‘The w/whole and the abject’

The subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, ‘inside' the subject as its own founding repudiation. (Butler 1994: 3)

My wish is that every subject’s encounter with the death drive might become in time more of an everyday occurrence --that the typical male subject, like his female counterpart, might learn to live with lack. (Silverman 1992: 65)

Since the middle of the 1990s French cinema has seen the resurgence of a version of the realism once associated with the 1970s. Frequently focusing on life in the provinces, especially the North, rather than in Paris, and on characters who are working-class or petty bourgeois, what we might call inner-city youths, or out-of-work dysfunctional men, these films have usually been praised by critics, if film festival prizes are anything to go by. Some, it is true, have criticised what they see as a complacent miserabilist tendency, fashionably, and cynically, seasoned with strong cinematic effects. A critic writing in Le Monde Diplomatique, for example, complains about what he sees as the facile sloganising of many of these films, which in cinematographic terms oscillate between ‘the darkest and most despairing naturalism and the most affected mannerism and formalism’; they ‘reject any political position’; and he claims that their ‘fascination for the abject and the sordid show an undeniable hatred for the people’, who, in his view, are no more than caricatures (Pardo 2000: 28). 1 The films he takes to task are Sombre (Grandrieux, 1998), La Vie de Jésus (Dumont, 1997), L’Humanité (Dumont, 1999), Assassin(s) (Kassovitz, 1997), Le Vie rêvée des anges (Zonca, 1998), Amants criminels (Ozon, 1999), Romance (Breillat, 1999). The film heading his list, however, is Gaspar Noé’s Seul contre tous (1998). The director, according to Pardo, ‘feels a fascisising [fascistoïde] complacency for the sordid and the abject’ (Pardo 2000: 28). Others have commented on the parallels between the butcher’s angry and scabrous inner monologue and the work of the French novelist Céline, used by Kristeva as one of the clearest expressions of the abject in literature (see for example Eisenbach 1999: 27; Péron 1999). 2

In this paper, I would like to explore two issues arising from these opening comments. My contention, following the implications of my two epigraphs, will be that the sordid, for want of a better word, is both essential and moral. I mean by this that such films are inescapable, because they are a necessary part of subject-positioning (as Butler implies in the first epigraph), and they are can be seen in a moral light, as implied by the second epigraph). I shall explore these issues by focusing on Noé’s short Carne, and the later Seul contre tous, which is a continuation of the biography of the protagonist of Carne. Both of these films were applauded by the majority of reviewers, and won a number of prizes. 3 The more general comments

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1 All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.
2 Although Noé claims not to have read Céline (Rouyer 1999: 31).
3 Carne won the International Critics Week Prize at Cannes, the Georges Sadoul Prize (for young filmmakers), and the Franco-American Prize of Avignon; Seul contre tous again won the International Critics Week Prize at Cannes, as well as Best Screenplay at the Catalonian International Film Festival, and the Golden Bayard at the Namur International Festival of French-Speaking Film. Generally, most
made by Pardo were also made about Seul contre tous by others: ‘a disquieting friction between excessive naturalism in the behaviour of the characters and rigorous stylization of atmosphere and décor’ (Loiseau 1999: 2). First, I would like to explore the issue of the abject. Most will associate the term in film studies with Barbara Creed’s Kristeva-based analysis of the horror film (see Creed 1993), whereas here I would like to suggest that it may be a fruitful approach to take in relation to these ‘films fascinated by the sordid’ to reprise the title of Pardo’s article, and more particularly with the twisted masculinity of Noé’s films. For this reason, I shall refer not just to the work of Julia Kristeva, but also to Calvin Thomas’s notion of ‘scatontological anxiety’. Second, following Robyn Longhurst’s work in social geography and Steven Shaviro’s in critical theory, I would like to show how part of that radical potential is created as a result of the interplay between something he sees as separated, what he calls naturalism and mannerism. In the final part of this essay, I shall, with reference to what I think are two key, although unmentioned intertexts, Le Boucher (Claude Chabrol, 1970), and La Haine (Mathieu Kassovitz, 1995), consider how the films are too cleverly derisive, and that their radical potential is thereby compromised, as it is by incest, but perhaps not in the way suggested by reviewers.

First, however, a brief synopsis of the films is in order. Both films are remarkable amongst other things for the soundtrack. This is mostly made up of the interior monologue of a Parisian horse butcher, a fascist ranting against everyone, especially women, gays and Arabs, in which there is much talk of arseholes, cunts, shit, cocks, fucking, and so on. 4

Carne, a 40-minute short, begins with an abattoir scene where a horse is killed and eviscerated, intercut with the birth of the butcher (Philippe Nahon)’s daughter, Cynthia (Blandine Lenoir), as she emerges from her mother (apart from Cynthia, none of the other characters is named). A rapid succession of short scenes with intertitles indicating the passage of the years recounts Cynthia’s childhood as she grows up without her mother who left the butcher shortly after the birth. The butcher idolises his daughter who is mute and retarded; we see him washing her, dressing her, feeding her, and, eventually, feeling ambivalent towards her sexually as she reaches adolescence. He mistakes the menstrual blood on her knickers for the blood of defloration by an Arab worker, whom one of the butcher’s acquaintances says he has seen with Cynthia. The butcher goes to find the worker on the nearby building site, called ‘le trou’, or the hole, and plunges his knife into an unsuspecting worker’s

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4 Noé said that the voice-over was inspired by an obscure Austrian film, Angst (Gerald Kargl, 1983), which tells the story of a man ‘released from prison after serving four years for murdering an elderly woman. He quickly begins to feel the compulsion to kill again. After failing to murder a cab driver, he flees and discovers a secluded rural home, where a young woman lives with her sick mother and retarded brother. He then begins to take out his sadistic pleasures on them, attempting to hold them hostage, while thinking of his troubled childhood with his abusive mother and grandmother’ (synopsis by Brian Patrick, from the Internet Movie Database).
mouth (the wrong man, as it happens) and twists it around. He is jailed, and his daughter placed in an institution. On his release he finds it difficult to get work and eventually decides to accompany the female owner of the café where he has been working (Frankye Pain), and whom he has made pregnant, to a new life in Lille.

