Monsters Within and Without

Reading Female Identity
Through Monstrosity
in Andrzej Żuławski’s Possession

Nikola Grbavac

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There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated.

Abstract

The aim of *Monsters Within and Without: Reading Female Identity Through Monstrosity in Andrzej Żuławski’s “Possession”* is to examine female identity as it is established by means of monstrosity and excess, which position women’s experience outside the dominant ideologies and modes of social functioning. I build my arguments upon social constructionist and structuralist thought, which provide me with perspectives that support my theories about the subversive role of *Possession* in revealing the suppression of women maintained through the assignment of various social roles, primarily those of motherhood and marriage.

Along with critiquing the embedded notions on women’s identity that stifle and oppress women by curbing their autonomy, creativity and sexuality, I propose that *Possession* demonstrates ways to destabilize these notions and deconstruct them. By using a wide range of theories of film, spectatorship, monstrosity, Otherness, and female identity, I argue against the interpretation of monstrosity as evil and destructive, and suggest that the monster represents a possibility for women, and later on the society as a whole, to question, explore and create new versions of the world through unbounded multiplicity.
Acknowledgements

I have always subscribed to the idea that talent is paramount for success. However, the time I have spent reading and researching over the course of my master’s program has taught me that persistence is as well. Looking back at the effort I have put into writing this thesis, I realize how demanding the creation a full-fledged piece of academic work is. I am thankful for this experience because it has lead me towards the creation of a piece of writing I am truly proud of and helped me realize that this is exactly what I want to do in the future.

I would like to thank my supervisor Jon Inge Faldalen for having listened to my plans, thoughts, and fears over many months, and for having offered a great deal of genuine advice on how to keep going every time I felt I could not budge. Even though it is possible that the way I express myself sometimes seems to resemble a spring of refractory ideas, Jon Inge was able to understand my thoughts, recognize the doubts I have faced, and above all believe in me, which is the kind of support I am most grateful for.

I am thankful for my family, a small yet strong group of people — grandma, grandpa, my two extraordinary aunts, and my mom and dad, whose love for me and for each other is boundless. All my life, my family has supported me in the making my own decisions; my voice and opinions have always been valued as equal to those of my elders, which has helped me develop a reflective, inquisitive character, and determined manner. Not a lot of people have a privilege of experiencing this kind of upbringing.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this thesis to the memory of the great director Andrzej Żuławski, who had passed away several months before this work was published.

Nikola Grbavac,
Oslo, May 2016
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1. Introduction

I was first introduced to Andrzej Żuławski’s Possession as a teenage boy. Growing up as a fan of horror films, there inevitably came a point at which I had become exhausted and weary of familiar formulas that are so often present in mainstream horror, and decided to seek out for what was less prominent. In one of such searches for obscure horror titles, I came across this film. I was attracted to the cover of the packaging, depicting a half naked woman with long, dark hair facing away from the viewer, with long, monstrous claws wrapped around her shoulders, and a tagline “Inhuman ecstasy fulfilled,” which promised a horrifying yet erotic experience. It is safe to say that the artwork was largely misleading. This kind of promotional measure is often undertaken with films that are deemed too unconventional to be sold to and accepted by the majority of viewers, films that possess themes, structure or plot elements that may be difficult to condense, and instead demand a great deal of personal investment, interest, and interpretation on the side of the viewer. I have grown to appreciate the fact that Possession offers much more than any of the three words in the tagline might suggest.

The layers of meaning bound to one another, the dramatic setup, and the shifts in tone and pace set Possession apart from the conventional formulas and rules horror films often follow. Carol Clover, opining on the significance of horror film to the viewer, and the heritage horror films leave in the society, determines that the value of horror is in “its engagement of repressed fears and desires and its reenactment of the residual conflicts surrounding those feelings.”¹ This is a great theoretical starting point that tries to unearth the source of fascination with horror film on the side of the viewer and explain the merit of such films outside their entertainment purposes.

However, when I take a look back at hundreds of horror films I have seen in my life, I come to a conclusion that very few of them achieved to address the aforementioned task successfully. Curiously enough, Clover seems to agree. She likens horror movies to folk tales, whose narratives are embedded in archetypes, stereotypes, and repetitiveness only to “generate an endless stream of what are in effect variants: sequels, remakes, and rip-offs.” Possession is not one such film. In fact, while it would be reductive to regard it as a horror film alone, Possession accomplishes to address the aforementioned values of horror film. This, I would argue, might also be true due to the fact that movies of any genre may and often do tackle with the repression of human emotions, fears, and impulses present within the society that has produced them. In addition, it would be rather compelling to debate whether Possession cannot be classified as a horror film due to the fact it steers away from the genre’s established norms which embrace familiar cultural and social codes, or if we may state that it can be classified as a horror film in spite of those norms.

Directed by the Polish director Andrzej Żuławski, Possession depicts a family of three living in West Berlin before the fall of the Berlin Wall. Anna, a seemingly timid housewife, and mother to the couple’s son Bob, welcomes her husband Mark back from a long business trip away from home. Immediately, Mark notices a change in Anna’s behavior. Anna is quiet, unresponsive, plagued by an unseen and unstated conflict. Soon enough, both Mark and the audience are offered insight into the extent of the change Anna is undergoing. As she unleashes a torrent of fears, emotions, excessive bodily and vocal movements, her actions may upon first viewing seem irrational and despicable, but in fact carry a more profound message, if only one tried to look for clues.

What seems to be apparent from the beginning, both in the plot and the character’s behavior and motivation, is shaken up and questioned as the film takes several drastic turns throughout its runtime. Family discord, marriage on the rocks, Mark’s abusive and controlling ways, and Anna’s secret infidelities all fall into the

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background as the film progresses, introducing the real reason behind Anna’s change — a monstrous, mucosal being in the state of development, hidden in a squalid apartment which Anna visits regularly. The being is both Anna’s progeny and her lover, and she grows progressively more obsessed with it, spending time with it, nurturing it and making love to it, even becoming murderous in order to protect it.

Upon its release in 1981, *Possession* won the Best Actress award at the Cannes Film Festival for its star Isabelle Adjani. It has since fallen into relative obscurity, known among critics and the film’s cult following for its transgressive take on the horror genre, and to the more general public for its infamous scene in the metro tunnel, which will play a role within the analysis that is to be presented in this text as well. I take upon the task of contributing to the discussion and analysis of *Possession* with the utmost pleasure given the fact that I am an avid admirer of its unconventional story and characters, riveting cinematography, and director Żuławski’s skillful ability to successfully fuse some of my personal favorite film genres within a single piece of cinema.

As I have mentioned above, the question of genre placement seems to be a particularly tricky effort in the case of this film. *Possession* is a genre-bending tour de force, a masterful blend of drama, horror, mystery, and espionage thriller that demands physical and mental endurance from its viewer, and an inquisitive and imaginative mind to fill in the gaps in the understanding of its plot. This has been noted by film critics. In his review for Slant Magazine, Bud Wilkins for example, refers to the surreal and dream-like features of the film, calling its dramatic structure “almost as schizoid as its protagonists.” The intensity of eroticism, the abuse-charged crescendo of emotions, the heightened manner in which the actors perform in front of the camera, sometimes bordering melodrama but never quite crossing that line, and the sheer brutality of many scenes in the film deeply provoke the viewer’s senses. Yet, as I will propose in my analysis, not for the reasons so many other horror films do.

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Considering the plurality of possible interpretations of the plot and characters’ actions it does not surprise that one might find that nothing more is expected of him or her but the sheer enjoyment in unadulterated, voyeuristic pleasure of viewing instances of excess. This is, no doubt about it, something which Possession surely does provide. However, those few and far between for whom the enjoyment and pure pleasure of viewing is not satisfactory have over the years shared their own interpretations via film reviews and on internet forums. According to the reviews, whether taken from an ideological viewpoint of what constitutes proper family relations or with the moral implications of adultery in mind, the consensus seems to be that, in Possession, Żuławski paints a picture of a failing marriage, of infidelity, jealousy, and the end of love between the two spouses, Anna and Mark. Following this interpretation, Anna’s extramarital affairs and lack of loyalty to her husband which lead to the subsequent breakup of their marriage are the overarching thematic points in the film, and her guilt and shame for having been unfaithful to her husband creates the monster. I will challenge this interpretation in my work.

Admittedly, Żuławski has himself stated that inspiration for the film came from the breakup of his own marriage, but it would be unwise to disregard any other possible interpretation of the film’s plot in favor of this particular one. Some reviewers have compared Possession to David Cronenberg’s The Brood (1979) which too features monstrous offspring, gore, mucus, and murder combined into a twisted adventure. It seemed to be a comparison that eluded Żuławski, who maintained that the only thing the two films have in common are that they were inspired by directors’ divorces from their wives, while director Daniel Bird added that one important difference seems to be the mystery and uncertainty that persists throughout Possession, whereas The Brood features “an element of closure, a


mythology.” Still, the comparisons of Possession being at least stylistically similar to The Brood remain.

It seems to me that the character of Anna cannot purely be seen as the bad seed, the irrational one, the bearer of evil, a visceral being going through a mental breakdown. It is not her actions that sow evil and destruction, leading to the apocalyptic denouement, but how those actions reverberate within her condition in the world and her position in the society and her family. This is precisely why I would encourage the viewer to displace the focus from fully understanding and interpreting the plot of the film, to the analysis and deconstruction of its elements. It is my intent to undertake one such analysis in this thesis, one that would, instead of taking a holistic approach, fragment the film into elements which speak to the viewer about the world the characters inhabit and how to exist in that would might have shaped them to become who they are, might have shaped their actions to turn out the way they do.

I look at Possession’s main female character, her identity, behavior and the ways in which she is established as a subject in the society, I analyze the idea of the monster and monstrosity within the film, the concept of the split which we will come to see works within this film on a multitude of levels, and finally discuss the various iterations of excess present in the film. At the center of the analysis stands the woman, Anna, and the probing into her character as a representation of women’s experience of the world. Monstrosity, the split, and excess are all concepts that describe her or her lived experience in a great number of ways.

It has been noted before that Andrzej Żuławski’s films often deal with the study of a single character, in addition to being able to capture and reveal something about the broader aspects of the civilization, as well as the the political and societal

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8 Totaro, “An Interview with Andrzej Zulawski and Daniel Bird.”
structure.\textsuperscript{11} This is a notion that strikes me as important in my interpretation of \textit{Possession}. I would like to call for a shift in focus from the previous perspectives of the viewing of the film, and argue for a new one, which would take into account a perhaps unjustifiably overlooked position, its role in the critique and deconstruction of the functioning of society and culture, and a commentary on how living within the social order affects its subjects. It is my understanding that \textit{Possession} is a film which deals with what it is to be a human constituted through language and socialization, and exist as part of the society. It goes beyond pleasure and ecstasy into an exploration of adversity, struggle, and abjection, and finally — it touches upon, but does not satisfy any needs or goals of its characters, nor does it offer any absolute resolutions.

Even though the film continued to fascinate me, each time I would revisit \textit{Possession} over the years, I developed new theories about its plot, characters, and interpreted its metaphors in new ways. I would come to reject certain convictions that previously seemed stable, and notice ideas and messages within the film’s text that had previously eluded me. In his interview with Donato Totaro, director Żuławski likens the abundance of mysteries and clues in \textit{Possession} to his understanding of life in general, which he sees as a mystery beyond human comprehension, an unsolvable conundrum one never fully understands.\textsuperscript{12} He thus appears to place \textit{Possession} on a shelf that deals with but does not ultimately answer life’s biggest puzzles, as he believes the answers to those are impossible to obtain. While that may be so, and while Żuławski’s approach appears to be in line with thinking about the world outside the binary oppositions, and structured, predefined notions that aim to provide answers about life and human existence, it is possible to discern and analyze patterns that emerge within the scope of this existence, and discuss them.

My approach in this thesis poses and aims to answer the following question — What is Anna’s drive to do the things she does? What are Anna’s desires, fears? Is she purely hysterical and irrational or might there be something in the way the world is

\begin{footnotes}
\item[12] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
structured around her that inevitably leads to the splintering within her mind, and the world that she inhabits? Might it be that if we try to look into how Anna got in the position she is in, we might gain better understanding of her actions? By taking this stance, I wish to displace the traditional way of viewing the film from the struggles of couple due to Anna’s behavior towards the struggles of the individual within the society, and try to interpret Anna’s character on her own, yet emerged within societal paradigms, and explain her existence not only in relation to her husband, her marriage, and her position in the society, but also in spite of those categories. And while I do not aim to completely reject any of the previous interpretations of the film, which are invaluable and which resonate with some of my own thinking about Possession, my aim is to take a look at, and offer new insights into the world of the film, and by doing so, reflect upon the larger implications the narrative brings into play, those that refer to the ways societies are run, and people are created as social subjects.

My personal partiality to Possession notwithstanding, I am convinced that the world of this film is an abundant source of ideas and concepts that shed light on overall human existence, with a specific focus on women’s experience. This thesis will primarily be concerned with an extensive examination of the main character, Anna. It will explore her motives, acts, and struggles and question how their portrayal might correspond to the ways women are allowed to exist in the world, how women unearth, rethink, recreate, and reclaim their identities in a world that makes it difficult to do so. I wish to make a point on how we may view this film and its main female character’s experiences as means of better understanding of the structures of power within our societies. Thus, I will view Anna’s experiences and most of what is happening in the film as metaphors for women’s condition in the world, within patriarchy, if you will. I pay attention to the terrifying and deeply unsettling positions Anna finds herself in when attempting to act out on the need to question and indeed, escape the limitations of her condition, pushes against the expectations society has thrust upon her, struggles with rejecting the ideas of fidelity, marriage, love, family,
etc. in her quest for self-actualization, for the establishment of primordial desire, and the identity she had left suppressed.

