

Horror Studies

Volume 1 Number 1

© 2010 Intellect Ltd Article. English language. doi: 10.1386/host.1.1.129/1

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# The Monstrous Masculine: Abjection and Todd Solondz's *Happiness*

**ABSTRACT**

*Horror films often use the male as monster, though conventional ideology says that it is not his masculine characteristics that make him monstrous. Barbara Creed writes that in the horror film, the male body is represented as monstrous "because it assumes characteristics usually associated with the female body." The thematic thread of Todd Solondz's Happiness (1998), beneath its facade of domestic anxiety, is that of deviant masculinity. In mapping Billy's horrific trajectory towards maturity, the film's project is an abject representation of the specific rites of passage that he must undergo in order to accede to manhood. Masculinity in the film is constructed as monstrous via the very characteristics that are inherent to his experience of becoming a man. While at face value Happiness would seem to elude classification as a horror film, it addresses these issues through the generic conventions of the horror film, employing many of the codes and conventions of horror, evoking an effect on the body of the spectator that is in keeping with the traditional appeal of the genre. Where these films traditionally work to annihilate the threat to patriarchy and repress the abject, Happiness concludes with images of the paternal order in crisis. Billy comes to embody the monstrous masculine, his semen marking the collapse of symbolic*

**KEYWORDS**

Kristeva  
abjection  
Creed  
Solondz  
*Happiness*  
monstrous masculine

*law, illustrated by the failure of the paternal figure to prohibit the incestuous bond that is established between mother and child.*

### **KRISTEVA, CREED, ABJECTION**

There is a scene in Todd Solondz's *Happiness* that echoes the dread and fascination that consumes the spectator when watching Norman Bates, the protagonist of Alfred Hitchcock's horror classic *Psycho* (1960), as he shifts worriedly from right to left after pushing Marion Crane's car into the murky waters of a swamp. Bill, the deviant, yet empathetic paedophile of *Happiness*, has prepared a tuna sandwich for his son's friend, Johnny, who is sleeping over for the night. After lacing the tuna with a sleeping pill, having earlier drugged his wife and sons with similarly laced ice cream sundaes, his gaze moves back and forth between the boy and the sandwich, as he waits for Johnny to divert his occupied attention to the fishy snack. An uncanny anticipation develops, akin to the feeling that resonates when Norman looks at Marion's car, her body entombed in the trunk, as it momentarily sticks in the muddy swamp. The simultaneous sense of repulsion and relief that fills the spectator when the car resumes its descent is similarly evoked when Johnny, falling victim to Bill's deception, looks cautiously into the tuna sandwich and takes a bite. Both Marion and Johnny are unsuspecting victims of a brutal crime carried out at the hands of a monster, with whom the spectator momentarily identifies.

In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Julia Kristeva analyses the conditions that make personal and social identity possible, positing a phase in the construction of subjectivity that requires a separation from the mother. This *abjection* takes place in the semiotic space of the mother/child symbiosis, a pre-symbolic level, prior to the subject's entry into language. In this space, the oral and anal drives of the child are regulated by its relationship with the maternal body (Oliver 1993: 34). The abject is 'not a quality in itself', but a relationship to a boundary, representing 'the object jettisoned out of that boundary, its other side, a margin' (Kristeva 1982: 69). The abject is tied to the fluids of childhood (excrement, vomit, blood), and to a lack of control and shamelessness. Experiencing the abject induces a simultaneous fear and fascination, a return to the space of the maternal semiotic, to 'the place where meaning collapses' (Kristeva 1982: 2). In her book *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Barbara Creed draws upon Kristeva's theory of abjection to argue that the horror film represents woman's reproductive functions as abject in order to produce her as monstrous. The genre's ideological project, she writes, is an attempt to 'bring about a confrontation with the abject', ultimately to expel it and 'redraw the boundaries between the human and non-human' (Creed 1996: 46). She posits that the horror film is linked to Kristeva's theory through its abundance of abject imagery, its treatment of boundary crossing, and its construction of the maternal figure as the monstrous feminine (Creed 1993a: 11). The male body, on the other hand, is represented as monstrous only when it assumes characteristics that are associated with the female body; his monstrosity is defined by the characteristics that make him not male (Creed 1993b: 118).

