines abjection. One pushes the boundaries of what is thinkable, reaching towards a primal repression, before the subject becomes "I". In film, the abject is not only written, but made visual and sensual through bodily excesses. An early example of the way film innovated the experience of tragedy is Carl Theodor Dreyer's *La Passion de Jeanne D'Arc* (1928), a historical silent drama depicting the trial and execution of the titular french saint. Dreyer narratively exemplifies the religious dimension of abjection and formally demonstrates cinematic purification of the abject, specifically through the use of the close up. In comparison, Jean-Luc Godard's 1962 film *Vivre Sa Vie* takes influence from Dreyer in depicting the fate of a woman's descent into prostitution. Godard presents narrative and formal challenges to the feminine tragedy tethered to the postmodern experience.

In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva looks to the semiotics of biblical abomination to demonstrate how biblical texts enact sacrifice, taboo, and sin as a means to constitute the pure, holy and righteous. In establishing these dichotomous categories, one is presented with a logical conformity tethered to language. A body must be clean and proper in order to be entered into the symbolic. Prohibition through taboo counterbalances sacrifice, each serving as the foundational logic of the symbolic order. Thou shall not kill, not "..sacrifice anything without observing rules and prohibitions."(112). We purify and repress the abject through prohibition, rectifying the (social) body. Kristeva's historicization of the social dimension of the abject serves as a guide in examining each film's female protagonist.

La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc depicts the well-known woman warrior in her final days through her trial to her execution. During her trial, Jeanne asserts that she is a saint, willed by God to drive the English out of France. Her judges verbally berate her, attempting to manipulate her into admitting that she is wrong or lying. While they threaten torture and execution, she holds fast to her belief till the bitter end. The film has since become a classic, praised for its affective cinematography and Renée Falconetti's performance as Jeanne. One is moved by Falconetti's ability to convey such despair through facial expressions that consume the frame in close-up shots.

The film is primarily shot in close-up, shot-reverse-shot sequences between Jeanne and her judges. The desired effect of close up is to emphasize Jeanne's emotional pain through what is conveyed through her face. Béla Balázs considers the close-up a filmic soliloquy that expresses a mental loneliness. The expression contains its own language that transcends verbal language’s ability to universally convey feelings and moods. It is a subjective experience rendered objective by the director. He sees the close-up as an entity in itself, transcending time and space. About *Jeanne D’Arc*, Balázs states, “Fierce passions, thoughts, emotions, convictions battle here, but their struggle is not in space” (281). Jeanne’s face seems to transcend the story, expressing despair that moves the spectators. Building upon Balàzs, Gilles Deleuze coined the term “affection-image”, or the close up. He states there is no close-up of the face, but that the face is the close-up. Instead, it represents an entity face-ified. It is the face in all its expressive potentials, defined by its affective power or quality. He describes the affect as the combination of “a reflecting, immobile unity and intensive expressive movements" (87). He argues that the affect is the face itself. For Deleuze, the face is typically either individuating, social, or relational, but in the close-up, it is none of those things. He asserts, “The facial close up is both the face and its effacement” (100). The close-up makes the face so much a face that it appears to not be a face at all, only the affect in which it expresses.

With the close-up of the face, details appear that would otherwise go unnoticed, such as primal details of the body’s functions. In *Jeanne D’Arc*, the object is embodied in bodily secretions, in blood, spit, sweat and tears drying on flesh. A fly buzzes around, landing on Jeanne’s face as if she is already a corpse, a site to occupy and feed on. Decaying teeth exposed through the mouths that utter death. The close up allows one to see not just emotions, but the suppression of them. In between her solemn expressions, Jeanne is shown with wide eyes, conveying an emptiness that almost appears as pleasure. The cathartic pleasure of all hope being lost. The men plead with her to save her life; she declares martyrdom her victory. Kristeva emphasizes that the abject is not merely filth, but what disturbs “identity, system, order” (4). Thus the close-up stands in as its own entity, something which cannot be incorporated into the larger social body but cannot constitute her as subject either. Abjection occurs when the Other takes the place of what should have been "I". Entrapped and sublimated in the close-up, Jeanne's eyes seem to wander to an object outside the frame. The successive shot does not suture the gap between her gaze with another shot which would represent the object, but cuts to the men who speak down to her. She averts her gaze to a non-object in order to exist elsewhere. The abjection of self leads one to elsewhere. As Kristeva describes it, "I then forget the point of departure and find myself removed to a secondary universe, set off from the one "I" am – Delight and loss." (Kristeva 12). As Jeanne declares martyrdom as her victory, she torments her judges with what appears to be a senseless masochism. Her abjection is her passion.

Other shots demonstrate Jeanne's abject position relative to the social order as she is mostly shown in shot-reverse-shot, isolated from the men who determine her fate. These men who act in the name of the "good" are shown to be the antagonists, whilst to them, Jeanne is the antagonist. When she is in the frame with another, she is isolated with the immense space between two subjects. The men stand above her, shot from a low angle, emphasizing the power they hold over her. The film seems to be one long shot-reverse-shot of faces, masculine malice juxtaposed with feminine terror. The close up itself demonstrates a blurring of those boundaries, as Ros Murray summarizes:

> "Beugnet characterizes the use of the close-up in the French 'cinema of sensation' as a means to 'do away with the usual binarisms and blur the frontiers between inside and outside, masculine and feminine, figurative and abstract, sensory and conceptual, subjective and objective" (455).

Murray describes how the close up, which is typically understood as making a partial object clearer, can also do the reverse, untethering its subject from binary categorizations.

Specifically he draws attention to the blurring of masculine and feminine which is relevant to Jeanne in the film. Jeanne's threat to the judges is especially tied to her refusal to be man or woman. Her masculinity calls to question and threatens their masculinity, thus threatening their own identity. Jeannes insistence upon the will of God and their political interests threaten the moral law that upholds their positions as subjects in the social. As Kristeva describes: “Pre-objects and abjects threaten from without as impurity, defilement, abomination, and eventually they trigger the persecutive apparatus” (116). Jeanne presents a challenge to religious law. To rid this ambiguity, Jeanne must be cast out as an abomination. Artaud emphasizes this point when he commented that the film aims to "reveal Joan as the victim of one of the most terrible of all perversions: the perversion of a divine principle in its passage through the minds of men, whether they be Church, Government or what you will." (Murray 457).

Jeanne is sentenced to death by burning at the stake. In her last moments, one can see her glance at a mother breastfeeding her child, at once invoking a maternal ideal and the memory of the mother and child as one. Kristeva states that everyone experiences abjection at the separation of the mother, when the subject separates the mother as part of itself in the act of constituting the self. The image of life juxtaposed against death, the life she could live, or a time when the subject wasn’t yet subjected. As she burns, the faces once shown with clarity become indistinguishable, veiled in smoke. A man in the crowd shouts that they have burned a saint and a riot forms in anger for her death. Fast music accompanies the riot till the camera lingers on the image of top of the wood burning with a cross in the background, panning up to the sky. The credits ensue with a melancholic opera and a heartening message about Jeanne’s legacy. Like the tragedy, the film pushes us to the limits of feeling by evoking pathos, then identifying us with the anger of the crowd. The emotional experience of the film is anchored in our investment with Jeanne's pain, for which one achieves catharsis at the recognition of injustice.

Like Jeanne was not honored until her death, *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* was not critically acclaimed at its time. The film itself has been spliced up, taken from, and spit back out across a long history of censorship for its negative depiction of France. Both cases speak to how power uses exclusion and censorship as a means to preserve its image. Decades later, *La Passion de Jeanne D'Arc's* resonance on cinema is cited in Jean-Luc Godard's 1962 film *Vivre Sa Vie*. In his experimental, New Wave style, Godard tells the story of Nana (Anna Karina), a young mother and wife who leaves her family for a life of her own as an aspiring actress. The film is structured into twelve tableaus depicting Nana's struggle and downfall.

Soon after leaving her family, she goes on a movie date and sees *La Passion de Jeanne D'Arc*, shown through a shot-reverse of close ups of Nana crying while watching Jeanne cry upon learning she will be executed. The inclusion of the film compares the two characters, but also foreshadows Nana's fate to come. She reads Falconetti's subtitled dialogue, "God knows our path, but we understand it only at the end of the road." Both Jeanne and Nana are isolated, which is evident through both film's use of the close-up. The comparison between the characters is most evident in the way their fates are governed by men who belittle and degrade them.

Nana's exclusion is based on her class and sex. She quickly finds herself short on money, struggling to make ends meet let alone follow her dreams. A photographer who agreed to take photos for her acting career persuades her into posing undressed. She faces charges for stealing money from a woman who dropped it on the street, despite deciding to return it to her. A friend tells Nana she has begun prostitution to make quick money without being married. She introduces Nana to her pimp, Raoul, and Nana begins prostituting herself. Nana is not comfortable with her sexuality, she does not seem to enjoy it, even being rejected by some clients. She finds herself placeless even on the outskirts.

Nana's isolation is emphasized as she is often shown alone in the frame, even while she is with others. When talking to a police officer about her charges, the officer is shown once while the camera remains on her for most of the sequence. Despite so much of her struggles emerging from her structural position, Nana's awareness of herself is emphasized by her constant presence in the frame and her occasional glances directly at the camera. Additionally, she declares she is entirely free and responsible for everything she does. However, as she attempts to assert herself as a subject, she is brought down by a profession that inhibits her ability to act freely.

