MILKY BODIES, OFF-WHITE MENACE: IDENTITY, MILK AND ABJECT FEMININITY IN RECENT US MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

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In the past milk has represented white, hegemonic society in the US through its association with middle-American wholesomeness and its red-checked table cloth. The recent shift from the good-guy-drinks-milk motif of films of the past to the villains-drinks-milk motif in films of modernity rejects the ideal society that milk represents through grotesque representations of its consumption and its consumers. In such recent US media as *The Strain* (2009), *The Hills Have Eyes* (2006), *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia* (2005-2009), *Mr. Brooks* (2007), *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), and *The Professional* (1994) milk’s representation perverts its myth indicating a souring of society-as-we-know-it. As milk turns “bad” in these films, whiteness and those norms and values associated with whiteness lose their quality of invisibility and can be inspected accordingly. The following pages ultimately investigate representations of milk in the media and suggest that recent changes in those representations subvert the hegemonic image of the virtuous white body, his God-given beverage, and the issues often overlaid with race such as class, normality, cleanliness and morality.
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INTRODUCTION

Although a strong aversion to milk replaced any desire to consume it shortly after I exited grade school, my interest in milk as a potential area of study put down roots after I watched the film Peeping Tom (1960) in an undergraduate literature course a few years ago. In the film, Mark, the main character and serial killer, visits his female neighbor and, following her offer of a beverage, enjoys a tall glass of milk whilst sitting at her kitchen table. Mark’s consumption of milk horrified me.

In Carol J. Clover’s book Men Women and Chainsaws, she describes Mark of Peeping Tom, as a “peeped-at child” and “a child on the side of the feminine” (175). Although one might use these comments to make an argument about the child-like qualities of the villain, linking milk-drinking to breast feeding and infancy, it doesn’t explain the horror with which I respond to the scene. During my first year of graduate school I started noticing more films in which villainous or socially unacceptable characters drink milk. Although milk takes on negative connotation in films as early as Peeping Tom and A Clockwork Orange (1971), the past two decades have seen an influx of films with unsettling images of milk. The Professional (1994), Natural Born Killers (1994), Mystic River (2003), V for Vendetta (2005), The Hills Have Eyes (2006), Mr. Brooks (2007), No Country for Old Men (2007) and Inglourious Basterds (2009) make up eight film released within the past 16 years that present images of white, male murderers drinking milk in an expressly eerie manner. Additionally, the TV series It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia (2005-2009) presents an incestuous, degenerate family who not only drinks milk constantly, but in several scenes pours it over their bodies. The Strain (2009), a recent novel co-written by horror film director Guillermo del Toro, presents vampiric bodies
with milk-white blood repeatedly described as such. Although a detailed analysis of each of these examples is ideal for concise conclusions as to the meaning of milk, the scope of this project allows for an investigation of just six. To start, it is suffice to say that milk has the power of horror.

Here I offer a brief history of milk’s initial transformation from bovine’s abject byproduct to America’s chaste wonder drink in the nineteenth century. Milk’s early media representation as indicative of purity, cleanliness and morality contrasts its recent representations in which it represents that which society wishes to reject and suppress. The significance of these subverted representations of milk is the subversion of an ideal white, America. In the past milk has been presented as indicative of all that is good, pure, clean and wholesome, in short, white superiority and domination. The antithesis of this represented whiteness is that which exists on the margins: dirt, blackness, Otherness, the abject. Whiteness is a safe, contained concept because its opposite is easily differentiated from it. However, in the popular media discussed here, white men, typically representative of dominant society, take on the role of abnormal body, and in those roles, they drink milk. This subverts the meaning of milk by complicating its traditional use as indicator of “good body,” thus changing the meaning of whiteness.

Recent appearances of milk on-screen are apocalyptic for white hegemony because they break down boundaries between what milk symbolizes and its opposite. This dismantling of the white/non-white dichotomy is progressive for identity politics because it works to minimize difference. That milk in all its nutritious whiteness might be used for the advantage of a villainous body means that it is not always good for white bodies. Ultimately this study will reveal that boundaries defining categories of race, class, normality, cleanliness and morality shift and slip in media, reflecting slips/shifts in real life. Although some theorists argue for distinct but
equally-respected categories of people, in other words a celebration of difference, the key to
greater acceptance of diversity is not this hope for different-but-equal. Different-but-equal leads
quickly to separate-but-equal, which inevitably ends with inequality. The key to better human
relations is for the borders separating people to become so unclear as to be rendered meaningless.
Thus, although in these films milk-drinking bodies are presented as abject, their ambiguous
presence is a step in the direction to taking ambiguousness for granted rather than taking borders
and binary categories for granted. In the end, this short work will reveal a possible shift in
understandings of difference, even though this shift is presented as a source of anxiety.

Despite a number of studies revealing the fallacy of milk’s inherent and worldwide
goodness, and despite individuals’ negative reactions to dairy consumption, highly mythological
beliefs about milk etched into the country’s ideology over 100 years hold strong. Milk’s
transformation in the public eye from a bacteria-ridden product responsible for high infant
mortality rates in cities to America’s wonder drink is a complicated one. During that
transformation a combination of government persuasion and the resulting collective memory
heralded milk as nature’s perfect food. Still milk’s status as a super food seems bizarre when
studies reveal that as much as 75 per cent of the population experiences lactose intolerance.

Studies based out of Baltimore released in the 1960s discovered that while as high as 70
per cent of black adults suffered from lactose intolerance, just six to 12 per cent of the Caucasian
population experienced the same. The rate of lactose intolerance is about 55 per cent in Mexican
American population (Scrimshaw). Further research revealed that “this pattern [of lactose
intolerance] was the genetic norm and that lactase activity was sustained only in a majority of
adults whose origins were in Northern Europe or some Mediterranean populations” (1083).
Overwhelmingly, populations considered minorities in the United States cannot handle the milk
administered during tests of lactose tolerance. Consumption of milk/milk products in these minority groups typically results in bloating and diarrhea (Kingfisher 451). While individuals of European descent are genetically predisposed to digest milk more effectively, the majority of the rest of the world experience discomfort in digesting the popular beverage. Considering that milk represents all that is clean, pure and righteous, and that the white body is the body most capable of digesting milk, milk’s popularity takes on new meaning.

Striking about the study of milk acceptability is that lactose intolerance doesn’t affect milk consumption as one would expect. In fact, “there is no doubt that populations with a high incidence of lactose intolerance can have a positive attitude toward, and consume, moderate quantities of milk” (Scrimshaw 1105). Milk consumption is made more tolerable in several ways. For example, taking milk in small quantities or in fermented forms wherein lactose breakdown eases digestion of milk/milk products (1117). Furthermore, individuals drinking milk oftentimes don’t realize the source of their discomfort and continue to drink milk, attributing stomach pain to other factors.

An article published by Medical Anthropology Quarterly, “Milk Makes Me Sick but My Body Needs It,” reveals the extent to which individuals suppress their discomfort in milk consumption in favor of supporting their belief in the value of milk. Interviews conducted with women of minority groups reveal that women “struggle with the contradictions between their own bodily knowledge and the official knowledge of experts and professionals” and are “indicative of hegemonic models of diet and health” (455). The study on which the article centers documents the experience of several Hispanic women as they discuss diet and nutrition with medical professionals. In one of the presented interviews, a Mexican American woman describes her body’s reaction to milk:
She claims that milk makes her feel ill but that she has been told that she should consume a minimum of two to three cups a day. Later in the interview, she explains that milk may be good for her because it moves gas out of her system. Rather than being the cause of her gas problems, then, milk is portrayed as a solution (455).

This example, of which there were several, illustrates the hegemony at work behind the Eurocentric notion that milk is good. The woman of the above-discussed study refers to the notion that milk is good without providing a source for her belief. Although information reflecting the reality of milk’s role in society is increasingly available, “the notion of milk as an appropriate adult food, particularly during pregnancy and lactation, is still emphasized in U.S. food and prenatal care programs” (Kingfisher 451). The study reveals that due to the taken-for-granted belief in milk’s goodness, and embarrassment about discussing the symptoms of dairy intolerance, “lactose intolerance may be rendered invisible” (459), which is, of course, not in the interest of anyone’s health.

That a food rich in protein and calcium is pushed on individuals living in a country in which osteoporosis remains a health problem isn’t ludicrous. However, lactose intolerance “is often considered an aberration or disease rather than part of a normal range of human variation” (Kingfisher 451). The fact remains that non-European bodies experience difficulty digesting milk. Melanie DePuis says in her book-length milk study *Nature’s Perfect Food*: “The perfect whiteness of this food and the white body genetically capable of digesting it in large quantities become linked” (11). That a cultural preference for lightness/whiteness runs into the realm of food is a fact that needs consideration.

Although the medical professionals who advocate milk as a super-food are well-
intentioned, they also often emerge from similar socioeconomic and racial backgrounds, which place them in a specific discourse community. This results in biocentrism, “an assumption that people generally are biologically the same as oneself” (Kingfisher 463). In regards to biocentrism and lactose intolerance, the standard individual who represents the biological norm is an individual of northern European descent. Thus the health and nutrition apparatuses promoting milk unintentionally render biological and cultural differences invisible.

Some organizations, such as the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (PCRM) find fault with the general push toward milk consumption, criticizing that “the Dietary Guidelines are insensitive to the health needs of minorities, 75 per cent of whom worldwide experience some degree of lactose intolerance” (Goldberg 827). PCRM advocates alternatives to milk drinking, suggesting that the essential vitamins and minerals found in milk can be found elsewhere. However, milk’s history in the United States is long and strong and still sweeps all members of society under a blanket of the lactose tolerant while many people in fact cannot tolerate. This concurrence of milk consumption and milk maldigestion leads to the conclusion that: “Milk consumption in normal individuals is often influenced more by availability, social attitudes, nutrition education, feeding programs and other cultural factors than by relative ability to digest lactose” (1085). It is these cultural factors that hold the spotlight in this discussion of milk’s changing significance in American media.

In her detailed sociocultural history of milk in the United States, Melanie Depuis explains the rise of milk’s popularity from its inception. Milk’s popularization set off over 100 years ago, long before scientists uncovered data supporting the health benefits of calcium or protein. DePuis calls milk’s history the “perfect story” or the story of milk’s perfection, as it outlines the development of the now-ubiquitous belief in milk’s innate goodness and perfection. It seems
fitting, then, that the first milk advocate in New York City claimed divine visitation as his inspiration for social reform. Worried about the degeneracy of sinful city folk, Robert Hartley wanted to bring them in contact with those virtuous people living in the country, hoping the latter would influence the former. Hartley made this connection through milk distribution. In speaking out against swill milk and alcohol, and in support of the fresh, country milk, Hartley set out to rid cities of “impure” people and encourage the morally sound. This crusade for purity set off the milk phenomena in the United States. In 1842 Hartley published *Essays on Milk*, which “paints a vision of perfection,” and cites the Bible in arguing for milk’s perfection (DePuis 25).

This idea that the Bible supports milk as America’s drink, that milk is God’s gift to man, marks the belief in milk’s goodness as strictly Western. Paired with the fact of European’s genetic tendency for lactose tolerance, this suggests that cultural constructions of milk promote an idea of white superiority. DuPuis, under the chapter subheading “Milk, Race, and Nation” observes that “because milk was a food of Northern Europeans, the link was soon make between this food and white social dominance” (117). DuPuis quotes famous 1920s nutritionist E.V. McCollum at length:

> The people who have achieved, who have become large, strong, vigorous people, who have reduced infant mortality, who have the best trades in the world, who have an appreciation for art, literature and music, who are progressive in science and every activity of the human intellect are the people who have used liberal amounts of milk and its products (117).

Although not expressly stated, it is strongly implied that these “people” are white as the Caucasian speaker references canonical, Western achievements. DuPuis also quotes Ulysses Hedrick, who makes his 1933 point more explicit: “Of all races, the Aryans seem to have been
the heaviest drinkers of milk...a fact that may in part account for the quick and high development of this division of human beings” (118). DuPuis goes on to describe advertisements that encourage the immigrants to drink milk in efforts to develop their Americanness.

Hartley claims universality and completeness as proof of milk’s Godliness. His, and later milk advocate’s, claim to milk’s universality covers both time and space. He explains that milk has been an integral part of the human diet since the creation of mankind, pointing to Biblical sections in which Abel brings milk to his Creator. Hartley then goes on to stress the importance of herding communities to social development. The notion of milk’s universality in terms of space/location, although easily disproved, found its way into dairy rhetoric of late 1800s/early 1900s. According to DePuis, “[t]his is not simply an ethnocentric gloss, it is a genuine attempt to establish an intrinsic natural--and God-given--relationship between human and consuming milk” (27). The second proof of milk’s inherent goodness is claims made regarding its completeness: “it presumably contains all the elements necessary for life” (34). As years passed, the religious flare behind milk promotion died out. However science-based information about milk published in the 1950s based more in health and wellness and less in scripture recalled the intentions of milk’s first fan, Robert Hartley: “In both cases, the goal is to induce in the public the habit of drinking milk, for its own good” (DePuis 39). This remains the case today, the best proof of which one finds in the famous milk mustache advertisements.

Representations of milk in advertisement constantly evolved to match up with society’s idea of purity and goodness. Milk advertisements in the 1840s played on pastoral notions of wholesome, humble country folk. These advertisements depict milkmaids knelt under a content-looking cow with a farm-setting as backdrop (DePuis 92, 93). They also call to mind paintings depicting similar scenes such as Vermeer’s famous oil-on-canvas The Milkmaid (1657) and
Francis Wheatley’s *Milk Below Maids* (1793). After the turn of the century, and in line with newly acquired knowledge (germ theory) and practices (pasteurization), representations of milk aimed to showcase the cleanliness of milk production (87). The milkmaid faded away and the milk “expert” stepped into the scene: “This new ‘overseer’ of purity, the inspector and the veterinary doctor, was always depicted as a man” (107). Whereas purity during the 1800s meant feminine virtue and righteousness, during the Industrial Era masculine cleanliness took its place, as health, hygiene and capitalist industry increased in importance. Of course, all of these notions are connected. In the article “White as Snow Or Milk,” the essence of milk, its whiteness, is described as indicating cleanliness and representing high ethical standards. White means good and clean. Dirt, that which indicates impurity, “threatens to upset the social order” (34) and exists at the edges of hegemonic society, while whiteness and, in this instance, milk, represents hegemonic society. “White as Snow Or Milk” focuses on Norwegian milk company, TINE, and its advertisement campaign:

The connection milk-cleanliness-ethics is particularity important to corporations such as TINE. Cleanliness is synonymous with health, that which is good. Health is good for the nation, so the corporation that produces milk, and thus contributes to good health, is good for the nation. The connections between health, cleanliness, nation and corporation thus become interwoven and nested. The nesting takes place in the form of positive loops, where a positive value attached to one element triggers a positive value in another element (Hernes 35).

This excerpt does well to explain the advertisement tactic of displaced meaning during a time in Norway when milk was criticized for its fat content and associated with heart disease. In this milk marketing scheme, milk consumption becomes a social and political statement in line with
the national character of Norway. The same can be said of representations of milk in American popular culture, although more recently a shift is taking place.

The collective memory of milk in the United States consists of many images and notions; however, two come immediately to mind: the milk man and the half-pint milk carton. Films of/set in the 1950s often depict the jolly milkman replacing empty milk bottles with fresh milk, keeping the classic American family stocked with their most crucial food item. This image of the milkman brings to mind countless notions about life in the U.S. during the 1950s: nationalistic, conservative, hegemonic, standardized, and assimilated.

The second image, that of the half-pint milk carton, is an image familiar to any individual who has stepped foot inside a grade school cafeteria. In 1919 the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the National Dairy Council went on a milk-promotion crusade in public schools (DePuis 108). Milk campaigns, which included speeches, poster contests, plays, songs and books that contained games, stories and lessons all for the promotion of milk drinking, were launched nationwide. Furthermore, measurements of height and weight were taken before and after these campaigns, and the USDA claimed that undernourishment saw a reduction of 12 per cent (109). Twenty years later, the government took another step in the direction of milk: “The half-pint container of milk became a lunchtime staple for millions of North American children in 1943, when the milk program was made part of the federal school lunch program” (Goldberg 826). Images of the milkman and the half-pint milk carton are inhabited by notions of wholesome innocence, invoking a sense of nostalgia even. In fact, images of milk in general represent an ideal America.

In Milk and Melancholy, Kenneth Hayes describes an image containing a glass of milk: “Everything in the tableau signifies wholesome rural simplicity. There is a no more typically
Middle-American snack than jam on bread with milk, and the red-check tablecloth and matching gingham shirt are conventional signs of homely American naivity” (Hayes 75). In line with the Norwegian marketing campaign for milk products, these examples attest to the displaced meaning in images of milk. Nothing inherent or essential about milk makes it “America’s drink;” its position in society’s diet is culturally constructed.

According to Marx, the economic and material structures of a society support and dictate the ideologies of that society. Such is the case with milk in the media. Due to the long-held belief in the innate goodness of milk, milk advertisement is not questioned, but why does the general public accept milk as nature’s perfect food? For centuries, and to the benefit of dairy farmers, milk has been advertised as such. Society has been hearing the story for so long that they accept it as objective truth, when in fact it is authoritative knowledge, or knowledge that “is not necessarily ‘true’ or ‘correct’ in any ‘objective’ sense but is, rather, a social accomplishment” (Kingfisher 450). In addition to the general public’s blind trust in milk’s goodness, the brand-less marketing of milk adds a sense of purity to commercials: “Because milk advertisements do not promote specific brands, they seem to defy the system of competition that underlies advertising, as if promoting a universal concept rather than a commodity” (Hayes 176). Milk distribution is presented as an exercise in good will. However, the milk industry doesn’t differ from any other production operation in the United States.

Although according to Tor Hernes milk “is a symbol of life, a source of nutrition and a product,” (31) it is firstly real capital, and the financial capital for its advertisement comes from those organizations benefiting financially from its consumption. Dairy farmers have been forced to support milk ads for the past 30 years:
Legislation in the 1980s made funding through assessments on milk sales mandatory for all dairy producers. This funding went toward national campaigns such as ‘Milk: America’s Health Kick’ and ‘Milk: It Does a Body Good’ in the 1980s and the milk mustache and ‘Got Milk?’ campaigns today (DuPuis 112).

Milk promotion has always been in the interest of dairy farmers. DuPuis puts it bluntly in her book when she explains that “the promotion of milk in schools was not simply a child health program, it was a farmer income problem” (114). Those individuals aware of this conflict of interest haven’t viewed it as such because they believe in milk’s place in America’s diet as a perfect food. This is not to say that milk’s perfection has never been challenged:

In December 1999 PCRM filed a lawsuit against the Advisory Committee to the US Department of Agriculture/Department of Health and Human Services Dietary Guidelines for Americans, claiming that members of the committee had inappropriate ties to the meat, egg, and dairy industries that biased their ability to objectively evaluate the Dietary Guidelines (Goldberg 827).

The next year the Advisory Committee agreed to recommend alternatives to dairy milk, and the PCRM dropped the lawsuit.