*Seul contre tous* picks up where *Carne* left off. It reprises Carne’s narrative with a rapid-delivery monologue by the butcher overlaying stills of buildings (the hotel where Cynthia was conceived, the butcher’s shop, the prison, the motorway to Lille, and so on). In this preamble, we learn more about the butcher’s early childhood; his father was a communist who died in the concentration camps, he never knew his mother, was raised as an orphan, was sodomised by his teacher. The butcher, dependant on his partner’s money, resents her. He is sacked from his job as a delicatessen-counter assistant for not smiling enough, becomes a night porter in a hospital, brutally attacks his pregnant wife when she accuses him of sleeping with a nurse, and leaves for Paris once more, taking his mother-in-law’s revolver. He fails to get a job, tries unsuccessfully to borrow money from acquaintances. Having gone to a café to spend his last few francs on a coffee, he is thrown out when he insults the owner’s son, and returns with the gun only to find the café closed. At the end of his tether, he picks Cynthia up from the institution with the aim of killing her and himself. We see him doing this, but it turns out to be a fantasy, and the film ends with him extolling the virtues of incest, as the only thing left for him.

**Theme**

The abject, as defined by Julia Kristeva, is characterised by a combination of fear and loathing, but also of attraction to the pre-Oedipal state, prior to the acquisition of language and prior to what Lacan calls the Law of the Father. The abject is therefore linked to the maternal, to lack of control and helplessness, to all the fluids we might associate with early childhood (vomit, blood, urine, excrement). The abject is a liminal state, an in-between, poised on the cusp of subject-hood, but not quite yet subjecthood.

In this opening section, I will explore the unsettling combination of fluidity and rigidity in the film. At first glance this binary might seem tediously and stereotypically gendered as female versus male, pre-Oedipal and Oedipal. However, the butcher is not so much contrasted with a female other, as presented to us as both rigid and fluid; and he hates both, as much as he is attracted to both. The concept I am suggesting is in reality not a binary; fluidity and rigidity are not the two ‘sides’ of the butcher. Rather, a better way of expressing the concept is the contrast but simultaneous imbrication between the whole (the wholeness and the singular) to which he aspires, and the hole (the oblivion contained within the whole) to which he aspires no less (hence the title of this paper). If I use the term imbrication, more usually found in architecture (where it means the overlapping of tiles), it is because the abject is crucially concerned with space, a point to which I shall return. As Kristeva points out, 'the one by whom the abject exists (...) instead of sounding himself as to his “being”, he does so concerning his place: "Where am I?" instead of "Who am I?" For the space that engrosses the deject, the excluded, is never one, nor homogeneous, nor totalizable, but essentially divisible, foldable, and catastrophic' (Kristeva 1982: 8; her emphases).

My way into these points will be to discuss two of the three clear references to *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976), which are the most obvious of the many filmic
references. The last part of the film is obsessively structured on key scenes in Taxi Driver. So much so indeed that one could say that Seul contre tous functions in the same way with regard to Taxi Driver as the hole does to the whole; the narrative of Seul contre tous, and the mise en scene, are imbricated, intertwine and interleave with remembered scenes from Taxi Driver. We become aware of a kind of slippage (the term imbrication also means the dripping of water from roof-tiles). This is fluid play, which matches the obsession with abject fluids evident in both films. The imaginary spaces of Seul contre tous distend leakily, like Dali’s liquid clocks.

**Taxi Driver variation 1: the porn film and the butcher as penis**

In the first reference to Taxi Driver the butcher goes disconsolately to see a porn movie and watches stonily-faced as a heterosexual couple perform on screen. The (ob)scene is optically smudged in the British-released version of the film, because the sight/site of copulation was felt to be too insistent. And yet the scene is a key one for the film, insisting on existential isolation and alienation, as well as on the radical separation of the sexes. As the butcher watches, he muses in his inimitable style:

> Either you’re born with a cock and you’re useful if you behave like a good hard cock which stuffs holes, or you’re born with a hole and you will only be useful if you are stuffed yourself. But in both cases you are alone. Yes, I’m a cock, a miserable cock, and to be respected I must always stay hard.

The ‘hard body’ desired here is Theeweleit’s ‘fascist male warrior’, who fears being overwhelmed by a feminising red flood (see Thomas 1996: 129). It is hardly surprising that we find in the butcher, who must draw blood as part of his job, a feeling of repulsion for fluids spilling out of control from ruptured and distended bodies, whether those of slaughtered horses or women giving birth, or indeed a woman dying. By contrast with these sites of abjection, the butcher is constantly drinking fluids contained in small cups (always expresso coffee) or glasses (red wine, brandy). These containers are themselves contained in his cupped hands, as if to underline the contrast between the anarchy of the uncontrolled body, which expels fluids in meaningless expenditure, and the controlling body, which purchases and consumes fluids.

Nahon’s body emphasises the rigidity and aggression of the hard body. He is squat; he has bulbous glaring eyes, and a belligerently protuberant nose. His body is thus constructed as a threatening forward lunge, matched linguistically by the monosyllables he occasionally spits out vituperatively, his teeth and fists clenched. As

