

Obscene, Object, Traumatic*

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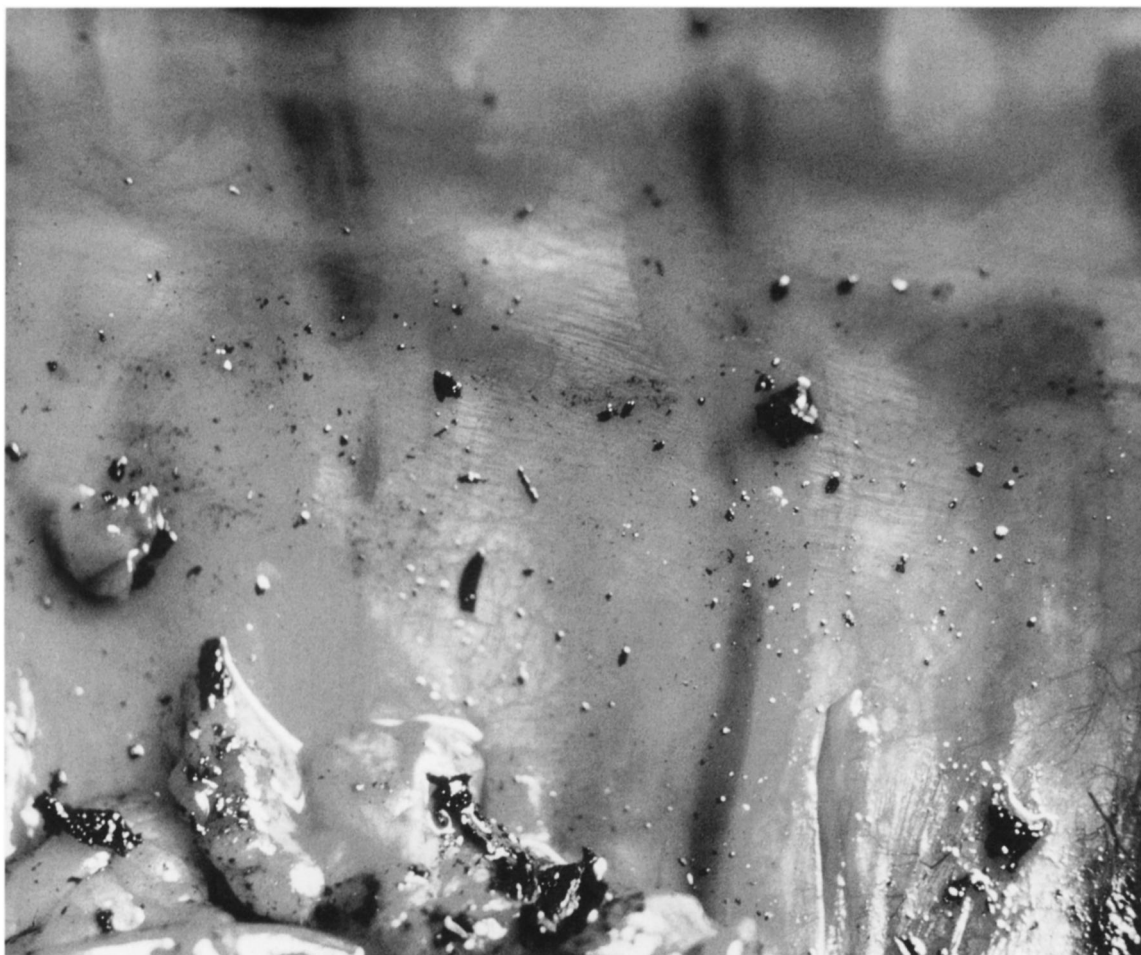
In contemporary art and theory, let alone in contemporary fiction and film, there is a general shift in conceptions of the real: *from the real understood as an effect of representation to the real understood as an event of trauma*. There are several ways to think about this shift, yet as it bespeaks a pervasive turn to psychoanalysis in critical culture, I want to graph it here in its terms—specifically in relation to the Lacanian discussion of the gaze in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*.

This is a notorious text, of course, much cited but little understood (so little that I will risk another résumé). For example, there may well be a male gaze, and no doubt capitalist spectacle is constructed from a masculinist perspective, but there is little brief for such arguments in *this* seminar of Lacan. For here the gaze is not embodied in a subject at all, at least not in the first instance. To an extent like Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* (1943), Lacan distinguishes between the look (or the eye) and the gaze, and to an extent like Merleau-Ponty in *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), he locates this gaze *in the world*. As with language in Lacan, then, so with the gaze: it preexists the subject, who, “looked at from all sides,” is but a “stain” in “the spectacle of the world.”¹ Thus positioned, the Lacanian subject feels the gaze as a threat, as if it queried him or her, and so it is that “the gaze, *qua objet a*, may come to symbolize this central lack expressed in the phenomenon of castration” (77).

Even more than Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, then, Lacan challenges the presumed transparency of the subject in sight. His account of the gaze mortifies this subject, especially so in the famous anecdote of the sardine can. Afloat on the sea and aglint in the sun, this can seems to look at the young Lacan in the fishing boat “at the level of the point of light, the point at which everything that looks at me is situated” (95). Thus seen as (s)he sees, pictured as (s)he pictures,

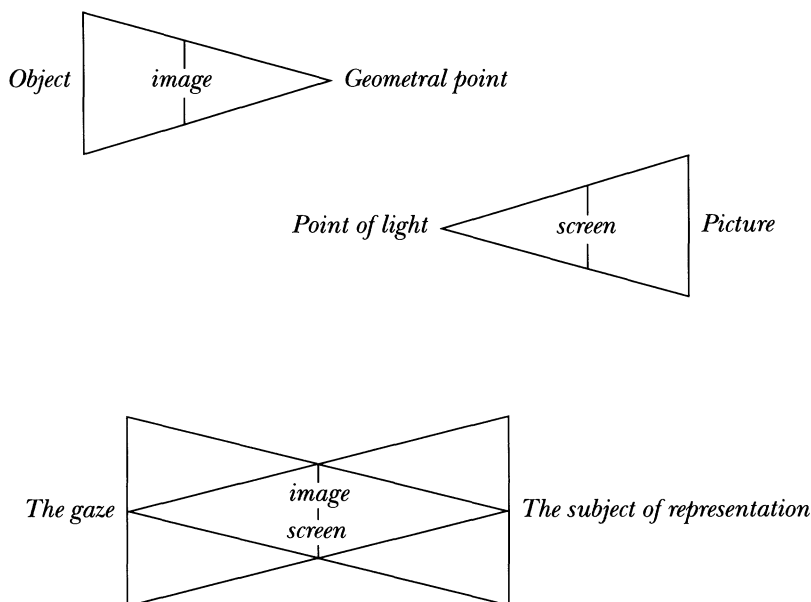
* This very partial lexicon of contemporary art and theory is extrapolated from *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), where a much more complete discussion of these terms can be found.

1. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), pp. 72, 75; all subsequent references in the text.



*Andres Serrano. The Morgue
(Burnt to Death III). 1992.*

the Lacanian subject is fixed in a double position, and this leads Lacan to superimpose on the usual cone of vision that emanates from the subject another cone that emanates from the object, at the point of light. It is this regard that he calls the gaze.



The first cone is familiar from Renaissance treatises on perspective: the object focused as an image for the subject at a geometral point of viewing. But, Lacan adds immediately, "I am not simply that punctiform being located at the geometral point from which the perspective is grasped. No doubt, in the depths of my eye, the picture is painted. The picture, certainly, is in my eye. But I, I am in the picture" (96).² That is, the subject is also under the regard of the object, photographed (as it were) by its light, pictured by its gaze: thus the superimposition of the two cones, with the object also at the point of the light (now called the gaze), the subject also at the point of the picture (now called the subject of representation), and the image also in line with the screen.

2. Curiously, the Sheridan translation adds a "not" ("But I am not in the picture") where the original reads "Mais moi, je suis dans le tableau" (*Seminar XI* [Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1973], p. 89). This addition has abetted the mistaking of the place of the subject mentioned in the next note. Lacan is clear enough on this point; e.g., "the first [triangular system] is that which, in the geometral field, puts in our place the subject of representation, and the second is that which turns *me* into a picture" (105).

The meaning of this last term, the screen, is obscure. I understand it to stand for the cultural reserve of which every image is one instance. Call it the conventions of art, the schemata of representation, the codes of visual culture, this screen mediates the object-gaze for the subject. But it also *protects* the subject from this object-gaze, for it captures the gaze, “pulsatile, dazzling and spread out” (89), and tames it in an image.³ This last formulation is crucial. For Lacan, animals are caught in the gaze of the world; they are only on display there. Humans are not so reduced to this “imaginary capture” (103), for we have access to the symbolic—in this case to the screen as the site of picture-making and viewing, where we can manipulate and moderate the gaze. In this way the screen allows the subject, at the point of the picture, to behold the object, at the point of light. Otherwise it would be impossible, for to see without this screen would be to be blinded by the gaze or touched by the real.

Thus, even as the gaze may trap the subject, the subject may tame the gaze. This is the function of the screen: to negotiate a *laying down* of the gaze as in a laying down of a weapon. Note the atavistic tropes of preying and taming, battling and negotiating; the gaze is given a strange agency here, and the subject is positioned in a paranoid way.⁴ Indeed, Lacan imagines the gaze not only as maleficent but as violent, a force that can arrest, even kill, if it is not disarmed

3. Some readers place the subject in the position of the screen, perhaps on the basis of this statement: “And if I am anything in the picture, it is always in the form of the screen, which I earlier called the stain, the spot” (97). The subject is a screen in the sense that, looked at from all sides, (s)he blocks the light of the world, casts a shadow, is a “stain” (paradoxically, it is this screening that permits the subject to see at all). But this screen is different from the image-screen, and to place the subject only there is to contradict the superimposition of the two cones wherein the subject is both viewer and picture. The subject is an agent of the image-screen, not one with it. In my reading, then, the gaze is not already semiotic, as it is for Norman Bryson in *Tradition and Desire: From David to Delacroix* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). In some respects his account improves on Lacan, who, through Merleau-Ponty, renders the gaze almost animistic. Yet to read the gaze as already semiotic may be to tame it before the fact, and indeed, for Bryson, it is the gaze that is benign, “a luminous plenitude,” and the screen that “mortifies” rather than protects the subject (“The Gaze in the Expanded Field,” in *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hal Foster [Seattle: Bay Press, 1988], p. 92).

4. In “The Gaze in the Expanded Field” Bryson argues that, however threatened by the gaze, the subject of the gaze is also confirmed by its very alterity. (On paranoia as the last refuge of the subject, see Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990], pp. 179–99.) As Bryson notes, other models of visibility are also tinged with paranoia—the male gaze, surveillance, spectacle, simulation, and so on. What produces this paranoia, and what might it serve—that is, besides this paradoxical in/security of the subject?

On the atavism of the nexus of gaze, prey, and paranoia, consider this remark of Philip K. Dick: “Paranoia, in some respects, I think, is a modern-day development of an ancient, archaic sense that animals still have—quarry-type animals—that they’re being watched. . . . I say paranoia is an atavistic sense. It’s a lingering sense, that we had long ago, when we were—our ancestors were—very vulnerable to predators, and this sense tells them they’re being watched. And they’re being watched probably by something that’s going to get them. . . . And often my characters have this feeling. But what really I’ve done is, I have atavised their society. That although it’s set in the future, in many ways they’re living—there is a retrogressive quality in their lives, you know? They’re living like our ancestors did. I mean, the hardware is in the future, the scenery’s in the future, but the situations are really from the past” (extract from a 1974 interview used as an epigraph to *The Collected Stories of Philip K. Dick*, vol. 2 [New York: Carol Publishing, 1990]).

first.⁵ At its more urgent, then, picture-making is apotropaic: its gestures (think of Expressionist painting) are made to arrest the gaze before the gaze can arrest us. At its more "Apollonian" (101), picture-making is placating: its perfections (think of Neoclassical painting) are intended to pacify the gaze, to "relax" the viewer from its grip. Such is aesthetic contemplation according to Lacan: some art may attempt a *trompe l'oeil*, a tricking of the eye, but all art aspires to a *dompte-regard*, a taming of the gaze.

