

MASCULINITY, PSYCHOANALYSIS,  
STRAIGHT QUEER THEORY

MASCULINITY, PSYCHOANALYSIS,  
STRAIGHT QUEER THEORY

ESSAYS ON ABJECTION IN LITERATURE,  
MASS CULTURE, AND FILM

Calvin Thomas

palgrave  
macmillan



MASCULINITY, PSYCHOANALYSIS, STRAIGHT QUEER THEORY

Copyright © Calvin Thomas, 2008.

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2008 978-0-230-60008-9

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

First published in 2008 by

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN™

175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010 and

Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, England RG21 6XS

Companies and representatives throughout the world.

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN is the global academic imprint of the Palgrave Macmillan division of St. Martin's Press, LLC and of Palgrave Macmillan Ltd. Macmillan® is a registered trademark in the United States, United Kingdom and other countries. Palgrave is a registered trademark in the European Union and other countries.

ISBN 978-1-349-36945-4 ISBN 978-0-230-61185-6 (eBook)

DOI 10.1057/9780230611856

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Thomas, Calvin, 1956–

Masculinity, psychoanalysis, straight queer theory : essays on abjection in literature, mass culture, and film / by Calvin Thomas.

p. cm.

1. Abjection in literature. 2. Abjection in motion pictures. 3. Masculinity in literature. 4. Masculinity in motion pictures. I. Title.

PN56.A23T46 2008

809'.933521—dc22

2007041259

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Design by Westchester Book Group

First edition: May 2008

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*To Amber and Jason, who help me keep my shoulders up.  
Long may they rule.*

# CONTENTS

Acknowledgments and Permissions	ix
Introduction: Object (without) Apologies	xi
1 Beginning with a Bit of (Be)Hindsight . . .	1
2 Re-enfleshing the Bright Boys; or, How Male Bodies Might Matter to Feminist Theory	19
3 Must Desire Be Taken Literally?	63
4 Cultural Droppings: On Bersani and Beckett	73
5 Is What You Want Something You Can Discuss?	93
6 “It’s No Longer Your Film”: Abjection and (the) <i>Mulholland</i> (Death) <i>Drive</i>	145
Notes	167
Works Cited	207
Index	217

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AND PERMISSIONS

A NUMBER OF LOVELY AND GENEROUS PEOPLE HELPED TO LUBRICATE various parts of this project. The first essay, "Beginning with a Bit of (Be) Hindsight . . .," is a revised and expanded version of a piece that was written for keynote presentation at the conference on "Men's Bodies" organized by Judith Still (who I thank for inviting me to come speak) at the University of Nottingham in 2001; it was published as "Racing Forms and the Exhibition(ist) (Mis)Match" in *Men's Bodies*, edited by Judith Still (Edinburgh University Press, 2003) and appears here by kind permission of Edinburgh University Press. The second essay, "Re-enfleshing the Bright Boys," is a considerably revised and expanded version of a piece that was first presented as a keynote address at the conference on "Posting the Male: Representations of Masculinity in the Twentieth Century" at the Research Centre for Literature and Cultural History at Liverpool John Moores University in 2000, and I thank Daniel Lea, Gill Plain, and Berthold Schoene-Harwood for their invitation. The piece was first published in a much shorter form in Judith Kegan Gardiner's collection *Masculinity Studies and Feminist Theory: New Directions* (Columbia University Press, 2002) and appears here by kind permission of Columbia University Press. The excerpt from "Holy Shit," from *Imperfect Thirst: Poems by Galway Kinnell* (copyright © 1994 by Galway Kinnell) that appears in the second essay, is reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Company (all rights reserved). The third essay, "Must Desire Be Taken Literally?" was written at the invitation of the editors of the journal *Parallax*: it appeared in the "Having Sex" issue of that journal (October–December 2002) and appears here in slightly different form with their permission ([www.informaworld.com](http://www.informaworld.com)). The fourth essay, "Cultural Droppings," was first published in *Twentieth Century Literature* 47, no. 2 (Summer 2001) and appears here in revised form by kind permission of *TCL*. The last essay, "It's No