In addition, I will observe how ultimately punishable and fatal an attempt to act out on these desires will prove to be for Anna. The complex portrayals of Anna’s inability to interact with others, but also to identify the ways of getting in touch and staying in touch with her own self provide for a fertile ground in my probing into discerning the manner in which societal structures assimilate human ideas and behaviors. The following is meant to be a study of what happens to those who are unable or refuse to, by choice or chance, interpellate and submit to the hegemony over their bodies, minds, choices, and actions. With this thesis, I hope to make a small contribution to film theory, the study of Andrzej Żulawski’s Possession, and continue the conversation on how women’s identities and sexuality are viewed within the society.

**Previous Research on the Analytical Subject**

While gathering material for this work, it had been a particular interest of mine to delve into research on what has been written about Possession in the context I wished to speak of it. Owing to this process, I have discovered a few academic articles that have dealt with the interpretation of Possession and its subject matter, or used it as a base to connect to various modes of critical theory. Some of these concepts and theories I have aimed to reflect upon myself, some side with and others attempt to challenge. Among many, one text emerged as standouts, not only for the author’s use of Possession as an analytical object by means of which the arguments were presented, but also for the theories the author tackled in order to deconstruct the character of Ana in relation to her sexuality and desire.

In her article “Mucous, Monsters and Angels: Irigaray and Zulawski’s Possession” Patricia MacCormack tackles the interpretation of Anna’s character in
Possession via the analysis of her sexuality and her relationship with the monster she creates. Right from the beginning of her work, MacCormack takes a staunch attitude that seeks to look beyond the interpretations offered by film theorists, who have established that the woman as an entity in relation to monstrosity can either be the monster herself or exist in relation to a monster, “abducted and coveted by it.” This kind of setup, argues McCormack, demands in turn the emergence of the archetype of a male hero who either saves the woman from the monster or relinquishes her of her own monstrosity, furthering the proto-position of the woman as less valuable than the man, in need of saving, only to “restore her place in phallic regimes, which is of course no place except subsidiary to, but less than, the male.” Through the discussion of female desire, monstrosity, women’s relation with the monster and the monstrous, MacCormack argues that Anna is neither a hero nor a damsel in distress — she is a creator, a figure who by seeking to establish her own self in the world, inadvertently unleashes from within herself a mucosal monster that provides her with pleasure and experiences that had previously been beyond her reach. At the same time this monster poses a threat to the patriarchal structure of the society.

MacCormack concludes her paper by proposing that the spectatorial experience within the film be interpreted as mucosal, i.e. diffused, with extensions, and openings. A “mucosal filter” provides no place for the type of spectatorship which establishes the camera view as male view, and drives viewers towards the identification with the main male character in film regardless of their gender. This is an idea that strikes me as worth elaborating on because it argues for the type of spectatorship and viewer identification that seem to be extremely rare. As it has been witnessed through numerous theories on spectatorship, especially the spectatorial experience of horror film, the identification with the male appears to be the primary type of identification and spectatorial experience on film. I shall discuss this more in

depth later on in the thesis. Throughout my analysis, I plan to come back to “Mucous, monsters and angels” and form a dialogue with MacCormack. This I view to be an invaluable part of the theoretical framework I have selected to build my arguments upon, or stand in opposition to as part of my interpretation.

**Thesis Structure and Thematic Units**

The main body of the analysis takes place within the third chapter, the main thematic units being *identity, monstrosity*, the exploration of the idea of the *split*, and a unit on the various forms of *excess* present in the actions of the main character and in the film overall. I have selected these units based on the fact they are mutually entangled within the film’s narrative and help create an image of who the main character is and what her motives are. More importantly, in these sections I plan to elaborate on my interpretation of the way the film speaks about the world we habituate in this moment, and most importantly the individual and the process of creation and maintenance of the subject within the society. I have put the interpretation of the main character’s identity as a woman at the forefront of my analysis, and thus the subchapter on identity functions as the frame to which I return to each time in my analysis of the more fixed concepts of monstrosity, the split, and excesses. Each of the units will answer my research questions by providing a deeper insight into the workings of the character of Anna, her drives and motives, as well as the world within which she exists.
Research Questions

Throughout my analysis there have been several important points I have wished to address, argue about, and uncover in great detail. One is concerned with exploration of the connection between Anna’s behavior and her existence as a woman, and the interplay of the two in the character and the film itself. The second one deals with the ways in which the aspects of an individual’s existence which can be seen as private and deeply personal, such as needs, desires, and the search for a deeper understanding of oneself and the world are regulated, moulded, and suppressed by the powers that be, and that which is concerned with the preservation of standardized societal and communal structures of humanity on a larger scale. Finally, what is also a concern of this thesis is an exploration into the world of the monster and monstrosity as a possibility to unbound women’s identity and agency, alternative to standard ways of existence. The questions I have aimed to find an answer to within the thesis are as follows:

How is Anna’s identity in the film established through the concepts of the monstrosity, the split, and the excess, and how do those three concepts work together to reveal Anna’s suppressed needs and desires?

In what ways does Anna’s behavior reflect her opposition to perform within the boundaries and expectations of the spousal, maternal, and other roles prescribed to her gender by the society?
2. Theoretical Framework, Methodology, and Material

Method

The method I have selected to follow within the scope of this thesis falls under qualitative research methods, namely textual analysis. I have researched about and read a substantial number of books and academic articles, and while reflecting upon the ideas and theories presented within these materials, come up with theories about the object of my analysis. I have also actively looked into finding material that can support the theories about the film that I have previously established myself. In this process I have, of course, realized that some of the selected work I ached to include in the thesis simply did not resonate well with the object of the analysis, and so there was a need for culling.

There are multiple reasons for the placement of textual analysis at the forefront of desirable methodology to be used in this thesis. First, within the frame of constructivist approach to academic writing, I see my work as a piece of the puzzle that is constantly being solved, yet it never can be pieced together to completion — a puzzle which instead continues to expand at all times. It is a text that builds upon and speaks to a large amount of other texts and theories, and along with them provides a field of knowledge that is and should continue to expand, remaining changeable at all times.

Second, as with any other scholarly work, I would take great pleasure at the prospect of this thesis being read by my peers, and in the spirit of scholarly discussion, conversed about, referenced, or challenged, thus maintaining space for constant academic debate. I am to rely heavily on the of intertextuality of material
within the academic scope of critical social and media theory, but am convinced of the ability of this feature to translate into other sociological, historical and cultural contexts, academic or otherwise. As always, to question everything is imperative, and thus I make no assertion about the finality of my conclusions.

This thesis is rooted within critical theory. My ultimate goals are to provide another view regarding the understanding of the society and its ways of functioning. Additionally, I aim to analyze how media texts can serve as reflections of the society they are inevitably a part of, as well as a critique of established societal modes of operation, of grand narratives that can seem both invisible and omnipresent, the archetypes, the stereotypes, and gender role conformity. In order to achieve a desired impact, I call upon as the basis of my theoretical framework several well-established critical theories and schools of thought that offer ideas about the deeper insights in to the way society functions and how the individual is affected by being a part of the society.

In this work I am influenced by social constructionist theory, which plays a big part in the ways I approach the object of my analysis, and so does structuralist and post-structuralist theory, psychoanalytical theory, critical film theory and feminist theory. These theories provide arguments that aim to tackle the analysis of the very fabric of human social existence and are thus important conduits for any in-depth critical media and social analysis. They focus on detailed aspects of human experience, the ideas and concepts that are often taken for granted, and question what’s been described as definitive and authoritative. This final point is, I firmly believe, one of the most important aspects of knowledge and learning: its constant expansion, and the questioning of what is prescribed to be definite, factual, or true.
The fundamental codes of a culture – those governing its language, its schemas of perception, its exchanges, its techniques, its values, the hierarchy of its practices – establish for every man, from the very first, the empirical orders with which he will be dealing and within which he will be at home.  

In the following pages I have decided to present a description of the systems of ideas, theories and theoretical terms one would require familiarity with in order to fully grasp the positions and arguments I have expressed in my analysis and the theoretical base I have built upon in order to support them. These short explanations should acquaint the reader with the theoretical perspectives taken in the thesis so that he or she may follow the analysis more easily, but their purpose is at the same time to provide me with the ease of using the concepts and terms throughout the work without the need to go back to define them each and every time they are summoned, once the analysis has commenced.

Social constructionist, as well as Structuralist and Post-Structuralist theory view humans, our activities, culture, identity, and perception of the world as part of the larger, all-encompassing system that is constructed, not naturally given. This world is, according to structuralists, established by means of language. In An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism, Madan Sarup states that post-structuralists “question the possibility of objectivity of any language of description or analysis.”

They contrast essentialist views, and any set of notions that invoke the presupposition that there exists something intrinsic or natural about human identity, human socialization, and the world itself that acts as an unchangeable natural and social drive. The meaning of social components within a given society, according

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to structuralist theory, emerges from the interaction with other elements of the system, through the language and through difference.

Structuralist theories are largely influenced by the work of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who posits that the linguistic *sign* is arbitrary. It emerges from the relationship of its *signifier* — the form of the sign, for example the word that is being used, and the *signified* — the idea or the concept that is represented by the signifier, the mental image that appears in our heads when we hear a certain word. The signifier and the signified exist only as part of the sign\(^\text{18}\), and the sign in turn must possess both the signifier and the signified. “There is no natural or inevitable link between the signifier and the signified”\(^\text{19}\) and from this emerges the idea that there is nothing natural about language either. In structuralist thought, various social and cultural phenomena are being deconstructed through linguistic methods, analyzed as language. And just like the sign is arbitrary, so can be social phenomena — defined and affected by pre-structured matrix of meaning within the language, in a constant relation to one another, through similarity and difference.

As Vivien Burr states in in her work *An Introduction to Social Constructionism*, social constructionist approach proposes that “[t]he person cannot pre-date language because it is language which brings the person into being in the first place.”\(^\text{20}\) That is not to say that people would not exist if there were no language, but instead that human experience and socialization is created and shaped by language. Additionally, what may be viewed as natural and definite by an essentialist is seen as simply a version that might persist for a moment in time and change its properties later on by a social constructionist. Social constructionism encourages critical approach to each and every aspect of human existence, it opposes taken-for-granted knowledge, taking into account human relations within a cultural and


\(^{19}\) Ibid.

historical circumstances that affect human perception and experience of the self, other people and the world. In my analysis I shall discuss numerous social aspects of the lived experience of the main characters and assert that what has caused disruption within their lives is in fact the adherence to social norms and the compliance to an experience that requires no understanding, no questioning, but acceptance and assimilation. These social aspects manifest itself in social constructionist theory, through various discourses. Our lived experience is created through language, and discourses that arise from language shape perspectives on self, other people, events, beliefs, etc. In the particular case of human identity, different discourses provide for a number of options within which a person can place his or her sexuality, gender, race, or any other trait. Regardless of whether these characteristics are considered to be given or dependent on socialization, a discourse shapes them. “[O]ur identity is constructed out of the discourses culturally available to us, and which we draw upon in our communications with other people.”

However, as it is often the case in society, some discourses are made to be dominant by instances of power, be it governments, science communities, institutions like schools, hospitals, prisons, etc., while others suffer suppression or even erasure. A common example presents the historically perpetuated idea that extends through time and cultural barriers, that which positions homosexuality as perverse, and in opposition to heterosexuality. The impact of this notion is twofold. First, it asserts power and positions, through language, cultural, medical, and other discourses, a divide between those with “normal” and “abnormal” sexuality, leading to social oppression. Second, it requires from us that we, by means of social interaction, establish ourselves as one of the provided sexualities, offering to us no other choices and denying us the right to come up with any. “The discourses that form our identity are intimately tied to the structures and practices that are lived out in society from day

21 Burr, “Does language affect the way we think?” 2-3.

to day, and it is in the interest of relatively powerful groups that some discourses and not others receive the stamp of ‘truth.’

Through discourse, dominant ideologies, systems of belief, shape perceivable reality and human experience. In *Feminist Film Theorists* Shohini Chaudhuri presents the ideas of the influential philosopher Louis Althusser and the ways in which he introduces his assertions about the notion of ideology. Althusser argues, in Chaudhuri’s words that a state establishes and maintains power through “repressive state apparatuses (government, army, police, law courts, prisons)” and “ideological state apparatuses (art, media, schools, family, church, political parties).” One of Althussers own terms I intend to refer to in my thesis is the concept of *interpellation*, the making of the subject through dominant ideology and consent to existence within it. Since the character of Anna attempts to break as many boundaries the dominant ideologies have set up for her, it is important for me to discuss the ways in which she attempts to avoid interpellation, and whether or not such an action is possible to begin with.

“Discourses are intimately connected to the way that society is organised and run. In our society we have a capitalist economy and we have institutions such as the law, education, marriage and the family, and the church. These things give shape and substance to the daily lives of each of us.” Dominant ideologies limit the number of possible choices and acceptable ideas one can possess and express. Their reach is so profound and difficult to extract oneself from that they create patterns of behavior and convictions that end up being viewed as intrinsic within a society, and accepted as a given. In this thesis I set out, therefore, to present a deconstructed view of the way women’s identity, social role, and sexuality are produced, defined and suppressed by society, through the structure with the aims of presenting media content that maintains

23 Burr, “What is a discourse?” 37.
25 Ibid.
26 Burr, “What is a discourse?” 36-37.
a subversive ideas, maintaining a disruptive role in the society, and thus revealing the structures of power and dominant ideologies.