I want to suggest that much contemporary art refuses this age-old mandate to pacify the gaze, to unite the imaginary and the symbolic against the real. *It is as if this art wanted the gaze to shine, the object to stand, the real to exist, in all the glory (or the horror) of its pulsatile desire, or at least to evoke this sublime condition.* To this end it moves not only to attack the image but to tear at the screen, or to suggest that it is already torn. This shift from the image-screen, the focus of most postmodernist art in the 1980s, to the object-gaze, the focus of most postmodernist art in the 1990s, is registered most clearly in the art of Cindy Sherman. Indeed, if we divide her work into three rough groups, it almost seems to move across the three main positions of the Lacanian diagram.

In her early work of 1975–82, from the film stills through the rear-projections to the centerfolds and the color tests, Sherman evokes the subject under the gaze, the subject-as-picture, which is also the principal site of other feminist work in appropriation art. Her subjects see, of course, but they are much more *seen*, captured by the gaze. Often, in the film stills and the centerfolds, this gaze seems to come from another subject, with whom the viewer may be implicated; sometimes, in the rear projections, it seems to come from the spectacle of the world; yet sometimes, too, it seems to come from within. Here Sherman shows her female subjects as self-surveilled, not in phenomenological reflexivity (*I see myself seeing myself*) but in psychological estrangement (*I am not what I imagined myself to be*). Thus in the distance between the made-up woman and her mirrored face in *Untitled Film Still #2* (1977), Sherman points to the gap between imagined and actual body-images that yawns within each of us, the gap of

5. Lacan relates this maleficent gaze to the evil eye, which he sees as an agent of disease and death, with the power to blind and to castrate: "It is a question of dispossessing the evil eye of the gaze, in order to ward it off. The evil eye is the *fascinum* [spell], it is that which has the effect of arresting movement and, literally, of killing life. . . . It is precisely one of the dimensions in which the power of the gaze is exercised directly" (118). For Lacan the evil eye is universal, and no equivalent beneficent eye exists, not even in the Bible. Yet much Christian art is fixed on the gazes of the Madonna upon the Child and the Child upon us. Typically, Lacan focuses instead on the exemplum of envy in Saint Augustine, who tells of his murderous feelings of exclusion at the sight of his little brother at the maternal breast: "Such is true envy—the envy that makes the subject pale before the image of a completeness closed upon itself, before the idea that the *petit a*, the separated *a* from which he is hanging, may be for another the possession that gives satisfaction" (116). Here Lacan can be contrasted with Walter Benjamin, who imagines the gaze as auratic and replete, from within the dyad of mother and child, rather than as anxious and invidious, from the position of the excluded third. Indeed, in Benjamin one discovers the beneficent eye that Lacan denies, a magical gaze that implicitly reverses fetishism and undoes castration, a redemptive aura based on the memory of a primal relationship with the maternal body. For more on this distinction, see my *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), pp. 193–205.

Cindy Sherman. Untitled Film Still #2.
1977.



(mis)recognition that we attempt to fill with fashion models and entertainment images every day and every night of our lives.

In her middle work of 1983–90, from the fashion photographs through the fairy-tale illustrations and the art-history portraits to the disaster pictures, Sherman moves to the image-screen, to its repertoire of representations. (This is a matter of focus only: she addresses the image-screen in the early work too, and the subject-as-picture hardly disappears in this middle work.) The fashion and art history series take up two files from the image-screen that have affected our self-fashionings profoundly. Here Sherman parodies vanguard design with a long runway of fashion victims, and pillories art history with a long gallery of butt-ugly aristocrats (in ersatz Renaissance, Baroque, Rococo, and Neoclassical types). But the play turns perverse when, in some fashion photographs, the gap between imagined and actual body-images becomes psychotic (one or two sitters seem to have no ego awareness at all) and when, in some art history photographs, deidealization is pushed to the point of desublimation: with scarred sacks for breasts and funky carbuncles for noses, these bodies break down the upright lines of proper representation, indeed of proper subjecthood.⁶

This turn to the grotesque is marked in her fairy-tale and disaster images,

6. Rosalind Krauss conceives this desublimation as an attack on the sublimated verticality of the traditional art image in *Cindy Sherman* (New York: Rizzoli, 1993). She, too, discusses the work in relation to the Lacanian diagram of visuality, albeit in a different way, as does Kaja Silverman in *Thresholds of the Visible* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

Cindy Sherman. Untitled #224. 1990.



some of which show horrific accidents of birth and freaks of nature (a young woman with a pig snout, a doll with the head of a dirty old man). Here, as often in horror movies and bedtime stories alike, horror means, first and foremost, horror of maternity, of the maternal body made strange, even repulsive, in repression. This body is the primary site of the *abject* as well, a category of (non)being defined by Julia Kristeva as neither subject nor object, but before one is the first (before full separation from the mother) or after one is the second (as a corpse given over to objecthood).⁷ Sherman evokes these extreme conditions in some disaster scenes suffused with signifiers of menstrual blood and sexual discharge, vomit and shit, decay and death. Such images tend toward a representation of the body turned inside out, of the subject literally abjected, thrown out. But this is also the condition of the outside turned in, of the invasion of the subject-as-picture by the object-gaze. At this point some images pass beyond the abject, which is often tied to particular meanings, not only toward the *informe*, a condition described by Bataille where significant form dissolves because the fundamental distinction between figure and ground, self and other, is lost, but also toward the *obscene*, where the object-gaze is presented *as if there were no scene to stage it, no frame of representation to contain it, no screen*.⁸

7. Or, rather, intimations of such conditions. See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982); all subsequent references in the text.

8. Regarding these differences, see "Conversation on the *Informe* and the Abject," *October* 67 (Winter 1993), and Rosalind Krauss, "*Informe* without Conclusion" in this issue.

Cindy Sherman. Untitled #190. 1989.