Longer Your Film,” was originally written for presentation at Emory University’s Psychoanalytic Studies Program Colloquium, and I would like to thank Elisa Marder and Angela Hunter for inviting me to speak at this forum; I also thank Adrian Johnston, Robert Sinnerbrink, and Doris McIlwain for help and encouragement with this piece, an earlier version of which was published in *Angelaki: The Theoretical Journal of the Humanities* 11, no. 2 (August 2006). I thank the editors of *Angelaki* ([www.informaworld.com](http://www.informaworld.com)) for permitting me to publish the piece in its present form here. I am grateful to the English Department and the College of Arts and Sciences at Georgia State University for a professional development leave, which helped, in the fall of 2004. Thanks also to the English Department for picking up various permission fees, and for making it possible for John Lowther to write the index (abundant thanks to John as well). I would like to thank my friends in Dublin, Noreen Giffney and Michael O’Rourke, as well as Lisa Downing at the Centre for the Interdisciplinary Study of Sexuality and Gender in Europe ([www.sall.ex.ac.uk/centres/cissge](http://www.sall.ex.ac.uk/centres/cissge)) at the University of Exeter, for their general support of my work. A special note of thanks goes to Peter Murphy, who knows why. I also offer thanks to Dr. John Buchanan for his moral and culinary support. Finally, all my thanks, and all my heart, go to Liz Stoehr, always.

## INTRODUCTION: ABJECT (WITHOUT) APOLOGIES

Does one write under any condition other than being possessed by abjection?

Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*

Might not language itself arouse an anxiety which it must also try, through its other circuits, to assuage?

Riley, *The Words of Selves*

What happened to this discharge? What have we lost, and to what end, in the elimination of this fall of letters? Out of shit, a treasure arose: the treasure of language.

Laporte, *History of Shit*

THIS BOOK CONCERNS THE PRODUCTIONS OF MASCULINITY; it draws heavily, perhaps lugubriously, on Lacanian psychoanalysis; and, despite the fact that its author participates in and benefits from the dominant social order as a privileged heterosexual male, the book nonetheless attempts to proliferate theoretically queer discourses that are inimical to that order, to its dominance, and to its privileges. And yet, for all of that, I did not really want to call this book *Masculinity, Psychoanalysis, Straight Queer Theory*. I wanted instead to title it *Adventures in Abjection*, for even though the book certainly addresses all of the topics announced in its given title, it is much more thoroughly concerned, if not saturated, with abject matters. Abjection is its perverse core as well as its pervasive strategy. Its existing title notwithstanding, then, this book most fundamentally promises its reader only essays in abjection, or abject *assays*, adventures in abjective writing.<sup>1</sup>

But what is “abjection,” anyway? Why would a reader want to have adventures in it? What does abjection have to do with reading and writing about masculinity, psychoanalysis, and queer theory, or about literature,

culture, and film? Some definitions would seem to be in order here, so let's begin with a brief rounding up of the usual discursive suspects. In *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex,"* Judith Butler writes that the word "abjection (in latin, *ab-jicere*) literally means to cast off, away, or out and, hence, presupposes and produces a domain of agency from which it is differentiated." For Butler, "the notion of *abjection* designates a degraded or cast out status within the terms of sociality" (243). In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Julia Kristeva writes of abjection as that which "disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect border, positions, rules" (4). She associates the abject with "what is jettisoned from the '*symbolic system*' [ . . . ] what escapes that social rationality, that logical order on which a social aggregate is based" (65). To the extent that what is jettisoned from any "symbolic system" or social field can be metaphorically related to what leaks or is expelled from the individual body and its various orifices, the abject is for Kristeva, and to some extent for Butler, always related to matters that traverse the body's boundaries, "polluting objects" that "always relate to corporeal orifices as to so many landmarks parceling-constituting the body's territory" (*Powers* 71): blood, pus, mucus, saliva, milk, urine, semen, feces, tears.