In “The History of Sexuality” Michel Foucault describes the Victorian era as one that has had the most profound effect on the suppression of human sexuality. In the opening he writes “Sexuality was carefully confined; it moved into the home. The conjugal family took custody of it and absorbed it into the serious function of reproduction. On the subject of sex, silence be came the rule.”27 The subduing of sexuality, especially women’s sexuality will be one of the more important topics I will discuss — sexuality seen through one self but also as influenced, prescribed and defined by the society; the suppression of sexuality by means of the social construction of the family as an institution that reproduces meaning and reiterates heteronormative and patriarchal archetypes and modes of defining of the world, affecting social relations.

In my analysis of Possession and its main character Anna, I will present an interpretation of how “entering into forms of life which are not necessarily in our own interest, but are in the interests of relatively powerful groups in society”28 may affect people. From this aspect, the analytical object in question provides for a plentiful deconstruction through the immediate provision of possible opportunities to subvert the structure. This is a unique trait of Possession that is not characteristic of many films, as the film does not only critique but also depicts the experience of its characters as they live through a very real change. And even though the monster starts out as an extension of Anna, it goes on to affect not only other characters in the film, but the structure of the world of the film, as well as grow to develop its own autonomy.

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Criteria for Scene Selection

The selection of scenes which I use in the analysis of Possession throughout the thesis was based on several criteria. First, it was of great importance to me to be able to include as many scenes that feature Anna, as she is the main character of both the film and the analysis that will take part in this thesis. Anna’s behavior is layered, and in every scene something new is to be learned about her character, behavior, her backstory, as well as the motivation for the way she behaves over the course of the film.

Second, in spite of the fact that the deconstruction of the character of Anna is the primary goal of this text, it would be impossible to truly present this character without having taken into account other characters Anna is position in relation to, characters and ideas that either influence Anna’s actions or are themselves being affected by Anna’s journey towards authenticity. Scenes from the film are explored in the order that is not chronological, but it instead follows the thematic thread of the thesis, with the discussion of scenes centered around the theories and concepts I wish to discuss.

On occasion, scenes are presented visually as well, in screenshots that are not captured in an arbitrary manner but are specifically selected for their impact. This is particularly important to be aware of when I discuss a scene that I have deconstructed for a specific camera angle or movement, as I believe these aspects to be of analytical importance as well, in addition to the analysis of narrative, script, actors’ movements, etc.
3. Analysis

Introduction

One important detour I shall take before starting the analysis concerns my interpretation of the role of the viewer in film viewing and how the spectatorial experience affects the perception of film, as well as my analysis. Much has been written over the years about how the audiences view films, whose point of view they assume, with whom they identify, etc. One of the most prominent theories, no doubt, is presented in Laura Mulvey’s seminal article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” in which Mulvey posits that film viewing is deeply dependent and “reinforced by pre-existing patterns of fascination already at work within the individual subject and the social formations that have moulded him.” And while Mulvey describes the experience of film viewing to be reflective of and functioning within the norms that are prescribed in the society, I do not find *Possession* to be a part of this formula.

Mulvey positions the male protagonist in mainstream film as the one that drives the narrative forward, one that is able to control the female within the narrative, and thus provide the audience with a distinctly male experience of power-driven domination, and through the male gaze objectification of the female characters. In *Possession*, I would argue, we are made witness to quite a different, more unique kind of experience in which the roles have not been reversed, the roles are deconstructed, destabilized, chaotic. Anna is at her weakest, most confused and repressed in the beginning of the film, and as the narrative unravels she becomes more independent,

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30 Ibid, 843.
escapes being defined, constricted, frees her sexuality and is defined by her own self, not by the men in her life. There is no husband, son, or lover — there is Anna, her own creation, and her own pleasure, which is affected by the outside powers and under constant attack, but no doubt still prevails. These assertions are essential for my analysis because it is on the basis of overall destabilization — that of genre, narrative structure, socially prescribed gender roles, performative aspects of the body, sexuality, and social roles that I build the foundation for my understanding of the character of Anna and Possession in general.

As has been mentioned, the film often takes violent turns in pace, genre, and presents a shift in perspective while viewing the film — that from male-signified, in which the viewer identifies with the male look, and the male lead character, Mark, to the female one, Anna. In the beginning of the film, the audiences are led towards identification with Mark. Along with him, they wonder where Anna is, what she has been doing, why she has abandoned performing her wifely duties and house chores. These discrepancies from what is expected, and Anna’s absence of both mind and body are intentionally portrayed as alarming and upsetting. We are observing Anna from the position of the patriarch, not from her point of view. Thus, we get no answer as to why she acts the way she does, because this is not even asked of her. We draw conclusions about her actions outside of her perspective. This will later change.

Horror film viewing has been a particular interest of mine, and in this arena there are several well-established theories that build upon Laura Mulvey’s arguments, and that seek to describe the ways in which the film and the audience together denote meaning. Thus, Carol J. Clover talks about the ability of the female protagonist in

Figure 1 Where is Anna?
slasher films to assume the position power of the gaze in the film’s denouement, when facing the killer, but nevertheless concludes that this does not postulate a role reversal, but an assimilation, the “symbolic phallicization”\textsuperscript{31} of the woman, which I would argue leaves undisturbed the paradigms of narrative and film viewing, as well as the gender and social structures outside the film. I consider these theories invaluable for my analysis because they allow me to investigate how the issue of spectatorship within \textit{Possession} and thus present my own theory that I consider to be characteristic of this particular film. I would propose that in \textit{Possession}, something which I am sure this film is not a sole example of, the spectator does not assume the male-signified role at all, and that in fact, female-signified and identified film viewing is in fact rather possible, as we are able to witness in this film.

In “When the Woman Looks” Linda Williams cites Laura Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze within film, stating that “women are given so little to identify with on the screen”\textsuperscript{32} and even when a woman is provided with something to identify with “she sees a monster that offers a distorted reflection of her own image. The monster is thus a particularly insidious form of the many mirrors patriarchal structures of seeing hold up to the woman.”\textsuperscript{33} While I do agree that, especially in mainstream cinema, women remain largely objectified, used as props or serve as a motivator for the male character in various ways, I consider it quite hasty to assign a patriarchal role to the idea of the monster in general terms. It is true that, slasher films for example, quite ironically, often serve as morality tales. Within the world of the slasher film, the monster-murderers often do represent agents of the patriarchal value system who punish the expression women’s sexuality, discipline and caution against the rebellious spirit among the youth, striving to instill conservative values within the world of the film and thus assert those values on the viewer as well. However, not all movie


\textsuperscript{32} Linda Williams, “When the Woman Looks,” \textit{The Dread of Difference: Gender and Horror Film}. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 15.

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid, 22.
monsters are the same. As I have previously stated and will discuss in more elaborate ways later on, the woman shares much of the willing and unwilling signification with the image of the monster.

Later on in her text however, Williams does provide for an argument that shifts her analysis into a different direction. By making a link between the woman’s look the threat the monster poses to the structure, and the power it can posses, Williams argues that the monstrous threat in horror film might not, as it is sometimes assumed, come from the repression within the male, and thus does not double for the male spectator and male film characters, but it instead signalizes the fear of women’s power and female sexuality. “The male look expresses conventional fear at that which differs from itself. The female look—a look given preeminent position in the horror film—shares the male fear of the monster’s freakishness, but also recognizes the sense in which this freakishness is similar to her own difference.”34 There is an abundance of clues to support this type of theory within Possession, some of which I have discussed already. Anna does not fear the monster at all however, she sees it as an extension of her, a representation of that which she had been forced to suppress and deny throughout her life, and a chance to make a change in her world which would lead her to a more satisfying lived experience.

Williams recognizes this potency of the monster and monstrous representation in film, discerning the difference in the perception of its power by the male and female look, asserting that “the monster is not so much lacking as he is powerful in a different way.”35 It is here that the idea of the power as difference plays an important part. The woman, just like the monster, does not need to assume a phallic role and establish her agency through the system: she can exist in spite of it, developing her own ways of existence, asserting her own presence through difference. Just like the woman is, within the phallocentric realm, seen to be lacking that which man does not, so is the monster. However, what both the female principle and the monster bring into

the world is a different kind of power, one that is fluid, mucosal, one that escapes full comprehension, and cannot be encircled.

In *Possession*, the spectator is positioned within the Other, his or her experience is as changeable and malleable as Anna’s. It is with growths, mucus, viscosity, and excesses that cannot be contained that the spectator identifies with Anna — described by MacCormack as “mucosal spectatorship,” one that lacks binary oppositions and structural limitations and conditioning. This particular characteristic of *Possession*, its ability to transcend gender-signified spectatorship and allow the viewer pure identification with the female character without risking that she become objectified is a moving success of the film. “Just as Anna gifts herself to the monster she has created without submission or domination but with mucosal love, so we create the image with us as mucosal spectatorial pleasure.” The viewer is able to identify with Anna because he or she discovers the world along with her, following the way of her creation.

I assign *Possession* very much a descriptive-deconstructive role, and view the film as a critique of the society, in which the audiences are drawn towards feeling for the women’s plight. The experience of viewing *Possession* does not by any means represent a prescriptive reiteration that aims to reestablish and restore the order, and return to the previous state of things, to what once was, to the structure. Quite the contrary. Understanding the film in this way is pivotal for me due to the fact that it forms the basis, the starting point of my argument and sets the analysis of the film in the direction I wish to take it. The idea that women do exist outside the rule of the man, the law of the Father, that they are not always in this constant push-pull action and activity in which they on one hand struggle between establishing their own identity and pursuing their goals, and on the other return to the confines of the prescribed societal roles. They are instead capable of creating and managing places in which they can simply be, exist on their own accord. One of those places, or an opportunity to create one, can be found within *Possession*.

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37 Ibid.
The aim of my analysis is to reveal how the character of Anna functions in resistance to the oppressive functions of the society, explain her apparent needs and desires, and argue about and how they function to establish her presence within the film, as well as help form an image of her condition within the social structure. I plan to do this by means of analyzing and interpreting the actions of the character, in addition to multiple visual cues and metaphors I have discovered within the structure of the film upon close inspection and reflection. Occasionally I shall give consideration to some of Anna’s statements. This will be the most scarce part of the analysis as the language as a category creates reality and precedes human experience, as opposed to being a reflection of reality, which is an idea supported by the theory which forms the background of my analytical thought, and is reflected in Possession itself. We are often made witness to Anna’s inability to express her desires, thoughts, fears, and feelings through language, which outlines its limitations.
Identity

In a male-dominated culture, where power, money, law, and social institutions are controlled by past, present, and future patriarchs, woman as the Other assumes particular significance.\(^{38}\)

— Robin Wood

In this section I shall discuss the ways in which Anna’s identity, sense of self, and her own awareness of the condition she is in are portrayed in the film. Thorough analysis of Anna’s identity and self-perception, seen through her actions can help decipher the clues about the ways in which Anna tries to deal with her predicament, and describe the manner in which she struggles to establish her autonomy. The section on identity acts as a frame of which *monstrosity, the split* and *the excess* are the components of. This section will encompass the aspects of the film and Anna’s identity that are more broad, and do not necessarily fall under the previously mentioned three categories but are of great importance regardless given that they provide for a deeper understanding of the analytical subject.

Since Anna’s identity does not exist on itself alone, it cannot be analyzed without also looking into the ways it is affected and shaped by outside influences, whether it be her functioning within the society, or the influence of the people who surround her in her everyday life. In fact, some of Anna’s motives in the film, such as her need to explore her sexuality and her sexual tastes and appetites indeed stem from her distressing and hampering experiences with her husband Mark and her lover Heinrich, which are in turn an indivisible part of the constructs and constrictions the

society has placed on all of these characters to begin with. Robin Wood’s quote above highlights the main thread of criticism and thought I wish to convey in this section, one that places Anna and the rest of Possession’s characters within the wider social context they are unavoidably a part of.

At the beginning of the film, in the first scene that establishes the setting, an apartment complex in West Berlin where the family lives, we are introduced to Anna and Mark, who returns from a lengthy business trip. Having previously been presented with the prospect of changes in their marriage over the phone, Mark asks Anna to explain herself. She is, however, unable to express herself, both orally and physically. The lack of any kind of physical touch between the two exacerbates the appearance of distance and alienation. This introduction to the main two characters foreshadows the struggles in their marriage, setting the tone for the way they communicate for the rest of the film. In addition, it introduces the idea of change Anna is aiming for, the lack of trust between the two, and the apparent secrecy Anna is characterized by, which fascinates, puzzles and disgusts Mark to the very end.

In “Mucus, Monsters and Angels,” MacCormack points to the ways in which the men in the film can be seen as the figures of oppression, pointing out that Anna’s sexuality is suffocated by Mark and forced into illusory sexual freedom by her lover Heinrich. Anna’s oppression however, extends to many more parts of Anna’s existence, beyond her smothered, denied sexuality. Additionally, Mark and Heinrich are not the only men who terrorize and persecute Anna throughout the film. What is 

made very obvious and explored thoroughly throughout the film are many modes in which women’s lives are affected by men, and the ways in which men and male-signified agents of power assert power and dominance over women. This is an incredibly important clue because to deconstruct the way men are behaving within the film brings me closer to understanding the world the characters inhabit, and further, to understand what it might be that has contributed to the way Anna thinks and behaves, which is one of the overarching goals of this thesis.

Let us take a look at some examples. It is made apparent, rather early in the film, that regardless of Anna’s odd behavior, Mark is a selfish, controlling and abusive man who uses his power within the family structure to invoke ownership over her. This can be seen through many ways in which Mark communicates with his wife. And while Anna’s heightened demeanor and excess of emotion might distract the viewer from the fact, Mark does prove to be an abusive partner. In one scene, Mark is awakened by a call from Anna in which she informs him she needs time to think. Mark asks incredulously: “What do you mean to think? Think about what?” and Anna replies: “To think about me,” and hangs up. It is made obvious, along with the couple’s exchanges in a few previous scenes, that Mark is not used to Anna behaving like an individual and a separate entity from married and family life. He is more concerned about where his wife is, and what she is doing, and shocked by her response that confuses and angers him, than he is interested in truly understanding what is happening in Anna’s head. This initial picture of discord foreshadows what’s to come, an exacerbation of the couple’s relationship, driven by Mark’s inability to comprehend Anna, both as a woman and as a person who is veering beyond that which is clear and perceptible to him.