The relationship between milk distributors’ fiscal agenda and milk’s representation in the media, and that between the latter and public notions of milk fit snugly into several models depicting sociocultural control of the masses by those with capital. Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony and Karl Marx’s theory of false consciousness explain the taken-for-grantedness of milk’s place in the American diet. Leszek Kolakowski gives a clear definition of hegemony in his text *Main Currents of Marxism*. Kolakowski explains that “hegemony signifies the control of the intellectual life of society by purely cultural means” (980). According to this definition,
hegemonic control results in ideologies or, as defined earlier, authoritative knowledge.

Authoritative knowledge is a social accomplishment. Rather than basis in objective truth, “[t]he power of authoritative knowledge is not that it is correct but that it counts” (Jordan, emphasis in original). Society’s acceptance of milk as good for everyone as presented in milk advertisement’s multitude of celebrity endorsers, and society’s belief that milk really is good, is in direct opposition to studies observing the way milk physically makes people feel. No doubt, people emotionally feel good about drinking milk because it “does a body good.”

Marxian concepts help too with an understanding of how milk has reached its position of elevated status. Marx observed that cultural beliefs develop out of the economic and material base of society. He said that consciousness is socially and politically determined and “[i]t is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness” (Marx) In short, reality is in the minds of real, active men. Although sometimes referred to as “false consciousness,” Marx didn’t regard these beliefs as erroneous. For Marx, “there is no problem of the world being ‘reflected’ in the mind,” and “[q]uestions of the correspondence between thought and reality-in-itself are meaningless, as is the opposition of subject and object considered as two independent entities, one absorbing images produced by the other” (Kolakowski 143). Marx accepted the slippage and overlap of objectivity and subjectivity as inevitable. However, he did not undermine the power and potential problems of this inevitable fact. According to Kolakowski:

‘Wrong’ thinking is that which confirms the state of human servitude and is unaware of its own proper function; emancipated thought is the affirmation of humanity, enabling man to develop his native abilities. Consciousness is the mental aspect of human life, as social process (for consciousness is realized only
in speech) whereby men communicate with one another and assimilate nature in humanized form. It can either intensify the slavery of man, imprisoned and dominated by material objects, or help him towards liberation (144).

To put it simply, consciousness’ role depends on how individuals use it. Dairy promotion misleads the public to a belief in milk’s status as a wonder drink. Although an increasing number of people argue against this belief, its objective truth or fiction merges with collective consciousness and becomes irrelevant for all intents and purposes. Real, active men believe milk is innately good, and so, for the time being, it is. This cultural control of human intellect is hegemony at its best. However, this hegemonic belief is challenged in the media discussed in this thesis.

To further scandalize the hegemonic belief in milk’s inherent goodness is the great motivator, money. Individuals drink milk because they blindly believe it to be the perfect food. They believe milk is advertised to the extent that it is advertised because government wants to improve the health of the nation. However, advertisement is always the means to money, and “the promotion of milk was in the economic interest of dairy farmers” (DuPuis 114).

Reminiscent of Marx’s base/superstructure theory, Stuart Hall’s model of encoding/decoding (165) is based in a technical infrastructure upon which rests the relationships of production. These aspects of product-making support the frameworks of knowledge which dictate meaning-making in eventual social discourse. In the case of milk, dairy farming and the commodities upon which it rests create and support the myths surrounding milk, which are reflected in representations of milk in the media, i.e. ‘meaningful’ discourse. Society reads the discourse on milk preferentially, or in the way the meaning-makers intended, and thus, society’s milk consumers feed the system, both ideologically and economically. They continue believing in,
and purchasing, milk.

This discussion of milk’s masquerade as a super food and the underlying monetary goals may seem as if it’s heading toward a weak, or at the very least, trivial, conspiracy theory. Society’s belief in milk’s goodness lacks basis in scientific fact, rather, it’s a socially constructed idea that helps dairy farmers sell a product. So what? Perhaps the next turn in this discussion of milk’s place in society only brings it closer to conspiracy, but an examination of milk’s changing role in filmic representations over time counters that notion. Milk’s cultural position is reflective of a larger system of meaning, specifically that of race politics in the United States.

Milk is representative of white, hegemonic agenda. The association of whiteness with goodness, purity and cleanliness, and the historical association of those qualities with the white race as well as with milk are not coincidental. The white body is the controlling body, the superior body, while the black body exists on the margins. It is everything that white is not. The white body can digest milk with ease. The non-white body cannot.

The association of milk with the Aryan race appears again in a series of photographs published in 1979. The artist collective General Idea’s still photograph \textit{Nazi Milk} and its video version \textit{Test Tube} depict an attractive blonde-haired boy wearing a white button-down shirt and tie (Hayes 147-152). The boy stands in a field with (presumably) his well-dressed, elderly parents. Behind them expands green pasture dotted with cows. The boy, “Billy,” drinks from a tall glass of milk and upon bringing the glass down from his lips, reveals a thick mustache in precisely the style of Adolph Hitler’s iconic facial hair. With his parents hands resting reassuringly on his shoulders, the boy smiles.

Although Hayes interprets these images extensively, they, first and foremost, connect the American “milk mustache” to Hitler’s mustache. More generally, \textit{Nazi Milk} and \textit{Test Tube}
connect milk with the Nazi Youth. The boy’s placement with his parents in front of a field of cows conjures images of Middle America, bringing to mind American values of wholesomeness, productivity and family. That he drinks milk also represents consumption, another staple of capitalist American life. “Billy” is the ideal youth: healthy, blonde, male, backed by his parents and, importantly, a milk drinker. The expression on Billy’s face is “slyly submissive and boldly defiant” (147) as if he mocks fellow milk drinkers for their blind devotion to the drink. Milk is explicitly linked with the white races of the West in these images. Billy seems fully aware of this linkage, and he seems to understand that it flies over the head of the majority of milk fans. Although dominant society believes milk’s goodness is based in science, DuPuis notes: “The establishment of white racial hegemony and the celebration and purification of a white substance digested predominantly by this group become more than accidental” (14). Milk’s popularity becomes evidence of white domination.

What better way to communicate that domination than to present multiple well-known celebrities as fans of the drink? In the introduction to The Milk Mustache Book Jay Schulberg describes the concern of the nation’s milk processors in the early 90s that a decline in milk consumption was negatively affecting national health. The Secretary of Agriculture, as well as Congress, apparently, agreed. The goal of coercing Americans into drinking milk spawned the famous “Got Milk?” campaign, which has published ads with over 100 celebrities since its inception in 1995 (Hsu 19).

In the milk mustache campaign, milk is endorsed from every angle, never failing to target a demographic group. Men, women, the elderly, teenagers, Caucasians, Blacks, Asians, Athletes, Americans, foreigners, musicians, models, everyone drinks milk according to these ads. Studies in advertisement indicate that if audiences feel they share characteristics with the endorser of a
product, the advertisement is more successful. “Thus, using multiple celebrities to endorse a product may create a consensus and help advertisers to positively affect consumer perception” (Hsu 20). Typically when using endorsers in advertisement, the image of the individual promoting some product should reflect the values of that product. In the case with milk, the belief that milk is valuable to everyone negates that logic.

The idea of milk as representative of sociopolitical whiteness is present in many of its artistic representations. The image of an all-American family sitting down to a dinner table upon which sit several glasses of milk is not foreign to the nation’s collective memory. Norman Rockwell’s paintings depict such an ideal America, specifically his 1935 painting Partygoers, in which an early-rising milkman meets a couple just heading home as he begins his delivery rounds. In Rockwell’s Soda Jerk (1953) three girls share vanilla milkshakes at a 50s-era soda shop. In more self-conscious, satirical fashion, almost every mealtime scene in Gary Ross’ film Pleasantville (1998) shows a bottle of fresh milk perspiring on the table. In fact, the introductory scene of this film, which is set in a picturesque, fifties-era town, shows a jolly milkman walking door-to-door with his rack of glass milk bottles. Back to the Future (1985), too, presents a dinnertime scene complete with glasses of milk in front of every child. In 2005’s The Prizewinner of Defiance, Ohio Julianne Moore’s line “We’re out of milk,” indicates the financial decline of an apparently picture-perfect American family in the 1950s. The absence of milk reflects the family’s lack of money and stability in an era where people worked hard to keep up appearances. These “appearances” were typically that of a white, patriarchal capitalism.

In Playing in the Dark, Toni Morrison examines race as it plays out in American literature. In discussing the alliance between ideas and their execution, Morrison quotes James Snead on the characteristic features of racism: “Marking, or supplying physically significant (usually
visual) characteristics with internal value equivalents, sharpening, by visual antithesis, their conceptual unity” (67). According to Snead, a central definer of racism is the attribution of internal value to external physicality. In the case of milk, media once attributed to milk the characteristics of light skin. Naomi Pabst, in an analysis of Morrison’s fiction work *The Bluest Eye*, describes the light-skinned black female character Maureen Peel, considered pompous and thus ostracized by her darker skinned peers:

> [F]or lunch she eats (yellow-and-white) egg-salad sandwiches and nourishes herself with white milk, while the other kids favor chocolate. Her clothes are ‘lemon-drop’ pastel with white trimmings, and her nickname, Meringue Pie, calls to mind layers of beige and yellow, smothered with stiff, frothy white (Pabst 197).

Here, Pabst implies that Morrison’s assignment of white milk as Maureen’s beverage of choice indicates a consciously-made connection between the whiteness of the milk and the lightness of Maureen’s skin. She continues to assert that Maureen’s surname, “Peel,” brings attention to the superficiality of her characterization: so much significance is allotted to the girl’s skin. More recent representations of milk and its drinkers, too, reveal that this symbolic whiteness is strictly skin deep.

Oftentimes, milk is presented as the antithesis of alcohol. If alcohol represents all the ills of society, with its connections to debauchery and licentiousness, as well as homelessness, drunkenness, domestic abuse, sexual assault, crime in general and even death, then milk represents all that is wholesome and good. In Roland Barthes *Mythologies*, he covers the symbolism of milk and wine. After describing wine as sharing the characteristics of instability, he goes on to compare wine to milk, quoted at length below:
Bachelard was probably right in seeing water as the opposite of wine: mythically, this is true; sociologically, today at least, less so; economic and historical circumstances have given this part to milk... milk is opposite of fire by all the denseness of its molecules, by the creamy, and therefore soothing, nature of its spreading. Wine is mutilating, surgical, it transmutes and delivers; milk is cosmetic, it joins, covers restores. Moreover, its purity, associated with the innocence of a child, is a token of strength, of a strength which is not revulsive, not congestive, but calm, white, lucid, the equal of reality (60).

In the 1939 western Destry Rides Again, the drink of choice of the town’s new deputy, Thomas Jefferson Destry, reflect Barthes observations. Destry rides into a town where his reputation as the son of a famed gunslinger precedes him. To the surprise of the townspeople, Destry not only fails to carry a gun, but he orders milk instead of whiskey when offered a drink at the bar. The townspeople thereafter do not take Destry seriously. In the end, however, Destry is the hero. Milk is again associated with virtue and goodness as the individual who opts for milk over alcohol also has the moral uprightness needed in town. However, in the texts discussed in this thesis, milk stands in as symbolic alcohol, and shares its negative qualities. Thus, the boundaries between positive and negative associations collapse, making milk abject.

Contrary to Barthes perception of milk, psychoanalytical theorist/critic Julia Kristeva views milk as an exemplar of the abject. In her book Powers of Horror Kristeva describes milk as that which is improper and unclean. She writes:

When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk--harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette papers, pitiful as a nail pairing-- I experience a gagging sensation and, still further down, spasms in the stomach, belly; and all the organs
shrivel up in the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead
and hands to perspire (Kristeva 2).

This description of milk not only turns the stomach, but falls more-so in line with recent filmic
representations of milk than does Barthes’ idea. The films listed earlier, and those that comprise
the focus of this paper, each emerged during the past twenty years. Because of progress and the
resulting tension in the area of race and class politics during recent decades, popular culture
produces media that speaks to shifting notions of difference.

Julia Kristeva’s work *Powers of Horror* provides a lens through which to examine media in
which milk’s meaning shifts, in which milk has this “power of horror.” Using psychoanalysis,
Kristeva, provides an in depth explication of society’s “abject,” that which crosses culturally
constructed borders. Janet Wolff explains that in Kristeva’s account, “the maternal body is the
object of horror, a feeling based in the fear of reincorporation into the mother, as well as in the
fear of the mother’s generative power. In becoming a subject, with defined boundaries, the child
is separating from the body of the mother. As a result, the maternal body becomes “abject’--an
object of horror and threat” (Wolff 419). Although Kristeva briefly mentions milk’s connection
to monstrous femininity, the critics and theorists following her expand on this specifically.
Barbara Creed and Kelly Oliver, especially, explain the relationship between milk, the female
body, and the source of abjection in that relationship.

Kristeva and her interpreters explain the notion of femininity as dreadful, monstrous and
abject using psychoanalysis. Because a child’s first food is milk, it associates the pre-verbal, pre-
subject state of infancy with its mother’s breast/milk. Because the child’s central necessity is
nourishment, the mother’s breast/milk fulfills the child’s every need during this first stage of
existence. As a result, the child perceives its mother as an extension of itself. It fails to realize
that its mother and itself are separate entities. The child’s eventual splitting from mother/breast/milk must occur because the child’s mother will inevitably fail to appear for the child one day. When the child understands that its mother is a separate subject whose sole existence is not the fulfillment of its needs, “splitting” takes place. This traumatic process is the child’s first step toward developing his or her own subjectivity. In symbolically separating from its mother, a child begins the task of being like her, that is, the task of becoming a subject. The trauma of splitting leaves individuals with a fear of reincorporation by the mother. Individuals once united with their mother through the pre-verbal stage of breast feeding, subconsciously find reverting back to this state plausible. Reincorporation by the mother presents itself as a cause for fear because it represents the death of the subject. However, this fear is accompanied by a simultaneous desire for that selfsame reunion with mother because it was during that union that a child’s needs were met fully without request. Tanya Krywinska explains this conundrum over a child’s feelings towards its mother: “The meaning of motherhood leans on this contradictory psychic knotting... In other words, women often represent two (or more) things at one and the same time” (Krywinska 32). The polysemic quality of the female body and, accordingly, of milk, resolves the contradictions in representations of milk from the past and present.

These concepts locate femininity as at once horrific and desirable. Through the logical connection of the female body to the maternal body, and that of the maternal body to the breast/milk, I suggest that milk shares these qualities of femininity. Milk furthermore can be located as abject because of the qualities it shares with other bodily fluids such as menstrual blood, feces, urine and saliva. These fluids exist as matter once a part of an individual, now expelled. Just as an infant exists within its mother’s body until birth expels it, these bodily fluids cloud the boundary between oneself and the outside world because they occupy both spaces
during their lives. Milk is therefore abject and an indicator of the abject.

In the films, television series and novel that I discuss in this project, milk marks white bodies transgressing society’s norms. The theory of abjection is based on the transgression of social norms. Milk-drinking characters in the popular media discussed here are abject outside of their milk consumption because they behave in ways that fall out of line with cultural norms and values. In carrying out acts Kristeva characterizes as abject (murder, incest, nomadism), they blur the boundaries between what is normal and abnormal, pure and impure, moral and amoral, self and other. That these horrific, abnormal bodies sometimes “pass” as normal bodies is an abomination in itself because it reflects an undetected crossing of boundaries, or a simultaneous occupation of spaces. This reflects anxieties about other types of border crossing, particularly by white bodies. In “Blackness/Mixedness: Contestations Over Crossing Signs” Naomi Pabst notes that “the mixing factor, represented in black/white mixed-race studies, tends to be feminized” (Pabst 191). In drawing connections between the feminization of mixed race bodies and the once-taboo status of biracial coupling, contemporary uneasiness and/or (morbid) curiosity about the ethnicity of individuals with unclear racial background begins to make sense. Much like the abject bodies discussed in the following chapters, mixed race bodies evoke anxiety in a society that relies of distinct boundaries.

Barbara Creed, in her article “Horror and the Monstrous Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection,” explains that “Kristeva is attempting to explore the different ways in which abjection, as a source of horror, works within patriarchal societies as a means of separating the human from the non-human and the fully constituted subject from the partially formed object” (Creed 45). As it relates to the present project, this “fully constituted subject” of which Creed speaks is the white majority empowered through hegemony while the “partially formed object”
is the marginalized minority. Society’s abject exists as a tool to keep entities such as these separate. This separation of abject/acceptable also acts as a determining factor in maintaining the status quo. Creed goes on to say that “[a]lthough the subject must exclude the abject, it must, nevertheless, be tolerated, for that which threatens to destroy life also helps to define life” (Creed 46). Without the abject, there could be no subject.

Kelly Oliver, in her flawless explication of milk as an abject substance in Western culture, explains milk’s meaning in the symbolic realm. Although I will delve deeper into the implications of the following excerpt in Chapter One, I quote her at length here:

On the level of personal archeology, separation from the mother’s milk is fundamental to establishing an autonomous individual. In Western culture, the repression of this bonding fluid and its abjection are central to our conception of personhood. Persons are autonomous and rational. They have overcome any animal nature and stepped sure-footedly into culture. Mother’s milk is a threat to both autonomy and rationality insofar is it recalls our animality. Western culture sustains itself by establishing borders between abject corporeal nature, which oozes and flows and defies categorization, on the one side, and civilized society composed of clean and proper individuals on the other (Oliver 74).

Here, Oliver states that milk symbolizes what society wishes to see pushed to the margins. Accordingly, in the media of discussion, milk can be read as an indicator of the types of characters society wishes to see pushed to the margins. Although what society considers abject shifts spatially and temporally, the milk drinkers in these films reveal contemporary social anxieties particularly regarding class, race, and the ways they overlay one another.

Chapter One of the present project discusses Guillermo Del Toro’s and Chuck Hogan’s co-
authored 2009 novel *The Strain*. Put briefly, the plot centers around three renegade specialists’ fight to rid Manhattan of a quickly-spreading disease that renders its victims vampires. Once a human turns vampire, his or her blood transforms from the thin, red fluid with which modern-day science is familiar into a thick, white substance repeatedly described as milky. This milk-white “blood” contains the virus that causes vampirism. The countless descriptions of vampire blood coupled with the consequences humans face after contact with said blood do well to support present literature about abject femininity. Furthermore, the behavior of the vampire leader and the spreading nature of vampirism reflect anxieties about immigration and assimilation.

The second chapter of this project deals with marginalized, racialized white bodies. In the television comedy series *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia* (2005-2009) and the horror film *The Hills Have Eyes* (2006) stereotypical “white trash” bodies drink milk. Although the McPoyle family of *It’s Always Sunny* exist as hyperbolically abject to comedic effect, they still fill the role of villainous, abnormal body that the other milk drinkers in this project fill. In fact, it is the comedic quality of this example of popular media that allows for the most obvious portrayal of abject, marginalized body. Laughter masks the stereotyped portrayal of a lower class white family. In *The Hills Have Eyes*, horror, instead of humor, disguises what might otherwise be interpreted as class commentary. In what is a fleeting scene, a member of the “Hills” clan, like the McPoyle family, perverts milk’s myth of purity and morality in his consumption of it. The unashamedly politically incorrect portrayal of lower class white bodies in these media reveal that this particular demographic-- poor and white-- is so abject that is allows for unapologetic objectification. In these examples the consumption of milk by abject bodies is redundant. However, the attribution of abject characteristics to a demographic frighteningly close to the
admirable and moral white middle class reveals a fear of slippage. If the boundary between morally upright society and those living in abject poverty continues to disintegrate, how will those on the “right” side of the tracks define themselves against the wrong?