The thematic thread that permeates Todd Solondz's *Happiness* is deviant masculinity, and each male in the film is burdened with a particular sexual dysfunction that gradually comes to light through displays of perverse or obscene behaviour. Situated among them is Billy Maplewood, the adolescent

boy whose burgeoning sexuality emerges as the primary focus of the narrative. In mapping Billy's horrific trajectory towards maturity, the film's project is an abject representation of the specific rites of passage that he must undergo in order to accede to manhood. As both an application of, and a reimagining of Creed's concepts, *Happiness* addresses its theme of abject masculinity through the generic conventions of the horror film, adopting a fluid strategy that adheres to, and then traverses, the boundaries of her thesis. Masculinity is constructed as monstrous in terms of the very characteristics that shape Billy's experience of becoming a man; characteristics that are revealed as inherent in the development of his sexual identity.

At face value *Happiness* would seem to elude classification as a horror film. Its outer appearance is that of black comedy, though resonating beneath its facade of suburban anxiety is a narrative that employs the shock tactics of horror, evoking an effect on the body of the spectator that is in keeping with the traditional appeal of the genre. Abject signifiers penetrate the *mise-en-scène* – death, vomit, excrement, semen – and the inappropriate relationship that develops between Bill and Billy situates the father and son on the side of the abject. Billy must navigate and eventually come to accept a path to maturity that is fraught with the deviance represented by his father, who comes to signify the collapse of the boundary between normal and abnormal sexual desire (Creed 1996: 39). In her chapter on *The Exorcist*, Creed argues that representations of the monstrous feminine are constructed through the female subject's rejection of the paternal order; her refusal to 'take up her place in the proper symbolic' represented as a return to the semiotic (Creed 1993a: 38). She arrives at this point by first explaining that this denial of the father is also construed as a failure on his part to ensure the separation between the mother and child. A similar breakdown in the paternal function produces a representation of the abject in *Happiness*. Bill's failure to respect the border that separates normal and abnormal sexuality positions him as abject, and his inability to enforce the symbolic law ultimately signals its collapse. His example of monstrous masculinity is proffered to Billy as a rite of passage into manhood. Accepting this cue from his father, Billy too violates the border of normative sexual behaviour. He passes into maturity with his first ejaculation, his semen marking a collapse of the symbolic law, as Bill fails to prohibit the incestuous bond that Billy enters into with his mother at the film's climax. The typical horror film attempts to resolve this conflict in patriarchal authority, working to 'separate out the symbolic order from all that threatens its stability', via the restoration of the law of the father, and by the repression of the abject maternal element (Creed 1996: 46). In *Happiness*, there is no such resolution for patriarchy, as embodied by Bill, and thus the film concludes with the symbolic order in chaos; the failure of the paternal constructed as abject masculinity.

## CONVENTIONAL HORROR

Central to the horror film is the theme of the nuclear family in crisis and *Happiness* employs this basic narrative strategy, exploring the horrific nature of a family invaded by male monstrosity. We are introduced to the Maplewoods: Bill is a psychiatrist and father, struggling to control his nascent paedophilic urges; he's married to Trish, a rapidly domestic housewife, and together they have two children, Billy and Timmy. In his *Introduction to the American Horror Film*, Robin Wood contends that a society built on monogamy and family

demands the repression of an enormous amount of sexual energy: its return to culture taking the form of our nightmarish visions, visions that find expression in the horror film (Wood 1979: 10, 15). He argues for the centrality of the family unit, identifying the primary narrative conflict in horror films as an issue linked to or triggered by familial or sexual tension (Wood 1979: 17). On the exterior the Maplewoods fit the ideal patriarchal mould. They are, as Trish puts it, a family who 'has it all'. However, their seemingly ideal suburban lifestyle is soon ruptured as Bill's repressed deviant masculinity gradually comes to light. This disruption at the heart of the Maplewood family serves as the central crisis of the film, out of which the surrounding narrative action develops.