Upon close viewing of Possession, I have noticed a big difference in what Mark is saying and what he is doing. He confesses he wants to understand Anna and do as she wishes, but turns violent every time they do come in contact. Therefore, he does not really wish to understand her, his wish is to control her and mould her to suit his needs, thus limiting her. He accuses Anna of being selfish and thinking only about herself but does not care to truly hear what moves her. He is only troubled by the fact
that she is not doing what he expects her to. In the scene at the cafe, where Anna and Mark meet to discuss their separation further exposes Mark as abusive, manipulative, and controlling, stunned at the apparent loss of grasp on his wife and his family.

Anna arrives at the cafe, and seems to be confident and liberated. Her speech is clear, her wording concise, in contrast with her incoherent expression from before. But then Mark tries to blackmail and control Anna by telling her that he wants to stop seeing their son in case they separate. Anna is shocked, but Mark instead shifts the discussion to Anna and her lover and gets loud and aggressive, accusing her of disloyalty. Finally conceding, Anna states: “No one is good or bad, but if you want I am the bad one,” says Anna, “And if I knew he existed in this world I would have never had Bob with you.” This comment sets Mark on a violent rampage through the cafe, causing ruckus, throwing chairs around, growling, and chasing after Anna.

Like a petulant child, Mark does not see beyond his own needs. After the fight at the cafe he goes to a hotel where he spends three weeks alone in a feverish state, having seizures, unaware of his surroundings, and appearing to have lost the ability to speak clearly, having withdrawals from the loss of power and dominance in his family life. It is quite obvious that by abandoning the family home and allowing himself the time to grieve the loss of his relationship with Anna, Mark acts out of pure drive for self-preservation. He tries to punish Anna with his actions and restrict her movements, fully believing that due to his absence Anna will be forced to perform her housebound roles and take care of Bob alone. He does not even question what might happen while he is away.

Figure 3 The fight at the cafe
And while we see how torn Anna is between two worlds that cannot coexist, Mark pursues whatever comes to his mind. There are clues about this in the way his methods at achieving his goals are ever changing. He aims to reestablish the order of things, and he tries to do this in a number of ways. First, by threatening Anna with his absence, which invokes the threat of the lack of the masculine power, the father who rearranges the chaos that was before him. Second by changing his mind, returning home and demanding that Anna leave her lover and come back home to him and Bob. Once Anna refuses, he unleashes another method of control: physical abuse. It is important to note that Mark fails in all his efforts. What drives him does not create, it destroys, which is something to remember when I talk about the ways in which Possession can be seen as a critique of patriarchal society.

Mark’s desire to control is further reflected in the way he treats Anna once the change in her behavior emerges. He snoops, investigates, and even hires a detective to follow Anna. This type of action is a good example of how Mark’s violence, and thus the violence bestowed to him by the powers that be, i.e. ideology, the power structures and discourses of which he is an agent have a reach and affect Anna’s existence even outside the house. The presupposition is that a man has a right to know where his wife is going and what she is doing and that this notion is not to be questioned. This right not being respected causes a fracture in the power balance between and man and his wife, between the man and the woman. It disturbs the structure. By having Anna observed and followed, Mark seeks to reestablish control and restore the cracked veneer of patriarchal dominance over her, of what is understood to be an equilibrium that has been interrupted.

Figure 4 A private detective follows Anna through the city
I am compelled to digress here from the close analysis of Mark’s behavior to
the topic of patriarchal control and conditioning of women. This topic is touched upon
throughout Possession, and yet it is particularly evident the scenes in which the the
detective follows Anna through Berlin, trying to find out about her whereabouts. And
yet at the same time, due to the fact that his pursuit is portrayed as blatantly obvious,
incompetent and somewhat comical, there is already an implication that he has not
found himself of stable ground, that the situation he has found himself in might be
more that he is able to handle, and that Anna is a challenging rival who is not to be
messed with. Furthermore, the detective, in one of his final brash and brazen moves,
impersonates the building manager, and imposes his presence on Anna, entering her
apartment.

It is of extreme importance for me to explain the manner in which I see the
apartment in which Anna has housed her monstrous creation. Firstly, it is an empty
space for the most part, save for the bed on which Anna makes love to the monster.
While her family apartment is messy, full of knickknacks, trinkets, signs of familial
life, Anna’s apartment is a cave, a cavern, existing for one purpose alone — to house
and to protect. A point is made throughout the film that Anna feels happy there, she
feels comfortable, free to be who she is, and this is incredibly valuable piece of
information due to the fact that the apartment in my view symbolizes the female
principle. It is a womb-like space, a feminine arena, both visually and metaphorically.
It is Anna’s dominion where she is free to explore her desires, and exist outside the
prescribed, structured existence. And thus it comes to me as no surprise that Anna is
highly protective of it.

The fact that Anna resorts to violence and murder in order to keep her space to
herself alone, safe from outside influences, is rendered in the film as quite expected.
As the detective opens the bathroom door, he catches a glimpse of something moving
in the darkness of the room. He enters to inspect what it is, but is quickly struck with
a broken wine bottle by Anna, killing him. The territory he has found himself in is
beyond the detective’s understanding, beyond the power he possesses, and that in
itself is his demise. Since I am not looking to discuss the practical sides of Anna’s
actions, or delve into discerning the degrees of morality of her deeds, I interpret the act of Anna killing the detective as symbolic, not literal. The detective is rendered useless and absorbed into nothingness once he enters the apartment. Being an agent of the Symbolic, once he enters the place that shakes up and disturbs the limits and boundaries set up by the Symbolic he loses his purpose and thus does not exist within it, for his power is driven from the Symbolic, supported by the structure. Once the structure is gone, so are its agents. The “monster” and “lover,” the sum of Anna’s excesses, which Anna has placed inside the apartment, represents is the essence of her being. It came from her literal womb and it continues to live and be sustained within the figurative womb.

Yet the power structure does not allow for change in practice so easily and Anna is soon visited by another detective. Even though he too soon faces a similar fate to his predecessor, it is undeniable that these men, along with the controlling and abusive husband and the egocentric lover pose a threat to Anna’s development and her relationship with herself. Attacks on Anna’s existence and her adventure are constant. Patricia MacCormack sees Anna’s plight as a rejection and a disgust for the “rigidity of phallocentric male sexual paradigms,” noting that “those who uphold these paradigms show disgust at the monster lover she has created.”40 It is no error that most of the people who witness the existence of Anna’s monster are men, and no coincidence indeed that all of them react in a similar way. They are rendered speechless, unable to articulate what they are feeling or thinking, and the monster

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40 MacCormack, “Mucous, monsters and angels: Irigaray and Zulawski's Possession,” 100.
seems to be a reprehensible threat to them. The monster makes the two detectives shocked and paralyzed in fear, Heinrich seems driven insane once the time comes for him to see it, and only Mark is able to understand that, while vile and incomprehensible to him, the monster represents something more valuable and important to Anna. This is important to remember because, as the world around them unravels, Mark becomes much more accepting of Anna and the world she has created, and instead of wishing to control and dominate her, he becomes her accomplice. While it is true that Anna’s friend Margie also witnesses Anna’s monster, which indeed costs Margie her life, there is a clue about how her experience differs from the men’s. While discussing the reasons she had to murder Margie, Anna confesses to Mark that Margie wanted to take the monster from Anna, which possibly implies more of a fascination with it, than a repulsion by it.

The murders Anna commits cause a shift in the perception of the world and our understanding of the character’s motivation, as they symbolize Anna’s open and active rejection of the structure and the symbolic order, and also her need to protect her creation, to protect the world she has fashioned for herself, which seems to be under constant attack from the outside forces. However, ethics and morality are not the only set of ideas and principles that are being questioned here. It is true, the murder of the detectives and Margie by Anna, and Heinrich by Mark ridicule human morality, the set of principles that seek to define what is right and what is wrong and thus prescribe behavior in accordance to those rules. What they suggest as well, though, is a questioning of opposing, binary categories that exist in language and thus the world, and their positioning as facts. It is a distrust and the lack of partiality towards the clear-cut, precisely defined essential qualities of these categories that motivates Anna.

As I have mentioned before, the murders are symbolic. They are indicative of both the presence of the structure of power which invades Anna’s space, even her private space at the empty apartment where she lives with her monster, and the potency of the monstrosity to affect this structure in an adverse manner. I do not wish to make a purely nihilist point about the meaninglessness of life and therefore death
as well here. It is clear that this kind of approach would not connect well with the world of *Possession*, as the chaos and disruption within the film serve the purpose of deconstructing the world and creating multitudes of new, uncharted meaning, and do not imply the abandonment of all meaning. Instead, what I propose here is to observe how Anna’s newly constructed condition opens her up to ways of thinking and understanding herself, her life, people around her and the world.

Anna’s motivation and urge, as it is witnessed in her behavior and her interaction with other characters in the film as well as her monster, is the pursuit of excavating new modes of existing, following one’s own drive, creating and redrawing the lines of identity and sexuality. And so, in several scenes, she tries to show Mark what she has seen, teach him what she has become privy to. Being embedded in the structure, Mark is difficult to get through to. I have mentioned before that in the scene at the cafe, Anna says to Mark that no one is simply good or bad. She follows the statement with another two, in which she proposes to take upon herself the mark of the bad one and asserts she regrets having had Bob with Mark. These two latter statements shift the attention of both Mark and the viewer from the former one — “no one is simply good or bad.”

Anna formulates a similar statement later on in the film as well — as Mark watches a recording of Anna made by Heinrich. Anna is in a disheveled state, crying, sweaty and anguished. With a pained expression on her face, Anna states:

> Goodness is only some kind of reflection upon evil. That’s all it is.

This is Anna’s last statement before the scene ends. Right after saying it, she makes a sound as if to say something, but stops, having realized the implication of her words. This kind of assessment coupled with multiple other ways of subversion both Anna and the monster exhibit in *Possession* point out the direction towards which Anna has developed. From the structuralist linguistic point of view, by positioning goodness in opposition to evil, one does not simply state the true nature of good and evil and their intrinsic values in the world, one states a value judgment that carries with itself many
other implications. As I have discussed before, the acceptance of the proposed natural and essential values of binary oppositions feeds off of persistent reiteration of difference, and thus presupposes existence within the structure, where binary values always assume the position of either positive or negative. Anna wants no part of that. She rejects the finality of any statement or belief.

Allow me now to return to the analysis of Mark’s behavior and the ways in which his behavior pushes Anna further away from him and into the world she has created by herself, for herself. After one of her nights away with the monster, Anna is back home with Bob, trying to be a good mother to him in the best way she is able to. Mark tries to stop Anna from leaving the family apartment to meet her lover, whom he presumes to be Heinrich, but is in fact the monster. After a long fight, the two conclude the talking by exchanging the following:

*Mark: Please don’t make me force you.*

*Anna: You can’t stop me. I’ll open the window and jump.*

*Mark: You need him that much?*

*Anna: Oh yes! Oh yes!*

*Mark: Fuck your needs!*

What stands out clear from the dialogue above is Mark’s demeanor that is at the same time oppressive and dismissive. He is consumed by his own needs and terrified of his own failures, expressing disdain for Anna and her sense of self-fulfillment. What follows is a violent and abusive outburst. Mark beats Anna and she is left beaten and bloodied. She manages to leave, and while Mark follows her, the scene is interrupted by a strange occurrence in which Anna first steps in front of a car towing truck, then as if under a spell, calmly walks off.

The scene I am discussing, which I will entitle The Big Fight for future reference, as it is an object of analysis and dissection of many themes I wish to touch upon, reveals that, despite being aware of how limiting her family life is by this point, Anna loves Bob and he is the only one she misses, one of the only serious instances
that still render her torn and unable to let go of her previous life. There is a common interpretation of this predicament, one that depicts the essentialist and naturalist bond between mother and child, but there is something far more telling at stake in this case. What I mean to convey is that Bob represents the only part of the “old life” in which Anna still sees herself, her own being, her own influence and impact on the world. He is the only thing that cannot be changed or denied, and that Anna feels positive emotions for. She rejects married life, the monotony of being a housewife, the structured idea of the family.

![Figure 6 Anna and Bob having breakfast; Bob is singing and Anna is laughing](image)

In other words, Anna rejects the invitation to a voluntary erasure of oneself. She had been forced to endure the suppression of her needs, desires, and wishes, she had been shaped into abandonment of the expression of her own identity, neglect of all that which makes her happy and fulfilled, and allows her to explore who she is, explore the world around her. There are clues about this within the film — Mark has been away for a year, supposedly working, yet the nature of his work remains ambiguous throughout the film. This has left him longing for the return to quiet and peaceful family life, whereas Anna, who had not been working for over a year at that point, has clearly abandoned all her aspirations and goals for housework and nurture. This contributes greatly to her condition. Given the fact that “[p]revailing discourses of femininity often construct women as, say, nurturant, close to nature, emotional, negatively affected by their hormones, empathic and vulnerable”[41] Anna is struggling with on one hand, her love for her child, and on the other, the lack of characteristics.

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[41] Burr, “What is a discourse?” 36.
she had been taught are expected to exist as part of her, that seek to define her via the social categories of being a woman and a mother.

On the other hand, Mark is not able to recognize Anna’s need for an identity that is established outside their union, and the family structure. He is deeply embedded within the patriarchal structure, and as I have previously mentioned, clings to that which he believes confirms and validates his existence — the masculine privileges society grants men, those who are called husbands and fathers, heads of their families, the breadwinners, the providers. These roles have a dual significance: they provide men, Mark in this case, with the privilege of decision-making for themselves and others, establishing them as the model, the benchmark others are to respect or mirror, and at the same these roles time place men in an inflexible, narrow form that is so precisely defined and constricted that it is quite easily disturbed. Thus, what emerges once again as a theme is the woman as a disturbance in a world that favors the masculine principle.

