

# CRIME, ABJECTION, TRANSGRESSION AND THE IMAGE

John Lechte

Macquarie University  
Sydney

**Bio:** John Lechte is Professor in Sociology at Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia. He is a specialist in cultural and social theory and of the work of Kristeva and Bataille. Recently, he has published on French philosophy and technology, as well as on the image and cinema. His *Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers* (2008) has just come out in a revised second edition.

# ***Crime, Abjection, Transgression and the Image\*\****

## **Introduction**

In what follows the discussion of crime and culture begins to exceed the boundaries of what was originally planned – something that I hope will be seen as a testimony to the potential richness of the theme of crime cultures than to an inability on my part to stick to the point. Having taken as my initial starting point Kristeva’s theory of abjection (evocative of the sacred) in relation to crime, I was quickly reminded of Georges Bataille’s notion of transgression and aspects of carnival as ‘interior experience’. For, carnival plays with the law only all the more to confirm it. Such an approach connotes the possibility of a deeper insight into workings of crime and the image than is possible if one remains with Kristeva’s theory, interesting though this is. Having crime cultures in mind, I could not resist the challenge that Bataille poses when he writes in his book on Nietzsche that: *‘Thus “communication”, without which nothing exists for us, is guaranteed by crime. “Communication” is love, and love taints those whom it unites’* (Bataille 1992: 18. Bataille’s emphasis). We have then not just crime culture but culture founded in crime, an idea which unites Bataille with Freud (1972) and with his contemporary, Walter Benjamin (1996).

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Given the link between abjection and nihilism, Nietzsche also enters the picture. In Nietzsche, we have the development of Kristeva's notion of the abject as 'what does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior' (Kristeva 1982: 4). For Nietzsche, this is nihilism that cannot acknowledge its debt to 'will to power', a notion, I propose, that is not too far removed from 'communication' in Bataille's sense.

The image (and fiction) is at issue when it is a matter of whether abjection can appear in film or in forms of representation. After considering the transparency or otherwise of the image, the main point of analysis here will be an examination of Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil* (1958). With this film, we are once again more in the territory of the Kristevan abject than in that of Bataille's transgression. Nevertheless, behind the exterior of corruption as presented by Welles's masterpiece, there is also the proposition – if one wants to look for it – that, in fact, positive law (as opposed to natural law), even in its day to day unfolding, is fundamentally underpinned by violence, a fact which keeps it in touch with transgression.

With all this in mind, then, let us now turn to the task in hand – which is to investigate crime, abjection and the image as these terms relate to, and interpenetrate with, each other.

### **Aspects of the Abject According to Kristeva**

As is now well known, the theme of abjection arises in the work of Julia Kristeva. Here, abjection as it occurs in moral and criminal contexts is particularly important. By ‘criminal’ must also be included Nazi crime, mentioned by Kristeva. The way that crime renders visible the vulnerability of borders emerges in terms of the distinction between sincerity and deceit, simulation and truth. These very distinctions, or variants of them, raise the question of how abjection can be represented – or, more rigorously, presented. Indeed, as Kristeva points out, as the abject is not an object it poses a problem for representation, which is mediation, as opposed to the *immediate* impact of the abject.

Apart from the psychoanalytical take on the abject, where what is expelled from the body/self takes precedence, both chronologically and materially, over what is incorporated (desired) – as is the case for the object – Kristeva refers to typically perverse – abject – scenes from everyday life with a moral inflection, as well as to ritual in the context of the sacred and the fragile opposition between purity (= ritually clean) and impurity (= ritually unclean), where prohibition comes into play. This is abjection occurring in conjunction with the sacred in religious contexts.

Considering abjection and the sacred as Kristeva understands it allows us to invoke aspects of Georges Bataille’s concept of transgression. For not only does transgression suggest transgression of the Law, but it does so in a way which ushers in a more profound operationalisation of abjection than is proposed by Kristeva. In short, Bataille offers a potentially more political take on the sacred and abjection. I will further elaborate on Kristeva’s theory below before moving on to Bataille on transgression and thence to Nietzsche on nihilism and will to power. For transgression also connotes what Bataille calls ‘interior experience’, which erases the boundaries of the discontinuous, ego subject

in ecstatic states evoked by laughter, giddiness, intoxication, nudity, orgasm, eroticism, anguish, poetry (= poeticising), nausea and carnival: in other words, there is a loss of self (as discontinuity) to the point of death: 'death means continuity of being' (Bataille 1986: 13).