Abjection thus involves the general realm of bodily production, expulsion, leakage, and defilement. For Butler, the question of abjection is more sociopolitical than corporeal or psychosexual: ethically and analytically, she is concerned with the way the dominant patriarchal-heteronormative social order maintains itself by "constituting zones of uninhabitability" (243) and unintelligibility, by constructing arenas of abject powerlessness, lifelessness, and meaninglessness to which it consigns its marginalized others. Abjection, for Butler, is the way the dominant order excrementalizes its dispossessed; it is, as she writes in *Gender Trouble*, the "mode by which others become shit" (134). For Kristeva, an individual subject's shitty feeling of abjection relates to more primordial anxieties concerning the maternal body and subjective fantasies of cloacal birth therefrom. The abject, she writes, "is the translinguistic spoor of the most archaic boundaries of the self's clean and proper body [*corps propre*]. In that sense, if it is a jettisoned object, it is so from the mother" (73). Abjection as a disruption of these archaically constituted boundaries poses a threat of "engulfment" to the subject, the threat "of being swamped by the dual relationship, thereby risking the loss not of a part (castration) but of the totality of his living being," the fantasmatic danger of "his very own identity sinking irretrievably into the mother" (64). Lacan, in *Seminar X: On Anxiety*, explains this sinking feeling of being swamped (or perhaps swiped) as follows:

It is not nostalgia for what is called the maternal womb which engenders anxiety, it is its imminence, it is everything that announces to us something which will allow us to glimpse that we are going to re-enter it. [. . .] What is most anxiety-provoking for the child is when the relationship through which he comes to be—on the basis of lack which makes him desire—is most perturbed: when there is no possibility of lack, when his mother is constantly on his back, especially by wiping his bottom. (December 5, 1962)

At bottom, Kristeva writes, it is the “logic of prohibition,” “the simple logic of *excluding filth*,” that “founds the abject,” establishing “the ‘self and clean’ [*corps propre*] of each social group if not of each subject” (64, 65). She points to the “excremental philosopher” Georges Bataille as having “linked the production of the abject to *the weakness of that prohibition*, which, in other respects, necessarily constitutes each social order.” Bataille, writes Kristeva, is “the first to have specified that the plane of abjection is that of the *subject/object relationship* (and not subject/other subject) and that this archaism is rooted in anal eroticism” (64).<sup>2</sup>

Now, if the preceding gives an adequate whiff of what abjection is all about, the question still remains why any self-respecting reader would want to have an adventure in such matters—particularly since respect for “the self” (or at least the “clean and proper” self) is precisely what an interest in abjection would seem most to demolish. In my first book, *Male Matters*, I attempted to demonstrate the use-value for feminist and queer political projects of fully exploring the various planes of abjection, of understanding how and why abjectified subject/object relations can invade and infect not only those between the infant and the mother but also those between one subject and another (across the divides of gender and/or sexual difference) and between the subject and the Big Other (i.e., the field of language as sociosymbolic order). The subject, as Lacan tells us, must constitute itself as a self by alienating itself, relating itself to itself, gaining and losing itself as an object in compulsively repetitive (or compulsively competitive) ways—in the game of *fort-da*, at the moment of mirror-stage recognition, in the “Oedipalizing” accession to the law of language, and so on. In *Male Matters*, and in this book as well (which I also briefly considered calling *More Male Matters*), I attempt to merge Lacan’s emphasis on imaginary, symbolic, and real self-alienation with the jettisoned matters of abjection and, most importantly, with what Leo Bersani calls “the destabilization of self initiated by the act of writing” (*Culture* 12). I relate what Roland Barthes calls “that faint uneasiness which seizes me when I look at ‘myself’ on a piece of paper” (*Camera Lucida* 13) with the anxiety that Lacan says any writer experiences when