Nana's insistence upon her freedom and responsibility is one of the fundamental ideas of existential thought. While Jeanne D'Arc's crisis is based in a society of belief, Nana's story reflects a modern feeling of God's abandonment, pioneered by existentialist movements of mid-century France. Her questions are tied to her happiness and how to live a meaningful life. Jeanne's faith in God gives her purpose, but Nana does not have such certainty. Although, the conflict in *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc*, raises the question: Who is to judge what God wills? Kierkegaard would say through a leap of faith, but humanist existentialists would say otherwise. Jean-Paul Sartre addressed this in his lecture, *Existentialism is a Humanism,* in discussion of Abraham. The first question Abraham should ask himself is: "Is this an angel?". The second question one should ask themselves is "Am I Abraham?" Jeannes only hope is to assure herself that she is right and God has willed this all to happen, yet through her tears one senses a sliver of doubt, fear that God will not save her.

In tableau 11, or "Place du Châlet – A Stranger – Nana, the unwitting philosopher", she asks an old man reading at a cafe if she can sit with him and they get into a philosophical discussion about what it means to speak with intention. Depicted by philosopher Bryce Parain, and carried by his personal thought, he expresses the way that we are controlled by language. In his commentary on the film, Adrian Martin notes that one of Parain's fundamental ideas was that we don't use language, but language uses us. During the conversation, Parain says that to speak meaningfully, once must renounce life for a while. Speaking is a resurrection in relation to life. To think and to talk are the same thing, one cannot distinguish a thought from the words that express it. Rather than not speaking to avoid error, one has to pass through error to arrive at truth. Kristeva notes an idea similar to Parain in the way the abject is written in Artaud's work:

> "At that level of downfall in subject and object, the abject is the equivalent of death. And writing, which allows one to recover, is equal to a resurrection. The writer, then, finds himself marked out for identification with Christ, if only in order for him, too, to be rejected, ab-jected" (26).

Speaking and writing; expression is both purification and resurrection. Godard blurs inside and outside of the film, asserting film as language by disrupting its grammar. Susan Sontag remarks in her essay on the film, that Godard resurrects the separation of sound and image of the silent era through his use of images and texts, specifically text that does not merely transmit dialogue. Rather than establishing causality in the narrative that would clarify how Nana gets from point A to point B, Godard sets up images that depict an issue, say, Nana's downfall into prostitution, and accompanies these images with texts that prove a point. In doing so, Godard writes himself into the text.

In the final tableau, Nana is with a man she wants to quit prostitution to live a life with. He reads from "The Oval Portrait " by Edgar Allen Poe, with Godard himself narrating it in voiceover. In the story, a man becomes obsessed with painting a picture of a young woman, just entering the prime of womanhood. Obsessed, he finds himself painting for days on end. The portrait, no more than her head and shoulders, appeared so marvelous as if it were that of a living person. Godard follows this line with shots of Nana shot from above or at the shoulders. When he finishes his portrait he declares, “This is indeed life itself!” and turns to his beloved, only to find her dead. In Godard's interjection, he declares himself the auteur, challenging the spectator to contemplate not only the narrative but the film medium itself. Godard confronts the ethical question at the collision of love and art. He exposes us to his fascination with Karina, his muse, while weighing it against the way he portrays her. Does Godard’s cinema verité style make this portrait more or less life-life? Through jump-cuts, structuring the film up in tableaus, and direct addresses, he constantly makes us aware of the camera apparatus.

Godard subverts the ending to the tragedy through the abruptness of Nana’s death. When she tells Raoul she plans on quitting prostitution, he reveals he is planning on selling her to another pimp. She is caught in an argument between pimps where she is used as leverage, thrown from one man to the other. Godard depicts how prostitution renders her a commodity to be bought and sold. Yet she is an unwanted good, a broken object left on the shelf. In the commotion she is shot, and the pimps flee, leaving her dead body on the street. After a brief linger on this shot, the film ends with no one to mourn her death. Her death is anti-climatic, with no catharsis. Abrupt yet inevitable. Meaningless. About the ending of *Vivre sa Vie*, Sontag writes:

> “He is mocking his own tale, which is unforgivable. It amounts to a peculiar failure of nerve, as if Godard did not dare to let us have Nana's death–in all its horrifying arbitrariness-but had to provide, at the last moment, a kind of subliminal causality. (The woman is my wife.–The artist who portrays his wife kills her.–Nana must die)” (6).

Sontag emphasizes the befuddling way Godard wraps up his tragedy by suddenly bringing in a causality that was neglected earlier in the film. His self-reflexive formal experimentation points to how he both exercises and challenges own authority as an auteur depicting a feminine tragedy. "The Oval Portrait " not only calls to question the translation of life into art, but raises something to be considered in terms of the close up. The general idea is that when one is so close to something, an image, a situation, it can no longer be looked at objectively. For the spectator, it becomes something of its own, separated from the outside. The close-up has the potential to be humanizing or dehumanizing. Deleuze regards the close-up as a nudity stronger than that of the body. He adamantly rejects the view that the close-up depicts partial objects, instead insisting with Balazs's view that the object of the close-up is raised to the status of entity by being cut off from spatio-temporal coordinates. When Godard uses the close-up, he does so as a resurrection, to establish Nana as subject once again. Nana's close-ups appear when she is most deep in thought. Godard need not show us Nana's prostitution by depicting the act of sex, but through a succession of images that depict partial objects. It is a tight framing of a man pulling money out of his pocket, the back of his head as he combs through his fair, a bed being unmade, an empty hanger next to half of Nana's shoulder in the frame. Meanwhile, Raoul explains to Nana her tasks in voiceover, as Godard depicts moments of Nana's new everyday life. Godard subverts the pornographic potential of the close-up in this sequence through a series of synecdoche in montage, by reducing the object into a series of parts. We do not see Nana being exploited, we see that she is exploited. Godard resists spectacle and illuminates the mundaneness of Nana's exploitation through the successive images that make up her routine.

In Dreyer and Godard’s portraits, the close-up exposes the woman in her raw emotion to gain audiences affection and sympathy. As noted by Murray, Dreyer seeks to eliminate distance and provide a physical experience. For Dreyer, the mimetic form of the silent film evokes emotion without the need for thought. With the lack of distance, the individuation of faces becomes blurred. Murray suggests that we should question who is the protagonist of the film, considering analyses that psychologize Dreyer’s artistic style as self-insertion. Although speculative, it points to the way the male auteur is positioned in the depiction of the feminine subject. As opposed to Dreyer's approach, Godard seeks to provoke the intellect through an essayistic style. Where Dreyer morphs dichotomous categories as masculine and feminine, Godard invokes separation as a means to promote distance, constantly reminding you that you are watching a film. In each close-up where Karina gazes directly into the camera, she looks at Godard himself as he questions his own position as an artist. Godard sends Nana to the place of abjection, between subject and object identification while he blurs the boundaries between life and art, reality and fiction. In writing her death, he purifies this ambiguity with a final mark of fiction.

Where the existential subject asks “Who am I?”, the abject stray asks themselves “Where am I?”. The close-up in the Passion of Jeanne of Arc isolates her from any spatial or temporal anchoring. Godard, who strays from the rules of cinema, brings Nana with him, as she jumps through tableaus rather than flowing through narrative. Both Jeanne and Nana are experiencing a wandering abjection based on an exclusion for refusing to fill their ‘proper’ feminine role. Jeanne transcends the gender binary, thus threatening the separation it upholds. She has not only taken up a leadership role in war, but is physically androgynous and refuses to submit to her judges like a woman would be expected to. Nana flees her role as a wife and a mother. When she becomes a prostitute, she is eventually rejected for being unable to perform her sexuality correctly, that is, to enjoy it.

Thus far, this thesis has analyzed *La Passion De Jeanne D'Arc* and *Vivre Sa Vie*, which are two of many possible routes filmmakers have taken in depicting feminine tragedy. Carl Theodor Dreyer uses the close up as a filmic soliloquy, isolating its subject from spatio-temporal confines, raising her to the status of entity. Dreyer's use of the close up reveals Jeanne in a sort of nudity, where every emotion is lined on the surface of the image, demanding the spectator's sympathy. In *Vivre Sa Vie*, Jean-Luc Godard takes inspiration from Dreyer's famous use of the close-up, but imbues it with a modern narrative stamped with his notable experimental use of form. *Vivre Sa Vie* comes across as an essayistic film, where Godard inserts himself into the film as he contemplates his role as an artist who has painted his muse into a tragedy. In his disruption of continuity editing, space and time as well as the causality between them, Godard brings cinema to new frontiers. Both films invoke tragedy as their subjects are pushed to the limits of suffering, where the abject creeps in. Abjection threatens the subject relative to their position in the social order, where they become unplaceable, the jettisoned object. Again, it is not merely that Nana is a prostitute that makes her abject, but that she is a prostitute that does not know how to perform her sexuality 'correctly'. The ambiguity of abjection and the contradictions of femininity converge on an unmarked road in which one can faintly make out in the horizon, signs for places called death, freedom, and catharsis.

Agnes Varda: The Path to Freedom is a Dirt Road

To further situate the abject, this chapter looks to the works of feminist filmmaker Agnes Varda, specifically her films *Cléo de Cinq à Sept* and *Sans Toit ni Loi.* Like Godard, Agnes Varda is associated with the French New Wave movement in cinema. The New Wave is well known for breaking away from traditionalism and pioneering an experimental approach to filmmaking that would be a major influence on the trajectory of cinema. Varda is associated with the “Left Bank " of the French New Wave which had less financial success and were less mainstream than other new-wave directors such as Godard and Francois Truffaut. Varda and other new wave directors took a cinema-verité approach to filmmaking, a cinema aimed at capturing truthfulness through observation and improvisation, often exposing the filmmaking process while doing so. In prioritizing reality, narrative films with cinema-verité seem to have a documentary-like quality. Varda directed both narrative and documentary films, but maintains a cinematic realism in her fiction, through choices such as unconventional subjects, tracking shots, and on-location shooting. Varda’s singularity as a filmmaker of the movement is in her draw to unconventional subjects and her thought-provoking depiction of them.