'Continuity of being' is also 'interior experience', which Bataille calls communication. Even crime, as we noted earlier, is a communication for Bataille to the extent that is linked to evil (Bataille 1992: 20). And evil, Bataille says, figures more importantly than anything else in Nietzsche's work. Indeed, it would be interesting to establish whether Nietzsche's Will to Power is closer to a communication in Bataille's sense than to anything to do with an ego's acts of will. In favour of such an interpretation is Nietzsche's point in section 485 of *The Will to Power* (1967) that the subject is a fiction. Again, in section 692, it is said that 'the will of psychology hitherto is an unjustified generalization'. On this basis, the will to power is not the will of a discontinuous individual, but approximates the state of *ecstasis*, or intoxication, within which discontinuous beings are swept up. Communication thus puts at risk discontinuous existence (= individual, autonomous existence). Crime, as connected to sacrifice, would thus put discontinuous existence – the realm of law as commonly understood – at risk.

### *The Fluidity of Abjection*

With regard to abjection and crime, we find that, for Kristeva, all crime is abject because it does not 'respect, borders, positions, rules' (Kristeva 1982: 4). But in particular, the abject appears in hypocritical crime, crime that pretends to be on the side of the law and

is not, crime that is absolutely deceitful, premeditated and underhand but appears to be the exact opposite, the epitome of rectitude: the judge who harshly sentences paedophiles and pornographers, but who has child pornography on his hard drive. Above all, perhaps, abjection is exemplified (if this is possible) by Nazi crime which killed children in the name of science and purity.

Abjection is also related to perversion, including corruption, illustrated by the way it plays with prohibitions, rules and the law: abjection, says Kristeva, ‘turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them. It kills in the name of life – a progressive despot; it lives at the behest of death – an operator in genetic experimentations; it curbs the other’s suffering for its own profit – a cynic (and a psychoanalyst); it establishes narcissistic power while pretending to reveal the abyss – an artist who practices his art as a “business”. Corruption is its most common, most obvious appearance. That is the socialized appearance of the abject’ (Kristeva 1982: 15-16).

Perhaps more than behaviour that is proven to be corrupt, abjection is the difficulty, or even impossibility, of determining where sincerity and honesty end and corruption begins. We can think here of criminals who have helped the police, but more importantly, for the ambiguity of abjection, of police and judicial figures who have become criminal.

In Australia, a number of corrupt police commissioners have fallen: the former New South Wales state premier of the 1960s, Sir Robert Askin, is now better-known for his collusion with New South Wales crime boss, Abe Saffron, and allegedly corrupt activities while in office than for anything else.

Straddling criminal and moral abjection is Bertolucci's conformist in the film of the same name (see *The Conformist* (1970)). The conformist has no moral bearing of his own as he depends entirely on the external world for moral sustenance.

Corruption, as we know, often occurs at the conjunction of the profession of noble motives by public figures and their real self-interest. The situation, says Nietzsche, is complicated by the fact that 'lack of courage' ensures that 'will to power' (= life) is never actively proclaimed. In effect, nihilism is never actively proclaimed. I shall elaborate upon this a little later in a discussion of nihilism and morality, where the aim is to deepen our grasp of the relationship between abjection and crime. With Nietzsche's notion of a compact between nihilism and the will to power comes the idea that conventional crime (not related to transgression) itself is essentially fluid like abjection.

### *Abjection and the Sacred*

The abject as it relates to the play of 'purity and danger', as the title of Mary Douglas's book (see Douglas (1966)) has it, is inextricably linked for Kristeva to what are, sociologically speaking, essentially pre-modern social and cultural forms, although, as a psychological force, it seems that the sacred still has relevance in secular societies. Generally, Kristeva addresses the question of the rationale for certain ritual practices of prohibition. The cadaver in particular is abject and must be purified through ritual: 'The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life' (Kristeva 1982: 4). Ritual is thus deemed crucial in cultures with

elementary symbolic structures – so that the separation from (= expulsion of) the mother, in psychoanalytic terms, can be problematic.