In Chapter Three the 2007 film *Mr. Brooks* takes the spotlight, while several other films fill supporting roles. In this crime-thriller, wealthy family-man Earl Brooks suffers from an addiction to murder, which he nurses with meticulously planned and executed killings under *nom de plume* “the Thumbprint Killer.” During three separate scenes spaced fairly evenly throughout the film, Brooks stands in front of his refrigerator late at night drinking a tall glass of milk. Notable, these milk-drinking scenes take place after he commits murders and before he visits his daughter’s bedroom. Brooks carries this beverage-of-choice through the house as he makes his way to bed in solitude. That this ritualistic habit takes place late at night while Brooks is alone indicates that though he meets society’s expectations superficially, behind closed doors he falls into the category of the abject. As I will elaborate in Chapter Three, Earl Brooks transgresses boundaries in terms of space and identity, commits premeditated murder, and carries on an intriguing relationship with his teenage daughter, all of which render him abject by Western standards. *Mr. Brooks* reveals anxieties about marginalized individuals “passing” as members of dominant majority. Along with *Inglourious Basterds* and *The Professional*, *Mr. Brooks* begs the question, if difference becomes indistinguishable, does it exist? And, if not, what of societies that define notions of normalcy against difference?

Ultimately this study aims to lend reason to the changing representations of milk and those characters drinking it in popular media. By first locating milk as abject, I conclude that those drinking it share a similar textual fate. I then break down what it is, exactly, that makes these characters abject and what their abjection reveals about the culture creating them. Notably, all of
the characters in question are white males. Just as the bland whiteness of milk makes it a choice signifier of cultural characteristics, this ruling group of white males is the perfect terrain for laying down culture’s fears and anxieties about the abject. Namoi Pabst quotes Gregory Stephens’ argument that “the greater force we use in repressing a forbidden taboo subject or psychic content, the greater will be the force of its return, often in mutated or disguised form, in unexpected places and unanticipated moments” (190). Here, Stephens makes the point that the more society pushes the abject to the margins, the more strongly it will push back, often in subverted form. The innocent, smooth whiteness of milk makes it the perfect vehicle for expression of society’s abject. Because white males exist in these films as marginalized bodies, boundaries about the power dynamics inherent in racial and classist conflict start to disintegrate. This disintegration of boundaries, arguably abject in itself, indicates the possibility of culture’s allowance of increasingly transitory social boundaries.
CHAPTER ONE: MILK-BLOOD AND THE MATERNAL ABJECT IN THE STRAIN

In Chuck Hogan’s and Guillermo Del Toro’s 2009 publication The Strain, disease prevention specialist Eph Goodweather, aging pawn shop broker Abraham Setrikian, and several choice colleagues take up the task of wiping out a blight that recently put its roots down in Manhattan and aims to take over the continental United States. This “blight,” is, in fact, vampirism brought over the Atlantic ocean from Eastern Europe on a Regis 777 airplane by vampire kingpin, an embodiment of evil most frequently referred to as “the Master.” The Master schedules his overseas travel so that the plane carrying him in his dirt-filled coffin lands just prior to a solar eclipse. After feasting on all those aboard the plane, and consequently infecting them, the Master uses the brief respite from sunlight provided by the eclipse to escape into the city. Following this initial onboard infection by the vampire virus, the disease quickly spreads and civic organization within New York breaks down. Eph and Setrikian run around the city armed with silver bullets and UV lights tracking the Master, hoping to put an end to the virus threatening the human race.

Although The Strain is far from literary masterpiece, a psychoanalytical reading of the text supports the theory of abject femininity glossed over in the Introduction. This section first supplies a more thorough explanation of Kristeva’s theories, as this thesis depends them. Then following a brief but necessary plot summary, a textual analysis reveals how The Strain illustrates Kristeva’s theories. In “Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection” Barbara Creed points out “that such ancient figures of abjection as the vampire, the ghoul, the zombie and the witch...continue to provide some of the most compelling images of horror in the modern cinema” (Creed 48). Accordingly in The Strain it is the age-old vampire that takes center
stage as a model of the abject. After locating the vampires from this particular text as such, the concluding discussion investigates classist commentary played out via the characterization of several human-turned-vampires for which I provide back story. While introducing ideas central to the remaining sections of the thesis, this chapter reveals how *The Strain*’s vampiric virus and accompanying race of vampires exemplify society’s notion of the abject female body that threatens the subjectivity of those coming in contact with it. Moreover, *The Strain* offers examples of ways in which society manipulates notions of abjection in order to maintain the status quo, which is to say, a promotion of middle- and upper-class white bodies as those exemplifying the norms and values of society.

Although the idea of the female body as a “threat to the symbolic” (Oliver 76) legitimizes claims to milk and femininity as abject, the traditionally female tasks of the maternal figure provide secondary support. Kelly Oliver’s “Nourishing the Speaking Subject: A Psychoanalytic Approach to Abominable Food and Women,” uses Kristeva’s ideas in an essay that focuses strictly on the meaning of milk. She explains that not only is maternity an abjectly liminal state, but the maternal body is the body that regulates “the most archaic boundaries of clean and proper self” (Oliver 72). Food and feces, matter which is taken in, or expelled from, the body violate its borders. In this sense, milk can be categorized like other more obviously abject substances because it exists as matter expelled, taken in, and again expelled, all under the care of the mother. Blood, the vampire’s drink of choice, should also be mentioned here as a fluid that confuses the boundaries between life and death. In subsequent chapters, less-mythical bloodletting enters the discussion as Kristeva considers murder abject. Although blood is necessary for life, its presence often indicates a threat to life while its absence, in the sense of menstruation, indicates the creation of life. It, too, is something intended for containment by the
body. However, it “call[s] into question the borders of the body and even the borders between life and death. Once again, it is the undecidable, the unsettling, the threat to identity, which is abject” (Oliver 73). In the following analysis, this theory contextualizes the bizarre happenings in *The Strain*, a novel in which blood and milk unite.

As previously mentioned, abject bodies serve as a means to maintain order in society. Abject figures represent or embody the qualities society rejects as contrasting notions of civilization and progress. By maintaining clearly defined borders between the acceptable and the unacceptable-abject, society maintains ideological order. For instance, Barbara Creed notes that “[a]lthough the specific nature of the border changes from film to film, the function of the monstrous remains the same--to bring about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability” (49). *The Strain*, of course, is not a film. However, this theory applies since the novel shares with horror films many of the qualities about which Creed writes.

Creed, however, takes her cues from Kristeva. Accordingly, Kristeva’s work is examined more closely in the following pages. A clear understanding of Kristeva’s ideas regarding milk’s key role in linking the female body to a state worthy of abjection facilitates the remainder of this chapter, as well as the thesis as a whole.

According to Kristeva, in order to fully separate ourselves from our mother’s body, and from the anxiety of reincorporation with the mother, we abject her body. This is difficult, however, because it is the mother’s body that we associate with the bliss of unasked-for and complete gratification. For this reason, we make the mother abject in order to separate from her. The abject-mother becomes the object-mother after separation is complete, and the (m)other/child relationship sets the stage for Other/subject relationships thereafter. Simply put, the mother is the first Other. Accordingly, like the Other, “[t]he abject is what threatens identity.
It is neither good nor evil, subject nor object, ego nor unconscious, nature nor culture, but something that threatens the distinctions themselves” (70). This recalls the notion that human subjects identify themselves against what they are not. Without a source of comparison, a means of differentiation, one’s own identity becomes meaningless. Defining normativity in the absence of an abject Other is like trying to glean results from an experiment without a control. The desire for identification through difference surfaces in countless instances in, and is critical to, this thesis.

Society uses these sources of comparison and means of differentiation in order to create categories and boundaries to protect the collective identities of socially-acceptable subjects. Those unadmitted subjects exist at the margins of society as the abject. Their proximity makes them difficult to ignore and, as a result, renders them worthy of fear, hatred or ridicule. Kristeva argues that the most abject force in Western society is the maternal body. Oliver explains that:

the abject threatens the unity/identity of both society and the subject. It calls into question the boundaries upon which they are constructed. The abject threat comes from what has been prohibited by culture, what has been prohibited so that culture can be. For Kristeva, in Western culture, the prohibition which founds, and yet undermines, society is the prohibition against the maternal body. It is what is off limits (71).

The vampiric bodies wreaking havoc in *The Strain* are aligned with the maternal body that, according to Kristeva, Western culture finds worthy of expulsion. Both the feminine body Kristeva discusses and the mythological vampire exist as Others that threaten society’s normative identity. As such, society abjects the femininely-gendered vampire in the same way that a child abjects his mother.
The boundary that the primary mother/child relationship calls into question is that border between mother and child. The child drinks from the mother’s body well after birth. Oliver asks, “How can we be bodies separated from our mothers when it is her body which we eat? Her fluids become ours. How can we imagine ourselves as separate bodies when we eat that which is not-us, which in turn becomes us” (70)? For this reason, milk and the body producing it symbolize a loss of identity, a return to the state of unity with the mother. This loss of identity is akin to death, especially in Western culture where individuality is prized and guarded. The abjection of the female body, then, “is a kind of crisis in identity” (71).

Symbolic of the abject qualities of the vampiric bodies of *The Strain*, is, firstly, their milk-white blood. Milk makes its first appearance in *The Strain* about 100 pages into the 400-page novel. The implication of its initial presence is that it carries the symbolism attributed to it by Roland Barthes in *Mythologies*. In one particular scene, taking place shortly after the investigation of the Regis 777 begins, Eph opts for cold milk over coffee. Although this act is benign enough, Del Toro then explains that “[e]ver since giving up liquor, Eph, like a calcium-hungry toddler, craved whole milk” (97) Here, milk becomes alcohol’s opposite, just as Barthes asserts. However the comparison of Eph to a “calcium-hungry toddler” feminizes him by placing him in the position of a child. Further into the book readers are reminded again of Eph’s taste for milk: “Test tubes clinked as he reached for a quart of whole milk, uncapping it and drinking it down fast. He needed calcium the same way he had once needed booze” (269). Again Eph is feminized here by his dependency on a substance. Because Eph *needs* milk, it takes the place of “booze.” This milk-as-alcohol trope will appear again in Chapters Two and Three.

Though Eph initially relies on the femininely gendered product, after drinking a portion of milk, Eph “brought the half-empty bottle away from his lips with the realization that he had just
slaked his thirst with the product of another mammal” (270). Although this line of thought is abandoned, the implication is that the realization of milk’s origins causes Eph to stop drinking. Consuming a product that once existed inside another animal’s body makes Eph feel uneasy as it recalls the vampire’s mode of acquiring nourishment. This uneasiness is also the muted experience of abjection that Oliver describes as stemming from a subconscious fear of reincorporation by the mother.

In “Nourishing the Speaking Subject: A Psychoanalytic Approach to Abominable Food and Women,” Kelly Oliver asserts that milk’s significance as a food stems from the fact that it is the first food consumed by all individuals. The association of this first food with the maternal body and femininity develops because it comes from the mother’s breast. Even in cases where bottle-fed formula replaces breast milk, the child associates eating with the provider of food: the mother. Furthermore, the child takes pleasure in the act of eating this product of its mother’s body. Because it keeps the child wanting more, the child’s continued nourishment is ensured (Oliver 68). Milk’s role in The Strain develops from its significance as symbolic of the incipient relationship between mother and child, a relationship that, as will unfold shortly, is both desirable and repulsive. The contradictory reactions that milk and the maternal body evoke, both of repulsion and attraction, emerge again in Chapter Two’s discussion of The Hills Have Eyes.

While the child breast feeds, he believes that he is part of his mother and that she exists for/with him in much same way that during pregnancy child and mother are codependent. The infant “‘takes’ itself for an extension of its mother’s body” (Oliver 70). Eventually, however, the mother weans the child and he comes to realize that his mother is a separate subject who does not exist solely for his gratification. When the child realizes that his mother can leave (and does), he must learn to communicate his needs and wants through language. In this way, “the move from
breast to speech is an organic evolution of the psyche through which speech is ‘literally’ substituted for the breast” (70). Thus, although one must of course preclude the other, more important than the giving of the breast milk is the taking away. For this reason, in the symbolic realm, the mother’s breast/milk represents the pre-verbal, pre-subject state during which the child is neither object nor subject, but part of its mother. The boundary between mother and child is unclear. Kristeva describes this liminal state using the term “abject,” and the process of escaping it “abjection.” As a rule, individuals flee from this liminal state, terrified of the absence of individuality it entails. However, it does not evoke feelings of horror in the vampiric bodies of this chapter and the marginalized whites of subsequent chapters. Because they do not adhere to society’s regulations about maintaining boundaries, be they familial, racial or class-related, these bodies are abjected. They threaten Western society’s notion of normal because what terrifies most appeals to them.

The relationship between the mother and child, and the process of taking milk from the mother’s body and using it to nourish oneself is mirrored by the semiotic world in the process of acquiring language. The child obtains language as it obtains milk: “The child takes language from the other and makes this language part of itself” (Oliver 69). Through the acquisition of language, the child communicates and identifies with the other. More importantly, the child “becomes like the other: a subject” (69). Once the child reaches this level of subjectivity, he no longer needs his mother in the same way he did before. Instead he uses language to navigate the world. However, according to Oliver’s interpretation of Lacan, language is sub-par to the breast because “once the child is separated from the maternal body, which met all of his needs, it must, but never can, say what it wants. It cannot say what it wants because its desire is always beyond language. And this is why we keep talking” (70). Here, Lacan begins to give expression to the
contradictory feelings human subjects have towards their mothers. Though the child desires his mother, for she gratified his every need when he was an infant, “[he] feels rage against his mother because her carrying him in her womb compromises his identity. How can he become a man when ‘he’ was once a woman” (78)? Although this logic presents problems for female subjects, as much Freudian criticism is want to do, it extends to mother-daughter relationships as well. How can a child become an autonomous person when she was once her mother? Ultimately it is milk’s feminine qualities, its abject qualities, that prove significant in *The Strain*. Toward the end of the novel, Eph continues to drink milk but, significantly, it doesn’t “give him that usual calming sensation” (303).

Indeed most subsequent references to milk, of which there are many, call to mind Kristeva’s, Creed’s and Oliver’s discussion of milk and the abject feminine. Although the “milk” in question is not literally the dairy-based fluid produced by mammals, its descriptions recall that substance, and so in this discussion it persists as symbolic milk. When a human turns vampire, his or her blood loses all coloration and thickens in consistency. The final product is described as “pasty white, almost as though sour milk had been introduced into the blood stream” (Del Toro 128). Later a scientist watches the “milky surface” (140) of this colorless blood. A minor character, Gus Lastname, witnesses a man “bleeding white--not red--a creamy substance thicker and brighter than milk” (154). Although it would be redundant to list the countless instances in which vampire blood is compared to milk, suffice it to say the similarities between vampire blood and milk are belabored in this text. As such, it is this “milk” that carries vampirism.

More information about the details of this milk-blood is revealed as the story progresses. Dr. Bennet, an autopsy specialist at the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner in Manhattan, discovers “something very thin, no more than an inch and a half in length” slithering inside a
sample while investigating the thick, white blood (141). Although Bennet meets a fate similar to those from whom he collected the blood sample before he identifies with certainty the slithering worm’s makeup, he initially categorizes it as a viral parasite. The following description of vampires as beings that use up the resources of their host’s environment reminds readers of similar accusations aimed at immigrants entering the US. Bennet reasons, “[t]here were various examples of parasites reshaping hosts in order to serve their own reproductive aspects. Was this the explanation for the bizarre after-death changes he has seen on the autopsy table?” (141). The milky blood worm is indeed the conduit of vampirism. In fact, one need not get bitten by a vampire to “catch” the disease. Mere contact with the vampiric blood suffices. Infection, in the case of Bennet, is described as a warm feeling on the back of the hand followed by a mild burning sensation, after “some of the white blood had splattered on him, and was now stinging his flesh” (142). More often, however, vampires spread the virus by way of direct attack.

The method of vampire attack described in *The Strain* differs from that typically scene in classic vampire texts. These blood-thirsty beings do not bite their victims, per se. Instead vampires use “a highly developed growth inside his mouth. Like a well-developed muscular stinger underneath the tongue” (230). This apparatus “engorges as they feed. Their flesh flushes almost crimson, their eyeballs, their cuticles. This stinger...is in fact a reconversion, a repurposing of the old pharynx, trachea, and lung sacs with the newly developed flesh” (230). The vampires use this stinger, which can extend across the length of a small room, to pierce their victims’ throats, thus accessing the blood necessary for survival. Setrakian describes the mark of the vampire as “[t]he point of penetration. A thin breach across the front of the throat” (219). This act of penetration and consumption of the victim carries significance from a psychoanalytical perspective. First, though, a discussion of the effects of infection is necessary.
One of the initially infected characters, a Goth-style musician by the name of Gabriel Bolivar, hears first from his doctor the status of his health. His doctor explains, referring to Bolivar’s heart: “It appears that the cancer is...manipulating the organ now. Beating it for you. Your lungs, the same. They are being invaded and...almost absorbed, transformed” (203). Dr. Box goes on to say that he would clinically consider Bolivar deceased. Only the cancer-like virus multiplying inside keeps him alive. Essentially, vampirism takes over the body of a living human and quickly outfits it for the survival of the vampire virus. In other words, “[t]he virus mimics the host’s form, though it reinvents its vital systems in order to best sustain itself....it colonizes and adapts the host for its survival” (218). Although this metamorphosis results in absence of character, memory loss, bleached-out skin, aggressive temperament, hair loss, and a whole host of other symptoms, a notable side effect is the loss of genitalia. When Bolivar’s robe slips away, it reveals “a limp penis, blackened and shriveled, ready to drop from his groin like a diseased fig from a dying tree” (203). Soon after readers get another glimpse of Bolivar’s genital region. On second view it is void of any sexual organs whatsoever.

Essentially, contact with a vampire, whether it be via their milky blood or puncture wound to the throat, results in complete loss of human subjectivity. Human victims lose their individual identity and become part of a hive that works solely to reproduce its kind. It is a death, a partial death, similar to the death-like experience feared in the confrontation with the monstrous feminine discussed earlier. Vampire attack is akin to reincorporation by the mother. The end result of vampirism is a genderless being on the side of the feminine, as it lacks a phallus. Furthermore, vampires reproduce by partially consuming their victims, just as females reproduce by taking in their male counterparts. In short vampirism renders its male victims demasculinized. Infection castrates Bolivar. His penis literally shrivels and eventually falls off. Replacing his
penis, however, is a substitute phallus: the stinging appendage that strikes from behind the tongue. Vampires use this phallus of the mouth to consume the blood of human subjects, consequently creating more vampires. These life-consuming oral phalluses are an inversion of the fictional phenomenon of vagina dentata. Instead of the gaping hole of the vagina dentata, it is a penetrating phallus. Leonard Cassuto describes the toothed vagina, reflecting that it:

is an image that is found in numerous myths across cultures. It appears in various accounts as a ‘barred and dangerous entrance’ that nonetheless holds great allure for the men who seek to enter it. Defanging the toothed vagina has generally been depicted in the myth as an heroic act of male courage, a brave risk taken to bring safe reproduction to society (Cassuto 62).