Cléo de Cinq à Sept (1962) and *Sans Toit ni Loi* (1985) are two of Varda’s better known narrative films, exemplary of her interest in feminine subjectivity. Varda depicts each female protagonist navigating their landscape through cinematic techniques that reflect the situations specific to the woman she is documenting. Both films exhibit existential themes such as freedom and mortality, but at opposite ends of a spectrum. One one hand, Cléo (Corrine Maurchand), of *Cléo de Cinq à Sept,* is an image-conscious pop star who transcends her normal routine in an excursion through Paris when faced with an existential crisis as she awaits a possible cancer diagnosis. On the other hand, *Sans Toit ni Loi* depicts the final days of Mona Bergeron (Sandrine

Bonnaire), a young vagrant woman traveling through the rural countryside of southern France. In comparing the films, one finds a juxtaposition between beauty and filth, wealth and poverty, and exclusion and civilization. Investigating these opposing themes allows us to welcome and interpret the ambiguity of femininity. From this point, we can begin to answer the question: Where does one find freedom in femininity, in abjection?

Firstly, an analysis of *Cléo de Cinq à Sept* will provide a lens through which to look at how Varda situates her feminine subjects and illuminate how abjection threatens identity. The film's protagonist, Cléo, is a famous singer who undergoes an existential crisis as she awaits a phone call from her doctor regarding biopsy results. As the film’s title indicates, Varda situates Cléo within real time. The film follows Cléo from the hours of 5:00 to 6:30 pm on June 21st. Throughout the film, clocks make the spectator aware of time passing. Varda situates Cléo within space as she veers off her usual route and traverses the streets of Paris. Visual reminders of where she is and what time it is grounds her subject in reality despite depicting a fictional narrative, which as the effect of dismissing any transcension that the typical female celebrity looked at through a male gaze might seem to have.

Varda establishes a female gaze to look at a subject who sees herself through the male gaze or what she is for the Other. Early in the film, Cléo, looking into a mirror, declares: “Ugliness is a kind of death. As long as I am beautiful, I am more alive than the others”. Cléo’s self-image and career success are dependent on her ability to perform feminine beauty, and the possibility of illness threatens her like death has already begun creeping into her body. Cléo both fears that death can be seen from the outside while feeling that the people around her do not take her ailment seriously enough and expect her to remain the same. She is advised by her assistant not to let her lover know she is unwell, as “men hate illness” and her lover, José, tells her that "beauty is health". The film centers itself on the collision between feminine beauty and death. It is not only that Cléo thinks her illness will kill her, but her logic is that her illness will make her ugly and that will kill her, leaving her symbolically dead.

Despite the film indicating the passage of time, time is not what drives the plot or provokes Cléo's fear. Cleo tries to avoid contamination through superstition. Superstition assumes a false causality which seems to dominate Cleo's mindset. Superstition, while maintaining Cléo's purity, is also what drives her fear. Superstitious practices are constantly broken in the film as a reminder of misfortune and death. She receives a tarot card reading in the beginning of the film, and after Cléo leaves, the seer reveals that the card spread indicates death is on its way. José puts his hat on the bed. A mirror from Cléo's purse shatters. Omens of death constantly make themselves present and structure the film. Alongside the film's motifs, Varda breaks continuity editing through the use of jump-cuts and 180-degree rule violations to emphasize her fracturing identity. The film's form deconstructs the demands of the ideal feminine beauty and exposes its limits.

The significance of her illness both has feminist and existential implications. The stomach, as connected to maternity, represents the picture of womanhood and femininity. Cléo is constantly depicted looking at herself through a mirror, as if to have a consistent grasp of her identity for the other. Joan Copjec, describing the situation of women under the patriarchy, states:

> "The structure thereby guarantees that even her innermost desire will always not be a transgression, but rather an implantation of the law, that even the process of "theorizing her own untenable situation" can only reflect back to her "as in a mirror", her subjugation to the gaze." (Copjec 54).

Here, Copjec explains how women internalize the male gaze as panoptic and omnipresent, thus impossible to escape from. Cléo's identity is built on the way that she appears for others, and the intangibility of this knowledge renders it a relatively unstable identity, lulling Cléo into an existential crisis. For the women the gaze functions like a panopticon. As Hilary Neroni points out, her image in the mirror becomes more fractured throughout the film. Cleo's constant glancing into mirrors depicts an excessive vanity at her hyperawareness of the public eye, even following her into private spaces. As Neroni points out, Cleo performs her femininity even when she is in her own bedroom. She states, "The private world ceases to be a respite from illusory presentation of one's self and instead the place of a primordial self deception" (104). The threat of illness and death shatters Cléo's pure image of herself that she cannot maintain even in the comfort of private space. Cléo's identity shattering at the glimpse of death expresses how abjection is a narcissistic crisis. As Kristeva describes: "the more or less beautiful image in which I behold or recognize myself rests upon an abjection that sunders it as soon as repression, the constant watchman, is relaxed" (13). Cléo's image shattering is a sort of abjection itself, as illness, ugliness, death, those things that she has placed outside of her image, threatens to become it. Cléo must enter the public in order to see herself from the outside. Later, Cléo reflects, "I thought everyone looked at me. I only look at myself." It is through this realization that Cléo is able to de-center her perceived self-image as objective truth.

Abjection is something of a narcissistic crisis that threatens the purity of the body and one's imagined mastery over it. Cléo faces a profound alienation from the world once she begins to see it from the perspective of death. It's an existential nausea, where ordinary objects appear to take on a new quality that threatens the stability of the world as she understands it. As in Jean-Paul Sartre's novel *Nausea*, where the protagonist, Antoine Roquentin, sits at a café when suddenly he becomes aware of his hands and wonders whether they have changed. The thought provokes his nausea, a "sweetish sickness" that impedes the flow of life, threatening his enjoyment. Cléo similarly experiences this when at a cafe, she puts on her own music and hardly anyone seems to notice. She suddenly becomes anxious about conversations around her and takes a second look at objects that never seemed out of place.

Cléo's sudden alienation is manifested in a scene in which she practices songs with her composers. She sings various songs with themes representing a different female identity. She is then given the song "Sans toi". The camera begins with Cléo on the side of the frame, surrounded by people and objects, then pans from her side to her facing the camera, zooming into a close-up of her face with a black background. She passionately sings lyrics such as "Belle en purte perte (beauty wasted)", and "Morte, au cercueil de verre (dead, in a glass coffin)". These lines emphasize the collision between beauty, death and vanity that inform Cléo's crisis. The ladder exemplifies her recent encounter with her mortality and her position as a woman who is constantly in the public eye and objectified for her beauty, which before seemed timeless. Cleo shows how the expectations of the feminine subject to be beautiful can become an essential part of her subjectivity and cause women to have unrealistic standards for themselves.

Cléo's existential crisis calls for a step outside routine, where she traverses the streets of Paris to put her mind at ease. She steps outside her career, her image, taking off her wig and dressing in black. The time and location are constantly identified, such as in shots of the clocks as time passes. The film was shot as if it were real time and takes a realistic route through Paris, speaking to the documentary aspects of Varda's style. In doing so, she paints a realistic portrait of a woman. Cléo meets up with a friend Dorothée, who works as a model for sculptures. Dorothée has a more relaxed attitude than Cléo. Cléo remarks that she could never pose nude in front of strangers, where Dorothée responds that “they’re looking at something more than just me”. Dorothée’s line illuminates a view of beauty as a quality of bodies as pure form and not subject, contrary to Cléo's constant value assessment of herself. After departing from Dorothée, she goes to a park where meets a soldier, Antoine. Antoine is fighting in the Algerian war, despite not agreeing with it. She and Antoine connect and he accompanies her to her Doctor's office. While she is still full of doubt, Antoine momentarily puts her mind at ease. At the last moments of the film, her doctor catches her just before she gives up on finding him. He tells her that her condition is not too serious and she will need two months of radiation therapy. The film ends with Cléo declaring she is no longer afraid, and she is happy.

In Cléo, the abject is subtle and unstated. It lies within the contradiction that she faces in trying to maintain a pure image of herself while the weight of the possibility of death places on her speaks for the fragility of that image, that mirror. The film is not a tragedy, as Cléo gets to live, yet it speaks to the threat of the abject. Paying close attention to how Varda frames her feminine subject relative to space and time and her use of rot and decay as motifs will provide insight for undergoing the analysis of *Sans Toit ni Loi*, where the protagonist aimlessly traverses her environment.

In *Sans Toit ni Loi*, Varda situates her protagonist, Mona Bergeron, as a symbol of societal exclusion and existential decay. Mona’s characterization reflects the abjection of self: the loss of distinction between self and Other. Motifs of rot and decay contribute to the portrayal of Mona as living-in-death, or a death infecting life, further invoking the abject. *Vagabond* presents a radical freedom that is rooted in dirt and self-defilement, in abjection.