A number of French feature films of the 1990s have opened up a debate about whether certain art practices which celebrate secularism and the absence of ritual prohibition, have fallen into an abject state, or whether such works, in rejecting any limits as to what is permitted to be presented, are genuinely instances of transgression in Bataille's sense. Are they nihilist for the sake of being nihilist, or are they providing people with a way of dealing with the violence and trauma that has hitherto been subject to taboo and thus repressed? The issues have been discussed in an illuminating way in relation to two films by Phillip Grandrieux by Martine Beugnet (2005), who says, inter alia, of the general tendency represented in part by Grandrieux, that: 'Usually categorised as art or auteur cinema, these works construct heterogeneous forms mixing elements from 'sub-genres' such as the gothic, gore, horror and pornography with references to high art and literary and artistic underground trends' (2005: 175). In the case of Grandrieux, his 'radical shift in the approach to film-making...helps to put into context the appearance of a contemporary cinema of evil [a phrase evoking Bataille's title, *Literature of Evil* (Bataille 1993)]' (2005: 175). But in a text cited by Beugnet, James Quandt (2004) explains the situation regarding the 'New French Extremity' in film making much more forcefully:

The critic truffle-snuffing for trends might call it the New French Extremity, the recent tendency to the willfully transgressive by directors like François Ozon, Gaspar Noé, Catherine Breillat, Phillip Grandrieux – and now, alas, [Bruno] Dumont [in *Twenty-nine Palms* (2003)]. Bava as much as Bataille, Salò no less

than Sade seem the determinants of a cinema suddenly determined to break every taboo, to wade in rivers of viscera and spumes of sperm, to fill each frame with flesh, nubile or gnarled, and subject it to all manner of penetration, mutilation, and defilement. Images and subjects once the provenance of splatter films, exploitation flicks, and porn – gang rapes, bashings and slashings and blindings, hard-ons and vulvas, cannibalism, sadomasochism and incest, fucking and fisting, sluices of cum and gore – proliferate in the high-art environs of a national cinema whose provocations have historically been formal, political, or philosophical (Godard, Gouzot, Debord)... (Quandt 2004: 127-128).

Here, it must be asked whether such cinema is truly transgressive, or whether, on the contrary it is essentially abject in its refusal, or inability, to respect any borders or prohibitions. We should bear in mind that Georges Bataille's notion of transgression (linked to the sacred) is still an open question for modern social formations even if it brings issues to a head in a more potent fashion than does Kristeva's 'abjection'. Indeed, the affirmative, 'transgression', which Bataille emphasises, can be compared to the more negative, 'prohibition', emphasised by Kristeva. In a statement which goes to the heart of the matter, Bataille famously says: 'The transgression does not deny the taboo [prohibition] but transcends it and completes it' (Bataille 1986: 63). Also: 'The taboo is there in order to be violated' (1986: 64). 'Organised transgression together with the taboo make social life what it is' (1986: 65) – or what it was, if transgression is no longer part of modern society. Thus, transgression simultaneously breaks rules and goes beyond limits as it 'maintains these limits just the same' (1986: 67). As Foucault put it in 1963

not long after Bataille's death, transgression is not negative: it affirms the limit as it transcends it. This makes it different from the usual negative understanding of transgression as a threat to the very existence of limits and rules (see Foucault 1963: 756).

For Bataille, transgression properly speaking is never absolute, is never about the transformation of society as a whole, and is always limited in time. This is why it is very different from revolutionary practices which aim at the complete overthrow of the existing social order. Breaking a taboo gives rise to the anguish which plays a role in ensuring its maintenance. This is the religious aspect of transgression. In fact, taboos are kept in the profane world and broken (= transgressed) in the sacred world. Transgression 'is the world of celebrations, sovereign rulers and God' (Bataille 1986: 68). Celebrations are the transgression of the law, not its observance. The sacred for Bataille is thus extremely ambiguous: 'The taboo would forbid the transgression but the fascination compels it' (1986: 68). On this basis, crime culture in cinema and literature would be one thing (possibly exemplifying transgression, like carnival does), while crime in secular society at large would be quite another.