Wood contends that the release of sexuality in horror films is typically presented as perverse and excessive, and such is the case in *Happiness* (Wood 1979: 21). At the centre of every horror film is a monster; in *Happiness* a monstrous masculinity haunts its characters, finding its core representation in Bill. In his taxonomy of the modern horror film, David J. Russell suggests that serial killers, maniacs and other human figures who appear monstrous to the audience are classifiable as 'deviant' (Russell 1998: 241). These deviant monsters threaten normality through acts of abnormality and transgression, challenging socially constructed rules of acceptable behaviour. The males in *Happiness* are unable to either assert or control their respective sexual drives, and these conditions ultimately lead to displays of their deviant, repudiated compulsions. Fraught with sexual desire for young boys, Bill's unchecked libidinal urges emerge during several conversations with his son, Billy, in which he offers answers to questions about sex and male anatomy. Just as their talks should be drawing to a close, however, he fractures the boundary of responsible parenting with inappropriate questions of his own that hint at a need to act out his frustrated sexual desires with the boy. His lack of control and disregard for the boundaries of proper sexual behaviour mark him as deviant. The film depicts two specific instances in which Bill acquiesces to his paedophilic impulses. The first is the aforementioned 'tuna sandwich' scene, where he drugs and rapes Billy's friend Johnny Grasso during a sleepover. His second encounter is with Ronald Farber, another one of Billy's schoolmates. When Billy mentions that Ronald's parents have gone on vacation and left him alone for the week, Bill drives to Ronald's house and takes advantage of the young boy. Both of these scenarios, however, are not played out on screen. Their horrific nature is only alluded to by an ominous fade to black that cuts the action just before the spectator can witness Bill go through with each malicious act. Their devastating effects are instead given representation in a dream sequence that Bill describes to his therapist.

Bill's fantasy begins in a lush green park where the sun is shining and the birds are chirping. One couple are jogging together along a gravel trail, and another walk hand-in-hand through the grass while a calming melody dominates the soundscape. The camera pans left, revealing more couples lounging together on a bench and picnicking in the sunlight. The peaceful setting is abruptly cut short as Bill comes into frame holding a machine gun. He cocks his weapon and stalks through the park pumping bullets into the frightened couples, stopping as the camera zooms out to capture him in long shot, standing amidst a scattering of bloody dead bodies. Wood writes that dreams are the embodiment of one's repressed desires, those that the conscious mind rejects (Wood 1979: 13); Bill's dream is a violent representation of the conflict between his drive to fulfil his obligation as a husband and father, and his desire to have

improper sexual relations with young boys. The former gives in to the latter, and his paedophilic impulses take over, finding expression as a murderous outburst that offers only a momentary feeling of release. Just after describing the fantasy, Bill is asked by his psychiatrist how it makes him feel. 'Much better,' he says. 'I wake up happy ... feeling good'. After his session, he goes to a local convenience mart and buys a copy of a teen magazine. In the parking lot, he masturbates to a picture of a young boy in the rear seat of his car. Coupled with the sense of relief he feels after recounting the nightmare, his display of perverse self-gratification is only a temporary mechanism for assuaging his repressed urges. Bill is eventually consumed by his perverse desire, the brutality of his fantasized shoot-out inflicted onto Johnny Grasso and Ronald Farber through two equally vicious acts of rape.

Perverse sexuality is on display from the very onset and, true to the conventions of the popular horror genre, this signals a return of the repressed deviance that exists at the core of masculinity in the film. The spectator is introduced to Allen through a verbal recounting of his sadistic sexual fantasy, in which he longs to tie up his neighbour Helen and 'pump, pump, pump her' so hard that his 'dick shoots right through her'. His over-abundance of testosterone is exuded as raw, sexual aggression; however, his conception of masculinity is so heavily associated with the orgasmic capacity of his genitalia that he is rendered impotent in the company of women. Confused as to what to do in their presence, he has instead regressed from female contact to making obscene phone calls and masturbating excessively, depicted in abject detail in the film. Lenny's affliction is his extreme apathy, requesting a separation from his wife and continually affirming throughout the film that he is 'in love with no one'. When Mona tells him not to feel guilty after the two have a brief sexual encounter in her apartment, his listless reply is that he 'doesn't feel anything'. His presence throughout the film is an eerie foreshadowing of the late stages of the male experience; he is a figure whose deviance has left him totally devoid of emotion, a symbol of patriarchy in decline. Perverse sexual behaviour perforates the boundaries of the film's primary male characters, spilling out onto the secondary and peripheral players as well: Pedro, the seemingly well-intentioned doorman, is revealed as a hostile rapist, forcing himself sexually upon Christina; Joe is a homophobic father who, suspecting his son is gay, wants to buy him a prostitute; Andy is without control of his masculinity, pitifully reduced to infantilism; and Vlad is a testosterone-fuelled philanderer, taking advantage of Joy's naiveté to use her for sex. There is no reprieve from deviance for the males in *Happiness*, an aspect of the narrative that proves essential towards an affirmation of the film's primary thematic focus.

