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Blood as a Fashion Statement: On the Trend of ‘Abjection Chic’ in Contemporary Horror Cinema

By Milo Farragher-Hanks

In August 2018, the 75th Venice International Film Festival played host, alongside new works from fêted international auteurs such as Alfonso Cuarón, Olivier Assayas, and Yorgos Lanthimos, to *Suspiria* (Luca Guadagnino, 2017), a remake of the 1977 horror film of the same name.¹ The original *Suspiria* (Dario Argento, 1977), a tale of witchcraft in a Berlin ballet academy, had never exactly attained widespread critical acceptance or mainstream recognition; its initial release in the United States saw it chastised as overly violent and incoherent by reputed critics such as Janet Maslin (“‘Suspiria’...does have its slender charms, though they will most assuredly be lost on viewers who are squeamish’), Gene Siskel (‘a weak imitation of *The Exorcist*’) and Bruce McCabe (‘too often more uncontrolled than the hysteria it’s trying to create’).² However, the very abstraction and violent excess which made *Suspiria* a hard sell for the critical establishment, coupled with the film’s colourful visual style and operatic score by Italian progressive rock band Goblin, have also made it an object of enduring fascination for horror connoisseurs. It is, in other words, a quintessentially *cult* film. And yet, four decades later, its remake premieres at a renowned hub of European film culture, helmed by a celebrated director and featuring an international cast of stars. Four years later, *Sight and Sound* conducted its decennial poll of the 250 greatest films of all time—surveyed from lists by critics, programmers, and filmmakers. The original *Suspiria*

¹ ‘Venice Film Fest Lineup Includes Coens, Luca Guadagnino and Alfonso Cuarón’

² ‘Suspiria, a Specialty Movie’, ‘Fox covers its prints on its part in ‘Suspiria’’, and ‘‘Suspiria’ is fitful’

appeared on the list for the first time, in 211th place.³ Also entering the list was *Possession* (Andrzej Zuwalski, 1981), a grisly psychological horror about a disintegrating marriage set against a Cold War backdrop.⁴ Once listed by the Director of Public Prosecutions as a ‘video nasty’ which could be seized by police as obscene, it now places 243rd on British film culture’s most sacrosanct list of canonical films.

Viewed all together, these developments suggest that in recent years the lines between the cult and the canonical have become less rigid than once they were. Any number of social and technological factors have contributed to this shift, including the emergence of a younger critical commentariat perhaps more open to genre films, and curated streaming services and widespread torrenting make it easier to access obscure or even banned films. In this article, I identify and analyse a trend in genre filmmaking which has emerged as a consequence of these cultural shifts; films which self-consciously emulate the aesthetics, tropes, and mannerisms of cult films while steadfastly avoiding the aspects of such films which make them marginal and, often, controversial. I refer to this trend as *abjection chic*. I will here seek to define and problematise abjection chic through analysis of two recent British horror films which partake of this trend, the 1960s-inflected *Last Night In Soho* (Edgar Wright, 2021) and the obliquely allegorical *Men* (Alex Garland, 2022).

First, however, we must set out the relationship between abjection and the cultic. Films become cult objects for a myriad of reasons, including but by no means limited to the highlighting of marginalised identities, representation of particular subcultures, unconventional approaches to or combinations of genre conventions, and artificial or kitsch aesthetics. There are cults around films depicting characters living at extremes, as Justin

³ *Sight and Sound*, April 2023, Vol.33, No.3, p.50

⁴ *Ibid*

Smith observes of the cult legacy of the seriocomic portrayal of addiction and poverty in *Withnail & I* (Bruce Robinson, 1987), and Glyn Davies of the frightening, fascistic bikers of *Scorpio Rising* (Kenneth Anger, 1964).⁵ There are also cults of failure; Allison Graham identifies the ‘cult of banality’ who with ‘hip knowingness...reveling in its suspension of belief’ laugh at the shoddy production values and generic cliches of 1950s B-movies, while Becky Bartlett identifies cult ‘badfilms’ such as *Monster-A-Go-Go* (Bill Rebane/Herschell Gordon Lewis, 1965) and *The Room* (Tommy Wiseau, 2003) which are ‘identified, distinguished and potentially valued for their incompetence and technical failure’.⁶ What unites all of these myriad facets or types of cult is *difference*, a sense of deviation from or excess of social and aesthetic norms. For the purposes of this essay, I wish to focus on one particular type of difference which has often both excluded films from mainstream respectability and by the same token made them the subject of ongoing, ritualistic fascination from more niche audiences—particularly (although not exclusively) in the horror genre. I refer here to a sense of *abjection*.