### **Crime, Law, Image and Abjection**

Transgression as sacrifice entails violence; but it is also the containment of violence (within the carnival period, for example). When approaching crime and the image, the notion of 'crime' should be understood in terms of the moral law as well as the positive law of the State. In fact, the foundation of law, as discussed by Freud (1972), and after

him, by Walter Benjamin (1996), then latterly by Giorgio Agamben (1998) and Jacques Derrida (1992), is one of violence – or at least, no foundation of the law can be discussed independently of violence. Bataille, too, points out that violence is integral to human society and that transgression is a mechanism for keeping it within bounds. For secular society, violence places things immediately into a moral context. As Benjamin noted, violence weakens the law rather than strengthens it; yet, violence is also a secret precondition to the extent that law is what articulates a way of life. This is a more revolutionary conception of violence than we find in Bataille. Violence for Benjamin is more than transgression. The hidden face of the law, therefore, could be thought to be doubly evil: on the one hand, the law, to come into being and to exist, has to call upon violence to assist it and, on the other hand, it works to keep this fact secret, a point that Kieslowski's *A Short Film About Killing* (1987) well demonstrates, as the execution of the murderer constitutes reciprocal violence. Violence thus implies that abjection is also at the origin of the law.

Here, we might recall Nietzsche's distinction, in *The Genealogy of Morals* (1996: 24-25, 34-36), between 'bad' and 'evil'. 'Bad' can give rise, and usually did, to violence (pre-Christian Rome might be an example), but it was violence resulting from the character of who one was – a kind of animal violence done in innocence for all to see. Evil, by contrast, is secretive, duplicitous, murky, often done out of *ressentiment*. It is evil, then, which is abject because it cannot show itself for what it is: it is Nazi crime committed in the best interests of humanity.

### *Image and Crime*

The image, too, needs further elaboration. If it is an object in its own right (which implies that it is ultimately opaque – a position that semiotics attempted to sustain) it will hardly reveal the abject: only itself. Or at least, if it does denote something, it is also riven with connotations. Thus, we will possibly have an abject image, but not an image of the abject. Given, as we shall have cause to mention later, that the abject, because it is not an object, is not a form of mediation, it puts the symbolic itself into question. However, it is no doubt important to recognise that the image is as much linked to Kristeva's 'semiotic' (which is drive-based) as it is part of the symbolic order (which is very much based on the code). Roland Barthes's early characterisation of the photographic image is thus pertinent to the image in general: '*it is a message without a code*' (Barthes 1979: 17. Barthes's emphasis). And before Barthes, there was Sartre, who also argued for the transparency of the image in order to avoid it being an object, as happens in the error of the 'illusion of immanence', the assumption that there is a reality of the image as well as an image of reality (see Sartre 2004).

While the abject cannot be represented (because it is not an object) an image cannot at all be reduced to a representation. There is thus a kind of co-habitation of the image and the abject: both are forms of immediacy before being mediation. On this basis, the abject can appear in cinema or photography, a point which serves to legitimate the references in what follows to certain forms of cinema and the abject. On this basis, as the cinema image is not reducible to a representation, it can be argued that the abject can appear directly in cinema.

## *Nihilism and Abjection*

Having said above that corrupt behaviour is abject because it is duplicitous, we turn to Nietzsche's take on the *will to power* and abjection. By invoking Nietzsche, the issue of the relationship of law and crime to abjection can be more readily understood and appreciated. Nihilism opens up the issues here. To be a nihilist in Nietzsche's sense is to recognise that the highest values have de-valued themselves. This implies that the pursuit of one value, or even set of values, will come into conflict with others. Truth is a key value that, according to Nietzsche, turns against morality: 'among the forces cultivated by morality was *truthfulness*: this eventually turned against morality, discovered its teleology, its partial perspective' (Nietzsche 1967: sect 5). Another example is based on the interdiction against killing. Again, this issue is addressed in Kieslowski's *Short Film About Killing*, where the senseless, slow and nihilistic murder of a taxi driver by a young country boy provokes the State to respond with meticulous preparations for his execution by hanging.

So, it is not that – or just that – modern society has become indifferent to morality, but that moral values themselves are in a state of tension with each other. Only by explicitly embracing this tension is some sort of moral value sustained and the abject kept at bay, albeit in a European and Western kind of way. As Kristeva writes:

He who denies morality is not abject; there can be grandeur in amorality and even in crime that flaunts disrespect for the law – rebellious, liberating, and suicidal crime. Abjection, on the other hand, is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a

terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it, a debtor who sells you up, a friend who stabs you....