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5 Apart from Angst, the other fairly obvious reference is Eraserhead (David Lynch, 1977), mentioned on a number of occasions by Noé. He cites it as the film which prompted him to make films (Gans 1992). Amongst the many other films mentioned by Noé in interviews one finds Straw Dogs (Sam Peckinpah, 1971) for its ‘intense violence’ (Rouyer 1999: 31), Un Chien andalou (Luis Buñuel, 1929), which showed him how to ‘announce the horror which will follow’ (Gans 1992); Los Olvidados (Luis Buñuel, 1950), which he says is his ‘favourite comedy. Buñuel pushes cruelty so far that you end up laughing’ (Rouyer 1999: 31); La Grande Bouffe (Marco Ferreri, 1973) and The Empire of the Passions (Nagisa Oshima, 1978) for their violence and explicit sex (Père 1999: 37); and 2001: A Space Odyssey (Stanley Kubrick, 1968). The latter is the first film he remembers seeing, at the age of six, and he claims to have seen it ‘again at least once a year since then’ (Rouyer 1999: 32); it and the work of Pasolini were his ‘reference points for may years’ (Père 1999: 38). Apart from Buñuel, it will be noticed that his references are nearly all from the 1970s; his two films combine the political realism of that decade with the effects more usually associated with younger youth filmmakers (a point made by Bonnaud 1999: 39), such as Jean-Pierre Jeunet/Marc Caro (whose Le Bunker de la dernière rafale, 1981, was presented at Cannes with Carne) and Jan Kouwen, who is listed for thanks in the credits of Seul contre tous.
Kristeva says of the abject subject, ‘I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish *myself* (Kristeva 1982: 3; her emphases). The butcher is a derisive version of the 1930s cloth-cap heroes played by Jean Gabin, a point alluded to by Eisenreich, but not developed (Eisenreich 1999: 26); and Noé himself pointed out that the simplistic nature of the butcher’s violent sentiments was part of his attempt to ‘recuperate the aesthetics of the popular pamphlets of the 1930s’ (Tran 1999). Gabin is usually laconic and monosyllabic at the start of his films, but the films more often than not work towards an explosion of anger and language, as though he cannot contain himself any longer. 6 *Seul contre tous* does not end with Gabin’s explosion, it begins with it, and works towards an apocalyptic uncontained fragmentation. The explosion seeps across and through the entire film in a stream of consciousness, literally a linguistic fluidity, which contaminates the often otherwise neutral sights we see (a humdrum hotel room, empty streets). That linguistic fluidity suggests that the rigidity of the butcher is not quite what it seems.

Indeed, the butcher’s observations as he watches the porn film are ambiguous. The subject of the utterance, shifting from male to female within the single ‘you’, suggests that the butcher himself is the one who needs to be ‘stuffed’, the hole made whole; in this fantasy he is both cock and hole at one and the same time. It is no surprise that one of the first titles of the film was ‘Penis’; 7 but it is equally no surprise that it was dropped. It is not because there is anything inherently shocking in the word, but because the word suggests only one part of the fantasied whole. That whole combines both masculinity, and a femininity constantly repressed and represented as abject. It is a masculinity subjected hysterically to the Law, and a femininity abjected in the liminal spaces which border and burrow through the Law, like a network of arteries pulsating obscenely under skin stretched to breaking point, until a hole perforates the skin for the blood to gush out, as happens when the butcher fantasises the murder of his daughter. As Kristeva says, the hard or clean and proper body desired by the butcher for himself can only be acquired by its fragmentation and dissolution: ‘the advent of one’s own identity demands a law that mutilates, whereas jouissance demands an *abjection* from which identity becomes absent’ (Kristeva 1982: 54; her emphasis).

Words gush out in the butcher’s stream of consciousness monologue, like the blood gushing out of Cynthia, like the blood which accompanies Cynthia’s birth in *Carne*, gushing out of the vagina, and like the blood gushing out of the slaughtered horse’s stomach in the scene intercut with Cynthia’s birth. The films show an obsession with holes of all kinds. It is not just the vagina through which blood and baby Cynthia emerge, or the hole in Cynthia’s neck spurting blood when she dies, or the horse’s stomach from which blood and guts gush out, or the vagina in the porn film, but the repeated scenes where the butcher gropes for Cynthia’s vagina as they sit on the bed, and the exterior shots of tunnels into which the butcher drives or emerges on foot. It is also the many shots of mouths, whether the mouth of the Arab worker

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6 Bazin reports the story that ‘Gabin insisted before signing any film contract that the story include one of those explosive scenes of anger at which he excels’ (Bazin 1971: 177). Vincendeau develops this point, emphasising that Gabin’s anger is a sign of ‘authenticity’. (Gauteur & Vincendeau 1993: 117, 136); as she says elsewhere, ‘since he can’t help it, it really is “him”’ (Vincendeau 2000: 73).

7 ‘I even thought of entitling the film Penis, or The Penis, because of the passages where the butcher compares himself to a cock. The penis evokes both a male attribute and a piece of flesh disconnected from the body. Phonetically, it would also have made you think of the National Front [because its leader is called Le Pen] and the butcher’s paranoid tendencies’ (Rouyer 1999: 32).
into which the butcher twists his knife, or the shots of the butcher’s own mouth with the eyes out of shot, cartoon-style. Noé points out in an interview that the use of Cinemascope obliged him to have only half of the face in shot, and he rationalises this by associating the mouth with bestiality and the eyes with the soul: ‘masking the eyes immediately creates anxiety in the spectator. When you speak to someone you need to see their eyes to know what they are thinking. The eyes represent the soul, whereas the mouth is the animal, organic part of a face’ (Gans 1992).

Importantly, however, the mouth is not just vaginal, as the opening scenes of *Carne* might have suggested; it is also cloacal. A number of spaces function as holes, not least because of their linguistic associations. The word *trou* in French is used colloquially for both the vagina, and, in the expression which occurs several times in the films, *trou de cul*, for the anus as well. It is also a colloquialism for prison, and it is the word used in *Carne* to refer to the building site. In each case, these spaces referred to as holes (the building site and the prison) contain other sexualised holes; for the building site it is the worker’s mouth penetrated by the butcher’s twisting knife held at his crotch height; and in the prison, there is an implication that the butcher and his cellmate engage in gay sex.

But spaces are often also closed to the butcher; doors of buildings—the hotel, the butcher’s shop, the café— are as frequently closed as open. Spaces are therefore as much cloacal as they are vaginal in the film. They are potential holes waiting to swallow him like the *vagina dentata*, or rejecting him because they are tightly closed like anxious anal sphincters.

In this section I have shown how the demarcation between rigidity and fluidity, which the butcher postulates as the marker of sexual difference, collapses under the weight of linguistic fluidity. The obsession with holes equally collapses the distinction between vagina and anus. In the next section, I shall explore the shift from the butcher as penis to the butcher as turd.