Abjection is generally defined as the visceral horror which accompanies the complete breakdown of meaning, particularly as it pertains to the boundary between self and other. In approaching the concept of abjection, I am informed by Julie Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. She writes:

⁵ Smith, *Withnail and Us*, p.187 and Davies, ‘Underground film and cult cinema’, p.27

⁶ Graham, ‘Journey to the Center of the Fifties’, p.109, 110 and Bartlett, “‘It Happens By Accident’”, p.40

‘It is not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection, but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a saviour...Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility. He who denies morality is not abject; there can be grandeur in amorality even in crime that flaunts its disrespect for the law—rebellious, liberating, and suicidal crime. Abjection, on the other hand, is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady, a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it, a debtor who sells you up, a friend who stabs you...’⁷

Abjection occurs, simply put, where order breaks down. Kristeva elaborates that ‘the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverises the subject...it is experienced at the peak of its strength when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very *being*, that it *is* none other than abject’.⁸ As a visceral medium attuned to its audience’s bodies and senses, cinema has a potent capacity to evoke a sense of abjection. The aforementioned *Suspiria* and *Possession* can both be seen as examples of abject cinema, disrupting the classical pleasure of narrative cohesion and identification with characters through their heightened, disordered visual styles, sparse and almost abstract narratives, and

⁷ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.4

⁸ *Ibid*, p.5

scenes of grotesque, intensely *physical* violence and gore. Through these, they seek to produce in the viewer an incoherent excess of sensation, a disrupted and disrupting viewing experience. The same might be said of any number of other films in the horror genre—particularly those in the splatter or slasher subgenres. The abjection of these films, the sense of moral, psychological, and physical disorder they evoke, has historically precluded them from mainstream recognition or canonisation. But by the same token, the same attributes that exclude these films and subgenres from the canon (and indeed, the very fact of their rejection from the canon) has made them attractive to audiences fascinated by alterity, by experiences of terror, unpleasure, and excess beyond the purview of most films and indeed of everyday life. As such, they have become *cult classics*. Famously, Linda Williams writes of the importance of excess to both the appeal and the cultural dismissal of the ‘body genres’ of horror, melodrama and pornography. ‘Alone or in combination, heavy doses of sex, violence, or emotion are dismissed by one faction or another as having no logic or reason for existing beyond their power to excite. Gratuitous sex, gratuitous violence and terror, gratuitous emotion are frequent epithets hurled at the “sensational” in pornography, horror, and melodrama’.⁹ Excesses which disrupt, disorient, or appal, are often essential to both the disgusted rejection and obsessive fascination which cult subgenres attract; as diffuse as uses of the term ‘cult cinema’ are, the majority of scholarship on the topic holds that these are important motifs in the category. Barry K. Grant, in one of the first major scholarly collections on cult cinema, identifies ‘a form of “transgression”’ as a uniting attribute of otherwise disparate films grouped as cult and suggests that said transgression is ‘central to their appeal’ for devoted spectators. Grant cites examples including *Pink Flamingos* (John Waters, 1975) and its ‘cheerful embrace of an aesthetic of the ugly’ and the ‘kinetic visual

⁹ Williams, ‘Body Genres’, p.3

pyrotechnics' found in *Mad Max* (George Miller, 1979).¹⁰ Subsequently, other scholars have extended this observation into more specific subtypes of cult film. Jeffrey Richards, surveying British cult films, notes themes of 'transgression, excess and hybridity' as recurring traits of such films, while Thomas Joseph Watson has identified a subset of 'cults of the censored' accrued around films subject to censorship, attracted to their notoriety.¹¹ Cult films are beloved by some for the very same reasons that they might be violently rejected by others. Any effort to evoke cult cinema while renouncing its more controversial or abrasive aspects, then, fundamentally changes the stakes of the category.

However, as discussed above, in recent years the boundaries between the cult and the mainstream have become porous, not least where horror is concerned. Films and genres once deemed too abject, too grotesque, too *much* for acceptance by critics and audiences are now celebrated by taste-making institutions in the film world. Across roughly the past decade, there has been an increased proliferation of both popular and academic works applying serious cultural and aesthetic analysis to cult horror films and thus helping shore up a canon of such; among such texts are Alexandra Heller-Nicholas' 2015 monograph on *Suspiria* and Kier-La Janisse's *House of Psychotic Women*, which was instrumental in bringing greater attention to titles including the aforementioned *Possession*.¹² When the avowedly liberal-minded and middle-brow *The Guardian* is publishing editorials on the legacies of women-in-prison films and the filmography of Dario Argento and *Little White Lies* compiling a ranked

¹⁰ Grant, 'Science Fiction Double Feature', p.123

¹¹ Richards, 'General Editor's Introduction', p.xiv, and Watson, 'Transgression in cult cinema', p.171

¹² Heller-Nicholas, *Devil's Advocates: Suspiria* and Janisse, *House of Psychotic Women*

list of ‘video nasties’, abject cinema and its audiences are no longer simply outcast.¹³ Such films are now sources of cultural capital, a signifier that the critic, spectator, or filmmaker is adventurous and esoteric in taste. What, then, is the place of abjection in cinema today? What becomes of those historically scorned genres when they are (tentatively) embraced by the mainstream? I contend that these cultural shifts have given rise to abjection chic.