(Kristeva, 1982: 4).<sup>1</sup>

The other mode of nihilism, however – one, no doubt, more in accord with the popular imagination – is that based in a refusal to choose to the point of indifference – in a refusal to decide or to judge, in a position of absolute vacillation resulting in acting without conviction. Because one starts by declaring that there are no absolutes there is also no basis upon which to choose, to decide or to judge. The absence of absolutes thus gives rise to absolute relativism, or at least to the belief that the latter is inevitable. Such a position evokes pacifism and the point when not acting can lead to worse (even violent) consequences than acting. This is the position that effectively embraces abjection: for it says that there is no need to choose. There can be peace without violence, truth without lies, the good without the bad, etc. But now, moral, epistemological, political – even artistic – borders are no longer sustained or sustainable (there are no credible rituals or other mechanisms left to sustain borders). In its more spectacular forms, abject relativism is manifest in the quasi legitimization of revisionist history (denial of the Gas Chambers), Creationism (denial of Darwinian theory) and New Age therapies (denial of medical anatomy and physiology). This form of nihilism, with its lack of grandeur, enables abjection to flourish.

Let us not deny that Nietzsche, although ostensibly proclaiming his nihilism and thus identifying with what we might call a noble form of nihilism – one, paradoxically, with

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Nietzsche's reference to the 'grand style' as an expression of the will to power in *The Will to Power* (1967: section 341). Those who cannot attain to the grand style in their 'crimes' (eg, petty criminals) risk being thrust back into abjection.

some moral bearing – also promotes the abject form by casting suspicion on all claims to truth in philosophy, the arts, sciences, politics and morality. Every claim to truth is, for Nietzsche, nothing more – nor less – than an assertion of the will to power. On one level Nietzsche says: you must have the courage to judge; on another level he says: every judgement is a will to power. Compare this passage from *Beyond Good and Evil*:

*Actual philosophers...are commanders and law-givers: they say ‘thus it shall be!’, it is they who determine the Wherefore and the Whither of mankind, and they possess for this task the preliminary work of all the philosophical labourers, of all those who have subdued the past – they reach for the future with creative hand, and everything that is or has been becomes for them a means, an instrument, a hammer. Their ‘knowing’ is creating, their creating is a law-giving, their will to truth is – will to power. (Nietzsche 1974a: sect 211, 123. Nietzsche’s emphasis).*

In a similar vein of duplicity, ‘love of one’s neighbour’ is really fear of one’s neighbour (Nietzsche 1974a: sect 201, 104). For Nietzsche, then, the appearance always differs from the reality (even though Nietzsche also denies the validity of the opposition). And this receives an extra boost in the abject stakes when we recall that it is the self, if not the self-interest, of the philosopher (= *will to power*) which is in play, rather than truth. The world is will to power and nothing besides, as Nietzsche reiterates at the end of his volume of notes on the subject. Truth, then, is the duplicity itself based on the need to believe and to find happiness as opposed to the strength to engage in inquiry and the

courage to accept the truth of the will to power. In the end, lack of courage, lack of strength, even lack of honesty, are the characteristics of our time. What this also implies is a lack of any real moral bearing. Indeed, belief, as Nietzsche puts it, ‘makes blessed: *consequently* it lies’ (Nietzsche 1974b: sect 50, 167. Nietzsche’s emphasis). And: ‘Error...is not blindness, error is *cowardice*’ (*Ecce homo*, Nietzsche’s emphasis. Cited by Hollingdale (1974a: 219)).

The thing is that philosophers and others work extremely hard to convince the world that that they are sincere and that what they say about the world is true. But, in truth, what philosophers say is really geared to shore up their power, a fact that is in keeping with a religion which tells people what they want to hear. And what of Nietzsche himself? Does he not propose to be telling us, in light of his inquiries, what is the case? Or does he really mean that he, too, is staking out his will to power? To try to answer this question would take us too far a field. Suffice to say that, in its incapacity to find any sure anchor point, while yet holding out the possibility of genuine illumination, Nietzsche plays with borders leaving us with the feeling that it is impossible to know which way to turn, and that, even by accepting the impossible one is still accepting a truth out of weakness and cowardice.