**Taxi Driver** variation 2: the gun in the mirror and the butcher as turd

The self-disgust generated by the abject is made clear in the second *Taxi Driver* reference, when the butcher returns to his hotel room and looks at himself in the mirror with his gun, fantasising that he will kill those who have crossed him, as well as killing himself. The violence he turns against himself bears out Kristeva’s point that in the abject the subject struggles to disentangle himself from what lies within, the unnameable and horrifying maternal origin. As the butcher says in that scene, playing on the part-homonym *mère/merde*, ‘my whole life has been a colossal turd, willed by a whore of a mother’; elsewhere in the film he refers to himself derisively as a ‘trou de cul’, or arsehole. He is both turd and hole, or, more precisely, turd in the hole, what Kristeva calls the anal penis, ‘the phallus with which infantile imagination provides the feminine sex’ (Kristeva 1982: 71). The butcher, desperate to remain hard and penile, realises that he is also fecal, *homo erectus*, but also *homo rectus*, whole and hole. There could be no clearer expression of what Calvin Thomas calls ‘scatontological anxiety’.

Thomas brings together Freud’s account of the *fort/da* game, and his theory of cloacal birth (‘It is a universal conviction amongst children that babies are born from the bowel like a piece of faeces: daecfication is a model of the act of birth’; Freud quoted in Thomas 1996: 85) to suggest that the former ‘is implicated not only with the boy’s phantasy of having been produced through his mother’s bowels, and his foreclosure of that phantasy, but also with his own struggles to secure identity through the control of his bowels’ (Thomas 1999: 29). As Thomas points out, those struggles
are never really successful, and all modes of representation are, to use his word, haunted by scatontological anxiety: 'The image of “unimpaired masculinity”, the self-produced, self-representational image of the actively “self-made man”, is haunted by the earlier phantasmatic image of having been a passively and cloacally (m)other-made child’ (Thomas 1999: 29). Hence the aggression against women in the butcher’s rambling monologue, and the fear of homosexuality, ‘a fear of the anus as phantasmatic origin in the former instance and as destination of desire or locus of pleasure (…) in the latter’ (Thomas 1996: 88). The beginning of Seul contre tous makes it clear that the butcher was abused as a child, an event which posits the possibility of the pleasure to be gained from the anus, even if it is a pleasure only available to the abuser (we assume); the butcher’s frequent references to sodomy suggest both repulsion and attraction, a fear of becoming feminised, but also the masochistic desire to return to be ‘a passive object and slave to this jouissance, aggressed, sadisticized’ (Kristeva 1982: 183), as Kristeva writes of some of Céline’s more racist and homophobic pronouncements.

Like Céline’s work, the butcher’s voice smears what we see in a fecal stream of consciousness, an effect all the more pronounced by the editing out of the pauses and breaths between statements. And we are attracted to this abject anality, submerged in it, for very simple material reasons. The butcher’s voice-over draws us close to him, for two reasons. First, because its almost continuous nature means that we are always with the butcher, ‘forced to share permanently his states of mind and to follow him in his most frightening excesses’, as Noé puts it (Rouyer 1999: 31); we share his thoughts even if we do not identify ourselves with him, he points out elsewhere (Père 1999: 36). Second, because the punctuating gunshots on the soundtrack interact with that voice-over, encouraging us to see that voice-over not for what it is, an extremely aggressive flow, but for what it is in relation to the gunshots, a more mellifluous flow, a refuge from what Noé calls the stress of those gunshots which, according to him, ‘place (the spectator) in a state of stress similar to the butcher’s. At the same time, Philippe Nahon’s voice is strong and warm. The spectator therefore navigates between a state of hypnosis and relief when he hears that voice, because he prefers it to the gunshots’ (Bourbon 1999).

Blood as a visual sign of rupture, rejected birth, menstruation, and death, mingles with the shit of the soundtrack. As Thomas suggests, the anxious subject ‘collapses all those heterogeneous processes for which bodies are sites—fecal, urinal, seminal, fetal, menstrual, glottal, lingual—into an undifferentiated and abject flux’ (Thomas 1966: 32); all of these are present either visually or linguistically in the two films. The borders between the visual and the aural are constantly shattered by explosions, whether aural, in the gunshots which punctuate the soundtrack, or the sudden zooms which jerk us forward dizzyingly from one plane into another. Sounds become signs, and signs become sounds, both signifying the horror of the abject with its fluid boundaries leaking into each other. Seeing and hearing melt into the se(e)aring light of a brilliant white fade-out at the end of the murder/suicide sequence, signifying apocalyptic failure, the blankness of an anger so excessive that the words strangle and extrude their obscene obverse, the silence of death, never so aptly named a pregnant silence, a silence full of what it cannot silence, a silence made of countless explosions paused as they are about to explode. Kristeva’s comment on Céline’s prose, which she describes as ‘a thin film constantly threatened with bursting’; (Kristeva 1982: 141) is an apt analysis of the promiscuity between the visual and the aural in Seul contre tous, as is her description of ‘the vision of the ab-ject’ as ‘the sign of an impossible object, a boundary and a limit' (Kristeva 1982: 154).
In this section, I have shown how the butcher’s frame of reference is fecal and abject. The clean, hard body, or *corps propre*, as Kristeva calls it, collapses its boundaries and is invaded from within by abject fluids associated with the mother. Another boundary, that between seeing and hearing, is collapsed as the butcher’s stream of consciousness permeates the image track, working both with and against it. In the next section, I shall explore the butcher’s antithetical attempts to resolve the dissolution of the boundaries; first, through hysterical cutting, second through incest; and, in so doing, I shall also consider why it is important that the anti-hero of these films should be a butcher.

*Taxi Driver* variation 3: murder, incest, cannibalism

The final reference to *Taxi Driver* is the butcher shooting his daughter, which, as in *Taxi Driver*, is a bloodbath in a claustrophobic hotel space. This scene, no less than the first two replays, all differ from *Taxi Driver* in one significant way, however. They underline the butcher’s failure, something he comments on in the fantasied murder scene (‘I’ve failed at everything. My birth, my youth, my love life, my shop. I should never have been born. My entire life is a mistake.’). In the first film theatre scene, he is alone, and comments disconsolately on solitude, whereas Travis Bickle unsuspectingly takes his suitably offended girlfriend. In the mirror scene, like Bickle, the butcher fantasises the death of others, but, unlike Bickle, also fantasises his own death. And, finally, in the murder scene, Bickle murders a whole group of pimps and prostitutes, and is heroised for those murders, whereas the butcher merely fantasises his daughter’s murder, but does not go through with it, remaining the unheroic failure he commented on in the previous mirror sequence.