In The Strain, Eph, Setrikian and company work together to complete this “brave task.” They symbolize masculinity in their logical, orderly and skilled manner, a juxtaposition of the lusty rat-race that characterizes the vampires’ behavior. Contrastingly, a few select characters in the text desire the vampiric virus. As Cassuto writes, it “holds great allure for the men who seek to enter it” because vampirism comprises immortality. One sacrifices autonomy in exchange for everlasting life.

Cassuto continues to say that the myth of vagina dentata indicates castration anxiety, particularly because it targets males. The notion of the vagina as an alluring location that nonetheless evokes horror surfaces in The Strain as well. The toothed vagina is a symbol of the abject maternal body. Although his brute force may bring to mind stereotypically masculine traits, the Master shares a source of horror with the abject feminine body. Furthermore, the Master is feminized by virtue of his disease. Mary Ann Doane in “The Clinical Eye” points out the culturally constructed connection between disease and the female body. Writes Doane,
“[d]isease and women have something in common--they are both socially devalued or undesirable, marginalized elements which constantly threaten to infiltrate and contaminate that which is more central, health or masculinity” (205). Doane goes on to note that “the world ‘hysteria’ is derived from the Greek word for ‘uterus.’” Thus that which invades the healthy body rendering it ill is gendered female, a trope that extends as far back as ancient Greece where a woman’s womb was thought to cause her undoing.

Readers receive their first description of the Master through the eyes of Eldritch Palmer. Written in weighty sentence fragments, the description makes clear that he is simultaneously repulsive and attractive. As Palmer’s eyes adjust to the light, he takes in the Master’s face. The text reads: “The horror. And the glory. The impious. And the magnificent. The savage. And the holy. Unnatural terror stretched Palmer’s face into a mask of fear, eventually turning the corners of it into a triumphant, teeth-clenching smile. The hideous transcendent. Behold the Master” (Del Toro 310). Admittedly melodramatic to the effect of the rising action of the plot, this description calls to mind earlier discussions of the monstrous feminine. Readers gather that the Master evokes feelings of abject horror at the same time as feelings of admiration and attraction. This recalls Kelly Oliver’s observation regarding an individual’s relationship with his mother that “in separating from our mothers we split her in two. If she were made wholly abject, then women would symbolically be made wholly abject. Therefore the mother is divided into the abject and the sublime (78). Kristeva, in *Powers of Horror*, uses the icon of the Virgin Mary to explain how Western civilization utilized the image of the holy mother to allow women a “clean” place in society. Interpreting Kristeva, Oliver says that an individual splits the maternal body so that he or she need not detest all women in abjecting the maternal symbol. Similarly Palmer splits the Master in order to reconcile his simultaneous desire and disgust for him. Only then can he accept
the Master as such. Palmer, as is implied by the contradictory syntax of his description of the Master paired with his exuberant smile, must know that the Master threatens his subjectivity as a human individual. However, his desire for the gratification of health, power and immortality that the Master promises to provide staves terror.

In Karen Horney’s 1932 essay “The Dread of Woman” she argues that masculine desire of woman is intertwined with a deep fear of her, a fear that the man seeks to expunge by objectifying it. Horney suggests that even the male ‘glorification of women has its source not only in his cravings for love, but also in his desire to conceal his dread.’ This dread, says Horney, does not lie solely in the fact that woman has been castrated (which is the basis for Freud’s explanation). Instead, ‘there must be a further dread, the object of which is the woman or the female genital’ (Cassuto 63).

That contact with this oral phallus, symbolic of vagina dentata, or contact with the milk-blood, symbolic of the abject maternal, turns human subjects into one indistinguishable part of a nonhuman hive mirrors the notion of reincorporation by the mother’s womb. Mireille Astore, regarding this state of uniting with the other, described it as such: “to be in a state of abjection is to merge the Other, that which is outside the self, with the self. It is truly an intolerable state of being. It signifies an apocalyptic spiraling of the unconscious while conscious. It is seeing unforetold death moments before dying” (Astore 18). This setup locates vampires as abject in precisely the same way society configures the maternal as abject. Several other qualities of vampires provide secondary support to this claim.

The novel begins with a rare eclipse. The authors correct the misnomer “solar eclipse,” explaining that during this planetary phenomenon, the earth itself is in fact eclipsed when the
moon passes between it and the sun, casting a small shadow. Forgiving its overstated symbolism as abnormal solar activity, the eclipse marks the arrival of an abject force in New York. It is described as such: “This occultation was a celestial perversion, a violation of the natural order. A cold, dead stone deposing a burning, living star. For Eldritch Palmer, it was proof that anything— anything, even the grossest betrayal of natural law— was indeed possible” (Del Toro 91). Again, this eclipse of the earth indicates a break in normalcy, a “betrayal of natural law.” What is abject is described by Kristeva as that which “draws attention to the fragility of the law” (Kristeva 4).

Following the eclipse of the earth, the only constant struggle is to expunge New York of its virus, an attempt to return order to the city. A return to order is always the desire of those in contact with the abject.

The scene of the Master’s initial attack is in opposition to the chaos it instigates. Upon first boarding the “dead” airplane for investigative purposes, Eph and his colleague, Nora, face utter orderliness. The usual signs of trauma elude the tableau. There are “no nosebleeds. No bulging eyes or bloated, mottled skin. No foaming or bloody discharge about the mouth. Everyone is his or her seat, no sign of panic or struggle. Arms hanging loose into the aisle or else sagged in laps. No evident trauma” (Del Toro 45). Save the fact of corpses rather than live humans seated on the plane, Eph and Noro initially find little out of the ordinary. However, this ordinariness in the presence of obvious disorder indicates matter out of place. Eph notes on the following page that “Whatever it was, it took everyone completely unaware. Including the air cop” (46). The ability of this out-of-place matter to carry out its work undetected contributes to the horror it evokes.

Although most qualities of the humans-turned-vampires are textbook abject, especially noteworthy is their liminal state between dead and alive. The most abhorrent examples of the abject are those which exist in a liminal state, refusing to adhere to society’s boundaries and
categories. Toward the novel’s conclusion, Eph and his team of vampire assassins come nearer and nearer to the Master. Eph describes the feeling as similar to that which he felt when approaching the airplane full of murdered civilians that marked the start of his adventure: “This sense of approaching something dead and not dead. Some delivery from another world” (Del Toro 378). The feeling he describes is horror, horror for the abject being that he seeks. Most important, however is the vampire’s ability to take away its victims’ subjectivity. Those innocent humans who fall prey to the vampire’s desires soon turn into vampires themselves, and accordingly, join the vampire race as a clan of abject bodies.

Although vampires emerge throughout the book as highly sophisticated organisms, their sanitary habits remain underdeveloped, a detail that marks them as unclean and thus dangerous to social structure. Eph and Nora discover a mysterious liquid sprayed throughout the cabin of the Regis 777 airplane while checking the space for blood with UV light. This liquid turns up on various occasions throughout the course of the book, always in locations vampires passed through. A chemical analysis reveals that the liquid contains ammonia, phosphorous, oxalic, iron, uric acids and plasma. Nora, after reading the results of the test, asks Eph what the chemical makeup of the substance reminds him of. He replies, “Excrement. Birds, bats. Like guano” (171). Nora, bewildered, explains the presence of the substance. She says, “Whoever, whatever was on that airplane...took a giant shit in the cabin.” This vampire excrement appears again, when Vasiliy Fet, the exterminator with the NewYork City Bureau of Pest Control, explores the sewers searching for an explanation to the recent unusual rat behavior in the city. He comes across a splash of urine that “would indicate a six-foot rat” (284). Unbeknownst to Vasiliy, the vampires took to the ever-dark sewer system, displacing the rat population and causing their strange behavior. The urine is proof of their presence.
Mary Douglas interprets society’s intense aversion to bodily wastes as an indication of society’s fear of traversed boundaries. According to Douglas, margins are dangerous for society as they reveal the fragility of social structure. Douglas says of margins:

If they are pulled this way or that the shape of functional experience is altered. Any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins. We should expect the orifices of the body to symbolize its especially vulnerable points. Matter issuing from them is marginal stuff of the most obvious kind. Spittle, blood, milk, urine, faeces or tears by simply issuing forth have traversed the boundary of the body. So also have bodily parings, skin, nail hair clippings and sweat (Douglas 374).

Thus, bodily wastes do not summon up feelings of disgust because of their makeup. Rather, people abhor spittle, milk, feces and the like because of what they symbolize: the body’s failure to contain itself. The unsavory notion that other bodies, social bodies, share those same vulnerabilities renders broken boundaries abject. Barbara Creed explains that horror films, or any media dealing with abject entities, exist as a way to deal with anxiety about these vulnerabilities. She writes that “the horror film brings about a confrontation with the abject (the corpse, bodily wastes, the monstrous feminine) in order, finally, to eject the abject and re-draw the boundaries between human and non-human” (Creed 53). The vampires in The Strain, physically abject in their tendency to drink blood, defecate, bleed white, etc. also exist as bodies society wishes to reject.

All of these qualities justify the rejection of a being that, significantly, threatens national borders and the autonomy of New York City, the symbol of the United State’s status as a first-class nation. The Master arrives in Manhattan via airplane. Because, as it were, vampires cannot enter a new territory without invitation, the Master secures a host in the United States before
making his trip. Once he arrives he has free range on the continent. Thus, the Master exists as a foreign body arriving in the United States uninvited, however aided in his journey. In spite of its rich history of multiculturalism, it is ethnoculturalism, the idea that America is a nation of white Protestants (Schildkraut 2), that holds strong in the United States. Pamela Paxton of Ohio State University points out that anti-immigrant sentiment is characteristic of the world’s democracies and that “even the United States, itself perhaps the archetypal immigrant society, has a long history of prejudice against newcomers to its shores” (549). These anti-immigrant attitudes, which spawn anti-immigrant policies, are the result of nativism, or “intense opposition to an internal minority on the grounds of its foreign (i.e. ‘un-American’) connections” (Perea 1). The United States experiences nativism, which targets different minority groups depending on political situations, in waves. According to Juan Perea, editor of the collection of essays Immigrants Out! nativism during the late 90s was aimed at Mexicans, Central Americans and Asians, Recent nativism extends its distrust to those individuals originating from the Middle East as well. Nativist feelings increase during periods of economic hard times because native-born Americans use immigrants as a scapegoat for such financial woe (Feagins 37). Paxton explains that “immigrants are resented for threatening natives’ economic and material interests in the form of jobs, crime, education, and taxation” (550). Although research indicates immigrants do not take away any more jobs than they create (Feagin 31), nativist feelings persist.

The Master is essentially an illegal immigrant who upsets the natural order of the territory he inhabits, beginning with the initial airplane feeding. His type of undocumented, unapproved travel puts fear into the heart of America. It threatens US citizens’ sense of national security, a result of many Americans’ aversion to foreign bodies, especially since September 11. The Master is the ultimate foreign body, sneaking into the US by airplane with plans to destroy the
nation. The text acts as cathartic reading for those traumatized by recent breaches of American security, whether those breaches are airplane hijackings or comparatively benign illegal immigrants’ entrance into the US. For fundamentalist Americans, the difference is insignificant.

Four individuals survive the Master’s attack on the “dead” airplane; they exist as the incipient carriers of the disease. Chosen by the Master, they do his work by maturing to vampirism, infecting more humans, and spreading the strain. The characterization of these survivors and their friends and family follows a trend based in socioeconomic status. Apparently wealthy and well-aware of the powerful social status that this wealth allows them, attorney Joan Luss and rock star Gabriel Bolivar are arrogant, spoiled and demanding. They embody the stereotypical “rich kid” who lacks the humility and empathy necessary for any humanistic sentiment or behavior. When Joan Luss’s nanny, who is all but Joan’s two children’s biological mother, expresses concern regarding the incident with “dead” airplane, out of which Joan exited as one of four survivors, Joan’s response is one of condescension: “Joan smiled at Neeva and her adorable little tropical superstitions--the smile cut abruptly short by a sharp pain in her jaw” (144). Obviously ironic, Joan dismisses Neeva’s concerns because she regards her as ignorant and backward because of her non-Western status. Unfortunate for Joan, Neeva’s “adorable little tropical superstitions” are spot-on.

Joan focuses solely on her finances. Although clearly retaining whatever illness befell her on the airplane, Joan leaves the hospital against doctors’ wishes with her sights set on a law suit: “As she rubbed her sore, swollen neck, Joan envisioned the impending lawsuit, and once again her spirits soared. She glanced around the kitchen. Funny how a house she had spent so much time and money redecorating and re-renovating could appear so suddenly...shabby” (144). In depicting Joan as a self-centered American with tunnel vision for the accumulation of wealth
while Neeva comes across as a sweet, humble woman, the writers work against the initial portrayal of foreign bodies in the United States as detrimental. However, the issue here shifts from nationality and race to class status. Joan is presented as too rich for humanitarianism; the morality conflated with the middle class is the ideal. It is only fitting that she turns into a vampire so she can continue her blood-sucking profession in more literal form.

This trend continues with the other survivors. Gabriel Bolivar, mentioned earlier, plans on building the largest and most ornate home in Manhattan. The remodeling of a downtown building is ongoing during the course of the story. Upon completion “the home would encompass thirty-one rooms and fourteen thousand total square feet, including a mosaic-lined swimming pool, servants’ quarters for a staff of sixteen, a basement recording studio, an a twenty-six-seat movie theater” (Del Toro 146). This endeavor in grandiose living arrangements exists as one of many ways Bolivar expresses his wealth. For Bolivar life is full of commodities that he can purchase or replace. He treats women in the same way that he treats materials. Female fans fawn over him; he brings several up to his penthouse apartment and kicks them out once they satisfy his needs. Like Joan, he focuses on the accumulation of wealth, though his marketing scheme relies on an image of subversion. As an entertainer, he is the “anti-everything Wal-Mart had loved to ban and religious America--including his own father--had sworn to oppose” (147).

Bolivar, an attractive man, never makes any public appearances unless done up in full Goth-style makeup: milk-white skin, black contacts, gaunt cheeks. Accordingly, he is aware that “[h]is entire career consisted of taking beauty and corrupting it” (147). He remarks that his fans respond positively to this subversion of goodness. Coincidently, Bolivar, his fellow vampires, and the other milky characters discussed in this thesis, also work to subvert good. Their
characterization and behavior alters the once-wholesome image of America’s favorite drink. The selfishness and greed that characterizes Joan Luss and Gabriel Bolivar is only magnified once they turn into vampires.

Less detail is provided about Captain Redfern’s private life, as he doesn’t return home from the hospital. Furthermore, although as one of the four survivors elaboration about his background might prove useful, because he attacks Eph and Nora and ends up dead by the scuffle’s end, the novel includes limited information about him. The single survivor not yet discussed significantly does not share the economic status of Gabriel Bolivar and Joan Luss. Instead, Ansel Barbour is the head of “a one-income household in an America of two-income households. And Ansel couldn’t take a second job, because then who would do the grocery shopping?” (123). The Barbour family is solidly middle class, and as a member of this American majority, they exemplify the qualities American ideology promotes. Inhabiting a three-bedroom home in a New York suburb, the Barbours have two Saint Bernards and a strong commitment to family. Ansel, upon experiencing the first symptoms of onset vampirism, thinks “[b]eing home...being with his family, could cure him of anything” (125). Although his family cannot in fact cure him, Ansel, the good-natured, moral man that he is, eats the family pets and then chains himself in the backyard shed to save his wife and children from a similar fate. He is like a still-loyal rabid dog that doesn’t bite its owner. Ansel remains the only victim able to maintain a sense of humanity during his metamorphosis to vampire. That this ability to resist the fully abject state of vampirism develops in a man embodying the trope of the wholesome American middle class points to a tertiary theme touting middle class morality. However dated the 1960 article, Robert Faris’ exegesis on the middle class states that:
In every society, one of more groups, classes, or castes takes a greater interest in upholding the societal moral order than do the others. In our society, for example, the most widespread, articulate, and persistent group in terms of upholding societal morals consists of middle-class persons... (Faris 2)

Though this fifty-year-old statement is bigoted in its classism, the sentiment expressed here is not without precedence, nor does it lack current sway. Faris merely articulates the trope of middle class morality present in many contemporary representations of class. Because Ansel Barbour represents what milk once represented -- this middle class morality -- he is less susceptible to the perverted form coursing through the veins of the abject.

These plane survivors, particularly Joan Luss, Gabriel Bolivar and Ansel Barbour, reveal a bias in presentation of vampiric bodies. Although vampirism is presented as an identity-consuming force, victims manage to maintain some semblance of their former selves. That Luss and Bolivar, both depicted as unsavory characters in their lust for money, likewise quickly relent to the bloodlust characteristic of vampirism, hints at a connection between the two traits. Contrastingly, Ansel Barbour, committed family man content with his modest income, shackles himself to the tool shed rather than harm his loved ones. These markedly different depictions of characters’ reactions to infection correspond with their initial personalities. This results in feelings of empathy and admiration toward Ansel, while Luss and Bolivar evoke disgust. In this way, the text celebrates and supports Middle America while expressing discontent with those individuals at the top. Excess is presented as worthy of abjection, a fitting theme for a country with a strong Protestant base. Furthermore, in accordance with society’s fear of the maternal body, the book reveals a refusal to give up individuality. Even in the grip of death-force, the characters retain some human traits.
With maturity, however, these vampires eventually give up their loyalties, be they to money or family, and fully embrace vampirism. They abandon their homes and join the ranks of vampires nesting in the underground sewer system. Setrikian says of the Master: “He has no affiliation. He is loyal to no one and nothing, belonging not to one country or another. He roams where he likes. He feeds where there is food” (Del Toro 301). This recalls Steve Garner’s discussion of nomadic peoples such as Travelers or Gypsies. Although this idea will be elaborated in the following chapters where characters exhibit similar lack of loyalty, it is worth noting here. Garner states that a dominant Western ideology presupposes that all people possess some allegiance to a nation-state or community. When they do not, their transgression of national boundaries renders them “matter out of place,” and, accordingly, worthy of abjection. Garner refers to “Bauman’s (1998) theory that modernity cannot cope with ambivalence between categories” which “is nowhere better borne out than in the continual misclassification of bodies viewed as out-of-place in the nation. Such bodies are a threat to the nation-state that demand unequivocal loyalty” (Garner 118). In The Strain, as well as the accompanying texts discussed here, the milky characters lack allegiance to a place.