This is the domain of her work after 1991 as well, the civil war and sex pictures, which are punctuated by close-ups of simulated damaged and/or dead body parts and sexual and/or excretory body parts respectively. Sometimes the screen seems so torn that the object-gaze not only invades the subject-as-picture but overwhelms it. And in a few of the disaster and civil war images we glimpse what it might be like to occupy the impossible third position in the Lacanian diagram, to behold the pulsatile gaze, even to touch the obscene object, without a screen for protection. In one image (*Untitled #190*) Sherman gives this evil eye a horrific visage of its own.

In this scheme of things the impulse to erode the subject and to tear at the screen has driven Sherman from the early work, where the subject is caught in the gaze, through the middle work, where it is invaded by the gaze, to the recent work, where it is obliterated by the gaze. But this double attack on subject and screen is not hers alone; it occurs on several fronts in contemporary art, where it is waged, almost openly, in the service of the real.

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“Obscene” does not mean “against the scene,” but it suggests an attack on the scene of representation, on the image-screen. As such it also suggests a way to understand the aggression against the visual so evident in contemporary art and alternative culture—as an imagined rupture of the image-screen, an impossible

opening onto the real.⁹ For the most part, however, this aggression is thought under the label of the abject, which has a different psychoanalytic valence.

According to the canonical definition of Kristeva, the abject is what I must get rid of in order to be an I at all. It is a phantasmatic substance not only alien to the subject but intimate with it—too much so in fact, and this overproximity produces panic in the subject. In this way the abject touches on the fragility of our boundaries, of the spatial distinction between our insides and outsides as well as of the temporal passage between the maternal body and the paternal law. Both spatially and temporally, then, abjection is a condition in which subjecthood is troubled, “where meaning collapses” (2); hence its attraction for avant-garde artists and writers who want to disturb these orderings of subject and society.

The notion is rich in ambiguities, on which the cultural-political valence of abject art may depend.¹⁰ Some are familiar by now: Can the abject be represented at all? If it is opposed to culture, can it be exposed in culture? If it is unconscious, can it be made conscious and remain abject? In other words, can there be a *conscientious abjection*, or is this all there can be? Indeed, can abject art ever escape an instrumental, indeed moralistic, use of the abject?¹¹

A crucial ambiguity in Kristeva is the slippage between the operation *to abject* and the condition *to be abject*. For her the operation to abject is fundamental to the maintenance of subjectivity and society, while the condition to be abject is subversive of both formations. Is the abject, then, disruptive of subjective and social orders or foundational of them, a crisis in these orders or a confirmation of them? If subjectivity and society abject the alien within, is abjection not a regulatory operation? That is, is abjection to regulation what transgression is to

9. This is manifest, for example, in the insistence on the factuality of the body as against the fantasy of transcendence in spectacle, virtual reality, cyberspace, and the like—an insistence that, again, is very different from the postmodernist delight in the image world where it was often assumed that the real had succumbed to the simulacral.

The attack on the image-screen has assumed other guises in other periods; see, for example, Louis Marin on the ambition of Caravaggio “to destroy painting” in *To Destroy Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). In this century this ambition is especially active in Dada and décollage (where spectacle is targeted). Such antivisuality may be related to the paranoia of the gaze noted above.

10. A fundamental ambiguity is the relation of subject and society, the psychological and the anthropological, the inside (as it were) and the outside. With her recourse to the work of Mary Douglas (especially *Purity and Danger*) Kristeva tends to align, indeed to conflate, the two, with the result that a disturbance of the one is automatically, traumatically, a disturbance of the other. This does not contribute much to the political clarity of critiques of the subject nor the psychological clarity of critiques of the social.

There are many readings of the Kristevan abject. For a critical elaboration, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993). Kristeva tends to primordialize disgust; to map abjection onto homophobia may be to primordialize it in turn. But then for many subjects both disgust and homophobia are primordial.

11. This points to a parallel question: Can there be an obscene representation that is not pornographic? Today it is important to insist on the difference, which might be thought along these lines: The obscene is a paradoxical representation without a scene to stage the object so that it appears too close to the viewer. The pornographic, on the other hand, is a conventional representation that distances the object so that the viewer is safeguarded as a voyeur.

taboo—an exceeding that is also a completing?¹² Or can the *condition* of abjection be mimed in a way that calls out, in order to disturb, the *operation* of abjection?

In her account of modernist writing, Kristeva views abjection as conservative, even defensive. “Edged with the sublime” (11), the abject is used to test the limits of sublimation, but the task remains to sublimate the abject, to purify it. Whether or not one agrees with this account, Kristeva does intimate a cultural shift in our own time. “In a world in which the Other has collapsed,” she states enigmatically, the task of the artist is no longer to sublimate the abject, to elevate it, but to plumb the abject, to fathom “the bottomless ‘primacy’ constituted by primal repression” (18). In a world in which the Other has collapsed: Kristeva implies that the paternal law that underwrites our social order is in crisis.¹³ In terms of the visibility outlined here, this implies a crisis in the image-screen as well; and some artists do attack it, while others, under the assumption that it is torn, probe behind it for the obscene object-gaze of the real. Meanwhile, in terms of the abject, still other artists explore the repressing of the maternal body said to underlie the symbolic order so as to exploit the disruptive effects of its material and/or metaphorical rem(a)inders.

Obviously the condition of image-screen and symbolic order alike is all-important; locally the valence of abject art also depends on it. If it is deemed intact, then the attack on the image-screen retains a transgressive value. However, if it is deemed torn, then such transgression is beside the point, and this old vocation of the avant-garde is at an end. But there is a third option as well, and that is to reformulate this vocation, to rethink transgression not as a rupture produced by a heroic avant-garde posited outside the symbolic order, but as a fracture traced by a strategic avant-garde positioned ambivalently within this order.¹⁴ In this view the goal of the avant-garde is not to break with the symbolic order absolutely (this old dream is dispelled), but to expose it in crisis, to register its points not only of breakdown but of breakthrough, the new possibilities that such a crisis opens up.