Arguably, his murderous fantasy is the logical conclusion to a series of insistent but ineffectual cuts practised in the two films. Cutting can be seen as an hysterical attempt to control time and the change which it brings, and to control space, most particularly to control the invasion of the fragmenting and hetero-dimensional abject into the monolithic and uni-dimensional *corps propre*. There is first the cut between the two films, which overlap with each other in terms of narrative. Then there are the very literal cuts we see as the butcher chops the meat at the beginning of *Carne*, these narrative cuts being mirrored by editing cuts as intertitles signal the passage of the years, as though the butcher were trying to control time. But, as he says at the end of this sequence of cuts, ‘the years go by before you have time to count them’. This sequence is echoed at the beginning of *Seul contre tous*, as the butcher recounts his life. His breathless, rapid-delivery monologue overlays a visual track consisting of photo-album stills of people and places, as if he were trying to staunch the flux of time by punctuating it with frozen images, familiar clichés providing havens of recognisability within the anarchic flux of life itself. The cuts we see at the beginning of the films are themselves echoed throughout by rapid edits accompanied by fast zooms and gunshot sounds, as previously mentioned. These procedures can be seen as attempts to separate body and sign, materiality and spirit, as it were, a procedure important in ritual, as Kristeva points out: ‘The rites surrounding defilement, particularly those involving excremental and menstrual variants, shift the border (...) that separates the body's territory from the signifying chain’ (Kristeva 1982: 73).

These various types of cutting have the opposite effect to that desired, however; they undermine the coherence of the narrative, compounding the butcher’s failure. As Kristeva points out in relation to Céline’s writing, the narrative is carved up into choice morsels with which the butcher is fascinated, and that fascination dislocates the narrative, allowing the abject to emerge, disrupt, and occasionally to overwhelm:
'The narrative (...) is both shattered and punctuated in its simply biographical and logical continuity by (...) clusters of fascination; what is disconnected regains its coherence in the permanence of abjection' (Kristeva: 1982: 149).

The importance of cutting is the first reason of several overlapping reasons why it makes sense to have a butcher as the anti-hero. A second reason is the association made between butchers and a primitive sexuality, according to Noé: 'The butcher’s sexuality is an excuse for many fantasies. It is seen as bestial and basic, probably because the butcher handles meat all day long and so his organic link is stronger than most' (Bourbon 1999).

A third reason is the religious connotations of meat-eating, linked with the self-disgust implied by the Fall. Kristeva points out how in Genesis man is allowed to eat meat after the Flood, and that this should not be seen as some kind of reward but an admission of fundamental evil, 'an acknowledgment of a bent toward murder essential to human beings' (Kristeva 1982: 96; her emphasis).

A fourth reason has to do with ritual, which protects from the unclean (souillure). The butcher’s insistent chopping in Carne, echoed by the editing in Seul contre tous, is a kind of ritual purification. Chopping the meat up, preparing it, and indeed cooking and eating it, as we see the butcher do in Carne, is a means of conjuring the unclean, associated with the archaic prelinguistic materiality of the mother. One of the more disquieting images in Seul contre tous is the butcher’s dream as he tries to sleep off his hunger; he probes fillets of meat which are made to look like vaginal lips.

A final reason is that the prohibition of incest is intimately connected with ritual, according to Kristeva, for whom the prohibition of incest protects the subject from the temptation of a return to a pre-Oedipal engulfment in the mother (Kristeva 1982: 63-64). Ritual, particularly that connected with defilement (souillure) separates the subject from his body and from the mother, and thereby legitimises the rejection of cannibalism:

Defilement reveals, at the same time as an attempt to throttle matrilinearity, an attempt at separating the speaking being from his body in order that the latter accede to the status of clean and proper body, that is to say, non-assimilable, uneatble, abject (...) Fear of the uncontrollable generative mother repels me from the body; I give up cannibalism because abjection (of the mother) leads me toward respect for the body of the other, my fellow man, my brother. (Kristeva 1982: 78-79).

The butcher, as pointed out above, fails lamentably in all of these respects. The films set up cutting as ritual, but the films are submerged in fluids, whether corporeal or linguistic. It is therefore logical that we should see images which suggest that the mother’s body and the daughter’s body can be eaten: the mother’s body giving birth is intercut with a horse being slaughtered for the butcher; the butcher dreams of vaginal fillets. It is therefore also logical that the butcher fails to kill his daughter, choosing instead the fantasy of incest, since incest represents the suspension of the Law of the Father, as Zizek points out (see Zizek 2000: 31), in the return to the non-differentiation of the pre-Oedipal and the engulfment in the archaic mother. It is for that reason that I disagree with reviewers who felt that the apparent redemption of the butcher through incest was a disappointing closure (see for example Genin 1999: 1). It is logical in terms of the butcher’s project; and, more importantly, it is emphatically not a redemption, but, in appearance at least, a regressive return to the abject.

In this section, I have shown how the third Taxi Driver reference emphasises the butcher’s failure, despite the cutting procedures which attempt to reinstate the control of the corps propre. Incest is no redemption, I have argued, but forms an integral part
of this failure, since it signals the return to the abject. In the next section, I shall
discuss the potential radicalism of the abject, and conclude by casting doubt that the
film realises that potential.

Coda 1: the radicalism of ‘corporeal space’
I began by relating Pardo’s view that *Seul contre tous*, like the other ‘sordid’ films he
mentions, is ideologically questionable, partly because in his view it establishes a gap
between naturalism and mannerism; Pardo means by this the miserabilist narrative
overlaid by a complacent attachment to formalist procedures, such as the gunshot
explosions, the rapid editing, the intertitles, and so on. Although one might wish to
argue that the gap between naturalism and mannerism helps support my argument,
because it is yet another cutting procedure to add to all the others, this is not the case.