Films partaking in abjection chic knowingly evoke the stylistic and narrative conventions of films and subgenres which have been subject both to controversy and cult adoration for their narrative-disrupting excesses of violent and/or sexual imagery. However, in invoking these recognisable tropes, these films also *disembody* them, subduing their corporeal and sensory excesses of feeling to narrative coherence and distant formal appreciation — the pleasures of ‘the appreciation of a work of art as an aesthetic unity’ and ‘Hollywood’s ideal of seamless...construction’ which Grant associates with the conventions of classical narrative cinema and contrasts with the incoherence and fragmentation of many cult texts.¹⁴ Abjection chic is knowing (that the audience recognises that the film is engaging in intertextual quotation is the point; as we will see, advance publicity for said films often features the filmmakers acknowledging their influences) but not parodic. Abjection chic decontextualises and defuses generic tropes and images but does not *deconstruct* them; it does not interrogate their meaning so much as negate it altogether. We are not, then, in the sardonically satirical territory of *The Slumber Party Massacre* (Amy Holden Jones, 1982), nor are we dealing with the interrogation of horror conventions seen in *Funny Games* (Michael Haneke, 1997). Rather, abjection chic performs the double-edged act of acquiring the (counter)cultural

¹³ See ‘Mad Max: Fury Road is less radical than its B-Movie Influences’, ‘Mellow giallo: has the horror genre lost its ability to shock?’ and ‘Every video nasty ranked from worst to best’

¹⁴ Grant, ‘Science Fiction Double Feature’, p.125

capital of abject cult cinema—thus suggesting the discerning, edgy taste of its makers and making an appeal to cult audiences—while avoiding the concomitant controversy. This contradicts the disruption of narrative and aesthetic pleasure which defines cinematic abjection. Therein lies the fundamental problem with abjection chic. In negating the abject, excessive, or disruptive qualities of the genres it evokes, abjection chic negates their subversive or alternative potential.

Through my analysis of *Last Night in Soho* (Edgar Wright, 2021) and *Men* (Alex Garland, 2022) I intend to illustrate the nature of abjection chic and mount a critique thereof. I will discuss how these films evoke the conventions of, respectively, *giallo* and folk horror, only to subject them to this process of disembodiment and aestheticization, producing smooth, coherent viewing experiences antithetical to most films in those two subgenres. These are by no means the only exemplary films. The horror film *X* (Ti West, 2022), about the cast and crew of a pornographic film falling afoul of a murderous elderly couple in 1970s Texas, can be seen as a dual example of abjection chic, playing on the countercultural connotations of slasher films and pornography while scrupulously avoiding their respective excesses of violent death and real sex. Nor is abjection chic confined to horror; see the manner in which the 1980s cityscape created for the comic-book-villain origin story *Joker* (Todd Phillips, 2019) suggests the grimy New York seen in psychologically fraught vigilante films like *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976) and *Ms .45* (Abel Ferrara, 1982). I elect to focus on *Last Night in Soho* and *Men* because they draw on especially recognisable subgenres wherein their disembodied treatment of their conventions is especially noticeable. Here, I will show through formal analysis how these films evoke and disembody key motifs of the *giallo* and the folk horror film. I will thus demonstrate how abjection chic denudes its sources of their transgressive physicality in service of experiences of aesthetic unity and narrative coherence, and mount a critique of the trend's implications for cult cinema.

First, some definitions of terms relating to the subgenres in question. *Giallo* refers to a style of Italian horror-thriller film emergent in the late 1960s and enjoying continuous popularity into the 1970s and 80s, its name derived from the *Il Giallo Mondadori* label under which cheap paperbacks of mystery novels were sold in Italy; this brand itself was named for its yellow covers. Synthesising aspects of the traditional murder mystery with Gothic horror and splatter, *giallo* emerged in the Italian film industry in the early 1960s, inspired by the aforementioned pulp novels as well as psychological crime films from France and Germany, and the work of Alfred Hitchcock.¹⁵ Although a diffuse subgenre, the typical giallo involved an amateur detective pursuing a masked, black-gloved killer who preys on women due not to any rational motive but a psychological disturbance. As the police prove ineffective and bodies pile up, the amateur detective is drawn into a game of cat and mouse with the killer, nearly losing their own life in the process. Antonio Bruschini and Stefano Pisilli's seminal tome *Giallo & Thrilling All'Italiana* notes that 'a particular mix of sex and violence' became a typical characteristic of the giallo, and lists several of the genre's key motifs, all related to its intimate and fetishistic portrayal of violence; 'knives, black gloves, camera movements, close-ups on the eyes of the assassin, as well as the disturbing and obsessive use of every minute detail'.¹⁶ Indeed, a sense of violent and sexual sensory excess is a central aspect of the *giallo*. Troy Howarth notes: 'the threat of violence is always here, and voyeurism, sexual dysfunction and the like are never far behind. The ultimate result is a totally chaotic spectacle which inevitably bends, twists and destroys the (typically naïve) world views of their

¹⁵ Bruschini and Piselli, *Giallo & Thrilling All'Italiana*, p.10

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p.11

protagonists'.¹⁷ Central to the genre, then, is a sense of moral and psychological disorder—of *abjection*, in other words.

Folk horror, meanwhile, refers to a style of horror film set in rural communities which are 'malevolent, haunted, possessed by time and ancestral curses'; it is a genre 'certainly defined by pre-Christian paganism, with its focus on rituals and sacrifice'.¹⁸ Drawing on the work of Adam Scovell, Andy Paciorek defines the folk horror's key traits as an emphasis on the rugged landscape and its history, a sense of isolation, a community with 'skewed' or alien 'moral views', and a ritualistic 'summoning' as its dramatic climax—traits also emphasised in the work of Keith McDonald and Wayne Johnson.¹⁹ Folk horror is perhaps still most associated with the so-called 'unholy trilogy' of British titles—*Witchfinder General* (Michael Reeves, 1968), *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (Piers Haggard, 1971) and *The Wicker Man* (Robin Hardy, 1973)—but is a global subgenre, encompassing the Polish *Matka Joanna od Aniolów/Mother Joan of the Angels* (Jerzy Kawalrowicz, 1961), the Korean *Gokseong/The Wailing* (Na Hong-in, 2016) and America's *The Witch* (Robert Eggers, 2015). Although perhaps not as associated with violent extremity as *giallo*, folk horror still contains a strong thread of abject brutality. From the rapes and tortures conducted by the titular villains of *Witchfinder General* to the sacrificial conflagration in which the protagonist of *The Wicker Man* perishes—to say nothing of the cranial traumas and baroquely tortuous rituals found in contemporary takes such as *Kill List* (Ben Wheatley, 2011) and *Midsommar* (Ari Aster,