It is the nearness of these vampiric bodies, lastly, that renders them abject. At a safe distance they wouldn’t threaten notions of what it means to be human, and, more specifically, what it means to be a human of civilized, progressive society. Elaborating on this idea of “nearness,” the term breaks down. Of course, the vampiric bodies exist in close physical proximity to healthy humans. Thus, their human status (which relies heavily on individuality and singularity) is at risk. Secondly, vampires exist near to humans physiologically. Because the vampiric bodies resemble human bodies, the possibility remains that one might not be able to tell the difference between a mature vampire and a human. That vampires straddle that boundary is a
true source of horror. If the line drawn that separates human from nonhuman gets washed away, then the definition of human lacks validity. If the abject merges with the subject, then the categories cease to exist. Through its use of abject bodies that possess characteristics society wishes to avoid, *The Strain* provides an example of ways society, in this case Western culture, turns the abject to its advantage, using it to promote dominant ideology.
The assignment of gut-level, abject qualities to bodies marginalized for racial or classist reasons is merely an excuse to reject such bodies for illegitimate reasons. Because it would prove unpopular to present lower class bodies as unsavory by nature of their economic status, popular media renders them unsavory by using classist stereotypes. This chapter explores the depiction of lower class, white bodies in a horror film and a television comedy in which said lower class bodies embody the stereotypes connected to their financial holdings. After locating these stereotypical “white trash” characters as abject in their superficial traits, namely appearance and behavior, an investigation of the social commentary behind their depictions ensues. These texts represent poverty as grotesque in an attempt to cope with guilt over social inequalities in the US. The characters are poor because they are grotesque, the texts suggest; poverty is the result of an essentially abject character. By drawing connections between the normative American middle class and whiteness, traditionally symbolized by milk, and between marginalized minorities and abject femininity, the perversion of symbolic milk, this discussion of poor, white bodies in two examples of American media reveals that milk appears in instances where society deems characters in need of metaphoric whitening. The lower class families in the film *The Hills Have Eyes* and the TV series *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia* are white, and as such, they exist in close proximity to the hegemonic majority in the US. However, because these characters live in abject poverty and behave in ways classified as “nonwhite,” media hyperbolizes the “white trash” stereotype to subhuman extents, thus abjecting what, prior to slippage, was once the hegemonic majority. *The Hills Have Eyes* and *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia* use a lack of
symbolic whiteness in the Hills mutants and the McPoyle family, respectively, to articulate what it means to be on the right side of white.

For those unfamiliar with the families of the texts in question, a brief description should suffice. The abject familial group of the 2006 horror remake *The Hills Have Eyes* consists of a handful of mutated humans. A gender-unspecific mutant explains to a member of the family pitted against the Hills clan the root of their mutated forms: “Your people asked our families to leave their town and you destroyed our homes. We went into the mines. You set off your bombs and turned everything to ashes. You made us what we’ve become. Boom. Boom. Boom” (*Hills*)

In this statement the mutant articulates ideas asserted throughout the film with imagery. Once a typical mid-western mining community, these families refused to abandon their land when minions of the US Department of Energy arrived to conduct nuclear tests. Instead they took to the hills and, irradiated by nuclear testing, mutated into grotesque forms. As mutants, the Hills people terrorize passersby and subsist on raw meat, specifically human flesh, human blood, and in one scene, a young mother’s breast milk. Although Wes Craven’s original *The Hills Have Eyes* makes certain plot points more explicit, such as the inbreed quality of the Hill mutants, this discussion focuses on the 2006 remake because of its milk-drinking scenes. In few instances where I reference the Craven classic to verify filmic facts, the shift is made clear.

Although markedly different in tone, the comedy series *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia* presents a family similar to that of *The Hills Have Eyes*. The McPoyle family, although not nearly so deformed as the Hills mutants, exhibits qualities indicating genetic trouble. The McPoyles likewise reject normative society, keeping for the most part to themselves, and occasionally choosing to torment members of the hegemonic majority. Although the McPoyle family refrains from consuming raw flesh of any sort, they exhibit a certain “lust for milk”
(Always Sunny). Thus although the Hills mutants and the McPoyle family exist in genres at opposite ends of the spectrum, they share qualities that warrant a joint discussion of the underlying social forces crafting them.

Beyond the cursory similarities between the Hills clan and McPoyles emerge qualities that mark the families as abject in a social sense. Of course their consumption of bodily fluids remains significant and surfaces in the discussion further on. Firstly, though, an examination of the ways in which the families fail to adhere to social norms is necessary. Both families exemplify an image of poverty hegemonic white America finds abject. In his discussion of the norms and values associated with whiteness, Steve Garner turns to the work of several different cultural theorists in order to develop a sense of what society sees as “normal” or socially desirable. The loose definition gleaned from these critics helps to establish dominant society’s notion of what falls beyond the scope of normalcy, as the categories define one another via opposition. Garner writes that Richard Dyer “sees norms of obsessive self-control, rationality, order and the repression of emotions, which manifests somatically as rigidity. This creates the norms of the Others as sensuality, vivacity and childish disorder” (Garner 49). Henry Giroux, in his reading of the film Dangerous Minds finds that it “demonstrates a sustained attempt to devalue and homogenise minority urban experience, and inculcate white middle-class values, presenting them as rational vis-a-vis irrational inner city youth” (Garner 50). Giroux concludes that American popular culture promotes “a similar white drive toward order and repression of disorder in popular American culture” (Garner 50). Finally, Frye draws connections between masculinity and whiteness developing the idea that masculinity is a “set of behaviour whose ‘monotonous similarity’ encapsulates whiteness as a collective experience” (Garner 50). In synthesizing these interpretations of Western normalcy, one concludes that middle-class
whiteness is the norm indicative of order, control, power and masculinity. Contrastingly, society and subsequently popular culture see nonwhite, lower class bodies as childlike, irrational, unorganized and femininely-gendered.

Robert Faris’ 1960 article, “The Middle Class from a Sociological Viewpoint,” offers explanations regarding the origin of class differences as well as thorough definitions of class categories. Although the article is outrageously classist, the creators of *The Hills Have Eyes* and *It’s Always Sunny* could have used it in creating their lower class characters. Faris writes: “The differences are not claimed to be absolute, but members of the lower class have less of the respect for property, less ambition, less dedication to the job and to other virtues” (Faris 2). Faris goes on to connect capacity for organization with moral character because organization “requires the performance by many persons of patterns of expected actions” (Faris 3), thus implying that by virtue of their inherent organizational skills, members of the middle class possess higher moral standards. Instead of focusing on class and morality, Garner discusses a race/moral character connection, writing that “[r]acialisation has always included a component of attributing cleanliness, decent behaviour and progress to whiteness as a moral characteristic: we might label this the ‘moral economy’ of whiteness” (Garner 96). In synthesizing their ideas about difference and morality, a connection between class and race emerges. The McPoyles, because they are poor but white, confuse these notions. Their class status, however, overshadows their whiteness. In explaining the relationship between the middle class and morality, Faris references Max Weber and points to the influence of religion:

As [Weber] saw it, a Puritan influence spread among the middle class as a set of values which facilitated aggressive economic individualism, and, following Weber, our contemporary popularizers have used this Protestant Ethic and
middle-class morality interchangeably. In general the ethic involves favorable sentiment toward ambition, industry, thrift, long-range goals with deferment of immediate gratification, individual responsibility, effective performance, rationality, forethought, effective manners and personal relations, and not least, respect for property. A religious ideology, by means of such values, supposedly liberates the energies of men to succeed in individual business competition (Faris 2)

Contemporary readers of Faris’ article can certainly pick apart his argument using their knowledge of the cultural construction of ideology. However, I don’t quote Faris in order to point out the classist fallacy of his words. Contemporary representations of class fulfill his prophecy, perpetuating stereotypes and supporting notions of the abject.

_The Hills Have Eyes_ opens with a 1960s housewife setting a cake on the countertop in her well-equipped kitchen. The scene is picturesque, her content housewifery an image of that era’s white, middle class perfection. “My cake is ready!” a recording says. Then the woman blows out the cake’s candles and the puff of smoke emitted from the candles evolves into the cloud of an exploding nuclear bomb. The images on screen then shift to a mélangé of scenes relating to nuclear activity. Viewers see various mushroom clouds, explosions, combat planes, dropping bombs, the obliteration of housings and buildings. Cars and trees blow over in radioactive winds. The sequence introduces images of human deformities: two-headed babies, misshapen faces and hands, bugged-out eyes, undeveloped limbs, and teeth like toothpicks. These images depict how nuclear testing affects the community living in and around the test zone. The evolution of the candles’ smoke puff into a mushroom cloud mirrors the evolution of healthy, happy families into the freakish mutant clans in which nuclear experiments executed in the mining towns resulted.
This transformation also resembles that which milk has undergone since its initial depiction as an image of perfection to the spoiled form it takes in recent media.

The plot of *The Hills Have Eyes* centers on the Hills clan attack of a vacationing family, the Carters, and the battles that ensues. The Carters epitomize the type of family that dominates society and popular culture. Furthermore, this family is a modern-day version of the Hills clan prior to irradiation and social implosion. Philip Brophy, referencing the original film, describes them as “[a]n all-white, all blond middle-class American family (mom, dad, two teenage kids, grandma, elder brother and his wife) set out on a camper holiday in the mid-west desert” (Brophy 280). This description aptly describes the family of the remake. They embody many if not all of the characteristics Robert Faris attributes to the middle class. Behavior and statements reveal that they are ambitious, goal-oriented, responsible, rational and well-mannered. The family in the remake is even more likable than that of the original film.

A filmic journey through the once-flourishing, now-decrepit Hills town reveals the decaying remnants of a once-picture-perfect community. The town looks like a 1962 postcard set afire with mannequins playing the parts of all-American townspeople. Little plastic kids swing on the swing set. Lace curtains hang from the windows. The dining room table is set for a family of five, and an apron-clad housewife-mannequin stands by. However the town’s current inhabitants have ceased to resemble their former selves. Instead, they play the role of marginalized, lower class body, and are characterized as such. Steve Garner’s discussion of “characteristics applied to nineteenth-century working classes, Irish immigrants and colonial subjects included ‘unreasonable, irrational, and easily excited, childlike, superstitious (not religious), criminal (with neither respect for private property, nor notions of property), excessively sexual, filthy, inhabited dark lands or territories and shared physical qualities”
(Garner 73). These descriptors likewise apply to the Hills clan and the McPoyle family.

Regarding their lack of respect for property, the Hills clan’s survival is based on the hijacking, pillaging and murder of traveling families. Because the Hills mutants’ central interest is the human flesh that is their food source, they steal valuables from the trailers they ransack and gives them to a lone gas station attendant up the road in exchange for sending victims their way. The McPoyle family’s respect for personal property is nearly as absent, as when they hold the owners of a local pub hostage and trick them into demolishing the interior of their own business. Of course, the behavior in both instances falls under the category of “criminal,” while only in the case of the McPoyle does it come across as unreasonable and/or irrational. Although a discussion of excessive sexuality, filthiness and shared physical qualities emerges further into this paper, their habitation of “dark lands or territories” is worth mentioning now as it signifies abject Otherness. The Hills mutants travel almost exclusively through the mining tunnels where they hid during nuclear testing on their land. These “dark lands or territories” give rise to anxieties over maintenance of autonomy. In his article “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia” Roger Caillois references French psychiatrist Eugene Minkowski in explaining the feelings of mystery darkness evokes. According to Minkowski darkness possesses positive qualities in the sense that it is “not the mere absence of light” (Caillois 30). Instead darkness fills up a space in obscuring our inability to see what is there. Darkness “touches the individual directly, envelopes him, penetrates him, and even passes through him” (Caillois 30). Thus, dark spaces aid in the sensation that the boundary between self and surrounding area is breaking down because darkness renders us unable to see ourselves. Certainly qualifying as dark territories are the caves traversed by the Hills mutants.

The Hills clan and McPoyle family embody every characteristic historically assigned to
marginalized whites in the United States. In the 1977 version of the film the Hills mutants resemble Americans Indians of the classic Western genre festooned with bone necklaces and beads, and padding around in moccasins surely offensive to the modern viewer. Although presented as an American mining family deformed by means of radiation and inbreeding, this stereotyped garb of nonwhite Other further marginalizes the characters. The 2006 remake, perhaps aiming to tone down the blatantly racist representation of lower class bodies, eliminates the tribal-like style of the Hills clan. Still the Hills clan dresses in raggedy, outdated clothing.

Steve Garner discusses the “trope of mobility in sedentary civilization” (118) in *Whiteness*. The United States, with homeownership as the pillar of the mythical American dream, promotes settling down and developing an allegiance to a place. Although loyalty should fall firstly to the nation itself, popular culture promotes state pride and local pride as well. Garner explains that “[a]llegiance to place through physical location is a key idea in the construction of community” (118). Thus individuals or groups who resist pressure to settle down face marginalization because a wandering lifestyle is not conducive to the goals of the nation. This explains, for instance, the stigma of trailer parks and mobile homes; society interprets the lack of allegiance to a place as “trashy” or “redneck,” definitely characteristic of lower class populations. Garner provides the example of Gypsy-Travellers, who “move all the time, not just within the borders of the nation, but frequently across them” and “therefore cannot earn this type of allegiance” (118). During the early 1900s, the characteristics of nomadism and shiftlessness were considered inherited traits passed on only in lower class, “degenerate” families. Likewise, criminality, incestuous behavior and immorality were considered traits specific to lower class, often Southern, individuals (Painter 270). Anthropologists of the early twentieth century believed intelligence to be linked directly to class status. Nell Irvin Painter pithily explains: “the higher
the class, the higher the intelligence” (319). This notion, too, was linked to genetics. The trope of mobility as well as that of criminality, incest and immorality as present in poor, Southern whites can be applied to the Hills mutants who do not inhabit a traditional location but rather move around and within indistinct hills in the southwestern desert. This recalls the discussion of the vampiric bodies of Chapter One. The Master lacks loyalty to any place and crosses over national boundaries undetected.

In juxtaposing the Hills clan and the all-American family with which they battle, The Hills Have Eyes “construct[s] a border between what Kristeva refers to as ‘clean and proper body’ and the abject body, or the body which has lost its form and integrity” (Creed 67). In placing a quintessential American family next to a family of flesh-eating, pillaging mutants, there is no question as to with which group the viewer should identify. Likewise, the McPoyle family, members of which all share “the unibrow, the eczema, the acne” specific to their genetic makeup, contrasts the group of friends who comprise the central characters of It’s Always Sunny. After all, “the concept of identity is a structure which depends on identification with another” (Creed 64). However, because the Hills mutants were once like their antithesis in the film, the viewer’s sense of identity cannot rest easy. As Kristeva points out, “[i]t is thus 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” (Kristeva 4). Because the Hills clan is just one step from normaky the film “puts the viewing subject’s sense of unified self into crisis” (Creed 65). This crisis is based in the logic “that could be me.”

In this exploration of Hills, Pluto exists as the most fascinating character because his infantile, animalistic qualities seem to express a desire to return to the womb. Although his cronies likewise exhibit these qualities, they persist more strongly in the character of Pluto. He
regularly laughs and giggles as a child does while playing, and prior to his molestation of Brenda, he slaps her in a style not intended to hurt, but rather, to tease. These playful qualities mark him as childlike. As discussed in Chapter One, the idea of returning to the pre-subject, pre-verbal state of unification with one’s mother is simultaneously desirable and terrifying because it means experiencing the bliss of complete gratification at the risk of losing one’s sense of self. Thus, the child’s relationship with the mother, as Tanya Krywinska says of lactation, is “bound up into a matrix of desire and disgust” (Krywinska 31). According to Melanie Klein, during early childhood children work their way through a stage called the paranoid-schizoid position during which they split objects with which they relate into categories of good and bad, a process fittingly called “splitting.” This process relates to that which was discussed earlier regarding the splitting of/from the mother. Pluto, however, with his childlike, animalistic and feminized character, behaves in a way that indicates his lack of regard for the abjection-worthy, symbolic figure of maternity.

Pluto’s consumption of raw flesh, his tattered, filthy clothing, and his tendency to squat and hobble work toward his characterization as animal-like and, accordingly, feminine. Further supporting this characterization is Pluto’s ability to navigate the barren desert and survive without the technology afforded to modern man. The remaining Hills mutants, too, exhibit these traits. This animalistic behavior indicates closeness to the earth and to the body that Janet Wolff recognizes as feminine. In her essay “Reinstating Corporeality: Feminism and Body Politics” she writes that:

We already have the notion that women are closer (too close) to the body compared with men. When we recognize the great value put on the soul or the mind as against the body (which is a central aspect of the process discussed by
Barker, in which the ‘positive body’ of rational science excluded and obscured the ‘absent body’ of desires and appetites), the significance of the identification of women with the body is clear (Wolff 417).

Wolff points out that the female body is regarded as being ruled by instinctual desires and appetites (read: animalistic) while the male body is comprised mostly of mind. Animal-like qualities have been historically assigned to nonwhite minorities as well. Susan Bordo in “Never Just Pictures” discusses the stereotype of the dark, female Other as compared to the “aristocratic WASP norm.” She writes that “[r]acist tracts continually describe Africans and Jews as dirty, animal-like, smelly and sexually ‘different’ from the white norm. Our body parts have been caricatured and exaggerated in racist cartoons and ‘scientific’ demonstrations of difference” (Bordo 463). Along these lines, abject female bodies and nonwhite minorities carry similar negative representations. This relates to the assignment of cliché-ridden, cowboys-and-Indians wardrobe to the mutants of the original Hills film. In the case of the lower class, white Hills family, their literal and metaphoric “dirtiness” garners them the treatment typically saved for nonwhites and/or women.

What society considers abject is specific to that society. However, the Hills clan is so far removed from society that hegemonic norms fail to reach them. Therefore, Pluto isn’t privy to what is or isn’t abjected in the society to which he once belonged. In other words, because he exists outside of society and is unaffected by its norms and values, he embraces what is most abject. For example, Pluto bites the head off of the Carter family’s pet bird and then pours its blood into his mouth, drinking it as if in ecstasy. The Hills mutants in general consume human flesh. In fact, their scheme to attack cross-country-traveling families is based on their desire for the meat of their victims. In her essay “Kristeva, Femininty, Abjection” Barbara Creed
references *The Hills Have Eyes* as it supports her claim that “food loathing is frequently represented as a major source of abjection, particularly the eating of human flesh” (Creed 65). This, because:

> The ultimate abjection is the corpse. The body protects itself from bodily wastes such as shit, blood, urine and pus by ejecting these things from the body just as it expels food that, for whatever reason, the subject finds loathsome. The body ejects these substances, at the same time extricating itself from them and from the place where they fall, so that it might continue to live (Creed 65).

However the already-abject Hills family fails to embrace this logic of abjection.