In the cold winter of rural southern France, a farmer discovers the corpse of a young woman lying in a ditch, coated in layers of wine and dirt. In voiceover, Varda identifies the woman as Mona Bergeron, noting she knows very little about her or where she came from. At the onset, Varda subverts the idea of an omniscient auteur who is going to provide us with all the answers. Instead, she invites us to piece together who Mona was alongside her. The film flashes back to the last weeks of Mona's life, intercut with documentary style interviews with those who encountered her during this time.

The film begins with the corpse, and rather than returning to the living body, Mona is depicted as the corpse who keeps on living. A vagrant. Teeth decaying, hair unruly, shoes falling apart. She hitchhikes, begs for food, taking without gratitude or debt. Along the road, she takes up with various people, such as a goat herder who criticizes her lifestyle, an agronomy professor who enjoys her company, as well as other vagrants. Varda's pseudo-documentary approach allows the spectator to see Mona through a variety of perspectives, whose affects range between disgust, befuddlement, sanctimony, and fascination. Such are the complicated mix of feelings aroused by abjection.

Mona fits Kristeva's characterization of the abjection of self. It is a profound alienation in which the abject person is something of a stray. She explains,

> "The one by whom the abject exists is [thus] a deject who places (himself), separates (himself), situates (himself), and therefore strays instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing" (8).

Mona is an example of the abject stray as a vagrant woman situated as wandering from and to her death. Mona certifies her exclusion by choosing to stray and finds enjoyment in her alienated status. In straying, she finds freedom from authority, rules and structure. She abandons situations when they no longer suit her or when her disruption demands order be restored.

Unlike Varda's earlier film, *Cléo from 5 to 7*, where time and location are frequently visually indicated so as to situate her female protagonist relative to space and time, absences and narrative gaps in *Vagabond* imbue Mona with a sense of placelessness. The abject stray is characterized by their relationship to space, for they do not ask "who am I?", but "where am I?". Reflecting back on Mona, those whom she encountered remark that she "blew in like the wind" or that "she came from nowhere", a shared contemplation as to where Mona came from. A woman from no place, going nowhere. Mona occupies the realm of possibility, demarcating her own universe in a world that moves without her.

Varda often depicts Mona through a tracking shot in which the camera appears to wander and leave her behind, as if she were not the subject of the frame. For example, a tracking shot pans across a dilapidated stone wall when we see Mona begin to emerge from one of its gaps before noticing a police car and quickly retreating. Instead of closing in on Mona, the camera continues its momentum across the wall, as Mona re-emerges and is seen walking into and past the frame. The tracking shot typically situates the subject within their landscape, but Varda subverts this by having her merely stumble into it. Varda stated that this choice was to intentionally depict that Mona is only a part of the landscape.

But this landscape is one that is frozen, barren, and decaying. Mona's abjection is cast in dirt and likened to the lifeless vegetation around her. She is taken in by an agronomy professor researching a fungus infecting trees that "spreads like cancer", brought over by men after war. Her, amongst other female characters in the film, express admiration for Mona's absolute sense of freedom. Mona is like this fungus, affecting or infecting the ones she leaves behind. The professor's research assistant recalls Mona asking him, "Do I scare you?" to which upon reflection he states: "Yes she scares me. She scares me because she revolts me."

Faced with abjection, one finds themselves discomforted with the need to distinguish oneself from it so as to reestablish their own sense of propriety. Characterizing Mona as abject emphasizes how the film confronts the spectator with their own values and calls them into question. The more Mona strays, the more we want her to stay. When Mona abandons what could stabilize her, when she gets angry or acts without manners, the spectator is confronted with their own investments, be it as simple as wanting her to act right. But that simple affect calls into question what/who has the right to have meaning, subjecthood. And for those who do not have the right, what space is there for them to go?

Mona invokes a fear of death and decay at the touch of the feminine. Following Kristeva, Barbera Creed considers abjection in terms of women in horror films who have broken out of their proper feminine role, thus appearing monstrous. Repeated tropes of feminine monsters illuminate a patriarchal fear of the feminine and subvert woman's typical containment within the frame as a fantasy object. We can consider Creed's thought in terms of how Varda's pseudo-documentary approach and precise use of framing releases Mona from this position. When Varda chooses to leave absences in the narrative or to have the camera wander, she emphasizes Mona's otherness. For example, another tracking shot follows a man in the woods as he watches Mona and begins to attack her, then the camera wanders up into the trees. Moving the camera away from the violence leaves it implied and emphasizes the lack of witnesses. Furthermore, Mona's reaction to her assault is never shown. It is precisely in Varda's depiction of Mona as less than subject that she releases her from the typical panoptic gaze imposed upon women in film.

Varda's overarching question about Mona is about the price of freedom. Varda stated that she wanted to film "what freedom and dirt meant" and contemplates this through Mona's relationship to space and the reactions she elicits from others. Existentialist thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir assert that each subject is constituted by their existence, not their essence, meaning that we are intrinsically and radically free to do as we will. De Beauvoir applies this idea to femininity, describing how women have been ascribed certain roles and attributes that have historically subordinated them. She argues that at our core, we are radically free to transcend these values and define ourselves as subjects.

The shortcomings of Mona's freedom are brought out by the goat herder, who tells her that she chose total freedom, but got total loneliness. What she is doing is not wandering, but withering. Mona's failure is in her unwillingness to universalize her freedom, she chooses it only for herself. She treats others as a means to an end, with no tangible end in sight. De Beauvoir critiques this position in the *Ethics of Ambiguity*, which she characterizes as the adventurer: a type of nihilist. As she describes,

> "The adventurer does not propose to be; he deliberately makes himself a lack of being; he aims expressly at existence; though engaged in his undertaking, he is at the same time detached from the goal. Whether he succeeds or fails, he goes right ahead throwing himself into a new enterprise to which he will give himself with the same indifferent ardor." (24)

De Beauvoir criticizes the attitude of the adventurer because he shares a contempt for other men that disregards the freedom of others. To be genuinely free is to destine one's existence to other existences. Mona, abject, not fully subject, utilizes her position of poverty to take from others and separate herself from others.

Varda offers us ways to critique Mona's freedom while simultaneously making the space to look at her sympathetically. As the film comes to a close, Mona is worn out and alone. She enters a village in which everyone is running to shelter, locking their doors and windows. She is bombarded by people in costumes who drench her in wine, leaving her weak and damp in the cold. She wanders to a farm where she stumbles into a ditch to die, returning to the moment in which we first encounter her.

The cost of Mona's freedom is a fortified existence, a loss of symbolic identity. What sort of freedom is there in exclusion, in straying, if it leaves one impoverished, cold and alone, where the only place left to go is a ditch at the end of a dirt road? Is it better to die than to comply? Varda opens up these questions but leaves the answers in the contingent. Vagabond presents a radical freedom that finds its ends and beginnings in the inescapability of a system built upon capitalist and patriarchal power dynamics. It extends beyond the existential matter of being and freedom and asks "Where do I go to get my freedom?"

Cléo de Cinq à Sept and *Sans Toit ni Loi* offer a juxtaposition between beauty and filth, inclusion and exclusion, and fame and isolation. While Cléo finds herself in a crisis of her ego, the abject threatening her social status, sense of beauty and value, Mona embraces the abject at the repulsion of others. As a filmmaker, Varda insists on the importance of choosing unorthodox subjects, where Mona is unconventional because she chooses freedom at the cost of filth and exclusion, freedom found through abjection. To her, illness, ugliness and death are one in the same thing. Cléo is an unconventional subject despite her seeming to be a conventional person because Varda depicts beauty as an integral part of her subjectivity rather than a spectacle Varda looks at her characters sympathetically, despite their selfishness. Her films show us a feminine gaze in cinema that embraces feminine contradiction. Varda opens up the radical potential of abjection by incorporating it into her filmmaking. Abjection becomes a means to center feminine subjectivity through a feminine gaze.

Female Masochism and the mOther in Haneke's *La Pianiste*

Michael Haneke's 2001 film, *La Pianiste,* provokes an ethical dilemma on the part of the spectator in depicting the cruel masochisms of its female protagonist. Based on the German novel by Elfriede Jenilek, Haneke probes into a woman's desire that undermines societal expectations. Erika Kohut (Isabelle Huppurt), is a sexually repressed woman in her late thirties and a piano teacher at a prestigious conservatory in Vienna. She still lives with her mother (Annie Girardot), who is excessively demanding and restrictive towards Erika, treating her as if she were still a teenager. She demands to know where Erika is at all times and spends most of her time watching television. Erika's repression manifests in masochistic, voyeuristic and self-mutilating sexual behaviors. The film depicts Erika's downfall as her desires begin to be realized. Erika's sexual fantasies and behaviors subverts typical depictions of women's sexuality in the media and are unsettling to watch. Haneke's filmic approach, such as the use of long takes and periods of silence, emphasizes this discomfort and confronts the spectator with their moral judgments. This chapter will interpret the mother-daughter dynamic through Kristeva's theory of the abject mother and Creed's analysis of her construction as monstrous in film. Additionally, I will delve into how Haneke's probes into feminine sexuality to invoke the abject, challenging the spectator with their own moral evaluations.

We are introduced to Erika through her dynamic with her mother, as the film opens with a dispute between the two after Erika arrives home late from the Conservatory. Erika's mother demands to know where she's been and goes through her bag discovering she's purchased a designer dress, one of many that she collects, but never wears. At first, Erika attempts to assert her autonomy, that she is a grown woman who can do what she wants, but then quickly submits to her mother's authority. After finding the receipt and seeing the dress, the two fight over it, leading to the dress ripping. Erika strikes her mother and calls her a bitch, to which her mother guilts her by claiming Erika wishes she were dead. The two cry and reconcile. In the next scene the two are shown sharing the same bed, discussing Erika's day at work. Erika's mother worries about Erika's pupils outperforming her, saying "No one must outshine you, my girl." Erika's mother treats her as though she was a teenager and puts her under high-standards. The opening scenes establish Erika's repressive home-environment, a repression that will underscore her actions throughout the rest of the film.