faced with the blank white page. At my most wretchedly neologistic, I call this anxiety *scatontological* in order to suggest that the unease that seizes me when I see “myself” reproduced/expelled/spelled out on paper resonates with the dread “memory” of having “originally” been “jettisoned from the mother” as *kakon* or bad object—“through the hole in her arse if my memory is correct” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 16). Moreover, I let this cloacal “memory,” which is no less determinate for being anatomically incorrect, or wholly false, serve as the fundament for the following bit of discursive excess from Lacan, which has served my own writing so often and so well: “This subject, who thinks that he can accede to himself by designating himself in the statement, is no more than such [a bad] object. Just ask the writer about the anxiety he experiences when he faces the blank sheet of paper, and he will tell you who *is* the turd of his phantasy” (*Écrits: A Selection* 315).<sup>3</sup> But I also attempt, both in *Male Matters* and in this book, to give this condition of *scatontological dysgraphic anxiety* a politically salutary twist, a sort of ethical (ref)use-value, by connecting it to what Bersani calls *ébranlement* or “self-shattering,” to a “self-divestiture [that] is enacted as a willful pursuit of abjection, a casting away not only of possessions but also of all the attributes that constitute the self as a valuable property” (*Homos* 126). The ethical assumption underlying all my sorry assays is that a willful pursuit of abjection as self-divestiture *in writing* could delubricate, roughen, or impede the punitive abjection of the other that the dominant social order enacts and upon which it depends, could refuse that order or render useless to it at least one of the subjective pivots through which it stabilizes itself—namely, *my* “self,” my always ideological sense of identity with myself. Even if this refusal effectively fecalizes my understanding that “‘I’ is an other,” a positively *self-shattering* immersion in the profusely scatontological dysgraphia of which I write could allow abjective writing to become something other than the mode by which *others* become shit.

So much, then, for self-respect, which is also always ideological, the basis of all identity politics, and pretty much what a reader should be prepared to relinquish in order to enter here. And yet, the reader should be entitled to know going in just how this book will differ from *Male Matters* even as it attempts to spread, to extend and refine, all that the first book uncovers.

First, I would say that while *Male Matters* wallows in a number of bodily fluids and substances—urine in the “Piss Hegel” section, semen in the discussions of the pornographical money-shot, and so on—*Masculinity, Psychoanalysis, Straight Queer Theory (MPSQT)* sticks pretty much with the anus and whatever figuratively falls in or out of it. One reason for this tighter focus is that while *Male Matters* attempts to engage with a number of different poststructuralist theorists of difference, *MPSQT* sticks pretty

much with Lacan and the thoughts on abjection that fall in and out of his writing.<sup>4</sup> Although I do not necessarily hold to what Fredric Jameson, in “Lacan and the Dialectic,” calls “the conviction that of all the writing called theoretical, Lacan’s is the richest” (365–66)—and I should say that the sentence in which this thesis appears is so dialectically constructed that I cannot tell if Jameson himself is affirming or negating it—I am fully persuaded by Tim Dean’s demonstration in *Beyond Sexuality* that “in its most fundamental formulations psychoanalysis is a queer theory” (268). Thus, while *Male Matters* attempts, in what now seems to me an overly apologetic manner, to establish its “male-feminist” bona fides by spending a lot of time ragging on psychoanalysis, *MPSQT* unapologetically refuses to follow suit. If while writing *Male Matters* and other material I was convinced that Judith Butler was “right” about Lacan, I discovered while writing this book that I no longer hold that view. And if my here announcing this change in perspective gives the impression that in this book my commitment to psychoanalysis as a queer theory trumps or supersedes my commitment to “male feminism,” I will offer only the hope—albeit, again, without apology—that your reading the book itself will correct that impression. Nor do I apologize for this book’s language, its gnarly epical sentences, its brazenly asinine puns, its obscene and unlabeled diction—though I will allow that if *Male Matters* took a lot of crap for what those who carped called its “jargon” (and it did), *MPSQT* is somewhat less of a jargon-fest than *Male Matters*. Finally, I would say that while *MPSQT* continues *Male Matters*’ ethical or political argument about the (ref)use-value of abjective *ébranlement*, this book works harder to tie the question of abjection to aesthetic experience and to the fate of close reading. In this regard, particularly in the later essays on Hitchcock and Lynch, this book might even be considered a contribution of sorts to what is now being called “the new formalism.”<sup>5</sup>