¹⁷ Howarth, *The Haunted World of Mario Bava*

¹⁸ Paciorek, 'Folk Horror', p.13-14 and McDonald and Johnson, *Contemporary Gothic and Horror Film*, p.57

¹⁹ Paciorak, *Folk Horror Studies*, p.13

2019)—pagan practice in the folk horror film often comes in the form of brutally biological violence.

In part because of their content, both of these subgenres have historically been restricted to cult appreciation. Mikel J. Koven argues for an understanding of *giallo* as ‘vernacular cinema’, by which he means ‘a kind of cinema intended for consumption outside of mainstream, bourgeois cinema culture’.²⁰ Critical of approaches which seek to frame *giallo* within Italian art cinema, Koven argues that ‘this genre was never intended for the art house, but for the grind house. These films were produced for marginalised movie theatres (and people), and for no other reason than immediate enjoyment’.²¹ Writing on folk horror in 2022, Jamie Chambers notes that ‘folk horror discourses to date have been furthered more by self-published enthusiasts within countercultural movements than writers drawing upon an interdisciplinary, international frame of reference within film studies’.²² Newland concurs that there is observable ‘a contemporary ‘cultification’ of folk horror’ centred on ‘a subcultural reappraisal of a range of rural 1960s and 1970s texts but also the development of new, contemporary texts that draw on and mine...their textual antecedents’.²³ With the essential motifs, cultural positions and relationships to abjection of *giallo* and folk horror established, we can now examine how *Last Night In Soho* and *Men* engage with these genres.

²⁰ Koven, *La Dolce Morte*, p.19

²¹ *Ibid*

²² Chambers, ‘Troubling Folk Horror’, p.11

²³ Paul Newman, ‘Folk Horror’, quoted in *ibid*

Last Night in Soho follows aspiring fashion designer Ellie Turner (Thomasin McKenzie) as she moves to London to attend its renowned College of Fashion. Moving into a flat in Soho, Ellie begins to experience vivid dreams of the area in the 1960s, an era whose fashions and music she idolises. In these dreams, she follows the experiences of Sandie (Anya Taylor-Joy), an aspiring nightclub singer who lived in the same apartment several decades prior to Ellie. Ellie initially finds escape and inspiration in her dreams, but they soon take a dark turn as Ellie sees Sandie abused and forced into sex work by her manager Jack (Matt Smith). Soon, Ellie begins to suspect that her dreams are not simply imaginings but real spectres of the past, as they begin to spill into her waking life. When she envisions Sandie murdered by Jack, she grows determined to solve the case. The film's blend of urban modernity with the fantastical, its focus on a physically and psychologically vulnerable amateur detective trying to solve a murder committed with a knife, and its use of a dichromatic red-blue lighting scheme in several scenes all place the film in relationship to *giallo*. In publicity for the film, both the filmmakers and several commentators remarked upon the influence of *giallo* upon *Last Night in Soho*. Interviewed by the horror periodical *Rue Morgue Magazine*, director Edgar Wright and co-writer Krysty Wilson-Cairns discuss the influence of titles such as *Suspiria*, *Profondo Rosso/Deep Red* (Dario Argento, 1975) and the work of Mario Bava on the film, while outlets such as Curzon and Flicks ran articles contextualising the film in relation to *giallo*.²⁴

²⁴ See 'Exclusive Interview: The Creators of "Last Night in Soho" on Giallo influences, The Music of Fear and More', 'A guide to giallo, the horror genre inspiring Edgar Wright's *Last Night in Soho*' and '*Last Night in Soho* and its gory giallo influences'

One of the key motifs through which *Last Night in Soho* engages with the *giallo* is glass. Glass surfaces are prominent throughout *giallo*'s slickly modern interiors, providing avenues for voyeuristic gazing, distorted reflections expressing disordered psyches, and an instrument of violence which perforates flesh and punctuates murders with dramatic shatterings. Glass in *giallo* is where the interior meets the exterior, one of its key sites of abjection. *Suspiria* has murder victim Pat Hingle (Eva Axén) fall through a pane of stained glass, a large shard of which ends up embedded in her face, while in *Tenebre/Tenebrae* (Dario Argento, 1982), a murdered woman collapses backwards through a glass partition towards the camera. One of the most macabre images in *E Tu Vivrai Nel Terrore! L'aldilà/The Beyond* (Lucio Fulci, 1981) features broken shards of a window broken by demonic forces flying into a man's face, leaving gushing wounds. *Last Night in Soho* prominently employs the mirror motif in Ellie's dreams, as a means of conveying the fusion of her identity with that of Sandy. In her first dream, Ellie enters a Soho nightclub where her reflection is shown in several mirrors in the foyer. As she talks to an attendant, we see her reflection replaced with that of Sandie, while Ellie herself remains in the foreground. After Ellie examines 'her' new reflection, the camera pans back, Sandie now standing where Ellie did while Ellie replaces her in the mirror. Through digital trickery, the film makes the relationship between reality and reflection mellifluous, turning the glass surface ghostly and intangible. Traditionally, in a *giallo* film, when a glass surface serves as a conduit to vision, it does so as an embodied aspect of the *mise-en-scene*. When in *L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo/The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* (Dario Argento, 1971) the protagonist witnesses an attempted murder through an art gallery's glass doors, the tension of the scene is created by the fact that the glass allows Sam to see the murder while preventing him from intervening, the banging of his fists against the glass providing a visceral undercurrent. The reflective surface serves as a spectral site in *Last Night in Soho*, but in a manner unmoored from physical reality.