Naturalism and mannerism, as I hope to have shown, work together to create an
abject space, which, following Robyn Longhurst’s work in social geography, I would
like to call a corporeal space (Longhurst 2001: 125). Longhurst’s work is of particular
significance for these films and for discussions of male abjection. She points out how
geographers tend to avoid discussion of closet spaces (toilets, bathrooms), still less
discussion of ‘the messiness of bodies’ (Longhurst 2001: 23). She also points out how
interdisciplinary work on the body has tended to avoid the exploration of
heterosexual white men. Part of her research focuses on the combination of these two
categories (heterosexual white men’s talk about bathrooms) with the aim of showing
how these spaces ‘are often experienced as sites/sights of abjection’, and exposing the
male body so that such men ‘can no longer pass themselves off as solid and hard’
(Longhurst 2001: 66). Her findings are in line with Kristeva and Thomas’s analyses of
the abject: bathrooms were seen by her respondents ‘to be places inhabited by bodies
that are at the mercy of (Mother) Nature, bodies that are potentially both seductive
(including seducing oneself to sexual pleasure) and repulsive’ (Longhurst 2001: 82).
This is very clearly what happens in the closet space of the hotel room in *Seul contre
tous*. Reviewing the possible names one could give to such a space—Homi Bhabha’s
‘Third Space’, constituted by hybridity, or Kristeva’s *chora*, which is coterminous
with the abject (see Kristeva 1982: 13-14)— she settles, following Moss and Dyck
(1999: 389) on the rather more useful term ‘corporeal space’:

Corporeal space consists of context, discursive inscriptions, material—
economic and matter-based—inscriptions, the biological, and the
physiological (...). These spaces are fluid, congealing from time to time
around the body, only to be destabilized with new boundaries forming when
any part of the context, the discourse, or the materiality shifts (Moss and Dyke

As this quotation makes clear, the butcher’s stream of consciousness is no less
part of the corporeal space than the blood he lets. The two criss-cross and combine;
both matter, and both *are* matter. As Thomas points out (for the purposes of this
discussion, I shall replace ‘writing’ and ‘writer’ by ‘speaking’ and ‘filmmaker’), ‘the
problem of death, castration, and the abjection that lies behind them becomes a
problem of [speaking], a question of the objectification, mutilation, and contamination
to which, in the very process of representing identity in language, the anxious male
[filmmaker] imagines that he submits his being’ (Thomas 1996: 28). Establishing
such an anxious corporeal space is therefore potentially radical, concording with
Shaviro’s suggestion that abjection can be productive:

Film’s radical potential to subvert social hierarchies and decompose relations
of power lies in its extreme capacity for seduction and violence (...). Film
should neither be exalted as a medium of collective fantasy nor condemned as a technology for intensifying and renewing experiences of passivity and abjection. (Shaviro 1993: 65)

For Shaviro, film (it is not altogether clear whether he means all films, or just the films he analyses, principally those of George Romero and David Cronenberg) can put the spectators in touch with their body because of its seductiveness, and can therefore induce the abject, leading to cataclysmic excess:

The more intensely my body is affected, and the more it is put in contact with appearances, the closer I approach abjection (which) is also an exaltation: there is deep, unresolvable ambivalence in the contact of the flesh, a continual affective oscillation. This indeterminacy is not empty, but overly, insufferably full: a hypertrophic surplus of irreconcilable sensations and passions, the bodily contours of my desire. (Shaviro 1993: 260).

Shaviro’s analysis of Cronenberg’s films points to monsters as embodiments of passion rather than repression (see Shaviro 1993: 130-33); similarly we could see the monster who is the butcher as an embodiment not so much of repression, but of a surplus of archaic desires and passions, and his apocalyptic logorrhoea as a cause of masochistic celebration, a revealing of the veiled hard body, rather than the complacent and cynical exhibition of monstrosity which might allow us to revel in our ‘normality’.

Yet, I cannot but help feel that Seul contre tous is not as radical a project as all this might make it seem. My analysis, structured around Taxi Driver, has repressed other intertexts, which are French, rather than American. I shall consider these in my concluding comments.

Coda 2: derision and ambiguity
Neither Noé, nor his reviewers have to my knowledge mentioned two films which might have seemed clear intertexts for Seul contre tous in particular. The first of these is Chabrol’s Hitchcockian thriller, Le Boucher (The Butcher). In that film, Popaul, the village butcher, is, unbeknownst to anyone, the serial child-killer who has been plaguing the village. The film suggests that it is Popaul’s experiences in the Algerian war, with all the atrocities he has witnessed, which have deranged him. This is bound up with his unrequited love for the schoolteacher. She realises that he is the killer, and he realises that she knows; but he cannot kill her, and she ends up by acting in a motherly way towards him. The film is therefore partly about Popaul’s confrontation with the abject within himself, and the attempt to return to it through a combination of love and murder. Typically Hitchcockian in its transference of guilt, the twists and turns of the film’s narrative lead us from repulsion, to understanding for the butcher. Whereas Algeria in Le Boucher is part of the abject, constantly displaced (not a single Arab face is seen in the butcher’s village), in Seul contre tous Algeria’s consequences in terms of immigration are seen constantly: the workers on the building site, one of whom, as described above, is orally raped by the butcher’s knife; the shopkeeper who takes over the butchery in Carne, who is said to ‘very nice’; the upper-class doctor (anyone in a position of authority is, for the butcher, a homosexual, by which he means a feminised male) who gives the butcher a job as a night-watchman; the frail youth whom the butcher insults in the café. Arabs have joined women as feminised

8 Noé has implied that he sees himself working in the same genres as Dario Argento and Cronenberg (Frodon 1999).
others who threaten to overwhelm the butcher with their effete abject bodies. To the ‘threat’ that these characters might suggest there are two possible responses. The first is the butcher’s racist insults which are unlikely to generate transference of guilt unless the spectator has the same views as the Front National. The film therefore acts as a derisive replay of *Le Boucher* and its blindness to issues of race.