For the most part, however, abject art has tended in two other directions. The first is to identify with the abject, to approach it somehow—to probe the wound of trauma, to touch the obscene object-gaze of the real. The second is to

12. “Transgression does not deny the taboo,” runs the famous formulation of Bataille, “but transcends and completes it.” *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* (1957), trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986), p. 63. There is a third option: that the abject is double and that its transgressive value is a function of this ambiguity. (Bataille, no less than Freud, was drawn to such double, adialectical terms.)

13. But then when is it not? The notion of hegemony suggests that it is always under threat, if not in crisis. In this regard the notion of the symbolic order may project more solidity than the social possesses.

14. Radical art and theory often celebrate failed figures, especially deviant masculinities, as transgressive of the symbolic order, but this avant-gardist logic of an inside and an outside assumes (affirms?) a stable order against which these figures are posed. In *My Own Private Germany: Daniel Paul Schreber's Secret History of Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), Eric Santner offers a brilliant rethinking of this logic: he relocates transgression within the symbolic order, at a point of crisis, which he defines as “symbolic authority in a state of emergency.”

Kiki Smith. *Blood Pool*. 1992.
(Photo: Ellen Page Wilson.)



represent the condition of abjection in order to provoke its operation—to catch abjection in the act, to make it reflexive, even repellent in its own right. The danger, of course, is that this mimesis may confirm a given abjection. Just as the old transgressive Surrealist once called out for the priestly police, so an abject artist (like Andres Serrano) may call out for an evangelical senator (like Jesse Helms), who then completes the work, as it were, negatively. Moreover, as left and right may agree on the social representatives of the abject, they may shore each other up in a public exchange of disgust, and this spectacle may inadvertently support the normativity of image-screen and symbolic order alike.¹⁵

These strategies of abject art are thus problematic, as they were in Surrealism over sixty years ago. Surrealism also used the abject to test sublimation; indeed, it claimed the point where desublimatory impulses confront sublimatory imperatives as its own.¹⁶ Yet it was at this point too that Surrealism broke down,

15. The obscene may have this effect too. Many contemporary images render the obscene thematic and so safe, in the service of the screen, not against it—which is what most abject art does, against its own wishes. Indeed, the obscene may be the ultimate apotropaic shield *against* the real—partaking of it in order to protect against it.

16. “Everything tends to make us believe,” Breton wrote in the *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* (1930), “that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions. Now, search as one may one will never find any other motivating force in the activities of the surrealists than the hope of finding and fixing this point” (in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972], pp. 123–24). Signal works of modernism emerge at this point between sublimation and desublimation (there are



Andres Serrano. *Madonna and Child*.
1987.

that it split into the two principal factions headed by André Breton and Georges Bataille. According to Breton, Bataille was an “excrement-philosopher” who refused to rise above big toes, mere matter, sheer shit, to raise the low to the high.¹⁷ For Bataille, Breton was a “juvenile victim” involved in an Oedipal game, an “Icarian pose” assumed less to undo the law than to provoke its punishment: despite his celebration of desire Breton was as committed to sublimation as the next aesthete.¹⁸ Elsewhere Bataille termed this aesthetic *le jeu des transpositions*, the game of substitutions, and he dismissed it as no match for the power of perversions: “I defy any amateur of painting to love a picture as much as a fetishist loves a shoe.”¹⁹

examples in Picasso, Pollock, Twombly, Eva Hesse, many others). Perhaps they are so privileged because we need the tension between the two or, more precisely, because we need this tension to be treated, both incited and soothed, *managed*.

17. See Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, pp. 180–87. At one point Breton charges Bataille with “psychasthenia” (more on which below).

18. See Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), pp. 39–40. For more on this opposition, see *Compulsive Beauty*, pp. 110–14.

19. Bataille, “L’Esprit moderne et le jeu des transpositions,” *Documents* 8 (1930). The best discussion of Bataille on this score remains Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture*, trans. Betsy Wing (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), especially pp. 98–115. Elsewhere Hollier has specified the fixed aspect of the abject according to Bataille: “It is the *subject* that is abject. That is where his attack on metaphoricity comes in. If you die, you die; you can’t have a substitute. What can’t be substituted is what binds subject and abject together. It can’t simply be a substance. It has to be a substance that addresses a subject, that puts it at risk, in a position from which it cannot move away” (“Conversation on the *Informe* and the Abject”).

I recall this old opposition for the perspective that it offers on abject art today. In a sense Breton and Bataille were both right, at least about each other. Often Breton and company did act like juvenile victims who provoked the paternal law *as if to ensure that it was still there*—at best in a neurotic plea for punishment, at worst in a paranoid demand for order. And this Icarian pose is again assumed by contemporary artists who are almost too eager to talk dirty in the museum, almost too ready to be tweaked by Hilton Kramer or spanked by Jesse Helms. On the other hand, the Bataillean ideal—to opt for the smelly shoe over the beautiful picture, to be fixed in perversion or stuck in abjection—is also adopted by contemporary artists discontent not only with the refinements of sublimation but with the displacements of desire. Is this, then, the option that abject art offers us—Oedipal naughtiness or infantile perversion? To act dirty with the secret wish to be spanked, or to wallow in shit with the secret faith that the most defiled might reverse into the most sacred, the most perverse into the most potent?

This mimesis of regression is pronounced in contemporary art. But, again, it can also be a strategy of perversion—that is, of *père-version*, of a turning from the father that is a twisting of his law. In the early 1990s this defiance was manifested in a general flaunting of shit-substitute (the real thing was rarely found). In Freud the order essential to civilization is opposed to anal eroticism, and in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930) he presents the famous origin myth meant to show us why. The story turns on the erection of man from all fours to two feet, for with this change in posture, according to Freud, came a revolution in sense: smell was degraded and sight privileged, the anal was repressed and the genital pronounced. The rest is history: with his genitals exposed, man was retuned to a sexual frequency that was continuous, not periodic, and he learned shame; and this coming together of sex and shame impelled him to seek a wife, to form a family, to found a civilization, to boldly go where no man had gone before. Wildly heterosexist as this zany tale is, it does reveal a normative conception of civilization—not only as a general sublimation of instincts but as a specific reaction against anal eroticism that is also a specific abjection of (male) homosexuality.²⁰