In his scathing critique of the film, Andrew Lewis Conn remarks that *Happiness* is nothing more than a series of 'shock tactics' that sink to the level of 'the stabbings and beheadings of the splatter film' (Lewis Conn 1999: 71). He overlooks the film's theme of deviant masculinity, dismissing its abject imagery as mere mechanical devices, superfluous to the progression of the film's narrative. Conn likens the film to action movies such as *Armageddon* (1998) and *Speed 2* (1997), suggesting that its failure to engage the spectator rests in its inability to support affable and empathetic characters for one to identify with. It is, however, the precise implementation of taboo subject matter that functions to give *Happiness* its unique sense of horror. In his discussion of David Cronenberg's *Shivers*, Robin Wood writes of the film's 'breaking of every sexual-social taboo – promiscuity, lesbianism, homosexuality, age-difference and

finally, incest' (Wood 1979: 24). In much the same way that Cronenberg's film is driven by specific instances of abnormal sexual behaviour, *Happiness* systematically builds its acts of sexual deviance one on top of another as a strategy towards what Wood calls an 'accumulation of horrors'. The physical effects of the horror film on the body of the spectator mark its primary allure as a popular genre, and *Happiness's* project is to provoke sensations of disgust through images of masturbation, death, sexual impropriety and incest. This defilement is methodically revealed as the narrative progresses, gradually laying the groundwork for a horrifying portrait of abject masculinity.

## BLURRED BOUNDARIES

The concept of the border in horror films is essential to a production of the monstrous, and Creed writes that anything that 'crosses or threatens to cross the border' is abject (Creed 1993a: 10–11). The construction of monstrosity in *Happiness* takes place at the border that separates normal and abnormal sexuality (Creed 1993a: 10–11). The opening sequence of the film is a cue to the spectator that the standards of a rational and controlled masculinity are out of balance, and no longer respected.

The film opens with a couple sharing an awkward pause as they sit together in an upscale restaurant. Joy has just broken-up with Andy, who, teary-eyed and shaken, asks if it's because of someone else. 'No,' she replies, 'it's just you' – a statement that cuts right to the heart of his inadequacy as a man. Instead of accepting her decision with the decorum expected of a man, he instead lashes out with a string of hateful remarks, evoking the abject with his supposition that she thinks he's 'shit'. He has failed to live up to the conventional standards of masculinity, evidenced by his childlike response to Joy's rejection. The scene is played out as if the two have exchanged gender roles, with Joy adopting the aggressive, forthright attitude, and Andy assuming the role of the vulnerable, jilted lover. This sequence signals a crossing over into a foreign space, where the dominant order is unsettled and out of control. The film is set up to be about male deviance, with the male subject signifying the abject with his disregard for the boundaries of proper masculinity.

The symbolic order sustains itself by maintaining its borders, and of all the characters in the film, Bill is the monstrous centre whose deviant transgressions most clearly point to the fragility of the symbolic order. Early in the film his son Billy approaches him to ask what the word 'come' means; Billy then admits that, although he has tried through masturbation, he has not yet been able to come – evidence that he has yet to surmount the most significant step in his sexual development, his first ejaculation. Bill responds as any father might, with an honest, clinical answer to his question. Billy continues to express frustration at not knowing what to do, and Bill then oversteps the boundaries of the situation when he asks, 'Do you want me to show you?' Later in the film the two are sitting in the family room, and Billy hesitantly inquires about the size of his penis. Again Bill offers sincere, fatherly advice, and again he fails to control his urges when asking, 'Do you want me to measure?' Kristeva writes that the abject 'does not respect borders, positions, rules' (Kristeva 1982: 4). These moments where Bill violates the borders of responsible fathering are marked as rites of passage in Billy's advancement toward maturity. His curiosity about sex and manhood is repeatedly met with answers that steer him toward a deviant, abject path.