Erika's relationship with her mother provides understanding for her sexual behaviors. Erika has been raised her entire life to be a concert pianist, and only knows this role. Her mother has such a hold on her, that she is unable to live a life of her own. Kristeva points out that the mother is the first contact with authority and abjection. One has to separate themselves from their mother in early childhood in order to establish themselves as subject and enter the symbolic. Psychoanalysis holds that the name-of-the-father places prohibition on desire and enacts rules of communication to enforce this separation. In Barbera Creed's book, *The Monstrous Feminine* she points to horror films such as *Carrie*, *Psycho* and *The Birds*, which demonstrate how, in the lack of paternal authority, the mother's tight reins on their child prevents their separation and their full entry into the symbolic. In each of the films, the mother figure is presented as a monstrous figure. As Creed describes,

> "By refusing to relinquish her hold on her child, she prevents it from taking up its proper place in relation to the symbolic. Partly consumed by the desire to remain locked in a blissful relationship with the mother and partly terrified of separation, the child finds it easy to succumb to the comforting pleasure of the dyadic relationship." (12)

Here, Creed describes the dynamic in which the child is consumed by their relationship to the mother to the point where they are unable to emerge as a separate subject. Erika's codependent relationship to her mother resembles this dyad.

As Kristeva and Creed point out, historically, this 'succumbing' to the mother has been prevented through defilement rituals. It is through maternal authority in which we experience a 'mapping of the body' learning to distinguish what is clean and proper from what isn't. This time signifies a period in which the body was explored without shame. Paternal authority shapes our entry into the symbolic and subjugates us to the Law, thus bringing shame, guilt etc. Creed argues that horror films are a modern defilement rite in which these two orders: maternal and paternal authority, come into play. Furthermore, she argues that when the monstrous feminine is presented in horror, it is always in relation to this early time of maternal authority. The presence of bodily substances in horror films, such as blood and vomit, simultaneously horrify us as symbolic subjects and bring us pleasure in breaking the taboo of filth, reminding us of that time before they were ab-jects of shame. The horror film confronts us with the abject so as to eject it and reconstitute the boundary between human and non-human.

While *La Pianiste* is not a horror film, Creed's argument helps us understand the way in which film usually engages us with the abject, which will in turn help us understand how Haneke subverts catharsis, leaving the spectator with a discomfort that lingers. In *La Pianiste*, Erika engages in defilement rituals so as to both disavow her mother's authority and reconcile with it. After hearing Erika perform at a recital and bonding over composers, a younger man named Walter Klemmins (Benoît Magimel) becomes infatuated with her. He auditions to become one of her pupils, to which Erika adamantly tries to dissuade the committee, believing him to be an unserious student who she is not going to nurture. The committee grants Walter's acceptance, implying that she was outnumbered or caved to majority opinion. In the following scene, Erika is seen in her bathroom at home as she cuts her vagina with a razor blade, anxiously puts on a pad and washes blood down the drain as her mother calls her for dinner from the other room. At dinner, Erika's mother notices blood dripping down her leg and believes Erika has her period, stating "it is not very appetizing".

Menstruation and other bodily substances in film are usually staged in scenes marked by their inability to be contained or controlled. For example, the famous scene in *Carrie* (1976) where Carrie gets her period for the first time in the showers at school. After an almost sensual scene of Carrie enjoying her body in the shower, the tone quickly shifts to horror as Carrie realizes the blood dripping down her legs. Not knowing what is happening due to her mother never teaching her about periods, she panics, horrified, reaching out to her peers with hands covered in blood as they throw pads and tampons at her. The dramatized staging of a girl's first period as a horrific event in Carrie exemplified menstrual blood as abject, an excess of the body that needs to be controlled. In contrast, Erika's restaging of the menstrual scene is disturbing for it goes past the horror of menstruation and is marked by her will and control.

On the surface, Erika appears to be sadistic, particularly in her role as a teacher. She is stern and demands perfection from her students, quick to point out when they err. However, when Erika is alone, her behaviors read masochistic or perverse. In between her life as a piano teacher and being with her mother, Erika finds solitary ways to satiate her sexual desires. She visits porn shops and watches peep-shows, mutilates her vagina with a razor blade, and watches a couple have sex in their car at a drive-in movie theater. As Walter pursues Erika romantically, he attempts to break through her cold exterior by being forward with his attraction to her. At his lesson, Erika cruelly rejects Walter's pursuits, but watches him go to hockey and presumably follows him there, as indicated by an obscured shot of hockey players entering the rink, like someone watching in secret.

Erika acts sadistically towards Walter in the hopes that he will inevitably want to fulfill her masochistic aim. As Lacan points out in *Seminar X*, sadism is not the inverse of masochism, but involves a movement from one to the other. For Lacan, the sadist seeks to isolate objet a, or the object-cause of desire by playing the part of the law. The sadist instills anxiety in another through their anticipated loss of an object by renouncing satisfaction that can be derived from said object. Erika assumes the position of the sadist in her first sexual encounter with Walter. At a recital, Erika is jealous after she sees Walter comforting another student, Anna, who is anxious about performing. Erika goes to the lobby, breaks a glass and puts it in Anna's coat pocket. After the performance, Anna inevitably cuts her hand after putting it in her pocket and Erika declares she can't stand blood and walks away. Walter follows her to the bathroom where the two kiss passionately. She proceeds to give him a hand job and fellatio, but insists that he looks at her, but not touch her, stopping if he disobeys. She refuses to let Walter climax, leaving him frustrated and humiliated, but also wanting more. Erika instills Walter with anxiety through threatening him with the loss of an object, through imposing a limit to his jouissance, in hopes that he then assume the position as Other and enunciate the law.

In many of Haneke's films, he explores the power dynamic between director and spectator, often confronting the spectator with his power as a filmmaker. If Walter isolates objet a for Erika, Haneke does so for us as well. As Margarete Johanna Landwehr points out: "This relationship between voyeurism and power plays a central role in Haneke's depiction of Erika and Klemmer's sadomasochistic relationship that reflects a director's power over the viewer in his control of the images" (no page numbers). For Landwehr, Haneke withholds what can be seen or known to demonstrate his control over the spectator's desire and this is reflected in Erika and Walter's relationship. She uses the example of the bathroom scene in which Erika commands Walter not to touch or look at himself, likening Erika's control over the action to Haneke's.

Understanding Haneke's standpoint as an auteur helps us to look at how he uses form to morally puzzle the spectators through the encounter with abjection. On the surface, the formal style in *La Pianiste* comes across as fairly conventional and simplistic. Dull color palettes, flat images, long-takes, and periods of silences render the imagery quite banal at times. Yet this banality illuminates the disturbing images amid it. For example, when Erika goes to a peep show. A screen displays a variety of pornographic videos for her to choose from and she swiftly settles upon a video of a woman being "throat-fucked". The camera lingers on Erika as she watches, straightfaced and picks up a used tissue from the trash can, holding it to her nose as she continues to watch. This is one of several shots where Haneke only ever briefly depicts what Erika is looking at and instead lingers on the image of her looking, emphasizing her position as a voyeur. As Erika watches the voice of an opera singer begin, transitioning to the next scene. Erika's odd behaviors are seamlessly blended into her routine, despite what should be an obvious juxtaposition between them. Erika's position as a female masochist is further puzzling because she never seems to derive any pleasure from her acts. What she's after is purely pain and degradation, for herself and others, which perhaps haunts us more than if she were shown deriving real pleasure from her acts. Yet by doing so, Haneke makes the film utterly non-pornographic. Haneke takes the spectator's pleasure thoroughly into account but only as a means to resist providing it.

The masochist's aim is the "anxiety of the Other", as attempted through the orchestration of a situation in which their partner must act as other and impose the law. In clinical psychoanalysis, the masochist pushes their partner to be the substitute for the father who has not commanded proper separation from the mother. Erika gives Walter a letter in which she outlines all the acts in which she consents for Walter to do, a letter which reveals the extent of her masochistic fantasies. Instead of reading it, Walter follows Erika to her apartment, insisting he doesn't need letters and they should just be physical. She brings him inside, much to her mother's dismay. They have to barricade Erika's door with her dresser to prevent her from coming in. Crosscut between Erika and Walter in her bedroom, Erika's mother is shown unable to focus on her television show and attempting to eavesdrop.

He coolly reads out Erika's letter, which details a fantasy of total submission. She consents to being tied up, gagged, slapped; forced to submit to him. She explicitly mentions her mother, stating that she wants to be locked up next to her, but out of her reach. When Erika indicates how serious she is about what she wrote, Walter is disgusted. He tells her she is sick, she needs treatment, she repulses him. He leaves. The limit that the masochist demands from their partner necessarily involves giving up some jouissance, and Walter is not interested in doing so. After reading the letter, he asks "but what will all of this get me?". Walter imposes a limit but doesn't enforce any proper separation. Erika, unable to substitute that father who will enforce separation, is stuck in the dyadic with her mother. That night, Erika climbs into bed with her mother, as usual. She makes amorous advances towards her, to which her mother adamantly rejects. Her mother in this situation is the only one who can assume the position of the father and enforce their separation. The next day, she visits Walter at hockey practice to make amends. He is at first reluctant, but they start having sex in a storage room and Erika vomits, leaving Walter further disgusted and unsatisfied.