FIGURE 1 — Sandie becomes Ellie’s reflection (*Last Night in Soho*, 2021)

As the scene progresses, Sandie enters the nightclub down a staircase lined by a series of mirrors in which Ellie’s reflection is shown, first in a medium shot from Sandie’s side, then a wide shot of the club. Again, the disparity between reflection and referent serves to unmoor the mirror from physical reality, heightened by the distorting quality of the multiple mirrors which seem to reflect Ellie endlessly—turning her image spectral and weightless. This disconnect is further emphasised when Sandie, on the staircase, walks past Ellie in the mirror, forcing the ‘reflection’ to hurry after Sandie. The mirror is thus further untethered from physical constraints. The stylistic use of the mirror in this scene clearly evokes its presence in the *giallo*, but where in that genre its physical weight and presence as an object within the *mise-en-scene* is paramount, the stylisation of this sequence instead makes the mirror a vehicle for compositions which defy any sense of realistic physicality.



FIGURE 2 — Ellie refracted in a hall of mirrors (*Last Night in Soho*, 2021)

As discussed above, the other primary use of the mirror in the *giallo* is as instrument of violence. *Last Night in Soho* evokes this use of the mirror during a later scene wherein Ellie experiences a vision of Jack apparently murdering Sandie. After she and fellow student John (Michael Aja) return to her flat from a Halloween party, Ellie begins to see Sandy and Jack in mirrors on the wall and ceiling, he looming threateningly over her, brandishing a knife, leading Ellie to cry out in distress. However, Jack soon materialises in the flat, crouching over Ellie in a shot from her point-of-view. Scrambling to the ground, Ellie sees the knife-wielding Jack holding Sandie down on the bed mere feet away from her. The physical boundaries between reflection and reality are again unseated, lending an unreality to the mirror's presence within the scene. Stumbling in the dark, John crashes into the mirror on the wall. As John flees the flat, a close-up shows his bare feet stepping on shards of broken glass. Glass' generically traditional explosion from object of reflection to enactor of injury is thus carried out. But where, for instance, in *Suspiria* dramatic close-ups on Pat's face as she is shoved through a pane of glass by her killer create an indelible, embodied impression of violent injury, here the editing fragments and distances the audience from the contact

between glass and skin. John's injury is one of only several points of action in the scene, along with Jack's apparent murder of Sandie playing out on the bed and Ellie's horrified reaction, which are rapidly intercut. John initially crashing into the mirror and crying out is shown in two shots, each lasting only a second, the rapid cut between largely covering the moment of impact. The later shot of him stepping on shards is similarly brief. There is no moment where the audience might *feel* the injurious materiality of glass. Rather, it is evoked, but subdued to the scene's narrative focus. Through this fragmentary editing scheme, the film conducts the double-act central to abjection chic. Its images of embodied injury and sounds of impact and shattering add a greater degree of intensity to the scene. However, the rapid edits ensure that the viewer never dwells on their sensory properties for too long, instead regularly directing their attention back to the scene's narrative content; the apparent murder of Sandie, Ellie's reaction, John's flight. *Last Night in Soho* burnishes one of its most dramatic scenes with a signifier of *giallo*'s abject extremity, but defuses its affective ability to overpower narrative through the use of a more conventional editing scheme.

It is in this scene that *Last Night in Soho* engages with another key motif of *giallo*; the stabbing. Blade-wielding, usually black-gloved killers are a staple of the genre, with terribly intimate murder set-pieces emphasising the sharpness of the weaponry, the gush of blood from wounds, and the physicality of perforation. As Koven argues, 'one of the "pleasures of the text" in watching these movies is seeing not just ever-increasing levels of graphic violence and gore... but seeing the filmmakers' imagination at work in the murderous use of a whole slew of normally benign implements. He goes on to note that 'the single most popular weapon [in *giallo*]...is a knife', before reeling off a list of other sharp implements employed to gruesome ends in the genre; 'straight razors...scalpels, artist utility knives, or

even letter openers can do the job with appropriate visceral impact'.²⁵ He makes note of several creatively deadly implementations of sharp objects in the genre, from the use of a spiked metallic glove in *6 donne por l'assassino/Blood and Black Lace* (Mario Bava, 1964) to decapitation by dredger in *Mio caro assassin/My Dear Killer* (Tonino Valerii, 1971).²⁶ This focus on such an intimate, fleshy method of killing is essential to making *giallo* abject, a 'body genre' offering sensorily extreme, destabilising experiences of violence.