Bill's representation in the film is one that both repels and attracts, evoking parallel feelings of disgust and pity. The deranged monster of the horror film is often its emotional centre, positioned as a sympathetic character with whom the audience is asked to identify (Wood 1979: 15). There is a sense of compassion felt for Bill as he tries to teach Billy what it is to be a man, equalled by the outrage that is provoked when his genuine advances venture beyond the bounds of decent parenting. His identity as a loving father and hard-working husband is fractured by the abject urges that have persisted beyond his control, corrupting Billy's path to manhood. Bill is the 'amoral oscillator'; at once conforming to one set of moral principles that define him as father and husband and secretly flaunting them with his deviant behaviours (Lechte 1990: 160). Bill signifies perverse sexuality, and his transgressions against proper symbolic masculinity mark him as abject, calling attention to the fragility of the law with his disregard for the border that separates normal and abnormal sexual desire.

In the closing moments of the film, after Bill's crimes of paedophilia have been made public, he sits with Billy for one last father/son discussion. The children at school have been talking, and Billy asks if the rumours and accusations that he is a 'serial rapist' and 'pervert' are true. Bill candidly describes the sexual acts he committed with Johnny and Ronald. 'I touched them,' he admits, 'I fucked them'. Billy asks whether or not he would ever want to share a similar encounter with him, asking, 'Would you ever fuck me?' Bill declines, saying, 'No, I'd jerk off instead'. Overwhelmed with emotion, Billy's only response is to weep in the face of Bill's brutal honesty. Chris Chang, in his article 'Cruel To Be Kind,' criticizes Solondz for what he calls an 'insistence on ambiguity' in such a critical moment in the film, accusing him of sidestepping the issue of whether Billy's tears are over the horrific events that have transpired or Bill's refusal to engage in sexual behaviour with him (Chang 1998: 75). Kristeva writes that, above all, abjection is ambiguity (Kristeva 1982: 9). It is the absence of borders, the in-between that lacks a definable object, which disturbs 'identity, system, order' (Kristeva 1982: 4). This void pushes the subject to seek out the symbolic structure and offers a sense of delineation against the loathsome, horrific body that exists at its foundation. Billy's outburst is neither a horrified judgment nor a jealous protest of his father's affections, but rather recognition of the abject and of the deviant model of masculinity being proffered to him. For Billy, this is the moment in which he is faced with the abject, with that which he must acknowledge and accept in himself as he navigates his treacherous path to maturity. The ambiguity surrounding this sequence is crucial to a representation of abjection in the film. As the two sit together in the darkened space of the living room, the dungeon-like atmosphere evokes an uncanny similarity to Dr Frankenstein's laboratory. Bill is frequently masked in shadow, like the vampire, creature, or monster that lurks in so many popular horror films. This visual motif is emphasized in key moments such as this throughout the film, and it is here that Bill has given life to a monstrous creation of his own. The boundary that once delineated father and son has dissolved, revealing them as dual representations of the monstrous masculine.

## **ABJECT SEMEN**

On a social level, Kristeva posits that a confrontation with the feminine is equivalent to a confrontation with the abject. The maternal authority is charged

with separating out and organizing the fluids and wastes that the child experiences in its early stages. Its relationship with the mother is defined by this 'primal mapping' of the body, during which the child exists in a realm without guilt or shame, in opposition to the symbolic (Creed 1993a: 38, 40). The mother lays out a foundation onto which the paternal law 'concatenates an order ... precisely by repressing the maternal authority and the corporeal mapping that abuts against them' (Kristeva 1982: 72). As a means of purifying the abject, the symbolic order supports interdictions against incest and defilement rituals, marking the body's 'clean and proper' boundaries (Kristeva 1982: 102). These symbolic mechanisms function to exclude the abject from personal and social identity, offering protection from the threat of dissolution.