Simone de Beauvoir talks in *The Second Sex* about marriage as one of the final frontiers of women’s subjugation and conditioning in a society. Maintaining that societies have always belonged to men and dismissing the notion of matriarchal society that predates the current patriarchal social order, de Beauvoir argues that married life presents another arena that crushes and controls women’s independence. To be well-adjusted within a society, to interpellate to the role that one is expected to assume means to Beauvoir that “the woman most fully integrated into society is the one with the fewest privileges in the society.” This is precisely what I find to be indicative of the source of Anna’s fear and frustration in *Possession*. Having realized that the denial of her own agency and autonomy leads her on the path of stale, uniform existence, Anna attempts to change this at any cost.

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Anna doesn’t hate Mark: when she says she is repulsed by him or cannot bear him, she is in fact repulsed by that which the society has made him to be, the characteristics of his role that do not set him apart from millions of other married men in the world. Mark does not and cannot understand Anna because he does not understand women to begin with, because he has not been allowed to. Similarly, he does not understand Anna because unlike him, she has been able to find cracks in the world she inhabits, look beyond the world she has been given, and reach through those cracks into the unknown in hopes of finding that which she has not been provided with in her lifetime until that point.

Mark is baffled and revolted by ideas that have not only occurred to Anna, but which she has ventured on to explore, ideas and experiences that have come to fruition, blossomed, wilted, morphed into one another, changing shapes and consistencies. This being so, Mark reaches for the only action which he deems powerful enough to restore his world — violence. To reestablish dominance and order by force seems to Mark to be the quickest act, one that confirms both physically and symbolically that he is indeed in control. The purpose of his violent actions is to validate and reaffirm his role in family and social life by shunning all that scares him and makes him question the world, by causing it to appear weak before him, and thus surpassing its ability to consume him.

MacCormack mentions the fact that Mark seems to be disgusted by Anna’s sexuality and asserts that the monster, unlike Anna’s human lovers, “creates an open space, a pure potentiality of feminine desire.”44 The monster thus opens Anna’s world, making it larger, allowing her to expand beyond that which has been allowed to before, it is “far more liberating than her phalloanthropomorphic options.”45 And while the monster pushes Anna to look into what is beyond the boundaries of her world, Mark and Heinrich represent the normative values that extinguish Anna’s flame. Monstrosity liberates Anna by not demanding that she relinquish her sexuality for it, providing her instead with the potency to explore her sexuality, to realize it as

more similar to the monstrous. It does not assert sexual power through the attack on women’s difference from phallic authority, it “liberates desire through becoming-more-than-one without subsuming difference.”

In *The History of Sexuality* Michel Foucault describes the Victorian erasure of children’s sexuality, describing the repression of sexuality as “a sentence to disappear, but also as an injunction to silence, an affirmation of nonexistence, and, by implication, an admission that there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, and nothing to know.” One particularly interesting movement we see Mark perform on both Bob and Anna when they are unclothed is when he grasps their chest, holding them under their arms and looking up at them, as if in awe. The repetition of this same action on both characters implies Mark’s need to establish both Anna and Bob as similar to each other, which they cannot be. Bob is a very young child who is years away from reaching puberty. He is thus the closest person to Mark who is expected to possess and express sexuality, while Anna is a woman whose entire being, the least of which her sexuality, can be compared to that of a child. What is implied in these two scenes is Mark’s need to desexualize Anna, to revirginize her, restoring her to a position of a child, not threatening to him, a purified sexuality that does not seem to him foreign or disgusting.

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46 MacCormack, “Mucous, monsters and angels: Irigaray and Zulawski’s *Possession,*” 96.
47 Foucault, “We ‘Other Victorians,’” 4.
Mark assumes that Anna is consumed by her lover and wishes to be with him. He is repulsed by her betrayal and is dismissive of her. However, at this point he has not yet grasped the power Anna carries within her and the abilities she has established autonomously without his or the help of anyone else. I would argue that, given the fact that the monstrous lover is Anna’s creation, an indivisible part of her, the sum of the suppressed parts of Anna, she leaves her family apartment to be with herself, to pursue her own needs, to unleash her own power. The empty apartment where she stores her monster is the only place she feels at peace, connected to herself, not distracted by rules of daily life or oppressed by society, or abused by her husband.

Regardless, Anna is aware of how the change in perspectives changes the interpretation of her experience, how different her experience is for her compared to how others might view it. She is aware of the disgust others feel upon seeing the monster. She feels shame, but not because she truly feels ashamed but because she knows that she should be — she is aware of how what she is doing might be interpreted by Mark and by the society, and is thus deeply troubled by the guilt she thinks she should feel. This later does change however, as Anna progresses from being afraid of how others may perceive her and the monster into a state of being in which she is led by her desires and impulses not caring about others, leading to murder.

In the scene after The Big Fight, Mark questions Anna, asking her if she is afraid of him or the possibility of being beaten, and she says no, but when he asks if she is afraid he would not like her, she confesses that she is. Much of Anna’s shame and confusion is expressed solely at the family apartment. This is where her role as a dutiful and faithful wife and mother is put to the test. Whenever Anna is seen in the family apartment her role is deeply stereotypical and limited — she is a cook and a maid, but in an eerily performative way, with no emotion or apparent satisfaction to be in such position. It is outside the family home where Anna establishes and performs most of her identity and newfound freedom. As I have described above, while Anna tries to let go of the shackles of patriarchally-structured society, a point is made throughout the film about her quest constantly being under threat of being
thwarted, whether it be by her husband, lover, detectives who follow her, or her own inability to let go of what came before her most recent development.

![Figure 8 Mark beats Anna](image)

Even so, in *Possession* we witness a change in Anna that renders her behavior plastic, in a constant state of reshaping and transfiguration. She begins the film nearly mute, and while one may conclude this to be due to the horrifying content of what she might have to share with her husband, I would assert that Anna’s inability to state her mind in words is so much more than that. This inability constantly reemerges in variable degrees throughout the film, and thus a point has to be made about the carnality of Anna’s character and her experience. In the post-structuralist vein of thought, the person is “constructed though language” and thus due to the limitations the use of language to express oneself requires, it cannot be through language, but through the body that Anna conveys her vision. Later in the film, it is revealed that Anna used to work as a ballet dance instructor, and this piece of information adds to the theory of Anna’s primary mode of expression being her body, not language. Dancing requires thoughts, emotions, and intentions to be perfectly expressed without words, but with the body alone and Anna is a master of using this method to make her mark on the world.

Before meeting Mark in the beginning of the film, Anna had already distanced herself from Heinrich, her lover, given birth to the monster and set upon an adventure beyond hers or anyone else's imagination. The beginning stages of Anna’s yearning for freedom are evident in her choosing a lover in Heinrich. And yet it is evident that

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48 Burr, “Does language affect the way we think?” 23.
behind Heinrich’s dandy-like demeanor, his grandiose and excessive statements there stands nothing more than an exaggerated shtick of what might best be described as a charlatan, than a man in touch with himself, other people, nature, or god. Patricia MacCormack describes what Heinrich is able to offer to Anna as “forced freedom” and Anna has quite evidently recognized this before the beginning of the film, for when her character is introduced she is already dealing with the sense of being torn between the world within the structure and the world outside it.

In one scene later in the film, Anna is being filmed by Heinrich, and is discussing about the ways that which is happening in her life affects her. At first she seems to be talking about being unfaithful to her husband but it is soon clear much larger issues are on her mind. She talks about the ways in which she views her daily life as oppressive, she is reminded of the performative nature of daily life and everyday tasks while, which she continues to perform in spite of finding them troublesome and draining to deal with. She compares the push she feels within herself to cancer and madness, but brushes off the possibility of those being the cause since they “contort reality” and the “possibility” she is facing “pierces reality,” i.e. makes a change, a dent in reality that does not allow it to return to the same way it used to be — it permanently alters it. The change Anna is talking about later on manifests itself physically, when Anna gives “birth” to the monster in a tunnel of the Berlin metro station. The monster is both a catalyst for and a result of many occurrences within the film: the growth of Anna’s drive to be her authentic self, the chaos it unleashes on the world of the film due to its incompatibility with the order of things in said world, and the change it brings with itself that grow beyond even Anna herself, once the monster reaches an autonomous stage itself.

“Anna goes crazy as a natural progression from her mimetic sexuality, a strict sexuality which is made to conform to and complement and be controlled by male desire in which she is simply a cog.” This is precisely what I wish to emphasize when I suggest that Anna is trying to leave the structure, to find a way to exist beyond

50 Ibid, 102.
the male principle. In my interpretation however this does not apply solely to Anna’s sexuality, it concerns her whole being, the physical and mental aspects of her existence, as well as her self within the society which she is a part of. It is never a single aspect of one’s existence that is shaped by being a part of the society, it is a sum of all things that work together.

Another scene that stands out particularly for its ability to showcase at the same time the ways in which Anna’s identity is unraveling, and render the the performative nature of housework meaningless features Anna, back at the family apartment, which has fallen into chaos with clothes, books, and food scattered around the living room. The camera follows Anna as she seems to be performing her daily routine. Only the routine is completely devoid of meaning. It is a movement rehearsed, mechanical, and without purpose — Anna puts the food in the living room and stores clothes in the fridge. She empties the pantry cupboards, with kitchen utensils and food falling to the floor. Mark appears shocked by her actions and suggests he could do the tasks for her, but she replies “It’s my job. I’m very good at it.” While Anna is happy when she is away, she nevertheless grows guilty for having abandoned Bob, and ends up coming back, where she grows disturbed and neurotic.

Figure 9 Anna introduces the idea of the monster as a “possibility”
again. The pull of the structure cannot be denied not underestimated. What had mattered and seemed of great importance to Anna for such a long time cannot be fully rejected and forgotten in a short time, and so Anna remains on the border of two worlds, which is something that Mark seems to begin to understand as well. In this scene, he states:

*It’s getting so difficult for you, isn’t it?*
*You’re not as...you’re not as strong or as sure of yourself as you thought you were so you keep coming back.*
*You must be...you must be — torn apart.*

This sentence highlights the split within Anna’s identity — that of a mother and housewife, and that of a woman freed, a woman who pursues her needs and desires without any consideration for others. The repetitive, meaningless characteristic of daily tasks she is expected to perform on the daily suffocates Anna and thus she introduces the chaos into them, pointing out their monotony, at the same time changing them. She enjoys this newfound freedom to do something she never has with objects that have a prescribed, predetermined role.

Even though Anna’s quest is ultimately futile for her personally, she does leave mark on the world in a number of ways. Her monster survives, and is in fact in the final moments of the movie, in front of the door to the apartment where Helen is looking after the now orphaned Bob. There is no white knight who saves Anna from the monster or her own monstrosity to restore the structure that has been shaken. Anna does not survive, but the rupture she has made in the tissue of the organism of the structure does, continuing to pose a threat to it, and endanger its functioning, leading to a possible eventual collapse, the monster proves that “social structures are arbitrary.”

The end of the film seems to suggest this in a seizure-like blend of audio-visual effects. The archetypal virtue represented in Helen, the teacher and the boy,

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51 MacCormack, “Mucous, monsters and angels: Irigaray and Zulawski’s Possession,” 95.
Bob is being threatened by the presence of Anna’s monster and the chaotic, disorienting, and apocalyptic sounds of sirens, airplanes, and explosions that continue on into the credits, hinting at the fact that the end of the film is not the end of the process Anna has started. What transpires over the course of the film, the disruptions that shake up the world the characters inhabit, and do not return to what, where and how they used to be. In this lies the clue to Anna’s ultimate victory.
Monstrosity

[F]emale desire both is and can create monsters.52

— Patricia MacCormack

The presence of a monster in horror film has often been interpreted to imply a threat to order and equilibrium. Monsters are thus said to either represent a disturbance of the body or mind. They appear in multiple discourses in culture, representing insanity, sickness, signalize punishment for having sinned in religion, etc., and yet their subversive characteristics are often portrayed in a disagreeable light. In horror films, monsters are either death-machines who perform the role of agents of the power structures or pathetic malformations, grotesque and disgusting, outcast and driven to invisibility within a society.

Monsters in slasher films are most often psychopathic killers and stand out due to their dual role. They are marked through their difference, medicalized, clearly labeled as monstrous, and as such cannot ever belong and be a recognized part of what is seen as a healthy society. And yet, instead of working towards destabilization of the structure, slasher film monsters are instead repeating the functions of the dominant ideologies, which in most cases turns out to be a role in punishing women’s sexuality, especially the budding sexuality of young teenagers. On the other hand, pathetic, malformed monsters represent another aspect of monstrosity, one that provides for an easy way for the society to render it useless and pathetic and thus make it less threatening.

52 MacCormack, “Mucous, monsters and angels: Irigaray and Zulawski's Possession,” 95.
To represent monsters and monstrosity in ways I have described above is to undermine its potency to create a change in the fabric of the world. It implies either subscribing to the power structures or revelry in meaningless destruction and death. The monster in Possession differs in many ways from the portrayal of monsters and monstrosity described above. The most apparent form of monstrosity in Possession is made visible in the birthing and nurturing process of an actual monster Anna has brought into the world, and her relationship to it, yet this is surely not the only version of monstrosity present in the film. Before taking upon the task of deciphering what Anna’s monster represents, I shall first reflect on other forms of monstrosity in the film.