### **Cinema: Crime and the Abject**

The challenge for art concerning the abject thus becomes obvious, even if, in America, the abject has been represented (so people think) with alacrity in painting, installations and photography. I do not deny that the abject can appear in artistic presentations. And

certainly Kristeva's work claims as much. But how it does so is a key element in making contact with it, much as the ugly poses a conundrum for art of the beautiful when presented artistically. If the abject *is* in art content this can also be a way of muting it, in the sense that a symbolic form (an interpretation) would enable it to see the light of day, as it were, the manifestation of that which otherwise remains hidden, secret, indistinct just as the unconscious is rendered relatively benign by language. Where does the abject lie in the horror movie, for example? I preface my answer to this by saying that dealing with horror – with the fear it evokes – is not (necessarily) an experience of the abject. Rather, I propose that the abject emerges in its fullest sense when something is shown (or presented) that should not be shown. So while a battle scene (cf., Eastwood's *Iwo Jima* (2006)) might be violent and explicitly so, it is not necessarily abject. By contrast, abject might be the rape scene in Gaspar Noé's *Irréversible* (2002) because it should not be shown. In fact, all the latter's force stems from its abject status: the sense that the director is in a wager with the audience, playing on its fascination, challenging it to deny that this is reality and 'you don't want to see it!' This links up to the earlier reference to certain French films of the 1990s as opening up a cinema of transgression or of evil (See Quandt (2004: 127-128, cited above). Even though, as we saw in the discussion of abjection and transgression, the issues here are complex, it has to be said that for specific artistic practices to be a true transgression and more than a momentary infringement of the law, art has to be a legitimated and designated sphere of transgressive practices as, for example, carnival is and has been. Or at least, the artist him- or herself has to proclaim art as the sphere of transgression if certain art practices are not to become, as has been argued, 'a blind celebration of murderous impulses and the death drive' (Beugnet 2005:

176, n5.) and the epitome of self-indulgence and abjection. The problem is that transgression arose within – even if also in opposition to – a religious context that an essentially secular society cannot easily revive. Whereas, in the past, two worlds – the sacred and the profane – existed side by side, now, all must come under the auspices of the secular law<sup>2</sup> so that transgression, like carnival, would have to come under the auspices of the State. Maybe abjection, which weaves its way between borders and thrives on ambiguity is thus the lot of contemporary society. As a consequence, we seem to be poised between transgression, which can have a certain grandeur, and abjection, which has none.

### *Horror in Cinema, Catastrophe and the Abject*

From a different angle, Barbara Creed evokes Kristeva in a much-cited essay analysing the abject in horror films. For Creed, the horror film (whether based on a crime or not) is, to cite the author, ‘an illustration of the work of abjection’ (Creed 2004: 39) because, apart from its evocation of the feminine and the fragility of borders, it ‘abounds in images of abjection, foremost of which is the corpse’ (Creed 2004: 39). Creed is thus quite clear that abjection can be (re)presented, and points, in evoking both Bataille and Kristeva, to the fascination effect of such films as *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) and *Hannibal* (2001), which deal with (the crime of) cannibalism (Creed 2004: 36). That the abject can be revealed, made manifest, through the visual image would be confirmed by the point made

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<sup>2</sup> ‘During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom’ (Bakhtin 1984: 7).

above in reference to Barthes and Sartre, to the effect that, contrary to a media view, the image is essentially transparent: a form of immediacy.

Aaron Kerner, in a book which touches on the theme of the image and representability, points out that there is a connection between catastrophe and abjection in relation to crime. Catastrophe, 'a product of human agency' for Kerner, is then characterised as the 'horrors of the Second World War, ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia, and Rwanda, the Killing Fields in Cambodia, the American firebombing of Tokyo that burned to death 100,000 people in one night' (Kerner 2004: 2). Like the abject, catastrophe (which can have an abject content) 'constitutes a crisis in representation because it is about trying to give form to ' "unimaginable" suffering, "unspeakable" horror, "incomprehensible" violence' (Kerner 2004: 2). Catastrophe (the Holocaust and Hiroshima), for Kerner, can never be unproblematically presented; but, on the other hand, one has to have the moral courage to continue in the attempt, using 'traditional rhetorical strategies' (including the performative 'middle voice', evoked by Roland Barthes) even in the knowledge of failure. The catastrophes that Kerner evokes, then, are crimes that constitute a crisis for representation. These crimes, we can add, are deeply embedded in postmodern, Western culture. They are crimes that are in an on-going struggle with the image.