As for the individual essays, the first takes up the question of “the production of men’s bodies” in relation to visual culture, revisits some of the still pertinent “theoretical scenes” from *Male Matters*, judges a few books by their covers, and, to address some of the “race matters” that *Male Matters* occluded, considers the prominent display of black male bodies in a Herb Ritts-directed Janet Jackson music video (“Love Will Never Do”) and an Oliver Stone football movie (*Any Given Sunday*). In the second essay, I posit abjective writing as one answer to the question of how male bodies might matter to feminist theory. This essay spells out my take on Lacan by examining the debate between Judith Butler and assorted Lacanians on the question of “gender vs. sexual difference.” It is here that I explain why, even if I am not completely taken with the certainty of certain Lacanians, I am no longer certain that Butler performatively does Lacan much justice. I close this essay by pitting Lee Edelman’s “homographesis”

against Galway Kinnell's "Holy Shit." In the third essay, I take up (or in) the question of the literal and figurative senses in which an author can be said to be "having sex"—in the particular form of receptive anal eroticism, a.k.a. the ass-fuck—while engaged in the act of writing. In the fourth essay, I examine the relation between Bersanian homo-ness and Beckettian aesthetic failure. Essay 5 presents an analysis of three Alfred Hitchcock films—*Spellbound*, *Rear Window*, and *Vertigo*—in relation to the Lacanian slogan "There's no such thing as a sexual relation." Here I argue that in the first two films Hitchcock stages the failure of the sexual relation as queer comedy, while in the last he dramatizes that failure as straight tragedy, as *the* tragedy of straightness. The final essay mixes Freud, Bataille, and Lacan to explicate the intricately formal "gift" of David Lynch's perfectly abject masterpiece, *Mulholland Drive*.

Again, while all of these essays touch on the subjects announced in the book's given title, it is the matter of abjection—as a problem of writing, as a disturbance in the relation between identity and its representation—that is the book's core concern, its obsession, perhaps its fetish, certainly its fate. But maybe here, in the end, *amor fati*, as Nietzsche would have it, is bound to (a perverse sort of) "triumph," both politically and aesthetically.<sup>6</sup> I have already alluded to the ethical or political possibilities that I think are inscribed in abjective writing, and I will of course elaborate on these in what follows. As should be evident at the outset, the book comes not to bury the abject but to distribute it more equitably so as to impede in whatever ways possible the punitive abjection of marginalized others: "Abjection for everybody!" would be its radically democratic slogan, its general economy, its only political *raison d'être*. On the other hand, the book's perversely unapologetic commitment to aesthetic experience (even if the experience is only that of abject failure) aligns it with Beckett's aesthetic credo—"to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail" (*Disjecta* 145)—or perhaps with the recalcitrant and aggressively supine figures of his fiction, or perhaps even with the antidemocratic "reckless and amoral artist-god" that Nietzsche describes in *The Birth of Tragedy*'s "Attempt at Self-Criticism," the Dionysian figure who in shattering the *principium individuationis* and fighting "at any risk whatever the *moral* interpretation and significance of existence" can only ever *aesthetically* free himself "from the *distress* of fullness and *overfullness* and from the *affliction* of the contradictions compressed in his soul" (22). I will say no more here about the nature of this book's distress or the location of its contradictions' compression, which, perhaps needless to say, isn't exactly in its soul. Suffice it to say that I will not have resolved any tensions by venturing that it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that the existence of abjective writing is politically justified.<sup>7</sup>