The abject is that which has been 'jettisoned from the symbolic system': what the body must 'permanently thrust aside in order to live' (Kristeva 1982: 3, 65). Creed's contention is that the popular horror film acts as a modern form of defilement rite; it attempts to purify the abject through a representation of, and encounter with, the maternal body. Its project is to saturate the film text with images of defilement, pointing to the fragility of the symbolic order, evoking the loathsome allure of abjection (Creed 1996: 43–44). The horror film provides an arena for spectators to consume these images, signalling a desire for the 'perverse pleasure' experienced in confronting the abject, which is equalled by the desire to expel it upon satiation (Creed 1993a: 10). In keeping with the horror film's propensity for the shocking, *Happiness* supplies an appreciable amount of abject imagery.

Blood, death, sexual impropriety and incest permeate the filmic space, finding expression through deviant masculine behaviour. Unable to bear the pain of Joy's rejection, Andy's cold, pale corpse is uncovered after he commits suicide by consuming a cocktail of pills and vodka. Christina grabs hold of Pedro's neck after he attacks her, snapping it backwards and killing him instantly. 'I had to cut up his body and plastic-bag all the parts,' she says when speaking about his remains. 'There's still some left in my freezer'. Bill's nightmare provides the most vicious images of murder in the film – his shooting spree leaves behind a trail of bloody wounds and corpses. These dead and decaying bodies in *Happiness* signify the ultimate collapse of boundaries: the 'utmost of abjection ... death infecting life' (Kristeva 1982: 4).

The blood that leaks from Bill's victims also serves to mark Johnny as abject. The morning after his sleepover at Billy's, Johnny remarks that he's not feeling very well and he vomits a viscous white goo onto the kitchen table. Later that day he finds blood in his stool, and at the hospital his parents discover that he has been raped. Johnny is doubly bound by abjection. His expulsion of abject waste points to the collapse of his body's proper borders, while at the same time signalling his violation of the 'interdiction against love of the same' (Kristeva 1982: 102) via the improper sexual relationship forced upon him by Bill. His vomit, bloody stool, and the breach of his body evoke the abject, and at the same time they signify Bill's horrific crime of rape. Kristeva writes that those who perpetrate crimes against the law are abject: 'the traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior' (Kristeva 1982: 4). Johnny's sickness points to Bill's abject criminality, and to the corrupt masculinity that has been awakened in him; the interior of the male body made visible via an encounter with abject masculinity.

In her book *Cinema's Missing Children*, Emma Wilson posits a repulsive similarity between Johnny's sickness at the breakfast table and Allen's sadistic

sexual fantasies (Wilson 2003: 49). Allen's desire to 'pump' Helen so hard that his 'dick shoots right through her ... and [his] cum squirts out of her mouth', evokes a strange association between vomiting and ejaculation in the film. After an episode in which he makes an obscene phone call to Helen from his desk at work, Allen vomits when his neighbour Christina comes to visit him with information about Pedro's death. This mirrors an earlier lewd phone call that he makes to Joy where he masturbates while talking to her, his semen captured in abject close-up as he ejaculates against the wall. Throughout the film, vomit and ejaculate are represented as vile by-products of an encounter with abject masculinity. This same sickness befalls Bill after his rape of Ronald Farber. He returns home to find Trish on the couch watching television. 'I think I have to lie down,' he says. 'I hope you're not coming down with whatever Johnny Grasso had,' she replies. What makes Bill sick, however, is that which he cannot cure. His affliction is an uncontrollable, deviant sexual make-up that is inherent to him as a man, and shared by the rest of the male characters in the film.

Allen is also linked to Billy in the film, and he is in many ways a foreshadowing of the man Billy will become: an uncanny doppelganger of sorts. The two are bound together not only by their physical similarities (both have chubby, awkward bodies and bespectacled faces) and their individual masturbatory episodes, but each also shares an intimate relationship with Bill. When Allen is describing the vile, abject fantasies he has about his neighbour Helen, Bill sits across from him, looking on with what seems to be genuine concern. His gaze, however, is insincere, and a subjective voice-over reveals that he is only pretending to listen, instead daydreaming about a list of errands he needs to finish. To the contrary, when talking with Billy, he is open and attentive; indeed his forthrightness pushes beyond the acceptable limits of proper fathering. Throughout the course of both relationships the abject flow of sexual impropriety is ignored between men. Bill abuses his responsibility as Billy's father, continually crossing the boundaries of proper parenting when talking to him about sex and manhood. He is similarly positioned as a father figure to Allen, and he neglects his obligation as a psychiatrist to counsel him through his perverse sexual fantasies. In both cases, abject masculinity is treated as unremarkable. It passes between men as something inherent in their masculine make-up, unnoticed but ever-present.