### *Crime and the Abject in Welles's Touch of Evil*

Those who act politically and openly break the law, or who act immorally in opposing conventional morality (cf. Nietzsche) are in a different category to those who are corrupt:

the judge on the take, the priest who abuses his parishioners' trust, or the politician whose private life and public pronouncements are secretly in conflict (think of some representatives – such as Jesse Helms – of the moral majority in America who have been pilloried in the art of Hans Haake). Corruption – and we should define this broadly to include the corruption of the self – is always to some degree devastating because it can never be predicted in the particular case: it is the unexpected *par excellence* – especially because it is secret. In short, corruption arises where it is least expected, and so does the abject. The expression, 'all politicians are corrupt', far from being a truism, is the sign of a need to anticipate corruption in order to cope with it. However, if all politicians were *known* to be corrupt, they would certainly be less abject and maybe not even truly corrupt to boot, for it would be similar to an accountant who placed a notice in the press to publicise his practice of fraud by 'fiddling the books'. How we deal with abjection is thus both a psychological and social issue, because, most of all, it is a threat to identities and subjectivities, as I hope my foregoing remarks have clearly implied. In particular, it is a loss of grandeur.

It remains now to investigate Orson Welles's film, *Touch of Evil* (1958) which, in its own way, is a statement about a certain kind of corruption and the abject – about the 'dirt' of corruption and thus of the abject.

The theme of dirt and rubbish – detritus – and how it dealt with in *Touch of Evil* has been masterfully described in an early essay by Eric M. Krueger (1972).<sup>3</sup> Krueger writes: '*Touch of Evil* is a seedy experience. Orson Welles drags us through the dirt, dust and garbage of his characters' existence; and therein lies his *mise en scène*: a world where filth, garbage and disarray become metaphors for evil...' (Krueger 1972: 57). Although,

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<sup>3</sup> Krueger (1972: 57) also gives a useful synopsis of the plot of *Touch of Evil*.

for Krueger, dirt is to be understood literally (everything really *is* dirty – the border town where the events take place, but especially the antihero and sheriff, detective Hank Quinlan; corruption is dirty); however, it really does not take much of a tweak for things to evoke ritual uncleanliness, or what Kristeva would call abjection. Indeed, the ‘Evil’ in the title can be seen as a switch word simultaneously evoking the dirt of corruption (the literal interpretation), ambiguity and the lies behind appearances (evil as abjection) and corruption as the transcendence and confirmation of positive law (transgression). While abjection would seem to be the term best suited to describe corruption in a secular setting, the actions and character of detective, Hank Quinlan (played by Welles) seem to transcend the law. Quinlan, acting in almost complete freedom to do things the way he wants, begins to assume a demigod status, albeit, to be sure, one with clay feet.

But Krueger is no doubt right in one sense: for dirt does have a primarily literal significance in modern, secular societies. Dirt can be defined scientifically as the vehicle of bacteria and disease. Ritual taboos and prohibitions have been all but evacuated from modern experience. By placing ‘evil’ in the title of his film, therefore, Welles goes against an absolute secularisation and leads the viewer to contemplate something more evocative of the sacred, so that dirt might also evoke the idea of morally or spiritually ‘unclean’ as well. Moreover, even secular times evoke the question of how one deals appropriately with a corpse, such as the one Quinlan will become when tumbles backwards into the sludge and murky water of the rubbish dump.

The scenario, then, plays on the various meanings of border – not only on the geographical border between Mexico and the U.S., but also on the border between criminality and law enforcement, friendship and betrayal (cf. the relationship between

Quinlan and offsider, Pete Menzies), fact and fiction (as relates, for example, to Quinlan's biography and in particular to the death of his wife), the moral and the immoral (cf. actions of Mexican drugs detective, Ramon Vargas, in collecting evidence against Quinlan), violence and non-violence (cf. Quinlan's actions in apprehending and interrogating suspects), justice and injustice. Thus, when the investigating authorities have responsibility for crime committed on one or other side of the border, it is a matter of jurisdictions. For the law, the maintenance of borders is fundamental. Justice, though, might be another matter.