By the same token, Pluto’s behavior indicates a desire to return to the womb. Although his infantile behavior supports this claim, better evidence is found during the scene in which the mutants enter the Carter family’s trailer-home. Upon arrival in the trailer, Pluto first rummages through the refrigerator. There he finds a carton of milk, the contents of which he hurriedly empties into this mouth. Pluto’s thirst for milk is presented again toward the end of the scene when he drinks milk from the breast of Lynn Carter, the nursing young mother. While holding a gun to her baby’s head, thus forcing her to allow it, Pluto pulls down Lynn’s dress and drinks from her lactating breast. Combined with these two instances of milk consumption, is Pluto’s rape of the teenage Carter, Brenda. After hitting a fellow mutant with the butt of his firearm for attempting the same, Pluto forces himself on Brenda. Although it is unclear whether penetration occurs as Brenda doesn’t bring up the incident, the scene suggests the act. This scene has Pluto literally attempting reentry to the womb through intercourse while at the same time marking him as overly sexual, which recalls the earlier discussion of the Hills clan as animal-like. From the perspective of the viewer, who identifies with Brenda, this act is a direct attack on the body.
sacred in Western ideology. According to Philip Brophy “[t]he contemporary Horror film tends to play not so much on the broad fear of Death, but more precisely on the fear of one’s own body, of how one controls and relates to it” (Brophy 280). For many, myself included, this rape scene exists as the most horrific of the entire film; worse than the crucifixion and burning of the father or the consumption of the mother.

Recalling Kelly Oliver’s use of Lacan in Chapter One, individuals communicate their needs through speech after they realize their mother doesn’t exist solely for the gratification of their needs. Unfortunately an individual’s needs fall beyond the scope of language which, according to Lacan, “is why we keep talking” (Oliver 70). Unlike most members of babbling society, Pluto and his Hills companions seem to have realized that their “desire is beyond language” (Oliver 70). When the United States Government Department of Energy arrived in town with the intention of testing nuclear weapons, the Hills community implored them to stay away. Their families and livelihood rested in those hills. But the Department of Energy did not listen and, instead, destroyed their lives. Thus it is fitting that Pluto and his mutant peers, who speak few lines during the film, reject language for the possibility of complete gratification by the womb. The film’s opening sequence in which a birthday cake mutates into a nuclear bomb is significant not only because it depicts the corruption of happy, middle class life, but because it depicts a birthday. Birthdays often inspire individuals to contemplate the past and future; they persist in popular culture as a sort of new beginning. Just as Pluto’s behavior suggests a desire to return to the womb, the film’s incipient scene depicting a women blowing out the candles on her birthday cake suggests a similar desire to start anew armed with knowledge of the past.

In summary The Hills Have Eyes legitimizes and perpetuates classist portrayals of the lower class by affixing to its representative bodies characteristics (inbred, mutated, cannibalistic)
worthy of abjection. The film passes tests of simplistic political correctedness because the bodies marked as abject are white. Just as milk exists as the ideal matter to endue with meaning because of its bland, innocuous quality, the invisibility of the white body renders it ideal for working out issues of class so often overlaid with race. Additionally, the film reveals an anxiety about the potential for slipping into a place of abjection. After all, the Hills mutants were “normal” before exposure to radioactive materials. It raises questions as to how the poor become poor, and why they remain as such, forcing viewers to consider the social and cultural factors underlying issues of economic disparity. However, the film unfortunately provides an easy explanation for abject poverty: the quality of one’s character.

As discussed throughout the previous examination of *The Hills Have Eyes*, the TV series *It’s Always Sunny In Philadelphia* includes in its cast of characters a stereotypical “white trash” family called the McPoyles. Although the McPoyles make appearances in only a handful of episodes, their onscreen presence is memorable. Mac, one of the show’s five main characters, says of McPoyle twins, Ryan and Liam: “They were the type of kids that would blow snot bubbles, you know, and rub them all over each other. They were gross. And they smelled like a couple of unwiped assholes” (*Always Sunny*). The comfort with which the McPoyle twins come into contact with bodily excretions indicates their status as abject bodies within the series. The McPoyles are further described in the DVD extra “Meet the McPoyles” during which the actors playing Liam and Ryan McPoyle discuss their characters. Jimmi Simpson, who plays Liam, says in response to the question, “What makes a McPoyle?” that he would “take a pretty healthy dump. Then you’re a McPoyle, my friend.” He goes on to say that “Phying the McPoyles is fun, and it’s very base and animalistic. So you slide into the soiled undies and, you know, be a creep.” These comments create an association between the McPoyles and bodily fluids and mark the
family as animalistic. Already the description of the McPoyles mirrors much previously-made commentary regarding the Hills mutants, as both groups exemplify “redneck” or “white trash” stereotypes.

During the first scene in which the McPoyles appear on screen, Mac’s friend Charlie visits the McPoyle brothers’ residence because he takes issue with their scheme to sue an innocent high school gym teacher for child molestation in order to collect a settlement. Liam McPoyle answers the door dressed only in his bathrobe. His skin and hair are damp, as if he has just finished bathing. Charlie asks Liam where his brother is, and Liam replies, “We just stepped out of the shower. He’ll be down in a minute” (Always Sunny). Charlie, surprised at the suggestion that the twins showered together, responds: “Did you just say we? Did you just say, ‘We just stepped out of the shower?’” Liam pauses and, taking back his initial statement, claims to have said “He.”

The implication of incestuous relationships between members of the McPoyle family continues in subsequent episodes. In the episode “The Gang Gets Held Hostage,” Dennis for reasons unimportant here, decides he must seduce Margaret McPoyle. On this topic, he remarks, “Now, I know I’m not one of the members of her family. I’ve got that going against me.” Dennis, a self-absorbed and arrogant man who heralds his own beauty, admits that because he lacks familial connection to Margaret, seducing her may prove difficult. Again, the text implies that the McPoyle family commits incestuous acts. The trope of lower class bodies participating in incestuous relationships holds its place in a discussion of the abject maternal because Kristeva argues that the “prohibition placed on the maternal body” is “a defense against autoeroticism and incest taboo” (Creed 67). Although the jury remains undecided as to the source of the ubiquitous incest taboo, the logic of the Oedipal complex suggests that, because male children
subconsciously desire their mothers, the female body is abjected to avoid the realization of these desires. That the topic of incest comes up in discussions of the abject implies that incest threatens the boundaries that abjection seeks to maintain. Particularly in instances of mother-son incest, the symbolic reunification with mother theme prevalent in this thesis is apparent. Copulation with his mother brings a child closer to the incipient state of the womb. However, even less specific examples of incest threaten boundaries of individuality and autonomy in that these couplings involve bodies too alike one another.

That the McPoyle family is characterized as incestuous recalls “white trash” stereotypes that promote the idea that lower class bodies emerge from the limited gene pool of their extended family, thus accounting for their class status. The idea that white poverty persists not because of social inequalities, but because the mutated genes of incest perpetuate it is a theme common in redneck horror films like *The Hills Have Eyes*. The theme of incest suggests a hyper-white body worthy of abjection. Contrary to the belief surrounding incest practiced in Ancient Egypt and European monarchies, discourse on incest in lower class communities centers on the consequences of assumed inbreeding. What with the McPoyle’s pale skin and disintegrating mental capacities, the implication is that incest renders these “white trash” bodies too much: too poor, and too white as such. The notion that one need mix a hint of color into white pigment before painting the walls of a home, too, mirror this idea of abject hyper-whiteness. It seems that, at any edge of middle class normalcy exists the possibility for marginalization. In this instance, that edge is a whitening, a lactification, that renders its victims abject.

Tanya Krywinska discusses disgust as “an emotion that emerges from knowing too much” (33) and relates this to the milk-based mother/child relationship in that “disgust can be felt if the child is overwhelmed by milk which then is read as ‘bad’ milk and must be spat out if the child is
to retain a sense of control” (33). In other words, this “knowing too much” might be re-articulated as a loss of control over knowledge. In this sense a lack of borders or boundaries, which leave those confined by borders or boundaries without control of their own containment, similarly generates disgust. The child overwhelmed with milk has lost control over what he takes into his body. Thus excess, as in the excess characteristic of these “white trash” figures, renders them abject.

*It’s Always Sunny* stands as the only text in this discussion of abject milk consumption and its implications in which DVD extras note and comment on the representation of milk. Even the text discussed in Chapter Three, in which the milk drinking screams for analysis, lacks a statement pertaining to milk in its Special Features. Jimmi Simpson in the DVD extra “Meet the McPoyles” comments on the family’s taste for milk:

> I’ll tell you a little something about milk and the McPoyles. They go together like hand and glove. And let me tell you why. I tried to come up with a couple of reasons why. Cos it wasn’t written in the script, the actual reason for the lust for milk. What I did was this. I did some research on people who love milk and where they come from, and most of them come from Iowa.

The lack of legitimate explanation in this quotation reveals that the creators of the TV show use milk as a symbol of the abject instinctually rather than rationally.

While several episodes present the McPoyles drinking milk, two scenes in particular showcase more questionable use of the beverage. The McPoyle family shows up at a tailgating party and exit their trailer one at a time. The family is absurdly large and foolish in appearance; the scene is reminiscent of circus clips in which an impossibly long series of clowns exits an impossibly small car. Members of the McPoyle clan begin dancing, and shortly after an
unnamed McPoyle appears holding a pitcher of milk. As if the milk were spraying champagne, he pours it over the head, face and body of a family member who continues to dance and writhe. In a second scene, after the McPoyles break into Paddy’s Bar and hold the owners hostage, they turn up the heat ("We’re gonna get this place hot and clammy, just like the McPoyles like it") and request their favorite beverage ("A couple of glasses of milk. Luke warm. Skim for the lady"). Soon after, hoping to prove their potential for violence, Liam instructs Ryan to stab “someone.” Ryan stabs Liam. To promote the healing process of this wound, Liam quickly grabs a glass of milk and splashes the white liquid over the cut as if sterilizing it with alcohol. In both scenes the unorthodox utilization of milk suggests that, for the McPoyles, it replaces alcohol. This idea is further supported with Dennis’ post-kiss comment that Margaret’s mouth tastes “milky.” Typically alcohol is the beverage that persists in its drinker’s mouth. As such, this penchant for milk simply checks off another trait consistent with the stereotype the McPoyles embody, that of the white trash family. Poverty and dysfunctional alcoholism often find themselves linked in popular culture.

As in *The Hills Have Eyes*, the “white trash” family of *It’s Always Sunny* promotes culturally ignorant notions of lower class bodies. However, that *It’s Always Sunny* does so by way of comedy allows for an ultimately alternative conclusion. The McPoyles hyperbolically “white trash” characterization renders their presence satirical. Although the series superficially promotes stereotypes of the white lower class, on an obvious level it pokes fun at the stereotype. Whether viewers encode the apparently satiric elements of the television series accordingly remains a factor worthy of investigation in many of contemporary media’s comedic texts. However, the trend of milk as indicative of deep seated social abjections continues here.

Often in contemporary discussions of social injustices, class is overlaid with race so that
race factors as the important issue. In this discussion, the misleading layering of qualities that render people or groups of people abject is picked apart, revealing that class status overwhelmingly marks people as abject Others. According to Toni Morrison, “[r]ace has become metaphorical--a way of referring to and disguising forces, events, classes, and expressions of social decay and economic division far more threatening to the body politic than biological ‘race’ ever was” (Morrison 63). Morrison attests to the notion that race is not a static, immovable quality, but rather a social marker that shifts according to various factors related to social status. We see this slippage of white body to marginalized body in both *The Hills Have Eyes* and *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia*. In these texts families sharing qualities with dominant ideology’s society, that is, light skin, fall from grace by way of a failure to adhere to Western society’s norms and values, norms and values specific to a white middle class majority. Their class surpasses their skin color in determining the factor of their eligibility and acceptability in society.

Milk, in these texts, marks the characters as abject. Sander Gilman in “Black Bodies, White Bodies” remarks on the meaningful association of iconic images with those individuals depicted in close proximity to them in works of art. He writes:

> Even with a modest nod to supposedly mimetic portrayals it is apparent that, when individuals are shown within a work of art (no matter how broadly defined), the ideologically charged iconographic nature of the representation dominates. And it dominates in a very specific manner, for the representation of individuals implies the creation of some greater class or classes to which the individual is seen to belong. These classes in turn are characterized by the use of a model which synthesizes our perception of the uniformity of the groups into a convincingly homogeneous image (Gilman 136).
In the discussed media, it is milk that stands in as an “ideologically charged” icon that implies an individual’s placement within a certain homogenous group. Milk indicates that the Hills mutants and the McPoyles belong to a class of abject bodies, in this case specifically lower class, white bodies. Furthermore, because the portrayal of typecast white trash figures has historical precedence, “[s]pecific individual realities are thus given mythic extension through association with the qualities of a class” (Gilman 136). Which is to say, these two abject families come to stand as illustrative of white poverty in general.

The closeness of abject white body, to white working class body, to middle class normative body renders the Hills mutants and the McPoyles especially grotesque. The nearness, the possibility of association, with abject white body calls to mind Kristeva’s discussion of abjection as based in anxieties and fears about disintegrating boundaries and border crossing. The majority at risk for penetration is that quintessential American group: white and middle class. An understanding that although race often obscures issues of class, it does not persists in accordance with it, awakens the reality that given unfortunate social conditions, poverty might befall anyone. That abject white characters consume milk, most often viewed as a beverage drunken by, and indicative of, white middle class society, reveals the transitory nature of the line dividing the class, at least in a biological sense. Nothing essential about lower class bodies make them lower class. However, representations of class inequalities as inevitable render the more fortunate guilt free. The consumption of milk by these characters is a fingernail picking at the patch of guiltlessness they generate.
CHAPTER THREE: PATERNAL LAW, CUNNING MURDER AND MIMICRY IN THE PROFESSIONAL, MR. BROOKS AND INGLOURIOUS BASTERDS

In nations held intact by law, that is, in most modern societies, individuals disobeying the law threaten a nation’s sense of order and collective identity. If too many members of society break the law, things fall apart. In the previous chapters of this thesis, discussion has focused on unwritten, hegemonically-enforced laws regarding cleanliness, taboos and bodily boundaries as they relate to social norms and values. These unwritten laws relate to what Julia Kristeva terms “maternal authority” because the mother unofficially teaches her child early on about “the self’s clean and proper body” (72). Previously discussed texts showcase characters that represent marginalized members of society, those ostracized because of their social status and/or behavior. This chapter differs in that it deals more so with citizens not abiding official law, or “law of the father.” Paternal law exists in the symbolic realm and is sustained with ritual. Barbara Creed explains that “[t]hrough ritual, the demarcation lines between human and nonhuman are drawn up anew and presumably made stronger for that process” (Creed 64). Repressive rituals such as criminal punishment or ideological rituals such as movie-going work to keep separate categories of accepted and unaccepted social bodies.

According to Kristeva “[a]ny 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” (Kristeva 4). Here, Kristeva implies that what is abject opposes order. Because laws maintain order, lawbreaking constitutes the abject. Premeditated crime, such as murder, is particularly abject because its premeditation suggests a malicious intention to subvert symbolic order, or the law of the father. The previously-discussed
characters from *The Strain, The Hills Have Eyes* and *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia* subvert order to ensure survival; their motives are bodily. The characters in the following discussion have dissimilar motives. They betray ideology at a more cerebral level.

This chapter focuses on white, male characters from three films: *Mr. Brooks* (2007), *Inglourious Basterds* (2010) and *The Professional* (1994). As white males these characters already take up the space of members of dominant society. As such they contrast the marginalized whites of *The Hills Have Eyes, It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia* and *The Strain*, characters who behave in ways that earn them descriptors such as “irrational,” “disorganized” and “dirty.” One would not similarly describe the milk-drinkers of the films discussed in this chapter. These characters follow self-imposed rules, carry out their work with compulsive organization and maintain their appearances, all of which enable them to blend into hegemonic society seamlessly. Their orderliness is paternal law in action.

Yet Earl Brooks of *Mr. Brooks*, Hans Landa of *Inglourious Basterds* and Leon of *The Professional* share one trait in particular that places them outside the arena of normative society. Although their motivation varies from film to film, these characters carry out premeditated murder without qualm. This behavior aligns Brooks, Landa and Leon with the vampires and impoverished whites of previous sections, though dissimilarly their transgressions transpire for the most part undetected because they commit their crimes while playing the role of normative body. In these films the ability of nontraditional white bodies to effectively “pass” as orthodox members of society is at least partially quelled by each film’s conclusion. This suppression of successful mimicry suggests that, in whatever way “edgy” the films seem, they exist within a realm of hegemonic media and, accordingly, promote current ideologically based notions of the acceptable and the unacceptable. However that these seemingly normative, highly abnormal
characters consume milk in approximately compulsive fashion hints at hazier notions of acceptability. This follows the trend of the ever-increasingly-blurred boundaries characteristic of the films’ post-modern era.

For those unfamiliar with these films, a brief summary is necessary, as well as a description of scenes in which these characters consume milk. *Mr. Brooks* is the story of Earl Brooks, an otherwise normal man addicted to killing strangers. Although he vows to never kill again, trouble with his daughter as well as with a peculiar witness to one of his murders causes him to renegotiate his vow. It is Brooks’ habit to drink a tall glass of milk in the early morning hours after returning home from a kill. He typically takes the milk to his daughter’s room and wishes her goodnight while holding the glass of thick, white liquid.

Although one wouldn’t consider Hans Landa a central player in *Inglourious Basterds* his role is nevertheless critical. As a law official employed by Nazi Germany, his task consists of “rounding up” the remaining Jews hiding in France or passing as Gentiles. In the film’s opening scene Landa visits a dairy farm in the French countryside where he suspects a Jewish family is hiding. While discussing the reason for his visitation on the farm, Landa requests a glass of fresh cow milk which he chugs quickly. Landa continues talking with the farm’s owner and requests another glass of milk. Concluding the scene, Landa’s men murder the Jewish family hiding underneath the floorboards of the house, as per his instructions.

The earliest of these three films, *The Professional*, imagines the development of a relationship between a seasoned hit man and the young girl that comes under his care. Matilda demands that Leon teach her the ways of his chosen career, and after much manipulation on her part, he agrees. Leon drinks several glasses of milk every day and, upon taking up the position of Matilda’s caretaker, forces her to drink milk as well. Although these three films differ in many
ways, certain trends stand out regarding the characters’ abject qualities. In this chapter I examine the ways in which their mutual taste for milk symbolizes more deeply rooted similarities, namely their shared interest in superficially upholding paternal law while simultaneously subverting it. Milk, the late symbol of Western virtue, acts as their masquerade.

Much media representation of serial killers depicts a crazed psychopath unable to resist his lust for blood, oftentimes laden with sexual proclivities. This portrait assures an easily observable difference between the serial killer and the normative citizen. A spectator can see that the serial killer is not a reflection of his or herself, nor does the serial killer mirror his or her company. A line is clearly drawn protecting the viewer’s sense of self. Yet Mr. Brooks, regardless of how many murders he commits, maintains an image of refined normalcy. Although he is a self-professed murder addict who attends AA meetings to cope with his addiction, on the surface Brooks acts as quintessential, well-to-do family man. His success in the realm of business, as well as philanthropy, wins him the title “Man of the Year.” Regarding his personal life, he maintains an intimate, active relationship with his unsuspecting wife and likewise shares an enviable closeness with his daughter, Jane. Brooks smiles, chuckles and makes jokes when he should and takes on a more serious countenance when appropriate. In general Brooks is practical man, thinking details through and coming up with rational solutions to any problem that arises.