The second possible response is that seen in *La Haine*, to which, in my view, *Seul contre tous* refers just as derisively as to *Le Boucher*; both *Seul contre tous* and *La Haine* make very explicit use of the same film, *Taxi Driver*, and both explicitly rework the same scene, the ‘who are you looking at’ scene, explored at some length above, as well as using a similar punctuating gunshot effect. In *La Haine*, we find a combination of multi-ethnicity (the American way of coping with ethnic difference) and assimilation (the –contested—French way of doing so) in the *black-blanc-beur* trio of the main protagonists (Hub the black, Vinz the white Jew, Saïd the Arab). Although no more optimistic than *Seul contre tous*, given that its premise is the impossibility of assimilation, *La Haine* does at least posit a multi-ethnic social space (its critique has to do with class difference and space, in the gulf between city and *banlieue*, or underprivileged outer suburbs), whereas *Seul contre tous*’s rhetoric of angry racist solitude works to deny it.

There is also, one might argue, in *Carne* and *Seul contre tous* a derisively excessive reworking of what Ginette Vincendeau has suggested is one of the defining tropes of French cinema, the relationship between an older man and a young woman, which she labels the father-daughter relationship (see Vincendeau 1992), 9 an issue I shall return to in the third coda.

In all of these three cases, then, one can see how Noé’s films, with their clear anchoring in a specifically French cinematographic culture (rather than the American culture of *Taxi Driver*), function as a derisive comment on that culture, an explicit *reductio ad absurdum* of the issues which those films treat implicitly. For that reason, I am convinced that Pardo is wrong when he says that the film is apolitical. It is political, engaging with, and not just gesturing at, difficult issues of Americanisation, racism, unemployment, and, at a deeper level, the confrontation with the body and its archaic desires.

But that does not make Noé’s films unambiguous. The use of pompous intertitles is derisive, as is the use of shots resembling cartoons (a mouth in close-up hurling racist insults). The final crane shot of *Seul contre tous* is more ambiguous than any other in the film. The butcher is on the balcony of his hotel room staring out. His daughter joins him, and he fondles her breasts. He begins his encomium to incest, and as he speaks the camera pans away from him to focus on the street leading off into the distance:

I don’t know how it’s going to end. But here with you, I exist, and I’m happy, happier than ever. The rest doesn’t matter. Maybe it’s our last day, maybe not. Maybe I’ll never shoot myself. Maybe I’ll make love to you, and tomorrow I’ll be locked up. Four months, a year, two years? (*Fast pan right away from the hotel.*) So what? Jail isn’t the end of the world. If the worst comes to the worst. (*Slow track forwards along the street.*) I can always hang myself. It doesn’t matter. Even if they lock me up, at least I’ll have this moment to hold on to. And the satisfaction of fulfilling my desire, instead of the desire of those

9 There are of course other forms of derision at work in the films: the cartoon-like use of pompous intertitles (‘Man has a morality’; ‘To live is to act egoistically. Survival is a genetic law’; Death does not open any doors’); the musical march in *Seul contre tous* which gives the butcher’s story an epic flavour.
around me. Finally, maybe my life has a meaning: to protect you, to give you all the happiness that nobody else will ever give you. You’re my little girl, and I’ll make of you a woman. We’ll do it, and we’ll be happy. It’ll be our secret. In any case, whether we do it or not, it won’t change the course of humanity. But for me and for you it’ll change everything. People think they’re free, but freedom doesn’t exist. There are only laws that others have made in their own interests; laws that lock me in my unhappiness. And one of these laws says that I must not love you. Because you are my daughter? But why? They forbid us this love, not because it’s evil, but because it’s too strong. (A car drives towards the camera and passes underneath; camera cranes down, as a child crosses the street in the background). Between us, that’s all I can see. I love you. That’s all there is to it. (The camera becomes immobile. There is a 22-second pause to distant street sounds before a fade to white).

The shot can be interpreted in two ways, depending on how one reads the camera movements. These movements away from the butcher towards a more neutral space suggest that, despite his insistent voice-over, we have moved out of his point of view. The shot could then be read positively as the trajectory away from the hard body towards the corporeal space where the butcher uncovers abject desire in the return to his lost mother (on the assumption that we can inscribe mother-son incest palimpsestically over incest with his daughter). In this reading, the 22-second pause suggests radical distance from the social, and the fade to white suggests apocalypse. We would privilege the butcher’s view that his love is so strong that it over-rides the law; it would be the utopian force of abjection as advanced by Shaviro.

If, on the other hand, we feel that there is no gap between what we see and what we hear, and that, despite a disorienting shot which disrupts the butcher’s point of view, the butcher’s point of view is nevertheless maintained, we might read the shot more negatively. We might focus on the abuser’s ‘secret’ which suggests that he remains in the community, but is invisible. The 22-second pause then becomes his distanced gaze as he surveys an empty street signifying radical separation from the community at the same time as he remains within it. The fade to white would then suggest his invisibility, or his blindness to the Law.

We may be attracted to the butcher’s abjection, the engulfment in the maternal signified by the rejection of the prohibition of incest (the hole), but we are also repelled by it to the extent that we accept the Law, and our constitution as subjects by the rejection of the abject (the whole). Derision is the result of both (self-)recognition, and the distance or irony protecting oneself from that recognition; attraction to the maternal corporeal space, engulfment in matter (the hole), on the one hand, and on the other hand, the *noli me tangere* which the ‘rational’ mind erects phallicly as the safety-barrier (the whole).

The question is whether these films veer more towards the hole or the whole, or whether the fine balance between them (the w/whole) creates productive unease in the spectator (all three positions were outlined by reviewers). That unease would be a precondition for the joyous recognition of abjection, and this might, possibly, then lead to the kind of radical submission to and celebration of the abject advanced by Shaviro, or at least, less spectacularly, the humdrum recognition of the death drive suggested by Silverman in the epigraph to this essay.

**Coda 3: semen**

In fact, *Seul contre tous* is neither joyous affirmation nor humdrum recognition of the abject, but a precarious balance between the two, a kind of leaky imbrication. In this
section, I shall be suggesting that this imbrication is figured narratively by incest, and metaphorically by something connected to it but which we do not see, at least not directly. The radical potential of incest as break with the Law and return to the abject, which I argued above, is destabilised by what is never shown in the film, although constantly gestured at: semen. In fact, I shall be claiming that semen does appear, but sublimated, figured both as closure, and as counter-weight to the abject (unlike other markers of the abject, such as excrement and menstrual blood, which are connected with the mother, semen, for obvious reasons, is paternal; see Kristeva 1982: 71-72). I shall then consider the implications of this structure for the spectators.