Ramon (Mike) Vargas, with his wife, Susan, crosses the Mexican border into the US just before the fatal dynamite bombing of businessman, Rudi Linnaker and girl friend's car. Vargas, being in the US at that moment, is out of his bailiwick and has to face Quinlan, who is in his. Later, however, Quinlan has to come to Vargas's hotel room to face accusations of corruption. Quinlan is then out of his comfort zone, a fact signified by Quinlan accidentally squashing a pigeon's egg which dribbles down the front of his suit (an event of abjection as the egg becomes dirt on Quinlan's clothing). Quinlan, however, also enters Mexico – moves out of his jurisdiction – in the interest of 'justice'. One bends – transgresses? – the rules, then, supposedly in pursuit of justice. But when he is caught out by Vargas, who twigs that the dynamite evidence against suspect Sanchez has been planted in the shoe box, Quinlan attempts, with the help of the under-world Grandis family to frame Vargas's wife, Susan (and, by implication, Vargas himself), as a drug addict (Joe Grandi, the father, is finally murdered by Quinlan). Quinlan then reveals himself to be ultimately self-serving, even though he proclaims that the 'fine print' of the law should not be allowed to stand in the way of capturing criminals. Quinlan claims to

be breaking rules and crossing boundaries in the interest of the greater good – of justice. In any case, Quinlan’s personal tragedy, as he tells it – his wife having been strangled by a still unknown assailant – suggests that he is barely able to pursue the course of justice because, despite a rebellious persona, deep down, Quinlan is racked by self-pity. His claim to be pursuing justice thus rings hollow.

But is Quinlan a totally abject figure as a corrupt police officer wallowing in the dirt? In a number of respects the answer is ‘yes’. To begin with, he tries to frame Vargas because the latter has evidence of Quinlan’s penchant for framing suspects. It is in revenge for Vargas attempting to bring evidence of his corruption to the notice of his superior and the district attorney that the Grandis are employed to administer drugs to Vargas’s wife while she is staying in their hotel. Uncle Joe Grandi thinks that he is working on an equal basis with Quinlan in the effort to discredit Vargas, when, in the same room where Vargas’s doped up wife is lying, Quinlan strangles Uncle Joe after alerting the loyal Pete Menzies.

Quinlan is abject, not just for what he does – for Vargas uncovers the corruption and Menzies finally turns against him – but also for what he is: large and oily, greedy, dirty: when Quinlan finally shoots Pete, he, in a phobic manner, scrubs off the blood in the polluted water of the rubbish dump – blood, like saliva, being one of the key fluids generating prohibitions. Earlier, we recalled the scene where, while facing his accusers, Quinlan had casually found a pigeon egg on the window sill of Vargas’s hotel room and then had clumsily broken it over his suit front in the kind of gesture that Welles seems to relish.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> In *Citizen Kane* (1941), for example, Kane, in the posthumous newsreel footage, accidentally pours cement over himself when turning the ‘first sod’ of a new building. In the same film, the crucial scene

The water runs right through the rubbish tip, the place where Quinlan himself finally ends up after Pete, mortally wounded, fatally shoots him. Quinlan ends up in the detritus and rubbish: his body, being on the border between inside and outside social life, should be the subject of ritual as protection against the negative force of abjection. Pete's blood again drips on Quinlan, who can't wash it off this time. And so Quinlan ends up in the shit. Tanya (Marlene Dietrich), owner of the bar with the player piano, and with whom, we are led to believe, Quinlan long ago had a relationship, asks whether someone will retrieve the Quinlan's bloated body – not just leave it there like another piece of rubbish. In effect, Quinlan, the corpse, requires ritualised attention in order that he not be the personification of abjection which his actions led him perilously close to becoming.

Not justice, not the law, not friendship or loyalty, but violence finally rules the day in Welles's film. Of the relationship between the image and violence, Jean-Luc Nancy has written: 'Violence always appears in an image' (Nancy 2003). Whether or not this is true, it is clear that, historically, violence and the image have gone together. The question now is to investigate the ontological status of their relationship, a relationship that is bound to include transgression and the sacred, if not crime culture.

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where Kane meets his second wife, Susan, is prefaced by Kane being almost totally splattered with mud from a passing vehicle.

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