First, Mark, whose views and expectations of Anna reflect those of the society, sees Anna’s behavior as monstrous. Her lack of adherence to the preset rules creates a rupture in the way he perceives his wife. While for Anna doing away with the performance of her wifely and motherly duties opens a new world she does not fully embrace, yet yearns for, Mark is on the other hand outraged by her change, and in fear of it. His emotions and actions range from confusion and suffering, to open verbal and physical aggression and abuse. As an agent of patriarchy, the structures of power, and the male principle, Mark is disturbed by anything that poses a threat to the equilibrium within the balance of power he has been given in the world. His role as a man is put to question, and his response to the monstrous change in his relationship with Anna results in his hiring of a detective who goes on to follow Anna. This act of paranoia-induced surveillance, along with the fact that Mark, whose profession is hinted at in the film to be that of a spy, is obsessed with the idea of knowing what Anna is doing, keeping Anna disciplined, and on a leash.

In the scene that takes place at an undated time in the past, before the beginning of the film’s main narrative Anna gives birth to the monster. This scene remains for me one of the most memorable moments ever captured on film. Żuławski has stated that there only ever was just one take of the scene as to assure genuine
expression from the main actress. The camera follows Anna as she gets off the metro at an underground stop carrying groceries. She at first begins to laugh maniacally. Laughter soon turns into chilling shrieks and screams, howling then roaring. Anna convulses, drops on the floor, shaking uncontrollably in a sequence of feral, spastic, and seizure-like movements, oozing blood and fluids followed by a chilling, guttural scream. Anna refers to this moment as the “miscarriage of Faith,” which left her with Chance, i.e. the monster.

In the beginning, it is evident, the monster is much more fluid, formless, and mucosal. It is not clearly defined, just like Anna’s sexuality and identity. MacCormack argues that in Possession “uses Anna’s productive, abortive blood to flood and wash away signifying symbolic systems, showing the female and desire itself as fluid.” The monster is characterized by Anna’s deconstructed visions of the world, and it in turn offers her what she needs — true freedom and pleasures she longs for. Thus we again reach a point where the idea of the monster and the idea of the woman come to coexist as similar. Both are standing at the borders of the structure and the world, both possess fluid identities and both threaten patriarchal and phallocentric values by providing an image of otherness, of difference. I will discuss the scene in the metro in more depth in the section on excess for I believe there is more to be said about it in order to flesh out a fuller picture of the character of Anna.

Figure 10 The birthing of the monster by Anna

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53 Totaro, “An Interview with Andrzej Zulawski and Daniel Bird.”
As I have mentioned before, in the case of the monster in *Possession*, I do not subscribe to the idea of the monster and monstrosity in a traditional sense of the word. The monster in *Possession* is not purely an aberration, a gruesome form which the spectator is supposed to wince at and reject. The monster, in fact, represents a biological, physical manifestation of a need of the main character to burst out of her mental, physical, and sexual imprisonment. It is what Anna expels at a point when she is unable to keep it suppressed, not for fear of the monster itself, but due to the instilled fear of being conditioned and required to suppress and reject it.

However, I have referred to Anna’s monster in that name, and will continue to do so for the sake of easier understanding. Additionally, I am convinced that an attempt to negate the fact that the monster is undoubtedly identified as such by most of the characters in the film would be unwise because to do so would be to undermine the immense amount of influence the monster leaves on the world of *Possession*. Taking this into account, any effort to refer to the monster in euphemisms would take away from the very real monstrosity it represents in the film, that which is outside the structure and does pose an actual threat to the order of things as they have been before its arrival into the world, and it destabilizes the structure, which in itself is monstrous “because it collapses binary machines and liberates desire through becoming-more-than-one without subsuming difference.”55 Thus, the monster in this film, depending on the set of ideas one sides with, is either a threat or an opportunity — it can play a dual role, representing an opportunity for people to start questioning the world, the way they live their lives, view themselves and others around them, etc. or a threat to the status quo, to the world existing in the shape it does at present.

Patricia MacCormack seems to be more interested in finding out how the existence of Anna’s monster in the film can aid in the understanding of Anna’s sexuality and women’s sexuality and desire in general, if we consider the fact that women exist as part of a world that is constantly suppressing and trying to define their existence and influence, placing women’s sexuality under and in opposition to male

sexuality. MacCormack describes mucosal monsters, of which Anna’s monster is one example of, as “angels enveloping and unfurling configurations of pleasure beyond phallogocentrism.”56 57 This precisely aligns with my theories about the monster as an opportunity for Anna to explore what is outside the preset, prescribed reality of her life, as well as experience her desire and sexuality outside the structure of marriage, partnership, and the heteronormative order.

And yet, no matter how liberating or explorative her experience might be, Anna’s monster is still a monster and it does not belong, just like her questioning of her life and the need to deconstruct is does not belong in the world that is established and defined within and by the structure. “Because women’s desire is this in-between it shares much with the great icon of the in-between, the anomaly, the monster. In this film the unbound desire of a woman literally externalizes and becomes a monster.”58 While I do recognize this interpretation, I would still like to maintain that what Anna experiences throughout the film involves much more than the exploration of her desire and sexuality. Entire predefined and pre-constructed identities are shed, with Anna questioning the ideas of love, feelings, her role as a wife and mother within the family structure, views on god and faith, reevaluating ethics in order to protect the world she creates, the world she is, etc.

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57 Phallogocentrism, coined by Jaques Derrida, refers to the way in which knowledge and meaning are constructed and maintained in the Western world, one which provides entitlement and privilege to the masculine principle of thinking the world. In Writing and Difference, he refers to the phallogocentric system as one of “metaphysical oppositions” characterized by binary oppositions.
As for MacCormack’s assertion that the monster is a product of generative love, of this I am somewhat dubious. While it is true that the monster is Anna’s child, both her child and her lover, and is as such a manifestation of Anna’s generative capabilities, it is not a product of love. MacCormack refers to the monster as a product of Anna’s desire, albeit not a repressed desire, but a desire that “has never been allowed to be acknowledged outside masculine paradigms.” While we may say that Anna’s desire had not necessarily been repressed but only suppressed by the society the fact remains that the monster seems to emerge as a solution after a long time of Anna suffering, looking for an answer to a problem she felt was there but could not define. From this we may conclude that Anna’s desires and needs have not always been clearly established and obvious to her. A desire that exists but has not been acknowledged neither by the subject itself, or recognized by society is both repressed and suppressed. Since human beings to not exist in a bubble, their social surroundings are an extension of their existence.

Writing on horror film in “The American Nightmare,” Robin Wood introduces repression as an important concept. He compares two types of repression, one that makes human beings different from other animals via self-control and being empathetic towards other people, and a more sinister form of repression, which he calls surplus repression. This type of repression “is specific to a particular culture and is the process whereby people are conditioned from earliest infancy to take on predetermined roles within that culture.” The outcome of rejecting this form of repression, according to Wood, is either neurosis or revolutionism. In the case of Possession, Anna exhibits both the tendencies of a neurotic and a revolutionary. Her monster however represents revolution fully — it possesses a potency to deconstruct the world in ways that have not been witnessed before.

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60 Ibid, 106.
What is revolutionary about Anna’s monster is that, as I have proposed a few paragraphs before, it represents and opportunity to rethink the world, to collapse the structure, the order and the meaning of things within it. Is is an opportunity to revolutionize sexuality, it envelops Anna, caresses her, she is submerged in it, connecting through bodily fluids, milk, blood and mucus, a stark contrast and departure from the phallocentric model. In his text, Wood presents a simple formula of the horror film genre: “normality is threatened by the Monster.” While this remains so in Possession, there is an important difference to note. In most horror films, the monster is branded as the enemy right from the start. In this case however, the monster is not being thwarted in his mission by Anna. It is given life, sustained, protected, and in turn it offers pleasure, it opens body and mind. It possesses potency and reaches beyond the “normality.”

While I do believe that one facet of the monster’s existence stems from Anna’s repressed desire and smothered sexual expression, the monster is on a larger scale a product of the aching for self-preservation on Anna’s part. As she can no longer function properly within the world she is in, Anna seeks to reshape the world as a coping mechanism of survival. The monstrous, abhorrent form it takes provides for a better understanding on just how much Anna’s monster does not belong in the world. Through the analysis of the monster’s metamorphosis in the film another idea emerges — while the monster is a form that poses a threat to the structure of the society, it is also changed by the society the longer it exists. This is precisely why the monster’s metamorphic forms remain inhuman while it is hidden and kept private by Anna, and why the moment it emerges as a true presence in the world, outside Anna, with its own autonomous movements and drives, it takes the physical form of Mark, Anna’s husband. It’s as though the monster has learned through experience that as long as it appears human it is still able to carry on with influencing and changing the world undisturbed.

Discussing Freud’s id in “Horror and Psychoanalysis: An Introductory Primer” Chris Dumas argues that it represents “awful pleasures that must be locked away”\textsuperscript{63}, and cites the scholar Margaret Taratt, who notices a direct link between the emergence of monsters and the monstrous in film to the repressed sexual desires in people. However, while it can be said that Anna’s monster does in part come from that place of repression and call for the return to the primal drives and basic instincts, when seen in the context of a horror film, the monster is not a threat to Anna at all, and as such it does not represent her own fears of facing the repressed. It instead forces others who come into contact with it to do so. The monster is a mirror for the fears others face. And while Anna is scared of losing her monster and being forced to abandon her creation, as well as the world within which she has established a potency to develop and multiply, others fear the monster precisely for what it seems to represent — an emergence of the id, a threat to the structure and the symbolic order, and an opportunity for change and the deconstruction of the world.

In her theory of the abject, Julia Kristeva describes it to be that which draws towards “the place where meaning collapses.”\textsuperscript{64} The monster in Possession is abject because it, in Anna’s words — “pierces reality,” it disturbs the structure and the symbolic order. Anna tries work against the pull of the world she inhabits, first by trying to develop her sexuality with her lover Heinrich, but upon realizing that the freedom she is exposed to with him is simply an image of freedom, an idea that is in name only, she becomes the creator of her own freedom. Anna struggles, both mentally and physically with being a willing participant of the societal structures, such as family, marital life, sexuality and sex as tools of procreation and not exploration of the senses, bodies, and pleasures. While Anna loves and cares for her son Bob, she is disgusted by the prescribed role she has to play in the society as a mother and a wife. She rejects to continue to interpellate herself and stay within the structure.


When taking a look at the Lacanian Symbolic as a structure that regulates, controls and establishes what is and what isn’t “reality,” it is evident that Anna outright rejects the Symbolic, and that her goal is to reach the reality that cannot be attained through the language and structure, the Real real. The abject “lies outside, beyond the set” and yet “from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master.” The abject properties of Anna’s monster do not lie solely within its monstrous physical manifestation, which is abject no doubt, but also within what it represents in the world into which it is brought. It is at the same time monstrosely threatening yet due to some of its attributes, outcast and rejected.

Anna’s monster represents abjection to everyone else but her. Still, it is without doubt that with the birthing of a monster, Anna has brought into the world something more than a provider of pleasure and opportunities to explore who she is. There remain within it Anna’s fears, doubts, anxieties, the poison the world has injected into Anna over the years unavoidably extends to her monster. Having come from within her, it knows, it is aware of her struggles right from the beginning. And thus, while it is not in any way a part of the society, the monster slowly works to overthrow it. Writing about literature, Julia Kristeva asserts the following: “On close inspection, all literature is probably a version of the apocalypse that seems to me rooted, no matter what its socio-historical conditions might be, on the fragile border (borderline cases) where identities (subject/object, etc.) do not exist or only barely so—double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject.” Anna’s monster exists within this border.

Barbara Creed discusses the theory of abjection, stating that within it, 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 gully constituted subject from the partially formed subject.” And

66 Ibid, 207.
much like Creed, what stands out to me when thinking about Kristeva’s words is the fact that at no point does the author clearly state whether she aligns with or against the abject and its properties. If assigned a purely descriptive role, Kristeva’s work loses some of its impact; an interpretation that supports it subversive tone renders it highly critical of patriarchal and phallocentric structures, while the tone that opposes abjection aligns with the structure and seems to me like the least satisfying one. While I believe that Kristeva’s theory seems to position abjection and the abject as a threat to life, in my interpretation the abject, just like the monster and monstrosity, take an active role in disrupting the phallocentric order. They overturn oppression, reject assimilation — the abject and the monster, just like the woman, scream to have its presence acknowledged, seen, recognized, and by doing so inevitably change the fabric of the world.

Creed writes: “The subject, constructed in and through language, through a desire for meaning, is also spoken by the abject, the place of meaninglessness — thus the subject is constantly beset by abjection which fascinates desire but which must be repelled for fear of self-annihilation.” I would argue that the abject does not represent meaninglessness at all, it instead represents meaning that cannot be thought of or imagined within language and the structure from which human beings emerge as subjects. The abject is abject because we see it as such, not because of some intrinsic, natural characteristic it possesses. Just like the Lacanian Real, it is there at all times, but remains forever beyond our reach and comprehension. This is why Anna’s behavior is erratic, why her emotions are heightened and why she seems to be driven insane. She is not happy within the world she has been a part of but she does not have the ability to exist fully in the world of the Other, within the abject. She is aware that she cannot reject both worlds so she is forced to choose one, which causes her mind to split. But fearing one’s own demise, fearing death cannot be compared to the survival instinct. The fear of dying reaches beyond rationality and is absolutely an ideological

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stance that fits within the structure. That is why Anna must abandon this fear in order to let go of her previous life.

The abject, the Other, and repression are concepts that are closely related, as they all presuppose aberration and difference. Robin Wood describes the Other and otherness as “something external to the culture or to the self, but also as what is repressed (though never destroyed) in the self and projected outward in order to be hated and disowned.”69 The way society deals with it, according to Wood, is either through destruction or assimilation. Thus for those who stand in the world representing the Other, there is a choice presented — to allow for the assimilation or keep disrupting the current order of things.