In the scene in question, *Last Night in Soho*'s Jack menacingly brandishes a large knife over the struggling Sandie, every inch one of the genre's phallically-empowered male killers. The build-up to the murder, as Jack pins Sandie to the bed and threatens her, is, as mentioned above, subject to a disorienting process of quick cutting. This makes concentrating on the precise movements of Jack and Sandie rather harder. As Jack stabs Sandie, the editing grows yet more frantic, close-ups on the bloodied knife interspersed with Ellie's horrified reaction, John fleeing the flat, and Ellie's landlady Ms Collins (Diana Rigg) bursting into the room. As such, while the murder is rendered quite *violent*—with close-ups on the blood-soaked knife and a brief shot from above of Sandie screaming in pain—the hectic inter-cutting prevents the spectator from any prolonged physical or sensory engagement with it. The affective force of the stabbing remains firmly within and subordinate to narrative context here. Let us contrast this with a similar scene in *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*, in which the film's anonymous masked killer breaks into the bedroom of his latest victim. The killer pinning the woman to her bed and cutting open her clothes using a switchblade is largely captured in an unbroken medium shot from the side. There is no looking away from the contact between

²⁵ Koven, *La Dolce Morte*, p.63

²⁶ *Ibid*, p.63-64

knife and skin. As the killer slits the woman's throat, a rapid cut takes us to an insert of bright red blood landing on a nearby surface. Where *Last Night in Soho* employs rapid editing to distract from and narratively frame its stabbing, *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* initially uses a static, unbroken take to overwhelm the viewer with the physicality of violence, then employs a jarring cut not to provide reprieve but to heighten the awful kinesis of the moment of killing. The sadism, the arbitrariness, and the duration of the killing in *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* cannot be evaded nor explained, while *Last Night in Soho* ensures that narrative context remains paramount.

Last Night in Soho returns to the knife-killing motif during its climax, when Ms Collins is revealed to in fact be Sandie — who survived Jack's attempted murder and killed him in self-defence, before going on to murder, in revenge, the other men who had abused her. A montage shows Sandie cutting the throats of several of these men in her flat with a large knife. Again, the violence here is graphic, with grisly sound effects and spurts of blood, while the room is cast in red light—*Profondo Rosso*, indeed—which adds to an overall sanguine impression. However, the film's editing strategies again subdue the violence to narrative order. The rapid cuts from one killing to the next prevent us from dwelling too long on the physicality of any one murder, while the sequence intersperses these killings with the older Sandie revealing the truth to Ellie in the present day. If *giallo* is in part defined by a tension between the rigours of a murder mystery plot and a disruptive excess of violence, then *Last Night in Soho* stabilises that equation. Sandie's narration and the repeated returns to the present day firmly position these stabbings as a turn in the film's plot first and foremost, preventing their visceral horror from overwhelming the scene. The film's disembodiment of the knife motif is heightened by the rest of the climax, as a knife-wielding Sandie pursues Ellie up the tenement stairwell, determined to kill Ellie now that she knows of Sandie's

murderous past. The pursuit is played out in slow-motion, lending Sandie's brandishing the knife a weightlessness and grace, and is intercut with Ellie's perception of the event.

Hallucinating due to sleep deprivation and the influence of a sedative she was given by Sandie, Ellie perceives Sandie as her younger self and the pursuit taking place on a glass stairway floating in a red, fiery void. This stylisation further abstracts the scene away from the physical, its locations and the physical movements contained therein made weightless, ephemeral. Even as the scene is still ostensibly driven by the physical threat of the knife-wielding Sandie, no sense of that danger as corporeally immediate registers. The signifiers of *giallo* dotted throughout the film are much the same as the 60s memorabilia which adorns Ellie's room in the opening scene—decontextualised fragments of a bygone subculture.



FIGURE 3 — Sandie wields a knife in ethereal fashion (*Last Night in Soho*, 2021)



FIGURE 4 — *Last Night in Soho*'s climax plays out against a dreamy, weightless backdrop

Men, similarly, is a film awash in signifiers of a cult horror subgenre. Following Harper Marlowe (Jessie Buckley) as she retreats to the Herefordshire countryside to recover from the suicide of her abusive husband, James (Paapa Essiedu), the film takes place in one of the genre's signature rural idylls with a dark side. All of the men in the surrounding community—including her landlord Geoffrey, the local vicar, and even a small boy—appear identical (all are played by Rory Kinnear), and exhibit increasingly invasive and abusive behaviour towards Harper; not least a nude, mute man who emerges from the woods and begins stalking Harper. As with *Last Night in Soho*, the film's connection to genre history was a key facet of its marketing. Interviewed by Lou Thomas for the BFI, director Alex Garland identified *Men* as folk horror and referenced *The Wicker Man* as an influence.²⁷

²⁷ 'Alex Garland on *Men*, his surprising rural chiller'

Critics for outlets both broadsheet (*The Guardian*'s Peter Bradshaw) and cult (*Bloody Disgusting*'s Meagen Navarro) also identified the film with folk horror.²⁸

One of the most consistent motifs of folk horror, of which *Men* makes prominent use, is landscape. Adam Scovell refers to 'an emphasis on landscape which subsequently isolates its communities and individuals' as essential to the genre, 'skewing the dominant moral and theological systems enough to cause violence, human sacrifices, torture, and even demonic and supernatural summonings'.²⁹ A sense of the landscape's isolating scale and inhospitable harshness is a narrative engine for folk horror and a source of its abject horror. The grass, the soil, the woodlands—these are folk horror's abject terrain, physically and mentally perilous and impervious to normative religious and moral authority. In *The Blood on Satan's Claw*, a mist-swept forest full of sharp, haggard branches and bronzed, autumnal leaves provides the location for a Satanic ritual conducted by a cult of children. The woodland is captured alternately in wide shots, which fill the screen with its harsh splendour, and close-ups in which branches seem to reach aggressively towards the viewer.