Allen and Billy are further tied to each other through the graphic expulsion of abject fluids: their semen. Kristeva writes that polluting objects fall into two types: excremental and menstrual (Kristeva 1982: 71). Both types emanate from the subject's relationship with the maternal body, excremental objects endangering from without, and menstrual blood threatening from within. Excremental fluids signify a split between the maternal authority and the paternal symbolic. They point back to a time when the child's relationship with the mother was unbound by feelings of embarrassment and shame, set apart as a realm characterized by his 'untrammelled pleasure in "playing" with the body and its wastes' (Creed 1993a: 13). These feelings are surmounted upon the subject's entry into the symbolic, during which the exclusion of filth is 'promoted to the ritual level of defilement', marking the sacred order of the body's 'self and clean' (Kristeva 1982: 65).

Defilement is expelled from the 'pores and openings' of the body, pointing to the fragility of its borders, as that which 'gives rise to abjection' (Kristeva 1982: 108). Impurities such as urine, blood, sperm, and excrement are those that obscure the borders of the body, and are 'subject to ritual acts,

whose purpose is to ward off defilement' (Lechte 1990: 160). Kristeva writes that, 'any secretion or discharge, anything that leaks out of the feminine or masculine body, defiles' (Kristeva 1982: 102). She notes, however, that not everything within one's body contaminates, and although sperm 'belongs to the borders of the body', it cannot represent the abject because it 'contains no polluting value' (Kristeva 1982: 71). The presence of semen in *Happiness*, however, does come to signify the abject, because it is contextualized as filthy, unclean. It is ascribed a polluted value because it represents a non-normative masculinity. This is evidenced not only by the specific focus put on Billy's quest to come, but also by the way in which it manifests itself in the film physically in Billy and Allen's abject cum shots, and symbolically in Johnny's ejaculatory vomiting and Bill's unrestrained gunfire. *Happiness* is explicitly about semen, and about the way in which it contaminates proper masculinity. Semen signifies the sickness that haunts the male body in the film, polluting him from within, and represented as abjected masculinity upon its expulsion.

### THE MONSTROUS MASCULINE

The closing sequence of the film begins with Billy standing alone on a balcony outside of his grandmother's new condominium. Looking down onto the pool area below, he spies a woman laying out a towel in preparation for sunbathing. His eyes devour her voluptuous figure, the scant bikini accentuating her curves, as she sits and opens a tube of sunscreen. He watches as she massages the lotion along her arms and over her breasts: his mouth agape as she turns over onto her stomach, softly untying her top to start tanning. In a state of arousal, and with no regard for the boundaries of the situation, Billy begins to masturbate on the open balcony while watching her sunbathe. Taking a cue from Bill's deviant model of behaviour, Billy's instinctual response when faced with the stimulation of a nearly naked woman is to immediately gratify his urges in plain view on the balcony, regardless of the potential consequences.

Creed posits that woman's monstrosity in the horror film is derived from her physical, sexual and biological attributes. She adds that man cannot 'give birth, lactate or menstruate', thus 'rendering his fathering and reproductive functions incapable of signifying monstrosity' (Creed 2005: 16). The perverse characteristics that define masculinity in *Happiness*, however, are explicitly related to Bill's perverse conception of fatherhood, and to Billy's comprehension of his newly acquired reproductive capabilities. Bill ignores the boundaries of proper father/son relations throughout the film, proffering his perverse conception of masculinity unto Billy. Upon realizing his father's fallibility, Billy is able to accept the notion of his own masculinity as abject, and he engages in behaviour similar to that of his deviant counterparts in the film. He achieves his first orgasm while masturbating in a setting where his respect for the boundaries of normal sexuality is disregarded, signalling his passage into an abject maturity. In *Happiness*, the deviant nature of the male body and its features are put on display and represented as abject, producing masculinity as monstrous.