“Being on the fringes of the world is not the best place for someone who intends to re-create it: here again, to go beyond the given, one must be deeply rooted in it,”70 states Simone de Beauvoir in her formative work *The Second Sex*. And while this rooting, entering the structure, seems to be the unavoidable direction the monster is headed for towards the end of the film, throughout most of the film we see Anna struggle to establish meaning and exert influence while indeed remaining on the fringes of the world. She knows that to be a heavily embedded part in the structure poses too much of a risk of becoming simply one of its cogs, parts that work for it, and maintain it. This is why Anna seems to be in a permanent state of movement. The excessive tone of her expression, movements, screams and shrieks seem to be her way of constantly disturbing the peacefulness of her surroundings, a constant reminder of the disturbance of the world around her, a reminder to keep searching, keep changing, keep looking, instead of settling into a moulded existence.

Her monster on the other hand, the more it develops, the more authentic and separate from Anna it becomes, the more it is embedded in the structure. However, it seems that the monster has an ability, or at least a promise of an ability not to become a subject of the structure. It does not intend to be one of its healthy cells — it is viral,

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cancerous, it aims to degrade the structure and break it down. The monster’s positioning as an authentic organism within the structure can be witnessed in the final moments of the film, in which it is revealed that its final shape is that of Mark’s physical double. As I have asserted before though, the fact that the monster takes the shape of Mark seems to me rather arbitrary, and Patricia MacCormack agrees with this, suggesting even that this final stage of its transformation might not be final after all: it is simply the final one we are able to witness before the film’s abrupt ending. Whether we choose to believe this or not the fact remains — the monster is not Mark. Its physical shape is merely a disguise, the surface layer, its skin acting as a protective shield which normalizes its appearance, making it less possible to attract attention, allowing it to blend in without problem, thus avoiding any disturbance in its mission.

As I have previously mentioned, the ending of Possession seems to imply an apocalypse-like turn of events. Anna and Mark are dead, and Anna’s monster is at the door of the apartment where Bob and his teacher Helen are. And while the film ends before we are able to see what happens next, and if the monster truly does come inside, Bob jumps into a filled bathtub face down, and Helen is scared as the jarring mixture of lights and sounds, a cacophony of emergency sirens, airplanes, rocket explosions and other dissonant noises can be heard from each and every direction. I interpret this as an introduction into a world not restructured, but deconstructed and de-structured by Anna’s monster.

I have previously argued about the place of the monster within abjection, and now I may also assert that the monster is a gatekeeper of the border — it is itself the split between two worlds. Chaotic, it opens to questioning and interpretation both the physical borders and the borders of meaning and social paradigms. The function of the border, in Barbara Creed’s words is to “bring about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability.” However, what happens in Possession is — the monster is carried into the world of the Symbolic by Anna. This is why it is so important to maintain that Anna is an inseparable part of the monster.

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The monster provides Anna with the look into the marvels of the world she is not familiar with but yearns for. And instead of following the monster down the border into that world, Anna in turn brings it with her past the border, into a world that is not welcoming towards it, it does provide a place for it. It is for this reason that the monster falls under the realm of the foreign, the abject, the excessive, the in-between. It cannot be compared with anything within the world of the structure, there are no binary oppositions that apply to it, the monster simply \textit{is}. Of course, as the monster spends more time in the world of the symbolic, it transmutes, it adapts. Never fully, yet enough to still maintain its influence undisturbed. It does so with Anna’s help throughout the film and only in the film’s final moments does it exhibit authentic autonomy, separate from Anna.
The Split

Yes, I’m thinking about him, but I recognize the self who has done something horrible
like a sister I’ve casually met on the street — “Hello, sister.”

— Anna

One of the most striking themes in Possession, the concept of the split and separation. Invoked throughout the film in several different modes, it makes its first appearance very early on. Anna’s family lives in West Berlin before the fall of the Berlin Wall. The first shot of the movie depicts a gray concrete wall, and so do the shots that follow. While the intended political message is difficult to overlook, I will try to focus on another aspect of such portrayal I deem more interesting.

On one hand, it is evident that the wall, along with West Berlin being the setting for the film, functions as an element that is supposed to increase the sense of unease and dread in the viewer. This however, is only one side of its role. If we take a look at the wall as a structure, and try to decipher both its connotative and denotative meaning, we will be able to argue that it functions both as a physical representation of oppressive regimes and a metaphor of the split, a tear in the fabric of reality, a disruption. The wall in Possession represents a barrier between two worlds. The Berlin Wall is one of the first images in the film, an establishing image that presents the film’s setting while also foreshadowing its narrative and thematic structure, and the metaphors within it.

And thus, just like Berlin is split between the East and the West, so are the film’s characters. Anna is split between her home and her monstrous lover, between the roles of wife, mother and housewife, and that of an individual free from the societal mores and constraints. She is torn, divided, unable to make a final decision. The split within her emerges in the shape of erratic, excessive, neurotic behavior that threatens to destroy Anna’s physical and mental state before she can even attain the
ability to make her choice and master her newfound life. One might say that Anna is not only split, but exists within the split, stands on the border, never tipping over fully into one world or the other. Camera angles and the positioning of the actors in the frame often work towards establishing this separation between them, maintaining distance, increasing the discomfort in the viewer, warning him or her that something is out of order in character’s daily life. Finally, I am reminded of the fact that the word itself — split — functions both as a metaphor for physicality of loss of understanding and closeness between lovers, and a symbolic expression that indicates by means of language the process of decoupling, of breakup, separation, divorce among people.

Another instance of the split emerges in the presence of Anna and Mark’s physical doppelgängers within the film. They represent parts of main characters that are not akin to their original versions at all, as I have previously discussed. They are the displaced versions of them, physical manifestations of the two main characters deepest longings, they are the “self” outside the characters’ self. Anna’s doppelgänger,
the timid and kind schoolteacher Helen, who only interacts with Mark and never shares physical space with Anna over the course of the film represents Mark’s longing for a wife he does not have — a virgin-mother, a nurturer. Helen is a surrogate for what Mark misses.

One theory that could be worth looking into concerns precisely the physical aspects of the doppelgängers and how their physical manifestations can also be seen as metaphorical and not literal. Perhaps Helen does not look like Anna at all, but instead represents the fragments of Anna’s persona that seem to Mark to be gone: her devotion to him, to the family, her calm, sheepish demeanor, and her untainted purity. On the other hand, Anna’s monster looks like Mark because in spite of everything she does love Mark, though she is aware he does not fulfill her needs. Still, Patricia MacCormack is convinced the monster’s resemblance to Mark is arbitrary, calling it “a double but with nothing in common with the primary male.”73 The monster resembles Mark physically, but it is not him, and it is not human at all to begin with, it is a mucosal, developing representation of the excess of needs, desires, and feelings Anna has kept suppressed inside of her all her life. It is a sum of her hidden and unspoken desires, the lust she could not have shared with her husband, the spirit bound by society and shaped into a malformed and twisted monstrosity that cannot exist in the world of the structure. It is chaotic, unpredictable, primal, and highly addictive.

Regardless of the way their presence in the film is interpreted, the case of doppelgängers remains curious. If we have stated that the monster is abject, then we may also assert that the doppelgängers, one if which the monster evolves into, can be brought to an analysis by means of one of Freud’s terms — unheimlich or uncanny. The uncanny represents something frightening, eerie and bizarre, yet familiar in its eeriness. I would like to bring the notion of the abject and the uncanny in a dialogue with each other and discuss the ways in which they may be similar or differ from one another.

The idea of the doppelgänger or a double, according to Freud, appears to have historically harkened back to the primitive stage, to primary narcissism — one makes a double of oneself through a picture or a sculpture in order to capture oneself in a fixed moment and thus ensure immortality, “[b]ut when this stage has been surmounted, the ‘double’ reverses its aspect. From having been an assurance of immortality, it becomes the uncanny harbinger of death.”

The first time he sees Helen, Mark obviously experiences an instance of the uncanny. He is in utter awe of her, shocked by her apparent similarity to Anna that he even tries to resolve this uncomfortable position he has been placed in by pulling Helen’s hair as if to try to reveal her as Anna wearing a wig. As he spends more time with her however, Mark abandons this primary repulsion and recognizes her as a perfect image of Anna that has been forever lost to him. On the other hand, I am again compelled to state that the monster having metamorphosed into a figure that looks like Mark’s doppelgänger carries far less insight into Anna’s character.

Helen is neither a representation of Anna’s narcissism nor does she represent death — she signifies Heinrich’s regression to the primitive stage, and his own narcissism. Helen stands for Heinrich’s last effort to establish himself within the social structure he had been conditioned to believe he should act in accordance to. Whereas the uncanny represents eerie familiarity, the abject signifies repulsion of that familiarity due to the characteristic of the abject that renders it repulsive and rejects it from the state of existing in the Lacanian Symbolic Order. And yet both seem to warn us of the disturbance of that which came before, a disruption in the finely polished veneer of the world.

The duality of Anna’s character, however, is not represented through Helen, whose presence allows for a deeper understanding of Mark’s desires rather than reveal additional information about Anna herself. Instead, Anna’s duality exists, as has been

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said before in the middle of her two worlds, in the tear between her two most prominent roles, her longing to be free and never fully being able to let go. Throughout the film, Anna refers to two opposing ideas, which she sometimes sees as sisters, calling them Faith and Chance. She confesses to Mark that in her birthing of the monster she “miscarried” Faith, and was left with Chance. I shall steer away from any religious interpretation since I would not find such a method of reading the film in alignment with the analytical approach I subscribe to. Instead, I view these two ideas as two ways to view the world and exist within it — for one all the answers are there already, and for the other the answers are not only absent, but pliable, adaptable, in a state of permanent change and fluidity. “Faith adheres to tradition without knowing why, accepting without questioning. Chance is accepting pure unbound possibility, questioning met with cacophony.”

The Chance Anna speaks of is placed beyond the limiting, prescribed constructs of the religious or any other discourse. It lies beyond the language, beyond the structure, beyond perceptive, interpretable reality. “Anna is forced to choose between faith in heterosexuality or chance of something else through unbinding desire. Faith is phallic sexuality, chance is monster sex, sex in transit, nomadic sex.”

One particularly interesting scene pictures another way in which Anna attempts to bridge the division within herself, reaching out from the world of the film into the world of the spectator. In the scene, Mark is watching a recording, presumably sent to him by Heinrich, in which Anna is teaching a ballet class. The recording is a flashback, it takes place before the main events of the film and it provides further insight into where Anna has come from in a sense of her intellectual reflection on life and herself. Heinrich records Anna as she pushes one particular student to hold a pose that causes the student discomfort for an extended period of time, making an example out of her. When the student after a while storms out of the classroom, screaming in pain, tortured and humiliated, Anna delivers a motivational monologue to the rest of the class about having had to push the girl to the point of

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75 MacCormack, “Mucous, monsters and angels: Irigaray and Zulawski’s Possession,” 104.
76 Ibid.
breaking in order to bring out more in her and help her become a success. Towards the end of her speech, Anna switches her focus from the students to addressing the viewer directly, turning her gaze towards the camera, stating:

*That’s why I’m with you. Because you say ‘I’ for me.*

It is clear that within the scope of the film’s narrative, Heinrich assumes Anna delivers this line to him. In his egocentric approach, Heinrich feels pride for having changed Anna, made her develop on a mental state.

However, this instance can also be seen as one in which Anna breaks the fourth wall, desperate for identification, reaching out to the viewer. At this point the monster had not yet been created, and Anna is confused, only sensing and longing for what’s to come, thinking Heinrich might be a part of the solution. It is clear in the several meetings of Mark and Heinrich throughout the film that Heinrich believes he has immense power of change and transformation over Anna. However, this scene signals the early stage of Anna’s realization that Heinrich might not be the answer to her conundrum. Furthermore, it is an example of the split within Anna. She turns to the camera to see herself in the Other, fearing the lack within herself, longing for identification, for the “I” she is not but the spectator is, and the “I” she represents for the spectator.

And while she struggles with the idea that her self resides somewhere else and is difficult to find and hold on to, Anna greets this possibility with a smile and excitement. For anything that brings change and disruption to the world she is trying so desperately to constitute herself in as different, through plurality of identities and meanings, must be welcomed, nurtured, allowed to grow and extend its reach to other people and to the world as a whole. Anna goes on to find a different self within herself, and brings it to the surface. She longs to bring about the Other and the abject into the world of the structure. Had her quest have been successful to its ultimate completion, the otherness I talk about would no longer be considered abject, yet its characteristics would remain the way they are.
In *Powers of Horror* Julia Kristeva highlights the existence of two worlds that function separately but are brought together in opposition through the concept of the split. “A split seems to have set in between, on the one hand, the body's territory where an authority without guilt prevails, a kind of fusion between mother and nature, and on the other hand, a totally different universe of socially signifying performances where embarrassment, shame, guilt, desire, etc. come into play—the order of the phallus.” Kristeva thus positions the body, the mother, nature, and therefore woman as well in opposition to the structure, which is rigid and phallocentric. Throughout *Possession*, these predefined limits are being questioned. Anna questions them by giving birth to the monster, by pursuing what drives her instead of choosing to abandon and suppress it any longer. Mark unshackles himself from the patriarchal values to an extent as well, by learning not to dismiss Anna a priori, to try to listen and understand her even though she might be speaking from a register different from Mark’s and foreign to him.

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The Excess

Excess always represents something additional, a surplus that cannot be accounted for, a residue that does not belong, and is thus, abject. A look into the instances of excess in Possession is crucial for the understanding of the character of Anna as well as for its potential to point to instances of greater significance to the deconstruction of the film’s characters and their motivation, as well as the messages the narrative carries. In addition, excess can appear in the rupture of our lived reality, pointing out the neuroses connected to the experience of existing within said reality. In Possession, excesses range from the characters’ emotional outbursts, assaults on the auditory senses in the form of loud screams, yelling, shouting, fighting, or explosions, and finally: the excesses of fluids — blood, mucus, sweat, and tears. I view these excesses as red flags within the film, alarming occurrences that demand attention and help provide more insight into the ways of interpreting and understanding what is happening on the screen.