In *Men*, Harper wanders into the woods early in the film; under an overcast sky she wanders through green foliage and dark soil, unmistakably one of the genre's eerily remote locales. However, the scene styles the location to lack a sense of physical heft. The woods are often shown in shallow focus around Harper's face in close-up, rendered as an abstract green void

²⁸ 'Men review — Alex Garland unleashes multiple Rory Kinnear in wacky folk-horror' and 'A24's Men review — Alex Garland Unsettles With Surreal Folk Horror'

²⁹ Scovell, 'Where to begin with folk horror'

through which she almost seems to float, rather than the concrete, harshly material space seen in *The Blood on Satan's Claw*. In medium shot, Harper moves ahead in slow motion, while the camera slowly tracks in front, rendering the movement of both her body and the camera through the space weightless. Furthermore, the scene also elides diegetic sound in favour of an ethereal, ambient score. The experience of the woods in *Men* is thus defined by the abstract beauty of light and colour, and by Harper's reaction, rather than any engagement with its materiality. The woodland's status as a place of transition into the otherworldly and archaic, is retained, but without any trace of its physical threat. Again, we see the cultural and affective paradox in which abjection chic places its audience. The menacing connotations of the woodland within folk horror are invoked blatantly enough that it is evident that the viewer is meant to be *conscious* of these cultic associations, and yet the sense of embodied threat which said landscape would typically connote is formally defused.



FIGURE 5 — Harper wanders through a verdant woodland (*Men*, 2022)

The village pub is another locale essential to folk horror's abject status, a space where drunken revels illustrate the community's pagan atavism and alien moral values. Early on in *The Wicker Man*, for instance, the devoutly Christian Sergeant Neil Howie (Edward Woodward) gets his first sense of just how out-of-place his faith and chastity are among the Celtic pagan residents of Summerisle when he stops at the Green Man Inn. There, he is discomfited as the locals raucously sing a bawdy song, close-ups on the uncomfortable Howie interspersed through disorienting edits with low-angled close-ups on singing men, their bellowing, weather-beaten visages huge and imposing. In *Witchfinder General*, witch hunter John Stearne (Robert Russell) and his associates cavort with naked women in a tavern, confirming the animalistic appetites lurking beneath their supposed divine mandate. Sharp shafts of light cut through the darkened pub from above, calling attention to the squalor of the environment and the pallor of exposed skin.

In *Men*, Harper ventures to the village pub after a series of distressing events, including the nude man attempting to break into her house. As with the forest, the pub is introduced in shallow focus, a blur of light and colour behind Geoffrey's head.. Once the pub is established in a medium shot shortly before Harper enters, it is softly lit in orange hues by lightbulbs mounted on the walls, which cast a gauzy glow across the room, producing a sense of distance. The scene's focus is on a conversation at the bar between Harper, the bartender, Geoffrey, and a policeman as she wearily discusses her ordeal and is then horrified to be informed that her stalker has been released from custody. This conversation is captured largely in medium shots of the bar or close-ups on individual characters as they speak. The camera is steady, head-on, and the cuts measured and timed with the rhythms of the conversation; none here of the disorienting cuts or uncomfortably intimate, off-kilter framings of *The Wicker Man*. Thus, while *Men* continues the folk horror tradition of using the

pub as a site of threat, and specifically sexual threat, that threat exists only on the level of narrative, rather than in a sensorily palpable fashion.³⁰ Yet again, editing and mise-en-scene place the viewer in an affectively paradoxical situation.



FIGURE 6 — The village pub out of focus behind Geoffrey (*Men*, 2022)

As both Racionek and Scovell discuss above, the typical folk horror narrative proceeds towards a climactic summoning, an act of typically violent or horrific ritual in which the

³⁰ It is worth noting that, as discussed in the reviews and the interview with Garland cited above, *Men*'s pastiche elements are in service to an allegory of misogyny — although in addressing this, we might note the film stays within an intellectualised/symbolic register, rather than the more embodied style through which theorists such as Carol J. Clover have argued that horror is able to engage with themes of gendered violence. If and how *Men* uses its genre elements to address misogyny is largely beyond the scope of this piece; as Vivian Sobchack notes when discussing *The Piano* (Jane Campion, 1993), appreciation of a film as affective experience does not entail uncritical endorsement of its politics (Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, p.61), and by the same token analysis of a film's sensory distance does not mean wholesale dismissal of its themes.

protagonist is helplessly trapped. Racionek notes that the summoning ‘may involve a supernatural element such as an invocation of a demon, or it may be an entirely earthly...event such as an act of violence or a ritual sacrifice’, and whether supernatural or not, the summoning tends to act as a moment of overwhelming, narrative-disrupting violent spectacle.³¹ The most enduringly infamous summoning in the genre’s history is the closing moments of *The Wicker Man*, in which Sgt Howie is forced into the titular idol, which is then set ablaze in a ritual intended to restore fertility to Summerisle’s crops. As the island’s denizens sing ‘Summer Is Icumen In’ below the blazing Wicker Man, harrowing close-ups show a bloodied, sweating Howie praying through tears as the flames close-in.