This orderliness translates to his homicidal style. To begin, after deciding on his next victim/s, he studies their routines and habits to eliminate the possibility of unanticipated events on the murder night. This method also doesn’t allow for the possibility of his capture. Brooks shoots his victims with a gun wrapped in a clear plastic bag. He seals the plastic around his wrist so that upon firing the weapon the bullet casing falls into the bag and is easily removed from the murder scene. Brooks vacuums each crime scene and takes the vacuum bag with him when he
leaves. Once he arrives back at his house, Brooks vacuums his car and burns the evening’s garments, eliminating all evidence of the crime. The meticulous execution of his murders ensures that police and detectives will not catch Brooks. His extreme care also allows him to carry out a completely normal daytime life. His own wife knows nothing of the crimes he commits under cover of night.

Brooks’ ability to pass as an ordinary member of society makes him a serial killer more terrifying than one with obviously psychotic characteristics. Leon of *The Professional* and Hans Landa of *Inglourious Basterds* share this ability to carry out criminal activity undetected. Although Leon manages this more so by generally avoiding any social scene, *The Professional* presents him as an ordinary, if quiet, man-- a hit man who might live just down the hall. While Landa does not attempt to keep his activities as a Nazi colonel secret during the plot of *Inglourious Basterds*, toward the film’s end he strikes a deal with American officials in which he secures himself passage to the United States. Landa fancies that once in the US his unsavory past will fall away and he will live the life of an innocent German immigrant, consequence free. Again, the idea that a murderer can participate in ordinary society undetected as such is present in *Inglourious Basterds*. These characters, Brooks, Landa and Leon, remind viewers that a murderer might live on their block, teach at their school or sit next to them on the subway. This disrupts the hegemonic notion that criminals look and act differently than non-criminals. Nell Irvin Painter, in *The History of White People*, reveals that in the early twentieth century, criminality was considered a genetic trait present only among lower class families. Thus, white, middle class individuals, pillars of modern society, might spot criminals based on their appearance and class status (275). Brooks, Landa and Leon defy any such categorization because their behavior doesn’t match society’s interpretation of their appearance. In other words, because
they look presentable and pass as “normal,” society doesn’t imagine their criminal behavior. Moreover, Brooks, Landa and Leon prove that no matter how hard society corrals and marginalizes them, there is no designated space for abject bodies. Thus, if a culturally-defined abject body manages to slip into normative society undetected he or she can remain there indefinitely. Because they illustrate the possibility of this slippage renders Brooks, Landa and Leon are especially worthy of abjection.

Mr. Brooks is characterized as a transgressor of boundaries because he carries out an all-American existence by day and the stealth life of a serial killer by night. He doesn’t belong to any one world, but instead, inhabits many. This calls to mind Homi K. Bhabha’s discussion of postcolonial mimicry as he presents it in “Of Mimicry and Man.” Bhabha examines instances in which colonized bodies come to take on the appearances and behavior of their colonizers. Although in the films discussed here, the bodies are not “colonized,” they share marginalization and benefit from mimicking the status quo body. According to Bhabha, this mimicry “poses an imminent threat to both ‘normalized’ knowledges and disciplinary powers” (126) because mimicry enables colonized bodies to take on the role of those dominating them. That the colonized might evolve to the point of blending in with the colonizer produces anxiety in the hearts of the colonizer because in their mimicry, the colonized might appropriate the power and knowledge once only available to the body he mimics. Accordingly ruling groups wish to maintain a notable difference between themselves and the individuals they rule. Bhabha explains that:

[…] colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be
effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference (Bhabha 126).

In other words, mimicry must be recognizable as “not quite,” as imperfectly executed, lest it menace the mimicked individual by threatening his or her sense of autonomy and correctness.

In the case of traditional colonized groups and their colonizers, there is no single “correct” lifestyle. Nonetheless, as I assert in the previous paragraph, those holding the power, the colonizers, maintain that their way constitutes the “right” way. Colonizers thus want the people of the territories they occupy to take up their lifestyle without doing so with so much success that they become too similar to themselves. In much of the discourse carried out in this thesis it is excess that renders bodies abject. In this instance it is the possibility that a body that dominant society believes to be essentially different from its normative members would become so similar to those normative members as to render itself indistinguishable that is abject. The possibility of this successful mimicry threatens dominant society’s sense of self.

One might argue that in the examples provided the specific difference between normal body and abnormal body allows for the assertion that there is a “correct” lifestyle: one should generally refrain from murdering other members of mankind. I maintain, however, that this is a culturally constructed norm with biblical precedent. In other words, “thou shalt not kill” emerged out of the human psyche. One could argue whether there is anything inherently wrong with murder. Still, the said “abnormal” bodies exist in opposition to dominant ideology and as such their ability to “pass” produces an anxiety identical to that experienced by colonizers facing the colonized. They threaten dominant society’s sense of self.

Roger Caillois in “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia” discusses the issue of mimicry as it relates to insects mimicking plant life, or other insects, in the field of biology. Because
Caillois takes a rather philosophical approach to the subject, his discussion of mimicry as a means of species survival applies to the present discussion of mimicry from a cultural studies perspective. Caillois opens his article explaining that:

> From whatever side one approaches things, the ultimate problem turns out in the final analysis to be that of distinction: distinctions between the real and the imaginary, between waking and sleeping, between ignorance and knowledge, etc. -- all of them, in short, distinctions in which valid consideration must demonstrate a keen awareness and the demand for resolution. Among distinctions, there is assuredly none more clear-cut than that between the organism and its surrounding (Caillois 16).

This “organism”/”surrounding” distinction remind readers of Kristeva’s work on the abject. Kristeva presents the idea that what is abject is that which questions the borders of Self, literally, as when milk leaves the breast, or metaphorically, as when foreign bodies encroach upon an individual’s, or a nation’s, sense of self. In Caillois’ parlance, “organism” stands in for Self while “surrounding” indicates a foreign Otherness Self wishes to keep separate. Caillois also articulates the “demand for resolution” of this problem of distinction, thus expressing a theme common in the films so far examined. In each of the texts discussed individuals wish to maintain a cohesive sense of self, as does the nation they represent, namely the United States.

According to Bhabha, “[m]imicry exists between the desire for a fixed identity and change (126). This statement does well to describe Brooks, as his desires leave him stuck between the life of a serial killer and the life of a successful family man. He wants to end his killing streak; however his addiction to murder tends to overpower his desire for normalcy. He explains his habit of killing people to the witness blackmailing him: “I don’t do this because I enjoy it, Mr.
Smith. I do it because I am addicted to it.” Therefore, unable to commit to either lifestyle, Brooks mimics the life of the man he wants to be while maintaining the life he can’t give up.

Brooks, Landa and Leon mimic dominant society in that they carry out lives so routine, so rational, that one would never suspect the gravity of their secret work. Leon and Brooks, in fact, aren’t even presented as “bad men,” per se. Earl Brooks evidently loves and works hard to protect, his wife and daughter, while Leon grows to care for Matilda. Both men would sacrifice their own lives for those of their loved once, though they willingly kill strangers. Leon, like Earl Brooks, maintains order in his life through strict adherence to routine and self-imposed rules. Daily and in consistent order he showers, irons his clothing, cares for his plant and sleeps, “with one eye open,” sitting upright in an armchair. Just as Brooks doesn’t murder individuals he knows personally, Leon’s mantra is “no women, no children.” Landa, too, carries out his duties with great dedication and systematic style. Though his work is less acceptable than Leon’s and Brooks’, it isn’t necessarily commitment to the Nazi agenda that motivates Landa, but rather, commitment to a job well done. In short, he possesses stellar work ethic. Although Landa is not a “good man,” he might be better described as a man so self-interested that he eludes classification as “good” or “bad.” He simply has no regard for human life. In contrast, Donny the “Jew Bear” and even Aldo the Apache, the commander of the Basterds, kill viciously with much regard for human life. Their bloodlust is backed by a genuine desire to avenge the atrocities carried out against Jews by Nazis during WWII. Their near-crazed killing spree is aligned with their mental states. Landa, Leon and Brooks, however, each possess internal traits that oppose the personality they project.

In addition to the sometimes contradictory personalities of Brooks, Landa and Leon, which might be described as a lack of definite boundary in regards to character, these three men
transgress boundaries physically. Mr. Brooks’ devotion to his daughter leads him to chance detection when he travels across the country to fix the problem of her sloppy college homicide. In doing this Mr. Brooks takes an airplane to California disguised as a 60s-era flower child. His chameleon-like abilities materialize as viewers see the veritable storehouse of alternate identities hidden beneath the floorboards of his hobby room. He travels undetected with the help of various identification cards, passports, wigs, mustaches and prosthetic facial features. Upon returning from California he appears as a grey-haired, old man walking with a cane. These border-crossing abilities also benefit Brooks when he sneaks about the houses of his murder victims. The tools he possesses for silent entry into locked homes baffles even the cleverest of detectives.

Leon, too, changes venue often, relocating his home from hotel to hotel whenever he sees fit. In this way he eludes enemies, officers of the law and curious neighbors. The mobility of Leon and Brooks plays a large part in their ability to “pass.” Although the scarification of Landa’s forehead spoils his plan of anonymous immigration to the US, had he managed to avoid that fate, he too would have successfully “passed.” In this way, the social root of these characters’ abjection is similar to that of Travellers and Jews, once-stigmatized members of society. Steve Garner in Whiteness elaborates on the trope of mobility as indicative of the abject. He writes, “[y]et the most unbearable and infuriating aspect of the non-whiteness of Travellers and Jews is that they can ‘pass.’ Social ascendance and the dropping of names and religious practices can render a Jew unidentifiable as such” (Garner 118). Garner elaborates on this idea of passing as it lends to mobility:

The idea of mobility is not merely applicable to geographical movement through space, but of transgression into social space. Jews and Travellers are shape-shifters, not playing by the rules. One of the rules is that the dirt of one’s culture
should be apparent: when it is absent a challenge to the dominant culture is advanced. If the difference between white and not-quite-white is down to dirt and disorder, and the representative of the latter is clean and ordered, then what else is left as an indelible distinguishing mark? (Garner 118).

Here Garner makes assertions that remind readers of the earlier reference to Bhabha’s “Of Mimicry and Man.” Essentially Garner begs the question, if the usual markers of difference no longer appear in those who are different, how can dominant society tell the difference? In line with this sentiment is the idea that if villainous bodies drink milk, a beverage traditionally consumed by the “good guys,” then boundaries between good and evil, right and wrong, normal and abnormal begin to fall away. Further proof of their abjectness lies in the physicality of what they do. Earlier in Chapter One I discussed the association of bodily fluids with the realm of the abject maternal. In short, because mothers traditionally deal with the excretions of their children, and because women themselves are characterized as “leaky,” the movement of fluids into and out of the body is connected to femininity and maternity. That a large component of Landa’s, Leon’s and Brooks’ activities involve bloodshed places them similarly close to bodily fluids. Thus while they symbolically defy borders and boundaries in their criminal activity and stealth mobility, their bloodshed marks them as individuals who literally open up the border between isolated body and outside world. In the same way that their undetected presence threatens collective identity’s sense of self, they literally eliminate individuals’ senses of complete self in murdering them. In creating soulless, bleeding bodies out of their victims they succeed in doing just what dominant society feared most: obliterating the boundary between self and Other to the extent that self becomes Other.

In The Hills Have Eyes, milk drinking renders characters childlike and to a certain extent
naive. Chapter Two discussed Pluto’s milk drinking as an indication that he desires the abject state of unity with the mother. The notion that milk symbolizes the innocence inherent in a return to the pre-verbal state of infancy appears here, as well. For example, Leon possesses many of the traits of a child, the least of which is his love for milk. He attends matinees of classic musicals and acts like an excited child, turning this way and that in an attempt to share his joy, and smiling as characters sing and dance onscreen. Additionally he cannot read and possesses an asexuality characteristic of a sexually-oblivious child. His characterization as innocent and childlike, marked by his consumption of milk, contrasts that of Matilda. The film portrays Matilda as, in many ways, more mature than Leon. Short shorts, commanding presence and heart-felt confessions of love sexualize the young girl to the extent that she becomes a quasi-Lolita, though her male counterpart is void of Humphert’s characteristic lust. Matilda, as the central female character keeping the company of a hit man, manages to match him in abject-worthy qualities. Her too-young sexuality, rootlessness and desire to murder make her unlike society’s image of a typical child, which lends meaning to Leon’s insistence that she consume milk in an effort to bring out her more child-like qualities, if they exist. Furthermore, her family’s drug-related execution and stereotypically lower class presentation mark her as originating from a socially abject location. She exists outside the realm of normalcy and, as a female, within the realm of abject femininity. Accordingly her presence is dangerous for Leon.

Although at a subconscious level Leon seems to know that Matilda represents his demise, as he wakes in the night and momentarily points a gun at her head before returning to sleep, the tender feelings she evokes in him render him helpless to instinct. Although Matilda is manipulative, demanding and irrational, a pastiche of qualities sure to get her and the company she keeps killed considering their line of business, Leon keeps her around. In the end it is
Matilda’s behavior that causes Leon’s death. In this way Matilda fulfills the trope of life-consuming female. In these films, although the criminal activities of men render them abject, it is the essentially abject qualities of the females that ultimately results in partial alleviation of their own subversive identities. Society must worry about them, but they, in turn, must deal with the monstrous feminine.

Although Leon, Brooks and Landa are presented as individuals that create anxiety in the heart of society, that anxiety is, to varying degrees, curbed. The elimination of this threat is conducted quite straight-forwardly in *The Professional* in that the film ends with Leon’s death. Once deceased normative society cannot continue taking him as one of its own kind. To a similar extent, society will not accept Landa at the conclusion of *Inglourious Basterds*. Aldo the Apache, the leader of the anti-Nazi troupe of Americans aiming to assassinate Hitler, carves a swastika into Landa’s forehead before delivering him to the sanctuary of the United States. Landa believed that he would slip into New England, his past forgotten. Instead his chaperones forever mark him as an active member of Hitler’s Nazi army. He cannot successfully mimic normative society as such.

The case of Brooks’ “passing” is markedly more complicated. Near the film’s conclusion, Brooks has successfully evaded the law and regained complete anonymity in his criminal activity. However the film ends with Brooks’ imagined murder at the hands of his beloved daughter, Jane. At three separate instances during the film a scene is depicted in which Brooks stands in front of his fridge in the darkened kitchen and enjoys a glass of milk after returning home from a kill. He takes this milk with him to his daughter’s room where she sleeps unaware of his presence. In these few scenes, Brooks bends over Jane and bids her goodnight. During the first of these scenes Brooks kisses Jane and says, “It’s nice to have you home.” That Brooks
continues to “tuck in” his daughter well into her adult years reveals that he takes her as a child. In some ways Jane fulfills this role. When Jane returns home from college, she gives her father a big kiss and sits on his lap like a little girl. However, subsequent scenes suggest that Jane exudes a less-innocent, more-sexual energy, as when about an hour into the film the camera takes on the perspective of Brooks’ gaze and zooms in on Jane’s mouth as she licks her lips. Similar to Matilda’s sexualization and subsequent pressure from Leon to drink Milk, Jane’s sexualization is paired with her father’s bedside consumption of milk. In both instances milk acts as a buffer against inappropriate erotic expressions.

Jane’s sexualization suggests something abjectly incestuous about the father/daughter relationship. Whether the implication of taboo behavior is intentional or not, the film makes clear that Brooks devotion to his daughter runs deeply. Jane’s mother points out that, for Brooks, Jane can do nothing wrong. Even when Jane returns home from college, pregnant and having murdered a classmate, Brooks does all that he can to fix her mistakes. That Jane is pregnant is significant to this discussion as, although the detail doesn’t hold much weight to the overall plot of the film, it makes her what Mierelle Astore terms “maternal abject.” According to Astore, “to be in a state of abjection is to merge the Other, that which is outside the self, with the self. It is truly an intolerable state of being. It signifies an apocalyptic spiraling of the unconscious while conscious. It is seeing unforetold death moments before dying” (Astore 18). Fittingly, pregnant Jane figures into the plot as the deliverer of unforetold death.

The film’s final late-night, post-murder, milk-drinking scene is different from the others in that after sipping his milk and kissing his sleeping daughter, she wakes and stabs him in the throat with scissors. Brooks clutches his neck while his arteries pump bright, red blood onto the stark, white sheets. Jane watches her father intently as he bleeds to death and calls her name.
Eventually Brooks falls still. Jane, with timid curiosity, removes her father’s glasses and places them on her own face. After this frame rests on Jane’s expression for several seconds, this scene cuts to Brooks tossing and turning in bed. He wakes up to realize that he has just dreamed that his daughter killed him. The credits role.

Because Brooks always drinks milk after committing a murder, and then carries the glass to his daughter’s room, the milk links Brooks’ propensity toward murder to Jane. Jane, as a symbol of sexuality, reproduction and femininity, exists as abject female while Brooks’ bloodlust is likewise a characteristic worthy of abjection. Therefore, even Brooks, abject in all his cunning murder schemes and border crossing, doesn’t compare to the monstrous female that is his daughter. As Barbara Creed reminds us: “All human societies have a conception of the monstrous feminine, of what it is about women that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject” (Creed 44). However much he loves her and protects her, the subconscious fear that she will destroy him surfaces in dreams. The ultimate abject body, that of the pregnant female, trumps Brooks’ lawlessness. With his daughter home Brooks must worry that the addiction to murder she inherited from him will result in his own end. Brooks’ alter ego, Marshall, even suggests as much. That Jane appropriates her father’s glasses after killing him reveals Brooks’ fear that she will become him, merge with him, and consume him, much like the folkloric vagina dentata. However, because he loves her so, Brooks is willing to risk his own life to save hers. The Professional’s Leon fulfilled a similar willingness to his own end.

Leon and Landa, likewise, share a taste for milk. As the milk in Mr. Brooks surfaces in scenes where Earl Brooks is close to his daughter, milk connects Leon to the young girl he takes as his companion. In offering to bring him milk from the store, she secures herself a spot in Leon’s life. Upon returning with the milk Matilda knocks on Leon’s door because her own
apartment is occupied by drug dealers who have just arrived to kill her entire family. Although he hesitates to let her into his apartment and subsequently into his life, Leon opens the door, saving Matilda from her family’s murderers. In this way, Matilda’s offer to pick up a couple of cartons of milk on a particular day results in her unusual coupling with Leon. In retrospect, it consecrates their solidarity. After their adventure begins, Leon passes on his milk-drinking habit to Matilda who reluctantly acquiesces. In both *The Professional* and *Mr. Brooks*, the consumption of milk seems to link abject characters to abjection’s poster child, the female.