In this light the shit movement in contemporary art may intend a symbolic reversal of this first step into civilization, of the repression of the anal and the olfactory. As such it may also intend a symbolic reversal of the phallic visuality of the erect body as the primary model of traditional painting and sculpture—the human figure as both subject and frame of representation in Western art. This double defiance of visual sublimation and vertical form is a strong subcurrent in

20. Abjected and/or repressed, these terms are rendered critical, able to disclose the heterosexist aspects of these operations. Yet this logic may accept a reduction of male homosexuality to anal eroticism, and, as with the infantilist parody of the paternal law or the infantilist exploration of the maternal body, it may accept the dominance of the very terms that it opposes.

twentieth-century art (which might be subtitled “Visuality and its Discontents”),²¹ and it is often expressed in a flaunting of anal eroticism. “Anal eroticism finds a narcissistic application in the production of defiance,” Freud wrote in his 1917 essay on the subject; in avant-gardist defiance too, one might add, from the chocolate grinders of Duchamp through the cans of *merde* of Piero Manzoni, to the shitty sculptures of John Miller and the shitty performances of Mike Kelley.²² In contemporary art anal-erotic defiance is often self-conscious, even self-parodic: it may test the anally repressive authority of traditional culture, but it also mocks the anally erotic narcissism of the vanguard rebel-artist. “Let’s Talk About Disobeying” reads one banner emblazoned with a cookie jar by Kelley. “Pants-shitter and Proud of It” reads another that derides the self-congratulation of the institutionally incontinent.²³

However pathetic, this defiance can also be perverse, a twisting of the paternal law of difference—sexual and generational, ethnic and social. Again, this perversion is often performed through a mimetic regression to “the anal universe where all differences are abolished.”²⁴ Such is the fictive space that artists like Miller and Kelley set up for critical play. “We interconnect everything, set up a field,” Kelley has the bunny say to the teddy in *Theory, Garbage, Stuffed Animals, Christ* (1991), “so there is no longer any differentiation.”²⁵ Like Miller, Kelley explores this space where symbols are not yet stable, where “the concepts *faeces* (money, gift), *baby* and *penis* are ill-distinguished from one another and are easily interchangeable.”²⁶ Both artists push this symbolic interchange toward a formal indistinction—push the baby and the penis, as it were, toward the lump of shit. However, this is done not to celebrate mere indistinction but to trouble symbolic difference. *Lumpen*, the German word for “rag” that gives us *Lumpensammler* (the ragpicker that so interested Benjamin) and *Lumpenproletariat* (the mass too ragged to form a class that so interested Marx, “the scum, the leavings, the refuse

21. For an incisive reading of this discontented modernism, see Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), and for a comprehensive history of this antiocular tradition, see Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

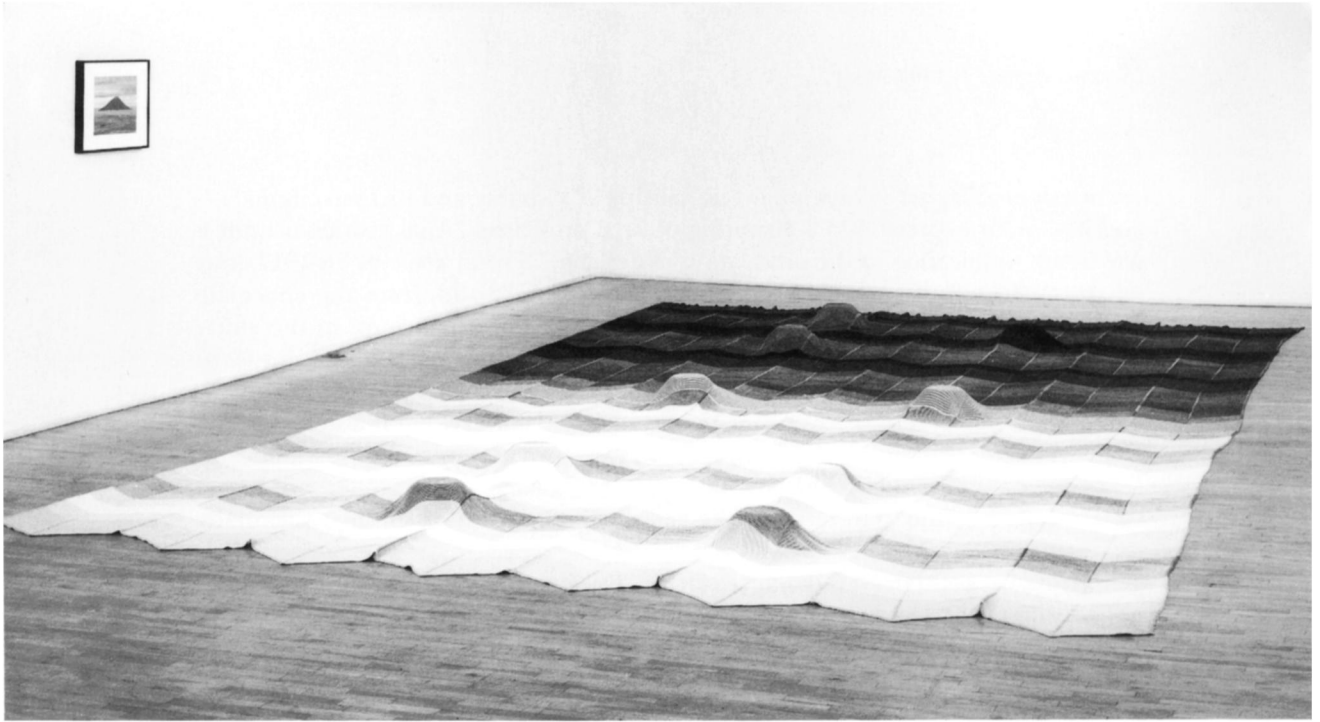
22. Sigmund Freud, “On Transformations of Instinct as Exemplified in Anal Eroticism,” in *On Sexuality*, ed. Angela Richards (London: Penguin, 1977), p. 301. On the primitivism of this avant-gardist defiance, see my “‘Primitive’ Scenes,” *Critical Inquiry* (Winter 1993). Mediations of anal eroticism, as in the “Black Paintings” of Robert Rauschenburg or the early graffiti paintings of Cy Twombly, tend to be more subversive than declarations of anal defiance.