Arguably, there might have been plenty of opportunities for semen to be shown, whether prior to the birth scene in Carne, or as part of the porn film the butcher watches in Seul contre tous, or even as part of his incest fantasy. It is there nevertheless. It appears indirectly in the unexpected fade to white at the end of the film, where it is linked to the butcher’s insistence that he will commit incest. It also appears indirectly throughout the film as the film itself. I described the constant cutting procedures above as an attempt to keep the abject at bay, to impose meaning on the body. Whether cuts of meat or cuts of film, cutting tries to impose the phallic economy; and if the cuts are the process, then the product is, metaphorically speaking, semen, which is why I suggest that semen is present liminally as the film itself. (I shall consider the implications of this statement for the spectator below.) As I pointed out above, however, the butcher (and the film) to a large extent fail, since cutting releases the abject, figured by flux (of blood, of language). Nevertheless, it is clear that the butcher, and the film, wish to impose meaning, however ambiguous, however fraught with tensions and contradictions.

My contention then is that the cutting is a constant struggle between the release of abjected blood and paternal semen; between red and white; between absence of meaning and meaning; between the hole and the whole. The final scenes of the film are crucial in this respect, since they contrast the murder of Cynthia and the rape of Cynthia as two alternative narrative economies answering the question ‘how can this end?’. The first produces, literally, a gaping hole which gushes blood, as had the feminised holes of Carne: Cynthia’s mother giving birth to Cynthia, intercut with the slaughter of the horse, could not make clearer the fear and fascination of the abject. But the final scenes take up another fascination, the fascination with Cynthia’s invisible vagina. The butcher is often seen groping for Cynthia’s vagina in Seul contre tous, fascinated by what is deceptive and doubly hidden from his gaze, first by her skirt, second by her flesh, the bleeding wound which deceives the gaze; neither we nor the butcher know in Carne whether the blood on her knickers signifies rape or menstruation.

Like semen, then, Cynthia’s vagina is never seen, but we know that it is there, an object of endless fascination for the butcher, who wishes to implant his semen in it, to loop the loop. Why? As the final sentences of the final dialogue suggest -- 'Between us, that’s all I can see. I love you.' -- the butcher seeks disappearance through identification with the same in a safe pre-Oedipal space where absent mother, mute daughter, and father collapse into a transcendent, phallicised space, no longer the messy corporeal space of the maternalised abject, but ‘pure’ emptiness. No blood, no words (the two are the same in these films, abject flux); just the blinding whiteness of the final money shot in fantasied copulation, figured by the slashing copula of my title, w/h, seen but not heard.

The implication for the spectator is interesting to say the least. I suggested above that the film is semen, the invisible product of the process which is the cutting. It is
invisible because abjected blood is more visible, and the visibility of semen can only be desired as imbricated in the abject (to put it another way, the whole is bounded by the hole). Arguably, spectators identify themselves sporadically with the butcher; as many reviewers point out, we certainly sympathise with him, partly because of the voice-over, partly because of his predicament, and this sympathy is likely to be a precondition of identification. With whom (or what) do we identify ourselves when not identifying with the butcher? My discussion suggests, amongst other possibilities, that we identify ourselves with the only character who has a name, Cynthia. Like her, we are mute in the face of her father’s rage, like her we are the butt of his aggression, his violent cuts, whether real or linguistic. We are Cynthia. To employ a neologism which refers back to Vincendeau’s claim that the father-daughter relationship is a staple of French cinema, the film has turned the spectator into a daughter; in the same way that one might say that a daughter has been ‘fathered’ by a man, the film spurts like a continuous money-shot over the face of the daughtered spectator.

Who is Cynthia? This extraordinary name (extraordinary because no other character has a name in the films, but are designated only by their narrative function) is, like Cynthia’s vagina, deceptive. It is one of the goddess Diana’s many names. 10 Diana, as the myth goes, was a huntress, hardly apt we may think for the character in the films. More apt is the fact that Diana never submitted to any man’s desire, and, beyond the confines of her family, consorted only with women. I see in these two films then the possibility of a radical feminisation of the spectator. The spectator is, at least in part, ‘Cynthiasised’, incorporated in abject feminised space, placed there by the butcher’s cuts and thrusts. Like the slashing copula of my title, w/h, the spectator is seen but not heard, mute and uncomprehending, at the same time as s/he is comprehended in corporeal space, caught between the abject hole of affect and the whole of rational distance.

This is unlikely to be a comfortable experience for either male or female spectators. As Judith Butler writes of the abject, ‘Certain abject zones (...) constitute[e] zones of uninhabitability which a subject fantasizes as threatening its own integrity with the prospect of a psychotic dissolution (“I would rather die than do or be that!”)’ (Butler 1994: 243). The films place us in an impossible position: we don’t want the abject (blood); nor do we want the alternative (fantasied semen). As spectators, we shuttle between the red and the white, between corporeal space and phallicised space, mothers and fathers left with only one name, suggesting resistance, but no voice.

In the three codas, I discussed the radical potential of Seul contre tous. I began by stating the case for the pleasure of excess (coda 1), but then showed how as yet unspoken intertexts (Le Boucher; La Haine) suggest a more distanced, derisive perspective. This led me to consider how the conclusion of the film tries to have it both ways, encouraging the spectator to revel in the abjection of incest at the same time as condemning it (coda 2). I concluded in coda 3 that these two positions (acceptance, rejection) are part of a more radical struggle between two types of space: transcendent, phallicised space, and the messy corporeal space of the maternalised abject. And I suggested that the film ‘daughters’ the spectator, placing the spectator in a position of mute resistance to what is essentially Hobson’s choice between these two spaces.

10 The Greeks knew her as Artemis, and the fact that she was born near Mount Cynthus accounts for Cynthia; since Cynthus was in Delos, she is also called Delia.
I began by claiming that these ‘sordid’ films are both necessary and moral. This is because they help us understand what we don’t want to be (“I would rather die than do or be that!”), while making it clear that what we don’t want to be is inescapably part of what we are.

References