Tarantino’s *Inglourious Basterds* opens with a twenty minute scene that takes place in the countryside of Nazi-occupied France. Secret Service officer Colonel Hans Landa arrives on the property of a dairy farmer with a small troupe of officers in tow. The dairy farm is the home of the LaPedite family, a single father and his three dutiful daughters. A Jewish fugitive family, the Dreyfuses, hides under the floorboards of the modest home. Landa suspects the farmer is guilty of sheltering the Dreyfus family, although he doesn’t state the nature of his visit at first. Instead he begins with a few simple questions relating to the names and ages of Dreyfus family members. While seated at the kitchen table in Monsieur LaPedite’s home, he requests a glass of milk which he gulps down at once. After smacking his lips he says, “Monsieur, to both your family and your cows I say, ‘Bravo.’” As they are an industrious Gentile family, their milk is good. Landa asks LaPedite information about the Jewish families living in the area prior to Nazi occupation. Near the end of the conversation Landa asks for more milk: “Before I go may I have more of your delicious milk,” he says. He drinks the second glass in a familiar hurried fashion. Following the stressful yet superficially friendly conversation, Landa slowly reveals the true nature of his visit. He forces a confession from the Monsieur LaPedite, who tearfully points out the areas on the floor under which the Dreyfus family is hiding. Landa then calls his men into the
house and orders them to kill the family by machine-gunning through the floorboards.

In short this scene depicts a wholesome, hardworking and moral family that earns its living producing a likewise wholesome and pure product: milk. The family is handsome, respectful, generous and, most importantly, attempting to save the lives of a Jewish family. Hans Landa enters the scene and is immediately recognizable as a villainous body. As a character standing for qualities in direct opposition to the farming family’s -- Landa lacks morals, respect and wholesomeness -- his consumption of their commodity is upsetting. That a villainous intruder finds nourishment in the wholesome food made by, and for, the rightful inhabitants of the farm is unsettling. In drinking the milk Landa consumes part of the family. He takes in the “good” food, yet remains “bad.” This scene reveals that no longer is milk a pure and wholesome food product meant for bodies exhibiting those qualities. It can likewise nourish the abjectly amoral.

Landa proves disloyal when his convenience-based allegiance to the Nazi party deteriorates with the materialization of a better opportunity. Rather than risk the fate of an officer on a war’s losing side, Landa insures the death of the Nazi party’s four highest in command in exchange for safe passage to the United States as a celebrated anti-Nazi war hero. In addition to a safe voyage, Landa secures himself a Purple Heart for bravery, clearance on any and all war crimes and a plush piece of property in Nantucket. It becomes clear here that Landa’s activities during the war found basis in depraved amorality coupled with a vain sense of work ethic, not necessarily a staunch approval of Nazi sentiment. When Aldo brings up Landa’s nickname, “The Jew Hunter,” Landa says, “I’m a detective. A damn good detective. Finding people is my specialty. So, naturally, I work for the Nazis finding people. And, yes, some of them were Jews. But ‘Jew Hunter?’ Just a name that stuck.” Like the vampires of *The Strain*, Landa lacks any sense of loyalty to a place or party. Instead he does only what benefits himself the most. No
doubt that after years of mechanized murder in and around Germany, Landa will slip into New England undetected and carry out a pleasant, ocean-front life.

Landa’s admission into the United States as a heroic undercover agent represents his appropriation of the qualities milk symbolizes. Just as he finds nourishment in the “good” family’s milk at the film’s start, Landa plans on cashing in on the benefits of “good” behavior when he indeed acts like a “bad” man. He crosses both national and metaphorical borders in entering the United States, as the American threshold symbolizes a fresh start behind a mask laden with the qualities of milk and gaining him the approval of the majority. This ability to transgress boundaries recalls *The Strain*’s vampires, the marginalized whites of Chapter Two and the seemingly normative bodies aforementioned in this chapter, Earl Brooks and Leon. Like the Master of *The Strain*, Landa is a foreign body whose arrival in the United States threatens national security and collective identity.

That Landa plans on immigrating to the US reflects American anxieties over unwelcome foreign bodies entering US territory. However in a scene that emanates the masculinity characteristic of American identity and present in much of Tarentino’s work, the remaining Basterds of the film’s title forever mark Landa as a Nazi. Although Aldo doesn’t fault Landa for the deal he struck with the United States in exchange for ending the war-- a “damn good deal” Aldo admits -- he questions Landa about his future in the US. He asks:

> When you get to your little place on Nantucket Island, I imagine you’re gonna want to take off that handsome-looking SS uniform of yours. Ain’t you?”

Aldo explains to Landa that he can’t abide that, saying, “If I had my way you’d wear that goddamned uniform everyday for the rest of your pecker-sucking life. But
I’m aware that ain’t practical. I’m aware you’re gonna have to take it off. So I’m gonna give you a little something you can’t take off (*Inglourious*).

With that, Aldo carves a swastika into Landa’s forehead, forever scarring him with the symbol of his abjectly monstrous past. With this exchange Aldo first articulates the American fear that foreigners will be unidentifiable as such in the United States. As keeps surfacing in this discussion, identity is based on comparison and without notable differences comparison becomes impossible. Aldo explains that he can’t allow Landa to enter the US without some indicator of his former life. Thus in using an excessively large (read: phallic) knife, to carve the swastika into Landa’s forehead, Landa become first and foremost a Nazi for the rest of his life. Noteworthy is that “Landa” and “Aldo” are near anagrams of one another, most likely an intentional indicator of their antithetic characteristics.

In giving Aldo an unnecessarily large knife, a Southern accent and a brutish character while Landa remains feminized in his eloquence, impeccable appearance and hands-off position as a colonel, Tarantino pokes fun at nation-base stereotypes. Still, while ridiculing the trope of the American cowboy and the well-mannered European, he promotes them all the same. Moreover, that brutish Aldo dominates the naive Landa, who based his future on deceit while trusting Aldo to deliver him safely to the US, renders the American superior. This scene, which is a half-serious rebel yell for Americanness, genders the United States masculine and in opposition to abject femininity.

*Inglourious Basterds, Mr. Brooks* and *The Professional* undoubtedly complicate previous chapters’ examination of abject, milk-consuming characters. Here we have three relatively normal bodies, save their predilection toward murder. These middle-aged, white males do not act out, make spectacles of themselves, or in any way draw attention to their non-normative
behavior. This ability to maintain a position “under the radar” while committing murder unbeknownst to most renders these characters abject. Creed in quoting Kristeva explains that the abject is that which “does not ‘respect borders, positions, rules’...that which ‘disturbs identity, system, order’” (Creed 45). Here the cause for abjection is the denial or rejection of borders and rules of Landa, Leon and Brooks, and the upsetting of identity in which it results. In passing as normative while behaving abnormally they transgress cultural and official borders and break laws. This threatens normative society’s identity. Homi K. Bhabha explains the similar situation present in post-colonial instances of identity threat and “passing.” He writes “[t]he ambivalence of colonial authority repeatedly turns from mimicry-- a difference that is almost nothing but not quite--to menace-- a difference that is almost total but not quite” (Bhabha 132). However in the end of these films, the ultimate example of abject body, that of the female, threatens the identity of the already-abject.

In Nell Irvin Painter’s history of the whiteness in the Western hemisphere, *The History of White People*, she includes two chapters about the involuntary sterilization of lower class white individuals considered “degenerates” during the early 20th century in the United States. The logic went that poverty stricken families prone to crime, disease and shiftlessness were detrimental to the maintenance of a pure, white race, as these qualities were considered hereditary, not environmental. Essentially these individuals faced sterilization because the middle-class, power-holding majority feared their reproduction. In one particular instance, a young woman named Deborah Kallikak found herself in the hands of several eugenicists. Eight-year-old Kallikak, the daughter of a poor, single mother, arrived at the Vineland Training School for Feeble-Minded Boys and Girls in 1897. By age 23 she was an attractive young woman, “skilled in sewing but slow in reading and writing” (Painter 271).
Painter describes the anxieties that Kallikak evoked in her wardens as such:

“Indeed, the great menace of someone like Deborah Kallikak lay in her normal, even attractive appearance and the likelihood, she should ever leave Vineland, of her having sex and, consequently, of bearing children” (Painter 271). Considered a “moron” (then an official classifier of intelligence) Kallikak was not considered capable of moral judgement. Thus, those watching over her at the Vineland Training School feared that beyond the walls of the school she would fall into a vicious life of crime. Furthermore her wardens feared that outside Vineland she would “pass” as a normative member of society, that is, middle class and of acceptable intelligence. That Kallikak might reproduce upon leaving the school worried those keeping her there because they believed she would pass on her “degenerate” genes, thus further tarnishing the white race. This fear that a body considered abnormal, whether by way of criminality, poverty or low intelligence, might pass as normal is evident in many of the texts discussed. It reflects real fears that emerge throughout history.

The various crises of identity that I discuss in this chapter ultimately reveal that “the concept of identity is a structure which depends on identification with another” (Creed 64) and the rejection of identification with an Other. However, as I have examined, when that Other is confused with another, an individual’s and/or a culture’s sense of self gets thrown out of whack. In *Powers of Horror* Kristeva poses the question of borderlessness: “How can I be without border? That elsewhere that I imagine beyond the present, or that I hallucinate so that I might, in a present time, speak to you, conceive of you--it is now here, jetted, abjected, into ‘my’ world. Deprived of world, therefore, I *fall in a faint*” (Kristeva 4). Kristeva describes the physical symptoms that the anxiety of permeated borders evokes in her. When the abject characters of these films, while upsetting the fragility of law, still “keep up appearances,” they jet themselves
into the subject’s world. Because they occupy a space that borders hegemonic self and criminal Other, they work to smudge the very boundaries separating the two groups resulting in a more liberal notion of what it means to be “normal.”
CONCLUSION

I have always approached texts, particularly film and television, from the point of view that every aspect of the mis-en-scene is intentionally and meticulously constructed. Film makers, television producers and novelists shouldn’t include scenes or details of scenes unless they hold some significance to the story, if for no other reason than every element in a scene costs money. It simply isn’t economical for audio-visual or print media to contain pointless details. Anton Chekhov famously said “If in Act I you have a pistol hanging on the wall, then it must fire in the last act” (Rayfield 203). Which is to say, one should not include details in a text unless their inclusion enriches, or is significant to, the overall experience.

In line with this logic, I set out to discover the significance of milk in recent media. Rather than shrug at the countless instances of socially non-normative characters consuming milk, I felt that some underlying symbolism connected each of these milk-drinking characters. After all, in media from eras past good-natured American children and patriotic heroes were the bodies most often drinking milk. In the Introduction I mentioned the 1939 film Destry Rides Again. In this classic western film, the town’s new deputy and the film’s hero, Thomas Jefferson Destry, opts for milk at the bar rather than drink whisky with the rest of the townsmen. Although common during Hollywood’s Golden Age, this use of milk as indicator of ethical body fell off during recent decades. Some sea change resulted in a trend of “bad guys” drinking milk, oftentimes in explicit fashion. Although one might chalk this trend up to coincidence, I find that true coincidences are rare.

However, I don’t propose that the creators of the texts discussed in the thesis consciously put a finger on their reason for adding “milk” to the list of necessary props. I believe that milk
stood as a means to add an extra edge of grotesqueness to certain already-abject characters. The question then arises, why use milk to suggest abjection? That milk, a beverage heralded as America’s wonder drink, the food representing all that is pure, righteous and beneficial, is re-appropriated as the beverage of choice for villainous and/or abnormal bodies in recent American media seems like a subject rife with meaning. By locating the use of milk as a textbook example of symbolic abjection I locate the characters drinking milk as those that society wishes to expel to the margins. Moreover these characters consistently exhibit qualities that cast them beyond the scope of the middle class majority, further supporting their marginalization. In short, milk exists as a mark of Otherness.

In the first text discussed in this exploration of milk in the media, 2009’s horror-pop fiction *The Strain*, Eph Goodweather’s taste for milk contrasts the milk-white blood present in the bodies of the vampires he seeks to destroy. Presented as the antithesis of alcohol, Eph consumes milk instead of alcohol and claims that the beverage supplants his propensity for excessive drinking. In this regard *The Strain* initially presents milk in a light similar to that of those classic Westerns and 1950s-era scenes of middle America. For Eph, milk is a wholesome drink that keeps him away from the bottle. However the drink feminizes Eph, as he relies on it. Furthermore his taste for milk soon ebbs when he discovers the milky blood swirling through the bodies of the vampires determined to take over Manhattan.

In *The Strain*, milk figures in as the blood of vampires more strongly than it does as Eph’s drink of choice. When vampires bite and infect humans, those individuals lose their subjectivity, the crux of Western identity. It is a partial death very much like the one Cassuto described in the mythological vagina dentata, and related to Oliver’s discussion of the anxiety over reunion with the mother. A fear of death surely persists in both cases. Furthermore vampirism renders its
victims demasculinized. Literally, the penis shrivels up and falls off. It is replaced by a phallus of the mouth, a phallus that consumes the blood of human subjects.

Red blood, the ultimate sign of a living, breathing, bleeding body, whitens in vampire victims. Briefly put, contact with this oral phallus, or with the milk-blood of vampires, “turns” humans into pre-verbal organisms. This pre-verbal state mirrors precisely that first stage of life during which the human child receives all its nourishment from its mother’s breast. The milk-blood of vampires is aligned with the breast milk of a symbolic mother, the speaking subject’s very first Other. As such, milk bridges the gap between Self and Other. This crossover represents a loss of individuality worthy of abjection.

Chapter Two discusses a TV show and a film in which lower class, white bodies consume milk. Because the milk-drinking characters in *The Hills Have Eyes* and *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia* fail to conform to the culturally constructed norms and values associated with white Americanness, society expels them. These films are merely a reflection of American life. “White trash” bodies in the United States are the last group toward which classism and racism is acceptably practiced. Thus they exist in the same margin that minorities and women inhabit. Because the Hills mutants and the McPoyle family are dirty, poor whites, in these two examples, “[r]acialised identity overlays class: Residues betray poverty and the distance from whiteness” (Garner 98). The metaphorical dirt of poverty renders these bodies nonwhite, at least inasmuch as they do not belong to normative American society.

Their milk drinking, however, does align them with traditional American whiteness. It signifies the possibility that these bodies will creep into society and take up space as “normal” bodies, that is, wield power. Although the Hills mutants live in abject poverty because the US government took away their livelihood, their activities reveal that with subversive behavior they
can take back resources valuable to them. In discussing different levels of whiteness within the
white majority of the West, Steve Garners refers to hierarchies that “are expressed in terms of
patterns of power relations; that is, the power to name, the power to control and distribute
resources” (Garner 64). In the case of The Hills, marginalized whites render middle-to-upper-
class families powerless while they procure the power to control and distribute resources.
Similarly, in It’s Always Sunny, the McPoyle family holds the owners of Paddy’s Bar hostage,
thus temporarily upsetting the traditional power relationship between the two groups. That these
characters exercise power typically unavailable to them, and that they drink milk, the
quintessential American beverage, suggests nearness between them and the middle class majority
in the US.

This nearness to which I refer, Julia Kristeva calls “a border,” the border that separates Self
from Other. Writes Kristeva, “[w]e may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity.
Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it--
on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger” (Kristeva 9). Here Kristeva
describes how the nearness of an abject figure menaces an individual because it threatens his
sense of self. Thus the Hill mutants and the McPoyle family, as off-white bodies by virtue of
their grotesque poverty, threaten normative white society because of their closeness to it.

The well-to-do, white, male characters discussed in Chapter Three are similarly abject.
Colonel Hans Landa, Earl Brooks and Leon succeed in passing as men who uphold the norms
and values of American culture when in fact they threaten to destroy the very structure on which
said culture rests. In committing premeditated murders these men fancy themselves above the
law, an idea American society cannot abide. And again, these characters’ penchance for milk
communicates the success with which they “pass.” Ultimately, however, events of the films snuff
each character’s menace to law and order, either with death, delineating mark or counteractive threat. Dominant society desires this elimination of threatening Other.

Notably, all of the characters in these texts discussed are white males. Just as the bland whiteness of milk makes it a choice signifier of culture’s abject qualities, this ruling group of white males is the perfect terrain for laying down culture’s fears and anxieties about the abject. Namoi Pabst quotes Gregory Stephens’ argument that “the greater force we use in repressing a forbidden taboo subject or psychic content, the greater will be the force of its return, often in mutated or disguised form, in unexpected places and unanticipated moments” (190). The more society pushes the abject to the margins, the more strongly it will push back, often in subverted form. The innocent, smooth, whiteness of milk makes it the perfect vehicle for expression of society’s abject. These texts use milk to reveal anxieties about nontraditional Americans’ presence in the United States because the characters resist the trope of quintessential American: white, middle class and adhering to norms of morality. Because white males exist in these films as marginalized bodies, boundaries about the power dynamics inherent in racial and classist conflict start to disintegrate. This disintegration of boundaries, arguably abject in itself, indicates the possibility of culture’s allowance of increasingly transitory social boundaries.

These several films, television series and novel do not solely comprise the recent body of media in which milk figures atypically. Films worthy of this characterization include *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), *Natural Born Killers* (1994), *No Country for Old Men* (2007), *V for Vendetta* (2006) and *Mystic River* (2003). In the recent Jay-Z music video for the song “On to the Next One,” white paint figures ostensibly as milk. The video includes clips of old-fashioned milk bottles followed by similarly positioned bottles of champagne, suggesting the milk-alcohol connection discussed in previous chapters. Additionally white liquid is drizzled over a black
crystal-encrusted skull and shown seeping through a pair of high-quality Nike sneakers. Here, milk-white paint destroys expensive commodities, diminishing their value. And of course this example of nontraditional milk representation doesn’t compare to the pornography industry’s use of milk, whether it be in lactation porn or films using store-bought, bottled milk, both types of movies of which are readily available on the Internet. In these films, milk often mixes with other bodily fluids, further perverting a food product once considered pure and wholesome.

That milk figures into pornography speaks to Barbara Creed’s statements on the subject of abjection and the monstrous feminine. Pornography, which showcases those animal-like instincts often attributed to the poor, minorities and women, provides individuals with a cathartic way to deal with anxieties over the feminine abject. Yet it conjures desire. Creed writes that “the subject is constantly beset by abjection which fascinates desire but which must be repelled for fear of self-annihilation.” (Creed 66). Accordingly, the use of milk in pornography tends to humiliate or degrade women, as do mainstream pornographic films in general. In this example, as in the texts discussed in the bulk of this project, milk functions as a marker of that which threatens society. Thus bodily fluids factor into a discussion of social structures.

Mary Douglas writes of this connection between body and society:

The body is a complex structure. The functions of its different parts and their relation afford a course of symbols for other complex structures. We cannot possible interpret rituals concerning excreta, breast milk, saliva and the rest unless we are prepared to see in the body a symbol of society, and to see the powers and dangers credited to social structures reproduced in small on the human body (Douglas 373).
Here Douglas does well to articulate the importance of viewing the body as a form upon which culture is written. Ideology, whether it is norms and values or law and order, is played out upon, and with, the body. Increasingly, with the ideas put forth in the twenty-first century about notions of truth and objective reality, the idea of the body has been capsizing. Thus, boundaries separating Self from Other begin to blur, and the Self exists nearer and nearer to the abject. Because of the selfsame blurring of boundaries characteristic of the postmodern era, it is only fitting that Self and Other should begin to coalesce at this time. This integration of Self and Other, as threatening as it is to society’s ruling groups, represents the diminution of markers of difference. Once difference is rendered indistinguishable, social inequalities will likewise lessen.
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