23. Here and elsewhere Kelley pushes infantile defiance toward adolescent dysfunction: “An adolescent is a dysfunctional adult, and art is a dysfunctional reality, as far as I am concerned” (quoted in *Catholic Tastes*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman [New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1994], p. 51).

24. Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, *Creativity and Perversion* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), p. 3. Differences are not abolished in this universe (this formulation tends to the homophobic) so much as transformed. The exemplar of this transformation in contemporary fiction is Dennis Cooper.

25. Mike Kelley, *Theory, Garbage, Stuffed Animals, Christ*, quoted in *Catholic Tastes*, p. 86.

26. Freud, “On Transformations of Instinct,” p. 298. Kelley plays on both psychoanalytic and anthropological intuitions about the interconnection of all these terms—feces, money, gifts, babies, penises. . . .



Mike Kelley. *The Riddle of the Sphinx*.
1991.

of all classes”),²⁷ is a crucial word in the Kelley lexicon, which he develops as a third term between the *informe* (of Bataille) and the abject (of Kristeva). In a sense, he does what Bataille urges: he bases materialism “on psychological or social facts.”²⁸ The result is an art of lumpy things, subjects, and personae that resist shaping, let alone sublimating or redeeming. Unlike the *Lumpen* of Napoleon III, Hitler, or Mussolini, the *Lumpen* of Kelley refuses molding, much less mobilizing.

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Is there a cultural politics here? Often in the general culture of abjection (I mean the culture of slackers and losers, grunge and Generation X) this posture of indifference expresses only a fatigue with the politics of difference. Yet sometimes too this posture seems to intimate a more fundamental fatigue: a strange drive to indistinction, a paradoxical desire to be desireless, a call of regression that goes beyond the infantile to the inorganic.²⁹ In a 1937 text crucial to the Lacanian discussion of the gaze, Roger Caillois, another associate of the

27. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in *Surveys from Exile*, ed. David Fernbach (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 197.

28. Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, p. 15.

29. What was the music of Nirvana about if not the Nirvana principle, a lullaby droned to the dreamy beat of the death drive? See my “Cult of Despair,” *New York Times*, December 30, 1994.

Bataille Surrealists, considered this drive to indistinction in terms of visibility—specifically of insects assimilated into space through mimicry.³⁰ This assimilation, Caillois argued, allows for no agency, let alone subjecthood (these organisms are “dispossessed of [this] privilege”), which he likened to the condition of extreme schizophrenics:

To these dispossessed souls, space seems to be a devouring force. Space pursues them, encircles them, digests them in a gigantic phagocytosis [consumption of bacteria]. It ends by replacing them. Then the body separates itself from thought, the individual breaks the boundary of his skin and occupies the other side of his senses. He tries to look at himself from any point whatever in space. He feels himself becoming space, *dark space where things cannot be put*. He is similar, not similar to something, but just *similar*. And he invents spaces of which he is “the convulsive possession.”³¹

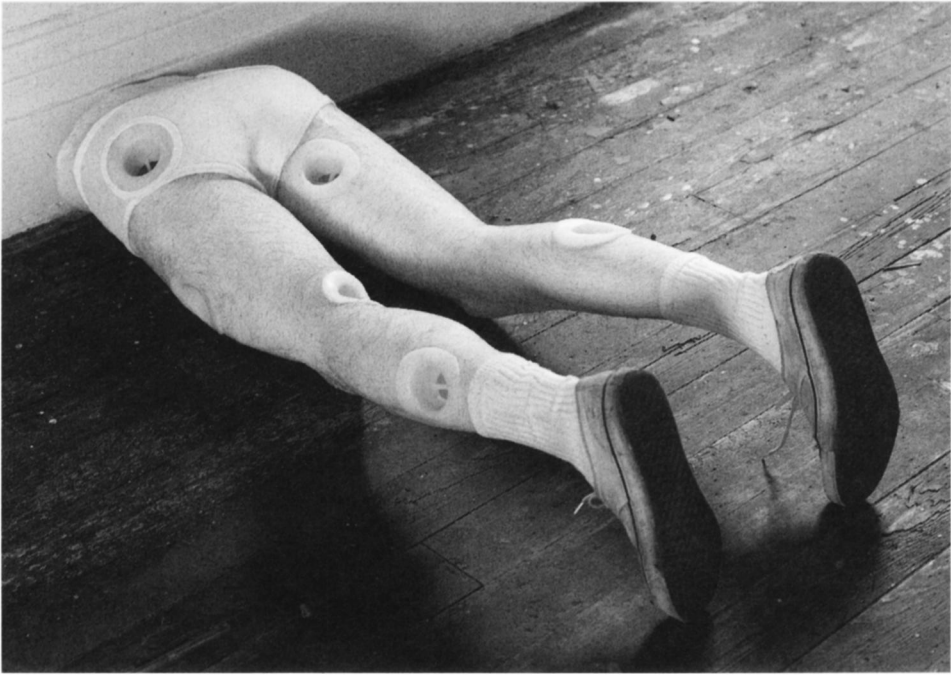
The breaching of the body, the gaze devouring the subject, the subject becoming the space, the state of mere similarity: these are conditions evoked in much art today. But to understand this convulsive possession in its contemporary guise, it must be split into its two constituent parts: on the one hand an ecstasy in the imagined breakdown of the image-screen and/or the symbolic order; on the other hand a horror at this breakdown followed by a despair about it. Early definitions of postmodernism evoked this first, *ecstatic* structure of feeling, sometimes in analogy with schizophrenia. Indeed, for Fredric Jameson the primary symptom of postmodernism was a schizophrenic breakdown in language and time that provoked a compensatory investment in image and space.³² And in the 1980s many artists did indulge in simulacral intensities and ahistorical pastiches. In recent intimations of postmodernism, however, the second, *melancholic* structure of feeling has dominated, and sometimes, as in Kristeva, it too is associated with a symbolic order in crisis. Here artists are drawn not to the highs of the simulacral image but to the lows of the depressive thing. If some high modernists sought to transcend the referential object and some early postmodernists to delight in the sheer image, some later postmodernists want to possess the real thing.