The final events of the film culminate in Haneke leaving the spectators with an ethical dilemma regarding Erika's masochism. The 'fulfillment' of Erika's masochistic fantasy ends in tragic action when Walter angrily shows up at their apartment and plays out Erika's fantasy. He pushes her mother away, locking her in her room. He repeats lines from Erika's letter as he acts them out. He slaps her to the point of bleeding and Erika begs him to stop. He rapes her to enact revenge for the way she has humiliated him. After getting what he wants, Walter leaves, and Erika lets her mother out. Erika successfully orchestrates the situation in which Walter will play the part of the sadist, but to her own Erika's destruction. Amid his violent outburst, Walter affirms, "This isn't how you imagined it, is it?" Part of the masochists' play is in the staging and orchestration of the acts, which Walter disregards. When he rapes her, he tries to get her to show her desire, to give him something to show this is what she wants, but he doesn't. When he leaves, he asks her if she's okay or if she needs anything. Female masochism is unsettling to many because it seems that a woman is playing a part in and enjoying her own oppression. So for Walter, who has a very conventional view of love and sex, he doesn't see the difference between Erika's desire and his own. But through a critical lens, we can understand that when Walter rapes Erika, he does so as an expression of power rather than to fulfill Erika's desires.

The law in which he expresses is not one which will guarantee Erika's separation from her mother, but a patriarchal law that perpetuates women's subordination. Walter successfully plays the part of the sadist, who leaves Erika with nothing but objet a, that slice of the Real. As Bruce Fink points out "the symbolic space in which the masochist can come into being is never fully supplied" (188). The masochist can never fully substitute the father who will enforce their separation from the mother and allow them to emerge as a subject in the symbolic. Erika is left only with her mother to take her into her arms again. It is important to note that in clinical psychoanalysis, the perversion diagnostic category that encompasses the sadist and the masochist does not apply to women. Lacan also remarks that female masochism is in a completely different scope than the perverts masochism. But neglecting to read Erika's masochism through the perverse structure wouldn't allow for as comprehensive an understanding of her repression as considered in regards to her relationship to her mother. These assertions further complicate the situation of how to read Erika's character, but also further illustrates the point that Erika, the extreme female masochist, doesn't have a place in the symbolic and situates her as abject. For Lacan, female masochism is a male fantasy and an ironic position. He thinks it is an ironic position because through her submission and assuming feminine position, she is the one who ultimately commands the law. Where Erika becomes abject is in the loss of distinguishment between herself as subject and object. In her isolation and repression covered over by masochistic fantasies, she assumes the position of object as a release from an overwhelming subjectivity.This is reflected in Haneke's use of long takes of Erika looking as opposed to the durations it takes from her point of view. Additionally, these shots do not identify us with her look but confront us with it, positioning her as a voyeur who looks back at us.

Haneke leaves the spectators left with an open wound rather than closure or catharsis.. Between the rape scene and the next, there is only a plain cut. Still in the kitchen, the next scene shows Erika packing a knife in her purse as her and her mother get ready for a concert in which Erika is supposed to substitute for Anna. In the venue lobby, she sees Walter come in with his family and he treats her indifferently. She takes the knife from her purse and stabs herself in the shoulder, leaving the venue and walking out into the streets. Haneke concludes the film with a series of open questions regarding the ethics of sexuality and sexual difference. His open ending allows us to see desire as both a lack and a question. Something that can never be filled and always a question of the Other's desire. He disturbs us by constantly confronting us with the abject, but never allowing it to be purified. He places the spectators in the same position as Walter, never gaining true satisfaction. In doing so, he positions the abject as an irreconcilable, always returning, feminine force that calls into question our own claims to subjectivity and morality.

Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me: To Die a Beautiful Death

This chapter discusses: *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* is David Lynch's 1992 independently produced prequel to the television series *Twin Peaks*, cancelled a year prior. The surrealist-soap opera centered on the investigation of the murder of Laura Palmer (Sheryll Lee), as well as the lives of those in the titular fictional town in Washington state. The creators of *Twin Peaks*, David Lynch and Mark Frost also created a third season to *Twin Peaks*, released in 2017. *Fire Walk with Me* resurrects Laura, depicting the last seven days of her life as she realizes that her father, Leland (Ray Wise), has been her anonymous abuser since childhood, possessed by an evil entity known as "BOB" (Frank Silva). BOB tells Laura that he wants to be her, or he will kill her. Laura descends into a state of despair as she accepts this information and decides that she would rather die than let BOB become her.

Fire Walk with Me marks itself distinct from the television series upon its opening, in the smashing of a boxed television depicting blue static accompanied by a scream. We realize we are watching the murder of Teresa Banks, whom Leland/BOB killed a year earlier. The first half-hour of the film takes place outside of Twin Peaks in a unhomely town called Deer Meadow. This segment of the film focuses on Teresa Bank's murder investigation and the mysterious disappearance of the detective on the case. The rest of the film depicts Laura's last seven days of life. For my purposes, I will primarily engage with the second part of the film. In the original series, FBI agent Dale Cooper (Kyle MacLachlan) comes to Twin Peaks to investigate Laura's murder and we find out that Laura was living a double life. Laura was the homecoming queen, active in her community and beloved by all. Meanwhile, she was addicted to cocaine, prostituting herself, and in a relationship with someone other than her boyfriend. In *Fire Walk with Me*, we learn that she was all of those things and none of those things. Rather, Laura was a master at becoming the person others wanted her to be. The mystery that sustained the television series was centered around the question “What is Laura’s secret?”. She appears to embody the enigma of feminine desire, possessing an enjoyment that escapes the grasp of others. *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* is above all, a resurrection. Laura Palmer transforms from an abject corpse to a living girl, the object becoming a subject. The film is invested in depicting her suffering, shame and confusion as she comes to terms with the violent force which torments her is nearer than she thinks. Despite Laura’s resurrection, she is living as if she is already dead; the soul in limbo.

Most of the scenes in *Fire Walk with Me* depict events already known to the spectator through the investigation in the first two seasons of the series. However, the film gives important context to Laura’s subjectivity. In a conversation with James, her secret boyfriend, in the bathroom at school she tells him to quit holding on so tight, that she is long gone. Crosscut in this scene is Laura’s public boyfriend, Bobby, kissing the glass of a showcase encasing Laura’s homecoming picture in the school hallway. Her relationship to James is depicted as passionate and intense, while her relationship to Bobby seems superficial. This is exemplified in a following scene in which Laura is with her best friend, Donna, who muses about how James is sweet and Bobby is a loser. Donna asks Laura if she were falling through space, if she thinks she would slow down after a while or go faster and faster. Laura replies, “faster and faster. For a long time, you wouldn’t feel anything, then you would burst into fire. Forever. And the angels wouldn’t help you because they’ve all gone away.” This line sets up two prominent leitmotifs in the films: Fire and angels, both associated with Laura. Fire represents the evil threatening to consume her, while angels represent her hope of salvation. In addition, this line as well as the scene with James give the spectator a sense of Laura’s state of mind before tragic action ensues.

Later at home, Laura goes to write in her secret diary when she realizes there have been pages torn out. She frantically drives to her friend Harold's house, an agoraphobic who she met on her Meal on Wheels route. She tells him about the missing pages and that she knows BOB is behind it, and he tries to assuage her by affirming that BOB isn’t real. She tells him desperately “BOB is real. He says he wants to be me or he will kill me”. Forcefully holding him close to her face, she slowly chants “Fire…walk…with…me”, as she sees herself turn into another, frightening, version of herself, sending her further into a meltdown. She asks Harold to keep her diary because BOB doesn’t know about him. At her house, the ceiling fan goes on, and Laura seems possessed as Bob, who as acousmêtre, declares “I want you. I want to taste through your mouth”. Acousmêtre, as coined by Michel Chion, describes the voice heard, but not seen in cinema. BOB is presented in acousemêtre to reflect his omnipresence, panopticism and all-powerfulness. Usually in disguise, inhabiting another body, but choosing precisely when to show his true face.

Following this scene, Laura is packing Meals on Wheels deliveries when an elderly woman and a young boy approach her, who in the series we know as the Tremonds/Chalfonts. The boy wears a paper mache mask with a pinocchio nose and a stick jutting out of the forehead and states “The man behind the mask is looking for the book with the pages torn out.” The elderly woman gives Laura a painting of a green room, saying it would look nice on her wall. Laura rushes home and goes up to her room, where she sees BOB, sinisterly smiling behind the dresser where she hides her diary. She runs back outside and hides in the bushes, and sees her father, Leland, come out of the house. This then makes her suspicious that Leland and BOB are the same person, but she is not quite ready to fully accept it.