Men climaxes with its own moment of summoning emphasising ideas of renewal and cyclicity, when Harper’s house is attacked by several of the identical men she has encountered throughout the film. In the garden, the nude, stalking man gives birth to the young boy out of a wound on his back, beginning a chain of events in which each of the men gives birth to another, pursuing Harper back into the house, where the vicar gives birth to an apparently resurrected James. Pushing the body to its limits and destroying the normative boundaries of self and other, this scene is on paper utterly abject. And yet its stylisation mutes its power. The ‘births’ are largely shown in medium shots from the side, providing the audience with a measure of distance from the scene’s bodily extremity. The grotesque body horror of the repeated ‘births’ is interspersed with cuts to Harper as she flees, reacting with a mute horror presumably intended to mirror that of the audience. In the finale of *The Wicker Man*, the audience’s point of identification, Howie, is mentally and physically destroyed, leaving the spectator adrift amidst its madness and violence. Harper, by contrast, remains a

³¹ Racionek, ‘Folk Horror’, p.15

constant and stable figure of optical and psychological identification. As extreme as the imagery becomes, our identification with the protagonist is not disrupted or subsumed; where we are situated within the scene, and how we ought to react, remain unambiguous. The ‘aesthetic unity’ to which Grant opposed the fractiousness of much of cult cinema is here not disturbed by but concomitant with the scene’s violent and grotesque content. Bodily extremity is present here, but as something *to be looked at*, to be distantly comprehended and contemplated on the level of symbolism and narrative meaning. This is encapsulated in a shot which features Harper in focus in the right foreground of the frame while a bloodied, newborn man crawls towards her from the back of shot, in a shallow-focus blur. The viewer is placed in a position to be *aware* of the presence of abject physical imagery, and thus regard the film as possessing a certain *verboten* charge, all while being kept at a safe distance from its capacity to overwhelm. *Men* thus glances down into the chthonian abyss of irrationality at the heart of folk horror while keeping its narrative and its audience safely perched above.



FIGURE 7—The grotesque ‘birth’ scene from a distance (*Men*, 2022)



FIGURE 8—Harper’s reactions serve as a point of identification for the viewer (*Men*, 2022)

Having now examined *Last Night in Soho* and *Men* as examples of abjection chic, I think it prudent to return to Julie Kristeva’s definition of abjection:

‘...what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.’

Looking over the two films surveyed, we can find many scenes we might describe as violent or intense. Yet is there disturbance? Is there ambiguity? Are the borders of identification, morality, taste disrespected by the images? I contend not. Rather, the audio-visual styling of these films consistently preserves the schematic order of narrative and our moral and psychological alignment with the protagonist, and upholds the viewer’s aesthetic and cerebral

distance from the image. Yet at the same time as these films scrub themselves clean of the abject extremity of their influences, they depend upon its absent presence for their tone and style. They are awash in signifiers of violent abjection, and our recognition of these signifiers as such *is the point*; that we understand that the filmmakers understand these lineages of cult filmmaking, and thus associate their film with its countercultural cache. That is the essential, unresolved tension of abjection chic—a tension which exposes the risks inherent in the mainstreaming of cult.

For scholars of cult, abject, or ‘bad’ cinema, what interests is the challenge that they pose to received wisdom about what makes for ‘good’ films and viewing practices. It is not excessively Romantic, nor unduly valorising of cult cinema and its audiences, to say that the alterity and unruliness of cult films and their (assumed) audiences are what makes them of interest to scholars; whether we embrace or recoil from them, they present a valuable challenge to our assumptions about what films and audiences are deemed worthy of respect. To turn once again to Williams, ‘where we as a culture often disagree, along lines of gender, age, or sexual orientation—is in which movies are over the edge, too “gross”’.³² Films which exist ‘over the edge’, which are ‘too much’, productively expose cultural fault lines, challenging us to consider where and why we draw the line. In evoking styles of film which go ‘over the edge’ but pulling back, nullifying their abject excesses in the service of more traditional narrative and aesthetic values, films like *Last Night in Soho* and *Men* discard their ability to challenge. There is an unresolved internal conflict within abjection chic, which shows the risks that come with the relatively increased visibility and acceptance of cult cinema. In being tentatively welcomed into the mainstream, cult genres are made subject to

³² Williams, ‘Film Bodies’, p.2

the mainstream's ruthlessly capitalistic logic, whereby all is reducible to marketability, signifiers for taste and demographic appropriated without thought to context or meaning. The internal paradoxes of abjection chic show that the meeting between the cult and the canonical ought should be accompanied by scrutiny. Abjection chic is a trend haunted by the ghosts of the extremities it nullifies—and as all scholars of cult cinema should know, it's when the haunted is scrutinised and investigated that the strange truth is revealed.

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