Today this bipolar postmodernism seems pushed toward a qualitative change: some artists appear driven by an ambition, on the one hand, to inhabit a

30. Roger Caillois, “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia,” trans. John Shepley, *October* 31 (Winter 1984). Denis Hollier glosses “psychasthenia” as follows: “a drop in the level of psychic energy, a kind of subjective detumescence, a loss of ego substance, a depressive exhaustion close to what a monk called *acedia*” (“Mimesis and Castration 1937,” *October* 31 [Winter 1984], p. 11).

31. Caillois, “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia,” p. 30.

32. This was first broached in “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983). This ecstatic version cannot be dissociated from the apparent boom of the early 1980s, nor the melancholic version (noted below) from the actual bust of the late 1980s and early 1990s.



Robert Gober. Untitled. 1991–93.

place of total affect and, on the other, to be drained of affect altogether; on the one hand, to possess the obscene vitality of the wound and, on the other, to occupy the radical nihility of the corpse. This oscillation suggests the dynamic of psychic shock parried by protective shield that Freud developed in his discussion of the death drive and Benjamin elaborated in his discussion of Baudelairean modernism—but now placed well beyond the pleasure principle.³³ Pure affect, no affect: *It Hurts, I Can't Feel Anything*.

Why this fascination with trauma, this envy of abjection, today? To be sure, motives exist within art, writing, and theory alike. As I suggested at the outset, there is a dissatisfaction with the textual model of reality—as if the real, repressed in poststructuralist postmodernism, had returned as traumatic. Then too there is a disillusionment with the celebration of desire as an open passport of a mobile subject—as if the real, dismissed by a performative postmodernism, were marshaled against a world of fantasy compromised by consumerism. But obviously there are other forces at work as well: a despair about the persistent AIDS crisis, invasive disease and death, systemic poverty and crime, a destroyed welfare state, indeed a broken social contract (as the rich opt out in revolution

33. See Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961), and Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" (1939), in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1977). This bipolarity of the ecstatic and the abject provides one affinity, sometimes remarked in cultural criticism, between the baroque and the postmodern. Both are drawn toward an ecstatic shattering that is also a traumatic breaking; both fix on the stigma and the stain.

from the top, and as the poor are dropped out in immiseration from the bottom). How one articulates these different forces is a difficult question—perhaps a definitive question for cultural criticism. In any case, together they have driven the contemporary concern with trauma and abjection.

And one result is this: a special truth seems to reside in traumatic or abject states, in diseased or damaged bodies. To be sure, the violated body is often the evidentiary basis of important witnessings to truth, of necessary testimonials against power. But there are dangers with this siting of truth as well, such as the restriction of our political imagination to two camps, the abjector and the abjected, and the assumption that in order not to be counted among sexists and racists one must become the phobic object of such subjects. If there is a subject of history for the culture of abjection at all, it is not the Worker, the Woman, or the Person of Color, but the Corpse. This is a politics of difference pushed beyond indifference, a politics of alterity pushed to nihilism.³⁴ “Everything goes dead,” says the Kelley teddy. “Like us,” responds the bunny.³⁵ But is this point of nihilism a critical epitome of impoverishment where power cannot penetrate, or is it a place from which power emanates in a strange new form? Is abjection a refusal of power or its reinvention in a strange new guise, or is it somehow both these events at once?³⁶ Finally, is abjection a space-time beyond redemption, or is it the fastest route for contemporary rogue-saints to grace?

Today there is a general tendency to redefine experience, individual and historical, in terms of trauma: a *lingua trauma* is spoken in popular culture, academic discourse, and art and literary worlds. Many contemporary novelists (e.g., Paul Auster, Dennis Cooper, Steve Erickson, Denis Johnson, Ian McEwan, Tim O’Brien) and filmmakers (e.g., Atom Egoyan in *Exotica*, Terry Gilliam in *12 Monkeys*, the Monty Python version of *La Jetée*) conceive experience in this paradoxical modality: experience that is *not* experienced, at least not punctually, that comes too early or too late, that must be acted out compulsively or reconstructed after the fact, almost analytically. Often in these novels and films narrative runs in reverse or moves very erratically, and the peripeteia is an event that happened long ago or not at all (per the logic of trauma this is sometimes ambiguous).

On the one hand, especially in art, writing, and theory, this trauma discourse continues the poststructuralist critique of the subject by other means, for strictly in a *psychoanalytic* register there is no subject of trauma—the position is evacuated—so the critique of the subject seems most radical here. On the other hand, especially in therapy culture, talk shows, and memoir-mongering, trauma is

34. To question this posture of indifference, however, is not to dismiss the possibility of a noncommunitarian politics, a subject of much provocative work in both cultural criticism (e.g., Leo Bersani) and political theory (e.g., Jean-Luc Nancy).

35. Kelley quoted in *Catholic Tastes*, p. 86.

36. “Self-divestiture in these artists,” Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit write of Samuel Beckett, Mark Rothko, and Alain Resnais in *Arts of Impoverishment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), “is also a renunciation of cultural authority.” Yet then they ask: “Might there, however, be a ‘power’ in such impotence?” (pp. 8–9). If so, it is a power they seem to advocate rather than to question.

treated as an event that guarantees the subject, and in this *psychologistic* register the subject, however disturbed, rushes back as survivor, witness, testifier. Here a traumatic subject does indeed exist, and it has absolute authority, for one cannot challenge the trauma of another: one can only believe it, even identify with it, or not. *In trauma discourse, then, the subject is evacuated and elevated at once.* And in this way it serves as a magical resolution of contradictory imperatives in contemporary culture: the imperative of deconstructive analyses on the one hand, and the imperative of multicultural histories on the other; the imperative to acknowledge the disrupted subjectivity that comes of a broken society on the one hand, and the imperative to affirm identity at all costs on the other. Today, thirty years after the death of the author, we are witness to a strange rebirth of the author as zombie, to a paradoxical condition of *absentee authority*.