One way we can read *Fire Walk with Me* is through the structure of a tragedy. Specifically, the appearance of the chorus, as manifested through figures from this realm known as the Lodge. Throughout both segments of the film, scenes of Dale Cooper interrupt the narrative flow. In the FBI headquarters in Philadelphia, he and his colleague Albert Rosenfeld and his boss, Gordon Cole (David Lynch) are visited by a long-lost colleague Phillip Jefferies (David Bowie). Phillip Jefferies describes a meeting that took place above a convenience store. The scene depicting the meeting is shown with television static like a veil, as we see several figures, both new and known from the series, such as the Chalfonts, who deliver ominous messages in reversed backward speech. Like the Greek chorus, these characters help emphasize plot points and themes as well as deliver moral messages. They appear to hold knowledge beyond the character or audience's understanding. For example, the Man from Another Place, a little person who declares himself as "the Arm" holds a ring and the air, declaring "With this ring… I thee wed". The ring has already been established as an important symbol, as in the first segment of the film, we learn it belonged to Teresa Banks. When her body is discovered, the ring is missing. The ring is a bearer of death, as made clear in the first segment of the film. One of the investigators, Chester (Chet) Desmond (Chris Isaak), finds the ring underneath a trailer in the park where Teresa lived. The moment he touches it, he vanishes into thin air. Agent Desmond's disappearance puts Dale Cooper onto the case, bringing him to investigate his disappearance. He finds out that this trailer belonged to an old woman and her grandson, called the Chalfonts. Cooper is also one of the chorus figures, who seems to be watching the film alongside us. Like the spectators, who are watching events in the past (before the series) take place, Cooper appears to know the events that will ensue. This makes sense because at the end of season 2, Cooper becomes trapped in the Lodge. In a dream Laura has, Cooper and the Man from Another Place appear to her, the man from Another Place holds out the ring for her, and Cooper tells her not to take it.

While Laura is the film's tragic hero, Leland is her opposing force representing the law. Leland is a split subject, when on one hand he is a respected lawyer and father, and on the other, a tormenter, an abuser; inhabited by evil. BOB is "immoral, sinister, scheming and shady" as Kristeva describes abjection "…a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles" (4). He displays his cruelties in a scene where he tells Laura to sit down for dinner, and suddenly becomes angry for not washing her hands before dinner. He declares that no one can eat until Laura washes her hands, pointing out dirt under her ring fingernail, the same finger in which investigators found a letter cut out underneath Teresa and later Laura's fingernail. However, right after Laura sits down, a close up shot of Laura's half-heart necklace from Leland's perspective indicates this was the trigger for his anger. He aggressively questions Laura: "Bobby didn't give this to you, did he? Who did? Is it from a lover?". This scene further indicates to Laura that Leland and BOB are the same person. Yet later that night, Leland expresses remorse for how he acted towards Laura as he cries and tells her how much he loves her.

Bob's possession can further be read as an abjection from a detail about BOB's past revealed in the series. In one of Cooper's revelatory dreams, he sees a one-armed man named Mike who told him he used to be BOB's accomplice, but "saw the face of God" and cut off his left arm which had a tattoo reading "Fire Walk with Me" to sever himself from BOB, and is now devoted to stopping him. After his dream, Cooper sends a deputy to find Mike, but ends up finding him as a traveling shoe salesman named Phillip Gerard. When asked about his arm, he said he lost it in a car accident and later revealed that the tattoo said "MOM". For what a perfect metaphor for abjection, where the severed arm indicates both a split from the mother and a split from the Other. BOB is that Other through which evil settles into the subject and makes it repugnant. As Kristeva describes:

> "For evil, thus displaced into the subject, will not cease tormenting him from within, no longer as a polluting or defiling substance, but as the ineradicable repulsion of his henceforth divided and contradictory being." (116)

Here, Kristeva describes the interiorization of impurity, abjection no longer being a threat from what's outside, but what's within. Yet it is not that BOB uses Leland to commit violence, but that Leland uses BOB. Although Bob exists in BOB as a possession, abjection merely preserves what was already there. Leland's violence against Laura is attached to his paternal authority, his prohibitions. Jouissance allows BOB to exist in Leland as an alter ego, where he shatters taboo, domesticity and prohibition in the guise of a good family man. The perfect cloak.

Leland/BOB abuses Laura on account of her sexuality. Through Lelands flashbacks, we discover that he killed Teresa because she was blackmailing him. Teresa and Laura did sex work together and Leland was one of Teresa's clients. Leland asked her to set up an orgy with her friends, but upon arriving, saw Laura and called it off. Teresa put the pieces together and blackmailed Leland for money. Instead of paying her, he kills her as she threatens to take off his mask, to reveal BOB. As Laura gets closer to figuring out who BOB is, his threats become more severe.Laura previously understood BOB as someone who came through her window at night to sexually assault her. During one of his attacks, she demands to know who BOB is, and she sees his true face as Leland. The next day, Laura is in a state of despair as she realizes she must make the choice: to let BOB become her or to let BOB kill her.

The pivotal tragic action occurs within the last fifteen minutes of the film. Laura and her friend Ronette Pulaski have gone to Jacque Renaults cabin with Leo Johnson for a night of drug infused sex. Leland appears and forces the girls to a train car, as Mike with the one arm rushes to catch up. Leland and BOB switch places throughout the scene, and Leland places a mirror under Laura, through which she watches her subjectivity shatter as she sees her face turn into BOB's. Laura watches as an angel appears for Ronnette and she is able to escape the train car, as Mike appears. He tosses Teresa's ring in the train car and Laura puts it on her finger while Leland screams "Don't make me do this!" as he murders her with an ax.

The chorus continues as the Man from Another Place is crosscut during the scene, transitioned through this recurring television static, as he watches in enjoyment. Here, Lynch connects Laura's suffering with our enjoyment of it. Throughout the scene, the catholic liturgy "Anges Dei" plays in the background, repeatings its famous "Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us". Lynch likens Laura to the sacrificial lamb and repents the sin of killing her once again. Kristeva discusses the role of sin in biblical abjection, which we can apply Lynch, who brings us to a similar position. She states "A source of evil and mingled with sin, abjection becomes the requisite for a reconciliation, in the mind, between the flesh and the law" (122). The purification of the abject and catharsis are one and the same thing, a limitless repetition to clear oneself of what cannot be rid of, momentarily, though it must be arrived at through pain. As Todd McGowan points out, when Laura takes the ring, "She marries herself to the death drive (153). As Hegel informs us, the reconciliation in tragedy lies in the eternal contradiction of individual sides of conflict, in its continuation.

Leland disposes of Laura's body in the river before entering the Lodge through a portal in the woods. Leland floats in the air and BOB appears alongside him, with a face of maliciousness. The Man from Another Place and Mike chant "BOB. I want all my garmonbozia (pain and sorrow)". BOB appears to remove this from Leland, taking blood in his hand and throwing it in the ground. This act exemplifies the catharsis at the end of tragedy, purification as a means for receiving pleasure. Then, Laura's corpse is shown as it is at the onset of the series, this famous image of a beautiful corpse. In the final scene of the film, Laura is sitting in a chair in the Lodge with Dale Cooper, who rests a comforting hand on her shoulder. First Lynch gives us the satisfaction of watching two protagonists whos lives are so intertwined but whose paths rarely cross, finally be unified. Music is a crucial element the pathos invoked in tragedy, and for Lynch's filmography as well. When Lynch and composer Angelo Baladmenti created music for Twin Peaks, Lynch would describe what he saw, the feelings that were there, which Baladmenti would translate into music. When describing the final scene to Balamenti, he stated: "She is crying and I want everyone to cry with her because they love her so much" (Criterion). Laura is depicted both crying and laughing while being flashes with a blue light as she watches an angel appear for her. Then, Lynch employs an interesting procedure where it switches from a shot-reverse-shot sequence, to a final slow zoom out from Laura and Cooper, then superimposing the angel as a blue, translucent figure in the corner. This procedure mimics the blue television static scattered throughout the film. Lynch sutures the gap between shot-reverse through a process Slavoj Zizek defines as interface, where the object being looked at and the subject looking are contained within the same shot. We can think back to the beginning of the film, which began on this zoomed in television static, to this final zoom out where he takes us to the limits of the screen. Zizek notes that Lynch's cinematic ontology is based in the juxtaposition between reality, as observed from a distance and an extreme proximity to the Real. He describes how this occurs in the beginning of *Fire Walk with Me* to emphasize his point. In the early credit sequence, we are immersed so far into the television (series) that we can no longer make it out for what it is. As emphasized by the axe shattering it, Lynch ultimately aims to destroy the comfort we had as spectators immersed in the soapy world of *Twin Peaks*, in order to see the real tragedy of Laura Palmer. In these last sequences of the film, Lynch finds a meeting place of beauty and horror and then imbues it with irony. The Lodge, for Zizek, is the place where one encounters the final fantasmatic lie, pointing out how this scene of Laura is somewhat ridiculous, but meant to be taken with complete seriousness.

On the other hand, Laura's ending in the lodge is her eternal state of suffering. In *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis,* Lacan describes Marquis De Sade's 'fantasm of eternal suffering', where he finds a conjunction between the play of pain and the phenomenon of the beautiful. For Lacan, the phenomenon of the beautiful is the limit of the second death. He describes how in Sade's texts, the victims are adorned with beauty so painfully obvious that it is easily missed. Following this line of thought, he points out that in Christianity, the limit is the image of the crucifixion–the image of suffering. Kristeva demonstrates a similar line of thought in pointing out that sin is a requisite for the beautiful. As she describes, the Christian recognition of sin includes a recognition of a power that directly converts to that of the image of holiness. She states: "One of the insights of Christianity, and not the least one, is to have gathered in a single move perversion and beauty as the lining and the cloth of one and the same economy" (125). Here, Kristeva is talking about a biblical opposition between the body as flesh, overflown with drive and confronted with the strictness of the law, and a sublimated, spiritual body, "submersed into divine speech in order to become beauty and love" (124). She points out how the latter body cannot exist without the former. Lynch similarly has this insight as a prominent motif throughout his films. Amid his darkness and horror, he allows the image of Laura to shine through. He wants us to see her beauty and to love her. He exposes how beauty can only be arrived at through some sort of perversion.