The most prominent source of excess in the film is Anna, and the most prominent place of excess in Anna can be observed by means of her physical expression. As I have discussed in the section on identity, in The Big Fight Anna and Mark clash in an incredibly violent, upsetting, and ground-shaking way. By questioning Anna about her whereabouts, Mark sets off a flood of emotional response in her. Cornered and questioned, Anna is reminded of all the reasons why she needed to leave her family home in the first place. She is repulsed by Mark and his controlling ways, disillusioned with life that lacks any excitement, saddened by the inflexible nature of human relations within the family structure, stifled by the monotony and the repetitiveness of daily tasks and responsibilities, the suppression and suffocation of her identity, freedom and sexuality. Anna’s emotions are heightened and she is pushed into a corner, from which the excess then emerges as a coping mechanism, and a method of defense. Anna is disgusted by Mark, she cannot stand to be in his presence — not necessarily because of himself alone, but more so due to the fact that he reminds her of everything she wishes to escape from. Anna
cannot even stand to be touched by Mark. At this point she has faced existence outside the structure, outside marriage, family, and even though she might try to, her being ultimately rejects having to interpellate.

As I have previously established, it is made clear throughout the film that Anna’s character is particularly tied to the paradigms of the body and bodily functions. To Anna, expression through body is paramount, the purest, most honest and true way in which she communicates. After all, the monster, a representation of so many things in Anna’s life, oozed from within her own body, formed through her own flesh, blood, and other secretions. When Anna is quiet, doesn’t say anything, or struggles to speak we are always left wondering about her true state and left with a sense of dread and uncertainty, but when we see her express herself trough the body, it is never a game of pretend for Anna. Thus, her body never lies: when she doesn’t like something, Anna’s body reacts — it shudders, shakes, and spasms, in an almost primal and deeply instinctual fashion. While her behavior might seem unhinged and deranged, the fact remains that considering Anna’s condition, one cannot imagine how he or she would behave if they were to take her place.

During The Big Fight, Anna desperately struggles to find any method of getting out of Mark’s shadow, any way to leave the family apartment, away from Mark and away from feeling oppressed and asphyxiated. Well aware of whom she is speaking to, and hellbent on making Mark see her as disgusting and promiscuous, Anna intentionally targets the sources of Mark’s insecurity, fear, and disgust, which mirror those of the society.

*Mark: You want me to believe you’re a…*

*Anna: A whore! Yes! A monster, a whore!*

*I fuck around with everybody.*

*Whenever you turn around I fuck around with everybody on every corner.*

*You will let me go!*
Another way through which Anna unleashes the suppressed is by letting go of blood. In one scene she cuts her neck with an electric knife. She self-harms because she feels too much. This excess, the expression of the overabundance of thoughts and emotions represents an outlet. Anna needs to ooze, whether it be emotions, fears, pain, or fluids. Since language, which constitutes the structure Anna is attempting to live outside, is not a possible mode through which she can act out her intentions, she is forced to exert her presence and express herself through her body. The blood, the twitches, the shrieking, the fluids, they all exist beyond the language, they steer towards the place of where meaning is not absent, but ever-changing. Anna does not cut her neck as an attempt at suicide, but as a form of release.

Figure 15 The suppressed within Anna is manifested through physical excess — screams, grimaces, and bodily spasms
The letting go of blood is a symbolic action that signifies Anna letting go of the pain caused by being abused and pressured into submission, as well as not knowing how to resolve the situation she is in. At the same time, the flowing of blood symbolizes menstruation. Anna allows the blood to flow from her body, and is seen walking around bloodied, oozing or with the liquid smeared over her skin and clothes. Patricia MacCormack describes Anna’s bleeding wounds as sacrificial, her sexuality and whole self sacrificed for the sin of man. I interpret the blood as potency, the liquid that signifies life, the flow of life within human beings, but especially women. The blood of Anna’s wounds is fresh and bright crimson, healthy, with Anna’s wounds functioning more as openings, signifying new passages and orifices, implying multiplicity.

Later in the same scene, we see Mark self-harm, but for different reasons than Anna. While she cuts herself as a form of release, Mark does so out of desire for knowledge. In spite of everything, he tries to understand Anna. MacCormack describes Mark’s wounds as vulvar and describes his action as “a giving up of dominance for autoeroticism or non-traditional eroticism.” This is an important point as Mark’s cutting introduces one of the first instances in which he attempts to identify with Anna, trying to better understand her. His motive is still to have her return to the way she was before but even this changes over time and the more he learns, the more both Anna and the monster change him, open him up to rethink the world and his experiencing of the world, people, and things within it.

Blood marks Anna as a mother: she is a mother in both of her worlds, mother to Bob and mother to her monster. Kristeva argues that menstrual blood “stands for the danger issuing from within the identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference.” Thus the fact that Anna is constantly dealing with blood and other bodily fluids signifies both her reproductive

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79 Ibid.
potency and her transitional state. By opening her mind and by opening a wound
Anna exhibits the force to change herself and the world around her through monstrous
possibility.

Along with blood, Anna seems to have developed a fascination with meat and
flesh — throughout the film she minces meat, stores cut up human body parts in the
fridge, It is implied that Anna feeds the monster with the bodies of men she kills. In
this one can recognize Kristeva’s ultimate abject — the corpse — “waste, transitional
matter, mixture, it is above all the opposite of the spiritual, of the symbolic, and of
divine law.” It is here that the monster’s position within the abjection, in opposition
to the structure is once again established. The excesses in the film result from this
clash of two mutually exclusive planes of existence. By killing the detectives, Anna
releases them of themselves, of ‘I.’ They become objects within abjection, which
serves to feed it, without any other purpose that would serve their former selves, as
they no longer are. The corpse, “is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is
no longer I who expel, "I" is expelled. The border has become an object.”

In “Film Bodies,” Linda Williams describes pornography, horror and
melodrama as body genres arguing that “each of these ecstatic excesses could be said
to share a quality of uncontrollable convulsion or spasm — the body “beside itself”
with sexual pleasure, fear and terror, or overpowering sadness.” While I would
argue that Possession is features elements of each genre, the film is not simply a
hybrid of genres. It is a war of the genres within a single instance. Throughout the
film, one genre is suppressed by another only to reemerge at some point in the film.
What remains common among them all is the fact that excess is present in each and
every one. The horror of the Otherness and the abject replaces the melodrama of the
family broken apart and Anna’s excessive crying and screaming. Anna’s attempts to
remove herself from the structure, to escape the forced subjugation create the horror

82 Ibid, 3-4.
83 Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess,” Film Quarterly, Vol. 44, No. 4
(Summer, 1991), 4.
of the abject, rupturing the fabric of the family drama and melodrama. Thus, genre power struggle within the film accounts for another example of how the excessive functions within Possession. Additionally, I do not subscribe to the notion that Possession falls under the lines Linda Williams describes in her text, which positions body genres as necessarily objectifying of women, positioning them as “spectacles of feminine victimization.”  

Anna is not prescribed the role of a victim in the film, her victimhood is instead described, deconstructed. Anna’s suffering is real and does not serve for the purpose of entertainment or the satisfaction of the scopophilic enjoyment in the spectacle that is female hysteria. Quite the contrary, it presents her plight with deep and utter understanding, a call, a scream for identification on the side of the viewer.

As with the concept of the split, Żuławski uses his skillful filmmaking in the goals of conveying messages he wishes to present to the viewer as particularly important. These concepts are presented by the positioning of the actors within the frame, through camera movements and the field size of the shot. Whereas the split is established by means of physical separation of characters, excess is constructed

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84 Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess,” 6.
through close-ups. In *L’intelligence d’une machine* the French filmmaker and film theorist describes the close-up as an attack on the familiar order of appearances. The image of an eye, a hand, a mouth that fills the screen - not only because it is magnified three hundred times, but also because we see it isolated from the organic whole - attains a characteristic of bestial autonomy.\(^\text{85}\) And so, as the camera often zooms in on Anna’s face in a tight shot, we witness her bulging eyes, open mouth, see her sweat, tears, etc. This form of excess brings Anna closer to the viewer creating at the same time utter identification and uncomfortable closeness, which in turn deepens said identification due to the fact it correctly portrays Anna’s condition.

\[\text{Figure 17 Monstrous birth constituted through excess}\]

Finally, it would not be possible to bring this analysis to a close without taking another look at the shocking scene of the birthing of the monster and how it functions when viewed in the context of excess. As Anna moves through the tunnel, another visual symbol of the feminine principle, she enters a heightened state, laughing loudly and uncontrollably, she trashes groceries on the walls, breaking and spilling them. She spills the milk, mother’s milk, and as it drips off the walls Anna continues to release inarticulate sounds from deep within her being. She resumes this monstrous dance in an array of movements, facial expressions, and screams leading up to a final image in which Anna gives birth to the monster through fluids — milk, blood, and bile, releasing a final chilling roar from within. The elements of excess in the scene contribute not only to it being memorable, by forcing us to witness in sheer shock this episode of monstrous ejection, but also point to the importance this single event, to its influence on the characters’ future, as well as the entire course of events presented in the film.

Not all excess is necessarily tied to an eruption of that which has been suppressed. Once again, I am compelled to invoke the idea of the potency of women’s sexuality, which receives in Possession a particular kind of attention, and is applauded for its ability to extend and multiply beyond control and beyond oppression. “Like female sexuality,” asserts Patricia MacCormack, “the creature is sticky, amorphous, and monstrous. And it continues to develop without quickening; unformed, unbound, and unstoppable.” Monstrosity here implies a different role from that which it is usually placed within in the society. What it can be argued to emerge from this argument is an improved understanding of both the monstrous and the female principle, via their shared attributes of multiplication and transfiguration, their state of constant change and open-ended, mucous, and fluid configuration.

The presence of excess in Possession does not work in support of the structures of power, but it instead reveals their role in oppression and subjugation of women, and human identities on a larger scale as well. The fact that Anna’s only

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escape from the horror of her social role is death does not confirm that one should not aim to unleash the chains, reject societal norms and functions, and fight against what has come to be considered natural and acceptable. Quite the opposite, her death confirms just how intricate, potent, and consuming the structures of power and authority are within a society. It points out to their ability to force conformity, and punish whomever tries to fail to answer the call to interpellate within the hegemonic form and adhere to the inscribed codes of the society.
4. Conclusion

*Mankind cannot remain indifferent to its monsters.*87

— Georges Bataille

In this thesis I have taken upon myself to discuss female identity as it is established in Andrzej Żuławski’s *Possession.* By assigning the film a subversive function, I have argued that it plays a significant role in critiquing institutionalized oppression of women, social suppression and control of women’s bodies and sexuality, and the prescription and forced adherence to social roles. Given the fact that this conditioning is formed through language, it is from language therefore that our understanding of the categories of meaning, discourse, grand narratives, and the formation of social roles and social structure arise. I have discussed the ways in which it is made clear that Anna struggles with continued existence in this world that suffocates, stifles, and punishes any attempt to explore, question, and if needed disrupt the limits of social existence, of the self, of agency, desire, sexuality, and morals.

The introduction of the concept of the monster and monstrous opportunity becomes apparent as a metaphor for a possible mode of subversion of these seemingly firm and fixed structures. I have proposed that, through the opening of new meanings, unbounded growth and expansion of alternatives to experience life, oneself, others, and the world monstrous forms provide for a rethinking and deconstruction of the world, providing in this case a woman with an exploration she has been conditioned

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to ignore, taught to suppress, and forced to abandon. The power of the monster is in its ever-changing, fluid, unfixed, unbound potency to subvert the structure and constantly recreate and reshape experience, which is something a system of binary oppositions, and discourses that limit human agency are not in favor of.

The monster in *Possession* is not a traditional monster that is outcast, and rejected for its difference. On the contrary, it is positioned as a form that arises from the world of abjection and Otherness to shock the symbolic order and shake up the structure with its relentless questioning of the prescribed, essentialist notions that have become dominant. It ridicules the arbitrary characteristics of human morals, notions of good and evil, social roles, reductive, essentialist beliefs on motherhood, creation, partnership, love, etc. Monstrosity in *Possession* is potent, it does not retract because of the set of rules that establish it as the Other, the abject, it seeks to find ways to bend those rules, submerge them within itself, absorb their influence and render them meaningless and point out their arbitrary influence which is powered by the systems of language, structure, and patriarchy.

Monsters and women share a host of similarities in the ways their existence is outlined within the scope of presiding ideological structures. This is one of the reasons why Anna reaches out for the monstrous potency within herself in order to establish a new form of actuality for herself. The monster is Anna’s her progeny and creation, an issue made of woman’s flesh and desire. This desire, once released, requires phallic symbols, no emergence into the structure, no assimilation; it does not require that Anna take up any fixed, prescribed role that would define the limits of her actions. In order to maintain its existence and assert its presence in the world, the monstrous relies only on its characteristic to disrupt the socially constructed ideas of the world, and

In my dialogue with various authors whose work I have analyzed, consulted, and discussed as part of this thesis, I have come to a conclusion that the monster in *Possession*, while constituted through abject Otherness in the dominant codes of the society, possesses the potency to overthrow the structure perhaps precisely due to these characteristics. Its power lies in the abandonment of binary oppositions,
patriarchal structures and phallocentrism through the deconstruction of the borders of social functioning, identification, subjectivity, and agency.
Bibliography


Online Sources


Filmography

*Possession*, 1981, France/West Germany, Directed by Andrzej Żuławski.