Immediately after his transgression on the balcony, a vivid close-up captures Billy's semen as it drips onto the guard rail, and the family dog Cookie scuttles over to lap up the milky substance. Running back into the dining room, Cookie rushes over to Trish and gives her an unexpected sign of affection, licking her on the face and mouth. Trish's interaction with the dog is a

vivid evocation of the abject, their abnormal contact functioning to symbolically unite Billy with his mother in an incestuous relationship, signified by the transfer of his semen to her via the dog's kiss. This illicit encounter is alluded to earlier in the scene by the half-finished glass of milk that sits in front of Billy's chair at the dinner table. Kristeva writes that milk binds the mother to the child, thus connoting incest (Kristeva 1982: 105). As a symbol of the semiotic, Billy's consumption of milk just prior to his revelation on the balcony implies his desire to reconnect with the maternal (Weir 1993: 82). He regresses to the early relationship with his mother, to the realm where guilt and embarrassment cease to exist. The spectator is immersed in the 'vortex of summons and repulsion' that characterizes the abject, situated in a state of disgusted pleasure, stirred by the experience of a violation of the incest taboo (Kristeva 1982: 1).

The prohibition against incest protects the subject from a return to the pre-Oedipal: a paternal function that acts as a rejection of the abject. Incest represents a breakdown of symbolic law, and Billy's improper union with his mother is a consequence of Bill's failure as a father. His absence at the film's conclusion, in conjunction with the pitiful image of Lenny at the dinner table, signifies a rupture in the paternal order. Creed argues that the popular horror film is an attempt to stage an encounter with the abject, only to annihilate its threat to the symbolic and restore the boundaries of normality (Creed 1993a: 14). Such is not the case in *Happiness*. The film stages a collapse of the symbolic order, signalling horror as an encounter with the perverse characteristics of the monstrous male figure. Where the traditional horror film functions to redraw its boundaries and abject the monstrous element, the paternal crisis in *Happiness* remains unresolved. Incest marks Billy as unclean, and his abject passage into manhood ultimately symbolizes the inherent deviance that exists at the core of masculinity in the film.

## A PORTRAIT OF HORROR

The horror film's milieu is its violation of boundaries, its pleasure in perversity, and its revelry in the breaking of cultural taboos. *Happiness* traverses these grounds in its exploration of the monstrous masculine, staging a collapse of the paternal order via Billy's horrific adolescent trajectory. In his essay 'The W/ Hole and the Abject,' Phil Powrie points to the perverse masculinity of Gaspar Noé's *Seul contre tous* as a crucial component in the film's radical exploration of abjection. He argues that the sordid 'variations' of the film's protagonist negotiates a delicate equilibrium between a confirmation and a refutation of the abject (Powrie 2004: 215). *Happiness's* construction of monstrous masculinity has the same subversive potential, working within and around the borders of the popular horror film to expose the inherent deviance of the male subject, and pointing to an encounter with the male body as an encounter with the abject.

In the final moments of the film, after his transgression on the balcony, Billy follows Cookie into the dining room and looks toward his family, proudly exclaiming, 'I came'. Their heads whirl around and look back in stunned silence as they realize for the first time that, like his father, Billy too has become a monster. The closing image of Norman Bates in *Psycho* imparts a similar representation of monstrosity, with its chilling juxtaposition of his mother's corpse, Marion's car being pulled from the water, and his devious, smiling face staring back at the spectator. Like Bill, Billy and

the rest of the men in *Happiness*, Norman is positioned as abject because of his criminality, his refusal to let go of the maternal, and his disregard for sexual borders. Hitchcock's film marks a significant turning point in the evolution of the horror film. Its subversive approach to the genre reinvented traditional conceptions of the monster, transforming him from an external, physical being to an internalized, psychological threat. As a horrifying portrait of a deranged serial killer, *Psycho* arouses concerns about one's ethical boundaries, implicating the spectator as capable of crime and murder. *Happiness's* grim vision of a patriarchal family is equally horrific; its portrait of a father and son at the margin of their sexual identities implicates an intrinsic male deviance, while their abject representation is constructed as monstrous masculinity.

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## SUGGESTED CITATION

Wadenius, A. (2010), 'The Monstrous Masculine: Abjection and Todd Solondz's *Happiness*', *Horror Studies* 1: 1, pp. 129–141, doi: 10.1386/host.1.1.129/1

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# Studies in Eastern European Cinema

ISSN 2040-350X (2 issues | Volume 1, 2010)

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