Through the structure of tragedy, we can understand how Laura chooses the ethical path. In *Seminar VII*, Lacan uses Antigone as the ideal ethical model for her insistence on her desire in giving her brother, Polynices, a proper burial despite it being the grounds for her execution. For Lacan, Antigone reveals to us a the line of sight that defines desire, a line of sight focused on an "image that possesses a mystery which up until now has never been articulated, since it forces you to close your eyes at the very moment you look at it" (247). Lacan asserts that this central image is the image of Antigone, and its power has to do with her beauty and its position between two symbolically differentiated fields. Antigone goes beyond the limit to the space between two deaths: symbolic death and real death. She violates the limits of Até, the point of symbolic death, through her desire. The line of sight that defines desire is life viewed from the position of death. This is the ethical position because it allows one to act against the "good" and in accordance with their desire.

Laura occupies a similar position as Antigone as she makes desire the law of her acts. In the same way that Antione states "I will bury him myself. And even if I die in the act, that death will be a glory." (86-87), Laura thrusts herself into death and Lynch ensures it will be a beautiful one. As Todd McGowan argues, we identify with Laura as an impossible object as she defines an ethical subjectivity. He states: "Ethics here means embracing the absence of an outside, the recognition that 'There's no place left to go'" (153). McGowan illuminates that Laura chooses the ethical path by ultimately choosing not to stray. Additionally, Laura's choice recognizes the singularity of everyone around her. As her world crumbles around her, she comes to occupy the space between life and death. In choosing to reject BOB, she chooses a universal principle that insists on the singularity of every other individual.

Lacan points out that Creon is as much the protagonist as Antigone in the play. He is the leader who seeks to promote the good, and this is his fundamental error. Lacan states: “The good can’t reign over all without an excess emerging whose fatal consequences are revealed to us in tragedy (259). Lacan helps us make an important distinction between the “good” as an ideal, promoted by the law and other structures of power versus the ethical good, as in accordance with one’s desire as a lack. The excess of this good is that which falls under abjection, what does not incorporate within spheres of morality, of the body, social structures, etc.

As Laura falls more and more towards abjection, as BOB makes his way into her and threatens her subjecthood, she resists him through declaring herself an empty subject. As demonstrated in the series, Leland will find his own tragic ends with BOB. Laura is full of contradictions, primarily relating to the inevitable contradiction of femininities. She is both homecoming queen and drug addict, pure and impure. These contradictions emphasize Lacan’s point “La femme n’existe pas”, or “the woman doesn’t exist.”. There is no universal signifier that can be applied to women, leaving them with an emptiness that paradoxically makes them more subject. Laura emphasizes this when she states: “Your Laura disappeared. It’s just me now”. There is no secret behind femininity, the mask is her true face. Lynch chooses to leave Laura as an eternal contradiction, spreading all her truths out onto the surface as coexisting. However, it is not that she resists abjection, but fully assumes it, permanently casting herself off into its eternal ambiguity.

Final Analysis and Conclusion:

This thesis has analyzed several cinematic tragedies centered on the downfall of its female protagonists. Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection allows a feminist, psychoanalytic framework to interpret what ethical grounds they encroach upon. Transitioning the theory from its home-base in horror film analysis to tragedy places emphasis on the moral theories of tragedy. I aimed to look at a variety of ways directors have gone about depicting their feminine subjects, in terms of narrative and formal experimentation. I set out to investigate what ethical and existential questions are raised about female subjectivity when it comes to lives marked by exclusion. We can think back to the she-tragedy, which marks women's suffering as a sexual spectacle for the male gaze, engage with the relevant issues pertinent to women's issues as well as consider how filmmakers have attempted to subvert such depictions.

La Passion De Jeanne of Arc demonstrates an early auteur in cinema who uses the power of faces to evoke its pathos. Godard will later do the work of aligning his protagonist with Dreyers, while illuminating the contradiction between her inherent, existential freedom as a modern subject and the perpetual, patriarchal oppressions which swallow her. Dreyer and Godard attempt to paint the most life-like portraits, Dreyer through the close up and Godard through his acknowledgement of medium. Dreyer's use of the close-up specifically contains Jeanne in the frame, emphasizing an unfreedom he cannot release her from. In stark contrast, Agnès Varda releases her female protagonist from the frame in *Sans Toit ni Loi* by not following Mona directly, as if she were not subject of the frame. Varda sets her subjects perpetually in motion as they navigate their landscapes. Godard and Varda both voice themselves as auteurs and ask themselves a similar question about what right they have as filmmakers to depict their tragic subjects. Jeanne and Nana both face a social exclusion that casts them into abjection.

Mona, however, poses an interesting consideration regarding abjection as she chooses her exclusion. Mona covers herself in dirt as she strays from the law. Mona and Erika of *La Pianiste* both bring out the disgust that occurs upon the encounter with the abject, being described as repulsive and undesirable as they assume their abject position. Haneke asserts his control over his spectators through identifying himself with his female protagonist. He opens up a crucial discussion about a feminine sexuality that goes beyond the limit of expectations. *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* offers a surrealist imagination of the abject, breaching upon horror, but remaining within Lynch's unique cinematic vision. *Fire Walk with Me* especially offers a possibility where abjection is purified not through an enacting of law but rekindling of a maternal wound through limitless love, supplied by an embrace of contradiction and a redirection of desire through the beautiful rather than through shame.

Abjection has radical potential because it encompasses that which cannot be incorporated into the law. As Barbera Creed points out, the feminine becomes monstrous when she does not assume her proper feminine role. Similarly in tragedy, the female protagonist becomes "monstrous" as a metaphor for her impurity, often a tainted or ambiguous sexuality that the forces around her aim to take advantage of or keep under control. I am brought back to a statement by Antonin Artaud as discussed in Chapter 1, where he describes *La Passion de Jeanne D'Arc* to reveal Jeanne to be the victim of "the perversion of a divine principle in its passage through the minds of men, whether they be Church, Government, or what you will". Artaud poignantly describes the essential feature of the feminine tragedy, where feminine subjectivity, desire, and freedom becomes suppressed and/or corrupted through men who claim to wield the law. The feminine tragedy indicates a place where feminine contradiction has the potential to reveal the limitations of such forces.

Works Cited

Badalamenti, Angelo. "Angelo Badalamenti on Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me" Interview by Criterion. Criterion Channel. 2017. Accessed 8 December 2023.

De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Citadel Press, 1976.

Balázs, Béla. "The Close-Up." *Theory of the Film*. 1945. 273-281.

Chion, Michel. "The Acousmêtre". *The Voice of Cinema*. Columbia University Press 1999. 17-30.

Creed, Barbara. *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. Routledge, 1993.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 1*: *The Movement Image*. University of Minnesota Press, 2001.

Fink, Bruce. *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique*. Harvard University Press, 1997.

Komorowski, J. "The masochian woman: A fantasy of male desire?". Middle Voices, 1 (1). 2021. Retrieved from https://dsc.duq.edu/middle_voices/vol1/iss1/3

Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay of Abjection*. Columbia University Press, 1984.

Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Aesthetics: lectures on fine art*. Clarendon Press, 1975.

Lacan, Jacques. *Anxiety*: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, Trans. A.R Price, Polity Press, 2014

Lacan, Jacques. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book 7*: *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. 1959-1960. Trans. Dennis Foster. Ed. Jacques Alain Miller. New York: W.W. Norton, & Company, 1997.

Landwehr, M.J. (2011), "Voyeurism, Violence, and the Power of the Media: The Reader's/Spectator's Complicity" in Jelinek's *The Piano Teacher* and Haneke's *La*

Pianiste, *Caché*, *The White Ribbon*. Int. J. Appl. Psychoanal. Studies, 8: 117-132. https://doi-org.ezproxy.uvm.edu/10.1002/aps.286

Marsden, Jean I. “Falling Women: She-Tragedy and Sexual Spectacle.” *Fatal Desire: Women, Sexuality, and the English Stage, 1660–1720*, Cornell University Press, 2006, pp. 60–99. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctv2n7hrc.7. Accessed 17 Apr. 2024.

Murray, Ros. “‘The Epidermis of Reality’: Artaud, the Material Body and Dreyer’s The Passion of Joan of Arc.” *Film-Philosophy*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2013, pp. 445–61, https://doi.org/10.3366/film.2013.0025.

McGowan, Todd. *The Impossible David Lynch*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.

Neroni, Hilary. *Feminist Film Theory and Cléo from 5 to 7*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.

Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. *The Birth of Tragedy*. New York :Dover Publications, 1995.

Poe, Edgar Allen. “The Oval Portrait.” *Edgar Allen Poe: Poetry & Tales*. Library of America, 1984. 484-488

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Existentialism is a Humanism*. Edited by John Kulka, translated by Carol Macomber, Yale University Press, 2007.

Sartre, Jean Paul. *Nausea*. Translated by Lloyd Alexander, New Directions, 1964.

Sontag, Susan. “Godard's Vivre Sa Vie.” *Against Interpretation*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966.

Sophocles., et al. *Antigone.* Oxford University Press, 2013.

Varda, Agnès. *Agnès Varda: Interviews*. Edited by T. Jefferson Kline, University Press of Mississippi, 2014.

Žižek, Slavoj. “Slavoj Zizek - Woman is one of the Names-of-the Father.” *Lacan.com*, https://www.lacan.com/zizwoman.htm. Accessed 23 April 2024.

Žižek, Slavoj. The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch's Lost Highway. Walter Chapin Simpson Center for the Humanities/University of Washington, 2000.

Žižek, Slavoj. The Metastases of Enjoyment : Six Essays on Women and Causality. London ; Verso, 2005.